



Althusser, The Infinite Farewell

Emilio de Ípola

FOREWORD BY

Étienne Balibar

ALTHUSSER, THE INFINITE FAREWELL

ALTHUSSER,

Translated by Gavin Arnall *With a foreword by Étienne Balibar*

EMILIO DE ÍPOLA

THE INFINITE FAREWELL

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To Claudia

To Julia and Miguel

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Gavin Arnall
Ann Arbor, Michigan
May 2017

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE ON REFERENCES

Whenever possible, I cite existing English translations of original sources. If a text is cited that has not yet been translated, I provide my own translation and cite the original. Sometimes both the existing translation and the original source are cited if the latter provides relevant information to the reader or plays a role in the book's argument.

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A philosopher's purgatory can last for more or less time. In Althusser's case, it will have been thirty years. There is no shortage of reasons to explain this fact, and they should not be obscured. Certain signs suggest, however, that this purgatory may be coming to an end. How long will the current renewal of interest last, and what reassessment will it yield? How will it transform the intellectual image of the author of *For Marx* or the way we philosophize? It is likely too early to say. It is possible, however, to get an idea of the questions that will form the heart of the discussion.

Emilio de Ípola's book is one of the striking testaments to this reversal of fortune, perhaps the most original one to date.¹ This book combines three of the elements that have, in a general way, contributed to the unanticipated rise of "Althusserian" studies: the return to the intellectual context of the 1960s to 1980s by one of its active participants; the use of posthumous publications (which exceed in volume, and often in interest, that which appeared during Althusser's lifetime), in order to reexamine what motivated his "project," as well as the internal tensions that marked it; and the relation of this project to a political critique whose points of reference have changed but whose urgency is greater than ever. I do not hesitate to recommend it to both new and old enthusiasts of "theoretical practice."²

Emilio de Ípola's book is written in the first person, and I will ask permission to do the same in the hopes that, rather than leading to sentimentalism, it will more candidly reveal "where I'm speaking from," as one used to say. Having been (along with others) the student, collaborator, and friend

of the man designated here as the “classic Althusser,” I cannot claim any detachment from what is discussed in these pages. I will not conceal, then, that I read de Ípola’s book with much emotion and much pleasure, but also with much interest and, before long, much surprise. He brought me the book one evening when I was in Buenos Aires, lending my support to a teaching program that is striving to maintain a long tradition of Franco-Argentinian exchanges. Emilio is not the kind of person who broadcasts the importance of his work to sing his own praises. He is one of the most authentic dandies I’ve ever had the fortune to meet, a man you might see up on the barricades with a cigar between his teeth, someone whom generations of students have revered, while he insists he was just trying to pass along a few concepts. “You’ll see,” he told me, “I went back to those old debates from our youth using the files at IMEC.³ Maybe some of my *porteño* ideas will move you to laughter or tears.” That’s putting it mildly. I spent all night devouring it. Then I reread it pen in hand, determined to make this work accessible to a non-Hispanophone readership.

Before getting into the substance of the book and describing what I believe to be the contribution of de Ípola’s analysis, it would be fitting to say a few words about the very particular relationship that Althusser maintained with Latin American intellectual revolutionaries during the 1960s and 1970s. In France and the rest of Europe, and elsewhere still, everyone had an opinion about his “intervention.” There were Althusserians and anti-Althusserians, attempts at application or extrapolation, virulent critiques, and reversals of attitude dictated by reflection, emotion, or political stances, not to mention Althusser’s own palinodes. But between Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, São Paulo, Bogotá, Mexico City, and even Havana, at least for a few years, in the period between the guerrillas and the dictatorships—as what Régis Debray called “the revolution in the revolution” was finding its way among the “paths” of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Salvador Allende—the situation was altogether different: there was a general conviction not only that Marxism was *alive*, but that it was being *reborn*, in the strict sense of the term.⁴ Effacing decades of dogmatism and revisionism to undertake the “return to Marx,” going inside his laboratory of thought and reassessing all the old assumptions from a different perspective, which allowed for an absolute fidelity to what the author of *Capital* intended and, at the same time, the victorious overcoming of the obstacles that had tripped up “Marxists” in his wake. The Marxism “recommended” by Althusser would have been, as in a Jorge Luis Borges story (but now with

stakes that were in direct contact with history), at once *identical* to itself and yet *entirely other*;⁵ Marxism's own empirical history would, in retrospect, have represented a deviation or "drift [*dérive*]."⁶ In this way, the figure of Althusser managed, incredibly, to become distinct from the interpreter or critic, without transforming into the political leader; instead, he came to resemble a "double."

