

Louis Althusser: Beyond and Within Reductionism

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I. Introduction

Althusser is one of the most discussed thinkers in British and American literary criticism in terms of his concept of subjectivity. Interestingly, his concept of subjectivity unfolds itself along with his interpretations of Marxism. As Althusser notes in *For Marx*, the central concern of Althusserian philosophical project is "the investigation of Marx's philosophical thought" (For Marx 21). He says about the aim of his theoretical investigations as follows: "what is Marxist philosophy? Has it any theoretical right to existence? And if it does exist in principle, how can its specificity be defined?"(For Marx 31). These questions, first of all, start from his need for "a more rigorous and richer definition of Marxist philosophy"(For Marx 77) because he felt that the already established interpretations of Marxism, for example, historicist, or humanist interpretation cannot comprehend the realities his contemporary society was confronted with. In this sense, He elaborates and reinterprets the Marxist philosophy, specifically, historical materialism and dialectical materialism, and makes new epistemological and historical concepts in his

works. Along with these concepts, he challenges those tendencies, for example, humanism, historicism, Hegelianism, and economism, which have haunted western Marxism since Lukacs's early works. He calls all those tendencies reductionism¹⁾, and defines his works as an intervention against these reductionism within Marxism.

Therefore, if we examine the process of his challenging what he called reductionism, we can approach his most important philosophical concepts, because his criticism of reductionism is based upon a series of his new epistemological and historical concepts, particularly, concepts related to his theories of ideology and subject. In this respect, this essay will investigate his criticism about reductionist interpretations of Marxism to illustrate his concept of subjectivity and reductionism. This discussion will illuminate his various epistemological and historical concepts: knowledge; practice; overdetermination; science; structural causality; subject and ideology. Then, do his theoretical and philosophical concepts completely get out of reductionism? This essay will also interrogate this problem around his several epistemological and historical concepts.

II. Beyond Reductionism: His Criticism of Established Interpretations of Marxism

Among these so-called reductionism, the first target of his criticism is empiricism because, according to Althusser, it is the essential basis of another reductionist interpretation of Marxism, i.e., historicism and humanism. His criticism of empiricism unfolds around his concept of knowledge. According to him, what is most problematic in empiricism is that it regards the product of theoretical practice, i.e., knowledge, as part of the reality. Thus, in empiricism, in order to acquire a knowledge of reality, the subject must perform an operation of abstraction of the essential on the reality through the experience of the subject. He insists

1) According to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, reductionism is “the attempt to exhaust the meaning of theoretical terms and statements by means of either explicit definitions or reduction definitions, or by the closely similar definitions” (227). In this sense it is “the replacement of the formal theoretical system with another system containing no theoretical terms and having no theoretical terms and having the same empirical content as the theory” (227).

that empiricism equates knowledge with one part of the real object. According to Althusser, Hegelian idealism is the most conspicuous example of empiricism in that it confuses thought and the real. Hegelianism is more problematical because it does so "by reducing the real to thought, by conceiving the real as the result of thought" (*For Marx* 188). Hegel conceives every social totality as having a unique internal spiritual principle to which all the diverse realities can be reduced. For Hegel, each of the diverse realities is only an expression of that spiritual principle. So, the complex of diverse phenomena of reality is reducible to a single and simple essence.

Althusser's criticism of empiricism (Hegelianism) is based upon a different concept of knowledge from that of empiricism (Hegelianism). For Althusser, thought and reality are all in the realm of thought itself, so they all become raw material in the production of knowledge. The concrete also takes place "entirely in thought", i.e., within what empiricism regards as abstraction. Thus, thought "never, as empiricism desperately demands it should, confronts a pure object which is ... identical to the real object" (*Reading Capital* 42-3). In this sense he asserts that empiricism "confuses thought with the real by reducing thought about the real to the real itself" (*Reading Capital* 87). For Althusser, Hegelianism is just one variant "borrowed from the most vulgar empiricism" because it starts from the same false assumption as empiricism.

