

Althusser's Social Theory: In Light of Overdetermination¹⁾

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I. Introduction

Althusser once suggested in his *Reading Capital* (Althusser and Balibar 1979) that there are many ways to read Marx's theory. It is interesting to note that the same holds true for Althusser as well: there are many different ways to read Althusser's social theory. There could be, for example, empiricist/rationalist, humanist/structuralist, determinist/antideterminist, or essentialist/antiessentialist readings of Althusser.

In this paper, however, I will provide one particular reading or

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interpretation of Althusser's social theory which I believe is worth in presenting it anew in a different theoretical terrain. Its value resides in relating it to, and associating it with antiessentialism rather than essentialism with which it typically has been linked. More specifically I will attempt to take Althusser's social theory beyond the controversies raging about rationalism, empiricism, humanism, or structuralism in contemporary theoretic debates. In so doing, I will elucidate Althusser's concept of overdetermination by virtue of which Marxist theory can finally rid itself of not only economic determinism but also various determinisms of all stripes.

Marxism, as with other theoretical traditions, has uneven and often contradictory lines of thought. The Marxian tradition is not a linear accumulation of previous interpretations but a ceaseless and multi-faceted interplay of competing alternatives both within and outside Marxism. It is within this complexity that I situate my interpretation of Althusser's social theory and the notion of overdetermination. My interpretation of Althusser and overdetermination has its theoretical roots in what might be called the "Amherst School" in America. The Amherst school centers its thinking around Althusser's notion of overdetermination and, among others, Resnick and Wolff's powerful reinterpretation of overdetermination (1987; 2010). While most antiessentialist thought rejects the basic categories of Marxism and most traditional Marxists in turn reject those of antiessentialism, the Amherst School has been rethinking Marxism and developing, for several decades, a kind of Althusserian overdeterminist Marxism that attempts to integrate insights from antiessentialist thought with the Marxist tradition.

II. Althusser's Overdetermination

Althusser's critique against essentialism, with his notion of

overdetermination, anticipates and points to a radical rethinking of Marxist theory from the vantage point of antiessentialism as opposed to essentialism, which has become one of the prominent characteristics of the twenty first century Marxist theory. Althusser's antiessentialism, however, is different from other antiessentialisms in significant ways. Althusser's deconstruction of essentialism operates clearly in the Marxist terrain and his deconstruction of classical Marxism is at one and the same movement coupled with the reconstruction of an antiessentialist Marxism. This deconstruction and reconstruction of Marxism has come to fruition of an antiessentialist Marxism which, nonetheless, bears within itself the imprint of unresolved tensions from its inception such as the last instance determinism and the positioning of the Marxian category of class in the, so-called, decentered totality. These unresolved tensions and contradictions shall be discussed further at the end of this paper.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the central project of Althusser's work—epitomized in his concept of overdetermination—represents one of the most profound and systematic attempts to break Marxism free of any and all forms of essentialist theoretical mold and, therefore, to move it into an antiessentialist terrain . Via the logic of overdetermination, Althusser paves the way for a radical transformation of Marxism in an antiessentialist vein (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxx-xxxi).

Althusser's overdetermination is a relentless critique of all forms of essentialism. In epistemology, it deconstructs the binary opposition between empiricism and rationalism (whether bourgeois or Marxist) by revealing their shared commitment to essentialism. His effort to ferret out and bring into bold relief the unique Marxian epistemology, that is, overdeterminism, is a double-edged sword (a "double intervention" or "drawing a demarcation line" in his own language). On the one hand, with his notion of overdeterminism, he rejects all kinds of essentialism as

bourgeois epistemology, and on the other, he rebuffs Marxist versions of essentialism as the survival and reemergence of bourgeois thinking inside Marxism (Althusser 1990: 12–13).

Antiessentialist Marxism, with Althusserian overdeterminism as its epistemology, brings into question any and all claims to truth. It challenges any and all claims to absolute truth. Truth(s) is (are) not objective, absolute, and homogeneous; but discursive, relative, and heterogeneous. According to overdetermination, empirical factuality in case of empiricism or pure reason in case of rationalism is not the final standard of truth but one among the many different criteria with and by which to construct alternative truths. Truth neither exists objectively outside any discourse in a singular and absolute form, nor is simply revealed to us by empirical fact or immanent logic. Instead, alternative truths are constructed through different theoretical practices in different theoretical frameworks. Thus, theorizing is not a passive interpretation of the objective and absolute truth, already out there, but an active intervention in the construction of multiple truths. Moreover, it is a contestation for the hegemony in multiple, alternative, and even contradictory truths; so, whether consciously or not, it inevitably entails taking a position.

In ontology, Althusserian overdeterminism also displaces the oppositional dichotomy between materialism and idealism. It lays bare their underlying assumption that any given totality, however complex in its appearance or surface, can be analyzed to reveal its simplicity (essence) at its core or in its depth—whether this essence be material or ideal and whether this essence be found in the first or last analysis.

