

LOUIS ALTHUSSER
"FROM CAPITAL TO MARX'S PHILOSOPHY" READING CAPITAL (1965)

Althusser's claim here, a development of his claims elsewhere concerning the anti-Hegelianism of the later Marx, is that Marx's Capital (1867) marks a significant epistemological rupture / break with the naive empiricism that shaped his outlook in earlier works such as Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 and The German Ideology (1845-1846). Althusser critiques the empiricist model of knowledge which views the perceiver as separated from the real or 'essential' object by what he metaphorises as a 'veil of the inessential.' This model of knowledge is predicated on a particular model of reading, Althusser claims. Reading has traditionally been conceived as a quest for the hidden *logos* or meaning intended by the author (this would be the true 'content' of the work, its essence) behind the formal properties of the work (this would be the veil of the 'inessential'). Althusser alludes in this regard to Freud's view that the repressed desires that lurk latently in the unconscious (e.g. desire for women in red stockings) can only express themselves indirectly through particular manifest symptoms (e.g. a particular dream about a red car or slip of the tongue) which seem to have little to do with the repressed desires themselves. These outward 'inessential' symptoms must be 'read' or interpreted in order to arrive at the true essence which they indirectly express. Althusser's target in all this is clearly the Hegelian expressivism which informs Marx's early theories as much as Freud's.

However, Althusser contends that it is better to think of knowledge less as the quest for hidden essence than as the effect of a specific mode of theoretical production of the Real. Much as humans produce objects (e.g. shoes) out of the raw material (e.g. a cow's skin) provided by nature, so too do humans produce theories (e.g. a particular claim about the nature of society such as the 'poor will always be with us') out of the raw material furnished by the 'real' (e.g. particular social phenomena such as the widespread nature of poverty). This process is entirely informed by the conceptual framework (what he calls, thanks to Lévi-Strauss, a 'problematic') within which it is conducted and which consequently determines what can be seen and, conversely, what remains invisible. Althusser suggests that this model of knowledge should be accompanied by a new 'symptomatic' model of reading, that is, a search for the problematic that permits only certain things to be seen/known (and not others) via the imposition of the reader's more scientific perspective on the discourse in question. Althusser goes through this long detour in order to justify his own radically different interpretation of Capital expounded in another essay in the same book entitled "The Object of Capital."

Althusser begins by drawing a link between knowing and reading, arguing that the early Marx treats Nature as something akin to a book, seeking an "immediate *reading* of essence in existence" (my emphasis; 16). This view of knowledge is based on a "certain idea of reading which makes written discourse the immediate transparency of the true and the real the discourse of the voice" (16). In other words, to know the truth about things in the real world is a lot like reading a book the meaning of which is found when one identifies the author's intention. The early Marx's conception of knowledge is shaped in particular, Althusser argues, by Hegel's notion of the expressive totality where "each part is *pars totalis* immediately expressing the whole that it inhabits" (17). The later Marx, by contrast, does not think that the "truth of history" (17) can be "read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible effects of a structure of structures" (17). This very different understanding of history gives rise, Althusser claims, to a very different approach to reading on the part of the later Marx who reads, in Capital, Adam Smith and the other

classical economists not for their essential meaning but, by searching less for some unified and coherent meaning actually expressed than the lacunae, absences, discontinuities and contradictions. Marx reads their "discourse . . . through his own discourse" (18) projected onto it like a "grid" (18) in order to uncover the lacunae in their discourse beneath the apparent continuity of their discourse. What Althusser describes as "reading-for-myopia" (19) does not "see that the combined existence of sightings and oversights in an author poses a problem, the problem of their combination" (19), which must be solved. It is this "non-vision . . . inside vision" (19) which is crucial. In other words, by focussing on problematic (but sometimes seemingly insignificant) points such as contradictions, etc. found in their texts, Marx is able to see, from his own superior vantage-point, through the manifest content (the 'said') of the work of these economists to their latent levels of meaning. In Capital, Marx would show "why classical economics was blind to what it nevertheless saw, and thus to explain the non-vision inside its vision" (23). Access to this hidden meaning, this blind-spot, is not available to the economists themselves because what remained invisible to them is a necessary effect of that which their conceptual framework allows to be seen. Classical economics was blind to what it produces because its "eyes are still fixed on the old question . . . or the old 'horizon' . . . within which the new problem 'is not visible'" (24). "What political economy did not see is not a pre-existing object which it could have seen but did not see – but an object which it produced itself in its operations of knowledge and which did not pre-exist it . . . what political economy does not see is what it does" (24).

