

Dictatorship of the Proletariat and/as Islet of Communism: The Tension of the Politics of the Encounter in Althusser

Panagiotis Sotiris

The aim of this presentation is to revisit Althusser's writings in the 1970s in defense of the dictatorship of the proletariat and examine the tensions running through them, tensions that can be related to his parallel thinking, at that period, on a potential materialism of the encounter. On the one hand, Althusser tried to expand a highly original politico-theoretical project of recreating the possibility of a fusion between the working class and Marxism, by means of a renewal of the communist movement, and a radical democratic conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat that included autonomous movements outside the party. On the other hand, the realisation of the extent of the rupture between the subaltern classes and both Marxist theory and communist political organisations led Althusser to a conception of the encounter as almost chance, including the imagery of islets of communism. What I want to suggest in this presentation is that this tension is not just one that runs through Althusser's writings, but also one that is at the heart of any politics for communism.

On July 6 1976, while Spain was still amidst the turmoil of the Transition period, Louis Althusser gave a talk at the Catalan College of Building Engineers and Technical Architects. Right from the beginning he chose to address the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Some months ago the 22nd Congress of the French Communist Party had had taken the dictatorship of the proletariat out of the Party program, a move that had been the culmination of the 'programmatic moment' of French political parties after May 1968. Some of Althusser's collaborators, such as Etienne Balibar had opposed this change and so had Althusser on April 23rd 1976, during the PCF's Book Fair at the Bastille and with the opportunity of *Editions Sociales'* edition of *Positions*. On that occasion Althusser insisted that it is not easy to abandon a concept, that if he were a delegate at the conference he would have voted against abandoning the dictatorship of the proletariat, and suggested that the problem with the notion of dictatorship had not to do with the dictatorship of the proletariat but

with the ‘mass exterminations’ that took place in the USSR ‘under Stalin’s dictatorship in a country proclaiming to be socialist’.¹ In Barcelona he decided to have the dictatorship of the proletariat as the central thematic of his talk:

I am going to talk about something else: the dictatorship of the proletariat.

We can say that this theme *is on the order of the day of every Communist Party in the world*. It is on the order of the day in People’s China, where the Chinese Communist Party insistently stresses the need to understand, respect and apply the dictatorship of the proletariat. It has been on the order of the day in the Soviet Union since 1936, that is to say, ever since Stalin declared officially that the USSR had now left behind the dictatorship of the proletariat and that it was thus no longer on the order of the day. But at the time that Stalin claimed that the dictatorship of the proletariat had been superseded in the USSR, he also declared that it was essential for the other Communist Parties, since unlike the USSR they had still not achieved socialism. Here, I must say that Stalin’s idea that when a given country reaches socialism, that social formation has thus superseded the dictatorship of the proletariat – an idea structuring all of his reasoning on this question – contradicts all the theses of Marx and Lenin, who declared that the dictatorship of the proletariat coincided with the entire socialist phase, far from it being superseded under socialism (Althusser, 2015, pp. 153-154).

Althusser suggests that ‘dictatorship of the proletariat is on the order of the day in a paradoxical manner’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 154) in the ‘Imperialist World. In regards to the French Communist Party he suggests that in ‘its Twenty-Second Congress has just officially abandoned the dictatorship of the proletariat, yet that same Congress voted unanimously for a resolution that entirely upholds the dictatorship of the proletariat, from A to Z’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 154). The Italian Communist Party ‘still has an interest in it, given that it has never officially renounced it’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 154), although he repeated his disagreement with the idea that hegemony could be accomplished before the seizure of political power.

Althusser’s argument is based on his assumption the ‘objective needs – and thus the scientific needs – expressed by the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat do not cease to exist upon the declaration that this concept or its expression [...] is to be abandoned’ (Althusser, 2015, pp 155-156). So Althusser set to present the theory of the

¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1976/04/26/m-althusser-met-en-garde-contre-le-risque-de-deferlement-droitier_2970234_1819218.html

dictatorship of the proletariat as formulated by Marx and Lenin. He insisted that he would not discuss Gramsci and the interpretations of Gramsci, although he suggests that if Gramsci was not writing under prison censorship he would have used the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat instead of hegemony.

For Althusser the dictatorship of the proletariat ‘belongs to the science founded by Marx – not to what people call “Marxist philosophy”’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 157). Of course, the idea that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a scientific concept comes from Marx and the 1852 letter to Weydemeyer (MECW 39, p. 60-66). And Althusser insisted that the dictatorship of the proletariat should first of all be considered as a scientific concept and as *objective truth*. This means that it is objectively true even if it does not yet exist.

Concretely, this means that the dictatorship of the proletariat is true for us even when the dictatorship of the proletariat – that is, socialism – does not exist in our countries. When the proletariat has already taken power, the truth of the dictatorship of the proletariat exists in another way, since its object has an actual existence to which this truth is thus directly applicable, strategically. Furthermore, when communism reigns across the world, the truth of the dictatorship of the proletariat will continue to exist, as the truth of what took place under socialism, even though it will not be applicable to what is going on under communism, since, with classes and the class struggle having disappeared, the dictatorship of the proletariat will have become superfluous. (Althusser, 2015, p. 159)

For Althusser Marx took a word from the language of politics, ‘dictatorship’, and one from the language of socialism, ‘proletariat’, and ‘forced them to co-exist in an explosive formulation (dictatorship of the proletariat) in order to express with an unprecedented concept the necessity of an unprecedented reality’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 160). For Althusser the use of the word dictatorship is the best to express ‘that type of absolute power, not previously endowed with a name, which every ruling class (feudalist, bourgeois, proletarian) necessarily exercises, not only at the political level but much more so beyond it, *in the class struggle that spans the whole of social life, from the base to the superstructure, from exploitation to ideology, passing – but only passing – through politics*’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 160). Moreover, Althusser insists that the crucial aspect is exactly that we are not only talking about the dictatorship of the

proletariat, but also about *the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie*, which is ‘the ‘secret’ to the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 160). Althusser used Lenin’s references to the fact that ‘the ‘freest’ parliamentary bourgeois democracy is the form *par excellence* of this dictatorship’ and that the ‘‘democracy of the widest masses’, ‘a thousand times freer’ than the freest bourgeois democracy’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 162), to suggest his main point which is exactly a conception of class power, in the end as sheer force, rule, and coercion, even it is mediated by democratic or parliamentary forms.