Althusserian overdeterminism deconstructs the binary hierarchy between surface and depth, between phenomenon and essence, and between part and whole in any given totality. From the vantage point of overdeterminism, each is the conditions of existence for the other. They

exist in mutual penetration, in mutual interdependence, in a word, in mutual overdetermination. In this precise sense, Althusser's discussion of the principal/secondary contradiction can be read as an attempt to displace the essentialist distinction in any totality between surface and depth, between phenomenon and essence, and so on. He maintains that "... the 'secondary' contradictions are not the pure phenomena of the 'principal' contradiction.... the secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the principal contradiction, that they really constitute its condition of existence, just as the principal contradiction constitutes their conditions of existence" (Althusser 1990: 205).

The Marxist totality for Althusser is not simply a materialist-structured Hegelian totality nor its inversion, a humanist Cartesian totality (Readhead 2010: 149). Instead, he postulates a "decentered structure" as the Marxist totality: "The Hegelian totality presupposes an original, primary essence that lies behind the complex appearance that it has produced by externalization in history; hence it is a structure with a center. The Marxist totality, however, is never separable in this way from the elements that constitute it, as each is the condition of existence of all the other.... hence it has no center.... it is a decentered structure" (Althusser 1990: 254-255).

Not only does the Marxist decentered totality deny the center (therefore the essence) of the totality but it also presupposes by definition that the totality is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. The Marxist totality is not a monolithic unity but a disruptive complexity interwoven and variegated with different levels and instances. Moreover, it postulates that there exists no necessary one-to-one correspondence and no necessary cause-and-effect relations among the various levels and instances of that totality.

Althusser's rigorous and relentless critique of essentialism lays the

foundation for a radical transformation of Marxist social theory. More than anything else, as is aptly pointed out, after Althusser's overdetermination, "the debate about the social formation and the determinacy in Marxism will never again be the same. That in itself constitutes 'an immense theoretical revolution'" (Hall 1985: 97). For the overdetermined totality of antiessentialist Marxism, there is no room for the bifurcation between base and superstructure. It follows from this that there is no one-to-one correspondence and, therefore, no cause-and-effect, no essence-phenomenon relation between base and superstructure. For antiessentialist Marxism, they are distinct (never reducible to each other) but inseparably intertwined clusters of processes in the overdetermined whole.

Althusser's overdetermination also paves the way for the radical transformation of Marxist theory of history. In arguing for an overdetermined theory of history, Althusser advances the thesis that history is a 'process without a subject.' History is a process that has no privileged subject (i.e., essence or origin) that preguarantees and warrants its progress. In like fashion, history is a process that has no telos toward which the progress of the essence is preguaranteed. In antiessentialist Marxist theory of history, both essentialism and teleology get rejected at one and the same movement: "History cannot have a 'subject [essence]' (real or potential, organized or spontaneous) because it is not bound by any necessary trajectory [telos]" (Callari and Ruccio 1996, 24).

Althusser deconstructs and displaces, with his overdeterminist notion, the essentialist conception of history and time as continuous and homogeneous. According to Althusser, Marxist history and time is not a monolithic unity but discontinuous, heterogeneous, and complex intersections of different histories and different times (Althusser and Balibar 1979: 91-105). He advances even further that all theories of

history construct their own historical time, space, and narrative (Althusser and Balibar 1979, 101). In a word, history is a dense network of overdetermination. It is no coincidence, then, that every aspects of the social and natural totality within it occurs. The logic of overdetermined constitutivity displaces that of causes and their effects and, at the same time, that of origin and telos. In this respect, history is, in no sense, either the homogeneous unfolding of class consciousness or the unilinear development of the mode of production, the trajectories of which are predetermined to march toward socialism or communism (Shin 2009: 120–121). Inseparably related to this is Althusser's overdetermination that sets the stage for a radical rethinking of the subject/identity and its politics in Marxist theory. This is not, in any way, to say that traditional Marxism does not have or formulate its own theory of class identity and politics but, instead, to argue that it is not to go much further insofar as it remains royal to or captive in essentialist and teleological discourses.

Althusser's notion of overdetermination undercuts the essentialist tie between the subject and its position and function in social formations. In no way, is the subject pregiven in any objective sense. It must always be constituted anew through ideology—not as false consciousness but as a "system of representations" (Althusser 1990, 231). It must be constituted through the "interpellation" process as a particular form of discursive practices (Althusser 1971, 170–177). Thus constituted subject is not a stable, concentric unity, just as the Marxist social totality is not a monolithic homogeneity but a decentered and multi-faceted complexity. In like fashion, the subject itself is also a decentered, fractured, contradictory, multi-accentual, and always excessive (never reducible to one identity) complexity. It follows from this that its positioning is also in no way fixed in social formations. There is no guarantee, then, that the subject with its corresponding identity would fill its predesignated position

and perform its proper function as preordained. Thus the subject always remains open to be constituted and positioned in different ways at different moments in different spaces.