This leads Althusser to expostulate that any science, that is, any claim to knowledge, can only "pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its problematic, which constitutes its absolute and definite conditions of possibility" and of the "forms in which all problems must be posed, at any given moment in the science" (24). Thus, "sighting is the act of its structural conditions" (24), being merely the "necessary reflection of the field on its objects" (25). In other words, any object or problem situated within this horizon is accordingly visible. By the same token, the "field of the problematic . . . defines and structures the invisible as the defined excluded . . . from the field of visibility" (26). These are "necessarily invisible in the field of the existing theory, because they are not objects of this theory, because they are forbidden by it" (26). Their "fleeting presence in the field when it does occur (in very peculiar and symptomatic circumstances) goes unperceived, and becomes . . . an undivulgeable absence – since the whole function of the field is . . . to forbid any sighting of them" (26). Any theoretical field is necessarily defined by what it excludes since "excluding what it is not makes it what it is" (27). To "see this invisible" (27) is to "identify the lacunae in the fulness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text" (27).

Althusser terms Marx's reading of the classical economists in this way a "symptomatic" (28) approach "insofar as it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a different text present as a necessary absence in the first" (28). Althusser in turn applies this symptomatic approach to Capital in an effort to uncover Marx's hidden problematic which consists in a concept that his era did not permit him to openly think: the "concept of the effectivity of a structure on its elements" (29) which is the "visible / invisible, absent / present keystone of his whole work" (29). This is the "concept essential to his thought, but absent from his discourse" (30).

Althusser then proceeds to try to explain the foregoing in greater detail. He draws a distinction between mere "philosophical ideology" (34) of the sort advanced by bourgeois empiricists such as John Locke responsible for a "mirror myth" (19) of knowledge qua "immediate vision and reading" (23), and later rationalists like Hegel who advanced an

expressivist myth of knowledge, on the one hand, and a Marxist science that conceives of knowledge as a form of theoretical production that penetrates beneath surface appearances not to an underlying essence but to a structural causality, on the other. Hegelians in particular, Althusser's real target, engage in what he describes as a "religious reading" (36) or "expressive reading" (36), the goal of which is the 'logos' and according to which to "know is to abstract from the real object its essence, the possession of which is then called knowledge" (36). In this schema, "transparency is not given from the beginning, but is separated . . . by the veil, the dross of impurities, of the inessential which steal the essential from us" (36). The perceiving object is separated from the essence of the real or concrete object by the veil of the inessential. In this scheme of things, moreover, knowledge is a "real part of the real object" (38). Althusser suggests that what needs to be interrogated is not the terms 'real' or 'concrete' but the term 'object,' arguing that "there are two distinct objects, the real object 'which exists outside the subject, independent of the process' (Marx) and the object of knowledge (the essence of the real object)" (40). Drawing on Spinoza in particular, Althusser contends that there are in fact two distinct objects, the real object which exists independently of the process of knowing as opposed to the object of knowledge. From this point of view, knowledge is less as an act of penetration than one of "production" (24).

Marx himself certainly distinguished, Althusser argues, the process of production by which the real object is produced (the "order of succession of the moments of historical genesis" [40]) from the process of production by which the object comes to be known. Marx is not guilty of idealism, i.e. of conceptualising thought as a "faculty of a transcendental subject . . . confronted by the real world as matter" (40). Thought for Marxism is a historically articulated process that is "constituted by a structure which combines the type of object on which it labours, the theoretical means of production available and the historical relations (theoretical, ideological, social)" (41) in which it is situated and which "assigns the thinking subject its place and function in the production of knowledges" (42). The "system of theoretical production" (42) is "founded on and articulated to the existing economic, political and ideological practices which directly or indirectly provide it with the essentials of its raw materials" (42) and is that which "defines the roles and functions of the 'thought' of particular individuals, who can only 'think' the problems already . . . posed" (42).

