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*The primacy of encounter of over form*

The most relevant text in the Althusserian works of the 80s is most likely, from a theoretical point of view, the typescript entitled by the *Ecrits* editors *The subterranean current of the materialism of the encounter*. It is an extremely fascinating text, where is barely outlined a subterranean history of a materialism, that would avoid the classical opposition of idealism-materialism, opposition which is internal to the Western History Metaphysics: materialism of contingency and of the aleatory, not ruled by the *grand princip* “nihil est sine ratione” that, as Heidegger said, echoed through the History of Western thought before being expressed by Leibniz.

However, the highest risk is hidden in his fascination : as Althusser used to say about the *Thesis on Feuerbach*, it is a text that dazzles more than enlightens, peaks of brilliance that break the common philosophical topics, intuitions that would open passages, but that, mostly, are not supported by the patient work of the concept. The main risk is to see in it an elimination of the powerful rationalism of the Sixties for a philosophy of the event, of the chance or, worse, of the freedom. The challenge consists, therefore, not so much in denying the ambiguities this type of interpretation is based on, but rather to recognise and highlight it, attempting to undo it with coup de force, by placing an unwritten thesis in Althusser's as theoretical centre of the text: the thesis of the primacy of the encounter over the form.

The fundamental issue that immediately arises is how related is this thesis with the statement of the primacy of the relation over elements, repeated over and over in the 60s and 70s. Is there any contradiction? The first thesis might not refer to a pre-existence of the elements with regard to the relation that the second denies? L'enjeu here is the possibility of thinking the materialism of the aleatory without abandoning the rationalist furrow.

## **1. The primacy of the Class Struggles**

As mentioned above, the primacy of relations over elements characterises the works of the first Althusser. Indeed famous is the position in *Réponse à John Lewis* where Althusser states that 1) the masses make the history and 2) class struggle is the motor of history. But the two thesis should not be comprehended on the same level since the first one can only be correctly

understood if subordinated to the second: “which means that the revolutionary power of the masses is powerful only in relation with the classes struggle”. In other words, it is inconceivable to have classes separated from and prior to struggle: “*one must therefore start from the classes struggle to understand the existence and nature of classes. The struggle of the classes must be put first [Il faut metre la lutte des classes au premier rang]*. And a few lines later he concludes: Absolute primacy of classes struggle [*Primat absolu de la lutte des classes*]”.

It’s clear that, as Stanislas Breton highlighted, the thesis of the primacy of classes struggle over the existence of classes may be translated in abstract terms in the thesis of the primacy of relation over elements. However the question is what exactly primacy means. I believe that the term can be read in the furrow of the Aristotelic tradition: primacy as *prote fusei*, prior by nature, not a temporal but an ontological priority. But without going back to Aristotle, it is possible to understand the meaning of “primacy” in the sense of the first proposition of Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “A substance is by nature prior to its affection [*Substantia prior est natura suis affectionibus.*]. It is an ontological primacy to be asserted on an epistemological level against a naive empiricism that considers things appearing in front of a subject as subsistent reality.

Introducing *Positivismusstreit* in the German sociology, Adorno takes a similar position from a methodological point of view according to which facts are not the last and impenetrable data, as the dominating sociology believed then, but they must be related to the totality to be understood:

The interpretation of facts – Adorno writes – leads to totality [...]. There is not any social fact that does not have its place and meaning in that totality. This is pre-ordinate to every single subject that represent the totality in his own monadological constitution. In this sense totality is the real supreme being.

Of course, such a position cannot be taken philosophically naïve; it is necessary to understand the relation it maintains with the tradition of expressive causality from Leibniz to Hegel.