For Marx, the relations of the class struggle (including those) sanctioned and regulated by law and the laws that suit the ruling class are not, in the last instance, juridical relations but rather relations of struggle. That is to say, they are relations of force, and, ultimately relations of violence – whether openly so or otherwise. This does not mean that Marx saw right and laws as having a pure ‘juridical’ essence, thus without violence; it means, rather, that because class relations are, in the last instance, extra-judicial (with a force distinct from right and laws) and these relations are thus ‘above the law’, and because they are, in the last instance, relations of force and violence (whether openly so or otherwise), the rule of one class in the class struggle must ‘necessarily’ be thought as ‘power above the law’: dictatorship. (Althusser, 2015, p. 162)

So although Althusser seems to return to a rather pedantic reminder of the Marxist vulgate on the dictatorship of the proletariat, in fact he is trying to suggest that it’d be wrong to see parliamentary democracies as a form of political power more amenable to socialist strategy.

Trying to present his broader argument, Althusser returns to a position that has been central in his thinking since the end of the 1960s, namely the primacy of class struggle over classes, a point linked to primacy of the relation of production over the productive forces.

Marx’s conception was totally different from this. Unlike the bourgeois theorists who imposed a separation between classes and class struggle, and generally gave primacy to classes over class struggle, Marx identified them, and, within this identity, gave primacy to class struggle over classes. The class struggle, for Marx, far from being a derivative effect that was more or less contingent on the existence of classes, instead formed a whole together with what divided the classes into classes and reproduced class division

in the class struggle. Philosophically speaking, this can be expressed as follows, according to the historical period: primacy of the contradiction over the opposites, or the identity of the contradiction and the opposites. (Althusser, 2015, p. 164)

This brought Althusser to a conception of exploitation and consequently of class power as a relation of force, of violence:

The working class's sale of its labour power (which stands behind each productive worker) can be sanctioned by juridical relations, but it is a relation of uninterrupted force, violence against the dispossessed, who pass back and forth between work and the reserve labour force.

As such, class violence – the violence ‘outside the law’ that the capitalist class exercises against the working class – is, in the last instance, to be found at the very centre of the capitalist production relation dividing classes into classes and reproducing this division through the double process of accumulation and proletarianisation. That is to say, it is anchored in ‘the last instance’: production. (Althusser, 2015, p. 164)

Consequently, for Althusser ‘The dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is a dictatorship because, in the last instance, it is a violence stronger than any law’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 164). This brings Althusser to the question of the State: ‘the state can only be understood in function of class struggle and class rule’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 165). And it is here that Althusser introduced a notion that will also be a central part of his 1978 *Marx in his limits* manuscript, namely the idea that the state is a machine: ‘the state is the machine that transforms violence into power, and, more concretely, the machine that transforms the relations of force of the class struggle into juridical relations regulated by laws’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 166). Consequently for Althusser laws ‘are no more than relations of force exercised under the *legal form* – that is, under the form of *rules* – and that the famous purity of law (commercial or political, private or public) and of norms (ideological, religious, moral or philosophical) is nothing but the form of violence transformed into laws’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 166). Moreover, this points to ‘violence reigning within laws – indeed, the particular violence that accompanies the sacred world of norms, of the disguised ‘values’ of ‘ideas’: *ideology*’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 167).

This enables Althusser to basically present of a theory of the non-neutrality of state apparatus that at the same time points to a theory of how a new dominant class would deeply transform the state: ‘to transform the state apparatus that it has inherited,

in order to adapt it to its own forms of exploitation and oppression' (Althusser, 2015, p. 168). This enables to present the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transformative exercise of power, not restricted by existing legality beyond simply treating as the violent seizure of power.

[T]he concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, taken in itself –that is, in the context of Marxist theory – does not prescribe any concrete form of seizing state power. That does not mean to say that it is a matter of indifference, but rather that we cannot deduce the concrete historical forms of seizing state power in any given country at any given moment from the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. I should reiterate that the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat designates 'absolute power above the law': the working class's class power in the class struggle after it has come to power. (Althusser, 2015, p. 169).

For Althusser the very notion of 'destruction' of the state, a notion central in the Marxist tradition, in fact refers to a process of deep transformation of the State apparatus in ways that make it much more democratic:

For example, Lenin said that after seizing state power it is necessary to break the essential piece of the bourgeois state apparatus that is parliamentary democracy. How did he conceive of this 'destruction'? He wanted parliamentary democracy to be 'active and lively', suppressing the division of labour between the legislature and the executive in a particular way, and making elected representatives recallable by the people at any moment. Destruction, then? It was in reality a deep transformation, converting this political apparatus in order to make it adequate to serving communism. (Althusser, 2015, p. 172).

Althusser insists that the dictatorship of the proletariat does not refer to any dictatorial form of power, either from a person or a party; it 'merely signals the fact of one class's rule in the class struggle, does not at all require *a priori* the dictatorship of one man or party' (Althusser, 2015, p. 172).

Althusser then moves to discuss the question of *political forms* of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But in order to that he first returns to a point that is central in his research in the 1970s, namely the idea that there is neither a socialist mode of production nor

socialist relations production and that socialism can only be conceived as a period of transformation and intense struggle.

Marx said about socialism has, ultimately, not *really* been taken seriously: namely, that it is a period of transition between the capitalist and communist modes of production. The simple reality that *there is no socialist mode of production*, that socialism is instead a transition, the lower stage of communism (Marx) has not been taken seriously. And, in consequence, another reality has not been taken seriously either: just as there is no socialist mode of production, it logically follows that there are no *socialist production relations*. Also not taken seriously is Marx and Lenin's idea that the class struggle continues in new forms during the so-called socialist transition period (the proof of this being that the state still exists), new forms which do really exist despite their lack of any visible relation to the forms familiar to the capitalist mode of production. (Althusser, 2015, p. 173)

It is important to note that this is position relatively different from the one he had presented in the *Sur la reproduction* manuscript, where Althusser accepted some version of socialist relations of production and a transition to socialism (as opposed to socialism as transition to communism).

