

The Althusserian Legacy

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From Althusserianism to “Regulation Theory”

Almost the entire generation of May 1968 in France came to Marxism through the work of Louis Althusser and his school. And even today almost everything fruitful that is written in France within a (greatly rarefied) culturally Marxist atmosphere remains marked by this origin. To say this is not to negate the importance of existential Marxism and the philosophy of praxis (in particular the work of Henri Lefebvre), nor to ignore the negative effects of the “structural Marxism” of *Reading Capital* (1965). It is simply to state that the success of the articles in the collection *For Marx* (1965) greatly helped to disengage French Marxism from the oversimplification, determinism and mechanism inherited from the Stalinist period. It is also to recognize that the viable and justified critiques of which “Althusserianism” has been the object have allowed some currents to “interiorize what has been transcended” (to appropriate a Hegelian term which doubtless would have displeased the master!), and thus to escape the general crisis of the human sciences and of structuralism during the 1970s. I am thinking in particular of the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1987), and, in relation to my own profession (political economy), that which today is referred to as “regulation theory.” We ourselves are “regulationists,” in a way “rebel sons” of Althusser.

From the very first, Althusser (for example in “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” 1962) taught us to conceive of history as a fabric of contradictory relations, *autonomous* in relation to one another, although overdetermining rather than “reflecting” one another. Neither politics nor ideologies “reflect” economic forces, but ideological-politico-economic “configurations” exist, either as stable configurations or configurations of crisis. During the 1960s, French Marxism thus aligned itself with all the reductionism of the “kapital-logik” genre. We were even invited to discover in every social formation a plurality of “modes of production” (relation-type configurations) articulated one to another (Rey, 1969): in short, configurations of configurations.

Since then, for example, domestic social relations (or patriarchy, or “*sexage*”) could be studied for themselves, without previous subordination to “capitalism.” France, as everywhere, was acquainted with the opposition

between "socialist feminists" and "radical feminists," but it was less virulent there than elsewhere. Autonomy and reciprocal overdetermination of social relations offered a theoretical substratum to think the autonomy and convergence of social movements. That this opportunity was hardly taken advantage of politically, I explain elsewhere (Lipietz, 1986a), but the possibility of a convergence and its theoretical articulation exists nevertheless.

Althusser and his school (in particular Balibar in his contribution to *Reading Capital*, and Bettelheim, 1970) broke with a determinist vision of historical evolution which conceived of the "productive forces" themselves (traditional "locomotives" of history for Stalinist Marxism) as social relations born in the organization of production. It was not from outside that the local representatives of a larger current, which from Maoists to radical Americans by way of the Italian "workerist" movement, proceeded in the 1960s and '70s, to concentrate in its attacks on capitalism no longer on the extraction of surplus-value alone, but on the dominant post-war industrial paradigms, accepted for the most part by communist parties: Taylorism and Fordism. This current was not only critically in sync with the reality of the labor struggles of the period, but also broke above all with the idea that "the development of capitalist productive forces prepared the way for communism." Capitalism did not prepare the way for anything but itself, and further over the course of time it had experienced and developed contrasting "forces of production" (forms of the organization of labor).

At the political level, this double rupture with determinism was developed principally by Poulantzas (1968) in his reading of Gramsci. For the simple and permanent juxtaposition of "bourgeoisie/proletariat," Poulantzas substituted the stabilization and dilution of successive, and always original, "hegemonic historical blocs," uniting the dominant and the dominated in struggles over the limits and terms of social compromise, on the basis of a perpetually new articulation of social relations.

These fecund basic notions unfortunately began to freeze in a kind of formal scholasticism in which social relations were no longer understood as contradictions or unstable tensions but as structures. This evolution developed explicitly out of *Reading Capital*. Althusserianism went on from there to reject the contradictory character of social relations themselves, and with it the autonomy of the individuals and groups contained in these relations and their capacity to be constituted as social subjects capable of transforming structures. This was a return to a pre-Marxist materialism, forgetting the *Theses on Feuerbach*, forgetting that there is a "consciousness" and thus a potential generator of transformation in the most routine practices, and cut off a fortiori from the transforming practice of the masses. This ossification contributed to the crisis of structural Marxism and all

French Marxism (although, it is true, in a different political conjuncture) in the middle of the 1970s.

It is precisely in a return to the contradictory character of social relations, which inhibits their reproduction, and in taking into consideration the conscious element, the active role of "representation" in reproducing itself, that the approaches based on "regulation" found their origin. Naturally the opening of the Great Crisis of capitalism in the 1970s obliged us at any rate to keep our distance from any approach that placed quasi-exclusive emphasis on reproduction.

It is good, at the distance of a quarter of a century, to measure our continuities and discontinuities. In the first part of this article, I will present a synthesis which I believe is able to honestly qualify the meaning of "classical Althusserianism" in the 1960s, and what comprised its evolution and its divergences. By "classical Althusserianism," I refer to the texts *For Marx*, the contributions to *Reading Capital* (particularly those of Etienne Balibar) and those of Nicos Poulantzas (1968). The post-1968 evolutions of these authors belong to another history, while the texts of this "corpus" were the point of departure for the majority of those who continued in, amended or broke with "classical Althusserianism."

