

The Politics of the *Fact to be Accomplished*: Political Practice and Materialism of the Encounter in Althusser

Panagiotis Sotiris

Abstract:

The aim of this article is to revisit some of Louis Althusser's texts from the 1970s and 1980s in order to examine the relation between Althusser's conceptualization of a materialism of the encounter and his calls for a new practice of politics as part of a strategy for communism. In particular, I try to discuss Althusser's reference to political practice and the organizational forms associated with it, at the same time attempting to stress the tensions and aporias running through these interventions.

Keywords: Althusser; Communism; Marxism; political practice; ideology

Introduction

One of the open questions in regards to the work of Louis Althusser is how to define and think the relation between the conceptualization of the materialism of the encounter and Althusser's constant references to the need for a *new practice of politics*, especially since the elaboration of the philosophical vocabulary of the materialism of the encounter coincided with Althusser taking increasingly critical positions in regards to the theory and strategy of the communist movement.¹ In what follows, I will try and revisit some texts by Althusser on the question of political practice in order to stress both the ways that Althusser attempted to answer this question but also the tensions and radical aporias running through this attempt.

¹ On the political character of Althusser's endeavour see inter alia Goshgarian 2006, Bruschi 2020, Sotiris 2020a.

1. The *Junes Theses* revisited

The 1986 *June Theses* is one of the last attempts by Althusser to present a coherent political position in light of the fully developed form of the materialism of the encounter. Althusser begins by insisting that ‘we have entered the period of the human *world revolution*, that of the liberation of humanity from its secular chains: the slavery of economic exploitation, the tyranny of the State and the mystification of ideology.’² In regards to the theoretical instruments used to examine the conjuncture Althusser insists that ‘aleatory materialism’³ is the ‘real’ materialism in Marx, the ‘just philosophy’ needed. Such a materialism enables a thinking of ‘living history’, one that only obeys to ‘a constant (which is not a law), the constant of the class struggle’.⁴ When Althusser attempts to offer an analysis of the conjuncture, he insists on the global character of events, a certain erosion of the hegemonic role of the US and the emergence of a ‘plurality of centres.’⁵ Consequently Althusser suggests this image of the world:

The world is from now on an unpredictable flow. If we want to give an image, we have to go back to Heraclitus (we do not swim twice in the same stream), or Epicurus (primacy of the void over the atomic particles). If we want to give a closer image, following here Deleuze (a French philosopher of genius), we must not depict the world in a Cartesian way as a hierarchical tree, but more like a horizontal rhizome.⁶

In order to substantiate his particular historical optimism Althusser uses the metaphor of the interstices that Marx first used when referring to market relations existing in the interstices of non capitalist modes of production in the same manner that Gods existed in the interstices of worlds according to Epicurus. Althusser had used the metaphor of communism or communist relations existing in the interstices or margins

2 Althusser 1986, p. 1.

3 Althusser 1986, p. 4.

4 Althusser 1986, p. 6.

5 Althusser 1986, p. 9.

6 Althusser 1986, p. 9

of capitalist societies in various instances since the 1970s, In 1986, Althusser thought that ‘we have to reverse the figure’, suggesting that there are actually within a world to its most part communist or liberated, only ‘imperialist interstices.’⁷ For Althusser, this world is ‘void of every assured and stable structure, void of theory, extremely depoliticized (an excellent sign: we reject the politics “of politicians” [*la politique ‘politicienne’*]. But it is in the silent hope of a real politics), [...] is offered to us and it is to be taken’.⁸ For Althusser this void is the ‘superior form’⁹ of Machiavelli’s *fortuna*.

Leaving aside Althusser’s particular assessment of the conjuncture of the mid-1980s, including this estimate that there was a global shift towards some form of social-democracy, it is interesting to see how Althusser describes a potential international political point of reference for these struggles for liberation. Althusser envisions a:

Centre of ideological convergence for the liberation and freedom in the world. A centre which will be a centre of information and not of direction: a centre freely open to all active groups where exchanges of information will take place. An international convergence for liberation [*une convergence internationale pour la liberation*] (CIL). I repeat: without power of decision, or even orientation. A centre of encounter, of exchanges and researches and above all an information bank on the situation of class struggle in all the countries of the world.¹⁰

For Althusser, if the proletariat is at the margins of bourgeois society, then the strategic problem is how to create a centre out of the margin, when the ‘margin is not united, it is very divided in multiple alternative groups and the vast majority of youths, the unemployed and the poor remain

