

Archaeologies of the Encounter: An Aleatory Account of the Emergence of Capital

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Abstract:

This paper aims to mobilize the concept of “aleatory materialism” from Althusser’s posthumous work “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter” to theorize the emergence of a capitalist mode of production and analyze theoretical problems of thinking through the emergence of a communist mode of production out of capitalism. A “materialism of the encounter,” with its non-teleological account of causality can theorize the emergence of such a complicated object and help think through transitions without recourse to necessity or sufficient reason. Retroactively, we can identify the discreet encounters that have “taken hold” in the institution of the capitalist mode of production, but we cannot trace with any necessity the islets that would form a communist mode of production.

Keywords: Louis Althusser; Marxism; Aleatory Materialism; Mode of Production; Economic History.

I: Introduction:

A mode of production is a curious thing because it presents itself as a totality, yet it emerges in fits and starts, often piecemeal. Often, we conceive of the history of modes of production as simple successions of totalities (ancient, feudal, capitalist), with an all-too-simplistic outside, dubbed by Marx as the Asiatic mode of production. The concept of a mode of production presents itself as a totality to those in it, yet the mode of production’s origins are islets, fragments, and developments that coalesce into itself.

A mode of production emerges from a composite of developments in the previous mode of production, but tends to subsume more and more under its sphere. In *Capital: Volume I*, Marx writes, “the transformation of the mode of production in one sphere of industry necessitates a similar transformation in other spheres.”¹ Once inaugurated and developed enough, a mode of production is in a position to subsume other sectors of productivity (e.g. industry, service, agriculture) under it. In his fragment *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Althusser attributes a mode of production’s tendency to subsume sectors under it to its *dominance*. A dominant mode of production subsumes surviving elements of previous modes of production.²

In spite of the overlap between a current, dominant mode of production and surviving elements of previous modes, a mode of production presents itself as a unity. Althusser describes this unity as “*the unity* between what Marx calls the productive forces and the relations of production. Thus every mode of production, dominant or dominated has in its unity, its productive forces and relations of production.”³ A mode of production unifies how labor produces products (commodities in the case of capitalism) and the relations between those who produce and those who reap benefits from productive forces (e.g. peasant and lord or worker and capitalist). This description of a dominant unity leaves aside questions of circulation, the reproduction of productive forces, and most importantly, the composition of elements which form it and its ascendance to dominance. The late Althusserian concept of aleatory materialism provides us with resources to ponder these questions.

Althusser’s outline of aleatory materialism in his later work, such as the essay “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” can help us develop a more nuanced account of capital’s emergence with more explanatory power and strategic insight for militants. In this paper I propose that capitalism emerged through a series of sustained “encounters” that subsumed more aspects of political-economic life in the early modern period and expanded geographically

1 Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1976), 505.

2 Louis Althusser (*On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. London, UK: Verso Books, 2014), 19-20.

3 *Ibid*, 20.

until it achieved world dominance. To do so, I will first give an account of causal relations in aleatory materialism. I will then examine capital's prehistory and the elements that eventually composed it through an aleatory lens. Finally, I will consider difficulties and possibilities aleatory materialism for signaling potential post-capitalist elements in "islets of communism."

II: Understanding Causes in Althusser's Aleatory Materialism

Althusser's posthumously published later work, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter" is a strange coda to his *oeuvre*. While both a stark stylistic departure from the "classical" Althusser and a rhapsodic engagement with a broad, heterogenous materialist current in philosophy, it has a continuity with his thought that elucidates his broader understanding of materialism. In this paper, I follow scholars such as Warren Montag and Emilio de Ípola who maintain a continuity between the "classical" Althusser of the mid-60s with this later work. Montag writes that "they [readers] thus rule out in advance any symptomatic reading of Althusser's own texts, a reading capable of registering, and perhaps explaining, its specific unevenness and conflictuality."⁴ The tendency to coax a unified, stable Althusserian line belies the nature of his writing. His posthumous writings were often initially fragments, sketches and prolegomena to a theoretical problem molded into a unified text by its editors. Likewise, the works published during his lifetime, such as *For Marx* and his contributions to *Reading Capital*, compile writings at different times or findings from seminars, with rectifications and theoretical reformulations in the text itself.

Conveniently enough, Althusser's method of a symptomatic reading, introduced in his contributions to *Reading Capital*, offers us a way to understand his later writing against the backdrop of his prior work. Althusser writes,

The same connection that defines the visible also defines the invisible as its shadowy obverse. It is the field of the problematic that defines and structures of the invisible as the

⁴ Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 173.

defined excluded, *excluded* from the field of visibility and *defined* as excluded by the existence and peculiar structure of the problematic; as what forbids and represses the reflection of the field on its object, i.e., the necessary and immanent interrelationship of the problematic and one of its objects.⁵

Althusser's description of a symptomatic reading offers us a means to understand the cryptic materialism of "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," which takes on the Epicurean world, consisting of atoms and void, which form the clinamen. Likewise, a symptomatic reading reveals the field of the text as presences and absences, and a symptomatic reading shows the gaps, or void of a text.