In the second section, I will expand the critique of the insufficiencies and dilemmas to which classical Althusserianism contributed.²

In the third section, I will briefly show how "regulation theory" currently seeks to overcome these obstacles. It goes without saying that, here as elsewhere, I speak only for myself: numerous "regulationist" practitioners have long eschewed referring to Marxism at all, and would not accept the connection claimed here. However, I do not intend to totally chart their intellectual itinerary, or that of those who are "agnostics" today.

I. Theses of Classical Althusserianism

In this first section, we will seek to present under the heading of "theses" ("didactic and dogmatic," as the Master liked to say) the ideas of the body of works cited above which had such a great intellectual resonance for a generation of social science researchers. We will see that from the beginning (that is, between *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*), some slippages operate whose ravaging effects would only be felt later. We will only sketch out the critique, pointing out in passing what the "regulationists" maintain. But we must begin by placing the emergence of classical Althusserianism itself into perspective.

1) Althusserianism in its Time

The first part of the 1960s marked, in France, the "resurgence" of Marxism, the re-emergence of the "frozen" theoretical Marxism of the

Stalinist era. Of course, some isolated thinkers, marginal militants, had never ceased to oppose the reigning dogmas, but often without taking into account the problematic which precisely defined these theses as "dogma." As for antidogmatic reactions, for example those of the journal *Arguments* and Henri Lefebvre, they slipped rapidly into eclecticism, either directly or through their readers. Finally, the fraction of the existentialist "fellow traveler" current of the French Communist Party brought into French philosophy a wave of interest in "the anthropology of praxis" but virtually without touching the "theory of history" that they then qualified as Marxist: in a way, they juxtaposed "the supplement of the soul." In any case these "contestations" left the intellectual field intact, since they barely affected the principal "potential users" of Marxism: the political parties which claimed it for themselves (and it was not the French Communist Party alone), and academic research.

It was completely different for the true theoretical "reformation" (in Calvin's sense) inaugurated by Louis Althusser's articles in *For Marx*, which would place at the front of the intellectual scene a pleiad of scholars and philosophers. Such bastions as the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études propagated a wave of strictly academic, or politically more useful, research: what we call here the "Althusserian school."

This school arises from a very particular political and epistemological conjuncture, evoked in the preface of *For Marx*.

a) Politics first. The renaissance of Marxist thought was provoked by the collapse of "frozen" Marxism: Althusser attributed the awakening to Stalin's death and the 20th Congress. He evokes the theory of "two sciences" (bourgeois science/proletarian science) advanced by the communist leaders "to defend against bourgeois attacks on Marxism at that time dangerously at risk in Lyssenko's biology." The Althusserian rupture with Stalinist dogmatism thus goes on to take the form of a restitution of the autonomous rights of "theory" in relation to political "necessities." This choice led to a series of consequences which today appear contradictory but whose logic was clear at the time. Tactically, this signifies the exclusion of the other "escape hatch" that Stalinism then advanced: the "Italian," "Togliattist" route, to which Garaudy can be linked. Philosophically, it is the obsessive refusal of "historicism" and the "problem of the subject." Scientifically, it is the completely natural union with the second component of the conjuncture at which the Althusserian school began: the structuralist vogue.

b) In effect, the Althusserian school was resolutely inscribed in a *purely scientific* movement which corresponds to the emergence in the French

university of a "new scientific continent," still contaminated by ideology: the social sciences. The dominant ideology for the most serious researchers was structuralism. The Althusserian school inscribed itself completely in the course of the discovery of this continent, marking when necessary its distances from a certain structuralism, but claiming no partisan specificity: there was only one science, and may the best-equipped win. Significant in this respect are the total absence of a "class break" within French epistemology (Bachelard, Canguilhem, Koyré, etc.) and the fundamental weakness of the break with structuralism. A proudly asserted refusal in the first case (autonomy of theoretical practice), and a tactical choice in the second case (one sole enemy: historicism).

2) *The Dialectical Materialism of the Althusserian School*

What then is the "Philosophy," Dialectical Materialism (DM), latent in the practice of the "historical theoretician" of Historical Materialism (HM)? It includes two groups of theses: methodological and ontological.

a) The Process of the Production of Knowledges

The methodological theses are posed in opposition to empiricism, and define the process of knowledge. We can summarize them thus:

Thesis 0: The real exists independently of the knowledge we have of it, and is not engendered by human thought nor by the development of an "absolute idea." This is the fundamental thesis of all materialism.