7 Althusser 1986, p. 9. On the imagery of interstices and islets see Sotiris 2020b.

8 Althusser 1986, p. 10.

9 Althusser 1986, p. 10.

10 Althusser 1986, p. 12.

outside the conscience of the necessity of union.’¹¹ Althusser admits that this desire for liberation is expressed in individualistic forms (‘live this freedom “everyone for themselves”’¹²), or in the new rise of religious feeling, and consequently he insists that the ‘essential task is being played today in the ideological class struggle, that is, in relation to philosophy’.¹³ And although Althusser acknowledged that the question of freedom was being taken over by the Right, he nevertheless insisted on the importance of a ‘hope for liberation and freedom’¹⁴ that he observed especially among the youth. The text ends with Althusser saying that he ‘returns to the silence’ but also that ‘has confidence in his comrades’ with the text ending in an optimistic way: ‘Be vigilant comrades, but have confidence. A last effort and will engage in the final struggle. And finally soon bread and roses’.¹⁵

Despite the fact that this text, along with other texts bears the marks of Althusser’s particularly difficult position in the 1980s and his inability to have a public presence and intervention, it does point to how he continued to struggle with the question of political practice. It is also important to note how Althusser, also in a line similar to texts from the late 1970s insisted in treating social transformation as liberation of human practices and not as ‘socialist construction.’¹⁶ To that we should also stress the way he described the potential international political centre of such a movement for liberation in terms of a point of convergence, of encounters, of exchanges and researches between struggles, rather than a ‘general headquarter’ or any other ‘military’ metaphor suggesting a centre of direction and political leadership.

2. What is a political practice for communism?

However, the question remains open: how can we think this particular political practice that aims at communism or human emancipation, within

11 Althusser 1986, p. 12

12 Althusser 1986, p. 12.

13 Althusser 1986, p. 13.

14 Althusser 1986, p. 14.

15 Althusser 1986, p. 14.

16 Althusser 2020a.

the context of the materialism of the encounter. Or to put more simply: what is the politics of the encounter?

We know that from the early stages of Althusser's attempt to deal with the question of radical contingency¹⁷ as the actual non-ontology of social forms and structures in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination',¹⁸ that the elaboration of a non teleological materialism was interwoven with political consideration and question of a transformative or revolutionary political practice. We know that Althusser always returns to this reference to a new practice of politics (as opposed to simply a new politics) often with a reference to Balibar's text on the 'Rectification of the Communist Manifesto',¹⁹ in which Balibar uses the example of the Paris Commune to suggest Marx finds in the example of the institutions and practices of the Commune elements of a new practice of politics beyond the logic of representation and of division between the political and the economic that marks bourgeois politics.

We also know, especially in light of the extent of the posthumously published material, that Althusser's elaboration on the philosophy of the encounter and aleatory materialism coincide with a period in which Althusser engages in an increasingly strong critique of the traditional communist movement, a position that is also evident in his public interventions both during the debates around the abandonment of the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat and then in his interventions around the crisis of Marxism (and the open strategic crisis of the PCF).

The question is how to rethink political practice to that end? There is a manuscript by Althusser that points to the question of practice and in particular political practice. This is the *Philosophy for Non-philosophers*.²⁰ Here Althusser makes a grand detour through the notion of practice and the different versions of practice as part of his general argument in regards to

17 On the centrality of a conception of radical contingency through the work of Althusser see Pippa 2019.

18 In Althusser 1969.

19 In Balibar 1974

20 Althusser 2017a.

the particular relation of philosophy to abstraction²¹ and practice in order to ground his insistence on the existence of *‘two contradictory practices of philosophy: the idealist and the materialist practice of philosophy’*.²² Althusser insists that *‘every practice is social’*, conceiving social practices not as acts or simple activities, but as *processes*: that is, *as a set of material, ideological, theoretical, and human (the agents) elements sufficiently well adapted to each other for their reciprocal action to produce a result that modifies the initial givens.*²³

To think political practice Althusser suggests that it has to be related to mode of production. Consequently the bourgeois practice of politics has to be related to the capitalist mode of production and how it came out of the encounter between independent historical processes:

Thus we can legitimately defend the idea that *the capitalist mode of production met up with [s’est rencontré avec] the bourgeoisie* (and with feudal lords who had become bourgeois), or, more precisely, that it was born at the ‘encounter’ of these independent processes, which affected, conjointly and simultaneously, *feudal lords* who had enriched themselves or landed proprietors eager to consolidate and exploit their holdings; *bourgeois* whose wealth stemmed from international trade (thus ‘owners of money’ all); and, finally, *workers* who had been ‘freed’ by being dispossessed.²⁴

This particular history leads to a very specific class struggle waged by the bourgeoisie. The condition of exploitation of wage workers marks its political practice. At the same time, it had to align itself *‘with the very workers*

21 Althusser offers the following definition of abstraction which enables his elaborations on the relation between philosophy, abstraction and practice: ‘Abstraction is not detachment of a part belonging to the concrete whole. Abstraction is bound to the concrete and derives from the concrete in ways that can vary (language is not ‘abstracted’ from the concrete the way law is, or the way the abstract gestures of every practice are). Yet the peculiarity of abstraction is to be something other than part of the concrete, since abstraction *adds* something to the concrete. What does it add? *The generality of a relation* (linguistic, legal, social, ideological) that concerns the concrete. Better: *this relation dominates the concrete without the latter’s knowledge, and it is this relation that constitutes the concrete as concrete.*’ (Althusser 2017a, p. 57).

