

The Politics of Althusser

Agon Hamza

One of the most difficult aspects of writing about Althusser is rethinking his politics. This is indeed a paradoxical position, since, in one instance, his entire oeuvre is political. This said, there are no Althusserian political parties or political movements of any kind. Further, it would be rather impossible to imagine a movement, say an anti-colonial front or a political movement or party¹, operating on Althusserian premises. If one will push cynicism to a slightly moderate tone, it is the concept of *overdetermination* (read in a rigid Althusserian manner) which would dissolve such a political organisation. In this regard, Althusserianism is not a political orientation in the strict sense.

So, is it still possible to be an Althusserian today, and more concretely, it is possible to be an Althusserian in politics? Or can we think of politics based on some Althusserian model, if such a thing would be possible in our era, that of the reign of barbaric cynicism? The Althusserian problematic is indispensably linked with the problem and the question of Marxism today. Philosophy declares positions, whereas theory re-produces problems within the existing political and ideological framework.

This permeates us to get a broader picture of Althusser's political project: he is not only a philosopher of the critique of situation, but also a philosopher of the critique of Marxism. His reading of Machiavelli bears witness to this.²

When dealing with Althusser, the problem of the relationship between philosophy and politics becomes evident. It concerns the function of philosophy in articulating the contemporary present. It might not be much of an exaggeration to boldly claim that this problem is at the same time the problem of philosophy itself. Namely, philosophically, thinking begins with, and equals, the attempts to articulate the present moment – just as Plato, in his Republic, tried to think of a city that would give people the best conditions to become philosophers. This was done based on the presupposition of philosophy of the equivalences of intelligences. The same applies to Hegel, who, in

¹ One should always, as a rule, be doubtful about the term “movement” versus the “party.”

² Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, London: Verso, 1999.

Philosophy of Right, does not try to outline the vision of a new state. However, even though one can assume the same premises of both Plato and Hegel, one crucial difference nonetheless stands between them. Unlike Hegel, Plato did outline and imagine an ideal state (going as far as to advise Dionysius on implementing a certain political idea), whereas Hegel was “content” with limiting himself to the analysis of the present.

However, what is the connection between proletarianization and philosophy? The proletarian position is defined as the moment when the worker is desubjectivized, rendered into a position equivalent to the money he receives for selling his labor power. In this sense, the proletarian position epitomizes the deadlocks generated by the antagonisms of capitalism. Second, it concerns the interdependent relation between Marxism and philosophy, and communism and politics. When we speak of Marx and philosophy, do we speak of a relation between two different positions within the same discipline of thought, or do we have in mind two distinct intellectual disciplines, which do not exist and operate in the same register, but nonetheless are interdependent and intercorrelated with one another? The paradoxical thesis thus runs as follows: Marx (and Marxism) is not a philosopher (respectively, a philosophy); it doesn't occupy a position within philosophy. However, Marxism (understood here as a critique of political economy) has determining consequences for philosophy itself.

This brings us to a crucial question: what is the relation between philosophy and capitalism? Philosophy has always had an interest in capitalism, although capitalism has no interest in philosophy. Can, then, philosophy be of help in, first, understanding and, second, critiquing and eventually doing away with capitalism? It is not difficult to declare capitalism as a non-philosophical, if not an anti-philosophical, enterprise. It is non-philosophical because capitalism as a social system of production has abandoned its philosophical ambitions by claiming itself to be utilitarian. However, this is the ideological “truth” of capitalism: placing itself as the only social system which “works,” which in turn reflects the success of capitalism, it presents itself in neutral terms. Nevertheless, one has to point out some specificities, specific to capitalism itself. It is the first “system based on relations of domination” in which domination is out in the open, displayed, with no transcendental excuses. Just as Karl Marx points out in *The Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.³

In capitalism, people are obliged to see social relations for how they appear to be. There is no beyond, as it were – the domination and exploitation are based precisely in the appearance of the appearance. They do not take place in another, separate ontological realm. Following this logic, we could also argue that the openness, or the visibility, of domination in capitalism is precisely the visibility of the domination that makes it opaque. Here we can refer to the commodity form: although it is very clear that commodities do not have the attributes inscribed to them, only through a dialectical analysis can one show how they are nonetheless treated as if they had them. Therefore, it is only by means of a dialectical analysis that the trivialities (of the commodity form, relations of domination, etc.) become a true riddle of a given social form. To return to the above-quoted paragraph from *The Communist Manifesto*, in capitalism, there is a sense in which capitalism makes us think. The strangeness of our situation is that despite capitalism being the form of organization of societies at the global level, we might not have the conceptual/philosophical tools to think it. But, just as Marx knew, capitalism is paradoxical in this respect: it is invisible, but at the same time the most thinkable of hitherto social systems (as no unthinkable God is relied upon to guarantee it).