Thesis 1: The progress of knowledge is a process of production like any other, which sets into motion the activity of a theoretician (who carries out a theoretical practice), who applies means of production to objects of labor to furnish a product. The whole of this process unfolds entirely within the realm of thought. Objects of labor ("Generalities I") are previously produced notions or concepts, the means of labor ("Generalities II") is the already-existing conceptual body, the product ("Generalities III") a new concept. In particular, the operation which consists of passing from "ideological" knowledge (recognition-misrecognition) to the scientific knowledge of a domain, an operation which marks the "birth" of a science, is called "epistemological break." In the course of its accumulation, knowledge is elevated from the abstract to the concrete, that is, from more general concepts to more fertile determinations, thus reproducing in the form of "concrete thought" the complexity of concrete reality.⁴

Thesis 2: This process is the method for appropriating the realm of thought; it is different from the method belonging to art or practical activity. There is thus not a "problem of knowledge" (the guarantees of the adequacy of the

idea of the real), but a place for mechanistic theory by which theoretical practice is articulated to other practices in the appropriation of the real. The result is that the primacy of practice does not signify the subordination of theory to other instances of human activity, since the "criterion of practice" is internal to the very moment of theory.⁵

b) A Complex Overdetermined Whole

Thus we arrive at the ontological theses which are also gnoseological theses, since there is all the same a relation between the structure of the real and the knowledge we have of it. Arriving at the object itself (here: the history of human social formations), we must be aware of "Marx's immense theoretical revolution": the setting in motion of "structural causality" (LLC, II, p. 56). It is precisely there that Althusser himself brings us the most original and useful but also the least infallible and most unstable ideas, the most "degradable" in the course of development of the Althusserian school. Here it follows the most controversial path (for other Marxists) yet the most fertile (for everyone). Let us again try to state the theses.

Thesis 3: The real is presented as a structural whole, not as an "even" combination of homogenous elements. Everything is first of all a structure of structures, a system of relations more than a collection of elements. The "elements" are themselves defined only by their place in the structure. For example, the capitalist and the proletarian, more generally defined as "men," are defined only as places in the capitalist relations of production.⁶

Thesis 4: These structures articulate relationships which are presented as "contradictions" between two aspects, of which one "dominates" the other, the sense of the term "domination" being specified in each case. For example, the infrastructure of the CMP (Capitalist Mode of Production) combines two relations of domination, proprietorship and possession.

It seems that, in classical Althusserianism, "structures" and "contradictions" are equivalent, and the categories and theses valid for one are so for the other as well. Here the great slippage becomes a decoy: PM speaks of "contradictions" and "overdetermination," LL of "relations" and "structural causality."

Thesis 5: Everything is always already given to us as complex (that is, constituted of multiple independent contradictions). It is concrete in this sense. The real does not develop out of an original "simple unity": on the contrary, a simple category can appear at the heart of the most complex given structures.

This thesis marks the radical rupture with the "vulgar reversal of the

Hegelian dialectic," that of the vulgar Marxism of the Stalinist period, according to which the economic infrastructure would be reflected as far as the intellectual sphere, opposing "expressive totality" at every turn: two solitary terms to a single contradiction. Bourgeois science and proletarian science ... The following theses specify the structure of this "already given complex whole" and the modality of its unity.

Thesis 6: In everything a dominant structure exists such that this domination is the unity of the whole ("the complex whole possesses the unity of an articulated structure in dominance" [PM, p. 208]). This domination consists in that, to repeat the words of Marx in the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, "it is a light in which all colors are bathed and which modifies their particular tonalities, a particular ether which determines the specific weight of all forms of existence which resort to it." The effects of this domination do not intervene "from the outside" of the dominant structure but as a specification of the structure itself.

Thesis 7: Reciprocally, "the secondary contradictions" are essential to the very existence of the principal contradiction, in reality they constitute its "condition of existence." For example, "the relations of production are not the pure phenomena of the forces of production: they are also their condition of existence" (PM, p. 211).

Thesis 8: Within the structure in dominance the dominated structures and conditions have their own efficacy and autonomy which are each time precised by the dominant structure, which for that reason is said to be "determinant in the last instance."

The four preceding theses permit a definition of the category of "overdetermination," which designates within the contradiction (or structure), whether it is principal or subordinated, the following essential quality: "the reflection, in the contradiction itself, of its conditions of existence, that is, of the situation within the structure in dominance of the complex whole" (LL, p. 215). For example, the principal contradiction (bourgeoisie/proletariat) can be overdetermined in "blockage" or "explosion" by the multiple secondary contradictions which dominate it but which are not its simple development (men/women, citizens/immigrants, etc.). It is important as well to grasp the reality, the efficacy of this overdetermination, unthinkable in the framework of a dialectic of Hegelian form, where, lacking the autonomy of the "already given," in the absence of a dislocation, irreducible to the principal, the secondary contradictions are made only of an interiorization of the one and only contradiction,

indefinitely connected, hence indefinitely "frozen." With this we have introduced two theses on the *dynamic* of reality (the possibility of change).

Thesis 9: The principal contradiction, as the principal aspect of every contradiction (said another way: the dominant element of each relation) can be displaced, because "nothing ever develops in an absolutely even fashion" (according to the terms of Heraclitus and Mao Tse-tung).