They are not simple because we must not confuse the *socialist* relations of production enabling common appropriation of the means of production, and, later, *communist* relations of production, with the relations to be established in the *phase of the transition to socialism*. For if socialism must not be confused with communism, the phase of the transition to socialism (of the construction of socialism) must *a fortiori* not be mistaken for socialism. (Althusser, 2014, p. 61)

However, already in 1973 and the manuscript on Imperialism Althusser insists that there is no socialist mode production: 'For the theory of the revolution and the transition to communism, the crucial point is that *the socialist mode of production* does not exist' (Althusser, 2020, p. 62). Althusser insists that Lenin 'defines this transition, this 'socialist socioeconomic' formation, as the contradictory co-existence of the capitalist mode of production and the communist mode of production – thus as the co-existence of capitalist elements and communist elements, of elements of the communist mode of production and of the capitalist mode of production' (Althusser, 2020, p. 63).

Returning to the 1976 lecture, Althusser turned to a discussion of what it means to transform the relation of production. For Althusser, expropriation in the form of nationalization is by itself a contradictory process. On the one hand, it is a formal way to ‘to trace out the future appropriation of the means of production’ and ‘to anticipate the abolition of the ‘separation’ of the direct producers from the means of production’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 175). On the other hand,

to nationalise is nothing other than cloaking capitalism with a new form, the state-capitalist form with which Lenin was obsessed, and which is nothing but the realisation of the deepest tendency of capitalism. Namely, the tendency that *no-one wants to talk about*, that of a ‘capitalism without capitalists’ (Marx) where the bourgeois state concentrates and distributes the functions of accumulation and investment, and, therefore, the reproduction of the capitalist relation. Yes, the capitalist relation, because there are still wage labourers and, with this, exploitation and commodity relations – that is, the power of money. (Althusser, 2015, p. 174)

Again this is a very important point from Althusser, in the sense that socialism is not just ‘state capitalism’, it is not just nationalization, but a more profound process of transformation of the economy. Moreover, this was also a warning in regards to the debates of the Left in that period, which was mainly oriented towards treating the nationalization of strategic enterprises as *per se* process of socialist transformation. In an analogy with Marx’s distinction between formal and real subsumption, Althusser suggests that the crucial challenge has to do with the fact that ‘it is the old (capitalist) relation that must submit to the new (communist) form’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 174). Althusser insists that this is the major stake of class struggle during the transition period, how the communist form will be imposed in a way that transforms the old capitalist relation instead of the capitalist relation becoming in the end again dominant.

I say communist form because the transformation of production (collective property, planning) is only formal, since it does not affect the relations of production (wage labour) or the division and organisation of labour. But at the same time, I say communist form because it has, nonetheless, already been set in motion, a subsumption tending towards its future and waiting for this future to give it reality and existence. And everything is at stake in this indecision, this crossroads: either the old capitalist relation will prove more powerful than the new communist form, or else the new

communist form will become real and impose itself as the new relation. (Althusser, 2015, p. 174)

This again points to the challenge of the ‘the *invention* of new forms appropriate to depriving the state of its now-transformed functions’, with the ‘the widest mass democracy’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 175). This process of *invention* to a large extent has to do with the knowledge accumulated through struggle and the forms of democratic functioning already achieved within parties, in sum what Althusser defines as the collective memory of the masses.

If the Communist Party does not get mixed up with the state, if it is attentive to the will of the masses, if the Communist Party is ‘one step ahead, but only one’, and above all not three steps behind, it can play a decisive role. And its role is so decisive that we can justifiably say that the Party can serve as the arbiter when the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the crossroads, giving the right direction to the tendency of history. Tell me how your party functions and I will tell you what the forms of your dictatorship of the proletariat are; tell me what these forms are and I will tell you if your state will disintegrate or be further strengthened; tell me what your state is and I will tell you what class’s dictatorship it is, proletarian or bourgeois. (Althusser, 2015, p. 176)

It is in this sense that Althusser stresses the importance of communist organizations and popular initiatives from below as political and organizational forms that already potentially represent a form communism, and act as terrains of prefigurative practices: ‘What are communist class-struggle organisations if not already communism? What are the popular initiatives that we now see emerging all around, in Spain, in Italy and other places, in the factories, suburbs, schools and sanctuaries, if not already communism?’ (Althusser, 2015, p. 177). This exemplifies the importance for Althusser of the experience of working class and popular movements in the 1970s, the expansive forms of communist organizing but also the proliferation of new forms of initiatives from the parts of the masses themselves. Moreover, this enables Althusser to suggest that communism is an objective tendency already active within capitalist societies.

Communism is an objective tendency already inscribed in our society. The increased collectivization of capitalist production, the workers’ movement’s forms of organisation and struggle, the initiatives of the popular masses, and – why not? – certain bold

initiatives by artists, writers and researchers, are outlines and symptoms of communism that exist even today. (Althusser, 2015, p. 178)²

This is a point that Althusser had already raised in the 1973 manuscript for a *Book on Imperialism*. In that Althusser takes the rather provocative stance that communism begins at the same moment that the capitalist mode begins, not in the sense of some teleological dynamic but in the sense of the dynamics and potential historical horizons inscribed at the heart of the contradictions of capitalism.

[T]he capitalist mode of production contains the seeds of the communist mode of production in its own contradictions from the moment it comes into existence. More precisely, we can say that communism exists (begins to exist in a real sense) with the earliest developments of the workers' class struggle. (Althusser, 2020, p. 63)

This is an important point since when Althusser referred to communist elements already existing, this always pointed towards struggles and the social forms emerging within struggle, either in regards to forms of self organization or in regards to forms of self-management, but he also adds what Marx described as forms of the increased socialisation of production.

The forms in which communist elements appear in capitalist society itself are countless. Marx himself names a whole series of them, from forms of children's education combining work and schooling to the new relations reigning in proletarian organizations, the proletarian family, the proletarian community of life and struggle, joint-stock companies, workers' co-operatives and so on, to say nothing of the 'socialization of production', which poses all sorts of problems, yet should also be noted. All these elements (which have multiplied in the past few years, especially since 1968; see LIP, the proletarian inventions in the class struggle: 'they have shown that the workers could do without bosses', Séguy) will not by itself lead to communism. Better: they are not all communist elements. They are elements for communism. Communism will adopt them, combine them, perfect them and develop their potentiality [*virtualités*], integrating them into the revolution in the relations of production which commands everything and is still absent from our world. (Althusser, 2020, pp. 64-65)

² 'Symptoms' is the version one can find in the Spanish edition of this text, upon which the English translation was based. A French version of the text refers to 'traces'.

