



Encountering Althusser*

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review of:

Louis Althusser (2006) *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, edited by F. Matheron and O. Corpet, translated and introduced by G. M. Goshgarian. London and New York: Verso. (PB: pp. 300, £16.99, ISBN: 1-84467-553-X)

Gregory Elliott (2006) *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*. Leiden and Boston: Brill. Historical Materialism Book Series (13). (HB: pp. 410, €93.00/US\$139.00, ISBN: 90-04-15337-3)

Introduction

Has organization studies ever encountered Louis Althusser? What Althusser? We can discern effects of Althusser's writings, for example, in work on ideology, where it mostly gets discussed in relation (and often deference) to Antonio Gramsci (e.g. Mumby 1998; Deetz, 1992), or, more recently, to Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (e.g. Jones and Spicer, 2005; Fleming and Spicer, 2005). Yet the "quite unexpected revival of interest in Althusser" that marked the 1990s, sparked by the publication of his autobiography (Althusser, 1993) and a biography (Moulier Boutang, 1992), which "revealed the existence of a hitherto unknown Althusser" (Elliott, 2006: 317) – this revival for all means and purposes bypassed organization studies.

What, then, might one gain from a new encounter with Althusser? What is the importance of the work by Althusser published since his death (for an overview, see Elliott, 2006: 318-319), and in particular the material contained in *Philosophy of the Encounter*? I would like to suggest that there are three particular points to consider. *First*, this work reveals a new Althusser, or at least an old one in new clothes, one that appears much unlike the one who is vaguely familiar to organization studies. This work thus makes possible a new encounter with Althusser; not with Althusser the 'structuralist', but with Althusser the philosopher of the encounter.

Second, this does not mean that we have to completely abandon or disregard Althusser's earlier work, such as *For Marx* or *Reading Capital*. Rather, as Elliott points out,

* I would like to thank participants of the Althusser reading group that took place in Leicester in early 2007 for the fruitful debates that occurred.

Althusser's late works "facilitate a litmus test on the Althusser of the 1960s and 1970s, indicating underlying themes across his oeuvre" (2006: 360). These late works thus allow us to read the earlier Althusser differently, anew. *Third*, the identification of an 'undercurrent of the materialism of the encounter' in the history of philosophy, which not only includes Marx but also such diverse figures as Epicurus, Machiavelli, Heidegger and Derrida, challenges us to resituate the work of Marx and Althusser within a different genealogy of thought, and to develop this particular current of philosophy, perhaps with the aim of rekindling the effects of Marx's and Althusser's work, and the challenges they pose to theory and politics, also in organization.

Gregory Elliot's *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* serves as an indispensable companion in this endeavour. Unfortunately, this is not the 'new synthesis' – Elliott himself admits (2006: ix) – the posthumous publication of Althusser's work deserves. Yet the book is still the "fullest account to date in English of Althusser's philosophico-political career in the 1960s and 1970s" (*ibid.*), and the addition of a new preface, extended postface, and updated bibliographical data mean that it can serve the purpose of introducing the most important aspects of Althusser's work, while relating the various periods of Althusser's work to each other. To this end, and somewhat cheekily, Elliott offers a periodisation of Althusser's work, much like Althusser did of Marx's work (except here the discontinuities are conceptual and not epistemological). Elliott (2006: 365) suggest the following:

- (i) 1945-1950: the Early Works
- (ii) 1950-1959: the Works of the Break
- (iii) 1960-1975: the Mature Works
- (iv) 1976-1978: the Transitional Works
- (v) 1979-1986: the Late Works

The texts that make up *Philosophy of the Encounter* all fall into the period of the Late Works, except 'Marx in his Limits' (1978-1979), and the 'Letter to Merab Mardashvili' that introduces it, which belong to the Transitional Works. 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' (1982-1983) is the other major essay in the volume, a piece meticulously assembled by the editors out of an unfinished book manuscript. These texts are supplemented by the interview 'Philosophy and Marxism' (1984-1987), assembled out of conversations with Fernanda Navarra, as recorded in the correspondence relating to the interview, also published here. 'Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher', Althusser's last philosophical work, completes the volume.

