

Rethinking Althusser: Ideology, Dialectics, and Critical Social Theory

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Introduction

This paper interrogates work by Louis Althusser within the larger context of an ongoing study into the efficacy of a dialectical approach to critical social theory. Althusser's work occupies a productive place in twentieth century thought: it rejects the existential humanism of Sartre, while upholding the type of determinate political positions sometimes abandoned by poststructuralists such as Foucault or Derrida. My aim is to read Althusser predominantly against himself in order to rework and relocate his rendering of the dialectic. Althusser's conception of the Marxist dialectic suffers, as I will show, from a number of conceptual deficiencies. Not only does it seem to reproduce the same type of economism he wanted to avoid, it overemphasizes the role of structural determinants. By refusing to employ any concept of the subject the conditions of dialectical analysis are lost, along with the possibility of accounting for political questions concerning experience and resistance.

I believe that for social theory the real promise of Althusser's thought lies in developing a more rigorous dialectical approach. The following is one way of envisioning the route this might take. 1) Refusing, unlike Althusser, to overemphasize the homogeneity of any ideological conjuncture, so that one can begin to identify the contradictory ways in which we are produced as subjects; 2) Maintaining the category of the subject over against Althusser's strict anti-humanism, which allows one to recognize the movements and rhythms of a subject-object dialectic; 3) Althusser's posthumously published work identifies what he terms "aleatory materialism." It places significant importance on the 'encounter' as a moment of ontological becoming that is open and multiple. By emphasizing the singularity of every encounter

alongside the insights of (1) and (2), a dialectical approach is produced that allows the subject to identify the contradictory elements of its own, always incomplete, production. Finally, and most significantly, these elements can then be recast as points of resistance within a larger critical social theory.

I - Althusser's Marxist Dialectic

Althusser's project of constructing a so-called 'scientific Marxism' relies on using the concepts, according to him, that Marx developed as a way of understanding the historical development of social formations as *a process without a subject*. Often Althusser explicates his version of a Marxist dialectic by counterposing it to Hegel's conception of dialectics. For example, the conception of an "overdetermined" contradiction is played off against "simple" one, which is based on the notion of an original unity that can be restored. Overdetermination implies that at any given moment society is characterized by multiple contradictions that are themselves the result of a multitude of different constituent elements (or at least more than two). The distinguishing feature of this complexity is a "structure in dominance" that assumes the principal role in organizing and articulating the specific form of any social whole (Althusser, 1969: 200-02). Althusser calls the structure in dominance "the most profound characteristic of the Marxist dialectic" (1969: 206). This dominance is responsible for the uneven and overdetermined development of the structures that constitute the social whole, which is what delineates a specifically Marxist contradiction. In any social formation the economy is the dominant structure, although, famously, it is only dominant "in the last instance" (Althusser, 1969: 217). This feature of the dialectic is not only a reality for Althusser, but is required in order to ". . . escape the

arbitrary relativism of observable displacements by giving these displacements the necessity of a function” (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 99). If the economy is only dominant in the last instance, this means that it is possible for a different structure to be dominant at any other instance, albeit for economic reasons. Indeed, Althusser goes so far as to claim that, “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes” (1969: 113). This is what invests overdetermination with such theoretical importance. At any given moment the structures that make up the social whole constitute a complex unity, which is governed by a specific structure in dominance. The productivity of overdetermination rests in the notion that the specific shape of a social formation is constantly developing (in response to the dominant structure), which requires an infinite return to the specific moment of conjuncture in order to articulate its form.

The apparent tension in Althusser, between an emphasis on rather rigid structures and each singular social formation that they compose, is not necessarily as great as it might seem. There is a certain implicit, continual movement, from one position to the other, even if for now the concern with structures seems to take priority. The explanatory priority of structures cannot be understood apart from Althusser’s rejection of humanism and the category of the subject, which he identifies as a major difference between the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics. Althusser invested great energy in his opposition to Hegelian and existentialist Marxists like Herbert Marcuse and Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he saw as humanists trapped in a philosophy of the subject and consciousness (see Althusser, 1976: 99, 188). The following quotation introduces Althusser’s notion of ideology, and helps to explain why humanism is an ideological concept.

