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From Return to Rupture: Althusser and the Post-Marxist Tradition

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Abstract: This paper seeks to articulate the theoretical development of Marxism to post-Marxism by examining Louis Althusser's influence on post-Marxist theory. I divide this paper into three parts and ask the following question: how did Althusser's "return to Marx" conceptually prepare the rupture with Marx found in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism? The first part contextualizes the debate between economic determinism and Marxist humanism by elaborating on their main positions through Marx's texts and his interpreters. The second part provides a discussion of Althusser's critiques of both economic determinism and humanism with the concept of "overdetermination" and thesis of the subject's constitution through interpellation. The third part explores the Leninist and Gramscian backgrounds of the notion of "hegemony" and its reconfiguration through Althusser's theoretical framework as found in the works of Laclau and Mouffe. I show that Althusser laid the groundwork for post-Marxism to develop out of Marxism through anti-essentialism that disputes the primacy of the forces of production and repudiates the constitutive subject's alienated labor as an underlying principle of critique.

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INTRODUCTION

The major events of the 20th century have posed important questions that greatly affected the development of critical and emancipatory theory, particularly Marxism. The success of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the failure of the Spartacist uprising of 1919, the advent of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, the student protests of 1968, and the proliferation of new social movements have all been critical junctures that informed the theory and practice of Marxism. The first half of the century was dominated by economistic readings of Marx, bannered by the Second International and, later, the Soviet Union. Dissatisfied with the determinist interpretations of Marx, humanist and historicist readings were developed in the works of Georg Lukács and Jean-Paul Sartre. Furthermore, the discovery and posthumous publication of Marx's early texts such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology* during the 1930s led to new readings of Marx, highlighting questions on the subject and the role it plays in determining history. The renewed philosophical interest in the anthropological dimension of Marx's thought became an important point of political and academic debate. This was the context which Louis Althusser intervened in France. His call for a "return to Marx" was a move that both challenged and affirmed Party legitimacy.

Jacques Rancière describes Althusser as the one "who cleared the way for a Marx who was neither the guarantor of Soviet state power nor the partner of theologians and armchair philosophers."[1] Althusser's "return to Marx" therefore had unintended consequences. His return allowed theorists to do "whatever they liked to" with Marxism.[2] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe are prime examples of this. They critically

[1] Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. by Emiliano Battista (New York and London: Continuum, 2011), xix.

[2] Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*, trans. by Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 12.

worked with Marx, especially in their groundbreaking work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, in their response to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the weakening legitimacy of the orthodox Marxist paradigm.[3] From the terrain of Marxism, their theoretical engagements have been regarded as "post-Marxism." The aim of this paper is to articulate the theoretical development of Marxism to post-Marxism. Furthermore, it concerns itself with the overarching question: how did Althusser's "return to Marx" conceptually prepare the rupture with Marx found in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism? I first situate and discuss the two dominant trends of Marxism, namely, economic determinism and humanism. I examine their key arguments through figures such G.V. Plekhanov, Joseph Stalin, Georg Lukács, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Following this, I explicate Althusser's "return to Marx" which covers his critique of deterministic and humanistic appropriations of Marxism, along with his concept of overdetermination and theory of subjectivity. I then proceed to elaborate Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory of hegemony and radical democracy by relating it to Althusser's anti-determinist and anti-humanist reading of Marx. With these in mind, I show that Althusser laid the groundwork for post-Marxism to develop out of Marxism through anti-essentialism that disputes the primacy of the forces of production and repudiates the constitutive subject's alienated labor as an underlying principle of critique. This demonstrates the relevance of Althusser's ideas in the face of complexifying conjunctures and understanding the nature of political interventions.

[3] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York and London: Verso, 2001).

MARXISM AND THE QUESTION OF HISTORY

Given that Marx, as Althusser argued, "founded" the science of history by opening it to scientific inquiry,[4] a concern with this object would also involve questions of who or what is the determinant factor in historical development. While there are many grey areas in terms of answering this question, the two general camps found in this debate mainly fall within two broad categories: 1) economic determinists and 2) humanists. Majority of the works within this theoretical debate are situated within the first six decades of the 20th century. While trying not to be reductive, general characteristics of the former involve a prioritization of understanding the economic base, particularly the forces of production, as the general motor of historical development. Humanism, on the other hand, has more variation in its problematic. A very well-known dimension inquired upon by Marxist humanism is the experience of alienation under capitalism. Moreover, humanists also explore themes of human agency in the constitution of various historical circumstances. These two specific traditions are more or less symptomatic of the historical circumstances that affected their respective milieus. Economic determinists express a certain optimism at the turn of the century with the growing international worker movements and rapid technological advancements. Meanwhile, humanists are informed by dissatisfaction with institutionalized Marxisms and the increasing popularity of phenomenology in the European academe.[5]

[4] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 4.

[5] For example, Alexandre Feron highlights how the entry of phenomenology in France added a "philosophical foundation" for Marxism. See Alexandre Feron, "Marxism and Phenomenology in France," in *Marx, a French Passion*, ed. by Jean-Numa Ducange and Anthony Burlaud, trans. by David Broder (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 219.