22 Althusser 2017a, p. 22.

23 Althusser 2017a, p. 81

24 Althusser 2017a, pp. 134-135.

*it exploited against the feudal lords' relationship*²⁵. Consequently, the bourgeois political practice has the particular feature *'to act through intermediaries, very precisely, by way of the action of the class, or a segment of the class, that it exploits and dominates'*.²⁶ This can explain the importance of the political ideological state apparatus and in particular the parliamentary representative system, including the electoral system, as *'ideological weapons'*²⁷ of the bourgeoisie.

Just as the bourgeoisie does not work, but makes others work – that is why it dominates those it exploits – so *it does not act for itself, but makes others act: the others whom it exploits*. An admirable political practice, which, from exploitation and domination, derives the means to secure its own power.²⁸

In contrast, *'the practices of the organized proletariat were always direct practices, without intermediaries. If the proletarians unite, the reason is that they know that they "can count only on their own strength"'*.²⁹ Consequently, this leads to an antagonistic form of political organization:

Contrary to bourgeois political organizations, dominated by a caste of politicians or technocrats, proletarian political organizations tend towards the greatest possible democracy of discussion, decision and action, even if this tradition too can be lost. On the basis of this extensive mass political experience, a new ideology arises and gradually gains strength, an ideology in which history is no longer made by individuals or ideas, but by the self-organized masses.³⁰

Communist organizations are also presented as forms of already existing communism, as the kind of communism in the interstices that we have

25 Althusser 2017a, p. 135.

26 Althusser 2017a, p. 136.

27 Althusser 2017a, p. 136.

28 Althusser 2017a, p. 137.

29 Althusser 2017a, p. 138.

30 Althusser 2017a, p. 138.

also discussed, an important point since it points to the fact that communist organizations do not (or perhaps *should not*) simply represent antagonistic organizational principles, but above all antagonistic social relations and forms.

Yes communism already exists in our midst and has for a long time now, not just in embryo, but in actual fact: for example, in communist organizations and other communities (even religious communities) or activities – on one absolute condition: *that no commodity relations reign in them, but only the free association of individuals who desire the emancipation of humanity and act accordingly.*³¹

Althusser insists that the aim of a communist practice of politics is ‘*the end of all politics*, including the end of all democracy, which is necessarily limited by its rules’, since *every form of politics* is [...] *bound up with the state*.³² Although, one can find echoes here of an ‘end of politics’ position, I think that it has more to do with Althusser’s insistence (or even ‘bending the stick to the other side’) on the antagonistic character of politics, rather than a ‘Saint-Simonian’ technocratic vision of a society where politics will be replaced by the simple ‘management of things.’

Moreover, for Althusser it is important to stress how in the case of political practice we are talking about a particular practice where the transformation of the objective relations also entails the self-transformation. For Althusser, this is closer to the Aristotelian definition of *praxis* as self-transformation and can be said for the bourgeoisie but above all for the proletariat, where the element of externality that marks bourgeois political practice (the externality inscribed in the difference between those that lead and those who act) disappears within revolutionary political practice.

31 Althusser 2017a, p. 139.

32 Althusser 2017a, p. 139.

The same holds a fortiori for proletarian political practice. For, here, there is no longer any intermediary at all. It is a peculiar feature of proletarian political practice consciously to assume this condition, and to *realize the unity of transformation of the objective situation with self transformation*. Marx came up with the earliest formulations of this identity in his ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, where he speaks of revolutionary ‘praxis’ as the identity of the transformation of the object (the balance of power) and the subject (the organized revolutionary class). Here, what subsists of externality in bourgeois political practice, between those who lead and those who act, or between ideas and action, disappears in favour of a dialectic of unification and reciprocal transformation of the objective situation and the revolutionary forces engaged in the combat.³³

3. What is it means to think politically within the context of the materialism of the encounter?

But what it means to think in terms of such as political practice? What it means to think politically within the terrain of political practices, as opposed to thinking theoretically? What it means to think politics? Althusser discusses this question in the first part of *Machiavelli and Us*. Althusser’s starting point is exactly the character of Machiavelli’s *Prince* as a text.

We must therefore bring to light a new determination, hitherto passed over in silence - political practice - and say that the theoretical elements are focused on Machiavelli's concrete political problem only because this political problem is itself focused on political practice. As a result, political practice makes its sudden appearance in the theoretical universe where initially the science of politics in

33 Althusser 2017a, p. 141.

general, and then a particular political problem, here at issue. Obviously, it is a question of sudden appearance in a text. To be more precise, a theoretical text is affected in its modality and dispositive by political practice.³⁴

However, Althusser brings forward another important question, namely the centrality of the conjuncture in relation to political practice. According to Althusser, ‘Machiavelli does not pose the political problem of national unity in general, even as a particular theoretical problem (among others in general); he poses this problem in terms of the case, and hence the singular conjuncture’.³⁵ Dealing with this Althusser suggests a very particular form of thinking, what he describes as thinking in the conjuncture or *under* the conjuncture. I think that is one of the most important attempts by Althusser to actually think the specificity of political practice.

