

September 2018

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Recommended Citation

Morejón, Gil (2016) "Overdetermination, Complication, Beatitude: Althusser's Physics of Social Modes," *Décalages*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2.
Available at: <https://scholar.oxy.edu/decalages/vol2/iss2/11>

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Overdetermination, Complication, Beatitude: Althusser's Physics of Social Modes

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was presented at the 2016 DePaul University Graduate Philosophy Colloquium.

complication

Louis Althusser can be largely credited for the recent renaissance of serious readings of Spinoza as providing a metaphysics particularly well-suited for contemporary political critique, developing a rigorous rationalism that cuts against the grain of abstract individualism, onto-theological humanism, positivist scientism, and capitalist ideology.¹ And just as Spinoza's theoretical interventions in political discourse were eminently strategic, as in the case of the anonymously-published *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Althusser similarly understood his own interventions to be necessarily conditioned by the historical conjunctures that occasioned his writings. His Spinozism therefore does not amount to a simple repetition of Spinoza's concepts; rather he repeats them always with a difference, elaborating strategic conceptual variations that both illuminate the contours of Spinoza's systematic philosophy and respond effectively to the discursive context of their rearticulation.

One central and well-known example of such a transposition is Althusser's infamous science-ideology distinction, which is a variation on Spinoza's theme of adequate and inadequate knowledge. In this paper I will argue that this epistemic problematic has its metaphysical correlate in another differential repetition, in the concept of *overdetermination*, with which Althusser seeks to articulate the problematic of antagonistic social formations. But overdetermination itself as a concept has only rarely been thematized. I argue that while the language of 'overdetermination' comes from psychoanalysis, and it has been variously presented as a Gramscian, Maoist, or Lacanian innovation, its real conceptual bases are found in Spinoza's materialist analysis of modal interactions, and situating it within this genealogy clarifies its sense.²

¹ Althusser's Spinozism has been the focus of much recent scholarship. Cf., e.g., Sharp, Hasana. *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011; Montag, Warren. *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013; Peden, Knox. *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014; *Crisis & Critique* 2:2, etc.

² Balibar's tantalizingly brief remarks on overdetermination construe it as primarily inspired by Gramscian notions of a decentered social totality. (Balibar, Étienne. "Structural Causality, Overdetermination, and Antagonism." In *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*. Eds. Antonio Calliari and David F. Ruccio. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1995.) In Chapter 3 of Elliott's *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, he presents overdetermination as a specifically Maoist development in the theory of contradiction; and while Elliott rightly emphasizes Althusser's Spinozism elsewhere in the text, Spinoza does not figure into Elliott's reconstruction of this concept. (Elliott, Gregory. *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*. Boston: Brill, 2006.) Katja Kolšek treats overdetermination at some length, but as a 'paradoxical,' 'problematic' or 'quasi-concept' best understood along Lacanian psychoanalytic lines (which are, on my reading, quite foreign to Althusser's Spinozist inspiration) as the effect of a 'parallax' shift in perspective on what she takes to

For Spinoza, modes are complex when they are *complicated*: that is, when they are *implicated* in a dynamic multiplicity of concrete assemblages or ensembles, none of which is sufficient to explain the mode as singularly constituting its essence. But at the same time, it is impossible for a mode not to be determined by every assemblage in which it is implicated. That is, complex modes are always overdetermined. The Spinozist challenge is to reach the point of view of the third kind of knowledge, or *beatitude*, in which a finite mode is grasped in its singularity. This however cannot be achieved by way of a ‘subtraction’ of the mode from the milieu of its overdetermination. Indeed subtraction leaves us always at the level of inadequate knowledge, the abstract perspective of the imagination. Althusser’s insistence on the overdetermined character of social modes is designed to prevent us from performing such a subtractive abstraction in trying to understand them.

In the first section of this paper, I will reconstruct some of the salient features of what I will call Spinoza’s physics of modes, which will let us see, in the second section, how Althusser’s concept of overdetermination repeats this complex physics at the level of social formations, in a variation that also seeks to introduce the Marxist theme of social antagonism. In fact, as we will see, the couplet ‘contradiction/overdetermination’ is itself contradictory, and the whole difficulty will lie in whether it is possible to recuperate a strong sense of antagonism once overdetermination is taken seriously.