His concept of three kinds of "Generalities" illuminate this stance more clearly. According to him, Generalities I is the term which designates the raw material of theoretical practices. For him, it is always composed of the concepts and abstraction. In other words, it is never concrete reality, but always an abstraction of one sort or another. It is, he asserts, transformed by the application of means of theoretical production, i.e., Generalities II, into a product, Generalities III. This Generalities III which is the product of theoretical practice is knowledge. In a word, every object of knowledge and the product of knowledge take place only in thought, irrespective of the real object itself²⁾. "The object of knowledge

2) For Althusser, although the object of knowledge in the strict sense is not the real object, the object

is," he says, "in itself absolutely distinct and different from the real object . . . the idea of the circle, which is the object of knowledge must not be confused with the circle, which is the real object" (*Reading Capital* 40).

Therefore, ideology, which, according to him, is one of knowledge, is "not a distorted representation of reality" (*Lenin and Philosophy* 154). He insists that this concept of "ideology as a misrepresentation of the real world" involves theoretical implications similar to that of empiricism: first, ideology is knowledge derived from the reality; second, that knowledge is derived from a subject's experience of an object (the reality) which is exterior to it. From this viewpoint, reality becomes the primary determination of ideology. It is the origin of ideology because it creates the position from which the experience is generated.

For Althusser, ideology is not immediately related to the reality. What ideology represents is men's "imaginary" relation to their conditions of existence (the reality)³). Thus, the imaginary modality of living is necessary because men's conditions of existence (the reality) can never be given to them through their experience of the reality as indicated in his concept of knowledge. The imaginary becomes the form in which men "live" their relations both to their conditions of existence and to their existences as subjects.

Then, what is the imaginary? For Althusser, the imaginary lies in the idea that man lives his relation to his conditions of existence as if he were a man⁴). It means that men live in the supposition that they are constitutive. In other words, Although men don't constitute their social relations, and they are not the origin of their social relations (the concept of "social relations" will be illuminated in the discussion of the social totality later), they live them "as if" they constituted themselves in them. Certainly, as indicated before, the "as if" is wholly in the thought. The imaginary is not a reflection of the conditions of existence of men. The

which is known finally, via the object of knowledge, is the real object, "but only in the last instance". For more details, see Althusser's *Reading Capital* 155-8.

3) The word "imaginary" is a metaphor that he borrowed from Lacan. In this article I am not going to interrogate the source of the borrowing but rather into what Althusser makes of it. For more details, see "Freud and Lacan" in *Lenin and Philosophy*.

4) For more details, see Hirst's *On Law and Ideology* 33-35.

imaginary does not represent anything other than what it is, and it cannot be false since it is not an idea or conception of the reality.

It is at this point that his concepts of practice and instance (level) are important because they can more clearly illuminate the previous concepts, for instance, knowledge, reality, and the imaginary. Althusser defines practice as follows:

By practice, in general I shall mean any process of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of "production"). In any practice thus conceived, the determinant moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the labour of transformation itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means" (For Marx, 166-7).

According to his definition, politics and ideology as well as economic production can all be regarded as forms of practice. They all entail a transformation of a given raw material or object into a specific product by means of a labour process. Especially he asserts that there are three main practices: economic practice (transformation of nature within social relations); political practice (the struggle to transform social relations themselves); and ideological practice⁵).

Further, he claims that each of three practices combines a set of formally similar elements and becomes the structure of a production, i.e., instance (level). Instance (level) means the site or the way in which each practice is articulated into the social totality. The social totality is composed of these instances. Every instance of the social whole, as the site of a distinct practice, is combined in a specific social relations, being distinct from another instances. In this sense, ideas are real and not "ideal" because they are always inscribed in social practice and are expressed in one distinct practice. Likewise, the object of knowledge can be distinguished from the real object because each is one distinct instance:

5) According to Glucksmann, however, they all share "homogeneous form." See Glucksmann's "A Ventriloquist Structuralism" 73-4.

It is perfectly legitimate to say that the production of knowledge which is peculiar to theoretical practice constitutes a process that takes place entirely in thought, just as we can say, *mutatis mutandis*, that the process of economic production takes place entirely in the economy, even though it implies, and precisely in the specific determinations of its structure, necessary relations with nature and the other structures (legal-political and ideological) which, taken together, constitute the global structure of a social formation belonging to a determinate mode of production" (*Reading Capital* 42).

In this sense, ideologies are not simply reflections in some realm of "ideas" of social relations. Rather, they are part of social relations, that is, a distinct instance of the social totality. They are as real as the economy. This is what he means when he says that ideology is not ideal or spiritual.