Philosophy and Marxism

Who, then, is this 'new' Althusser? In what ways is he different? The easiest way to encounter this later work of Althusser is perhaps through 'Philosophy and Marxism'. In the interview Althusser provides a reflection on his earlier project familiar to organization theorists under the title 'Althusserianism', explains his 'break' with the same, and introduces his later project of developing a 'materialism of the encounter'.

Althusser here, as elsewhere, asserts that Marx's work is incoherent and incomplete, and that this is due to Marx's relation to philosophy, and the way he has failed to break with a certain philosophical tradition. It is the absence of a philosophy proper to Marx that lead Althusser in his earlier work to attempt to recover a philosophy from Marx's texts, for example in *Reading Capital*, where – alongside Balibar, Rancière and Establet – he attempted to recover the 'logic of *Capital*' 'implicit' therein. On this project he now reflects:

We did so not on a whim, but out of a profound necessity: to make it possible to read and to think Marx's thought, we had to bring out the philosophy implicit in it, the only philosophy capable of clarifying the difficulties in his great work, *Capital* – capable, in a word, of rendering it thinkable, that is, *rational and coherent*. Turning every possible clue to advantage, then, we set out to acquire – to discover and elaborate – what was massively absent from it [*cette grande absente*]: Marx's philosophy. And we fabricated for Marx, really and truly *fabricated*, the philosophy that he lacked: this rational, coherent philosophy. (2006: 210, emphases here and subsequently in original)

Althusser acknowledges that the attempt to uncover the philosophy of Marx, his very own, in effect 'missed the mark' in that it gave Marx a philosophy dominated by 'the spirit of the times', one of 'Bachelardian and structuralist inspiration' which, Althusser writes, cannot be called 'Marxist philosophy' (2006: 257). Althusser thus leave behind this project and instead pronounces a new task, one of inventing a philosophy *for* Marx. That philosophy "will simply be a philosophy that takes its place in the history of philosophy" – as an undercurrent, as we will see below. It will be "capable of accounting for the conceptual discoveries that Marx puts to work in *Capital*", "it will be a philosophy *for Marxism*" (2006: 258).

It is remarkable that Althusser reposes the question 'what is (a Marxist) philosophy?' at this point, effectively acknowledging that his previous answers under the terms 'Theory of theoretical practice' and 'class struggle in theory' – which gave philosophy too much and too little space, respectively – were unsatisfactory. It fits into the picture here that in 'Marx in his Limits' Althusser seeks to show us the limits of Marx's philosophical practice, together with its political consequences, and that in 'Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' he searches for a new philosophy and practice for Marx.

Marx in his Limits

If we are on the road towards a new philosophy for Marxism, then what is left of Marx, and of the earlier Althusser? 'Marx in his Limits' is the last piece of writing Althusser completed before the period of psychosis during which, in 1980, he killed his wife, and which, as a consequence, ended his academic and political career. The piece thus marks a certain limit, a certain end, of Althusser's work up to that point. Here, once again, for the last time, and much more directly and effectively than previously, he provides an account of the 'limits' of Marx. He also, in effect, provides an account of the limits of his own work up to that point. In the 'Letter to Merab Mardashvili' he writes:

... the day of *reckoning* has come. It doesn't much matter who draws up the bill, it can even be nobody at all, but eventually a day comes when the little debts that one had avoided totalling show up on a list of things: and, in general, it's not the big spenders who have to pay the tab, but poor sobs like you and me (and how many others who are still more confused). Since bills are always wrong or rigged, one has to check them, but first one has to agree to pay them: all this in a political and theoretical cesspool without precedent (barring worse), the sole advantage of which is that there's no avoiding it. (2006: 2-3)

In light of the 'crisis of Marxism' that Althusser pronounces here, he proposes to 'ask the limit-question', which is: "What can we retain of Marx today as being truly essential to his thought, even if it has perhaps not (indeed, has surely not) always been well understood?" (2006: 13-14). This is all within a certain tradition of 'self-criticism' and 'rectification', evident in Marx's 'endless wrestling' with philosophy (2006: 45) as well as in Althusser's own work. The task here still revolves around effecting the break with philosophy that Marx instituted, and around overcoming the negative effects of the traces of idealism in Marx which have imposed certain limits on Marx's work, as well as on Althusser and on us.