Thesis 10: The overturning of the structure is made possible when the displacement of the contradictions brings dominance into a "strategic place" where a "condensation" of a contradiction operates. "Comprised in this way, the contradiction is the engine of all developments. The displacement and condensation, founded in its overdetermination, account for the phases which constitute the existence of complex processes, that is, of the becoming of things" (PM p. 223).

When the Althusserian school has finished emptying the contradiction, it will become incapable of thinking the possibility of change, but will remain perfectly capable of describing it. It will extract the tools of that description particularly from Balibar and Poulantzas. These we will discuss in the following paragraphs. But we must first proclaim our debt to the Althusserian school's first blow to "frozen" Marxism: the end of the myth of the single contradiction, of the messianic anticipation of a revolution from the implacable virtue of the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, "interiorized" in the proletariat/bourgeoisie contradiction.

All this, set apart from the degradation of the contradiction in structure, would then be very positive if it were not necessary to note in the course of these pages an eleventh thesis, not necessarily a consequence of, yet strongly indicated by the preceding:

Thesis 11: The support-agents of active structures conform to the requirements of the latter, such that they appear in a representation which the theoretical gives them, that can be vastly different from them conceptually, but which induces them nevertheless, conforming to their "place," to reproduce the structures which define them.

History thus appears as "a theater whose spectators can, on occasion, be spectators only because they are first of all forced to be its actors, caught in the constraints of a script and parts whose authors they cannot be since it is in essence *an authorless theater*" (LLC, II, p. 71). This radical negation of the subject in the name of structuralism knows its most refined form in the analysis of "forms of representation" given by Rancière, which concludes:

"the essential continuum of the function of the subject will be constituted in mystified being" (LLC, III, p. 77).

3) *The Concept of the Capitalist Mode of Production*

The philosophical rupture registered with the "Hegelian" conception of the whole (a single contradiction which exteriorizes and interiorizes the economic *ad infinitum*) opens in effect the breach of a series of scientific ruptures which shake the representation of historical materialism to its very foundations. What is taken again into consideration is the most classic concept of Marx: that of "modes of production." The famous "Preface of 1859" presented a simple schema ("matrix"):

—At the base, productive forces that "evolve." This is the "engine."

—Above, the "relations of production" adequate to the degree of development of the productive forces.

—On top, a political armature and an ideological justification for it all.

The first two levels form the economic "infrastructure," where all is defined; the other levels (political and ideological) only "reflect." This is why, in scholarly terms, a "mode of production" is defined as these two first levels, distinguishing therein two degrees: the first, fundamental (man/nature relations: the productive forces), and the already derived second, the relations of production (relations between men in nature).

The Althusserian school breaks with this simple schema, a Hegelian "matrix" simply turned upside-down, and conducts its attack on two fronts.

First Front: the mode of production is the concept (entirely within thought) of the articulation of three ever-present instances (and always already given together): economic, political, ideological. This "complex whole in dominance" is dominated in the last instance by the economy, in the sense that the economic structure determines the "matrix" of the mode (indications of the dominance and autonomy of various instances until their excision). For example, the economy can determine the dominance of politics and religion in the feudal mode of production.

Second Front: it is necessary to consider the very structure of the infrastructure, with its canonical distinction between productive forces (defined "technologically") and relation of production (defined "socially"). In so doing, the "development of productive forces" is itself defined as a social relation.⁹

Although the consequences of these two affirmations in the destruction of technologico-economic determinism are considerable, certain questions must remain. Let us stop at one of them, beginning with the "determining instance."

a) The Economic

All material production (whatever its mode) is necessarily social and brings into play the following elements: workers, means of production (objects of labor and means of labor) and non-workers. The "relations of production" are the combination of these elements. For example, in the CMP, the "worker" is *separate* from the means of production which is the *property* of non-workers. This is well known. Still, it is necessary to specify what it means. From the economic point of view, property signifies the capacity of the dominant element to "affect the unity of production onto which it brings to a particular production and to dispose of the product" (Bettelheim, 1970). But one such capacity supposes as a condition on the political and juridical level, the existence of the right and property and contracts which "permit" the worker to sell his labor power, and the proprietor of the means of production to keep the product. The juridical right of property is logically independent of economic property (and it is made separate from it in numerous situations comprised within capitalism).

We have thus already distinguished two relations: property/juridical property, borne by the same *supports* (men and things), but in places inscribed in two *different* and relatively autonomous instances. These two relations define (economically and juridically) the conditions of *placing value on capital* (the process of "valorization"). From this point it is possible to develop theories of exchange value and surplus value. But nothing has been said of the process of labor itself, or the production of use values that the "frozen" reading of Marx leaves in the indifferent quantitative flow of "productive forces": the accumulation of men, machines, invention, know-how ...

