

From 'Overdetermination' to 'Structural Causality': Some Unresolved Problems in Althusser's Treatment of Causality

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Introduction

Much of Althusser's work, in collaboration with Balibar, is concerned, by means of a 'symptomatic' reading of Marx's mature work, to draw out the latent, silent, untheorised concepts present in that work and provide and adequately describe these missing terms. In this way Althusser seeks to elaborate the fundamental concepts of a Marxist epistemology; concepts adequate to underpin philosophically Marx's scientific achievement. The central texts in this task are *For Marx* (1977) and *Reading Capital* (with Balibar 1977).

In 'Elements of Self-Criticism' (1976) Althusser argues the need of every philosophy to make a detour via other philosophies in order to define itself and grasp itself in terms of its difference. Hence, to find his own way, Marx rediscovered Hegel in order to distinguish himself from Hegel and define himself. To understand this detour and to clarify the distinctions between Marx and Hegel, Althusser argues that he too found a detour helpful. In his case the detour was via Spinoza.

If there are problems presented to our understanding of Marx due to Hegelian concepts and absent or silent concepts, there are equal problems in the way of our understanding Althusser presented by his Spinozist detour and his borrowing of concepts from other theorists such as Freud and Lacan. Althusser does not always clarify his use of 'imported' notions sufficiently. So problems arise in understanding to what extent they undergo modifications in Althusser's work and to what extent they retain their original connotations. As such concepts are imported from elaborated theoretical systems, they carry with them their own ontological and epistemological assumptions and problems, and a failure to clarify their precise use in the new context is a failure to define fully and adequately distinguish the new ontological and epistemological framework.

So, if Althusser's detour, together with his importations, are a response to banging his head for years 'against a wall of enigmatic texts', they in turn present enigmas, and a probing of those enigmas sometimes reveals unresolved epistemological difficulties.

Althusser identifies in Marx's *Capital* an untheorised but distinctive and centrally significant, notion of cause which he seeks to elaborate. The following examines the development of this notion of cause from that of 'overdetermination' in *For Marx* to that of 'structural causality' in *Reading Capital*. It is suggested that there are indeed unresolved ontological and epistemological problems and

that these stem, at least in part, from the original contexts of the concepts Althusser uses to define his 'new' notion and a failure to articulate adequately the relationship between his own ontology and epistemology and those from which he draws inspiration.

The problem of causality

In his essay 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (1977) Althusser argues that the meaning of Marx's reference to the inversion of Hegel's dialectic is problematic.

He contends that the common interpretation, which takes the inversion to refer to the nature of the object, to which the same dialectical method should be applied, substituting Hegel's 'world of the idea' for the 'real world', is incorrect. Althusser argues that it is the nature of the dialectic itself which is transformed in Marx's later work. In so far as Marx takes over certain notions, determinations and structures of the Hegelian dialectic these undergo changes in meaning and force.

Althusser distinguishes Marx's conception of the social totality from that of Hegel by pointing to the way in which Hegel, in characterising the essence of any historical period in terms of one simple internal principle which the whole concrete life of the people expresses in an external or alienated form, reduces the contradiction to the single simple contradiction of that internal principle. Marx, on the other hand, whilst identifying in *Capital* a basic general contradiction between the forces and relations of production embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes, between Capital and Labour, does not see the contradiction as a simple one but one which is '... always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised' (Althusser, 1977, p. 106). He sees that whilst this general contradiction is sufficient:

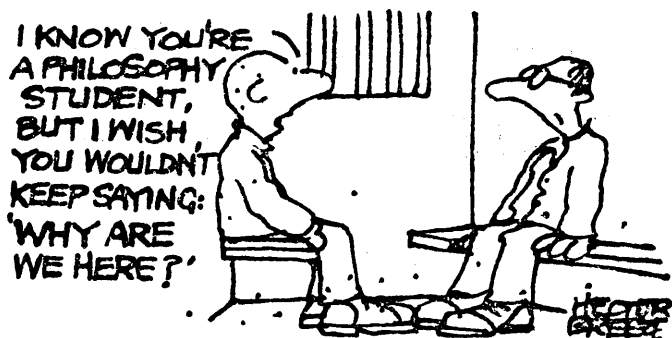
... to define the situation when revolution is the 'task of the day', it cannot of its own simple, direct power induce a 'revolutionary situation', ... If this contradiction is to become active in the strongest sense, to become a ruptural principle, there must be an accumulation of 'circumstances' and 'currents' so that whatever their origin and sense ... they 'fuse' into a ruptural unity.

For Marx then the social totality is a complex formation in which various levels and instances (of the superstructures as well as the base) are articulated in relations of reciprocal determination.

This conception could not be arrived at on the more usual interpretation of the 'inversion' which leads inevitably to an economic version of Marxism in which the superstructures have no effectivity and are reduced to mere epiphenomena, phenomenal forms, of the base.

In seeing the social totality as structured in this way Marx posed it as possessing a unity, but a unity quite different in character from the Hegelian spiritual whole, and in so doing he produced a crucial problem of causality.