In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but *the way* they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real and an ‘*imaginary*’, ‘*lived*’ relation . . . In ideology

the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses a will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality (1969: 233-34).

The humanist idea of the subject contains what Althusser calls “the theoretical characters cast in this ideological scenario,” which include “the philosophical Subject (the philosophizing consciousness), the scientific Subject (the knowing consciousness), and the empirical Subject (the perceiving consciousness) . . .” (1970: 54-5). Althusser is rejecting any notion of a constitutive subject that acts as the source of its own thoughts and actions. The humanist subject is ideological because it imagines that it controls its surroundings, that its relationship to its conditions of existence is shaped, first and foremost, by its ability to make unrestricted and transparent personal choices. Further, humanist notions of the subject necessarily rely on some idea of human essence, and therefore origin. To wit, humans have an original essence from which they are currently estranged or alienated; our foremost considerations, then, must be devoted to reestablishing conditions that allow this essence to become knowable, and flourish. This is the basis on which Marx’s early work is often judged. Althusser’s well-known claim is that there is an epistemological break in Marx’s work around 1845 (and in *The German Ideology* specifically) that signalled the end of his flirtations with the humanist anthropology of Hegel and Feuerbach.¹ Quite simply, when it comes to understanding social relations and change, the individual, or the category of the subject, is an inadequate unit of analysis (indeed an ideological one) compared with, say, classes, or the mode and relations of production,. Political and historical change, then, must be thought as a *process without a subject*.

In typically provocative fashion, Althusser writes that Marx’s “theoretical anti-humanism” constitutes a philosophical revolution. “It is impossible to know anything about men except on

the precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes” (1969: 229).² This has direct implications for the dialectic. While Althusser’s concept of overdetermination contains a specific understanding of complex contradiction between structural relations, it can no longer be articulated using the concepts of subject and object. Because he thinks the socio-political field as a series of objects, any claim to knowledge must be posed “. . . in terms which exclude any recourse to the ideological solution contained in the ideological characters Subject and Object, or to the mutual mirror-recognition structure, in the closed circle of which they move” (1970: 55). Althusser is hostile to any counter-argument that there is always a mediating term or element that displaces the simple subject-object dichotomy (subjectivity and labour are two terms that played this role for Hegel). “The concept of mediation is invested with one last role: the magical provision of post-stations in the empty space between theoretical principles and the ‘concrete’, as bricklayers make a chain to pass bricks” (Althusser and Balibar, 1970: 63). The existence of subject and object as theoretical terms cannot be made more real by making it look as if they interact with actual concrete social practices. To think otherwise places one in an ideological closure where the real is merely reduced to the theoretical unity of subject and object.

The list of features defining Althusser’s Marxist dialectic has become a long one. It is uniquely characterized by the following: a complex set of overdetermined contradictions; a structure in dominance that is determined, in the last instance, by the economy; the uneven development of contradictions; a form of theoretical anti-humanism that rejects the concepts of the subject, origin, essence, and mediation; and the concept of a process without a subject. But can these concepts actually function together? Can they account for the dialectical production of

social life Althusser purports to illustrate? Or might Althusser's recasting of dialectics itself qualify for revision?

II - The Impasse of Althusser's Dialectic

Althusser's version of the dialectic is, I believe, rightly thought of as a type of structuralism. The difficulty this poses is that there seems to be an unreconcilable difference between structuralism and dialectics. To the extent that structuralism is a determinism, it cannot account for the difference between structures and what they produce. That is, while dialectics identifies the precise contradiction between the particular and the general, which are then unable to retain their identities, structuralism sees the particular as a simple reflection of the general. To posit an unmediated, or uncontradictory identity, is to rule out dialectics. This can be demonstrated by looking at how Althusser deploys his conceptual tools.