Thus the obvious need to 'shift ground' or adopt a position 'representing the proletariat', however keenly Marx was aware of it (there is an interval of thirty-two years between the two formulas!), clearly did not suffice, in and of itself and from the outset, 'to settle accounts' with Marx's former philosophical consciousness... A materialist will conclude from this that there was more in Marx's practice, thought, and the contradictions of his problematic than in his consciousness. *He will also conclude that the limits of Marx's thought were not without effect on his acts or those of others.* (2006: 45)

It is no wonder, perhaps, that considering the question of Marx's break with philosophy revolves around materialism and idealism, where the 'real movement' is given primacy over the realm of ideas, that the limits that Althusser sees in Marx revolve precisely around the realm of ideal forms, those of the superstructure. In the remainder of the essay Althusser discusses various limits of Marx with regards to the state, ideology and politics.

Althusser starts off with a discussion of the state. For Althusser the state-machine is separate from class struggle "because that is *what it is made to be for*", since "the state needs this 'separation' in order to be able to intervene in the class struggle 'on all fronts'" (2006: 71). This implies that the state always has a function in class struggle and cannot simply be taken over by the proletariat, but must be dismantled. And since democracy as a merely political form leaves the state-machine, together with its function in the class struggle, intact, Althusser defends the notion of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. The latter "can only designate the whole set of economic, political and ideological forms by means of which the proletariat has to impose its politics on the old dominant, exploiting class" (2006: 90). For Althusser, the political forms of the domination of the proletariat "are 'normally' forms of the broadest possible mass democracy, in which democracy 'is taken to the limit'" (2006: 94) – proletarian domination means, 'normally', mass democracy.

We encounter another limit of Marx in his thinking on ideology, and his adherence to the notion of fetishism. Althusser is adamant that the theory of fetishism in *Capital* is a parable only necessary because of the false idealist form of argument imposed on the text, and that there is little use in the notion of fetishism. He wryly concludes that "I do

not think that it makes any sense at all to talk about the fetishism of the commodity, as if the commodity could be the source [*l'auteur*] 'of' fetishism" and it is rather the ideological state apparatuses that "may be at the origin of massive mystifications that go well beyond the illusion that consists, or is said to consist, in taking social relations between man for social relations between things" (2006: 134-135).

In the last few pages, Althusser turns to a discussion of Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Here Gramsci – supposedly working away at Marx's limits – is reprimanded for the effects that his notion produces on our thinking of the state and ideology in relation to production and reproduction. The idea that "it is possible to decipher everything about the terribly material nature of production and exploitation (hence of class struggle in production) ... by referring exclusively to the reality that Gramsci christens Hegemony" strikes Althusser as 'astoundingly idealist'; and "the pathetic little tag to the effect that 'hegemony is born in the factory'" does not remedy the effects of Gramsci 'bracketing out' the infrastructure (2006: 144-145). We are thus still caught within the limits of Marx, that, in Althusser's eyes, Gramsci is unable to overcome in this instance.