Althusser's adoption of Greek Atomism links the historical materialism of Marxism with a lineage of an "underground current of materialism" that has a through line from Epicurus and Lucretius, to Machiavelli, Spinoza, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger, and Althusser himself. The Epicurean doctrine divides all things into atoms and void. Epicurus writes, "the totality is [made up of] bodies and void...Beyond these two things [viz. bodies and void] nothing can be conceived, either by a comprehensive grasp or analogously to things so grasped."⁶ Epicurean metaphysics admits two elements of infinite magnitude: atoms that compose matter and the void. The formation of things and contingency is grounded upon the minute "swerve" of atoms from their necessary motion. Lucretius describes this, "but the factor that saves the mind itself from being governed in all its actions by an internal necessity, and from being constrained to submit passively to its domination, is the minute swerve of the atoms at unpredictable places and times."⁷ The Epicurean-Lucretian account of causality does not grant us freedom as "the uncaused," but rather entails a breakdown in the one-to-one relationship between one cause and another. This is still distinct from the earlier Althusserian concept of structural causality, which posits multiple causes

5 Louis Althusser, "From Capital to Marx's Philosophy" in *Reading Capital* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2015), 24.

6 Epicurus, "Letter to Heroditus," in *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 6.

7 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2018), 42.

and multiple effects because the cause of the swerve is phantom, in its passage from a world of abstract, singular atoms to composites.

According to Althusser, the swerve, in its originary form, is anterior to meaning and necessity. He claims:

What is more, it is clear that the encounter creates nothing of the reality of the world, which is nothing but agglomerated atoms, but *that it confers their reality upon the atoms themselves*, which, without swerve and encounter, would be nothing but *abstract* elements, lacking all consistency and existence. So much so that we can say that the *atoms' very existence is due to nothing but the swerve and the encounter* prior to which they led only a phantom existence.⁸

Althusser's interpretation of the initial swerve asserts that a moment of contingency is primary to necessity, reason, essence, and the concrete nature of things. The otherwise abstract elements of isolated atoms are distinct from the composites that form the sensible world. The existence and nature of things is rendered possible by a contingent encounter.

Althusser's appeal to the Epicurean origin places contingency prior to necessity. The intelligibility of things, causality, and succession arise from an encounter that "confers reality" to material prior to the emergence of bodies' form themselves. Emilio de Ípola comments on the role of Epicurean atomism in Althusser's aleatory materialism, and writes that "for the swerve to result in an encounter, from which a world can emerge, it must persist; it cannot be a fleeting encounter but rather one that endures, that then becomes the basis of the new world, of the new situation."⁹ De Ípola asserts that an atom's swerve in an encounter must be sustained and forceful enough to produce a world, or qualitative transformation. Thus, not every encounter is a transformative one, only ones of sustained duration.

Because reality is conferred after the fact to the form of composites, it upends an appeal to teleology or sufficient causality. Vittorio Morfino

⁸ Louis Althusser, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 169.

⁹ Emilio de Ípola, *Althusser: The Infinite Farewell* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 94.

identifies three theses that ground the philosophical tradition Althusser brings together under the banner of aleatory materialism. Morfino lists these theses:

1. The affirmation of the primacy of the encounter over form, of absence over presence, of the encounter over the form that springs forth from it;
2. The negation of every teleology;
3. The affirmation of reality as a process without a subject.¹⁰

Morfino's three theses of aleatory materialism reveal three fundamental themes in the "underground current." The first is the primacy of the encounter over form. Aleatory materialism regards forms as composites that result from prior encounters. In the context of our investigation, capitalism did not arise fully formed like Athena from the head of Zeus; it is the result of encounters and processes anterior to its inauguration as the dominant mode of production. Nevertheless, an aleatory materialist account precludes teleology. The emergence of a complex composite like capitalism is not the result of necessity or historical laws. It is the result of contingent encounters and only confers meaning to those processes as producing capitalism *post factum*. Third, though there is contingency in aleatory materialism, it does not entail a subject that freely chooses its developments; these are *processes* without subject.

Althusser takes Lucretius' and Epicurus' critiques of necessary causality and inquires what a composite *is* in dialogue with another reader of Lucretius, Machiavelli. For Althusser, Machiavelli clarifies the nature of a being in the encounter. He writes, "for a *being* (a body, an animal, a man, state or Prince) *to be*, an encounter has *to have taken place* (past infinitive). To limit ourselves to Machiavelli, an encounter has to have taken place between beings with affinities [*des affinissables*]; between such-and-such an individual and such-and-such a conjuncture or Fortune."¹¹ A composite, or in Althusser's language, a being, signifies that an encounter has to have

10 Vittorio Morfino, *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2015), 72.

11 Louis Althusser, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 193.

taken place. His parenthetical, “past infinitive,” is essential to our understanding of the necessity of composites in aleatory materialism. The necessity “has to have taken place” can only be conferred *after* the encounter, which is necessary *post factum*, when a composite takes form.

