The Lonely Hour of the Last Instance

LOUIS PIERRE ALTHUSSER, 1918–1990

Against what common sense, the common sense of financiers and lawyers, tell us, there are many writings that blow away, but a few words that remain. No doubt because they have been inscribed in life and history.

Louis Althusser on Jean Hyppolite, 1968

The death of Louis Althusser—Communist, Marxist, philosopher—scarcely constitutes a historical fact by his own exacting criteria of historicity. With it, however, one of the most extraordinary chapters in modern intellectual history has finally come to a close.

Of the principal representatives of the two major traditions with which he is associated—French Structuralism and Western Marxism—Althusser is survived only by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jürgen Habermas, respectively, as biographical accident supervenes tocompound the philosophico-political verdicts of the postmodernist ’80s on the marxist ’60s.

To date, with the exception of Ted Benton’s admirable notice in the Independent (27/10/90), obituaries on both sides of the Channel have been characterised by a pervasive, if predictable, anti-Marxism. Evident sympathy for the man, fond memories of the teacher, deep respect for the maitre, have been accompanied—whether in the Guardian, Le Monde or Liberation—by the conviction (stated or implied) that Althusser’s ultimate significance resides in his having demonstrated, not only that it isn’t ‘simple to be a Marxist in philosophy’, but that it is quite impossible. Indeed, doubtless pour décourager les autres, some have not hesitated to identify the death of Hélène Althusser at her husband’s hands as the inevitable dénouement of the very endeavour. Faits divers, fait politique... As if all that remained was the wreckage of a career tragically terminated by an indivisible act of destruction and self-destruction.

Before accounts can be settled, they must be accurately drafted. And we have yet to settle our accounts with Althusser. Buried in silence for the last decade of his life, the philosopher who wistfully observed of himself that he was famous solely for being notorious—by any just reckoning, one of the most important Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century—deserves better on the occasion of his passing.

The full, desperate story of the life and deaths of Louis Althusser awaits its historian; one day it will have to be told. For, whilst it may not be allowed to function—surreptitiously or blatantly, with regret of schadenfreude—as a substitute for an adequate intellectual appreciation, nor should it be evaded by anyone seeking to do elementary justice to him. In truth, it only serves to render his achievement the more remarkable.

The bare outlines of what he once referred to as ‘autoheterobiographical circumstances’ are clear enough. Born in Birmandreis, Algeria, in October 1918, Althusser’s youth was marked by the overwhelming influence of traditional Roman Catholicism—first in the shape of a pious mother, Lucienne, and then in the strongly anti-Popular Front milieu of the Lycée du Parc, Lyons, where from 1936 to 1939 he was taught in the preparatory class for the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) by Jean Guilton, Jean Lacroix and Joseph Hours (in common with contemporaries there, Althusser belonged to the Jeunesse etudiante chrétienne). Trained in the kind of spiritualist philosophy he was subsequently to disdain, Althusser came sixth in the highly competitive examination for the ENS in July 1939—only to be called up for military service that September. Captured the following summer, he spent close on five years as a prisoner of war in Schleswig Holstein, years attended by a loss of faith and the onset of a long history of depressive illness.

Upon his release Althusser resumed his formal education, coming first in the extremely demanding agrégation in philosophy in 1948, with a thesis (supervised by Gaston Bachelard) on The Notion of Content in Hegel’s Philosophy. In November 1948 he was appointed caiaman (teacher responsible for preparing students for the agrégation) at the ENS and remained there for the
rest of his active life, being promoted to Secretary of the École in 1962. The same month he joined the French Communist Party, rallied from quasi-heretical, left-Catholic circles by the bitter class struggles of the Cold War conjuncture, the promptings of his philosophical intimates (in particular Jacques Martin – the ‘prince of intelligence’, in Merleau-Ponty’s words – to whom For Marx is dedicated), and the example of Hélène Legotien (alias Rytman) – Resistance heroine, Communist dissident, later a distinguished sociologist – whom he met in the winter of 1945–46. Although Althusser maintained contact with various Catholic circles throughout his life, the die was now cast; he would never resign his party card, admission ticket to the working-class movement, throughout his life, the die was now cast; he would never resign his party card, admission ticket to the working-class movement, which is ‘our only hope and our destiny’. First hospitalized in 1946, and eventually diagnosed as a manic-depressive subject to fits of profound melancholy, Althusser suffered terribly, tenaciously waging, but inexorably losing, that ‘war without memoirs or memorials’ he evoked, in plangent tonalities, in ‘Freud and Lacan’ (1964). When, in November 1980, defeat came, provoked in part by the political setbacks of the late ’70s, the pitiless form it took – the ‘murder’ of his companion of some thirty-five years – condemned him to oblivion thereafter: a living death, divided between a succession of clinics and the obscenity of the twentieth arrondissement of Paris, nourished only by the devotion of a few friends and diminishing hopes of one day regaining health and resuming work.