In Reading Capital Althusser makes it quite clear that the problem of defining what he there refers to as 'structural causality' is central to the elaboration of a Marxist epistemology. He argues that neither of the theories of causality available to Marx were adequate to the task of thinking the relations of determination in a structured whole.



What Althusser describes as analytical and transitive causality and attributes a Cartesian origin, could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements. Seeing causality in terms of a sequential flux of events, it required, for example, the independent specification of cause and effect and could not allow the conception of causes existing in their effects. On the other hand, the alternative theory of expressive causality, which Althusser attributes to Leibniz and considers to dominate Hegel's thought, requires that the whole be reducible to an inner essence of which the elements are no more than phenomenal forms of expression. Thus, expressive causality is inadequate when the whole in question is conceived as structured.

Althusser argues that the question:

... by means of what concept is it possible to think the new type of determination ... by means of what concept or what set of concepts, is it possible to think the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations, by the effectivity of that structure? ... how is it possible to define the concept of structural causality?

(Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 186)

is present in an untheorised form, 'in the practical state', in Capital and sums up Marx's extraordinary scientific discovery.

The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances, for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution.

(Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 187)

Marx tackled the problem, which 'he had produced but not posed as a problem', practically, with 'extraordinary ingenuity', but he was inevitably hampered by a lack of any adequate conceptual apparatus. Althusser sees the task of providing such an apparatus as central to the production of

a Marxist epistemology adequate to the new form of scientificity implicit in Marx's theory of history and political economy. It involves forging '... a way of thinking the question that his scientific discovery has posed philosophy' (Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 193) and is tantamount to the production of 'a new form of rationality'.

In grappling with this problem of causality in For Marx (particularly in the essay 'Contradiction and Overdetermination'), Althusser draws on the Freudian notion of overdetermination. In doing so he encounters and reproduces the difficulties of encompassing the level of symbolic representation within the same set of causal relations as the base, physiological in the case of Freud and economic in that of Althusser. In Reading Capital the Freudian notion is not altogether lost and sits uneasily beside an interpretation of 'structural causality' drawn from Spinoza and embedded in a more generally Spinozistic ontological and epistemological framework.

Overdetermination in For Marx

Althusser introduces the notion of 'overdetermination' in For Marx to express the complexity of determination in the structured social formation. In discussing the formation of a 'ruptural unity' which precipitates revolution he contends that a vast accumulation of contradictions comes into play. These contradictions derive from the relations of production, one of the terms of the general contradiction, but they are more than its phenomenal forms; they are in turn its conditions of existence.

The unity they constitute in this 'fusion' into a revolutionary rupture, is constituted by their own essence and effectivity, by what they are and according to the specific modalities of their action.

(Althusser, 1977, p. 100)

Nevertheless, the contradictions are not seen as separate from, or as in any sense external effectivities upon, the whole. They have their existence, and can only be thought of as part of an articulated structure in which they are defined and determined and in turn defining and determining.

... the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence, and even from the instances it governs; it is radically affected by them, determining but also determined in one and the same moment, and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates; it might be called overdetermined in its principle.

(Althusser, 1977, p. 101)

Furthermore, whilst the economic is always 'determinant in the last instance', overdetermination constitutes the character of all social formations. It does not just refer to aberrant historical situations, it is universal:

... the economic dialectic is never active in the pure state; in history, these instances, the superstructures, etc. - are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strikes along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes.

(Althusser, 1977, p. 113)

So a social formation is always a structure constituted of levels articulated in reciprocally determining relationships. The superstructures are what they are because of their place in the whole. They are determined by the base which is 'determinant in the last instance', but they in turn constitute the conditions of existence of the base and as such exert their own specific effectivities.

With the notion of 'overdetermination' which he draws from Freud (see Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 188), Althusser is not merely expressing the complexity of causal

relations in the social formation. He is also conveying a character of internality in those relations. At the same time, he is holding on to a notion of levels which are defined in a sufficiently independent way to allow an exchange of transforming energy; a real effectivity, in both directions. Thus, he wishes to maintain both that cause and effect relations are internal and that effects are more than the expressions of causes.

Some of the problems involved in this can perhaps be clarified by reference to the source of the notion of overdetermination in Freud. However, there are difficulties involved in this. Freud's own use of the term is in itself ambiguous and ill-defined and Althusser does not detail the implications of his usage in relation to, or in contradistinction from, that of Freud.

Freud's Notion of Overdetermination

Freud and his collaborator Breuer sometimes use 'overdetermination' as a way of expressing a fairly simple idea of multiple causation in which a number of causes converge to produce a particular effect, whether it be a 'symptom' or a 'dream-image'. Breuer appears to be using it in this way when he says:

... there must be a convergence of several factors before a hysterical symptom can be generated in anyone who has hitherto been normal. Such symptoms are invariably 'overdetermined', to use Freud's expression.

It may be assumed that an overdetermination of this sort is also present when the same effect has been called out by a series of several provoking causes. The patient and those about him attribute the hysterical symptom only to the last cause, though that cause has, as a rule, merely brought to light something that had already been almost accomplished by other traumas.