In *The Prince* Machiavelli compares the contingent shifts brought by fortune to floods that cannot be “halt[ed]...in any way.”¹² His discussion of fortune late in *The Prince* precludes any absolute handbook for rulership, in contrast to his contemporaries or immediate precursors, such as Castiglione. Rather, there are virtues suited to the conjuncture, but above all cognizance of contingency and flexibility should guide political practice. Machiavelli emphasizes fortune’s tendency to undo the present conjuncture in times of upheaval, conflict, and uncertainty, but the other side of the coin is its production of a *new* conjuncture. Nevertheless, resistance can counter fortune to some degree. Machiavelli continues, “the same happens with fortune, which shows its powers where no force has been organized to resist it, and therefore strikes in places where it knows that no dykes or dams have been built to restrain it.”¹³ Machiavelli’s analogy of fortune-as-flood echoes the materialist origin of the philosophy of the encounter in the “swerve” of one atom into another. A flood is a forceful encounter of an excess of water over the banks, which can be countered only by the restraints of dykes or dams. For fortune to “flood over” these obstacles, it must have enough force to overtake the banks, whether manmade or natural. If we translate this to political-economic conjuncture, the developments of a new mode and set of relations of production must coalesce enough force to overcome the defenses a current set of political-economic relations has to maintain itself.

Machiavelli’s turn to fortune to subvert the genre of a political manual reveals that there is no infallible, intransigent law governing the correct political origin in the face of contingency. This too precludes any teleology, any meaning, or any direction to history looking forward. Althusser comments on fortune and history:

...If they [political conjunctures] had not arisen on the happy basis of a stroke of good Fortune which gave their

12 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 93.

13 *Ibid.*, 83.

‘*chance*’ to ‘*last*’ to the elements over whose conjunction it so happens (by chance) that this form had to preside. This shows that we are not – that we do not live – in Nothingness [*le Néant*], but that, although there is no Meaning to history (an End which transcends it, from its origins to its term), there can be no meaning *in* history, since this meaning emerges from an encounter that was real, and was really felicitous – or catastrophic, which also has meaning.¹⁴

In his turn to discussing an aleatory materialist theory of history, Althusser distinguishes between a meaning *of* history and meaning *in* history. To derive a meaning of history requires an access to the “outside” of history and an apprehension of totality, both of which we are precluded from because we are immanent *to* history. The encounters that arose from fortune have taken hold because of the force and lasting nature of encounters in the past. According to an aleatory materialist theory, meaning only arises in retrospect. Thus, meaning to history can only be conferred in the manner of Hegel’s “owl of Minerva” that “begins its flight only with the falling of dusk.”¹⁵ The difficulty of conferring meaning to history in its totality is due to our immanence in history. Furthermore, the absolute dusk of history, like “(economic) *necessity*, which is determinant in the last instance,”¹⁶ is determinant on an instance that has not arrived and has no guarantee of arriving.

How, then, are we to confer meaning *in* history? We can confer meaning to the objects of history (periodizations, states, modes of production, etc.) only after they have taken hold. In retrospect, the chance encounter, if sustained, takes on the appearance of necessity and law. Althusser writes that “once the stable figure of the world, of the *only* existing world...has been constituted – we have to do with a stable world in which events, in their succession [*suite*] obey ‘laws.’”¹⁷ Althusser’s

14 Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 194.

15 G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16.

16 Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” in *For Marx* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2005), 118.

17 Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 195.

discussion of laws of the “stable” world follow as a consequence from the contingency of the encounter. Though the encounter is a moment of contingency, its having-taken-place inaugurates the forms that follow from the encounter. For instance, laws of social relations in capital, such as splitting of use-value and exchange-value or the necessity of a capitalist’s realization of surplus value from their workers’ labor-power,¹⁸ are laws and operate according to some necessity, but we should not mistake them for natural laws, for they are only necessary laws in the present relations of production. This naturalization is necessary to critique a proper history of capital and its origins. Ellen Meiksins Wood describes this tendency as, “treat[ing] [capitalism] as the natural realization of ever-present tendencies.”¹⁹ Armed with an aleatory materialist account of causality, we can avoid this fatal error. Instead, we can discover the prehistory of capitalism in its true, contingent form: a series of sustained encounters which inaugurated its own necessity and laws once it became the dominant mode of production.

III: Aleatory Materialism and the Prehistory of Capitalism:

Althusser’s final considerations in “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter” reflect on the problem of the emergence of a capitalist mode of production. He takes the “materialism of the encounter” and applies it to Marx’s critique of political economy. Here, Althusser proposes an account of force for an encounter to take hold, “what matters of this conception...is *the aleatory character of the ‘taking-hold of this encounter, which gives rise to an accomplished fact* whose laws it is possible to state.”²⁰ The encounter conditions the laws of a mode of production and is registered with sufficient sustained force. He continues:

This can be put differently: the whole that results from the ‘taking-hold’ of the ‘encounter’ does not precede the ‘taking-hold’ of its elements, but follows it; for this reason, it might

18 A capitalist may not happen to realize surplus value from workers’ labor, but in doing so, a capitalist would quickly cease to be a capitalist, himself becoming pauperized and proletarianized in losing out in competition with other capitalists.

19 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2017), 3.