That day never dawned for this doux maître à la science pure et dure, who nevertheless persevered in existence with a fortitude one might be tempted to call singular, were it not common to all those for whom Hell is not other people, but something infinitely more insidious and ineluctable: their own subjectivity.

This, then, was the personal backdrop to the public career of a thinker who only emerged from the seclusion of the rue l’Ulm into the celebrity of the Quartier Latin after the Fourth Republic had succumbed to De Gaulle’s coup d’ état and as the PCF sought to rechart its course amidst the treacherous currents of de-Stalinization and the consequent Sino-Soviet split. Against the current of the prevalent Marxist humanism, predominantly moral in cast and now being adopted in homeopathic doses by the West European Communist Parties for official purposes, Althusser essayed a reconstruction of ‘historical and dialectical materialism’ – of Marxist science and Marxist philosophy – conducive to a ‘left-wing critique of Stalinism ... that would ... help put some substance back into the revolutionary project here in the West’. Unveiled in 1965 in the two books for which he is renowned – the characteristically laconically entitled For Marx and Reading Capital – Althusser’s Marxism represented an audacious combination of political radicalism, advertising Leninist affiliations and intimating Maoist sympathies, and philosophical modernism, conjugating Bachelardian conventionalist epistemology and Lacanian structuralist psychoanalysis with the ‘materialist conception of history’.

Althusser was later to identify Spinoza – and not Saussure – as the philosopher-general who had inspired the novel accents and distinctive theses of his intervention in Marxism. At the time, however, its austere anti-empiricism, its relentless hostility to historicism, and its astringent theoretical anti-humanism partially aligned it with the contemporaneous enterprises of Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, Barthes and Foucault, and it was rapidly assimilated to the ascendant structuralism.

High Althusserianism essentially encompassed three converging initiatives. First, it ventured a re-reading of the Marxist canon, which revolved around the postulate of an ‘epistemological break’ between the ideological works of the Young Marx and the scientific discourse of the mature Marx, restoring Capital to pride of place after its temporary demolition by the Paris Manuscripts. Secondly, it offered an alternative philosophy to ‘Diamat’ positivism and Western-Marxist anti-naturalism – the ‘Theory of theoretical practice’, an epistemology which sought to reconcile conventionalist disclosure of the historical, social and theoretical character of science with realist insistence on the existence of ‘real objects’ independent of, and irreducible to, theory. Thirdly, it elaborated a non-economic ‘science of the history of social formations’, comprising four main components: (1) an anti-Hegelian recasting of the dialectic, which excised abstract fatalism from and inscribed the ‘necessity of contingency’ in its structures, via the concepts of ‘contradiction and overdetermination’; (2) a reconceptualization of the structure of social formations that credited their constitutive complexity by displacing the base/superstructure model in favour of a schedule of ‘relatively autonomous’ instances – economic, political, ideological – governed by a structural causality of ‘determination in the last instance’; (3) an anti-teleological theory of modes of production as articulated combinations of relations and forces of production, which eschewed evolutionism in the theorization of historical transition; (4) finally – and perhaps most controversially – a re-theorization of ideology, not as ‘false consciousness’, but as ‘necessary illusion’ – people’s imaginary relations to their real conditions of existence, which might be transformed, but which would not be dissipated, under communism.