## 2. Primacy of Relations: *telos* or *alea*?

Althusser dedicated the final paragraph of *The Object of Capital*, significantly entitled “the immense scientific revolution of Marx”, focusing particularly on the difference between the Marxist and Leibnizian/Hegelian

conception. Althusser believes that in the *Capital* can be found, at practical level, a concept of causality that Marx hadn't theorised explicitly. This concept is concerned with the determination of the elements of a structure. In this sense neither the mechanistic model nor the organicistic one is appropriate:

Althusser maintains that Marx would have not used either the mechanistic or the organicistic model, but without knowing it, he adopted the Spinozian immanent causality model. At this point, however, the problem entirely consists in differentiating in detail the Spinozian model from the Hegelian model, mostly used in the Marxist tradition. At the end of this paragraph, Althusser multiplies the formulations which should underline this difference: "structural causality", "overdetermination" (a category introduced in "*For Marx*"), *Darstellung*, metonymical causality, immanent cause, and theatre without author. A few years later Althusser would oppose "whole" to "totality" in "*Is it Easy to be a Marxist in Philosophy?*", and "the whole without closure" to the closed totality of Idealist tradition in *Elements of Self-Criticism*.

In order to shed light on this point, we will try to consider the primacy of relations theory in the tradition of expressive causality. Leibniz holds that relations constitute reality insofar as they order the spatio-temporal structure of phenomena. But if these relations structure the world such as it appears, they nevertheless require two foundations: both a spiritual substance not constituted by relations (and therefore beyond all relation) and a divine intellect, without which, according to Leibniz, *nothing would be true*.<sup>1</sup> Hegel, in turn, dissolves all substantiality into the most radical relationality. But this relationality is not, however, the pure, unqualified play of action and reaction. It is instead conceived of as the presence of an all-pervading time that orders relations rather than being constituted by them. This presence is understood to be the contemporaneity of a principle that is immanent to the play of relations (the beautiful individuality, the abstract juridical person, and so on), a power that decides in advance what developments the play of relation can give rise to. The obscurity at the heart of the *Wechselwirkung* necessarily tends toward the light of the concept: this tension and tendency is lodged *ab initio* in the schema of simultaneity, the great temporal metaphor of *Geist*.

It seems, then, that both Leibniz and Hegel were able to pose the question of relations in the most radical way; and yet they both seem to have fled in the face of the extreme consequences these positions imply. Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony, for example, permits substance to enter into the play of relations only *on the condition* that it maintain the form of a possible essence in the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G.W. Leibniz, GP, Band V, 210, 25.

divine intellect. Leibniz therefore reduces relation to the combinatory game of a God cast as both architect and sovereign, a game always already decided in advance by the divine will's tendency toward the good. In the same way, Hegel's theory of the ruse of reason is said to weave the great tapestry of universal history, a tapestry whose warp and woof is the Idea and whose passions are the individual woven threads. Both pre-established harmony and the ruse of reason make relationality serve the ends of teleology: primacy of theology over relational nature, we could say, to echo the Althusserian formulation we started from. In both cases, the conception of time is the secret of this primacy, the theological eternity of Leibniz and its Hegelian secularisation into the temporality of the age.

In *Sketch of a Theory of the historic Time* Althusser tries to build a concept of time free from this double claim: the time of totality is neither eternity, nor contemporariness, but the complex articulation of differential times not referables to a simple essence. So if the thesis of the of relations, as Althusser himself admits, can be read in the furrow of the idealist theory, it is necessary to find a formula able to express this conception with an equal and contrary force compared to the tradition of expressive causality. Primacy of the chance over relation? In my opinion, the clearest formula is: primacy of encounter over the form. However, as mentioned beforehand, there is not this thesis in the *Subterranean Current*.

### 3. The 7 thesis of the “*Subterranean Current*” and the Materialism of the encounter

Firstly, let us consider the outline of this materialism. Althusser outlines the features of a tradition that seems to have crossed the centuries yet remained invisible on the surface, invisible because hard-fought, misunderstood, removed. This tradition he calls *materialism of the rain, of the deviation, of the encounter, and of the capture*. Epicurus, Lucretius, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, the Heideggerian *es gibt*, the Wittgensteinian *fallen*. What do these authors have in common? The resistance, the irreducibility to a history of Western thought understood as the history of reason or metaphysics, resistance to the great Hegelian-Heideggerian periodization.