20 Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 197.

not have ‘taken hold,’ and, *a fortiori*, ‘the encounter might not have taken place.’ All this is said – in veiled terms, to be sure, but it is said – in the formula that Marx uses in his frequent discussions of the ‘encounter’ [*das Vorgefundene*] between raw labour-power and the owners of money. We can go even further, and suppose *that this encounter occurred several times before taking hold in the West*, but, for lack of an element or a suitable arrangement of the elements, it failed to ‘take.’²¹

Althusser remarks that the encounter between wage labor and the nascent bourgeoisie did not result in the establishment of the capitalist mode of production *tout court*. The encounter takes place and repeats itself in a sustained manner until it “takes.” It is worth noting that the antagonism and contradiction between wage labor and merchant capital was initially secondary to the peasant-feudal lord contradiction that was primary during this encounter before it achieved dominance. In fact, the wage-relation was largely peripheral to feudal ties of peasants to land, the periodical use of *corvée*²² labor for large-scale public projects, and alliances of small producers in guilds.

These forms of labor in the feudal mode of production resist easy abstraction into the wage relation dominant in capitalism. The wage-relation of labor is itself an abstraction, but an abstraction which emerges in the relations of production between capital and pauperized labor. In *Capital: Volume I*, Marx examines wages as the appearance of “the price of labour, as a certain quantity of money that is paid for a certain quantity of labour.”²³ The value-equivalence of wages per quantity of labor is an abstraction of labor in terms of exchange value (i.e., a miner working for the same wage as a porter performs abstract labor at the same exchange value). This abstraction is nonetheless historically contingent upon the relations of production. Marx writes that “in the expression ‘value of labour,’ the concept of value is not only completely extinguished, but inverted, so that it becomes contrary. It is an expression as imaginary as

21 Ibid, 197-198.

22 “The name of the work that a serf was obligated to do for his lord without being paid for it” (Michael Mould, *The Routledge Dictionary of Cultural References in Modern French*, 147).

23 Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, 675.

the value of the earth. These imaginary expressions arise, nevertheless from the relations of production themselves.”²⁴ Here Marx criticizes classical political economy’s inversion of the primacy of labor-power and the value of labor. The value of labor exists only in the process of exchange of workers pauperized and dispossessed of their labor-power for wages furnished by a capitalist who has the means of production. The value-form of labor and wage relation of worker to capitalist arises from historically specific relations of production.

Because the waged enumeration of abstract labor-power as the value is historically specific to capital, it therefore has taken hold [*se prise*] from precapitalist elements. In *Theory as History*, Jairus Banaji critiques some economic historians’ particularly vulgar Marxist’s assertion that the relations of production are “the independent variables of the materialist conception of history.”²⁵ He writes:

This conception, quite unexceptional as it appears, became one of the most widespread and persistent illusions of vulgar Marxism. Although neither Marx nor Engels ever consciously reflected on the nature of their categories – the fact that Marx distinguished implicitly between ‘simply formal abstractions’ and ‘true abstractions,’ that he saw the failure to carry abstraction ‘far enough’ the secret of Ricardo’s confusion on ‘value,’ that he himself subjected ‘wage-labour’ to a careful and painstaking analysis – all go to indicate that, in the materialist conception, the process of investigating and defining the ‘relations of production’ in any given epoch was far more complicated than Dobb seemed to imagine.²⁶

Here, Banaji critiques historicizing relations of production as simple successive economic relations. The abstract form of exchangeable labor as labor value is contingent upon the myriad developments of practices of exchange and production, class relations, technical development, the

²⁴ Ibid, 677.

²⁵ Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2010), 53.

²⁶ Ibid, 53.

geographic expansion of trade empires, and other causes. This multifaceted variety of causes lends itself to an aleatory materialist conception of history because these are otherwise unrelated developments that are intertwined in the dominance of the capitalist mode of production, only because these encounters have occurred in such a way that confers this meaning and causal relationship.

The consolidation of merchant capital and what would become the capitalist mode of production occurred amid intense class struggles over the rent-seeking of feudal lords.²⁷ We have discussed the peripheral aspect of exchange or coerced labor in the form of the *corvée* earlier, but exchange was largely peripheral to feudal lord's "coercive rent-taking,"²⁸ in the form of taxation and periodic forced labor. The peasants nonetheless had "direct access to the means of their own reproduction and to the land itself."²⁹ The consequences of this is that the majority of labor was subsistence and for the reproduction of the producers themselves. Wood continues, "this has meant that when their surplus labour has been appropriated by exploiters, it has been done by what Marx called 'extra-economic' means – that is, by means of direct coercion, exercised by landlords or states employing their superior force, their privileged access to military, judicial and political power."³⁰ Woods' identification of coercion as the sole means of exploiting surplus labor does not mean that capitalism is non-coercive, as it has the monopoly on the repressive state apparatus, but rather it is that the threat of violence was the "extra-economic" peripheral appropriation of surplus labor from a largely subsistence mode of production. The antagonism of the feudal mode of production was largely between feudal lords who used juridical, ecclesiastical, and military power to loot periodically from the predominantly subsistence labor of peasants. This relation included the lord's "protection" of the peasantry in his *demesne* from other lords, which, in essence, entailed a monopoly of looting.