ECONOMIC DETERMINISM

In terms of Marxism's deterministic tendencies, the accusations thrown against Marx were not entirely baseless. One cannot deny that Marx's *magnum opus*, the three-volume *Capital,* was a work of economics as much as it was a work of philosophy and ontology. This fact made it difficult for Marxism to escape the traps of economistic interpretations. Adding to the difficulty of evading determinism are statements from Marx himself in texts such as *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, wherein he speaks of the relations and forces of production. He writes:

> No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.[6]

We can see here clearly that the words of Marx entertain a certain type of technological and economic determinism that simplifies and reduces society and its evolution to the changes in the economy, particularly of the forces of production. Additionally, for Marx, the relations of production simply follow these changes. The classical Marxist formulation explains revolutions being necessitated the moment contradictions in a mode of production ripen and manifest through economic crises. Pronouncements like this from Marx are often treated as prophetic visions, rather than educated economic forecasts based on the observations made available during his time. Adding to this deterministic reading of Marx is the posthumous publication of Friedrich Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* in 1925. The text propagates a deterministic

[6] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. by Maurice Dobb, trans. by S.W. Ryazanskaya (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 21.

ontology, in line with the Soviet interpretation of dialectical and historical materialism. Engels' text critiques the Hegelian dialectic for its idealism, and posited that the "laws of dialectics" are abstracted from the domain of nature and society. Engels enumerates the "three laws of the dialectic" following his reading of Hegel. These laws are the transformation of quantity into quality, the interpenetration of opposites, and the negation of the negation.[7] The problem with Engels' formulation is the transposition of these laws to the natural world and the consequent assumption that nature itself functions according to these set of principles.

Even before the official publication of Engels' *Dialectics of Nature,* there have already been similar texts that appear to have a strong affinity to Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Plekhanov's "A Few Words in Defence of Economic Materialism," which originally came out in the 1890s, is a case in point wherein he asserts the primacy of the economic base over the legal apparatuses found in the superstructure.[8] Plekhanov adheres to the principle of social relations as representative of economic relations. Society, and history as a whole, is regarded by him as the movement of achieving "equilibrium" between relations and forces of production.[9] Despite being nominally a determinist in this case, he already entertains questions surrounding human agency. William Shaw's interpretation of Plekhanov argues that historical inevitability is made possible by human wills acting in accordance with what a conjuncture may lead them to do.[10] Necessity and freedom become identical, wherein freedom is considered being knowledgeable of necessity. A subject may experience freedom through the realization that

[7] See Friedrich Engels, "Dialectics of Nature," in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 25, trans. by Clemens Dutt (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), 356.

[8] Georgi Plekhanov, "A Few Words in Defence of Economic Materialism," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 2, trans. by Julius Katzer (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 187.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] William H. Shaw, "Plekhanov on the Role of the Individual in History," in *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 35:3 (April 1988), 251.

it can "act in no other way."[11] In more concrete terms, the material conditions for revolution can inevitably lead to change the moment it forces the proletariat to act upon a crisis.

Similar to Plekhanov, Stalin's determinism is based on a reductive understanding of dialectics. Stalin's 1938 work *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* shows that dialectics is a movement towards higher and more complex forms or systems, wherein there is a constant struggle between old and new, and of contradictions within the very nature of things.[12] To put it simply, Stalin treated the dialectic as a law of nature, hence the importance of translating dialectical materialism into something more concrete through its extension in the study of history and society.[13] Ultimately, society follows the pattern of nature giving way to the new through modes of production rising out of dying ones. Typical of economic determinists like Plekhanov, Stalin affirms that a crisis necessitates revolutions as advancements in the mode of production are responsible for shifts in the superstructure of society. He regards the forces of production as "the most mobile and revolutionary element of production" where the relations of production must conform.[14] This is what constitutes Stalin's (and other economic determinists') view of historical materialism as a science. It does not simply study history from the perspectives of individuals and their actions, but rather from the point of view of class struggle and economic production.[15]

HUMANIST MARXISM

The economic determinist version of historical materialism would eventually have its inadequacies. Factors such as dogmatism, theoretical

[11] *Ibid*., 252.
[12] Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism & Concerning Questions of Leninism* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 3-6.
[13] *Ibid.,* 6.
[14] *Ibid.,* 20.
[15] *Ibid*.,19-20.

terrorism, and political turmoil in the form of Stalinist authoritarianism contributed to the frustration of intellectuals with Party-oriented Marxism. Eventually, questions of human experience and agency took center stage in the study of history. Lukács' landmark publication of *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923 became a groundwork for the development of Marxist humanism. Apart from this, the discovery and publication of Marx's early works in the 1930s, along with the growing interest in phenomenology influenced new directions in Marxist research. Suddenly, instead of talking about the infallible laws of history and the primacy of the economic base, scholars were occupied with understanding the dynamics of alienation and its presence in society during that time.

The *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Theses on Feuerbach* provided a theoretical impetus for the philosophical renewal of Marx by questioning the phenomenon of alienated labor. The *1844 Manuscripts* explains the consequences of alienation along four distinct lines, specifically: 1) the worker's alienation from product of labor, 2) the worker's alienation from the act of production, 3) the worker's alienation from himself, and 4) the worker's alienation from other men.[16] By virtue of capitalist property relations, the worker owns nothing else but his labor power. Through employment under the capitalist, the worker produces objects which are not his own. To put it simply, the worker is estranged from the products of his labor. This leads to alienation from the process of production, as the worker's labor is seen not as a part of his life, but something separate. Thus, labor, which is supposed to have an immediate relation with human life, altogether becomes a means to support life. Another added layer to this is man's universality as a species-being, whose labor creates beyond immediate needs and contributes to the creation of the objective world. Given that labor under capitalism is alien to the worker, the world

[16] I have summarized Marx's discussion of alienated labor from the section "Estranged Labor." For a more in-depth discussion, see Karl Marx, "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 324-330.

produced, therefore, is one which is also alienated ultimately confronting the worker. In other words, the worker is alienated from oneself for there is the inability to recognize the objective world as something that belongs to him. Answering the question of "to whom" is labor alienated, Marx reveals that alienation of labor is possible due to the fact that it is to fellow man where labor is alienated. The fact that one man—or one class of men for that matter—can claim another man's life activity simply because of the gulf between what one owns and lacks alludes to class struggle.