The effect of Althusser’s theoretical de-Stalinization, in and beyond France, was nothing short of electric. His renewal of Marxism represented a liberation for a younger generation, spared the long Stalinist night of theory for whose duration Communist intellectuals had been reduced to ideological officiators of the party ‘line’, but still invariably intimidated into ‘official philosophy’ by insinuations of original social sin. This, crucially, was the significance of the scandalous Althusserian re-vindication of the autonomy of theory: not the self-elevation of a scientific elite which his detractors, wilfully or carelessly, construed it as, neglecting his own deeply-felt (and lived) contextual allusion to those ‘whose labour, sufferings and struggles ... nourish and sustain our whole present and future, all our arguments for life and hope’; but the defence, against the intrusions (and potential
occupied most of the second phase of Althusser's career, but not to the exclusion of a last seminal contribution to substantive social theory: the celebrated extract from one of many abortive projects in this period, published as 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970), which registered the impact of the Cultural Revolution in China and May '68 in France, and proved to be his single most influential text. Thereafter, in a third phase from 1976 onwards, Althusser simultaneously displayed his political credentials, culminating in his philippic against the leadership of the PCF following its sabotage of the Unino of the Left in 1978 (What Must Change in the Party), and set about a self-destruction of Althusserianism (see especially Marxism Today, 1978) as ruthlessly as anything undertaken by his critics. Various explanations might be advanced for this sombre development. No doubt some overdetermination of the philosophico-political by the psychological is the most plausible, as unfulfilled political hopes aggravated an already deepening melancholia. 'The future lasts a long time,' Althusser had incessantly cautioned those who lived politics in the mode of 'subjective urgency'. By the turn of the decade there was little reason to suppose that it would witness les lendemains qui chantent. Twenty-five years on, what endures of a thought that guarantees its author an exceptional position in contemporary intellectual history, precariously poised between a Marxist tradition which he radically criticized and reconstructed for the sake of the revolutionary cause, and a 'post-Marxism' which has disavowed him, along with its erstwhile philosophical conscience, in these new times? What persists of the 'Althusserian revolution', which for a decade showed scant respect for national borders or disciplinary boundaries, sponsored a mass of research (much of it of lasting value), and defined the terms of theoretical debate on the Left? If many of his writings have blown away, are there a few words that remain, albeit screened by a convenient amnesia?

There is, first and foremost, the fact that Althusser's re-reading of the classics reconnected Marxism with vital, non-Marxist currents of thought (e.g. psychoanalysis and linguistics), restoring their brutally interrupted communication and facilitating a series of new departures (especially in the theory of ideology and cultural criticism). Secondly, his philosophy for science at once registered the autonomy of the natural and social sciences, and vindicated the possibility of science as the (interminable) production of rectifiable, objective knowledge of its object. Thirdly, the Althusserian critique of the Hegelian dialectic (and its Marxist avatars) as intrinsically teleological released Marxism from a series of false promissory notes (the inevitability of socialism as a function of linear economic progression; the proletariat as the 'universal class' in a secularized theodicy of (de)alienation; the historical messianism of an 'end of ideology'). Finally, the systematic reconstruction of historical materialism reclaimed it as an open scientific research programme, taking deadly aim at a crippling economic determinism and its corollary, economic reductionism, as it pertained to political practice and cultural production alike. In what is arguably the quintessential Althusserian essay, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (1962), a generation found its licence and its charter: in History ... the superstructures ... 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 strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes.

'Theoretical practice'; 'epistemological break'; 'symptomatic reading'; 'overdetermination'; 'determination in the last instance'; 'relative autonomy'; 'imaginary relations'; 'ideological state apparatuses'; 'class struggle in theory'; a few words — concepts and categories — that remain, inscribed in life and history (and 'better fewer but better', as someone once said). For they opened up new horizons within the 'continent of history', restored the intellectual reputation of Marxism, made it, if not simple, then that much easier to be a Marxist — in philosophy, cultural studies, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, political theory, etc. — than it would otherwise have been. His immediate students were not the only ones for whom Althusser provided either a theoretical formation or a formation for theory. Others, who never met him, recognize the immense debt they owe him and could make Balibar's acknowledgement their own: 'I learnt everything, if not from Althusser, then thanks to him.'

That such a legacy should have been forged amidst such adversity — almost on borrowed or stolen time — can only enhance (and in no way qualify) our admiration for Louis Althusser. In the last instance, if not before, we may be grateful to him.

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