This much said about the controversies over Marxism, overdeterminism, and antiessentialism, there arises a thorny question as to how to understand and explain antiessentialist Marxism's commitment to the Marxian notion of class, that is, its 'centrality' of class in the 'decentered' social totality. Does it not, despite its disclaimer, in any way 'essentialize' the class? Antiessentialist Marxism is confronted with this question not only from its opponents but also from those who are sympathetic to its formulations. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, antiessentialist Marxism bears within itself the imprint of this unresolved tension from its inception.

My tentative answer to this problem is two-folded. The first is to turn to the notion of 'entry point.' The second, enabled by and building upon the first, is to examine the complex and contradictory relations between essentialism and antiessentialism and show that they are not a 'rigid, mutually exclusive distinction.' By doing so, an overdeterminist attempt to go beyond, or synthesize in Hegelian sense, the essentialism/antiessentialism dichotomy can be suggested. In other words, overdeterminist Marxism requires antiessentialism and its other, essentialism, at the same time. It can embrace its entry point of class as its initial essentialist 'moment' which will be dialectically synthesized in its subsequent theorizing, though it will leave its trace 'forever.'

The centrality of class in overdeterminist Marxism can be explained, first, by its notion of entry point. The class as an entry point means class serves as the analytic starting point out of which to make sense of society or by which to organize a theory about society. It should be underscored here that the importance given as an entry point is quite different from the

importance given as an essence or an ultimate cause. Overdeterminist Marxism denies to its entry point of class a privileged position within the logic of theory, while recognizing its importance as a focus and an organizing principle of analysis. For overdeterminist Marxism, class has no meaning except through its relations to other non-class aspects of society. In other words, class is not an immanent essence that can and ultimately will provide causal explanations for other non-class aspects of society.

Therefore, for overdeterminist Marxism, choosing class as its entry point is not an attempt to essentialize class, that is, encompass all the other non-class aspects of society within the single grand-narrative of class. Instead, it is an attempt to make visible the complex interplay between class and other non-class aspects of society. In this sense, it can be said that overdeterminist Marxism requires class discourse and its other, non-class discourse, at the same time. Moreover, choosing an entry point and theorizing around it is never innocent. Given the myriad of possible entry points, theorizing becomes political in the sense that and to the extent that one cannot choose all possible entry points at once; so one must select among them. This entails a political project, whether consciously or not, and requires taking a position (Resnick and Wolff 1987: 25–29).

Second, overdeterminist Marxism can undercut the dichotomy between antiessentialism and essentialism, just as it deconstructs the binary opposition between Marxism and overdeterminism. The tensions and antagonisms between Marxism and overdeterminism do not have to be resolved in mutual rejection. The engagement between Marxism and overdeterminism does not have to be viewed as necessarily the negation of each other. In fact, overdeterminist Marxism sets an example *par excellence* for this case. It can be said that not only are there antiessentialist moments within essentialism but antiessentialism also bears

within itself essentialist moments. Overdeterminist Marxists' observation on this point can be found on various occasions; sometimes implicitly hinted and other times explicitly stated. For example, Gibson–Graham mention that "I [We] use the term antiessentialist (rather than nonessentialist) to signal the impossibility of fully transcending essentialist modes of thought" (1996: 214). For another, to paraphrase a little, Resnick and Wolff describe what they conceive of a boundary between essentialism and antiessentialism as follows: Antiessentialism's boundary—on the other side of which lies essentialism—is insecure, unstable, and porous. antiessentialist moments haunt, invade, and interrupt essentialism; the boundary is always at risk. The 'other' across the boundary forever threatens to turn back against its 'other,' to challenge and overturn essentialism's hegemony and substitute its own. Essentialism can last a long time suffering but also containing the disruptions of their antiessentialist moments (Resnick and Wolff 2010; Verikukis 2009).

To paraphrase again, Callari and Ruccio suggest that this incompleteness and indeterminacy between essentialism and antiessentialism is exactly one condition of existence of overdeterminist Marxism. It is the terrain to and in which overdeterminist Marxism must take an intervention: While it might be tempting to posit a determinate break between essentialism and antiessentialism, the break cannot ever be total and complete. Because of this, to simply abandon Marxism could amount to positing the conditions for an uncontested restoration of bourgeois essentialism. However significant the rupture, we believe, antiessentialism cannot but detect in itself 'traces' of essentialism. This persistence of essentialist traces within antiessentialism is the reason for the necessity (from the standpoint of liberatory politics) of a continued presence of Marxism, albeit a restructured Marxism (1996: 27–28).