(Freud and Breuer, 1974, pp. 289-90)

In the same work Freud uses the notion similarly:

... the principal feature in the aetiology of the neuroses - that their genesis is as a rule overdetermined, that several factors must come together to produce this result ...

(Freud and Breuer, 1974, p. 346)

However, this convergence of causal factors cannot, at least not always, be seen as a simple additive process where, as it were, the last straw breaks the camel's back. Freud's use of 'overdetermination' sometimes conveys a sense of 'redundancy' akin to that found in information theory. In his paper 'On Aphasia' he argues:

The safeguards of our speech against breakdown thus appear overdetermined, and it can easily stand the loss of one or the other element.

(Freud, 1953b, pp. 436-5)

This sense is also apparent in, for example, 'The psychotherapy of Hysteria' (Freud and Breuer, 1974, pp. 373-6), and in the notion of 'condensation' in the 'dream-work' (e.g. Freud, 1976, pp. 387-414).

The use of overdetermination in relation to the theory of condensation reveals yet another connotation of the concept in which effects are seen as symbolic representations of causes. Here the relation between cause and effect is an internal one and involves a dimension of meaning as well as force. As Freud is centrally concerned with meaningful and symbolic material and most of the effects he is interested in are symbolic in some way, this is a very significant aspect of his use of overdetermination. In particular, he seeks to theorise the way in which meaningful material, which 'represents' an instinctual desire, enters into relations of force involving a discharge of cathected energy and resulting in its transformation into a more cryptic 'symbolic' form. Thus, the causal relations with which Freud is concerned are intimately bound up with relations of meaning.

Ricoeur discusses this in an illuminating way and locates the central difficulty of psychoanalytic epistemology precisely here:

Freud's writings present themselves as a mixed or even ambiguous discourse, which at times states conflicts of force subject to an energetics, at times relations of meaning subject to a hermeneutics.

(Ricoeur, 1978, p. 65)

Ricoeur argues that both dimensions are necessary to psychoanalytic discourse and seeks to:

... overcome the gap between the two orders of discourse and to reach the point where one sees that the energetics implies a hermeneutics and the hermeneutics discloses an energetics. That point is where the positing or emergence of desire manifests itself in and through the process of symbolisation.

(Ricoeur, 1978, p. 65)

Ricoeur traces the development of the conceptualisation of this relationship from 'The Project', which he describes as the non-hermeneutic state of the system, through the complex interrelations of meaning and force in The Interpretation of Dreams, to the 'Papers on Metapsychology' (Freud, 1954, 1976 and 1953a), where it is most fully developed. He concludes this exploration by showing how, in his essay 'The Unconscious' Freud relates 'instinct' and 'idea'.

We can only arrive at a knowledge of the unconscious through a translation or transformation into something conscious, and Freud contends that psychoanalytic work shows us every day that translation of this kind is possible. This possibility entails a coincidence of force and meaning where instincts are made manifest in a psychical 'representative' that stands for them. All the derivatives in consciousness are merely transformations of this psychical representative. Instincts are energy, but they are not known in themselves, even in the unconscious. They are known as manifest in the 'idea', the psychic representative. So everything treated 'under the heading of "the (energetic) vicissitude" of instincts comes to language as the vicissitude of their psychical expressions' (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 142).

However, psychoanalysis is not thus reduced to the interpretation of relations of meaning, as the instinctual representative is an idea or group of ideas to which is cathected a definite quota of psychical energy or libido and the process of energy discharge is intimately linked with that of symbolic representation and transformation. So, Ricoeur argues, the language of force cannot be overcome by the language of meaning because of the irreducible character of affects from the economic point of view, i.e., that of the interplay of cathexes. It is nonetheless impossible to realise this pure economics apart from the representable and the sayable.

... affects 'represent' instincts and instincts 'represent' the body 'to the mind'. But the mere verbal assonance which so perplexes the translator - betrays a profound kinship between 'Repräsentanz' and 'representation' in the sense of ideas. In any case, no economics can efface the fact that affects are the charge of ideas....

(Ricoeur, 1978, p. 150)

In developing his theory of 'Repräsentanz' Freud is grappling with the problem of combining relations of force with relations of meaning.

Psychoanalysis never confronts one with bare forces, but always with forces in search of meaning; this link between force and meaning makes instinct a psychic reality, or more exactly, the limit concept at the frontier between the organic and the psychical.

(Ricoeur, 1978, p. 151)

Thus, the relationship between ideas and instincts is crucial to the conceptualisation of the relationship between the mental and the physical, mind and body and in Freud the relationship is construed as a causal one: instincts cause the psychic images which represent or express them in a meaningful symbolic form.

Althusser and Freud Compared

Althusser contends that his borrowing of Freud's concept of overdetermination reflects a concern for the same theoretical problem; that of the concept with which we are 'to think the determination of either an element or a structure by a structure' (Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 188).