To think in terms of the category of conjuncture is not to think on the conjuncture, as one would reflect on a set of concrete data. To think under the conjuncture is quite literally to submit to the problem induced and imposed by its case: the political problem of national unity and the constitution of Italy into a national state. Here the terms must be inverted: Machiavelli does not think the problem of national unity in terms of the conjuncture; it is the conjuncture itself that negatively, yet objectively, poses the problem of Italian national unity. Machiavelli merely registers in his theoretical position a problem that is objectively, historically posed by the case of the conjuncture: not by simple intellectual comparisons, but by the confrontation of existing class forces and their relationship of uneven development - in fact, by their aleatory future.³⁶

34 Althusser 1999, p. 18.

35 Althusser 1999, p. 18.

36 Althusser 1999, p. 18.

What is fascinating here is this attempt to suggest that political practice (or at least *thinking* its possibility) is a very discreet practice, which can be described as neither enhancing an already existing dynamic nor simply imposing a political will, but as thinking and acting as part of the dynamics of a particular relation of forces. In this sense, a successful political intervention is one that actually gives form to the open question (or potentiality) posed by the conjuncture itself.

Therewith, in next to no time, the meaning of all the elements of the conjuncture changes: they become real or potential forces in the struggle for the historical objective, and their relations become relations of force. They are assessed as *relations of force*, as a function of their engagement, with a view to the political objective to be attained. The whole question then becomes: in what *form* are all the positive forces currently available to be rallied, in order to achieve the political objective of national unity? Machiavelli gives this form a name: the Prince. An exceptional individual, endowed with *virtù*, who, starting from nothing or from something, will be able to mobilize the forces required to unify Italy under his leadership. There is nothing astonishing about the fact that this form is valorous *individuality*.³⁷

When Althusser attempted to actually describe the political practice of the New Prince (or more precisely how he read Machiavelli's conception of the political practice of the New Prince) he insisted on the need of radical novelty and the importance of the void: '*the New Prince can start from anywhere, and be anyone: ultimately start from nothing, and be nothing to start with.* Once again, nothingness - or, rather, the aleatory void.'³⁸ What is more important is that here we find Althusser actually attempting to think what a politics of the encounter, might be, or how to think politics in a terrain

37 Althusser 1999, p. 19.

38 Althusser 1999, p. 79.

of encounters that are at the same time specifically conditioned and radically unforeseeable.

But we are then in the presence of an exceptional form of thought. On the one hand, we have conditions specified with the utmost precision, from the general state of the Italian conjuncture to the forms of the encounter between *fortuna* and *virtù*, and the exigencies of the process of political practice. On the other, we have a total lack of specification as to the site and subject of political practice. The striking thing is that Machiavelli finally grasps both ends of the chain - in short, thinks and formulates this theoretical disjuncture, this 'contradiction', without wishing to propose any kind of theoretical reduction or resolution of it, whether notional or oneiric. This thinking of the disjuncture stems from the fact that Machiavelli not only formulates, but thinks, his problem politically - that is to say, as a contradiction in reality that cannot be removed by thought, but only by reality. It can be removed only by the sudden appearance - necessary, but unforeseeable and inscribable as regards place, time and person - of the *concrete* forms of the political *encounter* whose general conditions alone are defined. In this theory that ponders and preserves the disjuncture, room is thereby made for political practice. Room is made for it through this organization of disjoined theoretical notions, by the discrepancy between the definite and indefinite, the necessary and the unforeseeable. This discrepancy, thought and unresolved by thought, is the presence of history and political practice in theory itself.³⁹

I believe that here we have the closest that Althusser comes to defining the kind of political practice that is more suitable to the materialism of the encounter. It is a practice that at the same time is based upon an

³⁹ Althusser 1999, p. 80.

assessment of a relation of forces and of a series of determinations, specific and singular yet definite, and upon working for the unforeseeable, the unexpected. It is the practice of creating at the same time the conditions, the political, ideological, economic, cultural for a certain political sequence and at the same time, however contradictory this might seem, attempt to create the necessary *void*, the necessary non-saturation of the political field, the necessary openness that enables the unexpected encounter, or, to be more precise, the unexpected form that is the only possibility of an encounter.