In a similar manner to Marx's discussion of man's alienation from himself or his species-being, Marx, in the First and Eighth theses on Feuerbach, affirms the role of the subject's activity in the constitution of the social reality.[17] But furthermore, both the *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Theses on Feuerbach* refocus the problem of history away from the blind and abstract moments of technological developments toward human capability and subjective agency. Thanks in large part to these two texts, history was no longer a simple question of economics working under inviolable dialectical laws, but rather a narrative built on human intervention.

While predating the discovery of the *1844 Manuscripts*, Lukács already had something similar in mind in the composition of *History and Class Consciousness*, in which he highlights the role of immediacy as a product of mediation. The novelty of Lukács' analysis in this book is his Kantian and Hegelian approach in reading *Capital*, specifically the discussion on commodity fetishism. The question of capitalism is accordingly treated like the Kantian thing-in-itself, where its laws and objective structure are forever out of reach of the subject's interventions. Taking Hegel's route, Lukács asserts the path towards "objectivity" is through the subjective. Reified capitalist reality appears in its immediacy as built on quasi-natural laws.[18] The subjective realization of the

[17] Karl Marx, "Concerning Feuerbach," in *Early Writings*, 421–423.

[18] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971), 87.

proletariat becomes a key element in its dialectical interplay with the objective reorganization of society. Therefore, a launching point for human emancipation lies in the role of the proletariat to see itself as a maker of history. Consciousness of self-objectification through the products of labor becomes an initial step in breaking away from the bourgeois standpoint. Lukács' Hegel-inspired reading of Marx tells us that an objective understanding of history can be attained through analyzing the subjective moments that motivates change. Lukács, furthermore, opens up a field for an anthropocentric history, where the possibility of universal history is made by locating the central meaning of its movement in the praxis of man.

Echoing this anthropocentric materialism, Sartre attempted to synthesize existential thought with Marx's historical method. Consistent with his earlier existentialist texts such as *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre maintains man's desire for transcendence and man's being for-itself. Between facticity and transcendence, Sartre, in *Search for a Method*, points out the dual-nature of man's existence in which he exists both as product and producer of history.[19] As producer, man is capable of negating his facticity through realizing his project. Doing this, man creates an imprint in history. This product of praxis, however, becomes inert, as the alienated product becomes a hindrance to its original producer. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* Sartre introduced the concept of the "practico-inert" to demonstrate man's alienation. Inasmuch as it generates social relations,[20] it also becomes the source of its producer's disenfranchisement. Sartre's interpretation of Marxism shows us that human praxis inevitably goes up against itself by producing an objective order that determines him. If the dialectic is to be located somewhere, Sartre asserts that it is not in an external realm forcing

[19] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 87.

[20] Jean-Paul Sartre*, Critique of Dialectical Reason: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, ed. by Jonathan Rée, trans. by Alan Sheridan Smith, Vol. 1 (New York & London: Verso, 2004), 45-56.

necessity among us in the manner of Engels and Stalin, but rather in the field of human praxis which determine and is determined by the social relations it produces.[21] By restoring man to his rightful place and by synthesizing the existential thrust aimed at transcendence, the dialectic and Marxism appears to have reached a true synthesis between German idealism's subject capable of reality-producing intervention and economic determinism's hardline adherence to nature's objectivity.[22]

Marxist humanism, beginning with the Young Marx and all the way up to Lukács and Sartre, bears similarities. The first is the acknowledgment of the subject's role in shaping reality. Humanism asserts that the subject is not a mere passive follower of objectivity, but also its active producer. Capitalist society, as a product of man's praxis, also confronts him, thus appears the experience of alienation. The locus of emancipation is then located in man's ability to grasp the dialectic of subject and object, setting the goal of "disalienating" the subject from his objective world. The recognition of the subject in the object also grounds history in man. Perhaps the core tenet of any Marxist humanism is the affirmation of man as the maker of history. This ability to make history comes also at the price of being determined by history, hence the dialectic's existence in man's praxis. The anthropocentrism of this view further proposes the possibility of a universal history through man's alienation and transcendence of his alienation.

Through this simple excursus, we are now introduced to the conditions in which Althusser was theoretically thrown. On the one hand, economic determinism blindly favored the role of technology and the forces of production as history's ultimate motor. On the other, humanism posits subjective praxis as a maker of objective history and problematizes the role of consciousness in abolishing the conditions of exploitation. Althusser, seeing both these theoretical frameworks as deviations, called for a renewal of Marx's thought. This renewal is not simply a repetition of

[21] *Ibid.,* 58.
[22] Sartre, *Search for a Method,* 99.

Marx and past Marxisms, but is also a struggle to prove the scientificity and theoretical novelty of Marx's "discoveries." Thus, to renew Marxist science is to return to Marx.

ALTHUSSER: RE-READING AND RETURNING TO MARX

The Althusserian project, first and foremost, is a theoretical intervention for its time. The conjuncture Althusser belonged to was, like every other philosophical period, mired in endless controversies. The peculiarity of the French situation, as Althusser would put it in his Introduction of *For Marx*, is the supposed "absence" of a "theoretical culture" in its workers' movement.[23] With the increasing frustration toward the Marxist orthodoxy and the dialectics of nature, intellectuals in France attempted to form its own distinct reading of Marx. Sensing a gap in Marxist theory, French intellectuals sought to remedy this through phenomenology and a stronger emphasis on Marx's idealist heritage with the importation of Hegel into the French academe led by scholars such as Jean Hyppolite and Alexandre Kojève.[24] Feron regards this as the "first original Marxist current in France" since it attempts to bring a synthesis between philosophy and the politics of Marxism.[25] However, Althusser remained skeptical of economic determinism and humanism, regarding both as theoretical deviations. Despite the appearance of being directly opposed to each other, economism and humanism share a common ground, articulated in different ways: essentialism. Economic determinism and humanism managed to produce essentialist perspectives of history thanks in large part to linear and reductive theories of causality.