To be a pure empiricist or a pure rationalist is only possible in a purely

theoretical sense. In like manner, to be a pure essentialist or antiessentialist is only possible in a purely theoretical sense. To assume that overdeterminist Marxism is purely antiessentialist is to undermine its own overdeterminist position. Overdeterminist Marxism itself is not a cohesive unity but a disruptive flux pushed and pulled in every direction by contradictions and differences within and outside its discourse. The terrain of overdeterminist Marxism is a discursive formation marked by conflict and difference rather than by a dominant topical or methodological orientation.

In this respect, Resnick and Wolff, building upon their notion of entry point, offer a new insight to situate the notion of class in overdeterminist theory. By reexamining Hegel's dialectic, They argue that overdeterminist theory reinforces the principled commitment to antiessentialism by reaffirming its 'other,' the essentialist 'moment,' as always interwoven dialectically with antiessentialist analysis. Overdetermination initially contains its own negation, namely, an essentialism. The moment of initial essentialism will, in turn, be negated or annulled by overdetermination in a rather classic Hegelian rhythm (1987: 30–36). The moment of essentialist closure is thus opened up by the moment of antiessentialist differences. Indeed, within the whole terrain of overdeterminism, this moment of essentialist closure may be viewed as one of the many moments of antiessentialist differences captured at different moments. It is precisely in this sense that Althusser's breakthrough to overdetermination has to be a continuing break—that which is a point of no return.

In this way, overdeterminist Marxism attempts to go beyond essentialism/antiessentialism dichotomy. It tries to break out of an either/or dilemma. Antiessentialism is typically characterized by its unconditional celebration of difference (difference without unity), whereas essentialism, by its adherence to monolithic unity (unity without

difference). Overdeterminist Marxism recognizes the importance of both difference and unity. It attempts to articulate a certain unity within difference. This unity, however, always exists only in the process of perpetual slippage or endless sliding within the decentered totality. It is a contradictory unity or a ruptural unity which, by definition, must always be articulated and rearticulated. The project of overdeterminist Marxism is then a continuous process of articulation and rearticulation to bring forth the moment of unity around its notion of class within the decentered totality.

III. Marx's Epistemological Break

Althusser's concept of an epistemological break is an attempt to lay the groundwork for his argument for the specificity and particularity of Marxian theory. There have been some debates over whether or not there really is Marx's epistemological break and further, if so, when and where to exactly situate it in Marx's works. What is of concern here, however, is basically Althusser's assertion itself of Marx's epistemological break rather than the exact moment and location of it.

Althusser uses his periodization of Marx's epistemological break in the arguments for the specificity of Marxist dialectic, on the one hand, and against determinism and humanism, on the other. According to Althusser, Marx accomplishes this epistemological break through the "double rupture" (Althusser 1990: 48), that is, first with Hegel, then with Feuerbach. Marx's dialectic cannot be understood with the simple postulation of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Marx's epistemological break involves a radical "extraction"—a complete transformation, a painful operation which transforms what it extracts, rather than a simple "inversion" of Hegelian dialectic (Althusser 1990: 93). The specificity of the Marxist

dialectic—overdetermination by which Althusser means the reflection in contradiction itself of its conditions of existence within the complex whole, that is, the uneven developments of contradictions and the multifaceted aspects of determinations within the complex whole (1990: 209)—is obtained through this epistemological break, the basic transformation from the idealist, Hegelian, Feuerbachian, pre-Marxist problematic to the dialectical and historical materialist problematic afterwards. In short, Marx's epistemological break is the radical "transformation of the problematic" and the drastic "change of terrain" (Althusser and Balibar 1979: 27).

Althusser maintains that this radical transformation of the problematic enables Marx to overcome the theoretical blindness of the traditional sciences and thus to inaugurate a new science, a new science of history, that is, historical materialism. He argues against Marxist humanism that it is based on concepts such as human essence and alienated labor in Marx's early work written before Marx's transformation of the problematic, that is, before Marx's epistemological break. In consequence, he goes on to argue that it does not properly address the issue of class struggle. In parallel fashion, Althusser rejects economic determinism for its simple and reductionist dialectic contrary to overdetermination which he sees uniquely and distinctively as Marxian.

Althusser's assertion of Marx's epistemological break is less a matter of continuity or discontinuity in the history of Marx's thought, and more a matter of a particular understanding of how this continuity operates and interacts in the process of overdetermination. Althusser's notion of Marx's epistemological break is far from pure and simple. Instead, overdeterminism posits multiple and complex contradictions in the development of all things. No one process/contradiction is the pure phenomenon or the ultimate essence of any other process/contradiction in

the totality. To quote again:

....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 movement, and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates; it might be called *overdetermined in its principle* (Althusser 1990: 101, italics original).

