

The Althusserian Legacy



Edited by
E. ANN ~~KAPLAN~~
and
MICHAEL SPRINKER



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Maria Turchetto

History of Science and the Science of History

I am proposing here an examination of the text *Reading Capital*, written by Louis Althusser in 1965. I will consider it as a text in the history of philosophy. In *Reading Capital* Althusser explicitly asks which *philosophy* provides the basis, the foundation, for Marx's scientific work? In this sense, *Reading Capital* is, at the same time, a text in the history of philosophy and a text in the philosophy of science. In research on Marx's philosophy, it becomes essential in the Althusserian argument to consider Marx's *historical position* in relation to the school of classical economy, on the one hand, and to Hegel's philosophy, on the other. In other words, it is a matter of determining Marx's position in a *history of science* and in a *history of philosophy*.

I spoke of *historical position*, not simply theoretical position. Indeed, according to Althusser, Marx's *Capital* opens a new epoch in the history of science and in the history of philosophy: it marks a point of no return in these histories. I want to say that in reading *Capital*, Althusser does not simply establish a comparison between different theories: he formulates a *historical judgment* which is temporally directed, a vector with a very precise course. Marx's science is not simply "better" than Smith's or Ricardo's; it is subsequent. And Marx's philosophy, which is implicit in his science, is not simply "better" than Hegel's philosophy; it is subsequent. It belongs to the following epoch. Hegel's theories of classical economy are not simply *other* theories; they are the prehistory of Marx's theories.

Before beginning with this topic, a few words about the title I have chosen for this paper—"History of Science and Science of History." This is not a play on words, because history actually enters into the Althusserian argument in two ways. On the one hand, I said that Althusser analyzes *Capital* as a scientific work in terms of the *history of sciences*. On the other hand, the particular science whose history Althusser reconstructs is the *science of history*. According to Althusser, Marx's *Capital* marks a fundamental stage in the *history of the science of history*. To speak plainly, I have schematized Althusser's position in this way: according to Althusser, it is only with Marx that history becomes, for the first time, a true

"science," or at the very least a "mature" science. In other words, before Marx there was only prehistory of the science of history. One can see it; the play on words is inevitable.

To get into my subject, I will approach Althusser's text by asking a question which is possibly "aggressive" but, I believe, not too dissonant with the spirit of the author. I ask *what is philosophy?* Althusser aims to situate Marx's *Capital* in a history of the science of history. Moreover, Althusser explicitly says that he reads *Capital* as a philosopher, not as a historian. To examine *Capital's* place in the history of knowledge is then a philosophical not a historical question. Althusser says that to read *Capital* as a historian would have meant to read it questioning the relation between its historical analyses and an historical object, previously defined outside of it, without discussing this object. In other words, the historical consideration involved in Althusser's philosophy does not place Marx's work in relation to a "milieu" with a historical context defined somewhere else. On the contrary, Althusser's philosophy reflects on *how to define* these "contexts" or these historical "objects."

Philosophical discourse is specifically characterized by *putting the object of a science into question*. Althusser emphasizes this characterization in the comparison between the philosopher's reading on the one hand, and the readings of the historian, the economist, the logician, etc., on the other hand. These last readings would have considered the object of *Capital* as *given*, whereas the philosopher's reading considers the object of *Capital* as its true problem. In this sense, Althusser sometimes defines the philosopher's reading as an "epistemological reading." To read *Capital* as a philosopher, says Althusser, means to ask the epistemological question. That is to say, the question about the *relation with its object*, the question of the discourse constructed to treat this object—the question of *scientific discourse*. To get to the bottom of the question I asked previously—what is philosophy?—we can say that, according to Althusser, philosophy is epistemology, and epistemology is *reflection* on scientific discourse and, notably, research and reconstruction of the conceptual structure that provides the object of a science.

It is necessary to stress that in Althusser's text the term "epistemology" always has a broad meaning. I would say it has the classical sense of *theory of knowledge (connaissance)*. In particular, I want to say that it is not necessary to think of the limited sense the term is assigned in the neopositivist tradition, which uses this term to designate the investigation of the logical coherence of scientific argument, in polemical opposition to the term "philosophy," suspected of "metaphysics." According to Althusser, investigation of the coherence of the argument constitutes the goal of the

logician's reading. That is to say, the reading which poses the problem of methods of exposition and proof, again without questioning the object of these methods. Thus, the philosophical investigation of a scientific work is not simply an historical investigation, and not simply a logical investigation. Philosophical investigation is always an inquiry into the conceptual structure of a science which involves a historical judgement. One sees that the comparison—and indeed the distinction—between “philosophical,” “historical,” and “logical” is fundamental to an understanding of Althusser's lesson.