Economic determinists (and adherents of the dialectics of nature in general) read Marx along the lines of transitive causality. Althusser

[23] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York & London: Verso, 1996), 23.
[24] Feron, "Marxism and Phenomenology in France," 219-220.
[25] *Ibid.,* 227.

described transitive causality as "mechanistic."[26] In transitive causality, causes are external to their effects. Economic determinism holds that the dialectic is an external law, which is objective and found in nature. The dialectic, treated as a natural fact therefore affects social reality through a clear cause and effect relationship. Economic determinism traces everything back to an ontologized dialectic in its study of social dynamics and history in general. Against this, Althusser argues in *For Marx* that a conjuncture is not simply determined causally by a single level of the whole, but maintains its "overdetermination." This means a theorist can never conclusively pin down a certain event to a singular cause. Conjunctures are not manifestations of one contradiction that holds the causal explanation over everything; rather, they are fusions "into a ruptural unity," with different circumstances and contradictions that contain within them "their own essence and effectivity."[27] The unity which constitutes a present event is an accumulation of autonomous elements, capable of contributing to the existing conjuncture. Unlike what Marx originally says in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* which implies a linear determination of the superstructure by the base, Althusser asserts that superstructures have their own "relative autonomy," wherein the economy only becomes determinant "in the last instance" through production.[28] Different elements of a totality have their specific set of rules, which, while affected by other elements, are not solely determined by something external from them. Here, Althusser distances history from a Hegelian understanding of the whole's presence in its parts.[29] Althusser resorts to a theory of causality closer to Spinoza to further distance Marx from Hegelianism.

[26] Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. by David Fernbach and Ben Brewster (New York & London: Verso, 2015), 342.

[27] Althusser, *For Marx,* 99-100.

[28] *Ibid*., 111.

[29] In his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* Hegel argues that philosophy cannot forecast futures, for it is only a "child of its own time." Hegel insists to celebrate Reason as

As an alternative to simple causal explanations, Althusser proposes what he refers to as "structural causality" in *Reading Capital*. Unlike transitive or expressive forms of causality, causes and effects are not easily delineated from each other. Reality is neither an effect of ontological laws nor alienated human praxis. With this alternative theory of causality, Althusser asserts that we understand "that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effect."[30] There is nothing outside of a structure to which we can use as a causal explanation, just as we cannot seek any other substance or reality outside of nature. Structures are formed by elements and the way in which these elements are assembled constitutes certain rules/norms of such structures. Elements interact with each other; however, they maintain their degree of autonomy that has its own history. The concept of "structure" acts as a principle which unites these independent entities.[31] Superstructural elements such as law, schools, and culture have their own autonomy. At a "macro" level, we understand them and their interactions in their unity which compose a certain social totality. They may be affected by the economy and relations of production, but they are not entirely determined by them just as they can affect these aspects without being fully determinant. Althusser manages to avoid simple pluralism and deterministic unitarian thinking through structural causality. It acknowledges the plurality of elements and their respective effectivity, but also sees them as composing a structure which unites them. This becomes

it is found in the present. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by Allen W. Wood, trans. by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21-22.

[30] Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 344.

[31] Here, it is possible to speculate that Althusser uses Spinoza's differentiation of the attributes of thought and extension as an analogical tool for understanding the relation between structure and its effects. Attributes of thought and extension interact with one another as effects of a substance through different modes. See Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics Proved in Geometrical Order*, ed. Matthew Kisner, trans. by Matthew Kisner and Michael Silverthorne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2P7S.

clearer in the language he uses in his later writings on aleatory materialism, where we could understand how the necessity of a structure (its unity) is retroactively produced by contingent encounters of its elements; what unites social reality at a given moment are not overarching principles, but rather contingent encounters of elements that produce its own necessity.[32]

Structural causality serves two theoretical purposes for Althusser, since, apart from being a response to economic determinism, it also critiques humanism and its concept of subjectivity. Given that structural causality allows relative autonomy and an index of effectivity among the various levels of the whole, we can understand different institutions under a given social formation having their own level of determinacy within a totality. Thus, Althusser speaks of ideology and the subject from the perspective of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). This is an important contribution found in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." The major claim Althusser makes in his theory of ideology is the "always-already" subject's interpellation by ISAs. Through ideological interpellation, the "concrete individual" becomes a subject.[33] By virtue of "recognizing" this ideological hailing, the subject, in turn, accepts a certain way of relating to the world and acts accordingly to its recognized position in the social world.[34] In this sense, ideology (when accepted as "Truth") serves to be the "controls" which allow a subject to operate. For example, by recognizing oneself as a member of a political party, the acceptance of the core beliefs of that organization constitutes a subject. Upon accepting the "Truth" of this certain political party, the subject then realizes its role and place alongside the corresponding

[32] See Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, ed. by François Matheron and Oliver Corpet, trans. by G.M. Goshgarian (New York & London: Verso, 2006), 169. See also, Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 73-100.

[33] Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. by G.M. Goshgarian and Ben Brewster (New York & London: Verso, 2014), 261-262.