From the standpoint of overdeterminism, everything exists in contradictions, more precisely in the process of contradictions. Moreover, contradictions are multiple and complex—neither singular nor simple—stated otherwise, overdetermined. Everything exists in the process of overdetermination. Overdetermination is indeed the condition of existence for each and every thing. Althusser cites Mao on this point: "Contradiction exists in the process of development of all things" (Mao 1977: 30). Moreover, the process of the development of contradiction is "uneven" and "not static" (Mao 1977: 54).

It is no surprise, then, that contradiction also exists in the process of development of all theories and further that the development of all theories exists in the process of overdetermination. From the vantage point of overdeterminist epistemology, the development of theory is the process of uneven, multiple, and complex contradictions. It conceives the development of theory as the process of multiple ruptures, breakthroughs, or qualitative changes from, and possibly even relapses, retreats, or withdrawals into the existing theories; rather than the linear progress or unilateral accumulation of existing theories.

In this precise sense, Althusser makes the insightful remark (1976:

66–67) that Marx's epistemological break is a "continuous break." Marx did not accomplish it once and for all. It is, instead, a "point of no return," a beginning of "something that will have no end." It is an "inauguration of the beginning of an endless history" (1971: 39). In other words, it is and will itself be in the process of perpetual overdetermination.

In his discussion of Marx's epistemological break, Althusser goes even further to make the controversial distinction between science and ideology. In his view, Marxism becomes scientific only through and because of the epistemological break. According to Althusser, Marx's epistemological break refers to the radical and drastic transformation of Marx's problematic from an early idealist notion of the human being to a developed materialist notion of social formation—in short, he rebuffs Marxist humanism and economism and non-Marxian theories as ideologies based on pre-Marxist or pre-scientific problematics.

It should be underscored here that Althusser's distinction of science and ideology has nothing to do with that of truth and falsity. Althusser painstakingly states that ideology is "distinguished from science in that in it the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function" (Althusser 1990: 231). It is not distinguished by its falsity against truth. It is the "'lived' relation between men and their world" (1990: 233). It is a system of representation embedded in and intertwined with the overdetermined whole which, in turn, has its own effectivity on the overdetermined whole.

Furthermore, according to Althusser's notion of the process of the production of knowledge (discussed in what follows), the distinction of science and ideology is simply that of raw material (existing concepts) and its product (new concepts). It is a matter of the difference before and after the theoretical practice, i.e., before and after the transformation by the process of the production of knowledge. Thus, it can be safely said

that an ideology is a science before its transformation by the knowledge production process; in turn, this science can also be viewed as an ideology as long as it enters into the next knowledge production process as raw material. In a word, an ideology is just the "past" of a science (Althusser 1990: 231).

Nevertheless, the term ideology bears such a tenacious grip of error and falsity—as Althusser admits in his self-criticism (1976: 119)—that it usually entails unwanted consequences: for example, a 'witch hunt' to search out and destroy ideological deviants, to force these deviants to confess to their ideological witchcraft, and to bring them before the Supreme Authority of Science (Amariglio 2010: 329–331). Whether expected or not, Althusser's assertion of Marx's epistemological break, along with his distinction between science and ideology, has enticed such fierce controversies that Althusser himself once commented: "What a fuss I raised!.... (But) I shall continue to defend them...." (1976: 114).

In spite of this fuss, I would like to explicate and vindicate Althusser's distinction between science and ideology in light of his overdeterminist theory of knowledge, i.e., the process of the production of knowledge. In so doing, I will focus on Althusser's differentiation of the problematics of science and ideology. My discussion in what follows, likewise, carries no implication of truth/falsity or superiority/inferiority between science and ideology.

IV. The Process of Knowledge Production

In Althusser's view, the overdeterminist problematic is uniquely Marxian, whereas the essentialist problematic is traditional and non-Marxian. Among other things, the overdeterminist problematic differs from the essentialist problematic in two important dimensions: on one

level, the relation between thinking and being, more specifically, between the object of knowledge and the real object, and on the other, the relation between theory and its truth criterion.

Overdeterminism rebukes the dichotomy between thinking (the thought-concrete, the object of knowledge) and being (the real-concrete, the real object). Instead, thinking is considered to be a part of being. And further, the relation between thinking and being is conceived of as the dialectical relation between part and whole. The overdeterminist notion of whole is neither a fixed entity, nor the mechanistic and algebraic sum total of its parts as Althusser aptly points out: "The Marxist whole is complex and uneven" (Althusser 1976: 183). Accordingly, thinking takes part in shaping being as well as vice versa. Thinking and being are mutually constitutive. Thinking (the thought-concrete, the object of knowledge, the part) is in the process of overdetermination with being (the real-concrete, the real object, the whole). "Being" is indeed the process of "becoming" in the fullest sense of the term.