There would be room, of course, to interrogate the historical, cultural, psychological, and geopolitical reasons for this representation, which was fashioned out of desire and the imaginary, but also out of demand and intractability.⁷ Some other time, if I can muster the courage, I will describe the devastating effects that this representation ultimately had on Althusser himself—who was unable to bear the position of master, even at a distance. But here we are discussing something more cheerful. After coming to terms with the hope of witnessing the return of truth incarnate, after regaining freedom in the face of both nostalgia and resentment, after effectively measuring the distance between two worlds that are in some sense each other's doubles—which for this very reason can neither divide nor intersect—reflection can take its rightful place. This book, *The Infinite Farewell*, which presents itself as an anamnesis provoked by the shock of the encounter with Althusser's posthumous works, is not just a portrait—the likeness of which we will discuss later on—but also a veritable conversation with him, a conversation in which the irreducible multiplicity of his faces mitigates to some extent his actual absence. In the absence of the ability to summon him to respond, it is still possible to set up the discussion he must have had with himself (or should have had) and to intervene as a third party. What results is a powerful and original construction that is anything but mere commentary. It owes as much to the concerns, knowledge, and thought of its author as it does to the formulations of *Reading Capital* and *Machiavelli and Us*. Others may, if they wish, enter into this work themselves and seek to inflect it. I think it would be time well spent.

Let us now look at how this book breaks new ground in its reading and discussion of Althusser. It will be helpful to follow the order of the three main chapters. In chapter 2, de Ípola offers an entirely updated interpretation of Althusser's relation to structuralism, based essentially on the reconstruction of his so-called *différend* with Lévi-Strauss, the difference between his attitude and Lacan's, and the importance of Badiou's and Miller's interventions in this domain. This interpretation is not archaeological or anecdotal. We will see that it is a key to arguments about the much-discussed

“theoreticism.” The approach de Ípola has chosen imparts the full weight of a philosophical problem as profound as it is difficult—that of “structural causality”—that has not yet, perhaps, revealed all its dimensions.

I can attest to the fact that the dispute between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss in the early 1960s over the articulation of symbolic structures and the different regimes of historicity (following the nearly simultaneous publication of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and *The Savage Mind*) indeed sparked numerous theoretical projects (in Marxism, epistemology, and applied psychoanalysis, as well as anthropology and politics, in the history of philosophy), which the group provisionally assembled around Althusser was attempting to combine.⁸ I also think de Ípola is right to propose a symptomatic reading of the denials contained in the double movement of imitation and rejection that marked our attitude toward the idea of “structure” as Lévi-Strauss understood it, both before and after *Reading Capital* was put together. Some minor individual differences aside, Althusser and the rest of us were all much closer than we ever wanted to admit to the question posed by the idea of symbolic efficacy (one need only look closely, as de Ípola does here, at the analogies between the problematic of the lacking signification [*signification manquante*] in Lévi-Strauss and that of the absent cause in Althusser to be convinced of this fact) and, on the other hand, not attentive enough to its implications with respect to the question of the “supposition of the subject,” to the extent that structure reveals itself to be essentially incomplete, marked by a constitutive lack. By the same token, I think he is right to suggest that in this ambivalent relation to structuralism (which combined a systematic attempt to take structuralism beyond its own formulations and a retreat before its “idealist” philosophical consequences) there resides one of the keys—if not *the* key—to the uncertainties and inconsistencies that mark Althusser’s theoretical project: either one attributes these to the internal, subterranean pressure of another philosophy that is contradictory with the first and betrays itself in the form of a “Freudian slip,” or else one attributes them to the external pressure of politics and its organizational demands. The implications of this complex would also be the point of departure for revisiting what, precisely, is *theoretical* in Althusser’s *theoreticist* ambition (which we shared with him) to rectify the course of revolutionary politics by starting from an “epistemological break,” which was understood as tantamount to a revolution in the field of “science.”