[34] *Ibid.,* 257.

responsibilities it has in relation to the institutions which it belongs. Under bourgeois law, there is the concept of the subject as bearer of "essential traits." But in reality, these traits are only essential to bourgeois legal institutions.[35] The moment I recognize myself as a legal subject, I act under certain rules and articulate a number of practices which operate under the subjectivity I assume. Due to the fact that there is always a plurality of institutions with their own ideology and ideological assumptions, the concrete individual is therefore not only interpellated once, but many times over, thus assuming "multiple instances" of subjectivity. The (unified) "Subject" does not exist; what actually exists are only "subjects." The Althusserian subject is consequently "split," just as Lacan's is in the mirror stage.[36] In a sense, Althusser, like Lacan, is opposed to a subject equated to the conscious ego. Subjectivity, as Lacan argues, is constituted by the symbolic order and the "story the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier."[37]

It is by accepting a role given by a signifier in the symbolic order that a subject comes to be. The structuralist readings of the subject by Althusser and Lacan are heavily opposed to an absolute sense of freedom and agency, as espoused by the early works of Sartre and which he tempers in his later Marxist writings. But moreover, by accepting one's role as a "worker" or as a "factory owner," both being uniquely dictated by capitalist relations, one's agency and freedom is already limited within the matrix of practices permitted by these institutions. When one thinks of it, even one's "freedom" to enter into contract between employer and employee is already mediated by the interpellation of an individual as a "legal subject." Althusser's work on the subject also recasts "the problem

[35] *Ibid.,* 262.

[36] Lacan regards the "absolute subject" as "unthinkable." The subject is "split" by virtue of the disjunction between its "ideal-I" and the external world. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75-81.

[37] *Ibid.,* 7.

of the individual," which Sartre asserts in both *Search for a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Althusser writes in *Reading Capital*:

> It defines for the capitalist mode of production the different forms of individuality required and produced by that mode according to functions, of which the individuals are 'bearers' (Träger), in the division of labour, in the different 'levels' of the structure … The concept of the variations in the mode of historical existence of individuality opens the way to what is really left of the 'problem of the role of the individual in history.'[38]

Once again, we see the difference between humanism as represented by Sartre and the Lacan-like theory of the subject of Althusser. Sartre (and perhaps even Lukács) supposedly misses the fact that we are speaking of history and "individuals," not history and "the individual." The individuals/individualities Althusser speaks of are empty subjects, who are not absolute bearers of freedoms, but rather bearers of "functions" afforded to them by whatever social relations they are situated in. No less than Marx himself says this in *Capital* that his "standpoint … n less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them."[39] As bearers of social relations, individuals act in such a way that supports an existing totality for it to reproduce itself. Individuals acting under the subjectivity of the capitalist, for example, have "the appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract" as its "sole driving force behind his operations."[40] This perfectly explains how capitalism "melts everything into air," overriding codes of morals and

[38] Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 260.

[39] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1990), 92.

[40] *Ibid.,* 254.

ethics. The capitalist subject does not follow the rules of religious piety in the context of running a business, for certain religious virtues stand against the self-valorization of capital. Althusser manages to show a stark tonal difference in Marx's exposition from his humanist texts and *Capital*. The former approaches critique from a normative manner, in that, there is an ideal or an "ought" that serves as the gauge for which we can say that something is wrong. Categories of "man" and "alienation" serve as moral compasses that become ways to demonstrate the problems of capitalism. Meanwhile, the mature Marx takes a descriptive approach in critique. He concerns himself more of how and why capitalism is possible by breaking down its elements. By doing so, while not explicitly saying it, Marx does manage to at least anticipate a concept of an empty subject. In short, from Marx's perspective, no matter how an individual attempts to assert its freedom over its material conditions, it will always be limited by its entanglements with various elements of society that determines its actions and beliefs. Ideological interpellation acts as a "manual" which defines the dos and don'ts entailed by specific institutions.

Rather than viewing the subject in its different entanglements, the humanist interpretation sees it is a "hermeneutic key" in understanding the past and present. While it is already understood that the both past and present are products of humanity's self-objectification, Sartre asserts that the subject is also capable of "reconstituting" the past in its present praxis by constructing the "past, that is to say transcended, reality, by rediscovering it in the present transcendence which preserved it; and it is itself constructed by this resuscitated past which transforms it in so far as it restores it."[41] As such, the subject's praxis has a synchronic dimension to it by bringing together past and present. The humanist subject has within it a synthetic role, to the point that theorists such as Lukács speak of the proletariat as an expression of society's "objective aims."[42] As economic determinists find causality to be transitive, humanists see

[41] Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* 56.
[42] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness,* 149.

causality as expressive. The latter theory of causality depicts history as an expression of a certain principle. For humanists, history is an expression of the subject's alienated praxis. Althusser observes that, for humanists, the present, too, follows the same idea of a "homogenous" time where different elements of a totality express one and the same causal factor, where this causal factor exists "immediately and empirically."[43] Once again appealing to the concept of relative autonomy, Althusser asserts the importance of seeing the complexity of the whole and its different elements having their "own history and time."[44] The humanist subject is considered to be a unification of past and present. Meanwhile, another dimension introduced in *Reading Capital* that adds to the splitting of the Althusserian subject is the multiplicity of temporalities within a whole. This does not mean, however, that the plural temporalities act in full independence of each other. Althusser notes that "the specificity of each of these times and of each of these histories—in other words, their relative autonomy and independence—is based on a certain type of articulation in the whole, and therefore on a certain type of dependence with respect to the whole."[45] This means that the way in which the different levels of the whole express their difference in temporality affects and is affected by the whole in which it is a part of. Unlike the homogenous temporality of humanism which makes the unified subject synthesize past and present, thus allowing a reduction of society as a product of objectified praxis, Althusser's subject experiences various histories and times of society. Althusser's analytical method understands how capitalist society, for instance, not simply the manifestation of one essential principle, but an effect of various levels articulating themselves differentially.