Essentialism, on the contrary, posits a deep but ultimately bridgeable abyss or a fundamental gap between thinking and being. For essentialism, the ultimate goal of human knowledge is to bridge this presumed gap, whether by empirical factuality or by human reason. The truth or the essence is already out there in the real object, in the real world. Thus, essentialist theory is the process of abstraction--separation and extraction of the dross from the pure and of the inessential from the essential (Althusser and Balibar 1979: 35-38). Precisely in this regard, overdeterminism radically differentiates itself from essentialism which posits a fundamental gap between thinking and being, and further identifies the object of knowledge (the thought-concrete) with the real object (the real-concrete)--the confusion of part and whole (Mader 2010: 418-420).

As for the relation between theory and its truth criterion, overdeterminist theory entails within its process the production of its truth criterion, whereas essentialist theory seeks its truth criterion outside its process. Essentialist theory presupposes the essence (the absolute truth) out there which guarantees its validation. For overdeterminist theory, there is no such thing as the essence; there is no master discourse, no metanarrative. The truth criterion is internal to each and every theory. It is in this precise sense that Althusser makes a distinction that overdeterminist theory is an open process, whereas essentialist theory is a closed process (Althusser and Balibar 1979: 56–60).

In consequence, for overdeterminism, truths are plural, multiple. Truths themselves are located in the process of overdetermination and accordingly prone to complex contradictions and ceaseless changes. From the vantage point of overdeterminism, theorizing means taking a position in the struggle of conflicting truths. Theorizing is not the interpretation of the absolute truth but the intervention in the multiple and conflicting truths.

Furthermore, overdeterminism conceives theory as one of the many processes in the overdetermined whole. It even materializes the domain of theory by posing it as a theoretical practice, one of the many social practices, that is, a process of production of knowledge. According to Althusser (1990: 183–185), to put it schematically, this process of production of knowledge is composed of three elements—Generality I (raw material: existing concepts or ideological knowledges), Generality II (tools: theoretical frameworks), and Generality III (products: scientific knowledges or new concepts). Just as any other production process, it involves the transformation of the raw material (existing concepts) into the product (new concepts). It is not a simple extraction or separation of the inessential from the essential. For the overdeterminist process of knowledge production, there is no essence as the pre-given guarantee that

is to be excavated; to be sifted; to be separated from the inessential.

Given this notion of Althusser's theoretical practice, the difference between science and ideology means the transformation of Generality I (ideology) to Generality III (science)——"the production of Generality III by the work of Generality II on Generality I" (1990: 185). Furthermore, the process of production of knowledge is in the process of overdetermination; it is set in motion indefinitely; it is forever in change and becoming.

It follows from this that Althusser's distinction between science and ideology can be construed as the difference before and after the theoretical practice; before and after the transformation by the process of knowledge production. An ideology can be just the "past" of a science (Althusser 1990: 231).

If permitted to put it in a very rough and schematic way, Marx produces Marxism (Generality III) by the work of German Philosophy (Generality II) on English Political Economy and French Socialism (Generality I) (Althusser 1972: 169–170). In turn, Althusser produces, say, Althusserian Marxism (Generality III) by the work of his conceptual framework (Generality II) on traditional, essentialist Marxism (Generality I). Again, some Marxists, after Althusser, produce antiessentialist Marxism by the very work of Althusser's notion of overdetermination on Althusserian Marxism and antiessentialism. Needless to say, this never-ending process of production of knowledge is in the process of overdetermination with all the other processes in the natural–social totality.

V. Althusser's overdeterminist Marxism

Given his powerful notion of overdetermination, it is no accident that Althusser painstakingly argues that Marxism is neither economism, nor

humanism nor structuralism (functionalism), nor historicism, and so on. Instead, Althusser conceives of Marxism as overdeterminism. Overdeterminism is precisely the point of the fusion of Marxism and antiessentialism for which Althusser laid the groundwork.

In the first place, from Althusser's standpoint, Marxism is not economism (economic determinism). One source for this view is Engels's letter to Joseph Bloch of September 21–22, 1890, in which he reformulated the relation of superstructure to economic determinism, the ghost which had haunted Marxism since its inception.

According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the super structure... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*" (Marx and Engels 1975: 475, italics original).

Althusser liberated Marxism from the tenacious grip of this form of economic reductionism. In his conception of overdeterminism, there is no room for essentialism; there is no room for one process or one site in the social totality to act as the ultimate cause of any other process or site.

As an example, take the complex structured whole that is society. In it, the 'relations of production' are not the pure phenomena of the forces of production; they are also their conditions of existence. The

superstructure is not the pure phenomenon of the structure, it is also its conditions of existence (Althusser 1990: 205).

The economic base is not the essence of the superstructure; nor is the latter some simple reflection of the former. Not only are they the distinct processes with their own relative autonomy among many other processes in any social formation but they are also intertwined in the multifaceted processes of overdetermination within the complex whole--between themselves, among other processes, and with the complex whole.