What is important is not that Althusser suggests that we can find communist elements in contemporary struggles against capitalism, but that he insists that these elements do not represent communism, they cannot be considered fully developed communist social and political forms. That is why he insists that communism will not come by itself, but through a process of intense struggle and an entire transition period.

Communism, however, will not come about by itself. It has to be built at the end of a long march, one stage of which is called socialism, which is not a mode of production. (Althusser, 2020, p. 65)

We know that apart from this text and a later lecture on the 22nd Congress Althusser did not publish anything else on this question. The long manuscript he had prepared on the situation in the Party and the debates around the dictatorship of the proletariat, *Les vaches noires* (Althusser 2016) was eventually not published, mainly because of objections by some Althusser's collaborators at that time. By itself it is a remarkable manuscript offering not only Althusser's critique of the bureaucratic culture of the PCF and his very clear apprehension of the transformation of the USSR into an exploitative and oppressing social formation, but also crucial insights in regards to questions of the effectivity of class struggle at all levels. Some of these elements might resurface later, in texts such as *What must change in the Party*, but one could only imagine the repercussions there would have been if Althusser had chosen to publish it as it planned.

The most extensive public intervention would come by Balibar, in the form of his 1976 *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. Balibar also suggests that the dictatorship of the proletariat points to a conception of socialism as a transition period of intense struggle.

The proletarian revolution already entails, right from the beginning, the *development of communist social forms*, in particular in the shape of the political intervention and organization of the masses themselves, without which it would never have been possible to make the transition from the bourgeois State to proletarian democracy. In other words, proletarian democracy is not the realization of full liberty for the working

people, but it is the struggle for liberation, it is the process and concrete experience of liberation as materialized in this very struggle. (Balibar 1977, p. 123)

It is also important that how Balibar insists that the polemic against the dictatorship of the proletariat is not about a fear of dictatorship or a fear of authoritarian measures, but it is rather a fear of the masses, a fear of the forms of militant mass democracy involved in processes of revolutionary transformation.

From this point of view it is possible to explain why the dictatorship of the proletariat is feared or rejected. The reason does not lie in a principled bringing about socialism by democratic means. On the contrary, it lies in the *fear of democracy*, the fear of *the mass forms* of democracy which overshoot and explode the extraordinarily narrow limits within which every bourgeois State confines democracy. Or perhaps in despair that history will ever make it possible for these forms to develop. (Balibar 1977, p. 123)

Apart from the July intervention in Barcelona, Althusser would make another public intervention almost a year after the beginning of the debate on the dictatorship of the proletariat within the ranks of the PCF. This would take the form of an intervention in a debate organized by the Sorbonne Philosophy Branch of the French Union of Communist Students on the 16th of December 1976, later published. In contrast to the more critical tone of the *Vaches Noires*, here Althusser begins on a positive tone: '*never* has the mass movement, never has the workers' and people's revolutionary movement, despite serious local defeats and despite the problems raised by the socialist countries, been so powerful in the world' (Althusser 1977, p. 4). Althusser acknowledges that 'the 'abandonment' of the dictatorship of the proletariat has played its part as a symbolic act, making it possible to present in spectacular fashion the break with a certain past, left vague verbally, while opening the road to a *different* socialism (from that reigning in the USSR)' (Althusser 1977, p. 10). At the same time he insists that the important aspect has exactly to do with the initiatives of the masses.

To tell them, even if still only as a hint, that they will have to *organize themselves* autonomously, in original forms, in firms, urban districts and villages, around the questions of labour and living conditions, the questions of housing, education, health, transport, the environment, etc.; in order to define and defend their demands, first to prepare for the establishment of a revolutionary state, then to maintain it, stimulate it

and at the same time force it to 'wither away'. Such mass organizations, which no one can define in advance and on behalf of the masses, already exist or are being sought in Italy, Spain and Portugal, where they play an important part, despite all difficulties. (Althusser, 1977, p. 11)

At the same time, Althusser repeated the line of criticism already suggested in the July lecture, including the insistence '*there is no socialist mode of production, there are no socialist relations of production, no socialist law, etc.*' (Althusser, 1977, p. 15). And it is on the basis of this criticism that Althusser presents an image of the transition as struggle and transformation.

Truly, and I ask that these words be carefully weighed, to 'destroy' the bourgeois state, in order to replace it with the state of the working class and its allies, *is not to add the adjective 'democratic' to each existing state apparatus*. It is something quite other than a formal and potentially reformist operation, it is to revolutionize in their structures, practices and ideologies the existing state apparatuses; to suppress some of them, to create others; it is *to transform the forms of the division of labour* between the repressive, political and ideological apparatuses; it is *to revolutionize their methods of work and the bourgeois ideology* that dominates their practices; it is to assure them *new relations with the masses* in response to mass initiatives, on the basis of a new, *proletarian* ideology, in order to prepare for the 'withering away of the state', i.e. its replacement by mass organizations. (Althusser, 1977, p. 17)

All these attest to the fact that Althusser chose to intervene in the debates around the dictatorship of the proletariat not just to defend a notion from the tradition of Marxism, nor to simply insist on a 'philological' reading of Lenin. It is not simply about suggesting an insistence on the revolutionary road and not 'reformism'. Rather it is at the centre of Althusser's critique of the theory, politics and ideology of the Communist movement at that period. It combines Althusser's rethinking of the very notion of the mode of production and consequently of the impossibility of a socialist mode of production, of the primacy of class struggle over classes, of the primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces, of the need to rethink the deeply class character and the non-neutrality of the State (and consequently of the inadequacy of most Marxist thinking on the State), and of the need to rethink social transformation as intensified class struggles, of popular initiatives from below and of deep structural

transformations induced exactly by the force of popular movements. As such it was both an apprehension of the dynamics of the movements that had emerged in the previous years and of the inadequacies of the strategy of the Communist movement.