However, I would like to stress that this void should not be understood in terms of a pre-existing emptiness or nothingness but rather as the bringing to the fore of the constant potential so change, transformation and the possibility of new encounters and consequently new forms. As Warren Montag and Giorgos Fourtounis have shown, although Althusser seems in certain instances to suggest an almost metaphysical conception of a primordial void, there is also a more materialist conception of the void which point to how the void is more effect rather than cause of the encounter, in the sense that it is the encounter and consequently the new relations and forms that emerge that point to the actual void (and potential) at the heart of the pre-existing social and historical configuration. For Montag '[F]rom this perspective the void is not the condition of the encounter, rather, the encounter is the condition of the void, although understood as a verb, an activity rather than a substance, even if that substance is a negation of substance',⁴⁰ and for Fourtounis 'the void is *made* by the thing that emerges from an encounter, as part of the *cause* (in both senses) of its existence.'⁴¹ In a similar manner, Vittorio Morfino has insisted that we should never forget the primacy of the encounter over form and in a certain way over the void:

What role does the void play in such a philosophy? I would like to maintain that the emphasis on the concepts of 'nothing,' the 'null' and the 'void' has a purely rhetorical

40 Montag 2010, p. 168.

41 Fourtounis 2013, p. 56.

function; that contingency and the aleatory are the effect of an encounter and not of the nothing or the void. If this rhetorical function is transformed into a theoretical proposition, it risks transforming the theory of the encounter into a theory of the event or of freedom.⁴²

Consequently, the conceptual framework of the encounter, even with the references to the void does not point to some metaphysical conception of pure chance but to the very complexity, difficulty, plural temporality, but also *possibility* of political practice, a politics of the encounter.

4. The question of political and organizational forms

I think that so far we have managed to see four particular elements of Althusser's attempt to rethink political practice in light of the materialism of the encounter:

- (a) Political practice can only be thought in a conjectural and relational way, in its singular conditioning by the relations of forces that define (and constantly change) the terrain of social and political antagonism, and under the primacy of the antagonistic relations over the conflicting social forces of the conjunctural dynamics over the structural stabilities – as such it is always about transformation and self-transformation, it is *praxis*.
- (b) Antagonistic social relations imply antagonistic forms and practices of politics, meaning that in a certain way there is not a general form of political practice, but particular forms of political practice, associated to movements and social dynamics and thus entailing antagonistic historical horizons.
- (c) Attempting to think political practice within the contours of the materialism of the encounter entails a form of thinking that is inseparable from political practice, a thinking of both the complexity of determinations and the attempt to consciously attempt to affect them in their complexity and plural temporality and to work for the unexpected and the unforeseeable, in the sense of creating the void that can make it possible;

42 Morfino 2014, p. 97.

(d) All this requires political and organizational forms that enable this particular thinking, intervention and dialectic of transformation and self-transformation, organizational forms that have to be both militant and democratic, in a certain way depicting in practice and in action the new social forms and relation that the subaltern are struggling for.

One crucial aspect, especially in regards to the last question, can be found in Althusser's intervention in the debates around the 22nd Congress of the French Communist Party and the question of the abandonment of the dictatorship proletariat. Here Althusser adds another important element to this antagonistic 'new practice of politics', namely the importance of autonomous organizations of the masses which should be treated as embryonic forms of a revolutionary state that has to 'wither away'. In the following passage Althusser talks about the slogan 'union of the people of France' in a manner rather oppositional to its use by the leadership of the PCF.

Why address the popular masses in this way? To tell them, even if still only as a hint, that they will have to *organize themselves* autonomously, in original forms, in firms, urban districts and villages, around the questions of labour and living conditions, the questions of housing, education, health, transport, the environment, etc.; in order to define and defend their demands, first to prepare for the establishment of a revolutionary state, then to maintain it, stimulate it and at the same time force it to 'wither away'. Such mass organizations, which no one can define in advance and on behalf of the masses, already exist or are being sought in Italy, Spain and Portugal, where they play an important part, despite all difficulties. If the masses seize on the slogan of the union of the people of France and interpret it in this mass sense, they will be re-establishing connections with a living tradition of popular struggle in our country and will be able to help give a new content to the political forms

by which the power of the working people will be exercised under socialism.⁴³

This conception of the need for autonomous organizations of the masses is based on two important premises that we can find in Althusser's writings from this period. The first has to do with the insistence that a socialist mode of production does not exist, and that in contrast socialism is a '*contradictory* period during which capitalist elements (e.g. wage labour) and Communist elements (e.g. new mass organizations) co-exist in a conflictual way'.⁴⁴ Consequently it is a period of struggle which can only be conceived as a strategy for communism.

Unlike modes of production that are defined by their own relations of production, socialism cannot be defined *by itself*, by *its own* relations of production, because it does not have any of its own, but only *by the contradiction* between the capitalism it emerged from and the communism of which it is the first phase: hence as a function of its position vis-à-vis the capitalism from which it is gradually emerging and the communism which is its future. Very concretely this recalls Marx's slogan: communism is not an ideal but '*the real movement unfolding beneath our eyes*'. Very concretely this means: the strategy of the workers' movement must take this dialectic into account: *it cannot be merely the strategy of socialism*, it is necessarily the strategy of communism, or else the whole process is in danger of marking time and getting bogged down at one moment or another (and this must be foreseen). Only on the basis of the strategy of communism can socialism be conceived as a transitory and contradictory phase, and a strategy and forms of struggle be established from this moment that do not foster any illusions about socialism (such as 'We've arrived: everybody out'—Lenin's ironic comment) but treat socialism as it is, without getting

43 Althusser 1977, p. 11.

44 Althusser 1977, p. 15.

bogged down in the first ‘transition’ that happens to come along.⁴⁵

The second premise has to do with the non-neutrality of the state and the need for a process of radical transformation and revolutionizing that cannot be described as simple democratization. This is based on Althusser’s conceptualization of the State as a machine that transforms social force into class power and legal arrangements, but also again on the importance of autonomous organizations of the masses as crucial aspects of the revolutionary process.