27 This is not an isolated incident but a motivating factor in political struggles from the peasant revolts of late Medieval Europe (notably Wat Tyler's 1381 Peasant Revolt and the "Peasant Wars" of 16th century Germany) to the French Revolution.

28 Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*, 354.

29 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*, 95.

30 *Ibid*, 95-96.

Though it was the primary means of appropriating value, and the primary class antagonism, the relationship between peasant and feudal lord was hardly the only class-relation in medieval and early modern Europe. Engels describes the fragmented class encounters and antagonism between feudal lords, clergy, burghers, and peasants, “besides princes and priests we find nobles and peasants in the countryside, and in towns we find patricians, burghers and plebians, whose interests as estates differed radically even when they did not cross each other or come into conflict.”³¹ Engels’ description of class composition and relations in 16th century offers a more thorough picture of social being in a given mode of production: yes, there is a primary terrain of struggle between an exploiting and exploited class, but transformations in the production process can force a shift in the primary terrain of struggle (and of the classes that compose the struggle).

Engels’ inquiry into the class relations at the time of the Peasant Wars offers insight into the difficulty of the question of class composition in an aleatory materialist analysis. Though labor and production has long existed (both abstractly and in a variety of concrete forms), the composition of the exploited and exploiting classes in a specific mode and relation of production is immanent to that period. Althusser emphasizes the development of the proletariat’s aleatory character against attributing the proletariat simply to industrialization. He writes:

When Marx and Engels say that the proletariat is ‘they product of big industry,’ they utter a very great piece of nonsense, positioning themselves within the *logic of the accomplished fact of the reproduction of the proletariat on an extended scale*, not the aleatory logic of the ‘encounter’ which produces (rather than reproduces), as the proletariat, this mass of impoverished, expropriated human beings as one of the elements making up the mode of production. In this process, Marx and Engels shift from the first conception of the mode

31 Frederick Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 2000), 81.

of production, an historico-aleatory conception to a second, which is essentialistic and philosophical.³²

When Marx and Engels attribute the proletariat to the development of big history, they reduce the diffuse set of encounters to a single process of technical development of industrial capital. This reduces the aleatory logic of the “encounter” to a singular process of development. Thus far, we have discussed the development of the wage relation as a form of enumerating labor-value for a pauperized, disposed laborer. This is a distinct process from the technical development of industrial capital, and could have easily been a simple transformation of enumerating agrarian labor-power if not for the sustained encounters of the development of industrial instruments of production and transportation and the accumulation of a dispossessed “reserve army of labor” of former subsistence farmers in urban centers such as Manchester and London. These two encounters are necessary albeit insufficient conditions for the composition of the “proletariat,” and are but two encounters which we can now attribute to the inauguration of a capitalist mode of production.

Althusser critiques a simplistic story of the multifaceted encounters that came to be the capitalist mode of production. He refutes a Marxist conception of historical modes of production as successive totalities, stating, “on this [Marx’s] hypothesis [of the emergence of a Mode of production], each element has, not an independent history, but a history that pursues an end...a history constituting a whole which endlessly *reproduces* its own elements, so made as to mesh.”³³ An Orthodox Marxist conception of history apprehends modes of production and their emergence as a totality, privileging the necessary interdependence of things in their relation, in a Hegelian echo. Althusser continues this line of critique and writes, “Marx, however, abandons this thesis [the emergence of capital from a sustained encounter] for *the thesis of a mythical ‘decay’ of the feudal mode of production and the birth of the bourgeoisie from the heart of this decay.*”³⁴ An emphasis on totality glosses over the disparate, sustained

32 Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 198.

33 Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 200.

34 *Ibid.*, 200-201.

encounters which accumulate and crystallize into a mode of production. In other words, though giving an excellent holistic picture of a present mode of production, an Orthodox Marxist analysis gives shorthand and mythemes to its prehistory. Though structurally similar in the logic of dispossession and violence, the primitive accumulation in the genocide of Native Americans, the slave trade, and land enclosure in England were distinct encounters. Jason Read comments on the necessity of these distinct yet interrelated processes of primitive accumulation for capital, “primitive accumulation serves as the names for not only an event but a process, the expropriation and legislation necessary to destroy other economic and social relations in order to make them productive for capital.”³⁵ Read’s observation shows that the novel economic practices in the wage relation, production, and circulation are made possible through the destruction and dispossession of other economic social relations, whether the genocidal practice of settler-colonialism, the enslavement of Native Americans in the Spanish *Encomienda* and *Hacienda* systems, the looting and enslavement of West African labor in the global slave trade and so on. Though these processes are not the focus of my analysis, they are essential to keep in mind as the inseparable companion of protocapitalist economic transformations in the 16th-18th centuries.

Althusser’s aleatory materialist analysis of the prehistory of capitalism can be read fruitfully alongside *longue durée* economic histories in order to understand how a mode of production can emerge. We have touched briefly upon the historical development of the wage-relation and composition of the proletariat, but this account overlooks the importance of transformations in merchant capital in consolidating capitalist forms of circulation. In his masterpiece, *The Long Twentieth Century*, Giovanni Arrighi analyses capitalism as a dynamic of geographic expansion and capitalist subsumption of *faux frais* (e.g., transportation, protection) of capitalist accumulation. He describes his methodology as two hegemonies, “the first genealogy describes the development of capitalism as a succession of world hegemonies. The second genealogy describes that same development as a succession of systemic cycles of accumulation.”³⁶

35 Jason Read, “Primitive Accumulation: The Aleatory Foundation of Capitalism,” *Rethinking Marxism* Volume 14, Number 2, pg. 37.