It is in this context that Althusser criticizes historicism because it, as Geras points out, represents a sort of compendium of all mistaken notions we have seen (73–4). According to him, the basis of historicism is the empiricist reduction of the object of knowledge to the real object and it negates the differences between the practices⁶). It has, consequently, an Hegelian conception of the social totality, and regards historical time as a linear continuum susceptible to the essential section. Especially, as revealed in his discussion of Lukacs' philosophy, historicism tends to deprive theoretical practice of its specificity, to assimilate it to the other practices, ideological, political, and economic, and ultimately to dissolve them all in a single notion of practice in general, i.e., historical practice or praxis. Thus, for historicist, Marxism becomes "the direct product . . . of the activity and experience of the masses" (*Reading Capital* 134), of their political and ideological practice, or of the self-consciousness (class consciousness) of the proletariat⁷).

As Althusser point out, this interpretation of historicism is in essence closely related to its concept of subject because it results from the belief that the subject is "constitutive." The most conspicuous example of this concept of subject can be seen in Lukacs's concept of subject. In

6) Althusser deals with this issue in detail in "The Errors of Classical Economics" in *Reading Capital*, especially, 116–8.

7) Althusser discusses this issue in detail, dealing with Gramsci's achievement and limitations in "Marxism is not Historicism." in *Lenin and Philosophy*. Here Althusser attacks this aspect of historicism. For more details, see Ferretter 81–5.

Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*, it is subject that makes history, and this subject knows reality by experience because the subject makes reality⁸). Therefore, for Lukacs, there is a true consciousness, and the knowledge of the class subject is adequate to the social reality in that this class subject is in the process of constructing the social reality.

For Althusser, however, there is no such concept of subject: it is not subjects that make history. His concept of subject is evident in his concept of social totality. According to him, the social totality is conceived as a process without a subject. It means that social totality is not a process constituted by a subject, and that subject does not occupy a place in it as origin or author. The forms of subjectivity are conceived just as both effects of and supports of the process⁹). The relation of subject to the process, consequently, is determined by the process. This means that the subject can never simply recognize the conditions of existence. As discussed before, it is in this respect that the subject is related to the social totality through an "imaginary" relation. And the imaginary relation of subjects to their conditions of existence is the foundation of Althusser's concept of ideology. In short, the subjects are just "the definition and distribution of these places and functions" (*Reading Capital* 252). As Balibar notes, for Althusser, "individuals are merely the effects of the different practices" (*Reading Capital* 253): "each relatively autonomous practice . . . engenders forms of historical individuality which are peculiar to it" (251). In consequence, the human subject is definitely abolished, and there appears the "complete primacy of practices"¹⁰). It is in this context that he, claiming upon "theoretical anti-humanism," criticizes not only empiricism but also humanism.

As discussed before, in this social totality, each instance is as real as

8) For Lukacs, the subject who knows reality is actually the class subject which is dominant in the process of constructing history.

9) As Burnstein and Weedon notes, in the relation of subject with ideology, the individual is also assigned the role of bearer or agent of ideological practices, which he or she experiences as interpellated subjectivity, i.e., subjectivity imposed on the individual, through ideology, in which the individual is addressed as "always-already subject". This concept of non-constitutive subject is well shown in Althusser's "Ideology and the State." For more details, see *On Ideology* 200.

10) In this sense, according to Althusser, Cremonini deserves our attention because "his animals and men are distanced from the nature fixed for them by our "idea," i.e., by the ruling ideology. See "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract" in *Lenin and Philosophy* 210-2.

one another, and merely has different relative weight in determining the whole. It means that each instance has its own specific effectivity, and that each instance is determining as well as determined. This is evident in his concept of structural causality. For him, structural causality means the determination of its "regional structures" (ideology being one of them) by "the global structure" in dominance of the social formation. It describes the effect of a whole on its parts, "the effectivity of a structure on its elements"¹¹). Thus, every instance contributes in its own right to determining the nature of the overall configuration of which it is a part, as well as being determined by it in turn. Each instance has just different degree of specific effectivity and the social totality is a hierarchy of these instances¹²). In this sense, ideology is conceived as an instance which, together with the economic and political instances, comprises a social formation. Therefore, the imaginary has an autonomous relation to the social totality. Although the imaginary is overdetermined by the totality of conditions of existence, the imaginary in turn overdetermines that totality and becomes part of it. So, while one instance can displace another to assume the dominant role, such variations occur within a structure which is invariant to the extent that it always has a dominant element. This is what Althusser means by the concept of "structure in dominance." This thesis of being determined and determining is what he indicates by the concept of overdetermination.