We can ask other, similar questions, always with the goal of better understanding what Althusserian “epistemological philosophy” is. For example, one can investigate philosophy with regard to the difference between philosophy and science. One can ask again—the question brings us back to the same nucleus of questions—what are the “materials” of philosophy? What does philosophy concern itself with? With this question, I want to put forward again a problem raised principally in debates on the subject of the history of philosophy. Should the history of philosophy feed itself exclusively on interior material, that is, philosophical systems? Or, on the contrary, should it limit itself to the exterior and follow its path alongside the history of sciences, the history of relations, the history of culture, etc.?

I believe it is possible to find a univocal response to this question in Althusser's text. First, one must include *the sciences* within the “materials” of philosophy—that goes without saying. We have seen that philosophy is concerned with scientific discourse. Philosophy formulates a judgment of the capacity for innovation of scientific theories, it aims at recognizing “epistemological revolutions”; this, notably, is the historical judgement engaged in by philosophy. The sciences are thus the material *par excellence*, or indeed the raw material of philosophy, because philosophy does not really have an object (in the sense that all science has its own object). Rather, philosophy is a twice-removed reflection on knowledge. In addition, sciences are the *exclusive* material of philosophical work. The knowledge philosophy provides for theory is only scientific knowledge. It is not, I want to say, a knowledge (*savoir*) in the broad and generic sense of the term, that is to say, the sense which includes religions, myths, forms of life, *mentalités*, etc. These different forms of knowledge can enter into philosophical discourse at best as “epistemological obstacles,” that is, on the negative side of a discourse which aims to distinguish between “scientific” and “pre-scientific,” between “science” and “ideology,” between “history” and “prehistory” of knowledge.

Of course—we must clarify the point—these cultural “non-scientific” or “pre-scientific” forms can form the specific object of different particular sciences. In this case we will have “sciences of nature.” In this sense we must emphasize that Althusser departs from a *strong unitary idea* of knowledge, an idea which suffices to exclude *a priori* any dichotomy between “nature” and “culture.”

In conclusion, we can say that Althusser’s “epistemological philosophy” is not related to “culture” in the generic sense of “human expression” or of any kind of “knowledge” (*savoir*). “Epistemological philosophy” is only related to what is properly called scientific knowledge (*savoir*). It has to do only with the knowledge (*connaissance*) of objects, either “natural” or “cultural,” but in any case objects which are defined and examined in a scientific manner. Consequently, the history of philosophy is the history of scientific knowledge (*connaissance*), and its materials can be the “raw materials” of sciences, or even of refinements, indeed of philosophical elaborations.

To conclude the question of the relations between philosophy and science in a provisional manner, we must add that the unitary idea of knowledge (*connaissance*) I spoke about does not exclude the *plurality of the sciences*. There is not *science* (singular); there are always a number of specific sciences. In the Althusserian conception, the plurality of sciences does not derive from a descriptive notation such as the specialization of the modern world or something similar. The plurality derives from the definition itself of “science.” In effect, there are a number of sciences because science exists only from the point of the *delimitation of the scientific object*. Whereas philosophy, as we have seen, does not have an object, science is always science of a defined object.

“Delimitation of an object” is really not the proper term. I chose a synthetic formula, suitable for unraveling the differences between philosophy and science. But we must say that it is not really a matter of “delimitation” but rather of *construction*. The term “delimitation” nevertheless emphasizes that all science provides a rupture in the “infinite unknitting of sense that is the world.” (Here, I’m using the words of Max Weber.) Thus, the plurality of sciences finally returns to the plurality of possible ruptures. On the other hand, even the term “object” is not the most precise. Althusser, in fact, almost never uses it alone. He always speaks of the “object-discourse relation,” of the “unity of discourse with its *object*,” etc. I will return to this shortly. But let’s accept for the moment this incorrect formulation, “delimitation of the object.” We say then that all science has a delimited (constructed) object, whereas philosophy concerns the modalities of delimitation (construction). The sciences can

rightfully be unaware of these modalities of delimitation (construction), either because they are not interested in discussing them or, in a strong sense, because they do not understand them at all. That is, because they have forgotten or falsified the delimitation.