It is important at this stage to point out that some of Althusser's final work, which will be examined shortly, goes a long way to overturning the impression that he is a structuralist (also see Althusser, 1976: 126-31). Nonetheless, there are times when his work is so burdened by its attention to structures that there seems to be room for little else. Concepts such as overdetermination, structure in dominance, and uneven development, certainly require us to reconsider our understanding of how the social whole is constituted. What remains absent in Althusser's work is an actual demonstration of how these concepts function together.³ This is not a serious problem *if* such a demonstration could be made. However, I think the reason why Althusser never demonstrated his dialectic is because it was immobilized by the very (structuralist) categories he used to release it from conceptual determinism (economism in this

case). The idea of a structure in dominance allows for conceptualizing the uneven development of structural contradictions. How is a dominant structure established? Althusser's answer, if it can be called one, is to posit the economy as the determining structure 'in the last instance,' even though that moment supposedly never comes. This sleight of hand allows him to avoid conceptual pluralism, as well as the determinism that would result if the last instance ever arrived. But if the last instance never comes, then it is no longer possible for the economy to be determinant. Assuming the last instance can occur, then any appeal to the overdetermined conditions of a social whole loses its force. Overdetermined conditions would then rest on the existence of one simple determination: the economy. The last instance ends up being indistinguishable from the first instance, or any other, since any determinant structure other than the economy is in debt to it for this status. Further, Althusser cannot explain the positional dominance of the economy by referring to any particular configuration of the social whole because it exists for him as a trans-historical fact.⁴ This a priori causal factor produces a deterministic understanding of how the social is constituted. The result for social critique is that the possibility of a dialectics has been written out because the source of all contradictions has been determined in advance.

Despite this impasse, I believe Althusser's work still contains a number of conceptual tools that can help build a radical approach - that is, one with transformative intentions and potential - to social critique. The first step is to reexamine his efforts to theorize ideology. Because there has been a massive amount of literature on this very topic, my discussion will be confined to identifying contradictory tendencies and heterogeneous spaces within ideological processes that allow for the possibility of resistant practices. This is partly what Althusser had in

mind when he described how, in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, he had succumbed to “theoreticism”, which he described in the following way: “[the] primacy of theory over practice; one-sided insistence on theory; but more precisely: *speculative-rationalism*” (1976: 124). This suggests that the composition of structuralism left questions of political struggle - specifically class struggle - behind. Theoretical questions ended up eliminating the most important political questions. To put it another way, jettisoning the subject, or reducing it to nothing more than an effect of structures, eliminated the space for a detailed analysis of experience, resistance, or the possibility of social change. Rethinking ideological processes through a dialectical approach gives sufficient priority to political subjectivities while attempting to avoid theoreticism.

III – Reconsidering Ideology

I have already made reference to Althusser’s notion of ideology as it appeared in *For Marx*. The seminal essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” affirms that earlier conception, stating that “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (2001: 109). The sophistication of this concept is made evident using Althusser’s previous example of humanism, which is both imaginary - insofar as its purported account of our relationship to our conditions of existence is a fantasy - and real - insofar as it continues to function as a dominant discourse that structures our thoughts and actions. Significantly, ideology is now also said to have a material existence in the practices of apparatuses (kneel and pray in Church, for example, and you will believe).⁵ This accounts for the common objection that ideology-critique is idealist and ignores material practices of subjects. Even more important is the fact that for Althusser, “. . . there is no ideology except by the subject

and for subjects. Meaning, there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject: meaning, *by the category of the subject and its functioning*” (2001: 115). Ideology produces subjects, as well as the category of the subject - which is conceptualized as a person endowed with the ability to identify the ideas and practices he believes and participates in prior to doing so - as an adaptive mechanism. The (produced) individual sees himself reflected in the institutions and practices of a society, to which his needs are adapted. Althusser refers to the ideological “interpellation” of the subject, where a call from a policeman in the street (“Hey, you there!”) causes one to turn and acknowledge not only the voice, but the attendant subject identity as well (2001: 118). We are, of course, constantly hailed in other ways: receiving a letter or a phone call, or behaving within the proscribed boundaries of law, all allow a person to think ‘Yes, that’s me.’ Judith Butler points out that turning toward the voice of the law is not a result of hailing alone, but is also motivated by a positive anticipation of identity formation (Butler, 1995: 8). In other words, by construing ‘law’ more broadly, the turn toward dominant identities results in part from a fear of being labelled as a social other.