It is there that the Althusserian school's reading of *Capital* delivers a second relation which intervenes in the structure of economics: the relation of *real appropriation* (from Balibar) or *possession* (from Bettelheim). It determines, for the labor process itself, the combination of the same elements of economic structure. It substitutes, for the element "possessor," "the capacity to set in motion the productive forces in the process of labor" (Bettelheim, 1970). This implies a particular determination of the combination of the activity of the worker, the means of labor and the object of labor. It is this combination (this relation) which qualifies the famous "development of productive forces."

In the case of the feudal or the artisanal mode of production, the worker himself sets the productive forces into motion. The means of labor is only a tool which extends his arm, and the process of labor, to his "work." There is a unity, in terms of the object, of the activity and the means of labor. In developed forms of capitalist production, there is on the contrary unity of the means and the object of labor (the press and the steel plate), a unity that

is opposed to the indifferent worker who is only the servant of the machinery.

We thus establish in the CMP a homology between each of the two economic relations (proprietorship and possession, not counting their *correspondence* with the juridical relation), characterized by the separation of the worker and the means of production and by the domination of the non-worker. The profit the theoreticians of "Fordism" draw from these reflections is well-known (in particular Coriat, 1978). At this point, two errors of vulgar Marxism, juridicism and quantitativism, are clearly denounced.

The first consists of identifying capitalist relations of production at the level of the *juridical* property relation. We are thus led not to recognize in such an economic form the capitalist relations of production, thinking that they are not yet there (the putting-out system), or that they are no longer there (state capitalism in Eastern nations).

In addition, Balibar's demonstration that the "level of productive forces" is *also* a "relation of production" shatters the glass of the "neutrality of productive forces": they have a class character. The politics of "quantitative" developments of capitalist-type productive forces, from which Stalin expected the production of "material bases of communism" have (literally) bound labor. This error (essentially identical to technological determinism) has existed since the beginning of the Russian Revolution; since then "the workers' opposition" has been opposed on this point to Lenin, who mechanically imported Taylorism and the individual direction of factories. In this instance, "frozen" Marxism confused the two constitutive relations of the economic instance.

The "two" constitutive relations ... according to *Reading Capital*. Because the least vulgar economist cannot suppress his astonishment: evidently, one is lacking. That to which Marx dedicated the first section of *Capital*, and notably the first chapter: market relations. We will not enter into the symptomatic analysis of this oversight here, but the fact remains that classical Althusserianism's *criticism*, from Althusser and Balibar to Poulantzas by way of Macherey, purely and simply makes out that the unification of the means of production and workers, under juridical and economic proprietorship and possessed by capital, operates within *separate*, non-coordinated economic unities, independent of one another, which must first of all find suppliers and *afterward* a "client" for their production.

The oversight of this first relation, its reduction to an ideological and juridical illusion, without doubt corresponds first to a simple reaction: Stalinist Marxism has for too long limited its critique of capitalism to the "anarchy of the market-place." By placing the accent on the extortion of surplus-value and the dispossession of the direct producer from the control

of his labor, classical Althusserianism pursues legitimate political goals. But this does not excuse (autonomy of theory!) such a failure to take into account.

As we see it, however, the criticism is deeper than that. With the autonomy of economic units, the autonomy of the individual appears (its "liberty") and the contradiction between individual subjects and social reproduction. "Subject," "contradiction": two words which will become taboo; "Hegelians," "humanists." This is why Althusser, in his Preface to the Garnier-Flammarion edition of *Capital*, strongly advises the reader to "skip" the first chapters. This is why Macherey (LLC, IV) persists in forgetting, over the course of dozens of pages, that the process of capitalist production is administered by different capitals. This is why Balibar (LLC) persists in demonstrating that this variety is only illusory and introduces no "original" contradiction in the reproduction of capitalism as a whole.

b) The Articulation of Political and Ideological Conditions

Evidently, it is no longer a question of building upon this infrastructure a political and ideological superstructure, "like preliminary essences entering into a series of external relations. The articulation proper to all research on a Mode of Production requires the constitution [of these] regional instances" (Poulantzas, 1968 Part I, p. 11). However, these instances have in principle a general definition of their autonomy, specified in each mode, according to modalities to be determined "in the last instance" by the economic.

The political level for Poulantzas (p. 36) is that of decoding, maintaining or transforming the unity of a social formation. The political structures of a mode "consist of the institutionalized power of the State." Political practice is that which produces transformations within the unity of the mode and the social formation. Politics is thus the crucial instance when all the contradictions of a function are reflected and condensed, that which can imply the existence of political structures (and practices) corresponding to economic and ideological *functions* of politics properly stated.

The "ideological" level is the site where the agents of a formation, bearers of its structures, live their conditions of existence, the "lived" relations of agents to these conditions (II, p. 27). In modes and social formations, its function is "to occult real contradictions, to reconstitute in an imaginary plan a relatively coherent discourse" (II, p. 28). More than the conceptual system, it recovers a group of practices and structures which constitute the "culture" of a society (such as religion). It thus reflects the unity of the formation, and constitutes its *cement* (using Gramsci's word), but only at the level of the imaginary (which does not impede its real efficacy on the other levels of the structure).