When he define this materialism, Althusser says that it is included in this thesis:

“thesis of the primacy of positivity over negativity (Deleuze)”;

“thesis of the primacy of deviation over a rectilinear course”;

“thesis of the primacy of disorder over order”;  
“thesis of the primacy of ‘dissemination’ over the position of sense in every meaning (Derrida)”;  
“thesis of the primacy of absence over presence (Derrida)”;  
“thesis of the primacy of ‘nothing’ over every ‘form’”;  
“thesis of the primacy of aliatory materialism over every formalism”

The fundamental philosophical references in this thesis are Deleuze (thesis 1), Epicureanism (thesis 2 and 6), and Derrida (thesis 4 and 5). Among the first four thesis and the fifth Althusser makes a reference to the *Fall* of Wittgenstein and Heidegger *es gibt*. However, the multiplication of theoretical references, in my opinion, does not show us the right direction: I would not discuss in detail the pertinence of each one of them. I would only say that are references that might be misleading compared to the conceptuality used in the definition of the materialism of the encounter. According to me, the risk of this series of thesis is perfectly resumed by an expression that Althusser use referring to Heidegger: “transcendental contingency of the world”. The expression is nearly nonsense, but as far as it can be understood, it seems to build an opposition between subject and world whose encounter would acquire the necessary character of the contingency.

Therefore these thesis should be provisionally left aside with their ambiguity in order to take into consideration what I consider the fundamental thesis: the primacy of encounter over form. Let us see how Althusser characterises the philosophy of encounter in a brief interlude of its subterranean history:

1. Every being is the product of an encounter,
2. Every encounter is the effect of other encounters *ad infinitum*,
3. Every encounter might not have taken place
4. The elements, that permitted the encounter to take place, had not already included the being that was produced by the encounter.

#### 4. The Function of Emptiness

What role does void play in such a philosophy? I would like to maintain that the emphasis on the concepts of “nothing” and “void” has only a rhetorical function: the contingency, the aliatory, indeed, is the effect of the encounter and not of the the nothing/void. If this rhetorical function is

understood as theoretical, it might transfigure the theory of the encounter into a theory of event or the freedom.

If we pay attention to the theoretical strategy that lies behind the occurrence of these terms, it clearly emerges how the emphasis placed on this is purely rhetorical: The nothing of Epicurus' *clinamen* as well as Rousseau's nothing of society are the effect of a philosophical strategy used against the conceptual horizon in which they were (the Aristotelic qualitative space, the natural law doctrine). Machiavelli's nothing, that Althusser insisted claiming about Valentino that was only an oversight: far from being a *homme de rien*, coming from nothing, Caesar was Alexander VI's son, protected and advised by his father and finally nominated gonfalonier of the papal State. Spinoza and Machiavelli philosophical void is the description of a precise philosophical strategy: an occupation of space in the philosophical Kampfplatz. Finally, the void in Hobbes is nothing more than an absence of external determination to action, not an absolute absence of determinations. And this is confirmed by the disappearance of the concept of void as regards to Marx. The only two occurrences of the term "void" have the task of showing the difference between the conception of a theological mode of production and an aliatory one.

Void is only the condition of possibility of fluctuation. It is the necessary concept to think the fluctuation. It is the absence of a plan that precedes the encounter of elements, but void does not have any significance on its own. Starting from this point, the inadequacy of all those thesis that do not underline the element of encounter seem to be clearly outlined: terms such as "positivity", "deviation", "disorder", "dissemination", "absence" and "nothing" highly risk to be ambiguous or misleading if not understood by means of the category of encounter.

### 5. *Althusser's Two Rainstorms*

Let us now go over the first page of Althusser: it is literally a very beautiful page:

It rains.

Firstly, this book may therefore be a book on simple rain. Malebracnche asked himself: "why does it rain over the sea, on main roads and on sand", given that this water from the sky, while elsewhere watering cultivation (which is great), does not add anything to the seawater or gets lost in the roads or in the desert sand.

It will not be about that rain, providential or counterprovidential.

On the contrary, this book concern another rain, a profound subject running through the whole history of philosophy that was hard-fought and removed as soon as set out: the ‘rain’ (Lucretius) of Epicurus’ atoms which parallelly fall into void, the parallelism ‘rain’ of Spinoza’s infinite attributes, and many more: Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, even Heidegger and Derrida.