The insidious nature of ideology as it currently functions is revealed in the double meaning of the term subject.⁶ It refers to both a free-willing individual as well as subjection to a more powerful authority. Rather than being thought of as incompatible, ideology functions *because* of this contradiction: only because we believe that we have freely consented to our own subjection do we not resist. A common objection that often arises at this point is that Althusser has presented a closed system of ideological production. The dominant ideology seems to enjoy its status simply by virtue of being dominant, which, along with the focus on the general mechanisms of ideology, obscures how the various interpellations made by each ideological state

apparatus can come into conflict (see Lock, 1996: 31; Resch, 1992: 215; Therborn, 1980: 79). In a postscript added to the essay on ideology one year after it was completed, Althusser attempts to account for this omission.

In fact, the State and its Apparatuses only have meaning from the point of view of the class struggle, as an apparatus of class struggle ensuring class oppression and guaranteeing the conditions of exploitation and its reproduction. But there is no class struggle without antagonistic classes. Whoever says class struggle of the ruling class says resistance, revolt, and class struggle of the ruled class. This is why the ISAs are not the realization of ideology *in general*, nor even the conflict-free realization of the ideology of the ruling class (2001: 125).

A distinction must be made, then, between the general functioning of ideology that produces a particular notion of the individual subject, and the specific functioning of different *ideologies* that produce contradictions within and between subjects. Althusser's postscript gestures at this specific functioning, but cannot account for it. This is a critical absence, since it prevents a theorization of the space in which contradictory - and potentially transformative - processes take place.⁷

A productive attempt at theorizing the contradictory tendencies of ideological interpellation has been made by Goran Therborn. He believes that ideology is fundamentally contradictory in character because relations of qualification and relations of subjection are unable to seamlessly reflect what the other requires.

The reproduction of any social organization, be it an exploitative society or a revolutionary party, entails a basic correspondence between subjection and qualification. Those who have been subjected to a particular discipline, qualify for the given roles and are capable of carrying them out. But there is always an inherent possibility that a contradiction may develop between the two. New kinds of qualification may be required and provided, new skills that clash with traditional forms of subjection. Or, conversely, new forms of subjection may develop that clash with the provision of still-needed qualifications. The effects of a contradiction between subjection and qualification are opposition and revolt or underperformance and withdrawal (1980: 17).

Ideology operates to reproduce the present form of social organization, but nevertheless produces subject positions that prevent exact social reproduction.⁸ If Althusser has tried to describe the type of subject that is produced when ideology succeeds, it is equally important to ask what type of subject is produced when ideology fails. This occurs when a subject must choose between - or even simultaneously act out - a number of conflicting subjectivities. Although Althusser manages to retain the category of the subject by claiming that no society can be free of ideology (we are always-already subjects⁹), the result of not taking into account the contradictory demands of subjection and qualification is another example of structural stasis. Further, we lack any means to differentiate between dominant and subordinate ideologies, as well as ideologies that do not have an ideological state apparatus as their source. On the other hand, a dialectical sense of ideological interpellation as an ongoing process would preclude any resolution free from contradiction.

This alternative approach would allow for a certain type of subject to be theorized: one that is not originary or constitutive, but produced within a social context that contains spaces for resistance against that context. The ability of a subject-object dialectic to account for spaces that can become antagonistic sites of contestation - because they cannot be fully closed or sutured by ideology - is what makes it overtly political. In other words, there is a complex set of dependent relations between subject and object (ideology, ISAs, socio-economic relations) that proceed by way of dialectical contradiction. This is why it is necessary to retain the notion of the subject, albeit as one that is itself in process, because the reproduction of the social world cannot occur without it. What cannot be determined in advance, however, is the exact nature of the subject that would emerge in and through such spaces of resistance. Since even specific and localized ideologies operate to reproduce large numbers (or types) of subjects, ideological contradictions

contain the possibility of mobilizing a group subject. One of the biggest obstacles to this is humanist (or liberal) ideology, which would continue to reproduce atomized subjects unless it was itself fatally caught in the contradictory conjuncture. I do not want to dismiss any individual subject that is produced out of ideological contradictions. Nevertheless, I agree with Althusser that political significance lies far more with group based subjectivities than individual ones.