This may perhaps be better explained through a concrete example through the coexistence of the Church and the factory. For humanists, the subject is a product of both its belongingness to a religion and as a

[43] See Althusser, *Reading Capital,* 240.
[44] *Ibid.,* 247.
[45] *Ibid.*

member of the working class. They would understand how both these institutions are products of human praxis. Therefore, the subject is synthetically producer and produced by these institutions. Meanwhile, an Althusserian understanding of this would see the existence of two relatively independent institutions that co-exist within a given context. Acknowledging that they have different goals and historical contexts, we realize how contradictions in society may arise not necessarily resulting from disunified human praxis, but from plural temporalities. The contradiction between Church and capital, for example, is a result of the relatively autonomous histories between the two entities. Moving forward with this example, a concrete individual, as a religious subject and worker-subject may favor one aspect over the other. The individual may see religion as more important, hence taking time off from work to attend church services. Immediately, we see how instead of uniting different practices, the concrete individual is split between religious and worker subjectivity, disuniting the different aspects of society. This is because, in this example, the temporality of the Church is not harmonized with the temporality of production. But at the same time, it is the individual's partaking in production that may allow it to participate in a religious service through offerings which the individual sources from its wage. This simple example shows how, despite the autonomy of religious practice from production, production still affects religion. On a larger and more abstract scale, Althusser manages to explain these concepts and take into consideration temporal complexities which are often missed by other readers of Marx.

Apart from the contentious nature of the subject, Althusser also finds the normative ideal of humanism "unscientific." The consistent thread that connects the works of the Young Marx and his humanist interpreters is the aim of suturing the subject-object divide. A crucial component for liberation in the humanist account is the subject's recognition of oneself in the objective world. That is, the subject must reappropriate its alienated praxis by attaining a level of consciousness so

that it may act upon its circumstances. It is precisely "consciousness" that concerns Althusser. In *For Marx,* he writes that "it is in ideology (as the locus of political struggle) that men *become conscious* of their place in the world and in history."[46] Recalling how ideology interpellates an individual as a subject, the subject appears at the moment of self-consciousness or self-recognition of one's role within ideology. While Althusser acknowledges the role of ideology beyond capitalism,[47] the concept of "becoming aware" of one's alienation is not enough to abolish it.[48] One has to undergo the road of science to inquire on capitalism's conditions of possibility before effectively abolishing it. The problem of humanism is its assumption that praxis is the beginning and end of capitalism, with the only difference is that capitalism's end is brought about by a self-reflexive action. In stark contrast to this, Althusser's reading of Marx argues for complexity and the need to understand capitalism not as a completely unified whole, but rather, a whole with parts that are not immediately transparent.

We see Althusser's extensive discussion and criticism of the respective shortcomings of both economic determinism and humanism. As two sides of the same coin, the tendency to reduce society to abstract natural laws or pure human praxis, essentialist discourse falls short in taking account of the contradictions, complexities, and fragmentary characteristic of conjunctures. This is what, as I see it, necessitated a renewed reading of Marx coupled with a heavy focus on his mature texts. But more importantly, Althusser's anti-essentialism exemplified by the concept "empty" subject and his descriptive analysis of ideology brings us closer to the terrain of post-Marxism. Althusser's work shows us that capitalism is not a singular force and, therefore, any critique of it must keep this in mind. Inasmuch as the economy affects politics and vice-versa, there will always be room between the two to operate freely. The

[46] Althusser, *For Marx,* 233.
[47] *Ibid.,* 232-236.
[48] *Ibid.,* 230.

gap opened by Althusser becomes an interest, especially for Laclau and Mouffe.

TOWARDS NEW TERRAINS: THE POST-MARXIST THEORY OF LACLAU AND MOUFFE

Jean-François Lyotard's declaration of the "end of grand narratives"[49] reflected the situation of Marxism at the second half of the 20th century. The emergence of new social movements representing struggles that go beyond class signified a new stage in the development of global politics. Instead of speaking about one narrative founded on a universal history which culminates in a classless society, new social movements focused on issues such as the environment, feminism, gender, and race. A chasm opens between the social agent and economic conditions on the one hand, and the accomplishment of a political task on the other. This is theoretically expressed through Althusser's development of overdetermination and the empty subject. A central problem to this, which we may consider in our reading of Laclau and Mouffe, is the possibility of uniting different struggles under one position, without reverting to the determinist and essentialist paradigm of Marxism. To bridge the gap between anti-essentialism and unifying multiple struggles, Laclau and Mouffe mobilize the concept of hegemony and construct a radical democratic project. Their post-Marxism, as Laclau would put it, serves both a questioning and recovery of the categories of Marxism.[50] Consequently, to suit the hegemony for a radical democratic project means first, to see hegemony in historicity from Lenin to Gramsci.