the physics of modes

To begin with, what is a mode? Modes constitute one of the central categories of Spinoza’s metaphysics, alongside substance and attribute. Spinoza defines substance as that which exists in itself and which is conceived through itself. A substance’s attribute, he writes, is “what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.”³ Modes are then the affections of a substance, the ways of being possible for a substance. Modes therefore cannot exist independently; they exist and are conceived not in and through themselves, but in and through the substance of which they are modifications. In the first 11 propositions of the *Ethics*, Spinoza shows that there can only be one substance, the absolutely infinite being called God or nature, which exists necessarily and is expressed in an infinity of attributes, including thought and extension.⁴ As Deleuze writes in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, the *Ethics*

be the proper object of materialist philosophy (and so of Althusser’s), namely, the void. (Kolšek, Katja. “The parallax object of Althusser’s materialist philosophy.” In *Encountering Althusser*. Eds. Katja Diefenbach, Sara R. Farris, Gal Kirn, and Peter D. Thomas. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.)

³ Spinoza, Benedict de. *Ethics*. In *Complete Works*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Ed. Michael Morgan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002. I D4

⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics* I P1-11

begins with given substantial attributes and proceeds “as quickly as possible”⁵ to this idea of God, from which everything else follows: in Proposition 16, Spinoza tells us that from “the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes.”⁶

The majority of Book I is concerned with little else than establishing precisely what is meant by ‘the necessity of the divine nature’, which Spinoza argues is unique and absolute. But once he has done away with the quasi-transcendental illusions of an anthropomorphic God and a teleologically-organized nature, the rest of the *Ethics* focuses almost exclusively on the physics of determinate and finite modes.⁷ The finite modes that follow from the divine nature are determined, as regards both their essence and existence, by God as their efficient cause.⁸ Moreover, modes are necessarily determined to produce the effects they do: they cannot determine themselves to produce other effects, and they cannot render themselves

⁵ Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Trans. Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988. Pg. 111

⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics* I P16

⁷ I leave aside here the complex problem posed by the ‘infinite modes’, which Spinoza discusses briefly in *Ethics* I P21-23. Spinoza says that there are both immediate and mediate infinite modes, where the first are always produced by the absolute nature of substance, and the second, while also having always eternally been produced, are caused by the immediate infinite modes or by other mediate infinite modes. Schuller asks Spinoza for examples to clarify what this means, and Spinoza responds in Letter 64: “the examples you ask for of the first kind [i.e., immediate infinite modes] are: in the case of thought, absolutely infinite intellect; in the case of extension, motion and rest. An example of the second kind [i.e., mediate infinite modes] is the face of the whole universe, which, although varying in infinite ways, yet remains always the same.” (Spinoza, Benedict de. Letter 64, in *Complete Works*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Ed. Michael Morgan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002.)

Still, just what Spinoza exactly means, and what conceptual work is done, by the infinite modes remains somewhat unclear and has been the focus of several investigations in recent Spinoza scholarship. Cf. Huenemann, Charles. “Modes Infinite and Finite in Spinoza’s Metaphysics.” *NASS Monograph #3* (1995): 3-21; Schmaltz, Tad M. “Spinoza’s Mediate Infinite Mode.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35:2 (1997): 199-235; Gabbey, Alan. “Spinoza, infinite modes and the infinitive mood.” *Studia Spinozana* 16 (2008): 41-65; Garrett, Don. “The Essence of the Body and the Part of the Mind that is Eternal.” In *A Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*. Ed. Olli Koistinen. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Melamed, Yitzhak Y. *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, especially Chapter 4.

For the purposes of this essay, I am concerned exclusively with finite and determinate modes, and this is what I will intend even when I discuss ‘modes’ without qualification.

⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics* I P25

undetermined.⁹ But the manner in which God constitutes the efficient cause of such modal determination is, always, *as another mode*. For, as Spinoza argues, if a mode's determination followed immediately from the absolute and infinite nature of God, that mode would itself be necessarily eternal and infinite; so, any determinate and finite mode is “determined to exist and produce an effect by God or an attribute of God insofar as it is modified by a modification which is finite and has a determinate existence.”¹⁰ That is, insofar as something is finite and determinate, it can only affect and be affected by other finite and determinate things. Consequently, we might add a corollary to Deleuze's insight: it is as if Spinoza gets to God as quickly as he can, just in order to have done with God as quickly as possible. If we are concerned with finite and determinate things – like environments, societies, economies, human beings, desires and affects – our analysis will have to bear on other finite and determinate modes and the logic of modal interactions.