If there has been a trend so far in this paper, it has been toward retheorizing Althusser's strict positions on dialectics, the role of structures, and anti-humanism. My arguments are not designed to dismiss Althusser, but to make his work less restrictive. For instance, social structures remain vital to the constitution of the social whole, but can no longer account all on their own for its expression; the subject can be theorized so that intervention in social processes is possible, while avoiding most of the anti-humanist critique. The next section looks at Althusser's own efforts to relax his emphasis on structures and apparatuses by radicalizing what he refers to as the 'conjuncture.' The provocative concept of 'aleatory materialism' stresses contingency rather than structural determinism, and has so far resisted assimilation to any specific methodological approach. My use of the term seeks to locate it within a reading of Althusser that is dialectical, as well as faithful to the general development of his thought.

IV - The Challenge of Aleatory Materialism

In the 1980s Althusser began developing the concept of the aleatory in order to theorize the singularity of any material encounter. "*Encounter*. Again, a "*casus*," a "case," a factual accident without origin, cause, or end" (1997: 14). In moving toward a philosophy of the encounter, Althusser is again confronting the question - which had so often been a *problem* - of

how theory can provide a necessary place for politics. There is a “. . . need to *think differently*, to *speak differently*, in order *to act* and conceive the horizon of our actions in a different manner, in order finally to reach, and propose, a different conception of history: materialist and aleatory” (quoted in Navarro, 1998: 97). How is one to theorize a political moment within an encounter that cannot be anticipated, that does not announce its arrival or have any apparent reasons for being? The answer to this question is critical because it determines, out of a number of possibilities, which direction aleatory materialism can take.

The reading of aleatory materialism I want to propose makes it compatible with the dialectical understanding of ideology, and its attention to continuity and discontinuity, set out in the last section. Althusser invokes the (Machiavellian) instinct of the fox to describe the approach required to control the political opportunities available during an encounter. “This instinct is in fact 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” (1997:16). This suggests that each encounter represents an unpredictable conjuncture of structures, practices, and subjectivities. (Given my emphasis – as well as Althusser’s – on contradiction, perhaps the phrase ‘disjunctive conjuncture’ reflects more accurately what I am trying to capture.) The political lesson to be drawn is that an aleatory encounter provides a moment of radical openness where the “relation of appropriation that the human subject enters into with others” can be remade (Althusser, 1997: 9).

Althusser tries to make the nature of the encounter more explicit:

. . . it is only in the individual and social life of singularities (nominalisms), really singular - but universal, for these singularities are as if traversed and haunted by repetitive or constant invariants, not by generalities but repetitive constants - that one can rediscover under their singular variations in other singularities of the same species and genus (1997: 9).

Singularities *and* repetitions. This means that the singularity of the event is located in the unique organization of its elements, since some of its elements will have been encountered before. I will try to show that it is precisely this double movement of singularity and repetition that has been eliminated from competing accounts of aleatory materialism, thereby preventing any possible space for dialectics.

In an article on Althusser's later thought, and aleatory materialism in particular, Antonio Negri also identifies how an appeal to subjectivity is a valid theoretical course, calling it ". . . the identification of the necessary terrain for an antagonistic response to capitalist restructuring" (1996: 60). But throughout his article, Negri seems to reduce the role of resistant subjectivities to the well-worn model of class struggle against capitalism, thereby closing off the aleatory moment in the production of subjectivity. The theoretical force of the aleatory is that one cannot predict the location or type of space that might become available to oppositional political forces. The assumption that capitalism would be *the* primary opponent, and class struggle *the* primary means, regulates aleatory materialism in the same way that the structure in dominance was determined in the last instance by the economy. Undeterred, Negri continues on to repeatedly argue that aleatory materialism signals the end of dialectics. "As a matter of fact, dialectics is nothing else but a figure for idealism . . ."; "To be sure, the postmodern totalization of power removes, as we have seen, any possibility of a dialectics."; "In postmodern society, which the action of the ISAs has constructed as a compactly ideological society, there is no longer even space for the fiction of the dialectic" (1996: 61, 63, 67). What Negri is arguing, I think, is that dialectical rhythms can no longer account for the operations of power. Resistance does not emerge from within a contradictory whole, but on the margins of a society that is totalitarian, yet fragile (1996: 62, 67).