At the same time, it was a call for a new research program on both the State and its class role and function and on the need to rethink the highly original political and organizational forms the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat alluded to. Moreover, Althusser at this stage considers the 'elements of communism' emerging within struggles as potentialities that in their turn can only be materialized through a 'long march' of struggles, ruptures and transformative practices, an entire period of confrontation.

This research programme would take various forms and we can see it guiding various interventions by Althusser: the interventions on the crisis of Marxism (which also stressed the absence of a theory of the State in Marxism), the *Marx in his Limits* manuscript, the critique of Gramsci in *What is to be done?* (Althusser 2020).

The centrality of the dictatorship of the proletariat for Althusser as a conception of a transition to communism that is marked by struggles, confrontation but also invention and experimentation, is something that can account for many aspects of his theoretical interventions. For example his emphasis on the capitalist state being a machine turning social force into political power and law is an expansion of his insistence to see the bourgeois state, including advanced liberal parliamentary democracies, as dictatorships of the bourgeoisie, namely as non- neutral and class determined political forms that can only be deeply transformed. It is his answer to any conception that the bourgeois state can be used as it is or it can be simple 'self-transformed'. In this sense, it is under the prospect of the dictatorship of the proletariat that we can understand his polemics with Poulantzas and his resistance to what he perceived as the danger that Gramsci could be read as argument in favor of a reformist approach (something that unfortunately had the cost of his 'missed encounter' with Gramsci).

And indeed in *Marx in his limits* Althusser returns to the question of the social and political forms of the dictatorship of the proletariat. He insists the notion of dictatorship does not refer to a *political regime* or *government by decree* but to *class domination* and, in the case of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the *transformations* such class domination induces and the novel *institutions* such a process requires.

If it is to exist, this domination must exist in the forms of production (nationalizations combined with a more or less extensive market sector, self-management, workers' control over production, and so on), in political forms (councils, represented in a National Council by their delegates) and in ideological forms (what Lenin called cultural revolution). (Althusser, 2006, p. 90)

And Althusser reminds of Lenin's insistence that the political form of the dictatorship of the proletariat is exactly a *mass democracy*: 'Lenin understood this very well: he contrasted the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, as the dictatorship of the few, with the dictatorship of the proletariat, that of the immense majority of the people, arguing that *the political form which corresponded to this dictatorship (or domination) was mass democracy (by no means dictatorship)*' (Althusser, 2006, p. 91).

In the 1977-78 *Philosophy for non-philosophers* Althusser also returns to this question. Here the emphasis is on the need for the communist party to not be a *party of government* even under conditions of the dictatorship of the proletariat:

This point is crucial, for a communist party has no business entering the government of a bourgeois state (even if this government is a 'left' government of popular unity intent on carrying out democratic reforms) in order to 'administer' the affairs of a bourgeois state. But it also has no business entering a government of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the belief that its ultimate vocation is to '*administer*' *the affairs of this state, whose destruction it should be preparing* . For if it devotes all its forces to such administration, it will be unable to help to destroy the state. A communist party can consequently not conduct itself on any grounds whatsoever as a 'party of government', for to be a party of government is to be a 'party of the state', something that comes down either to serving the bourgeois state or helping to perpetuate the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat – when a communist party's mission is to help to destroy it. (Althusser 2017a, p. 125-126)

Consequently Althusser stresses not only the radical novelty of the political practice associated with working class struggles and a communist horizon, but also that this entails a new radically democratic conception of forms of political organization.

Contrary to bourgeois political organizations, dominated by a caste of politicians or technocrats, proletarian political organizations tend towards the greatest possible

democracy of discussion, decision and action, even if this tradition too can be lost. On the basis of this extensive mass political experience, a new ideology arises and gradually gains strength, an ideology in which history is no longer made by individuals or ideas, but by the self-organized masses. (Althusser 2017a, p. 138)

And again Althusser returns to the *leitmotiv* of the communist elements already existing in contemporary social forms, not as a dream or political desire, but as actual tendency and even necessity.

The proletariat knows that these perspectives are not utopian, for communism is not a dream, but a necessity, a tendency, inscribed in the history of the present. Yes, communism already exists in our midst and has for a long time now, not just in embryo, but in actual fact: for example, in communist organizations and other communities (even religious communities) or activities – on one absolute condition: *that no commodity relations reign in them, but only the free association of individuals who desire the emancipation of humanity and act accordingly.* (Althusser 2017a, p. 139)

This is again linked to the conception of socialism as a transition period of intensified struggle that entails the possibility of defeat and is also in a sense *aleatory*.

For socialism is no longer capitalism, but is not yet communism. It is a *transition* in which capitalist relations (surplus value, wage-work, money, the state and its apparatuses, the regime of political parties) coexist with communist relations (collective property, the party and so on). During this transition, the class struggle continues, albeit in new, often unrecognizable forms, threatening the progress of the crossing. Yes, it is possible to lapse back into capitalism, if one follows an economistic, idealist line. The vestiges of prophetic ideology in Marx himself notwithstanding, the transition to communism is never guaranteed in advance, even if one proclaims, as does the USSR, that one is already establishing its ‘material bases’. (This is a concept that makes little sense in Marxist theory, which, for its part, talks about *the* base, that is, the infrastructure, not about ‘material bases’, which might then be distinguished from the relations of production.) Hence there is a need for the kind of political vigilance that never loses sight of the prospect of communism and never sacrifices its long-term future for the sake of immediate reforms, albeit well aware that that future is aleatory. (Althusser 2017a, p. 140)

This brings us to another important aspect of Althusser's endeavour. We know that the same time with these interventions on the dictatorship of the proletariat Althusser was following another research programme, that of a highly original materialism of the encounter, a rewriting of historical materialism under a radically anti-teleological stance, one took up a line of reasoning already present in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination'. The notion of the encounter explicitly appears in texts already in the second half of the 1960s, in the 1973 course on Rousseau and the other 1970s manuscripts. And as G.M. Goshgarian has suggested the materialism of the encounter is the non-philosophy of the dictatorship of the proletariat (Goshgarian 2006). For Althusser the materialism of the encounter is presented as a different parallel lineage in the history of philosophy.