Now in Book II, Spinoza indicates the elements of such an analysis at the level of bodies, in the so-called ‘physical digression’, *de natura corporum*. Between Propositions 13 and 14, Spinoza introduces new axioms, definitions, and lemmas, sketching out the logic of bodily interactions. Individual bodies are modes of one and the same extended substance, and so are distinguished from one another not by essence but by their characteristic relations of movement and rest, the relative relations of speed and slowness maintained between their parts. The degree of a body's complexity determines the extent of its capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies without this characteristic relation being compromised.¹¹ So long as its relation remains within the threshold determined by its degree of complexity, a body can still be said to retain its nature, or be the same thing, if its parts are replaced, if it changes in size or direction, or if it functions as a part within another body's relation of movement and rest. One can thus understand how a single mode, if it is sufficiently complex, may be simultaneously implicated in a multiplicity of modal assemblages, without its identity being reducible to the way in which it is determined by any one assemblage in particular. This feature of sufficiently complex modes clearly applies in the case of human beings, which for Spinoza are only notable precisely for their complexity: the human body is “affected by external bodies in very many ways,” and “can move and dispose external bodies in a great many ways.”¹² And it is this irreducible character of determinate relations of multiple implication and simultaneous affection, natural to complex modes, that Althusser will call *overdetermination* with regard to really existing social modes.

⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics* I P26-7

¹⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics* I P27Dem

¹¹ Spinoza, *Ethics* II L1, 4-7

¹² Spinoza, *Ethics* II Postulates III, VI

Why, however, should we call this logic of modal interaction a *physics*? It is true that as a physics it does not possess the ideal reversibility of classical Newtonian models. Its epistemological limitations resemble those of chemistry, where the nature of an effect only obscurely indicates the natures of the causes involved in its production. This is a physics of overlapping and discontinuous systems, open circuits, and environs in which, as Prigogine and Stengers write in reference to the post-Newtonian dynamics of nonlinear systems, “reversibility and determinism apply only to simple, limiting cases.”¹³ Modes are often complex and their interactions become increasingly complicated – at the limit, the complications extend to infinity. But even the infinite complexity of a system of interactive determinations is only apparently chaotic in its effects. And in this physics there is never action ‘at a distance’ – assemblages involve and complicate, affect and determine, other modes through the intensive plenum of extended substance. Modes are never so pristine as the ideal objects of geometry, and their interactions never as simple as the vectors of classical physics; in each case, what is at stake is a physics of complication, a dynamics of complexity, a strict rationalism of the apparently chaotic.

A further complication follows from the fact that any idea of the kinds of bodies we have been describing also involves the idea of the human body whose mind thinks it: one cannot clearly subtract out the nature of one’s own body or mind from the idea of the external body. Strictly speaking, in this case what one has is the idea of the bodily assemblage involving, at the very least, both one’s own and the external body.¹⁴ This is the ineradicable problem of the inadequate first kind of knowledge, which Spinoza also calls the imagination and which Althusser will reconceive as ideology. And if he infamously declares that ‘ideology has no history’, still my own inadequate knowledge or ideological understanding surely does: the images of the natures of myself and of external bodies that I subtract from the obscure whole of this ideal assemblage will be determined according to a series of potentially confused ideal and affective associations that have taken shape in the course of my individual experiences.¹⁵

¹³ Prigogine, Ilya and Isabelle Stengers. *Order Out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984. Pg. 8. Anticipating where this paper will lead, compare these lines by Althusser: “an ‘*overdetermined contradiction*’ may either be *overdetermined* in the direction of a *historical inhibition*, a real ‘block’ for the contradiction (for example, Wilhelmine Germany), or in the direction of a *revolutionary rupture* (Russia in 1917), but in neither condition *is it ever found in the ‘pure’ state*. ‘Purity’ itself would be the exception, I agree, but I know of no example to refer to.” (Althusser, Louis. “Contradiction and Overdetermination.” In *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Verso, 2005. Pg. 106)

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics* II P16

¹⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics* II P18s; P40s; III P57