The real autonomization of the political level is a characteristic aspect of the capitalist mode of production: to speak truly, there is no "Politics and

"State" other than the bourgeois. This autonomous place for political structure within the CMP is precisely the effect of determination in the last instance of economic structure. In this mode of production, in effect, the double separation of the producer from his means of production assures the unity of the process of valorization under the ownership of capital, and hence the appropriation of surplus-value, in the (apparent) *absence* of all external "violence" except the "despotism of the enterprise."

Let us go further. The capitalist relations of production which govern the production of juridically private labor, executed on one another independently within separate economic unities which integrate workers—themselves separate from their means of production—have, in the consequent practice and social relations of the agents, an "isolating effect" (concurrency between capitalists and workers, etc.) which refers to the juridical-political superstructure, "autonomous" in relation to the economy, the group of functions of the "unity" of the structure (I, p. 133-37). It is the State which integrates, organizes and represents a people-nation of citizens, juridical personalities. In particular, we have already observed that the relation of "economic ownership" has as a condition of existence (was overdetermined by) the relation of juridical ownership.

In this way the two specific traits of politics in the CMP are isolated: autonomy (by its relation to economics) and the function of unity. They differentiate it from the detailed and indissolubly economic structure of feudal power. These two traits are intimately linked, when one imagines the characterization of the bourgeois class that we attribute to Marx, a class "which, at each moment, sacrifices its own general class interest, its political interest, to its most limited particular and private interests" (*The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*).

This conception is thus opposed to the fixed conception of the State that could be drawn from Lenin's polemical definition in *State and Revolution*: a tool of the dominant classes to "subdue" the oppressed classes. It emphasizes (1) that "the bourgeoisie" exists only as "a class for itself," it needs the existence of political structures to be recognized as a class; (2) that the relative autonomy of politics permits the State to assure the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production even if the bourgeoisie is incapable of insuring its historical responsibility; and (3) that, in particular, it is relieved of complex tasks other than that of subduing the dominated classes by means of "special detachments of armed men."

The "autonomy" of politics thus acquires a strong meaning: structural and institutional autonomy, not identified with optimal political economy (from an economic point of view) and optimal general politics (from the point of view of maintaining the social formation), not identified with the dominant class (economically), the "reigning" class or "tenants of poverty," etc.

It is easy to guess the profit which the "regulationists" will later draw from the work of Poulantzas: if politics (and ideology) are "always already" given and economically overdetermined, the State is no longer a "support for capital." Law and Representation intervene in the formation of economic relations themselves: market, wage-earners (Lipietz, 1985b). And insofar as the State (as an institution) "intervenes," it does so as an archetype of the regulated forms of the social formation (Delormé, André, 1983; Lipietz, 1986).

However, the already-sketched critiques do nothing but aggravate the difficulties. First of all, in the absence of "subjects" really opposed in contradictory structures, it is no longer possible to see very well what there is to unify. What are these if not structures combatting one another? This is a useful point of view, but insufficient, and we will see the efforts of Poulantzas to address this difficulty. In addition, the "isolating" effect (between capitalists, between wage-workers) is reported by Poulantzas (who follows classical Althusserianism in ignoring the contradictions of market relations) as the juridical instance: "economic units" are autonomous because they are *juridically* private, the *ideological* effect of which is the misunderstanding (*méconnaissance*) of their unity at the heart of reproduction. Bettelheim (1970) will rectify this fundamental error by showing that the separation of market units is a real separation at the core of the process of social production, indicating a real contradiction in economic reproduction, which is only formally recovered by the planning within nations having public ownership of the means of production.

4) Social Formations

Pure modes of production do not exist. All that exist, in reality, are particular combinations, specific intersections of modes. It is thus necessary to have recourse to concrete objects of thought, social formations, complex wholes dominated in general by a mode of production which imprints its matrix upon them. "In general," because there exist precisely social formations in transition between the dominance of two modes.

To render more concrete in thought the concept of the mode compared to that of formation, two directions can be taken: the external articulation of the dominant mode with other modes, or the international periodization of the mode.

External articulation with other modes evidently does not consist of a simple juxtaposition: the dominant mode overdetermines the others and gives them a specific "degenerated" form (ground-rent, the "slave plantations" of the American South). It is even possible to locate modes of production which cannot exist as dominant but which can appear in the transitions or under the domination of another, such as the mode of "small independent producers."

This concerns the dominant mode itself. It delimits first in the history of the social formation two phases: that of its "beginnings" (transition in the strict sense); and the phase of reproduction enlarged in the structure. But the unequal development between the branches imposes case by case a realization of this distinction after the establishment of the dominance of the mode. Next, the displacement of the contradictions of the mode to the interior of its invariant structure founds a "periodization" of this mode which is imposed (with dislodgings) on the formation.