With the thesis of the encounter, Epicurus introduced into philosophy an idea of phenomenal importance that has hardly been consciously perceived until now, except by Machiavelli, Spinoza and Marx. That everything is an encounter, of either elementary particles or composite bodies and subjects; that every encounter takes place under the domination of [*sous*] that other encounter of time, space and their contents that we call a conjuncture (using a word that repeats 'encounter', but in the form of junction); and that every encounter is, under the conditions stated above, contingent, and necessarily contingent – all this opens up unprecedented perspectives on events, and thus also on history and time. (Althusser 2017a, p. 142)

The political character and the research into the materialism of the encounter was already obvious in elements such as the increased emphasis on the effectivity (and primacy) of class struggle and on the importance on treating the State as what transforms an excess of social forces into political power and law. But it is also related, in texts like the 1976 *Être marxiste en philosophie* where it is combined with a thinking of the *limit* and even the *margin*. In this reading the materialism of the encounter becomes a thinking of limits, margins and traces, combined with a certain thinking of the void as the space where encounters could be possible.

This is evident in his reading of Derrida on the notion of the margin: 'Derrida has very convincingly shown that we must look to the *margin* for the answer to the question of a limit that is not a limit' (Althusser 2017b, p. 127). Althusser here suggests

that this notion of the margin is exactly a thinking of what is outside or beyond an order of things, even when this is supposed to exclude any form 'outside':

We must accordingly find the means, and it is not easy, to think, simultaneously, the Order which is round, and thus limited by its curve, and the not-outside, that is, the absence of curves and limits. A limit that is, in sum, a non-limit, a circle that is a circle, but with no outside. (Althusser 2017b, p. 86)

So here we are facing with a notion of the margin as limit, as that is beyond the order of things, or the prevailing configuration of social forms and norms, but in a way that is both inside and outside, both immanent and contingent. And it here that Althusser enters into a dialogue with Derrida:

Derrida has very convincingly shown that we must to look to the *margin* for the answer to the question of a limit that is not a limit. Everybody knows what a margin is: there is one on this very page, an empty space alongside a full one. You would think that fullness could not do without emptiness, and the other way around. This presupposes a limit between the two, of course, but a limit that is not an Order or, at any rate, does not derive from an Order, since we can vary the margin, and thus the limit. It makes no difference whether the margin is two centimetres wide, or three; it's enough to come to an agreement with the compositor, and you're all set. Derrida has seen, then, that this 'play' matters to the margin, quite as much as the margin matters to the limit. But this 'play' of course changes everything, since it is free, not constrained; thus it frees itself and frees us of all Order, flat or round, monist or dualist, or even twisted. (Althusser, 2017b, p. 127)

It is here that the margin becomes a metaphor or a synecdoche for the emergence of antagonistic social forms and practices.

This margin is now beginning to sustain our hopes, after being subjected to our despair. For what is in the margin is marginal: the mad, children, deviants, philosophers, the mentally ill, deranged or normal artists, the abnormal and so on. And it turns out that, once normality has been demystified (Canguilhem has done a great deal to help us understand this, after Spinoza and Nietzsche), one suddenly realizes that interesting things go on in the vicinity of the margin: on the margin of official society, where the exploited workers and the immigrant workers are, together with children, from whose

mouths the truth has long come, and artists, from the greatest to the humblest, with Breton and his friends in-between, and the poor in spirit when they are saints, even if they don't know it, and the mad, and certain prisoners, Soviet and Latin American prisoners in particular and so on. The margin is also the beach, the one on which everyone will alight to enjoy the sun after we have at last crossed this terrible river of socialism in the boat of the dictatorship of the proletariat. And then we shall have the free reign of the margin on the beach of communism: there will be no more written texts, no more written right, no more written law, no more written orders, no more writing, nothing but living traces, traces of the spoken word, exchanges of words and goods without money, without (written) accounts, exchanges of looks and voices, of love or hate, with no dishonest descriptions of the merchandise. This will be the end of the dictatorship of writing, the end of the dictatorship of language, the reign of the universal margin and the universal family, I tell you, the reign of whiteness, which one will see in the whites of people's eyes, the universal reign of whites, that is, of the white race, but all the races will be white [*blanc*], that is, all colours (Althusser, 2017a, p. 128)

Althusser in the first draft of *Being a Marxist in Philosophy* explicitly linked Derrida's theory of writing with Marx's theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat: 'Derrida has, moreover, worked out a whole theory of writing, as Marx had worked out a whole theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which our leaders have unfortunately failed to understand' (Althusser 2017b, p. 169). See also another quote from the first draft: 'The fact that a theory of the margin such as his leads straight to the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat' (Althusser 2017b, p. 169).

I believe that the problematic of the encounter both informs Althusser's attempt for a more radical critique of the statism and reformism of the official Communist Movement and sets the limit of the critique. It informs it by providing a much more open conception of historical causality and thus of the complexity, contingency and possibility of historical ruptures and revolutionary sequences. Moreover, this emphasis on the contingency of the conjuncture and on the importance of overdetermination, also implied an increased interest on the constant effectivity of the class struggle, an effectivity that is relational, non linear and open to different outcomes. If everything has to do in the last instance with a relation of forces in social and political antagonism, then an element of radical contingency is introduced at the centre of any thinking of a politics of social transformation. At the same time this points to the question what political practice can indeed enable us to work towards good encounters? One could

point here to the very notion of the *new practice of politics* and also to Althusser's constant return to the thematic of the popular initiatives of the masses. One could suggest that this is indeed like working towards good encounters. Because this reliance on popular initiatives and also on mass democracy has an element of experimentation and also of accepting contingency but also working towards it, working towards creating both the elements of a potential overdetermination, but also towards the emergence of communist elements and communist virtualities.

On the other hand there is always the temptation or even the danger of the encounter being treated as a purely aleatory process, a kind of randomization of any form of political practice. When this is projected upon the theoretical and political challenges based by the very notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of the conception of socialism as a transition period traversed by struggles and conflicts, then the tension becomes more evident. The element of the *longue durée* of struggles and transformative practices seems to be somehow overshadowed by this idea of communist elements already existent. What is more important is that in some instances this emphasis on the contingent and even aleatory character of political practice is combined with this emphasis on communist elements already existing, communism already existing.