It is striking to consider the extreme distance Negri has taken from Althusser's formulations in *For Marx* concerning the contradictory unity of the social whole. Negri's appropriation of aleatory materialism does not take into account the repetitions that for Althusser "haunt" each and every singularity. Althusser's allowance for repetitive invariants provides a theoretical space for dialectics, because while eschewing any absolute origin, it also guards against the opposite extreme of immaculate conception. Singularities do not emerge out of nothing, but are driven by the very repetitions they come to threaten and eliminate. Without recognizing this, Negri's reading of aleatory materialism is reduced to a postmodern social theory. Because his event has no antecedents and does not, therefore, precipitate other events, Negri's only political option is to rely on an empty proclamation "of the communist struggle to come" (1997: 67), which offers no reason to think a communist struggle is any more likely than a conservative, liberal, or anarchist one.

It is better, I think, to conceive of the aleatory as a disjunctive conjuncture, which is characterized by what can be termed a *rupture in process*. The double meaning is quite deliberate: the aleatory is a moment of rupture in established processes, as well as a process of rupture that establishes new repetitions. In other words, the aleatory takes the form of a process that challenges the processes - the repetitions - that still traverse the singular moment. I think this reading retains the type of problematic that Althusser engaged with throughout all of his work: how can we best understand the nature of the social at any specific moment, and the political opportunities that accompany that moment? It shows that Althusser is still having to contend with theoreticism as well. On the one hand, aleatory materialism is more abstract than his previous work, which at least named structures or apparatuses that could then be examined. Conversely,

there is now an overt attempt to understand how each moment has the potential opening for a radical political intervention. This is what makes the reading of aleatory materialism similar to the one on ideology: the political moment is located in the contradictions between repetitions, which produce singularities, just as the attempt of ideologies to reproduce a certain type of subject and social relations results in contradictions that produce fissures for new, resistant subjectivities. How, then, do these concepts contribute to a critical social theory?

V – Conclusion: Some Directions for Critical Social Theory

Althusser finds great value in the concept of ‘the whole’ (or society), unlike other French thinkers such as J-F Lyotard. Althusser insists on this concept because any partial formation is capable of appearing free from contradiction, and may not contain the specific structure in dominance that directs the whole. In true dialectical fashion, it is only by identifying the whole that the extent of its internal inadequacies are revealed, preventing any unity from being achieved. In response to the disjunctures that structure social life, Althusser set a standard of rigour for himself that required a continuous set of determinate negations. Politically, this meant that Althusser was never reluctant to show what position he occupied. At the beginning of a lecture on Hegel he announced: “I shall begin at the end. I shall lay my cards on the table so everyone can see them. They are what they are: they carry the stamp of *Marxism-Leninism*” (1977: 164). Determinate negations are in part a measure of one’s political commitment. More significant is whether or not the concepts one chooses to employ allow for sufficient determinations to be made. Indeed, Althusser’s work did not always allow for this, which was part of the difficulty with his conceptualization of the dialectic. Although he seems to have the requisite concepts for

determinate negations (the structure in dominance, determination in the last instance, the various theses on ideology, for example), they sometimes close off the theoretical space necessary for their own operation. The role of the structure in dominance, or the movements of uneven development, were never demonstrated. This is one of the main reasons why Althusser's dialectic is unpersuasive, and it illustrates the importance of determinate negations to critical social theory.

Althusser's concepts of ideology and ideology-critique allow social theory to make determinate claims that distinguish what is real from what is thought or imagined to be real.¹⁰ Related to systems of thought, ideology critique can be used more broadly to designate those systems that are closed, or lacking a type of reflexive mechanism - such as immanent critique - to test its claims against its own standard of argument. I tried to show how placing Althusser's concept of ideology within a broader dialectical approach ensures its productivity as a critique of the ideological characters he identified, and as a way of identifying contradictions in the production of subjectivity that might turn into spaces of possible resistance.