Truly, and I ask that these words be carefully weighed, to ‘destroy’ the bourgeois state, in order to replace it with the state of the working class and its allies, *is not to add the adjective ‘democratic’ to each existing state apparatus*. It is something quite other than a formal and potentially reformist operation, it is to revolutionize in their structures, practices and ideologies the existing state apparatuses; to suppress some of them, to create others; it is *to transform the forms of the division of labour* between the repressive, political and ideological apparatuses; it is *to revolutionize their methods of work and the bourgeois ideology* that dominates their practices; it is to assure them *new relations with the masses* in response to mass initiatives, on the basis of a new, *proletarian* ideology, in order to prepare for the ‘withering away of the state’, i.e. its replacement by mass organizations.⁴⁶

It is obvious that when Althusser thinks this potential new practice of politics associated with a strategy for communism there are certain thematics to which he constantly returns: the insistence on the initiatives of the masses, this idea of autonomous organizations of the masses, references to the inventions of new forms, a constant critique of typical representative democracy, an emphasis on constant struggle and

45 Althusser 1977, p. 16.

46 Althusser 1977, p. 17

transformation. It is interesting that we find the same references also in the description of a new practice of philosophy in the 1976 lecture on the transformation of philosophy, where the challenge is the liberation and free exercise of social practices and human ideas:

To support our argument by comparison with the revolutionary State, which ought to be a State that is a 'non-State' - that is, a State tending to its own dissolution, to be replaced by forms of free association - one might equally say that the philosophy which obsessed Marx, Lenin and Gramsci ought to be a 'non-philosophy' - that is, one which ceases to be produced in the form of a philosophy, whose function of theoretical hegemony will disappear in order to make way for new forms of philosophical existence. And just as the free association of workers ought, according to Marx, to replace the State so as to play a totally different role from that of the State (not one of violence and repression), so it can be said that the new forms of philosophical existence linked to the future of these free associations will cease to have as their essential function the constitution of the dominant ideology, with all the compromises and exploitation that accompany it, in order to promote the liberation and free exercise of social practices and human ideas.⁴⁷

I think that this emphasis on liberating social practices is a central aspect of any thinking but also of any politics that relate to the encounter, exactly because it points towards the need constantly creating the potential for new relations, new forms and new encounters.

5. Who does politics?

However, we are still far from an answer in regards to in what ways we can think a political practice informed by the materialism of the encounter.

47 Althusser 1990, pp. 264-265

It is not an easy question, especially since this also poses the question of what or who does politics. As Emilio de Ípola stressed.

However, the theses on aleatory materialism, on the coefficient of contingency inherent to any historical process, on the irreplaceable allotment of will, of *virtù* (and fortune) that is required of any politics worthy of the name (all issues developed by the last Althusser) would seem to place serious obstacles in the way of the decisive conceptual disqualification of the subject. To whom should the qualities of good — or bad — politics be attributed? What or who “does” politics?⁴⁸

One way to deal with this is to return to Althusser reading Machiavelli. In notes that were published as part of the second edition of his autobiography,⁴⁹ Althusser returns to Machiavelli as a thinker of the encounter.

The crucial question of a transformative political practice is presented as the question of ‘how to guide one’s *virtù* in order to produce a real continuation of fortune, that is, to maintain *in a lasting way* (Machiavelli’s problem: “a principality that *lasts*”) a favorable conjuncture.’⁵⁰ It is here that the figure of the fox enters the scene with its ‘quiet instinct [...] the *instinctive* intuition of the conjuncture and of possible fortune to be seized: a new “encounter,” but this time controlled and prepared as in advance’.⁵¹ At the same time, it is important to note the complex way with which Althusser described the necessary *lasting image* of the prince the importance of the need to be ‘*at a distance from himself, his own desires, and impulses, and therefore, in the language of the time, from his passions*’.⁵² Consequently, it is important to ‘remain always faithful to this image of himself, therefore, to restrain his own “passions” for him to conform to them *in lasting way*,

48 De Ípola 2018, p. 96

49 Althusser 1994

50 Althusser 1997, p. 14.

51 Althusser 1997, p. 16.

52 Althusser 1997, p. 16.

for without it he could not render fortune and therefore the friendship of his peoples *lasting*.⁵³ However, Althusser also stressed that Machiavelli remains silent on the ‘nature’ of the fox and thinks of it ‘only in its *effects* of semblance’, also referring to the “‘theater” of politics’.⁵⁴