The periodization by the CMP by Marxists presents numerous gaps: the contrary would be surprising, the "dislodgement" between the structures-contradictions permitting choice. Marx privileges the periodization by the relation of possession: manufacture/large-scale industry/automation. Ultimately the Marxists have privileged a periodization in *stages* relative to the functioning of the unifying structure of the CMP which the Althusserians ignore: the market. We arrive at the division "competitive stage/monopoly stage."

The coexistence in a single social formation of different modes of production, stages, etc. subdivides the dominant and dominated classes into strata or fractions. What is then the unity of a social formation? Structural unity is inscribed in it, we have already said, at the political level. The question is naturally that of the unity founded by a "domination." This "unity under domination" introduces the concept of *hegemony*, particularly as developed by Poulantzas following Gramsci, and means two things.

—It indicates the constitution of the political interests of the dominant classes, in their relation to the Capitalist State, as representative of the general interest of the "people-nation." Gramsci points out (in his *Modern Prince*): "This means that the dominant group is concretely coordinated with the general interests of the subordinated groups and that the life of the State is ... like a continual passage of unstable equilibria ..., equilibria to which the interests of dominant groups bring it, but only up to a certain point, that is, not up to the paltry interests of corporative economy."

—In the *block* of dominant classes *in power*, one of the classes (or a fraction) holds a hegemony over others.

We can see that the analysis in terms of "social formation" rectifies the "economic" conception of "frozen" Marxism:

—Because it takes into account a plurality of contradictions overdetermined between them, and no longer leaves two homogeneous camps face to face, defined by their antagonistic place in the relations of production. There are certainly at every moment two camps on either side of a principal contradiction, but it must be determined at all moments because it is displaced and not necessarily identifiable at the economic level.

—Because, even at the economic level, it can explain the obstacle or the lessening of the tendentially explosive contradictions of capitalism (against the “catastrophism” of Rosa Luxemburg).

—Because at the political and ideological level, it permits a “distancing” between the immediate and catastrophic interests of the bourgeoisie and the strategy of their class. This distance provokes a fracturing within the dominant classes, and shows that the fraction which is hegemonic is not indifferent to the dominated classes, neither from the point of view of their short-term material interests, nor from the point of view of the struggle for social transformation.

Poulantzas certainly had in mind the choice between fascism and social democracy, which the KPD did not know how to make under the Weimar Republic. But the regulationists reintroduced a much more general idea: capitalism does not always function in the same way; there are several solutions, several possible forms of reorganization at the time of its great crises, and the choice very much depends on the forms of institutionalized compromise which the dominating classes are capable of proposing or imposing.

5) *The Theory of Passage*

What is most striking about the preceding explications is the strange appearance of “historical materialism.” The Althusserian school has brought a quantity of concepts depicting a static reality up to date, but it seems that this could be to the detriment of what has passed as the very originality of Marxism: a theory of variables, even a tentative “absolute historicization” of whatever seems eternal in the dominant ideology.

Balibar and Althusser do not conceal it: their reading of *Capital* is first a condemnation of “evolutionism.” “Marx told us that all modes of production are historical moments; he did not tell us that these moments engendered one another ... here the identity of chronology and of an internal law of the development of forms is found broken” (LLC, II, p. 112). And Balibar recognized that “historical materialism, reduced to the single concept of modes of production conceived as combinations, should be found in the impossibility of thinking at the same theoretical level the passage of one combination to another” (LLC, II, p. 157). Hence the necessity of a second concept: that of “passage,” analysis of the *transition* between two modes, thus of the formation and dissolution of modes. Balibar (in LLC) provides the principal contribution on this point.

The mode of production is in effect first a reproduction of the places of the various elements of the structure: “production of objects and individuals for social relations, a production in which individuals are determined to

produce and objects to be produced in a specific form for social relations” (LLC, II, p. 175). This is why the theory of reproduction is conceptualized not in time but “in a plan” which translates the “eternalization” of the mode and of its “places.” Production is a “process without a subject,” or perhaps (but this means nothing), the subject is the relations of production that “set into motion” the workers who are already defined as proletarian before being sold to a particular functionary of capital.

To conceive of the structure as reproduction, and reproduction (of social relations) as the condition of production (of objects), is not only to make the mode of production the very concept of historical continuity, but also to prevent thinking the passage between two modes as an “irrational gap,” in which one stops and sees what one will do next (since to live it is certainly necessary to produce, hence to reproduce the conditions of production), and inversely to prevent thinking the passage to another structure by the same functioning of the previous structure (which would only be known as a reproduction of itself: we know of the Althusserians’ affection for Spinoza).

The result: each passage is a “*revolution*,” and one does not slip insensibly from one mode to another; each beginning is a “*discovery*.” The new mode needs to “find” elements in the dissolution of the one preceding; each transition is a “quasi-mode of production,” with its specific structure and reproduction.

a) A Theory of Origins

To formulate a theory of the origins of a mode is to take a *retrospective*. We know the structural elements of this mode: thus, we know the *theoretical presuppositions* of the appearance of this mode. If they are reunited, the mode can begin its greater reproduction. But whence comes the reunion? Certainly not from the mode itself, but as a product of the social formation under the domination of the preceding mode, which constitutes the *historical conditions* of the appearance of the mode, and of the realization of its theoretical presuppositions. These elements are *defined* in the new world but born separately in the ancient one and are thus susceptible to a *genealogy* which is indifferent to its means of arrival: it will “forget” its origin, and from there several series of “historical conditions” can satisfy the same “presuppositions” (LLC, II, p. 184ff).