In the second place, it is worthwhile mentioning Althusser believes that Marxism is not a form of humanism. Althusser's theoretical anti-humanism entails the critique that humanism fails to appreciate the complex and multifaceted dialectic of overdeterminism. For Althusser, it is a bourgeois epistemology that presumes that the history of any social formation can be grasped within the dialectic of the self-realization or the linear development of a human essence. Overdeterminism repudiates the notion of the essence as a pre-given guarantee. For overdeterminism, the human being (human nature) is the "ensemble of relations" (Gramsci 1971: 352) or the "complex of social relations" (358) in the fullest sense of the Gramscian notion of the term. Human nature is neither pre-given nor pre-given. Rather, the definition of human nature itself is a product and a constituent of the complex of social relations. Thus, for Althusser, human nature does not exist in the form of some human essence as a pre-given and transcendent fixity, but in the complex of social relations as an overdetermined process.

Althusser also rebukes humanism because of what he sees as to typically idealist concept of human essence--a concept that downgrades the importance of class struggle--to use Althusser's own expression, "kills class struggle" (1971: 22). Despite many humanists' efforts to

disassociate themselves from individualism, Althusser sees humanism as inseparably related to an individualism that serves the bourgeois denial of class struggle. For Althusser, it is not the person as an isolated individual but the masses as a complex and changing group that make history (1976: 46–48). Althusser's anti-humanism is an attempt to "put the class struggle in the front rank" (48).

In the third place, for Althusser, "Marxism is not structuralism." Despite his explicit reluctance to be identified with the "structuralist ideology" (Althusser and Balibar 1979: 7). Althusser has been widely interpreted in close association with structuralism and sometimes even with structural-functionalism (especially in relation to his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"). This interpretation is due partly to Althusser's use of seemingly structuralist vocabulary—he puts it as "a very ambiguous flirtation with structuralist terminology" (1976: 128)—and partly to his readers' tendency to conclude that anyone who criticizes humanism must therefore be a structuralist. This conclusion follows from the presumption that social theory encompasses only two possible, alternative theoretical strategies, that is, either humanism or structuralism.

My argument, however, is that the whole point of Althusser's elaboration of overdetermination is to argue that these two possibilities are not the only possibilities and that one can break out of or go beyond the shared essentialism of structuralism and humanism. Consequently, I would like to view Althusser as an antiessentialist, that is, an overdeterminist in the precise sense that at the heart of his various concepts such as the complex structured whole, the structure in dominance, the accumulation of contradictions, and so on, there lies his powerful notion of overdetermination which cannot be embraced within the traditional essentialist framework. His critique of humanism should be understood as

an attempt to go beyond the essentialist framework *per se*, rather than as an attempt to justify a structuralist determinism by falsifying a humanist determinism.

Concerning Althusser's so-called structural-functionalism in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," I would contend that this essay should be viewed within the larger context of Althusser's central focus on the theoretical construction of overdeterminism. Thus, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" should be understood as an essay that attempts to materialize the realm of superstructure and to elevate the importance of the superstructure in the social formation.

Finally, for Althusser, "Marxism is not historicism." For Althusser, history can be reduced neither to the self-evolution or self-realization of human essence, nor to the linear or unilateral development of the economic mode of production. History is instead the "complex intersections of different times," say, economic time, biological time, philosophical time, and so forth (Althusser and Balibar 1979: 101). Following this notion of the complex intersections of different times such as the time of the political, of the theoretical, of the ideological, of art, and the like, it is perfectly conceivable to conceptualize multiple social relations in any social formation.

Althusser's notion of the complex intersections of different times within and constituting any "history" can be extended to a parallel notion of multiple social relations or sub-systems within any society. In its specifically Marxist form, as Althusser suggests, this means conceptualizing societies as complex intersections of multiple, different class structures, each exhibiting its own trajectory which, at the same time, is dependent and influential upon the trajectory of all the others. No ultimate telos or meta-historical drive governs this endlessly changing pattern of mutually overdetermining trajectories.

Althusser's conception of overdetermined history opens the door to conceive of history as the complex interactions of multiple modes of production rather than as a simple linear progress from one mode of production to another. Furthermore, it gives an enriched meaning to the Gramscian notion that "The societies in which a single individual can take part are very numerous, more than would appear. It is through these societies that the individual belongs to the human race. Thus the ways in which the single individual enters into relation with nature are many and complex..." (Gramsci 1971: 353).