It has been argued (Giddens, 1979, p. 158) that Althusser uses the notion of overdetermination only in the sense of a convergence of causes, but there are good reasons for supposing that he also takes over the sense of 'redundancy' in his borrowing of the notion of condensation and, more importantly, that he espouses the implication of relations of meaning and symbolic transformation in Freud's use of the term and with it the epistemological problem detailed by Ricoeur.

One factor that renders this interpretation reasonable is the fact that Althusser is influenced by Lacan's reading of Freud which emphasises relations of meaning. However, more important is the character of Althusser's own problematic. Central to Althusser's work is his concern to provide an account of the social totality which avoids a crude economic determinism and allows for the effectivity of the superstructures whilst at the same time retaining a notion of determination by the base in the 'last instance'. He concentrates in particular on accounting for the effectivity of the ideological instance and he is quite clear that this is a symbolic level which has a relation of meaning with the base. It is, moreover, not a relation of simple expression but:

... an ideology is a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society.
(Althusser, 1977, p. 231)

In his later work, and in particular in his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1971), Althusser is concerned to develop his conceptualisation of the way in which ideology 'represents', in a mythical way, the relations of production whilst maintaining a relative autonomy and an effectivity upon the base. It seems reasonable, therefore, to suppose that Althusser's affinity with the Freudian problematic is close and that he shares the epistemological problem, identified by Ricoeur, of reconciling relations of force with relations of meaning, which is reflected in his use of the notion of overdetermination.

Freud's concern with mental, symbolic representations of 'biological' bodily forces and the energy relations involved is close to Althusser's concern to theorize the 'representation' of the base in the superstructures as a causal relationship. However, it is not clear to what extent, if any, Freud intended a reciprocally determining effect of the dream images and/or symptoms upon the biological base. Althusser clearly does intend the superstructures to exert a reciprocal effectivity upon the economic base and a dimension of difficulty thus enters his problematic which is perhaps not so marked in that of Freud. The problem of the meaning of 'determination in the last instance' is one which persists throughout Althusser's work and he seems better placed to account for the persistence of a structure than for transition and change. This problem is further accentuated in Reading Capital where, in the move to a more Spinozistic epistemological framework, the internality of cause/effect relationships is even more strongly emphasised.

Structural Causality in Reading Capital

In developing the notion of structural causality in Reading Capital Althusser pays more explicit attention to the representational aspects of the structural relationships than in his treatment of overdetermination. This is pointed up by his selection of 'Darstellung' as the most appropriate and

least metaphorical of the concepts which Marx uses to 'think the effectivity of the structure'. He locates in 'Darstellung' the key epistemological concept of the whole of the Marxist theory of value:

... the concept whose object is precisely to designate the mode of presence of the structure in its effects and therefore to designate structural causality itself.

(Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 188)

The importance of 'representation' is further brought out in Althusser's metaphor of the authorless theatre where he likens 'Darstellung' to the mode of existence of a stage direction (mise en scène) of the theatre which is simultaneously its own stage, its own script, its own actors, etc. (1977b, p. 193). Similarly, his use of Lacan's notion of metonymic causality synonymous with 'structural causality' emphasises the 'symbolic' aspects of the relationships in question.

'Darstellung' and 'overdetermination' are both attempts to express the nature of the 'structure articulated in dominance'. Both notions recognise the significance of 'representation' but in each case Althusser takes care to emphasise that the reduction of 'representation' to mere appearance is not what is intended. He is, for example, concerned with the temptation so to reduce Marx's central notion of fetishism (Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 191). However, it has been argued above that in the case of overdetermination, whilst such a reduction is avoided, problems of a 'mixed discourse' are encountered.

In using the notion of 'Darstellung' Althusser stresses the idea of the 'absent cause': the cause internal to its effects or the existence of a structure in its effects. It has been argued that in thus holding the view that the structure, whilst specifying its effects, is nothing outside its effects, Althusser falls into the trap of postulating an 'essentialist' and self-sustaining totality or 'eternity' (McLennan et al, 1978, p. 81, and Hindess and Hirst, 1977, p. 134). The question must now be posed as to what extent this criticism is justified. To what extent does the shift to 'Darstellung' or 'structural causality' lose some of the more dynamic connotations of 'overdetermination' and the idea of a 'structure articulated in dominance', in stressing the internality and representational character of cause/effect relationships.

The notion of a cause internal to its effects: 'immanent in its effects' is derived from Spinoza's conception of God as causa immanens (1955, 'Ethics', Part 1, prop. 18), and for Althusser, as much as Spinoza, the concept is intimately connected with other fundamental notions and cannot be discussed in isolation from its general epistemological context. Reading Capital is thoroughly influenced by Spinoza's epistemology but whilst Althusser acknowledges this, he does not detail his derivations or the ways in which his philosophy differs. The issues in question may, therefore, be illuminated by retracing Althusser's footsteps and consulting Spinoza directly.

Spinoza's Metaphysics <2>

Spinoza's metaphysics is a thoroughgoing monism. At its heart it is the rejection of the conception of the universe as a plurality of substances each persisting through time in possession of certain essential attributes. One of the central difficulties with any 'plurality' doctrine is that of accounting for interactions between substances of essentially different natures and attributes. Thus, for example, arises the classical mind/body problem which stems from the Cartesian distinction between thought and extension.