Back to Althusser. His philosophical commitment to Marxism and radical politics was certainly conditioned by the conjunctures within which he lived and worked. But when those conjunctures disappear, Althusser’s singularity gains its crucial importance. His readings and reconceptualization of Marx echoed extensively, precisely

³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics), pp. 9–10.

because they did not reduce Marxism into yet another academic discipline, reduced only to the interest of “professional” philosophers. In this sense, Althusser’s Marxism is not only a rupture between Marxism and non-Marxist forms of doing politics and philosophy, but a very rupture within Marxism itself. So, how should we understand the rather paradoxical proposition that the era of Althusserian politics is not over? The thesis I want to propose thus is that the Althusserian politics is inconceivable in our theoretical conjuncture (within the Left), precisely because we are still trapped in the leftist fantasy concerning Stalinism, and its consequences. Althusser’s position was that only through Marxism could we understand our history. Does this not hold true for most of the critiques of Stalinism? Employing the usual catchwords (abuses, horrors, crimes, and so on) in understanding and explaining Stalin is helping ourselves with pseudoconcepts, as Althusser knew very well. We often mistake facts for concepts. This said, one should not entertain the thought that such a situation might be possible, i.e., a political situation of the Left without the spectre of Stalinism is not a structuring instance.

So, how should we think of the Althusserian politics? An Althusserian path would have been to assert the primacy of the class struggle with respect to the critique of ideology and the unconscious over the conscious. The class struggle is not only about reflecting on the capacities and strength of the adversaries, but, according to Althusser, it is also mostly and predominantly about choosing our own terrain and our form of the struggle. Departing from this, the question we need to pose thus is: in today’s conjuncture, who will systematically and collectively carry the anti-capitalist struggle, in so far as we agree that anti-capitalism should be the minimal requirement for being a communist today?

Althusser, following Marx, upheld the primacy of contradiction over the contraries. That is to say, the primacy of class struggle over the classes, and to quote Althusser:

then it is this antagonism itself which must comprise the object of ‘the concrete analysis of the concrete situation’. Otherwise, we lapse into ‘vulgar sociology’.⁴

The question is, then – to quote Althusser again:

⁴ Louis Althusser, *What Is To Be Done?*, Cambridge: Polity, 2020, p.2

of grasping the two poles of the antagonism at the same time *in order to be able to grasp the antagonism as that which constitutes the two poles*, in order to grasp the class struggle as that which constitutes the classes by dividing them into classes.⁵

That is why it is possible to say that a concrete analysis and the Marxist theory or political consciousness of the conditions for knowledge are one and the same. All that differs is the scale of the object.

Althusser is fond of Lenin's dictum: *concrete analysis of the concrete situation*⁶ – as he demonstrates on many occasions.

With the overload of the political opinions from all sorts of spectrums, more than ever one is tempted to propose the indifference to political matters. The very term “opinion” is problematic. The contemporary world has declared war on the long and painful process of thinking. We are not only encouraged, but also solicited to abandon thinking. Instead, we are encouraged to feel and have opinions.

We cannot have opinions about scientific, political, artistic, and other matters. Political opinions in political matters are profoundly problematic because no matter what we say, they are indeed irrelevant to the situation, as we lack the real knowledge and means to practice something that could be useful. There are political problems and situations that are as they are, and they appear as obscure not because they are necessarily in themselves so, but because I do not have *enough real* information, nor means to get it, neither the necessary sufficient means to use it. Therefore, one of the most hypocritical positions is to occupy a position of pretending to have more intimacy with these situations, than with scientific or artistic problems that also equally escape my grasp. In this sense, the more I pretend that I know a certain specific situation, the more I turn politics into a discursive war, rather than sticking to what it really is, a question of principled pragmatic organization based on effective territorial engagements. This seems to be the problem of the political commentaries and analyses of the left, with virtually every geo-political, economic, cultural, or other problem in the world today. Whenever one is engaged in providing a ‘concrete analysis of a concrete situation’ the beautiful souls of the Left immediately react by evoking Marx and sometimes even Lenin in order to make up and justify for their total lack of concrete positioning towards concrete situations. The real difficulty in Lenin's dictum is not