VI. Conclusion

By means of his powerful notion of overdetermination, Althusser makes it possible to finally liberate Marxism not only from economic determinism but also from determinisms of all stripes. By his attempt to go beyond the essentialist framework using his notion of overdetermination, whether it be structuralism/humanism in social theory or empiricism/rationalism in epistemology, he lays the groundwork for a fusion of Marxism and antiessentialism. Granted his immense contribution to the Marxist tradition, Althusser himself nevertheless demonstrates hesitation in taking a final step to indeed emancipate Marxism from the tenacious grip of all sorts of determinisms and to take Marxism beyond essentialist/determinist debates into anti-essentialist/-determinist, i.e., overdeterminist) debates.

Althusser, on the one hand, reveals his hesitation to finally let go of all determinisms by accepting the determination in the last instance by the economy. On the other hand, Althusser discloses his rationalism (to use Althusser's own self-critical language, "theoretical deviation" (1976: 105) or "speculative-rationalism" (124) by lapsing into the dichotomy between science (in the singular) and ideology (in the singular). Despite his

repudiation of the existence of a meta-narrative, a master-discourse, or a trans-theoretical standard of truth, it seems that Althusser readmits, in his discussion of science and ideology, the meta-narrative in the name of the problematic. Stated otherwise, he does not underscore enough the fact that, from the overdeterminist standpoint, the problematic itself exists in the process of multiple contradictions (needless to say, including non-theoretical ones) and continuous changes.

In this respect, as Amariglio pointed out, Althusser's concept of overdetermination stands as the "best self-criticism" (1987, 183) of his last-instance determinism and his recourse to rationalism. Accordingly, it is my belief that Althusser's hesitancy (his determinism and rationalism) should not diminish his initial and original contribution to the Marxist tradition: that is, opened the door to liberate Marxism from all the determinisms and to lay the groundwork for the fusion of Marxism and antiessentialism.

Concerning his affirmation of determination in the last instance by the economy, it is Althusser, after all, who stated that "From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" (1990: 113). And with regard to his own recourse to rationalism, Althusser notes that it is "... his [Marx's] failures and even his relapses are a part of the theoretical drama he lived.... Alone, Marx looked around him for allies and supporters: who can reproach him for allowing himself to lean on Hegel?" and that we are only on "the threshold of the land he [Marx] opened and discovered for us" (Althusser and Balibar 1979: 193). In parallel fashion, I believe the same holds for Althusser as well. It is one thing to simply reproach Althusser for allowing himself to lean on rationalism and it is quite another to inherit and develop the conceptual space of overdetermination Althusser discovered and opened for us.

From the overdeterminist epistemological standpoint, Marxian theory is

no longer able to claim any privileged position in relation to truth (any more than other non-Marxian theories are). For essentialist Marxists, the almost chaotic complication which overdeterminism necessarily entails may seem tantamount to theoretical nihilism. Moreover, they may construe overdeterminism as simple relativism or pluralism which amounts to turning over their weapons to the enemy. However, overdeterminist Marxists embrace, rather than fear and shy away, this diversity of overdeterminism. By virtue of inheriting and further developing Althusser's notion of overdetermination, overdeterminist Marxists hold on to their commitment and partisanship in search of a way of going beyond capitalism, while breaking out of the essentialist debates.

For overdeterminist Marxism, there is no theory which does not bear within itself the traces of the particular society in which it arises and exists. Likewise, there is no theory which does not have its own social consequences. Theory and society exist in the process of mutual determination. Theorizing is not the interpretation of the pregiven or presupposed absolute truth but the direct intervention and contestation for social hegemony among multiple, conflicting, and alternative truths.

Overdeterminist Marxism interrogates other theories not on the grounds of the absolute standard of singular truth but on the grounds of their social conditions of existence and their social consequences. In this exact sense, overdeterminist Marxism is far from relativism and pluralism, pure and simple (Resnick and Wolff 2010: 170–171). Overdeterminist Marxism takes positions toward and make alliances with proponents of other theories based precisely on its assessment of the social conditions and consequences of those theories. All truths and all theories are not equally valid or acceptable from this standpoint. There is much more in overdeterminist Marxism yet to be developed on the basis of Althusser's struggle against essentialist or determinist thinking and the rethinking of

Marxism to which it has given rise.

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Abstract

Althusser's Social Theory:
In Light of Overdetermination

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In this paper, I will provide one particular reading or interpretation of Althusser's social theory which I believe is worth in presenting it anew in a different theoretical terrain. Its value resides in relating it to, and associating it with antiessentialism rather than essentialism with which it typically has been linked. More specifically I will attempt to take Althusser's social theory beyond the controversies raging about rationalism, empiricism, humanism, or structuralism in contemporary theoretic debates. In so doing, I will elucidate Althusser's notion of overdetermination by virtue of which Marxist theory can finally rid itself of not only economic determinism but also various determinisms of all stripes.

Key Words: Althusser, Overdetermination, Marxism, Antiessentialism, Structuralism

알튀세르, 중층결정, 마르크스주의, 반본질론, 구조주의

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