36 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, 85.

For Arrighi, the development and expansion of capital is the history of successive hegemonies (Genoese, Dutch, British, American) and the expansion-subsumption of mercantile capitalist accumulation. For example, the Genoese hegemony was a peripheral hegemonic relation of financing Iberian colonialism overseas, while the Dutch integrated the military apparatus of a large fleet into their own merchant capital. Another important encounter was the integration of finance and commodities under a single market enterprise in Amsterdam. Arrighi explains, “the component was the policy of transforming Amsterdam not just into the central warehouse of world commerce but also into the central money and capital market of the European world economy. The key tactical move in this respect was the creation in Amsterdam of the first stock exchange in *permanent* session.”³⁷ Arrighi’s genealogy of capital highlights the integration of more and more sectors of human activity into the logic of the value-form. While finance speculation and lending was a peripheral, ostracized practice, more and more was integrated and subsumed under it, including distribution and production.

Though it emphasizes circulation and the subsumption of more and more *faux frais* into capitalist forms of circulation, Arrighi’s genealogy of capital’s emergence shows that the formation of a mode of production is emergent from a long history rather than arising in its totality from a political transformation. Just as a mode of production and its dominant class has a long prehistory, it also has its survivals. Althusser remarks on the survivals of feudalism well into the 19th century, “it was not until 1850-1870 that capitalism established itself firmly in France.”³⁸ Althusser points to the survival of vestiges of feudalism well into the 19th century and the sporadic antagonism between aristocrats and bourgeoisie (e.g. the English Civil War, the French Revolution)³⁹ as an argument that Marx’s theory of the bourgeoisie is insufficient. His analysis of “survivals,” of a previous mode of production haunt the legacy of “really existing socialisms,” and

37 Ibid, 142.

38 Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 201.

39 An example of a bourgeois revolution that includes both an antagonistic relation (in this case between Northern Industrial capital and Southern slaveholding planter capital) and lasting social effects is the “second American Revolution” of the American Civil War and Reconstruction until the “*thermidor*” moment of the congressional compromise in Hayes’ election.

the difficulty of superseding the capitalist mode of production in spite of the seizure of the state apparatus.

IV: Capital *se prise*, and Post-Capitalist Islets:

The eventual dominance of a capitalist mode of production is the result of a surprisingly non-antagonistic process of the emergence of the wage relation, advancing marketization of circulation and production as well as colonial plunder.⁴⁰ This cooperation and transformations of the world economic system happened amid the background between struggles over agrarian labor relations with the working peasants. Because of this, we must outline the difference in the class relations between aristocracy and bourgeoisie in precapitalist formations and bourgeoisie and proletariat under capital.

Althusser's reflections shy away from reflections on the differences between aristocracy-bourgeoisie class relations and the relations between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. In spite of sporadic antagonism, the eventual dominance of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist mode of production shows characteristics of a passive revolution. Gramsci characterizes a passive revolution as a revolution when "what was involved was not a social group which 'led' other groups, but a state which, even though it had limitations as a power, 'led' the group which should have been 'leading' and was able to put at the latter's disposal an army and a politico-diplomatic strength."⁴¹ The encounters of finance capital that coalesced into the capitalist mode of production was a sustained encounter of *subsumption* largely tangential to the class struggles between prince and peasant I touched upon earlier. In spite of clashes, such as the French and American revolutions or the revolutions of 1848, the consolidation of capitalism as a mode of production in Britain first, then later worldwide was a consolidation in cooperation with the state. This is evident in both the private-public partnerships of imperialist trade

40 This process was evidently a violent process, but was a project of cooperation between the nascent bourgeoisie of merchant capital and the largely aristocratic state formations of Western Europe to share the spoils of the slaughter, conquest, and plunder of the Americas, West Africa, and Asian ports.

41 Antonio Gramsci, "Notes on Italian History," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York, NY: International Publishers, Inc., 2014), 105.

companies such as the British East India Company or the *Vereenigde Nederlandsche Oost Indische Compagnie*,⁴² as well as domestic cooperation in state and capitalist investment, notably the cooperation of the Hohenzollern monarchy of Prussia (and Germany after 1871) with the Junkers, or the militarized Prussian aristocracy who increasingly entered capitalist enterprise in industrializing areas like the Rhine and Silesia.