Spinoza accepts the view that substances are essentially things which originate and change in accordance with the laws of their own natures. However, if substances do interact, the succession of their states cannot be wholly explained in terms of their own essential natures. Some of their states or modifications in their natures will be the effect of the action of external substances upon them.

Hence, a distinction must be drawn between the accidental or contingent attributes and modifications and those which can be deduced from their essential natures. As substances are, by definition, such that their attributes and modifications can be explained in terms of their own natures, then for them to have such contingent properties, the effects of causes other than themselves, would involve a contradiction.

So, interactions can only take place between the partial forms of a single substance. Accepting the existence of interactions, and rejecting the Leibnizian alternative of a system of self-determining, non-interacting substances, monads, Spinoza concludes that there can be only one substance, all of whose attributes are derived from its essential nature and are therefore necessary and not contingent. This substance is thus 'causa sui'; cause of itself, and is identified with the universe as a whole; the unique and all-inclusive totality which Spinoza calls God or Nature.

On Spinoza's account, nothing within Nature is contingent and nothing is outside Nature. The postulation of God as a first and, therefore, transient cause, with all the difficulties attendant upon that doctrine, is thus rejected. God or Nature is both Creator and Creation and the immanent, 'eternal' cause of all things. It is self-creating and self-created, possesses infinite attributes and is free in the sense that it acts merely according to the necessary laws of its own nature. Nature is a unity of substance, an infinite whole, which generates its own partial forms from itself. Thus, every particular thing which exists is conceived as a 'modification' or particular differentiation of the unique all-inclusive substance.

To explain the existence and activity of any 'thing' (modus or partial form of substance) we must be able to deduce its existence and activity from the essential attributes and modes of Nature as a whole. All partial forms fall within a single causal system ultimately intelligible to human reason within a single deductive system which necessarily reflects the whole order of Nature.

Substance is revealed to us solely under the two infinite and eternal attributes by which we conceive it: thought and extension. The 'modes' or states of substance can be graded in an order of logical dependence beginning with the immediate, infinite and eternal modes (necessary and universal features of the universe immediately deducible from the infinite attributes) and descending to the finite modes (limited and transient differentiations of substance). These finite modes can only be understood, and their essences deduced, as effects of the infinite and eternal modes.

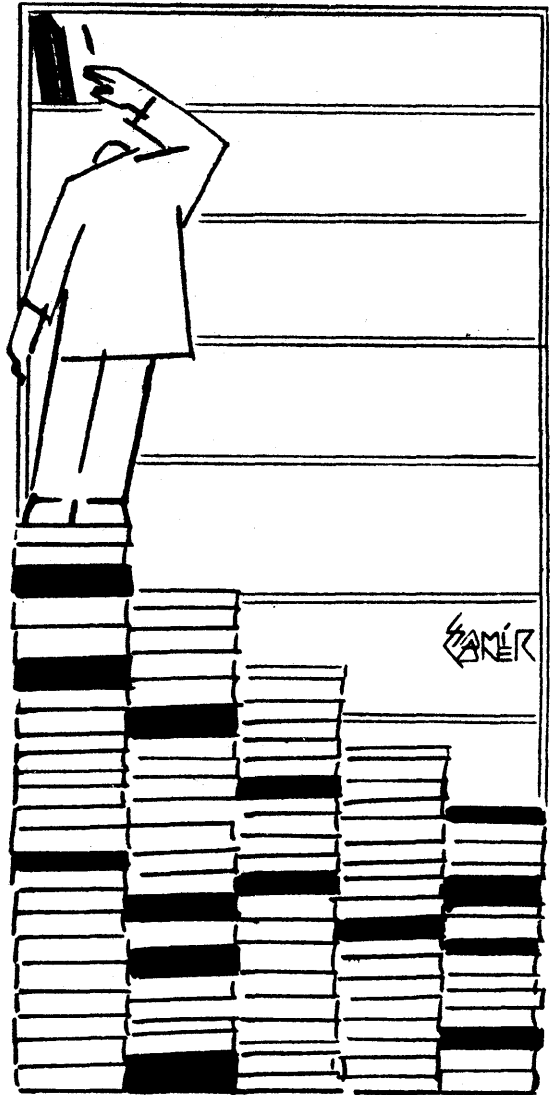
The infinite and eternal mode under the attribute of extension is called 'motion-and-rest', which can perhaps be translated into the more familiar term 'energy'. Everything within the extended or spatial world is constituted of particular proportions of motion-and-rest. Whilst the proportions in the system as a whole remain constant, since there can be no external cause to explain any overall change, within the subordinate parts of the system the proportions of motion-and-rest are constantly changing as interactions take place. In more modern terms, Spinoza seems, in effect, to be saying that the extended world is to be conceived as a self-contained and all-inclusive system of interactions in which the total amount of energy is constant, and that the changing configurations of extended bodies can be adequately represented as transmissions or exchanges of energy within the system.