Where is the answer to a question which derives spontaneously from the assertion that knowledge is only scientific knowledge: what is philosophy good for? what is the use of it? In other words, isn't the family of sciences sufficient? Why would it need to have a philosophy alongside or over it? We have just seen the reason: scientific practice can work very well, can produce knowledge very well, even without understanding its philosophical constitution. According to Althusser, this is exactly the case with Marx. His scientific practice does not correspond to his philosophical declarations. Notably—and here the philosophical judgment becomes an historical judgment—the scientific practice at work in *Capital* is often *more advanced* than the methodological assertions contained in the same text.

The Althusserian analysis of the contradictions between Marx's science and many of his philosophical statements is well-known. The examples he uses are also well-known (the *Letter to citizen Maurice La Châtre*, where Marx says that he applies the Hegelian method to economic and political arguments). Here let me recall the fundamental indication which brings us back to Althusserian analysis. We must look for Marx's philosophy in Marx's science—a science which is extremely innovative.

But how is Marx's science innovative? It is possible, yet again, to locate a clear and univocal response in Althusser's text. Marx's science is innovative because it is *not empiricist*, or, to express it better, because its object is constructed by rigorous, non-empiricist modalities. I believe the time has come to provide clarification for the term "object." In fact, there is hardly an empiricist conception of knowledge that can speak of "objects" without problems. The term "object" as well as the term "subject" belong to the empiricist tradition. When one speaks of the "construction" of scientific objects (no longer given objects), or the "production of knowledge," the question becomes complicated. It is not only a matter of constructing an object. The starting point of scientific production is a collection of "structural conditions," one could say a "structure of observation" which, at the same time, defines *visible objects* (and, consequently, *invisible objects*), the *position of the subject* in the structure of observation, and a *domain of verifiability*.

I cannot enter into the details here of this triple determination which follows from "scientific construction" (permit me to refer you to my other work, especially to the text "Per la critica di un'autocritica"). In any case, I want to stress in a few words that the subject is determined by the

conceptual structure as well as by the object. Indeed, in the Althusserian reading of *Capital*, anti-empiricism is, at the same time, anti-subjectivism. Since there is no longer a pre-categorical object, just as there is no longer a pre-categorical subject, the subject is “produced” by the “structural conditions” of the theory, as well as the object. In other words, the givens of a “real object” provided to sensible intuition and the givens of the “ideal object” coming from subjective representation are equally *poor* according to Althusser: neither one nor the other succeeds in showing the conceptual structure which constitutes the objects of knowledge. There you have a critique of “idealist” subjectivism. It is not a matter of an idealist inversion of empiricism. That’s very important, because this critique can avoid the consequences of a relativism with no means of escape. Put another way, it concerns maintaining the conditions with a view to guaranteeing the comparison between different theories—to avoid incommensurability.

It is also important to envision the determination of a domain of verifiability. Here one encounters the question Althusser’s interpreters have quarreled a good deal about: the question of the interiority of the criterion of truth. Above all it concerns—again—an anti-empiricist appeal. One must reject the idea of a verification that would be exterior and foreign to the theoretical hypothesis. The pressing question of Marx’s *Capital*—one knows it well—is that a certain Marxism claimed to verify it simply by revolutionary practice. Althusser notes that such a claim is not legitimate in other sciences: for example, the physicist does not claim to verify all the mathematical theorems he uses.

I must now call attention to a subsequent notion of Althusser’s. One grants to science the right to an interior criterion of truth from the moment it is constituted and developed. What does that mean? From what point can one say that a science is “developed,” that it is mature, or has come of age? In a word, science’s coming of age consists of being at the level of its time. Thus, it is at majority relative to its historical time. Or, according to Althusser, the form of scientificity at the level of the present time is exactly that “constructivist,” anti-empiricist form we have been talking about. In the historical present, sciences *must not* depart from the pre-categorical givens concerning the object, for fear of being judged “pre-scientific,” “ideological.” Today—better, after Marx—there is a prohibition against being an empiricist; empiricism is forbidden.

So one can understand the sense of historical judgement involved in the philosophical investigation of *Capital*. This is not only a question of clarifying what Marx does. At the same time it is a matter of indicating what the sciences must do. Once criticized, empiricism is not just any

theoretical choice whatever; it is backtracking, a retreat. Marx lies beyond the threshold of scientificity; all empiricist science after him remains behind it.