Take for example the following quotation from the 1978 dialogue with Rossana Rossanda and how it appeared in *Dialectiques*:

Marx thinks of communism as a *tendency* of capitalist society. This tendency is not an abstract outcome. It already exists concretely in the 'interstices of capitalist society' (a little like the commodity exchanges that existed 'in the interstices' of slave or feudal society), virtual forms of communism: in the associations that accomplish, all aspects considered, to escape commodity relations. (Althusser, 1998, p. 285)

Such a passage can be read in two ways. Either as a reference to the elements of communism that need a lot of elaboration and struggle and thus more thinking of the political and organizational forms and strategic options that point to this direction, or as to the constant re-emergence of communist elements in the hope some of these encounters might hold, but without being in a position to do much to that direction.

In regards to the first possible reading one could return to Althusser's reference to a *dialectic of the tendency* in *Marx in his limits*, again as part of a discussion of the

dictatorship of the proletariat as conflict and struggle. Althusser insists that we need to think

in terms of a dialectic of the tendency, necessarily entangled 'with countervailing causes' (spawned, first and foremost, by the tendency itself), in which it is both possible and necessary to intervene politically in order to make possible the realization of this tendency. Without this 'intervention', the tendency will never be automatically realized. If this 'intervention' is inept, the worst is to be feared: the mediocrity of a 'historical compromise' whose variants can be infinite, and which can culminate in horrors. All that is required is that the situation of imperialism lend a helping hand. (Althusser 2006, p. 94)³

So in this first reading the crucial question is what kind of political *intervention* can actually enhance these tendencies already existing and – at the same time – also make good use of whatever necessarily unforeseeable dynamics emerge in always singular conjunctures. It is here the importance of Althusser's constant dialogue with Machiavelli, even from the early 1960s acquires its full potential. Because it is in Althusser's reading of Machiavelli and this particular conception of '*thinking under the conjuncture*' (Althusser, 1999, p. 18) that we can find some crucial reference points. Of particular importance is how Althusser describes the complex dialectic of assessment and intervention in a *relation of forces* that the very notion of political practice entails:

Therewith, in next to no time, the meaning of all the elements of the conjuncture changes: they become real or potential forces in the struggle for the historical objective, and their relations become relations of force. They are assessed as *relations of force*, as a function of their engagement, with a view to the political objective to be attained. The whole question then becomes: in what *form* are all the positive forces currently available to be rallied, in order to achieve the political objective of national unity? Machiavelli gives this form a name: the Prince. An exceptional individual, endowed

³ Althusser will insist on the importance of the Marx's conception of *tendential laws* also in his texts from the 1980s: 'Living history obeys only a constant (not a law): the constant of class struggle. Marx did not use the term 'constant', which I have taken from Levi-Strauss, but an expression of genius: 'tendential law', capable of inflecting (but not contradicting) the *primary tendential law*, which means that a tendency does not possess the form or figure of a linear law, but that it can bifurcate under the impact of an encounter with another tendency, and so on *ad irifinitum*. At each intersection the tendency can take a path that is unforeseeable because it is *aleatory*.' (Althusser 2006, p. 264.).

with *virtù*, who, starting from nothing or from something, will be able to mobilize the forces required to unify Italy under his leadership. There is nothing astonishing about the fact that this form is valorous *individuality*. (Althusser, 1999, p. 19)

The very difficulty of this endeavour, which is both political and intellectual is again discussed by Althusser in his dialogue with Machiavelli, where what he confronts in thought that are actually contradictions in reality and in the last instance can only be removed by reality. This conception of political action and political thinking is obvious in passages such as the following

Machiavelli not only formulates, but thinks, his problem politically - that is to say, as a contradiction in reality that cannot be removed by thought, but only by reality. It can be removed only by the sudden appearance - necessary, but unforeseeable and inascribable as regards place, time and person - of the *concrete* forms of the political encounter whose general conditions alone are defined. In this theory that ponders and preserves the disjuncture, room is thereby made for political practice. Room is made for it through this organization of disjoined theoretical notions, by the discrepancy between the definite and indefinite, the necessary and the unforeseeable. This discrepancy, thought and unresolved by thought, is the presence of history and political practice in theory itself. (Althusser, 1999, p. 80)

For the second possible reading of this conceptualization of the communist elements already present and active we can return to the 1976 *How to be a Marxist in philosophy* we can already see this thinking of the 'margin', metonymy for communist elements already existing, as something in a sense always already.

What is encouraging – for I know you, you are going to say I'm raving – is that the margin is no utopia; it exists today, well and truly, in reality. Witness not just Derrida's theory, but the existence of all the marginal sorts, in the official statistics or not. It exists and is developing in every country – yes, in every country, even the USSR. I shall explain that to you some day; unfortunately, I don't have the time today. (Althusser, 2017a, p. 88)

I would like to stress this image of the margin also in another sense. One of Althusser's main preoccupations in the 1970s has to do with the question of the

autonomous organizations of the masses. As we have seen for Althusser this is an integral aspect of his conception of the politics of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In his text on the 22nd Congress of the PCF he stressed the importance of

restoring their voice to the masses who make history. Not just putting oneself 'at the service of the masses' (a slogan which may be pretty reactionary), but opening one's ears to them, studying and understanding their aspirations and their contradictions, their aspirations in their contradictions, learning how to be attentive to the masses' imagination and inventiveness. (Althusser 1977, p. 11)

Althusser gradually started referring to this as a contradiction, stressing the distance between the communist organizations and the autonomous social movements along with the relation with the state. In his 1977 intervention on the 'Crisis of Marxism' he makes the following point:

In the East as in the West we are confronted with the grave problem of the relation existing between these organizations and the State: with the problem, in the East, of the fusion of these organizations with the State, an open fusion; with the problem, in the West, of the risk of fusion, because the bourgeois State never stops trying to integrate the organizations of class struggle of the working class into its own operations, often with success. (Althusser 1978, p. 220)

This in regards to the question of the relation between the Party and the State and Althusser's already discussed insistence that the Party should not be fully incorporated into the State. At the same time Althusser stressed the importance of autonomous organizations of the masses, independent of not only the State but also the party. Again in the "Crisis of Marxism" Althusser stresses the crucial question:

And above all – the most important of questions for past and future – how can relations be established with the mass movement which, transcending the traditional distinction between trade union and party, will permit the development of initiatives among the people, which usually fail to fit into the division between the economic and political spheres (even 'added together')? Because we are witnessing more and more mass movements of the people arising by themselves, outside of the trade unions and parties, bringing – or capable of bringing – something indispensable to the struggle. In short,

how can we properly respond to the demands and expectations of the masses of the people. (Althusser 1978, p. 220)

I think that here we can find the basic tension running through Althusser's rethinking of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is the tension between insisting on the centrality of the party form in the attempt towards seizure of power, which remains part of Althusser's 'Leninism' and all the emphasis on the autonomous initiatives, organizational forms and collective struggles of the masses viewed as already existing elements or traces or outlines of communism. This tension is exacerbated by Althusser's growing insistence on how historical processes and political sequences can only be thought as encounters, contingent and even aleatory and in no way pre-conditioned and even planned. Of course, one might say that this is tension running through the very notion of politics as defined by a Machiavellian conception of over-determination.