None of this is to deny the possibility of forming adequate knowledge of material assemblages that include us, but it is to underscore some of the difficulties attending such an effort. And in particular, it highlights the futility of any attempt at attaining adequate knowledge by *subtraction*, that is, by imagining the object of knowledge outside its (over)determining milieu. If we want to retain the image of physics here, it is because modes as Spinoza has described them function as points of articulation and inflection within fields of complex forces and interactions. After all, Spinoza tells us, the singular essence of any thing or mode is precisely its *conatus*, its striving to persevere in its being; this goes just as well for ideas as it does for bodies, from the simplest to the most complex.¹⁶ In this sense, ideas, as existing modes, are the objects of a physics of the ideal (which is not the same as an ideal physics). As Alexandre Matheron shows in his important study *Individu et communaut  chez Spinoza*, at orders of sufficient complexity – and again, human beings are clearly sufficiently complex for this – a mode’s striving involves the effort to transform objective conditions, the modes constituting its milieu, such that they will naturally tend to increase its own power.¹⁷ This attempt at transforming external modes is always underway at a multiplicity of levels simultaneously, and modes are complicated at every level. Am I not immanently involved in the complex efforts to determine reality naturally being pursued by capital, the United States, the university, my family, and mitochondria? My mind is the idea of the body implicated in all these material assemblages and more, but it does not follow that I automatically have adequate knowledge of any of them.

Spinoza argues that it will only be by making a retreat to the greater or lesser generality of the common notions that I can begin to form adequate ideas, but by definition these cannot be adequate ideas *of* these particular assemblages.¹⁸ The common notions constitute the second kind of knowledge: “What is common to all things and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any singular thing,” and “can only be conceived adequately.”¹⁹ Common notions may be organized along on a spectrum, according to which they indicate a maximum or minimum of generality; at one end they describe what is common to all modes of a given attribute, and at the other what is common to just two modes of an attribute. At the latter extreme, the least general common notion of which I can form an adequate idea is of my body and one other body. We can say that the less general the common notion, the more ‘useful’ it is, since the domain of bodies whose relations it adequately expresses is more specifically delimited the less general it is. By contrast, a maximally general common notion is almost practically useless: all bodies are modes of

¹⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics* III P7

¹⁷ Matheron, Alexandre. *Individu et communaut  chez Spinoza*. Paris: Minuit, 1969. Chs. 3 and 4

¹⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics* II P37-40

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics* II P37; P38

extension, involving relations of movement and rest; the universal applicability of a concept is at the same time its poverty. But in neither case do common notions express the essences of singular things; rather, as Deleuze says, common notions express a *unity of composition*; they are “physico-chemical or biological Ideas rather than geometric ones: they present Nature’s unity of composition in its various aspects.”²⁰

For Spinoza, it is always possible to form common notions, that is, to attain adequate knowledge; and that common notions form the basis of reason, which consists in regarding things not as contingent but as necessary.²¹ But whether one actually attains adequate knowledge is also subject to the laws of necessity, which paradoxically means that it is a matter of having a fortuitous encounter, a joyful interaction in which I grasp the necessity of a unity of composition, affirm the power of my own mind as a mode of thinking, and recognize the inadequate character of what I had previously imagined. And whether this happens does not depend on my volition, since for Spinoza the will and understanding are coextensive: I affirm just what is involved in the idea I have, whether my idea is adequate or confused.²² In order to pass beyond the inadequacy of my imagination, I must be determined to think something adequately by external causes that bring me joy and increase my power of thinking. Even the autodidact requires a situation in which the physics of modes encourages thought, a favorable milieu in which the complex of determinations implicates them in a joyful encounter; where the agreement of their body and that of another gives rise to the affirmation of a shared unity of composition. But this does not always happen, for objective circumstances are not always favorable to thought. Adequate knowledge might never ‘take hold’, as Althusser sometimes likes to put it. As Spinoza writes: “When we say that a man rests in false ideas, and does not doubt them, we do not, on that account, say that he is certain, but only that he does not doubt, or that he rests in false ideas because there are no causes to bring it about that his imagination wavers.”²³ This, again, is the problem of ideology: my remaining within inadequate knowledge must be interrupted from without, for I cannot will knowledge beyond what I already happen to know.

But once I have some adequate knowledge, I can proceed all the way to what Spinoza calls *beatitude*, the third kind of knowledge, in which I affirm the necessity not only of the relations involved in a unity of composition but of singular things. Beatitude consists in grasping individual modes as fully necessary from the perspective of their production, which involves a total disavowal of contingency as a third quasi-transcendental illusion (after an anthropomorphic God and a teleological Nature). Both common notions and knowledge of the third kind are systems of

²⁰ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 115

²¹ Spinoza, *Ethics* II P44

²² Spinoza, *Ethics* II P49

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics* II P49s

adequate ideas involving necessity, but the former bear on relations of composition and the latter on singular essences. We can then say that these illusions are operations of the imagination: the first is a projection, the second an inversion, and the third a subtraction which yields images of things only by stripping them of their determination, extracting them from the order of production, from the actual order of effective reality. But beatitude is knowledge of things precisely as determined, as necessarily produced in all their complications: it is the joy that just is the power of thinking.