For Althusser this distance as mastery over passions should not be viewed as the result of intellectual knowledge to dissipate ideological illusions. Turning to Spinoza, he insists that ‘[t]he mastery of the passions in Spinoza, far from being able to be interpreted as an “intellectual” liberation of the negative efficacy of the passions, on the contrary consists in their subsumption united with the internal *displacement* of the “sad passions” into “joyous passions”.’⁵⁵ Moreover, Althusser insists that the ‘[t]he *amor intellectus Dei* is in no way an “intellectual” love; it is the love of the entire individual, which is a finite mode of infinite substance – a love of the body substantially united with the love of the *mens*, and bringing about in the movements of the *mens* the very movements of the body, those of the fundamental *conatus*: “The more power the body has the more freedom the mind has” (Spinoza).⁵⁶ That is why Althusser insisted that the fox is ‘the *body*, its *liberated potential*’.⁵⁷ It is in this sense that ‘the Prince (and as Spinoza will say every man) must establish between himself and his passions a critical and revolutionary relation of distance such that he can displace – transform his passions from sad passions (subsumed and passive) into joyous passions (free and active), without which no thoughtful political action can achieve *lasting* success.’⁵⁸

However, when Althusser attempted to answer whether all this can be of practical use in the conjuncture his writing (that of the 1980s), the tone is negative. In a certain way he was describing a world where there can be no potential political centre, exactly because globalization has created a world without economic centre. Politics is everywhere but in a form the

53 Althusser 1997, pp. 16-17.

54 Althusser 1997, p. 17,

55 Althusser 1997, p. 18.

56 Althusser 1997, p. 18.

57 Althusser 1994, p. 496

58 Althusser 1994, p. 498

leads to ‘*total mass depolitisation*.⁵⁹ This leads to an expansion of all forms of ideology along with a dispersion of politics that makes it impossible to have a ‘strategic centre’. Consequently, there is nothing that ‘permits the anticipation in the future and the founding of a “New principality” to unite a humanity that is torn between pseudo-national conflicts’ and ‘despite the infantile utopian hopes of Gramsci, it is very clear that *Machiavelli is of absolutely no use to us*, despite his authentic materialist inspiration’.⁶⁰

6. What primitive political accumulation for communism?

This oscillation between historical optimism and historical pessimism can perhaps be explained by the difficulties of Althusser’s situation in the 1980s. Moreover, in many instances Althusser made obvious that actually thinking through the question of the political forms of what could be a ‘New Prince’ was a task that he could not face. This means that it remains an open question how to collectively think not in terms of the ‘*accomplished fact*’ but of ‘*the fact to be accomplished*’ and of ‘*the conditions of the absence of any political form appropriate to the production of this result*’,⁶¹ in the sense of a ‘*primitive political accumulation*’,⁶² to use in the context of a strategy for communism the terms Althusser used to describe aspects of Machiavelli’s solitude.

Perhaps some starting points can be found in Althusser’s interventions in the second half of the 1970s around the thematic of the crisis of Marxism. Here Althusser insisted on the need to not reduce politics to the forms associated with the bourgeois version:

Concerning politics, it is a matter above all else of not reducing it to the forms officially sanctioned as political by bourgeois ideology: the state, popular representation, the political struggle over the possession of state power, political parties, etc. If we enter into this logic and remain in it, we

59 Althusser 1994, p. 502

60 Althusser 1994, p. 506.

61 Althusser 1999, p. 121.

62 Althusser 1999, p. 125.

risk falling not only into “parliamentary cretinism” but above all the juridical illusion of politics: since politics is defined by political right, and this right consecrates (and consecrates only) the forms of politics defined by bourgeois ideology, including in the activity of parties.⁶³

The second important aspect is the need to maintain the autonomy of the Party in regards to the State. Hence Althusser’s insistence on the Party being outside the State

On principle, according to its political and historical purpose, the party must be *outside the state*, both under the bourgeois state, and even more so under the proletarian state. The party must be the instrument of the destruction of the bourgeois state, before becoming, bit by bit, one of the instruments of the withering away of the state. The political exteriority of the party with regard to the state is a fundamental principle that we can draw from the scarce texts of Marx and Lenin on this question. Without this autonomy of the party (and not of politics) in relation to the state, we will never get out of the bourgeois state, however “reformed” we want it to be.⁶⁴

When Althusser attempt to discuss the question of a new practice of politics, he expresses his disagreement with a simple conception of ‘socialisation of politics’ as suggested by Ingrao instead stressing more the idea of a new practice of politics: ‘What is interesting to me, in the very examples that Ingrao cites, is that things happen *in reverse*: not politics towards the masses, but the masses towards politics, and, what is crucial, *towards a new practice of politics*.’⁶⁵

However, this move of the masses towards politics in the sense of a new practice of politics remains in the end highly aporetic. Althusser’s critique

63 Althusser 2017b.

64 Althusser 2017b.

65 Althusser 2017b.

of Poulantzas or his fear that a certain reading of Gramsci would lead to a reformist turn or an inability to maintain the necessary distance and autonomy from the State,⁶⁶ are well known,⁶⁷ yet the alternative is never articulated apart from drawing line of demarcations, especially in the sense of an emphasis on autonomous organizations and the distance from the State. In light of the above the many references to islets of communism and to communism already existing in the interstices, in my reading tend to be expressions of this aporia, rather than actual strategic suggestions.