In the following lines, Althusser reaches a definition of subterranean current as “materialism of rain”. Yet in the typescript Althusser does not keep the promise of the splendid opening. His will not be a book about rain at all. The rain metaphor will rarely return, and not always with pertinence: the rain of Epicurus’ atoms, Machiavelli’s Italian States, Spinoza’s parallel attributes, the men in Rousseau’s forest, the parallel marches of workers and students in French May. In a more or less pertinent way, these rainfalls are mould on Epicurus’ atoms; vertical and parallel fall of the bodies before the *clinamen* would give way to the multiple collisions that gave origins to the worlds. But this rain is not a metaphor of the thesis of the primacy of the encounter over form, but rather of the thesis of the primacy of non-encounter over encounter, which might be complementary: before the encounter that gives origin to the world the atoms fell like raindrops without meeting each other and their existence were purely abstract.

The rain that opens the writing, the rain that falls on the harvest-fields, on the road, on the desert or the sea, is left aside like a beautiful image without pertinence. In my opinion, this is actually the theoretical core of the text: it is the rain Aristotle spoke of, long before Malebranche, in a fundamental paragraph of *Physics*.

## 6. Rain on the Corn Fields

We have first of all to explain Aristotle conception of chance. This concern for events that do not take place either always or mostly, but happen for the sake of an end in an accidental way (between these are fortuitous those that at origin have a choice, whereas random are those that do not). Let us read Aristotle’s example:

A man is engaged in collecting subscriptions for a feast. He would have gone to such and such a place for the purpose of getting the money, if he had known. He actually went there for another purpose, and it was only accidentally that he got his money by going there; and this was not due to the fact that he went there as a rule or necessarily, nor is the end effected (getting the money) a cause present in himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>*Phys.* 196b32-197a1.

Chance commonly understood as whatever does not have a cause does not exist for Aristotle; it only makes sense for Aristotle regarding a causal order and, indeed, it presupposes it. Everything that happens has a cause: a stone falls by virtue of its nature, a man goes to the market in order to make a purchase. It is a question of natural processes. However, these do not happen in solitude but in the middle of other natural processes. It happens that some processes are intertwined with others: the stone falls and hits a man who is passing by, the man gone to the market meets a debtor and collects his loan. In both cases it is a question of the encounter between two causal processes: in fact, the man who is hit passed by there for determinate reasons, the debtor found himself in the market for determinate reasons. Now, what in this intertwining of causal processes makes us speak about chance and fortune? An apparent teleology, an “as if”: it would seem that this intertwining is prepared by a meaning, by an intention. It could seem that the stone had fallen with the intention of killing, as if at the origin had been the aim to kill; it could seem that the man had gone to the market in order to collect, as if at the origin had been the aim to collect, but in reality none of this is so: the stone’s aim was to fall downwards, its cause for itself, and by accident has hit the man; the man’s aim was to go to the market to make a purchase, his cause for himself, and by accident has encountered the creditor.

On the basis of this theory of chance (of which fortune is obviously a subset) Aristotle is in a position to refute Democritus’s position: Chance and fortune are causes of effects which, though they might result from intelligence or nature, have in fact been caused by something accidentally. Now since nothing which is accidental is prior to what is *per se*, it is clear that no accidental cause can be prior to a cause *per se*. Chance and fortune, therefore, are posterior to intelligence and nature. Hence, however true it may be that the heavens are due to chance, it will still be true that intelligence and nature will be prior causes of this universe and of many things in it besides.<sup>3</sup>

In these lines, Aristotle is stating the primacy of intellect and nature over chance and fortune, i.e., to translate Aristotle’s words into Althusserian terminology, the primacy of form over encounter. Yet in paragraph 8 Aristotle wonders if every teleology is not in reality apparent, an appearance of finality, in other words, if every form is not in reality an effect of chance. Here is the extraordinary Aristotelian passage:

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<sup>3</sup>*Phys.* 198a5-13. [Translation slightly modified—trans.]