In this respect he criticizes the economism. For him, there is not one simple economic contradiction which governs everything. According to economist claims, all other instances are reduced to epiphenomena of the economic instance or they are the phenomenal forms of a simple, essential contradiction, that is, the economic. However, Althusser insists

11) In this sense, the concept of the structural causality is distinct from the linear and expressive causality. It is because the structure is a cause present or immanent in its elements / effects, rather than exterior to them. It is also because it exists only in the totality of these elements / effects and their relations. As for this issue, see Althusser's "Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution" in *Reading Capital* 166-8.; also Jameson deals with it in detail. See his *The Political Unconscious* 35-43.

12) For the different instances of the social formation is not reducible to an original essence, the histories of these instances cannot be subsumed under a unique, all-embracing history which is the mere succession of those essences. Each relatively autonomous level of the whole has its own relatively autonomous history. Of course, their independence is the relative independence compatible with, and complementary to, their determination in the last instance by the economy, i.e., their relative dependence. For more details, see Geras 16. Also see Levine 46-7.

there is a multiplicity of contradictions existing in all levels of the social formation and constituting a kind of hierarchy of effectiveness within it. Determination is never simple but always complex and multiple, and this is what Althusser encapsulates in the concept of overdetermination¹³). Nonetheless it must be remembered that Althusser never negates each instance is determined "in the last instance" by the economic mode of production. The economy determines for the non-economic instances their respective degree of autonomy.

III. Within Reductionism: His Concepts of the ISAs and Science

As we have seen, through his epistemological and historical concepts, Althusser continues to challenge the reductionist interpretations of Marxism which have been influential in this century. Then, does his philosophical system have no elements of reductionism? It does not necessarily seem to be so.

What is the most conspicuous among his reductionist elements may be shown in his theory of the ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses). As to the question of "how is it possible for social relations (for instance, capitalist social relation) to exist?," he presents the theory of the ISAs. According to him, the ISAs are organs of the state, but are not necessarily included within the institutional forms of the state like the RSAs (Repressive State Apparatuses). Nonetheless, they are unified by a common function, i.e., the reproduction of the dominant relations of production. Thus, ideological social relations are articulated within a system of the ISAs and these apparatuses serve to reproduce the relations of production. These institutions form and condition subjects to accept the dominant relations of production. In other words, the dominant ideology assures individuals a specific "lived relation" to the relations of production.

However, this theory of the ISAs to the question of "the reproduction

13) Althusser discusses this issue in "Contradiction and overdetermination." For more details, see *For Marx* 107-11.

of the relations of production" reveals his functionalism. He resolves the problem of "the reproduction of the relations of production" into the distribution of subjects suitably equipped as "support" for the places of the social division of labour. The "places" are already provided with subjectivities adequate and appropriate to them. That is to say, he equates the relations of production with the distribution of subjects to "places" in the social division of labour. So, the relations of production are conceived just as relations of the social positions these subjects occupy. The ISAs is merely the place where a particular "subjection to the dominant ideology" is organized, in which the practico-social function of the dominant ideology is accomplished. However, in these "places," the subjects become completely functional means.

Furthermore, each agency of the ISAs also becomes only a means to fulfil a functional end. It merely performs the function of maintenance or reproduction. Each means has no determinant effect on the form for which it is functional. It is conceived strictly as a support of the function. Thus, only the function or functional end becomes universal in his theory of the ISAs. This is evident in his treatment of the switch from the church/family couple, functional for reproduction of the relations of production in feudalism, to the school/family couple, functional for the reproduction of the relations of production in capitalism. That is to say, for him, the reproduction of the relations of production is all converted into a functional imperative and apparatuses assigned to perform this function. In this sense, as Hall points out, it can be said that he falls into functionalism¹⁴).

His reductionism is also revealed in his concept of science. In order to understand his concept of science, we need to investigate his concept of the problematic because it is the pivotal point of his concept of science. According to him, the problematic, what he calls Generalities II, is the term designating the theoretical framework which puts into relation with one another the basic concepts (Generalities I). It determines the nature of each concept by its place and function in this system of relationships,

14) Stuart Hall calls this aspect of Althusser's "functionalism," and criticizes that Althusser falls into "the structural functionalism." For more details, see Stuart Hall's "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" 64-8.

and thus confers on each concept its particular significance. Thus, the problematic, as a theoretical structure, is represented as the determinant element in the process of production of knowledge. So, the problematic is a category as applicable to ideological as it is to scientific practice.