Lenin and the offshoot ideology that bears his name, Leninism, has been a source of economistic interpretations of society. Such is the

[49] See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

[50] Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 93.

case for self-proclaimed Leninists like Stalin. However, Mouffe notes that Lenin's political practice has its anti-economistic moments as it "shattered the narrow economistic confines of Western Marxist thought at the beginning of the century."[51] His pamphlet, *What is to be Done?,* serves as a prime example of the separation between the agent and political task. Arguing against "trade union consciousness," Lenin asserts that the proletariat does not arrive at class consciousness on its own. Class consciousness has to be injected from the outside.[52] For Lenin, the working class will not necessarily call for the destruction of capitalism. If they are to be mobilized against it, a revolutionary party is necessary. Although Lenin had these tendencies, there are parts of his thought that remained essentialist through and through, such as his theory of the state for instance.[53] Gramsci's own theory further advances how hegemony is thought of. The true merit of Gramsci's notion of hegemony comes from its entanglement with common sense philosophy and its articulation through concrete human practices. Gramsci claims that in some way, "all men are philosophers," insofar as people espouse a certain worldview that manifests itself in one's actions.[54] Gramsci stresses the role of intellectuals in shaping culture and the worldviews contained within them. The power of ideas is expressed materially. Part of an effective hegemony is how different groups can cohesively act in coordination bound by a worldview. The organic intellectual is responsible for making the particular interest of a specific social group the general interest of society. As Gramsci mentions, the organic intellectual needs to be an "organizer of masses of

[51] Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. by James Martin (New York: Routledge, 2013), 22.

[52] Vladimir Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1947), 31.

[53] Lenin follows Engels and Marx by claiming the class nature of State institutions as "an organ of class domination." See Vladimir Lenin, *State and Revolution*, (New York: International Publishers, 1943), 8-9.

[54] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 344.

men."[55] The intellectual does this by spreading ideas and making them "an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order."[56] The achievement of hegemony entails that a particular interest becomes universally accepted as representative of the general will. In this case, if the working class desires to be the hegemonic force of society, it must present its particular interest and make it resonate with non-members of the working class. A particular ideology must then become "common sense" and "transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class"[57] for it to be concretely articulated in an agent's action. To put it differently, hegemony can unite heterogenous social forces under a particular programme, if, and only if, that particular programme can resonate as a representative of a universal interest. In Gramsci's own words:

> this presupposes the attainment of a "cultural-social" unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world, both general and particular, operating in transitory bursts (in emotional ways) or permanently.[58]

Gramsci does concede the fact that society and its various classes will have their different agendas. Social change cannot be achieved, however, if a class remains in itself. It must be able to relate the different struggles of other movements to effectively universalize its worldview. Yet, there are still limits to Gramsci's theory. As I see it, although he does push toward the detachment of actor from act, Gramsci still maintains a level of Hegelianism and, consequently essentialism, in his work. For Gramsci, the "philosophy of an historical epoch is, therefore, nothing

[55] *Ibid.,* 6.
[56] *Ibid.,* 325.
[57] *Ibid.,* 181.
[58] *Ibid.,* 349.

other than the 'history' of that epoch itself."[59] This was criticized by Althusser for viewing philosophy along the lines of a homogenous temporality that sees philosophy as nothing but the reflection of an underlying cause in the present.[60] Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe observed that Gramsci still maintained class as an "ontological foundation" which acts as "a single unifying principle in every hegemonic formation."[61] At the end of the day, Gramsci does not fully embrace contingency in his theory of hegemony due to his class-based philosophy of history.

This is the relevance of Althusser's interventions in the development of post-Marxist theory,[62] since it divorces politics from the economy and emphasizes the role of relating oneself to an identity in constructing subjectivity. But despite his relevance, Laclau and Mouffe contest the true meaning of overdetermination in Althusser's theory in relation to economic determination in the last instance. Despite the theoretical advancement Althusser made through a non-reductionist approach in understanding conjunctures, Laclau and Mouffe contend that the economy, as determinant in the last instance produced "an abstract universal object, the 'economy', which produces concrete effects," which is altogether "simple determination and not overdetermination."[63] Laclau and Mouffe affirm the pure contingency of social formations. Post-Marxism proper, while not entirely ignoring economic struggles, never reduces politics to economics. This rids society of "any single unitary and positive logic"[64] which acts as a gauge for us to predict and connect political action to its supposed agents.

A major breakthrough of Laclau and Mouffe carrying forward the Gramscian concept of hegemony is the consideration of the constitution

[59] *Ibid.,* 345.
[60] See Althusser, *Reading Capital,* 280-283.
[61] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 69.
[62] Perhaps an interesting relation between Althusser and Mouffe is the latter's attendance in Althusser's seminars in the 1960s. See James Martin, "Introduction," in Mouffe, *Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, 2.
[63] Laclau and Mouffe*, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* 99.
[64] *Ibid.,* 143.

of the political subject. Like Althusser, post-Marxist theory is best described as an "anti-humanist" theory. For post-Marxists, "social agents lack any essence."[65] This means that the concrete individuals do not necessarily have any inherent traits. Just as Althusser claims that individuals are "bearers" of social relations, Laclau and Mouffe similarly hold that "it is the discourse which constitutes the subject position of the social agent."[66] Following Althusser, the subject of post-Marxism is "constituted" the moment it accepts meaning from a system of signs. The agency, beliefs, and practices of a subject are always results of a discursive totality. The hegemonic task of uniting dispersed interests and wills involves the construction of discourse that constitutes a subject's identity around a certain idea. Political action and emancipation, for post-Marxism, is not a result of a historical process where the Subject becomes fully aware of its alienation, setting out to recognize the objective world as its own positing. The problem of such a humanist interpretation of history is its homogenization of human practices, as if every practice is one and the same. Post-Marxism is cognizant of the different meanings of human practice, especially in the context of discursive systems. This heterogeneity is what requires "sectorial identity … conceived as a nucleus and starting point in the constitution of a wider popular will."[67] However, the anti-humanist aspect of post-Marxism must be qualified. For Laclau and Mouffe, the humanism they distance themselves from is a metaphysical and essentialist interpretation of subjectivity.[68] Humanism per se, as an ideology, is not outrightly rejected by Laclau and Mouffe. Humanism can be emancipatory. Laclau and Mouffe provide an example of the category of "Man" and its relation to subjectivity. As a "nodal point," the identification with the concept of "Man" becomes determinant

[65] *Ibid.,* 93.