A difficulty presents itself: why should not nature work, not for the sake of something, nor because it is better so, but just as the sky rains, not in order to make the corn grow, but of necessity? (What is drawn up must cool, and what has been cooled must become water and descend, the result of this being that the corn grows.) Similarly if a man's crop is spoiled on the threshing-floor, the rain did not fall for the sake of this—in order that the crop might be spoiled—but that result just followed. Why then should it not be the same with the parts in nature, e.g. that our teeth should come up of necessity—the front teeth sharp, fitted for tearing, the molars broad and useful for grinding down the food—since they did not arise for this end, but it was merely a coincident result; and so with all other parts in which we suppose that there is purpose? Wherever then all the parts came about just what they would have been if they had come to be for an end, such things survived, being organized spontaneously in a fitting way; whereas those which grew otherwise perished and continue to perish, as Empedocles says his 'man-faced oxprogeny' did.<sup>4</sup>

Everything could have happened by necessity and not for the sake of an end. It rains, is a fact. And rain can have positive effects, to make crops grow, or negative effects, to spoil crops on the threshing-floor. In the two cases it doesn't rain for an end, but necessarily (*ex anagkes*). Aristotle wonders if every form could not be thought on the model of rain and its possible effects on grain. Forms would be none other than the result of a successful combination of necessity, a good organization that for this reason persists; by contrast, bad organizations perish and have perished like calves with human faces. Forms, then, do not exist because they are produced with an end to existing, but because they are casually adapted to existence. This primacy of the encounter over form is a hypothesis that Aristotle discards, relying on the use of language: "wherever we speak of chance we have always already positively stated first of all teleological structures."<sup>5</sup>

### *7. Primacy of Encounter over Form: Rereading Darwin*

I would like to maintain that the Althusserian position is diametrically opposite to the Aristotelic one, and that the unwritten thesis of Althusser in the *Subterranean Current* is actually its theoretical core: the primacy of

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<sup>4</sup>*Phys.* 198b 17-33.

<sup>5</sup>Wieland, p. 328.

encounter over form.

This thesis receives an entire new light if we compare the Althusserian text with an author evoked only once: Charles Darwin.

The role that Althusser gives to Darwin is very important: Darwin is used against Hegel and at stake is of course Marx, namely the possibility of distinguishing a teleological theory of the mode of production from an aleatory one. It is a fundamental role because it provides Althusser a model of application of the thesis of the primacy of the encounter over form in the treatment of the natural world. No transcendental contingency of the world, just the emergence of every natural form from a complex encounter of an extremely large number of elements.

In paragraph 8 of *Physics*, it was said that Aristotle had contemplated the possibility of such a theory before refusing it. In first of the *Historical sketch of the progress of opinion on the origin of species*, Darwin actually quotes Aristotle's passage that we read, adding:

We here see the principle of Natural Selection shadowed forth, but how little Aristotle fully comprehended the principle, is shown by his remarks on the formation of the teeth.

But, the fact that the Darwin theory is opposed to Aristotle's one is in some way admitted even in common sense. What is much less evident is that the theory of Darwin is opposed to the Hegelian philosophy. The theory of Darwin was largely interpreted as a theory of progress, of the evolution of forms, in a sense that is compatible with the synthaxis of Hegelian logic.

Résumé of Darwin

#### *8. Darwin and the materialism of the aleatory*

Far from being an incidental reference from *the Subterranean Current*, Darwin's theory instead seems to be an invisible centre. Its fundamental nucleus is not the thesis of the evolution of forms (against fixism), but precisely the primacy of the encounter over form, i.e. the contingency not so much of the world (terms which would not have made sense to Darwin), but of every form because it is the result of a complex mesh of encounters of which each one is necessary, but of an aleatory necessity, if the oxymoron is conceded, which lacks a project or telos. In this sense, the elements taken are

not there because the form may be but each one have its own history, effect in turn of a mesh of encounters that took place, but obviously failed. In this way, providing that the *telos* and the project are rejected (and the correlative concept of nature as order), the thesis of the primacy of encounter over form results perfectly compatible with that of relations over elements: the complex web of relations which constitutes the stable face of nature in a given period is not order and guarantee of stability, but a complex mesh of encounters, the failure or the taking place of one of which can redesign the web, and so may go, as Darwin writes, “*in ever-increasing circles of complexity*”.

I believe that is precisely this model that allows Althusser to distinguish a teleological conception of the mode of production from an aliatory one