social formations and overdetermination

When he wrote “Contradiction and Overdetermination” in 1962, Althusser was more than a little bit anxious to distinguish Marxism from Hegelianism; a significant part of the essay involves arguing for the uniqueness of the Marxist dialectic. Althusser was particularly troubled by the inadequacy of the metaphors of ‘inverting Hegel’ and of ‘extracting the rational kernel from the mystical shell’ – which left one with, respectively, just Hegelian dialectics again, or else nothing at all.²⁴ The piece belongs in a curious genre of postwar French thought marked by its utter disdain for anything called Hegelian.²⁵ Althusser’s concern in rejecting the specifically Hegelian concept of contradiction in trying to elaborate a systematic Marxist philosophy is very close to what Deleuze, in *Difference & Repetition*, referred to as the “insipid monocentricity”²⁶ of Hegelian dialectics: its tendency to reduce real complexities to a single essential determination. At the very least, Althusser argues, the univocal character of Hegelian contradiction is inappropriate for an analysis of historically

²⁴ Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” 89-94

²⁵ The longer story here is best told by Elliott in Chapter 2 of *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*. There we learn that in the early 1960s, the *Partie communiste français* had launched an investigation into what went wrong with that whole Stalinist scene, which culminated in a piece published in the *Cahiers communistes* entitled “The Tasks of Communist Philosophers and the Critique of Stalin’s Errors” [*Les tâches des philosophes communistes et la critique des erreurs philosophiques de Staline*]. The conclusions reached and presented by Maurice Thorez and Roger Garaudy criticized Stalin’s *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* for being insufficiently Hegelian, and suggested that the way forward for communist philosophers would have to involve a positive reappraisal of the ‘negation of the negation’. Althusser’s “Contradiction and Overdetermination” and “On the Materialist Dialectic” were quite explicitly critiques and repudiations of this official party line, published even while he remained a member of the PCF. (Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, 56-60) On Althusser’s tortured relationship with the equally torturous efforts of the ‘de-stalinization’ of the PCF, see also Chapters 5 and 6 of Peden’s *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology*, esp. pgs. 133-142, 151-157.

²⁶ Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference & Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. Pg. 263

concrete social formations, which are highly complicated modes of existence and thus will only be inadequately or ideologically grasped if they are understood as the phenomenal expression of any one assemblage; this would be subtraction. In the place of this reductive tendency, Althusser draws on the Spinozist physics of modes we have just been describing to advance a provisional concept of overdetermination in which multiple levels of effectivity are simultaneously operative.²⁷

Althusser's refrain is constant: Marx gave us the elements for a real science of history, breaking with idealist philosophies and ideologies of history.²⁸ This involves not only the introduction of new concepts, but new relations between the concepts with which we seek to grasp social modes and their historical trajectories. What we are

²⁷ One last point before leaving behind the question of Hegel and Hegelianism. If Althusser's avowed anti-Hegelianism is particularly pronounced in this essay, it is first due to political circumstances (see note 25 above), but also because he might be called a 'recovering Hegelian'. After all, this is a thinker whose master's thesis, "On Content in the Thought of G.W.F. Hegel", features lines like: "the world has become Hegelian to the extent that Hegel was a truth capable of becoming a world," and the admission that Hegel's system, with all its extravagant claims, is "presented so compellingly and with such rigor that the possibility of its falling apart would be unthinkable, if history did not offer us the spectacle of its disintegration." (Althusser, Louis. "On Content in the Thought of G.W.F. Hegel." In *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*. Ed. François Matheron. Trans. G.M. Goshgarion. New York: Verso, 1997. Pgs. 36, 99). His review of Kojève's *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, "Man, That Night," positions itself not as a critique of Hegel but as a defense of a more complete Hegel, against the one-sidedness of existentialist or subjectivist readings of Hegel: if Kojève had emphasized that 'substance is a subject', he missed Hegel's deeper point that 'substance is *also* a subject'. Finally the 1950 essay "The Return to Hegel", which is somewhat more sociological in tone, distinguished between the revolutionary materialist and bourgeois idealist tendencies of Hegelian thought and its reception. (Althusser, *The Spectre of Hegel*)