Democracy, commodity fetishism, hegemony: three terms that are quite popular in organization theory today; that Althusser sees these to be part of the limits of Marx, and that he suggests very different perspectives on these than the ones prevalent in organization studies today, should at least leave us thinking. Yet the last limit of Marx that Althusser points to might be considered the most important:

Yet the fact is that this aberrant thesis brings us to the threshold of another 'absolute limit' of Marxist thought: namely, its inability to think 'politics'... our authors have never given us, except in the form of lists or descriptions, even the rudiments of an analysis responding to the question: *just what might politics be?* Where is politics to be found? In what forms? What distinguishes it from non-political forms, and how then should we designate these other forms? (2006: 150, emphases in original)

Materialism of the Encounter

How, then, are we to work on these limits – of Marx, of Althusser, of our own thought? And how is this to contribute to thinking the political? 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' was the first thing Althusser wrote after 'Marx in his Limits', in which Althusser considered the political limits of Marx to be an effect of the philosophical conundrum that he found himself in. It is perhaps fitting that 'Underground Current' thus seeks to uncover a new philosophy.

My intention, here, is to insist on the existence of a materialist tradition that has not been recognized by the history of philosophy. That of Democritus, Epicurus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau (the Rousseau of the second *Discourse*), Marx and Heidegger, together with the categories that they defended: the void, the limit, the margin, the absence of a centre, the displacement of the centre to the margin (and vice versa), and freedom. A materialism of the encounter, of contingency – in sum, of *the aleatory*, which is opposed even to the materialisms that have been recognized as such, including that commonly attributed to Marx, Engels and Lenin, which, like every other materialism of the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is, a disguised form of idealism. (2006: 261-262)

Althusser moves very quickly through a discussion of Epicurus and the swerve, Heidegger and the *'es gibt'*, Machiavelli and the 'atomized country', Spinoza and the philosophical void, Hobbes and the 'war of all against all' as an enforced encounter, Rousseau and the social contract as 'an encounter that has taken form', only to end up with Marx. That the stakes here are not merely philosophical but also political is emphasised by Althusser's comment that the concepts of encounter and conjuncture are "a means with which to think not only the *reality* of history, but, above all, the reality of *politics*; not only the essence of reality but, above all, the essence of *practice*, and the link between these two realities in their *encounter: in struggle*" (2006: 188) – which thus brings us back to the limits of Marx.

The rather brief commentaries on such a vast array of thinkers are suggestive rather than conclusive, and the whole piece can probably most productively be read as a provocation, one that seeks to unsettle the philosophical positioning that Marx and Althusser have been subjected to in organization studies and elsewhere, and one that seeks to situate Marx and Althusser in a strand of (methodological) 'anti-necessitarianism' (Suchting, 2004: 66). These are thus the first rough sketches of an attempt to explore, develop, and even invent a new philosophy for Marxism, a task which has been taken up by Suchting (2004) and Morfino (2005), but one that will take much more work.

A New Encounter?

The task then is to encounter Althusser anew. It is also one of inheriting Marx through Althusser, of reading him through his limits, of reposing Marx's challenge to philosophy and of developing a new philosophy for Marxism. Yet the contours of this engagement are far from certain. Elliott writes:

Following the geopolitical earthquake of 1989-91, and in the utterly changed context of the present, what remained an unresolved issue twenty years ago constitutes a profound enigma to me today, revolving around not only *what* to be for or against in Althusser and *how*, but the *whys and wherefores* of the very operation. (2006, x-xi)

Unfortunately, Elliott will not accompany us any further on this journey, for, as he writes, "however long the future lasts, this will, for better or worse, be my final written word on the subject of Louis Althusser" (2006: xii). *The Detour of Theory* will thus serve merely as a door-opener to a further meeting with Althusser, one that will instead be accompanied by various other voices seeking to take up the inheritance of Althusser, such as that of G.M. Goshgarian, who so thoroughly introduces *Philosophy of the Encounter*, and a few others (e.g. McInerney, 2005; Montag, 2003; Morfino, 2005; Suchting, 2004).

The stakes of this encounter revolve around the limits of Marx and Althusser. For organization studies, this also involves posing the question of post-Marxism. Will this later work of Althusser – which has been said to involve a 'self-overcoming of Marxism' (Vatter, 2004; Montag, 2004) – challenge the dominant post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in organization studies? Will it lead to a reconsideration of

questions of state, ideology and politics within organization studies? One can only hope that an encounter with Althusser will take place in organization studies, and that this time it will take hold.

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