Althusser contends that "thought's labour on its raw material" (42) consists in the "transformation of intuition and representation into concepts" (42). For this reason, no matter how far back one delves into a particular branch of knowledge, access to the thing-in-itself and, thus, knowledge of its truth, is always already mediated by a structure of representation. Much as the economic mode of production shapes labour power, so the theoretical mode of production determines "thought power" (42). Just as the process of economic production is determined by its "necessary relations with nature and the other structures (legal-political and ideological) which . . . constitute the global structure of a social formation belonging to a determinate mode of production" (42), so thought is a "real system . . . articulated to the real world of a given historical society which maintains determinate relations with nature" (42) and is "defined by the conditions of its existence and practice" (42), that "peculiar structure" (42) of "raw material (object of theoretical practice) . . . means of production and its relations of production and its relations with the other structures of society" (42). Empiricism dreams only naively, in short, of confronting and knowing a "pure object which is then identical to the real object" (43).

Accordingly, Althusser contends, the history of the development of knowledge(s) (intellectual history, the history of ideas) is not the Hegelian one of the triumphant progress of reason but of a series of radical discontinuities, ruptures and reorganisations,

the prehistory of any science being ideology. For example, Marx's concept of the dialectic is not the one borrowed from Hegel. As Althusser argues elsewhere, Marx's dialectic was only obtained in fact by a rupture with the Hegelian dialectic. It is useless to conflate history with logic, as Hegel does. The order of proofs in Capital, for example, is determined by the validating criteria involved, the relevant "theoretical problematic" (49). Marx's installation of a new order in the theoretical, a "new form of apodicticity or scientificity" (51) takes time to be acknowledged. Marx is, from this perspective, the "revolutionary inventor of a science (the science of history)" (51).

The relation between the object of knowledge and the real object hinges on the specific mode of appropriation of the real world implied in the object of knowledge. Althusser wants to stress that there is a qualitative difference between the various forms of phenomena in order to avoid the trap posed by the "vicious circle of the mirror relation of ideological recognition" (53). The mechanism of this appropriation of reality must not be confused with the closed circuit of the mutual mirror-recognition structure of subject and object that ideology would confuse us with. The mechanism by which the "process of knowledge, which takes place entirely in thought" (56) produces the "cognitive appropriation of its real object, which exists outside thought in the real world" (56) consists in

practice. Any social formation consists of a number of instances / levels made up of relatively autonomous distinct practices – political, ideological, technical, scientific, with the economic being determinant in the last instance. Each practice is distinguished by the type of object or raw material worked on, its internal procedures and its ultimate product or object-effect. The objects of the various modes of theoretical knowledge are knowledge-effects that do not mediate knowledge (for example, in other practices such as aesthetic practice, the object is the aesthetic-effect). (56)

In other words, for Althusser, the varying nature of the different dimensions of the social and natural world necessitate differing epistemological approaches and methods.

Althusser concludes by drawing on Saussure's distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic axes of an utterance. The production of knowledge proceeds along two axes simultaneously. He argues that just as any social formation is the product of the intersection of diachronic development (the history of the succession of the modes of production) and the synchronic coexistence at any given historical stage of the various practices which comprise the social formation at any particular moment, so the *scientific* knowledge-effect (the knowledge-effect of any theoretical practice may be subdivided into scientific and ideological parts) may be conceptualised simultaneously diachronically (the "succession of proofs in the ordered discourse of the proof" (68)) and synchronically (the conceptual system as it exists at a given moment, the "organisational structure of the concepts in the thought-totality or system" [68]). Any concept is defined by its place and function in the totality of the thinker's thought system, for example, Marx's concept of surplus value is determined by its link to other concepts in his thought-totality as a whole. The "hierarchy of concepts" (68), in turn, determines the diachronic order of their appearance in the scientific discourse. The order of proofs is determined by the validating criteria involved, the relevant "theoretical problematic" (49). In short, the "forms of proof in scientific discourse . . . are the diachrony of a basic synchrony" (68).