However, the inefficacy of drawing direct parallels between the triumph of the bourgeoisie and value-form and our current struggle for a dictatorship of the proletariat should not dissuade us from any comparison. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx conceives of capital's relation to earlier modes of production as an archaeology, one we can only reconstruct from our vantage in capitalism. He writes:

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose primary unconquered remnants are carried along in it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape.⁴³

If we take Marx at his word and jettison the teleological lockstep of some elements of Vulgar Marxism, we can discover great sensitivity to the aleatory crystallization of a mode of production in Marx's reflections. His oft quoted aphorism "human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape," shows his debt to Darwin in comparing human and ape *Gattungswesen* [species-being] to modes of production. The divergent evolution of human and ape show traces of a common ancestor, structural similarities, and kinship. Likewise, a mode of production shows remnants of its prehistory, uneven development, the origins of vestigial habits from previous forms of social mediation, and much more. This analytic of

42 The "United Dutch East India Company" which had a monopoly on the spice trade in present-day Indonesia

43 Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1973), 105.

analogy, kinship, and archaeology in Marx's introduction to the *Grundrisse* anticipates the multiplicity of dominant and dominated modes of production in Althusser's *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.⁴⁴

Marx's project in *the Grundrisse* looks backwards from the present structure, an opposite vantage-point to Althusser's in "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," which apprehends the void present at the establishment of things. Althusser writes, "we shall say that the materialism of the encounter has been christened 'materialism' only provisionally, in order to bring out its radical opposition to any idealism of consciousness or reason, whatever its destination."⁴⁵ From our vantage mediated by the capitalist mode of production we can trace an archaeology, a series of encounters that coalesced into capitalism, but we can only provisionally trace these. For Althusser, 'a mode of production is a combination because it is a *structure* that imposes its unity on a series of elements. What counts in a mode of production, what makes it such-and-such, is *the mode of domination* of the structure over its elements."⁴⁶ A mode of production is a structural unity that imposes its dominance over the elements. For example, in capitalism, the dominance of the value-form and a class extracting surplus value from productive labor has expanded geographically and subsumed more and more under its domination in its encounters.

Even though capitalism is the *dominant* mode of production, it is not total in our shared social being. While capitalism is the dominant mode of production, there exist multiple, dominated modes of production. Althusser writes:

The dominated modes are those surviving from the old social formation's past or the one that may be emerging in its present. The plurality of modes of production in every social formation and the current dominance of one mode of production over those that are disappearing or coming into being make it possible to account for the contradictory

44 Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 19.

45 Louis Althusser, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 189.

46 Ibid, 203.

complexity of empirical facts observable in every concrete social formation, but also for the contradictory tendencies that clash within it and find expression as its history (the observable real transformations in the economy, politics, and ideology).”⁴⁷

Althusser argues for a *plurality* of modes of production that includes a dominant mode of production (e.g., feudalism, capitalism), and a plurality of dominated modes of production. The dominated modes include both vestigial remainders from older modes of production (e.g., hereditary titles, ecclesiastical tithes) and elements which are the sees or islets that may compose a successive mode of production. This plurality makes for a “contradictory complexity of observable facts,” of elements that resist seamless subsumption into the dominant mode of production.⁴⁸ The plurality and contradictions between the elements of a *dominant* mode of production and *dominated* modes of production drive historical change in either the transformations within a mode of production⁴⁹ or the emergence of a new mode of production. We observed a number of contradictions between the elements of dominant and dominated modes of production in the emergence of capitalism in the early modern period, like the transformation from feudal ties and *corvée* labor to rent and wage-labor in the land enclosure movement of 17th-18th century England. Likewise, there are elements which may well come to form communism in our social relations, but whether or not they well “take” [*se prise*] is contingent, per our aleatory theory of causality.

The question of whether or not the elements which may lead to compose a communist mode of production to “take” is a twofold problem: the first is the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat because a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie actively struggles against any

47 Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 19-20.

48 Althusser gives the example of “landed estates” that form the basis for ground rent as a survival of Feudalism in capitalism (Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 29).

49 Capitalism, though dominant since the 19th century went through a number of technical transformations as well as formations in the relations of production. For example the “formality” of a wage relation changed over the years, with largely informal labor bought and sold at the worksite, to more stable careers, to the emergent “gig” economy marks transformations in the wage-relation in the capitalist mode of production.

workers' or subaltern movement to reproduce the current relations of production. The second is a question of whether the islets of communism will indeed lead to sustained encounters to form a dominant mode of production. The establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat is a necessary yet insufficient condition for the abolition of capitalism, the value-form, and the establishment of a communist mode of production.

In *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, Etienne Balibar considers the problem of these two related albeit difficult to suture tasks. Balibar elaborates on Lenin's thesis that socialism is the period of a dictatorship of the proletariat's transition to communism and rectifies it in light of the crisis of the official communist parties of the postwar period. He writes, "it follows that the dictatorship of proletariat is not the period of 'transition to socialism,' and even less is it a particular political 'road' taken by this transition to socialism: *it is socialism itself, an historical period of uninterrupted revolution and of the deepening of the class struggle, the period of transition to communism.*"⁵⁰ Balibar's rectification illustrates that socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat is a period of the deepening of the class struggle in the transition to communism. If we read this thesis in light of Althusser's conception of dominant and dominated modes of production existing plurally, then the socialist period of transition is the period of political struggle to establish the dominance of a communist mode of production. While this struggle is necessary it does not guarantee uninterrupted revolution against the surviving formations of capitalism. Furthermore, it is a mere *political* struggle, and as we have seen in the elements that have come to compose capitalism, the political struggle between classes is more often than not tangential to the contingency of the encounters which will coalesce into a mode of production. Nevertheless, because communism is a mode of production unique to capitalism or feudalism because the producers are not dominated or exploited and have direct control over their own means of production, communism must be established in relations of production under the political control of the proletariat.