It remains difficult, however, to conceptualize actual political resistance, rather than just gesture to how resistance might be possible, and under what circumstances. This is where one of the limits of Althusser is met: his excellent work on the role and influence of social structures leaves no space for the intervention of a human subject, whether in the form of a class, individuals, or otherwise. Althusser's stress on the aleatory nature of any political encounter attempts to redress this problem by showing that any moment contains fissures and cracks where resistance might find a beginning. His reference to singularities and repetitions endeavours, in my mind, to understand the current distribution of the possible. This is not to say that

singularities evoke great potential, while repetitions close down that potential. In is rather their unique interplay that constructs the contradictions and disjunctions that help make resistance possible. It is this move – from theorizing social criticism to social action – that remains virtually irresolvable, yet so necessary for Althusser: “Everything depends, in the last instance, not on techniques but on militants, on their class consciousness, on their devotion, and on their courage” (in Ferry and Renaut, 1990: 29).

¹ I am not going to comment in any length on Althusser’s claim, which inspired so much literature that there is little left to say on this matter. While I think that there is a general shift in Marx’s work away from humanism and toward his ‘scientific’ notion of historical materialism, I disagree with the notion of a break. To my mind, Marx’s later work - especially *Capital* - lacks a certain political urgency once it is divorced from the ethical underpinnings of alienation. This is not to say that alienation is a concept we cannot go without, but that it is one that Marx could not go without. For a strong set of arguments against Althusser’s position, see Norman Geras (1983) *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso).

² It is interesting to note that although it has become much more common to cite Foucault’s attack on the notion of Man in *The Order of Things*, Althusser’s essay (“Marxism and Humanism” in *For Marx*) was published two years prior to Foucault’s work. I should also note the point made by Martin Heidegger, that a theoretical rejection of humanism “does not mean that such thinking aligns itself against the humane and advocates the inhuman, that it promotes the inhumane and deprecates the dignity of man.” See “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings* (1993), ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins), 233.

³ This, along with his charge that Althusser falls prey to structuralism, is one of the few helpful insights in E.P. Thompson’s (1978) bombastic polemic in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press).

⁴ Althusser does discuss how the feudal and capitalist modes of production have different ruling ideological state apparatuses, but still does not explain *why* the economy plays the dominant determining role. See Althusser, 2001: 100-106.

⁵ See Althusser, 2001: 112-113. Examples of ideological state apparatuses include organized religion, the family, legal structures, and the educational system, which Althusser says is the most important one. They are different from the repressive state apparatus (the army, police, prisons, government, for example) which functions primarily through violence and repression, not ideology.

⁶ See the comment that “Although we know that the individual is always already a subject, we go on using this term, convenient because of the contrasting effect it produces” (Althusser, 2001: 120n). Note how Althusser’s earlier hostility toward the concept of the subject has dissipated, at least in this instance.

⁷ I should point out that in *For Marx* (1969: 62-63) Althusser does refer to how individual ideologies function. However, I think there is too much to presume, between this and the postscript quoted above, that Althusser took this into account sufficiently. In Althusser's defence, it is too easy to speak of his 'theory of ideology,' and also incorrect. The subtitle of his essay on ideology is "Notes Toward an Investigation," and the first footnote states: "The ideas expounded should not be regarded as more than the introduction to a discussion" (2001: 85).

⁸ Therborn uses the example of how the student movement in the 1960s emerged out of a contradiction "involving a massive increase in tertiary education and training to which the old forms of academic subjection no longer effectively corresponded in the given conjuncture" (1980: 46).

⁹ For the claim that we are "always-already subjects," see Althusser, 2001: 177; 1969: 232.

¹⁰ For someone like Theodor Adorno, ideology is identity thinking. One can only be freed from ideology if difference and heterogeneity is acknowledged and established. This is a different formulation than Althusser's, but it obviously contributed to the type of dialectical reading of ideology and subject formation proposed in this paper.

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