⁵ Ibid., p.5

⁶ V.I.Lenin, “Komunismus”, in *Collected Works* 31, Moswoc: Progress Publishers, 1974, p.166

analysing “the concrete situation” (what is truly going on singularly), but rather providing a “concrete analysis”. That is to say, an analysis that is not more committed to the identification of the analyst (as an “abstract analyst” of a concrete situation or as a someone who can guarantee that providing the correct analysis will guarantee his/her recognition by others as a “true” Marxist). Undertaking a “concrete analysis” can be traumatic precisely because it gives priority to the concrete situation over the reproduction of the analyst as an abstract individual, which means that it takes the side of the people over the side of the Left, waiting for the effects of the intervention/analysis in order to find out where one stands. It is precisely at this point where risk is located. As he himself holds, you can’t see everything from everywhere.

From here one can think of a letter Althusser sent to Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, an Italian communist militant, on the 2nd of April 1968. There he writes:

Politics is a protracted war. Do not be in a hurry. Try to see things far in advance, and know how to wait, today. Don't live in terms of subjective urgency. Know, too, how to put your defeats to use.⁷

So, where are we today? During the 1970s, French philosophers produced a theory of power that only leaves space for emancipatory politics from a position of resistance to power, never in exercising it.

The period of the socialist revolutions is over, and capitalism has become a global system. The socialist era is over, and we need to radically rethink the idea of communism.

Marx's famous response to Proudhon's *The Philosophy of Poverty* was to return the message in its inverted form: *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Today, when the value of thinking has become itself measured by the standards of the incessant activity and production that organize all forms of labor, it might be time to supplement Marx's position. The crisis of the left is no longer the crisis of idealism, of a "poor" philosophy disconnected from the material basis that conditions it – ours is a poverty of philosophy, a blatant absence of any form of thinking subtracted from the imperative of compulsive activity. A "return to philosophy" has, then, a double role today: one, it is a means to

⁷ Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *Letters from the inside of the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser*, London: NLB, 1973, p.23.

reinvent the critical powers needed in order to transform the world; and two, it is the first movement of constructing something that has no place in our world.

Furthermore, the decision to affirm the critical and transformative power of philosophical thinking also allows us to shed light on our contemporary predicament from a renewed perspective, as the crisis of the left, more than the crises of capitalism, becomes our main concern. Considered from the standpoint of our "poverty of philosophy," it suddenly becomes possible to recognize the imposture at the heart of some of our diagnoses of our enemies and struggles: for example, the supposition, shared by most of the left today, that we live in postideological times, in which all that is left for us to do is to act, or – in its most current version – the idea that "neoliberalism" names our true enemies, a conclusion that all too comfortably allows us to bypass producing new critical resources and therefore confronting our current lack of any robust conceptual framework, given that our adversary is conveniently cut off from its complex political-economic grounding. Paradoxically, today, the impasse of philosophy alone marks the left's most important tasks: to develop a more profound and comprehensive account of the left's failures in the twentieth century and to think the problem of political organization anew.

Following this, the philosophical event inaugurated by Althusser should be conceived in the following way: every endeavor to rethink Marx's work, as well as to reinvent the idea of communism, has to go through the positions established by Althusser. In this sense, Althusser cannot be ignored; one has to engage with the Althusserian legacy. However, the fidelity that Althusser exhibits vis-à-vis Marx does not involve repeating theses, giving exegetical summaries, or dogmatically sticking to the master's positions. Therefore, the return to Althusser should be undertaken precisely in this sense: a materialist reading of Althusser that consists in treating Althusser in the way he treated Marx. Such a return to Althusser should not be understood as a repetition of the same philosophical mantra reduced to a given historical context, but rather as the reinvention of the philosophical and political potential of his thought. This means that one cannot simply take up Althusser within his own conception of his problematic. Nevertheless, we can – and we must – take up his problematic as a premise, as a starting point.