I want now to draw several conclusions. Philosophy must clarify the "form of scientificity" which certain scientific knowledge is based on (often without being fully conscious of it). But it does not simply concern making notes. Philosophy does not have a purely explicative function. It prescribes; it requires certain conditions for recognizing knowledge as "scientific." In other words, philosophy must distinguish the scientific from the pre-scientific. It follows that philosophy is of necessity *history of philosophy*. In effect, "scientific" and "pre-scientific" are *relative* concepts from the historical point of view.

That means, on the one hand, that Althusser accepts the modern dimension of the relativity of knowledges, but that does not mean foregoing judgement in the name of relativism. On the other hand, clearly, according to Althusser, history is directionless. Rather, it has to construct a direction, a directionality which marks a significant forward and backward. That is the task of philosophy.

From the second half of the 19th century, many sciences are carried along by a process of theoretical transformation which will lead them very far from positivism and empiricism. This is not a linear process. In fact, one speaks of this process as a "crisis of the sciences," and this is not a process which unfolds in exactly the same manner in each scientific field. But it is also not a movement of totally chaotic dispersion. One can locate the directions, the coordinates. Gaston Bachelard spoke of this process as the "formation of the new scientific spirit," including in it a number of decisive "epistemological ruptures" in the area of natural sciences, such as the introduction of probabilism in physics, the mathematicization of chemistry, etc. In my opinion, the Althusserian reading of *Capital* exhibits many similarities with the Bachelardian reading of the transformations of the natural sciences. On the one hand, Althusser judges the concept of the "means of production" to be an "epistemological rupture" in the *science of history* comparable to the mathematicization of chemistry or the introduction of probabilism into physics. On the other hand, Althusser tries to generalize the characteristics of this "epistemological rupture" beyond the limits of the particular science where it arises. It is the same synthetic scheme as Bachelard's. Bachelard sees different aspects of the same process in the conceptual transformations of chemistry and physics. A process which leads, across its oscillations and alternating rhythms, to the goal of a new scientific spirit which can—in the name of the unity of sciences—be pictured in a coherent chart. In a certain sense, Althusser

will complete this chart with the path of the historical and social sciences. This is *the same path*, because after Marx, historical and social sciences must leave the old empiricist spirit and re-examine their concepts of "law," "causality," "determination," etc. This passing beyond empiricist history, which begins with Marx and is far from being attained today, is not any theoretical transformation whatsoever, but *the same transformation* which the sciences attain in general in the 20th century.

The consequences are remarkable. All barriers between "nature" and "culture" are broken down. This is not banal; a large part of 20th-century culture, and notably German culture, has always protected these barriers. After Marx, one can construct a critique of the empiricist ideology of history which, on the other hand, is in many ways analogous to the constructivism emerging in the physical sciences in the 20th century. Consequently, Marx is displaced from the 19th century to the 20th century. Thus, with the permission of the theoretician of the "crisis of Marxism," Marx is not properly a "classical" author. On the contrary, he opens the contemporary age—the new scientific spirit in the field of history.

I would like to add in conclusion that Marx's displacement to the 20th century is very significant when one compares him with the moderns, rather than comparing him with classical authors. Althusser reads *Capital* in relation to classical economics and Hegelian philosophy, according to a tradition which is certainly—we must say—philologically correct. Hegel, Smith, and Ricardo are indeed the true sources for Marx. What I am suggesting is reading *Capital* in relation to subsequent developments in the science of economics and the theory of history, especially in relation to authors in the historical school of economics, on the one hand, and on the other, in relation to authors who are engaged in a long debate with the historical school, the so-called conflict of methods (*Methodenstreit*). Once more I cannot go into details here, but again permit me to refer you to my work cited earlier.

In any case, the lesson of Althusser is fundamentally to attempt this comparison between Marx, on the one hand, and Schmöller, Roscher, Knies, Menger, Weber, and Rickert on the other. It involves a comparison which is perhaps questionable from a philological point of view, but is in my opinion correct from a theoretical point of view. A similar comparison can, I believe, further illuminate the subject if one considers that today, not only in common usage, but also among a large number of scholars and specialists, the term "historical" is used as a synonym for "empirical."

Translated by Martha Calhoun