What we normally single out as particular physical bodies or things owe their identity and their distinguishing characteristics to the particular proportion of motion-and-rest among the ultimate or elementary particles, 'corpora simplicissima' of which they are composed. So, particular things or physical bodies can be analysed into configurations of ultimate particles, the qualitative exchanges of which produce the changes in quality of the gross composite bodies.

All physical bodies including the human body are complex bodies, though of differing orders of complexity. They

may not be first order configurations of elementary particles but configurations of configurations and so on up to any order of complexity. A physical body will retain its identity no matter how much the distribution of motion-and-rest between different parts of the configuration changes, so long as the total amount in the configuration remains roughly constant. Thus, any more or less stable configuration, although internally complex, may be regarded as a single individual, internal changes in the distribution of its motion-and-rest accounting for changes in its qualities.

However, particular things or bodies can be no more than finite modes. They are sub-systems within the total system and are bounded by other objects within the system. They are not eternal, but come into being and pass away as the distribution of motion-and-rest within the universe as a whole changes. Any finite thing within Nature is constantly being effected by other finite causes in its environment. The history of any particular thing or finite mode is the history of its constant interaction with its environment and the more complex a particular mode the greater the variety of ways in which it can affect and be affected by its environment.



Nevertheless, each particular thing exhibits a characteristic tendency to cohesion and the preservation of its identity - a striving, 'conatus' to persist in its own being. This 'conatus' constitutes the only sense in which particular things, which are not substances, can be said to have 'essences'. Particular things are constantly undergoing

changes of state as the effects of causes other than themselves, but it is only in so far as they are themselves originating causes that they can be said to have determinate natures of their own. The character and individuality of a particular thing depends on this, necessarily limited (no dependent mode can be an originating cause entirely) power of self-maintenance.

A notion of 'conatus' or something similar has often been demanded by biologists as necessary to the understanding of living systems. No such notion was included in the Cartesian 'mechanistic' cosmology, but in Spinoza's system all bodies or objects from the simplest mechanical systems to the most complex organic and living systems exhibit conatus. Spinoza can allow that in higher order systems, which consist of configurations within configurations through many levels, the relative tendency to self-maintenance, in spite of internal changes, is more noticeable precisely because of the greater possible variety of internal changes. Thus, the distinctions between living and non-living and between conscious and non-conscious things are represented as differences of degree of structural complexity.

More must be said of Spinoza's conceptualisation of the relationship between thought and extension in examining further the representational aspects of Althusser's notion of structural causality. However, it will perhaps first be useful to consider Althusser's notion of a structured totality in relation to Spinoza's system.

The Notion of a Structured Totality in Althusser

Althusser is, then, correct in taking from Spinoza a conception of a complexly structured totality as opposed to a totality which is expressive of a single internal principle or idea. Complete knowledge of the cause of anything in nature ultimately involves a complete knowledge of the deductive system which maps the whole order of Nature, but this whole is a complex system of varyingly complex structures and substructures which are the modes or states of substance interacting in energy exchanges in which they are formed, changed and destroyed.

In view of the fundamental monism of the metaphysics, there would appear to be no problem in accounting for causal interactions between the elements and levels of the social formation, if these could be construed as yet more complexly structured modes of the substance than the physical bodies we normally identify as objects. However, the ideological cannot simply be construed as such a level. Complications arise in view of the relationship between thought and extension, as will be discussed below.

For the moment, we must examine the notion of the structured totality further. Structural causality, for Althusser, refers to the presence of a structure in its effects. He argues that this is essential to avoid the classical conception of the economic object and thus to avoid seeing the Marxist conception of the economic object as determined 'from outside' by a non-economic structure. He contends that:

... the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, in short, that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.

(Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 189)

He had previously argued, à propos the notion of 'synchrony', that the synchrony concerns the knowledge of the complex articulation that makes the whole a whole:

The synchronic is then nothing but the conception of the specific relations that exist between the different elements and the different structures of the structure of the whole, it is the knowledge of the relations of dependence and

articulation which make it an organic whole; a system. The synchronic is eternity in Spinoza's sense, or the adequate knowledge of a complex object by the adequate knowledge of its complexity.

(Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 107)

It seems, then, that Althusser is admitting no external causes to be effective in relation to the social totality, which is presumably co-extensive with the capitalist social formation, as the object of knowledge of Capital is the set of concepts which would constitute an adequate knowledge of its complexity. This social totality is to be comprehended in terms of its internal relations only, presumably deduced as dependent modes in relation to the dominant/determining in the last instance/infinite and eternal mode - the economic. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Althusser is assimilating the social totality to Spinoza's God or Nature as a whole, as this is the only structure in Spinoza's system which is 'causa sui' and the only structure which can be (ultimately) adequately known, in terms of its own internal complexity, without reference to anything other than itself. Anything less than the unique self-creating substance is subject to external causes and equally subject to deformation and change.

If Althusser does intend the social formation to be thus taken as a self-sustaining totality in the Spinozistic sense, an 'eternity' to which no temporal predicates are applicable and which can be known entirely in terms of its own complexity, then, as only internal structures and substructures would be subject to change, he does appear to be open to the criticisms of McLennan et al and Hindess and Hirst. Within such a framework it would indeed be difficult to envisage a theory of transition, as the very notion of transition contradicts that of the social formation so conceived.