One might say that this has also to do with actual aporias at the centre of Marx and Engel's theorization of questions that have to do with the State, the party and politics. As Balibar underlined, in an intervention that coincided with Althusser's interventions on the crisis of Marxism, 'the "the Marxist theory of the State" [...] is *an ideological conception*, in the sense that historical materialism has tendentially attributed to this concept'.⁶⁸ Balibar undertook in this text a very close reading of the tensions running through the elaborations of Marx and Engels, along with the shift in problematic from the early schema of alienation to the later conceptualization of the State as machine, which is also expressed as a shift from the party as conscience to the party as organization.⁶⁹ However, Balibar insisted that the 'thesis of the "party-conscience" never disappeared, but under the effect of its proper difficulties and of the historical "experimentation" it had to subordinate itself tendentially to the thesis of the "party-organization", which contradicts on essential points'.⁷⁰ Moreover, the crucial historical experience of the Paris Commune 'does not shine any new light on the relations between the (revolutionary) party and the State (of the dictatorship of the proletariat); it helps the emergence of a form or "working class government" *without* organized party, *a fortiori* without leading [*dirigeant*] party, which is *at the same time* its weakness and its historical significance ("self-government" of the working class in its

66 Althusser 2006; Althusser 2020b.

67 On the debate on the State see Kalampokas, Betzelos and Sotiris 2018.

68 Balibar 1978, p. 122

69 Balibar 1978, p. 137.

70 Balibar 1978, p. 144.

mass organizations).⁷¹ Consequently, for Balibar ‘the definition of the State as “machine” is not sufficient to determine the type of organization that the party must be and the functions it has to fulfil’.⁷² Moreover, according to Balibar, this conception of the State as machine cannot account for the inextricable relation between politics and ideology, exemplified in the famous phrase from the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* on the ‘ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out [*ausfechten*].’ It is this element that can explain why Marx will maintain a reference to the conception of politics as form of illusion and inversion, because this points to both ‘*a concept of the State and a concept of ideology*’.⁷³ Consequently for Balibar the paradox of Marx and Engel’s approach is that:

During a half century of experiences and analyses the questions of the State and the party in Marx and Engels remain blocked from their point of departure, the question of ideology, and the obstacle of an ideological theory of ideology.⁷⁴

Conclusion

I think that this small detour through Balibar’s analysis offers a way to rethink the limits of Althusser’s confrontation with the question of a new practice of politics within the terrain of the materialism of the encounter. On the one hand Althusser was fully aware of the complexity of political practice within such a radically non-teleological and open conception of the conjuncture. It is a form of politics that is based on a thinking under the conjuncture and without any guarantees, and which must at the same time accumulate ‘advantageous conditions’, lift obstacles, and create the ‘void’ that can enable new encounters and new forms, which in their turn will need to invent new ways to become lasting. It is a politics that is always

⁷¹ Balibar 1978, p. 151-152.

⁷² Balibar 1978, p. 152.

⁷³ Balibar 1978, p. 167.

⁷⁴ Balibar 1978, p. 167.

intertwined with ideology and ideological forms which as the example of the fox shows, are also necessary for the encounter to last. It is a politics that is based upon a very complex and uneven relation between the 'vanguard' or the organization and the 'masses' in which the ideological transformation and emergence of new political subjectivities (the shift from sad passions to joyous passions) can only be thought as praxis and collective practice and not simply as enlightenment. All this complex conception of new transformative (and self-transformative) political practice requires an equally complex thinking of both the political terrain and the State and the forms of organization. Althusser indeed offers starting points: the necessity for organizations to avoid the identification with the State and the bourgeois mode of politics, the need for autonomous organizations of the masses (beyond parties), the conception of forms of organization as points of encounter and convergence of different experience and the insistence that organization must also be islets of communism, representing the emergence of new social forms. However, at the same time all these remain starting points. The conception of the State as machine becomes an obstacle when thinking the complexity of the political terrain. The simple reference to autonomy of organization and the idea of a 'dialectic of thinking and praxis' cannot account for the complex process of collective transformation that the shift to joyous passions entails. The ability to at the same time create conditions, change the balance of forces, and 'prepare for the unexpected] and the emergence of the necessary collective militant *virtù* remain an open and unanswered question. Perhaps because we are dealing with questions that can only be answered by actual historical experiences and not just theorists.

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