I tend to think that the kind of 'generalized anti-Hegelianism' that Deleuze describes in his Preface to *Difference & Repetition* is overstated, if only because it is always a *certain* Hegel that is taken as 'the enemy', and indeed as the kind of enemy who a different Hegel would have also targeted. In the case concerning us here, it is noteworthy, for instance, that it is quite possible to read Althusser's elaboration of overdetermination as an attempt at being more Hegelian than Hegel, rather than as a flight from Hegelianism. To insist on the real depth of complexity, to refuse to allow for the reduction of so many different determinations to a single 'essential' one – is this not after all the meaning of the Hegelian dictum that 'the true is the whole,' the critique of every such analysis as 'one-sided'? In other words, Althusser is 'anti-Hegelian' to the precise extent that Hegel's own treatment of history is where he is at his least Hegelian, his least dialectical, his most one-sided.

²⁸ Even though he admits that Marx's 'rupture' or 'epistemological break' was never 'complete': "It was only tendential." (Althusser, Louis. "Philosophy and Marxism." In *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*. Ed. François Matheron and Oliver Corpet. Trans. G.M. Goshgarion. New York: Verso, 2006. Pg. 258)

dealing with is a new *problematic*, that is, a new way of articulating the necessity of an object of knowledge, or a new system of concepts.²⁹ As Althusser writes in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Marx saw that the notion of ‘society’ was non-scientific or ideological, and introduced in its place a new problematic, a new conceptual constellation involving ‘social formations’ and ‘modes of production’: “‘social formation’ designates every ‘concrete society’ that has historical existence and is *individualized*, so that it is distinct from other societies contemporaneous with it, and is also distinct from its own past, by virtue of the mode of production dominant in it.”³⁰ A mode of production is itself a contradictory unity of the *forces* and *relations* of production. Moreover, Althusser argues that there are always multiple modes of production in a given social formation, but that one of these is dominant at any given point; and a social formation is individuated as the antagonistic or contradictory unity in which one mode of production happens to be dominant.

If this is a ‘scientific’ advance, on the Spinozist model we have explored, it would have to be because we are able to grasp adequately some common notions particular to social modes of existence. Consider Marx’s discussion, in Chapter 7 of the first volume of *Capital*, of the labor-process, in which he begins by laying out what is common to all modes of production: namely, raw materials, means of production, and the purposive exercise of labor-power. Only subsequently, having laid out this concept of production from the perspective of its unity of composition, does he turn to the specifically capitalist mode of production, which involves a formal contradiction between the forces of production and their relations.³¹ And this is how Althusser tries to hold together the two sides of the problem: on the one hand, a social formation is overdetermined by the multiplicity of modes of production that it involves; on the other hand, there is an objective contradiction at the heart of any social formation whose dominant mode of production is capitalist. But nothing in the social formation is fully determined by any one contradiction, nothing is its pure expression; as Althusser puts it, “the apparently simple contradiction is *always overdetermined*.”³²

²⁹ N.B. It is possible for old concepts to be retained in a new scientific understanding, on condition that their sense is transformed to the extent that they play a new role in the new problematic. This concept of ‘problematic’ in Althusser’s work came from his early collaborator Jacques Martin. Cf. Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology*, 139.

³⁰ Althusser, Louis. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. Trans. G.M. Goshgarion. New York: Verso, 2014. Pg. 19

³¹ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, volume 1*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin, 1971. Ch. 7. Similarly it would be possible to read Marx’s concept of *surplus-value* as a common notion, belonging to the new problematic of the exploitation of labor-power, by means of which he clarified the political economists’ confused categories of ‘profit’, ‘rent’, ‘interest’, etc.

³² Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” 106

A social formation and its elements are always complicated in the Spinozist sense, and Althusser describes the kinds of material ensembles that have real effects in these complex determinations: superstructural assemblages like ideologies and political movements, but also the sociohistorical relations internal to the state along with its international situation. These are complex, mutually determining and co-implicating relations, dynamic logics of modal interactions, and it is the specific effectivity of these modal assemblages that would be the object of a physics of social formations. For there is no question of subtracting them from their field of effectivity and understanding anything about them thereby; they only exist as produced and insofar as they have determinate effects. And although, as Althusser says, the theory of the specific effectivity of these ensembles remains largely unelaborated, he gestures at the beatitude such a physics promises: “it is by formulating their effectivity that their *essence* can be attained.”³³ By grasping the real and effective determining power of these social modes, in the way they complicate others, we pass from the second to the third kind of knowledge, identifying not just the unity of composition of social formations in general but the very reality of the material existences that comprise them here and now. And to gain this kind of understanding would surely be joyful.

³³ Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” 114