It seems then that, as Althusser presumably does not intend to espouse a doctrine of plurality more akin to that of Leibniz than that of Descartes, he is guilty of an 'error' in Spinoza's sense of that term, in taking the part for the whole. Spinoza's monism perhaps leads more directly to the classical dialectical materialism of Engels' Dialectics of Nature in which the whole universe comprises the totality of interacting elements and structures.

Thought, Extension and Reality

Before returning, in conclusion, to the problem of the representational character of the effects of the 'absent cause', it will be useful first to compare Althusser's conception of the relationship between 'thought' and 'reality' with Spinoza's view of that between 'thought' and 'extension'.

It has already been noted that Spinoza's metaphysics is a thoroughgoing monism. He thus challenges the division of reality into thought and extension, irreducible one to the other but causally related. In his system, thought and extension are still irreducible but, as attributes under which a single substance is conceived, the connection between them is more intimate than any causal connection.

Thought, like extension, is a universal attribute of substance. Beings which we know as thinking beings, and in particular human beings, are distinguished from other modes of substance merely in terms of the complexity of their configurations. In a sense, thinking can be said to be a property of structure, the way of functioning of a thinking body due to its structural configuration. The structure is the condition of existence of the thinking activity, but thinking is the mode of activity, the functioning of the structure so, as functioning cannot be reduced to structure, thinking cannot be reduced, as it is in a mechanistic materialism, to some underlying physical process of which it is a mere epiphenomenon.

Neither can the relationship between the idea which is the human mind and the human body which constitutes its ideatum be construed as a causal relationship. Bodily

changes do not cause mental changes: they are mental changes and vice-versa. There is one connection of causes of natural events which is conceived under the two attributes. Thus: 'The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (Spinoza, 1955, *Ethics*, Part 2, Prop. 7). However, my mind as the idea of my body reflects the order of causes, not in Nature as a whole but, in one particular fragment of Nature. The particular finite mode of extension which is my body interacts, or exchanges energy, with its environment and every such interaction is reflected in an idea. Changes of state, which are the effects of the impinging of external bodies (configurations of substance) on the particular finite mode which is my body, are reflected in ideas which are the ideas of imagination or of 'experientia vaga' which is the lowest level of human knowledge. This knowledge is passive in the sense that the idea is produced by external causes acting on my body and not by a sequence of previous ideas in my mind.

'Experientia vaga' roughly corresponds to sense perception. In perception a modification of my body occurs which is caused by the interaction between the state of my body and the perceived object. This modification is reflected in an idea. Thus, the idea so produced represents neither the true nature and essence of my body nor the true nature of the external object. It simply represents a particular modification of extension without reflecting in itself the true causes of this modification.

Such ideas or perceptual judgements are not in themselves false, if considered one by one; each has its ideatum. However, as they simply reflect successive modifications of my body in its interaction with other bodies, they are logically unrelated to each other. In Spinoza, to say of an idea that it is true or adequate is to state its relation with other ideas in the system of ideas which ultimately constitutes God's thinking or the system of ideas as a whole, which reflects extension as a whole.

When an idea of the imagination or a perceptual judgement is rejected as false, this implies that it does not fit into a system or cohere with other ideas or judgements, i.e., it is false in relation to a more coherent system of ideas which more adequately represents the order of things. An idea may be adequate at one level, say that of common sense, but inadequate in a larger context such as that of a particular science which in turn can only be adequate up to a point.

The production of more adequate knowledge, therefore, involves a logical analysis of the relationship between ideas and the striving for a coherent deductive system of interconnected ideas which reflects the interconnections of the modes of extension and thus, adequately representing the order of causes in Nature as a whole, is equivalent to the thinking of God or Nature itself. Error, then, is not an absolute but consists in attributing too great a generality to a partial form or limited truth.

Althusser argues that empiricism and Hegelian idealism both reduce the 'object of knowledge' to the 'real object'. The fail to distinguish the real object existing outside the subject and independent of the process of producing knowledge from the subject that produces it. Marx, on the other hand, in common with Spinoza, distinguishes between the real object and the object of knowledge. Althusser refers to Spinoza's example in distinguishing the idea of a circle from its ideatum the circle itself. He argues that for Spinoza the idea of a circle is the object of knowledge whereas the circle is the real object. The process of the production of knowledge works on the object of knowledge and takes place entirely within thought.

However, Althusser contends that the trap of idealism is avoided as the thought in question

... is not a faculty of a transcendental subject or absolute consciousness confronted by the real world as matter; nor is thought a faculty of a psychological subject, although human individuals are its agents. This thought is the historically constituted system of an apparatus of thought, founded on and articulated to natural and social

reality.

(Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 41)

This apparatus of thought is constituted by a structure which combines its raw material (the object on which it labours), its means of production (theory, method and technique) and the historical relations in which it produces. It is thus a determinate reality which defines the roles and functions of the thought of particular thinking subjects who 'can only "think" the problems already actually or potentially posed' (Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 42). In producing knowledge, thought as it were reworks its previous productions which constitute its raw material which is, therefore, an historically given:

... an ever-already complex raw material which combines together in a particular 'Verbindung' sensuous, technical and ideological elements, ...

(Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 43)

Althusser denies that in the production of knowledge the logical order of the deduction of the categories or concepts, in terms of which the contemporary 'society effect' is to be thought, follows the order in which they have been historically determinant. No 'genetic' argument is resorted to as a criterion of adequacy of a system of concepts that constitutes knowledge. This is given by their interrelationships in an articulated system, a 'thought-totality' and the order of the development of the forms or categories is given by their systematic dependence in terms of the production of the 'discourse of the proof'.

Althusser, then, follows Spinoza in arguing that recourse to sense perception is no criterion of the truth or adequacy of a system of concepts. This is given in terms of their coherence as a system which can only be established in thought by logical analysis. A true system or theory will, of course, work in respect of our observations and experiments, but no amount of observation and experiment can confirm a system's adequacy. Thus Althusser states: 'It has been possible to apply Marx's theory with success because it is "true"; it is not true because it has been applied with success' (Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 59).

However, Althusser appears crucially to misinterpret Spinoza on precisely the point which establishes the connection between thought and extension. In Spinoza, each idea is intimately connected with its counterpart in extension; its ideatum. They cannot fall apart. Greater adequacy is achieved as ideas are selected, in the process of thinking, in terms of their relationships with other ideas to produce a more coherent system, and thinking thus frees us from isolated 'experientia vaga'. So, we can begin to build increasingly coherent systems of concepts. However, as thought and extension are attributes of the one substance, only one totally coherent deductive system of concepts is possible and this necessarily reflects adequately the interconnected system of extended modes and thus represents the order of causes in Nature as a whole.

Althusser, on the other hand, identifies 'ideatum' with 'reality'. He appears to miss the point of the 'two attributes' doctrine and re-introduces a thought reality dualism and the question of their possible causal interaction. In order to avoid the traps of 'idealism' and 'subjectivism' he argues that 'reality' exists independently of thought. He consequently disconnects the order of 'thought' from that of 'reality'. In parting company with Spinoza's rigorous monism, he loses the guarantee that one and only one coherent system of concepts is possible and that it will fit 'reality'.

In Conclusion

We must finally return to the question of representation in relation to the notion of structural causality and it can now be seen that the different terms Althusser uses to denote his concept of causality reveal ambiguities and problems that result from an oscillation between a monistic Spinozistic metaphysics and the dualistic metaphysics that underlies the Freudian problematic.

On the one hand, Althusser espouses Spinoza's notion of truth as adequacy and with it that of error as the attribution of too great a generality to a partial form or limited truth. As has been seen this theory of truth, though somewhat misinterpreted by Althusser, demands that thought and extension be conceived as two attributes of one substance. On this view, ideology should be construed as partial truth, i.e., true at a particular level, in that it represents real relations and conditions, but inadequate as a systematic understanding of those relations and conditions in terms of their real causes and effects.

Althusser seems to be viewing ideology in this way when he refers to it as a knowledge effect:

This expression knowledge effect constitutes a generic object which includes at least two sub-objects: the ideological knowledge effect and the scientific knowledge effect. The ideological knowledge effect is distinguished by its properties (it is an effect of recognition - mis-recognition in a mirror connection) from the scientific knowledge effect: ...

(Althusser and Balibar, 1977, p. 67)

As such, ideology belongs to the order of thought and cannot, to be consistent with the requirements of the theory of truth, be ascribed an independent existence as a causally effective instance in the social totality.

On the other hand, much of Althusser's work is concerned precisely to establish the independent (relatively autonomous) existence of ideology as a system of representations which have a causal effectivity. In taking 'Dar-

stellung' and 'metonymic causality' as synonymous with 'structural causality', Althusser emphasises the representational character of the relationships in question as well as their internality. At the same time, he asserts their causal nature in relation to a structure composed of levels articulated in dominance. He thus encounters the problems of mixing the discourse of meaning and energy relationships which have already been noted and which relate to a persistent dualism of thought and 'reality' that requires their interaction to be thought in causal terms.

It would seem, then, that there remain significant ontological and epistemological problems in Althusser's treatment of the crucially important question of causality.

If he were to take a more consistently Spinozistic line, then relationships of representation would need to be seen as having a more intimate nature than that of causality. A difficulty would thus arise à propos the effectivity of the system of representations which constitutes ideology. On the other hand, maintaining commitment to the causal effectivity of representations involves the problems of the dualistic metaphysics.

Althusser's sensitivity to the problems presented by dualism is perhaps indicated by his explicit articulation of a 'materialist' theory of ideology in his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'. Whilst beyond the scope of this discussion, it would be interesting to explore the extent to which, in locating ideology in material practices and in developing a theory of subjectivity which sites the effectivity of ideology in the conscious subject, a possible solution to some of the problems posed here is indicated.

* Stresses in all quotations are from the original.

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