This is far from evolutionism. Capitalism, contrary to what Stalinist Marxism thought, does not descend from feudalism as man descended from the ape in vulgar Darwinism. These presuppositions can be satisfied as well by the dissolution of the Asiatic mode of production as by the unleashing of a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

b) The Theory of Tendencies

Let us imagine the problem in the other sense (the end of a mode). The question is very different: it ignores some elements it acts to create (they are defined only by the structure of the following mode). We can at the most see what elements of the present mode *tend* to become.

Now these are defined in the "space-plan" of the reproduction of their structure, the synchrony which the concept constitutes of their relations. The "functioning" of that structure is the "dynamic" of the structure, "that is, its existence in time" (LLC, II, p. 194). Is this dynamic simultaneously the "history" of the structure, the engine of its obsolescence? No. The "contradiction" announced by Marx in the CMP between the socialization of productive forces and the private character of the relations of production is only, for Balibar, that the structure itself *developed in time*; in fact it is manifested only as a contradiction by the dissociation in thought of the "contradictory effects" of the structure. The representation of laws of the dynamic as "tendencies" is coupled with "counter-tendencies": in fact, the tendency (of the decline of the rate of profit, for example) is the same law inherent to the structure, coupled with the internal determination of the rhythm of the appearance of its effects (pp. 198-99), that is, of the definition of "its" temporality.

Thus, "the contradiction is only between effects, but it is not original, the cause is not divided in itself, it cannot be analyzed in antagonistic terms" (p. 201). Notably, the two relations of the economic base (relations of property and possession) are in relations of "reciprocal limitation," they co-determine the submission of labor to capital: "we thus rediscover here, not the contradiction, but the complexity of the mode of production, [its] double articulation" (p. 204).

Let us specify at once that, for us, Balibar marks here the "point of inversion" of classical Althusserianism, and the substitution of "structure" for "contradiction" as a fundamental category will not be long in making its effects felt: the return to non-dialectical materialism, with characteristically the change "by the external causes" which will appear in the next paragraph.

But before "surpassing" Balibar, we will subscribe to the conclusion of his theory of tendencies: the "contradiction" between the effects of the immanent laws of economic structure cannot, of itself, elicit the mode of its own nature; being the very function of structure, it can only arrive at an *equilibrium*, even in the form of prolonged or cyclical crises. But the effects of economics can be "the material base" of other results, such as the constitution of reformative or revolutionary social forces, in other instances endowed with *their* temporality. To understand that these temporalities can be born in the unity of a conjuncture is another problem, exterior and

economic. It must be supposed that in addition one rethinks relations in terms of contradictions, but the analysis of Balibar is perfectly pertinent to the critique of the economic determinism of "frozen" Marxism, as it is to the catastrophism of Rosa Luxemburg.

The "regulationists" remain faithful on this point to the Althusserian contribution. In fact, their objects will not be "modes of production," but the modes of particular forms of capitalism, the "models of development," analyzed as combinations of a technological paradigm, a regime of accumulation, a mode of regulation. They will maintain the distinction between the analysis of "theoretical presuppositions" of a model, the "discovery" of its historical conditions, the "tendencies" conducive to its crisis; but they will refuse, against for example the theory of "long cycles," to think that models of development are linked to one another according to some transhistorical (technological?) determinism. In marking a more and more pronounced skepticism towards the idea of the emergence of a new mode of production at the horizon of their own time, they will insist on the profusion of *ruptures* (great crises, institutionalized compromises) separating the consecutive models of development.⁹ In return, all their effort against the Althusserian heritage will consist of showing that the contradictions of a model of development are original, inscribed in its structure, and that it is a veritable miracle (a "find") that a mode of regulation should have been able to be established as a resolution, over a long period, of these contradictions. Before evoking their solutions, it is necessary to pass to a more symptomatic critique of classical Althusserianism. But first let us show what is bequeathed, to the economists of Marxist inspiration who have had to confront the crisis of the 1970s, by the Althusserian school, in matters of predictive methodology.

6) Prediction

With the two fundamental concepts which resume the Althusserian conception of time, that of the dynamic as the existence of a structure in time and that of overdetermination, we have two tools at our disposal (to combine) for thinking evolution and mutation.

a) The Tendential Analysis

The first type of result is produced by a theoretical reflection on an abstract structure (the CMP, or the economy in the CMP). It expresses the development of the structure in a temporality which is proper to it. That is to say that such a "state" of the structure can be found as much in the future as in the past or even never to be attained! Everything depends on the concrete diachrony in which this dynamic is articulated. The process that consists of developing the internal dynamic in thought up to its ultimate