[66] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," in Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, 101.

[67] Ernesto Laclau, "Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics," in *Critical Inquiry* 32:4 (2006), 675.

[68] See Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," 125.

of the social practices which follow from it.[69] What this means is that in forming a struggle, the signifier "Man" becomes a point where people can rally around, representing something universal. How one acts and what one struggles for is determined by this category.

Hegemony takes place with multiple struggles carrying their own particular demand. Each particular demand contains a double-meaning: one internal to the movement itself and the other, which is more universal.[70] The demands form a "chain of equivalence," united by "an anti-system meaning."[71] As Laclau notes, hegemony occurs when "the body of one particularity assumes a function of universal representation."[72] Political subjectivity becomes possible by setting up a hegemonic discourse where a certain signifier generates a universal meaning. This constructed meaning is articulated by the subjects who identify with this nodal point. In this way, the multiple meaning-giving systems Althusser shows us are united by one overarching discourse. While we may argue that post-Marxism, as a type of critical theory, has an emancipative dimension to it, we must be aware of its limits. Post-Marxism does not promise total emancipation of society, unlike the traditional Marxist notion of communism. The dispersed nature of social struggles and the contingent nature of subjectivity mean that there will always be a "surplus" that hegemony may leave out, or even exclude. This means that society can never be fully closed or reconciled, hence, the importance of the category of "antagonism" in Laclau and Mouffe's project. As Laclau and Mouffe write in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy:* "the two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate

[69] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* 117.

[70] Ernesto Laclau, "Constructing Universality," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (New York & London: Verso, 2000), 302.

[71] *Ibid.*

[72] *Ibid.,* 303.

them."[73] The instability of extant signifiers and the struggle between two camps for their articulation permit hegemony in the first place. Ultimately, the radical democratic project of Laclau and Mouffe does not eliminate heterogeneity in society, but rather, rests on it. Another way of understanding this is the idea of presupposing the existence of a political foe. Hegemonically uniting a chain of equivalences cannot take place if a common "enemy" does not exist. However, having antagonism cannot fully guarantee hegemony, as Laclau and Mouffe cite the case of millenarianism, since it fixes antagonistic identities.[74]

The existence of antagonisms, as Mouffe would claim, cannot be eradicated. In *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe further detailed the possibility of democracy working with a hegemonic politics.[75] The project entails an acknowledgement that, while democratic societies are pluralistic, it can never totally end in rational consensus. To this, Mouffe proposes the concept of "agonism" which she defines as a confrontation wherein "the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate. Her ideas will be fought with vigour but her right to defend them will never be questioned."[76] By accepting pluralism, Mouffe further extends the concept of contingency in understanding emancipatory struggle by opening the field of history to constant social change. Although it appears to be a disadvantage, the open nature of struggle and emancipation allows novel forms of organization to emerge that allows experimental approaches to liberation.

CONCLUSION

Althusser remains influential to this day, especially if one considers the advent of post-Marxist theory. Despite his initial pedagogic task of

[73] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* 136.
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018), 90.
[76] *Ibid.,* 91.

returning to Marx, he has unintentionally laid the foundations for a rupture with Marx. His own conjuncture allowed for his thinking to produce a vital force for the revaluation of Marxist categories, especially at the time of his engagement with economic determinism and humanism. His critiques are further appreciated when contextualized within his milieu. The concepts of overdetermination and interpellation as constitutive of subjectivity have impacted the understanding of events and the political agency they may demand. His anti-determinist and anti-humanist campaign was altogether a campaign against essentialist Marxism that aimed to render society and history as fully legible. His "return," moreover, was not a straight road. It necessitated detours through thinkers such as Spinoza and Lacan. His reconstruction of Marx may be considered "successful." Yet, its success does not come in the form of putting Marx's science of history up to par with the other continents of history. His return to Marx finds its achievement in inspiring a whole new way of thinking and grasping the conjuncture.

Moving forward with what Althusser leaves behind, Laclau and Mouffe set out to critically assess and reimagine what Marx's ideas mean in a highly pluralized world. Apart from Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe mobilize Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism seeks to develop a socialist project while also acknowledging the inherent contingency found in society. Society evolves not out of dialectical laws, but rather through discourse and the identification with signifiers endowing the subject's practices with meaning. Instead of treating the contingency of social orders as a disadvantage, they take advantage of the discrepancy of historical task and political agent. This allows emancipatory potential to be located beyond the working class and expand the democratic struggle. With new subjectivities constantly emerging, the task of theory today is to become historically sensitive to potentials in reorganizing society. This task can only be effective, however, if we constantly push thought toward unchartered terrains by constantly questioning the theoretical traditions we claim as our own.

Recent scholarship has paid attention to Althusser's later work. If one goes through the pages of those texts, one finds a different individual. Even with his efforts to restore Marxism's scientific enterprise, Althusser succumbs to the fact that Marx and Marxism have its limits.[77] Perhaps Althusser's most important lesson is seeing Marx's limits, allowing his readers to surpass the theoretical impasses which it encounters in the course of history. These limits become new ways in which theory adapts and sharpens into new weapons for critique today.

[77] Althusser dedicates a book's worth of material in discussing Marx. The opening 155-page section of his posthumous text *Philosophy of the Encounter* is titled "Marx in his Limits." See Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter,* 7-162; 198-200.

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