However, although Althusser's initial project, including all his highly original epistemological approach, seems to suggest an attempt to think not only *fortuna*, but also *virtu*, the collective ability, organizational and intellectual, to actually think and do politics under the conjuncture, in certain way as trying to create social political and intellectual conditions for 'good encounters' and 'lasting encounters', it seems that this greater apprehension of the extent of the crisis of the communist movement takes the form of an even greater reliance on the *fortuna* of already existing and spontaneously emerging elements of communism.

In the end this tension takes the form of Althusser's almost poetic thinking of islets of communism. This is evident, for example, on a note by Althusser in 1980

I am in Greece with friends. In Athens. What a wonderful country: the beauty of the city under the sun, and now the storm: a splendour, I see the city from the apartment, and I am listening to Beethoven's 7th Symphony on the radio. Only the sea, the islands, and the beach are missing. The woman I love is with me. Friends will come, wonderful. I am happy and communism is within reach.

Communism exists today in all places where

- 1) there is no commodity relation
- 2) therefore no economic exploitation
- 3) therefore no political domination
- 4) therefore no ideological servitude or intimidation

It exists everywhere in the world, in the islets of friendship (between all the friends that love each other and talk about what interests them, between all the children that play, between all the men that play football or other games where it is about winning by respecting the rules of the game, without hurting anyone) Communism is respect for others, when all relations of exploitation, domination and intimidation have been suppressed or suspended. (Althusser 2018)

The same tone emerges in Althusser's intervention in Italy in April 1980 in Terni. Here is a journalistic account of his intervention

Communism exists "everywhere – even here, today, in Terni, or in a church, or on a field where football is played – there where real relationships, are created, islets of communism characterized by three conditions: no economic exploitation, no pressure from political power, no ideological servitude." "Otherwise," Althusser adds, "socialism is crap." Communism is not eclipsed, on the contrary, "the future is played in our head," on condition of defeating all "paper tigers," all "misconceptions." (Lo Iacono 2015)

In the 1980s this thinking would take even more extreme forms, including his provocative suggestion in 1986 that the world is in its most part already communist or liberated and that there are only 'imperialist interstices'. It is in this context, and taken into consideration the element of his isolation at that period, that Althusser would insist on a rather minimalist approach even to the question of the Party, when in the 1986 *Theses de Juin* he envisions a

Centre of ideological convergence for the liberation and freedom in the world. A centre which will be a centre of information and not of direction: a centre freely open to all active groups where exchanges of information will take place. An international convergence for liberation [*une convergence internationale pour la liberation*] (CIL). I repeat: without power of decision, or even orientation. A centre of encounter, of exchanges and researches and above all an information bank on the situation of class struggle in all the countries of the world. (Althusser, 1986, p. 12)

It is obvious that here we have reached the other side of this constant 'bending of the stick'. At the same time, one might say that this is an inescapable tension of

revolutionary politics, in the form of the tension between the expansive political and ideological forms that are necessary to actually counter the weight of the ideological apparatuses of the State (and also the repressive ones), with all the danger that they can become detached from the dynamics of class struggles and also to mutate in bureaucratic ossified form, or even become electoral machines without content, and on the other hand the constant problem of mass subaltern movements and dynamics that in many instances are suspicious or even hostile to political forms. It is also the tension between the *long durée* of organizing and preparing and laying the seeds in a way and the sudden and unforeseen highly overdetermined character of the kind of social and political explosions that are the only one capable of actually initiating sequence of social and political change. It is in a sense the very difficulty and in a certain sense tragedy of trying to do politics in a communist horizon, inspired indeed by the traces of communist in struggles, solidarity and small scale liberation from the constraints of the market and the realization of both the pervasive extent of the domination by capital and the fact that actual opportunities will emerge only when you are at least prepared for them. It is, to use of Althusser's own masters, what Spinoza suggested when he insisted the *potentia multitudinis* is the only 'ontological' foundation of all political forms, including those of mass servitude.

Is there a way out? I am not sure. I would suggest that since this is an inescapable tension the best thing to do is to embrace it in the sense of experimenting with political forms that can incorporate this tension and at the same time enhance its positive dynamics. It is here that perhaps Gramsci's conception of the modern Prince as laboratory for the emergence of new forms of political intellectual and as the terrain of a process of a self-transformation of the subaltern into a social force capable of reclaiming its 'integral autonomy', can be useful. But this is another story...

Conclusion

In this presentation I tried to highlight the tension in Althusser's writings between, on the one hand, a conception of transition based upon the combination of a form of a 'revolutionary sovereignty' combined with a constant effort towards transformation of social relations of production, and, on the other hand, a conception of communism emerging at the interstices of capitalist society. Althusser's writings point both towards an attempt to rethink communism as the limit of class antagonism and of

the struggle inscribed at the heart of the capitalist relation of production including the struggle and experimentation within the dictatorship of the proletariat, and towards an attempt to bypass the complex political labour of creating the conditions to turn these elements into new social forms and relations, i.e. all the effort associated with assembling the modern Prince and rethinking transition as both struggle and experimentation. Althusser, despite the unfinished and in certain instances contradictory character of his interventions (always ‘bending the stick to the other side’) offers a way to rethink the dictatorship of the proletariat and dual power as forms of liberating the collective ingenuity and experimentation of the subaltern classes. In a period where questions of political strategy and organization have returned to the fore Althusser offers indispensable starting points.

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