For him, however, there is a radical difference between the problematic of an ideology and that of a science because an ideological concept designates an existing reality, whereas a scientific concept just "provides us with the means of knowing it" without designating an existing reality (*For Marx* 223). According to him, an ideology, unlike a science, does not provide us with an adequate instrument of knowledge. It fails to do so because "it is governed by interests beyond the necessity of knowledge alone" (*Reading Capital* 141). Ideology "reflects many interests other than those of reason" (*Reading Capital* 141). Thus, science and ideology are two distinct practices. A science is founded only at the cost of a complete rupture with the ideological problematic which precedes it, i.e, a thorough-going mutation of basic structure of ideological structure. This rupture Althusser calls an epistemological break.

Thus, science can no more be ranged within the category of superstructure. One must "distinguish between the relatively autonomous and peculiar history of scientific knowledge (Marxism) and the other modalities of historical existence (those of the ideological and politico-legal superstructures, and that of the economic structure)" (*Reading Capital* 133). In this sense, science is not a superstructure. It is outside the economic base. Althusser excludes science from the social formation.

However, is it possible? can science be free from the social totality? Can science be free from ideology? Considering the problems of "finance for research programmes; the relation between pure science and technology; the outlooks of scientists" (*On Ideology* 100), it seems to be too naive an assumption. In his works, however, Althusser never tackles the problem of the relationship between the scientific and the other practices. The epistemological break which separates the science from ideology is taken for a fact, not analysed, though such an analysis is declared to be an indispensable project¹⁵). Thus, we cannot but treat this

distinction as a purely intellectual one, i.e., idealistical one¹⁶).

In this respect it is no coincidence that, as Geras notes, Althusser thinks the relation between Marxist theory and the working class movement as one of exteriority because Althusser regards Marxist theory as science. In other words, the former is produced outside the latter, and must be imported into it. However, as Glucksmann points out, in reducing the whole process by which Marxist theory was produced to a theoretical activity autonomous of the political practice of the working class, it is actually perpetuating a reduction as grave as any of those castigated by Althusser himself (102). This may be another reductionism based on idealism.

IV. Conclusion

As we have discussed, Althusser tried to overcome the reductionist interpretations of Marxism through his reinterpretation of it. It seemed, however, that he could not also escape the trap of reductionism completely. Nevertheless, we cannot underevaluate his attempt to overcome the reductionist interpretations of Marxism (empiricism, historicism, humanism, and economism). It can be said that he built the new roadsign in interpreting Marxism, confronted with the new realities which could not be understood in such reductionism. Presumably, in this sense we need to pay attention to his philosophy nowadays, because we are also facing another new realities which cannot be comprehended by any philosophical concepts.

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15) This is evident in some of his writings. For example, see *For Marx* 168–9.

16) In this sense, many people from Glucksmann and Geras to Callinicos criticize his theory of science as "idealism" or "Kantianism." For more details, see *On Ideology* 100.

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Abstract

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Althusser tried to illuminate a more rigorous and richer definition of Marxist philosophy because he felt that already established interpretations of Marxism cannot comprehend the realities his contemporary society was confronted with. This essay aims to investigate Althusser's criticism of various interpretations of Marxism, that is to say, empiricism, historicism, humanism, and economism. While interrogating his evaluation of so-called reductionist interpretations of Marxism, this essay also illustrate his

various epistemological and historical concepts: knowledge; practice; overdetermination; science; structural causality; subject and ideology. This essay ultimately interrogates his concept of subjectivity and reductionism.

Although Althusser tried to overcome the reductionist interpretations of Marxism through his reinterpretation of it, it seemed that he could not escape the trap of reductionism completely. His theory of the ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses) to the question of "the reproduction of the relations of production" reveals his functionalism. His reductionism is also shown in his concept of science because Althusser excludes science from the social formation. Even though his theoretical and philosophical concepts cannot completely get out of reductionism, it can be said that he built the new road sign in interpreting Marxism.

Key Words: Louis Althusser, Marxism, Reductionism, Subjectivity, Ideology

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