⁵⁰ Etienne Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (London, UK: New Left Review Books, 1977), 124.

Because the dictatorship is a necessary albeit insufficient condition for the establishment of communism, we must briefly meditate on islets of communism as they currently exist under the domination of capitalism. These islets exist in the margin.

In his paper, “From Traces of Communism to Islets of Communism: Revisiting Althusser’s Metaphors,” Panagiotis Sotiris cites a 1980 letter by Althusser where he “offers an almost poetic vision of an already existing communism in those practices and relations that escape the commodity relation.”⁵¹ The marginal existence of communism is practices and relations that escape subsumption by the commodity relation in spite of Capital’s dominance. Althusser lists these conditions:

Communism exists today in all places where:

1. there is no commodity relation
2. therefore no economic exploitation
3. therefore no political domination
4. therefore no ideological servitude or intimidation⁵²

Althusser’s four conditions for communism are the conditions for the communist relations a dictatorship of the proletariat struggles *for*. In the absence of the commodity relation there is neither exploitation nor domination, and this is communism. There is an unfortunate paradox that must be overcome: a mode of production characterized by the *lack* of domination must assume a dominant position in all social relations.

The paradox of establishing the dominance of communism as the absence of domination undergirds the tension present in much of Althusser’s thought and his responses to the crises of official Marxism and the communist party form. Sotiris remarks on the lessons to be drawn from this tension in his reflection on Althusser’s posthumously published *Machiavelli and Us*:

51 Panagiotis Sotiris, “From Traces of Communism to Islets of Communism: Revisiting Althusser’s Metaphors,” *Filozofski Vestnik*, Volume XLI, Number 1, 130.

52 Louis Althusser, in William S. Lewis, « Sur un voyage en Grèce », 2018 (translated by Panagiotis Sotiris) available at: <https://www.imec-archives.com/matieres-premieres/papiers/althusser/sur-un-voyage-en-grece>

Perhaps it was the weight of the realisation that the need for a politics of radical novelty and the creation of the conditions for fortunate encounters between struggles, strategy, and social dynamics could only be answered by a painful and thorough recomposition of the political organisations of the working class, a task well beyond a simple call for a left-wing turn of the actually existing communist movement and also beyond simply investing in the expansion of already existing islets of communism.⁵³

Sotiris' prescription for the militant struggle highlights the difficulty of the two-fold task of establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat and the expansion of already-existing elements of communism. The first task requires a recomposition of our working-class political formations in a radically novel way. The second is a felicitous meeting of novel strategy and *fortuna* in the expansion of these islets. As we saw with the establishment of capitalism, capitalism is the result of scattered dynamics of merchant capital, plunder, industrialization, the wage form, and land enclosure, just to name a few "islets" we can now recognize. The expansion of these islets were not the result of ideological struggle, but were rather novel forms of organizing and rationalizing production and circulation carried out by merchants, states, and landowners. Our struggle is, on the other hand, necessarily ideological.

V: Conclusion

Althusser's aleatory materialist analysis in "The Underground Current of the Philosophy of the Encounter" gives us a novel means to understand the emergence of capitalism, not as a stage imposed by the bourgeoisie in class struggle, but rather as a series of sustained encounters and cycles of accumulation through different "phases" of capital until it became the mode of production that, "doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus."⁵⁴ These phases of accumulation were developed as passive

53 Panagiotis Sotiris, "From Traces of Communism to Islets of Communism: Revisiting Althusser's Metaphors," *Filozofski Vestnik*, Volume XLI, Number 1, 135. Available at: <https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/article/view/9827/8992>

54 William Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar," *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Press, 1994), Act I, Scene II, Lines 136-137.

revolutions through the cooperation of statecraft and merchant capital. This of course precludes any facile parallelism with superseding Capitalism with a socialist mode of production and the dictatorship of the proletariat because we act in antagonism to the bourgeoisie and the state that upholds it.

Although capitalism has emerged in a way we can trace to become the dominant mode of production, the “islets” of communism exist in a dominated form. In a letter to Fernanda Navarro, Althusser writes:

Of course there are, as you say, ‘possibilities’ within social determination, if only because there are several different orders of social determination and because this creates a play – of gaps, blank spaces, or margins in which the subject may find his path determined or not determined by social constraints; but this non-determination is an effect, a sub-effect, of determination, of determinations; what I called not only overdetermination, but underdetermination ... Do you see what I mean?⁵⁵

In the social determinations under the dominance of the capitalist mode of production, there remain “gaps, blank spaces, or margins,” which are both the vestigial survivals of previous modes of production and islets that may become another mode of production, possibly communism. The struggle is not only the political struggle to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat, but is also to foster and take advantage of the islets of communism in the margins of capitalism. There, the encounters which may take [*se prise*] as communism can occur.

⁵⁵ Louis Althusser, “Correspondence About ‘Philosophy and Marxism,’” *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 236.

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