As a matter of fact, this work, which brings up to date fine conceptual figures and surprising relationships between texts, is not lacking in contem-

porary relevance; it goes beyond a rewriting of Althusser's self-critique that would restore to him what he *did not say* or said insufficiently.⁹ Indeed, now is the time to reread the structuralist debate and to reassess the roles that different representatives of the "philosophical moment" of the 1960s played in that debate.¹⁰ And this rereading must not limit itself to discussions about the legitimacy of applying the "linguistic model" to anthropology, literature, the history of religion, and psychoanalysis, or (to use Milner's terminology)¹¹ the relation between a "research program" and a "structuralist *doxa*," or the possibility or impossibility, in general, of relegating questions of knowledge and practice (even those of affectivity and "life") to one or more *orders of discourse*, to an *instance of the letter*, as Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida debated. This rereading must address above all the relation between the *idea of structure* as such and the category of the *subject*, which governs the entirety of classical philosophy (potentially under other names, in particular, that of *praxis*). As I have argued elsewhere, this relation cannot be reduced to a reciprocal exclusion (such that a coherent structuralism would constitute the archetype of a philosophy "without a subject," and the condition for thinking subjectivity would be to "do away with structure"), yet it necessarily entails a certain contradiction. In recreating—"inventing," in the literal sense—the debates of Lévi-Strauss and Althusser on this topic, de Ípola does not just reconstruct the backdrop of contemporaneous developments (the most ambitious expression of which was probably the Lacanian notion of the *barred subject*, which Jacques-Alain Miller related to the *function of misrecognition* that Althusser said was shared by Marx's and Freud's critiques of humanism); he also brings to light a singular chiasm [*chassé-croisé*]. It is unquestionably true that adopting the structural point of view should block the path to any conception of any *constituting subject* (be it in thought or in history), at the risk of seriously troubling any political philosophy that takes on the task of recognizing in history the collective subject capable of "transforming the world." But, as it so happens, the incessantly renewed questioning into the properties and modalities of the *constituted subject* (for Althusser, the subject constituted by "ideology," which is itself considered to be the representative "instance" in which the material "last instance" is recognized and misrecognized) confers on Lévi-Strauss's work a remarkable relevance after the fact. What de Ípola diagnoses in Althusser is a wavering between a return to the themes of philosophies of praxis (Sartre, Gramsci, even Lukács) to reestablish the possibility of a *transformation* of social relations and the existing state of things, and (the more interesting op-

tion, in his view) the ambiguous opening (in the form of things that spring to mind in a premonitory way, or Freudian slips) onto another problematic (by way of “conjuncture,” “singularity,” and “overdetermination”). One can see that he also took cues from Lévi-Strauss himself as to the relations between culture and individual psychical processes, which form the very site of variation and, more profoundly, of anthropological *deviation*.

I will say no more about that. But one can see, I think, that de Ípola’s analysis harbors the seeds of a *general* questioning (concentrated here on two authors) of what, in the work of structuralists—those who claim that label or repudiate it, those whose work is of greater or lesser significance—makes it possible to revolutionize the question of the subject, starting with a critique of its ideological and metaphysical inheritance, but also to clear the way for a new position, one that is still uncertain, in which indeterminacy and efficacy could be in question simultaneously. This allows us to glimpse the fact that, from a philosophical perspective, the great frontier that must be recognized is the problematic of *modalities* (classically: reality, contingency, necessity). Such would indeed be the heart of the inquiries undertaken by the “last Althusser,” which de Ípola, in a Straussian vein, dubs *esoteric*.¹² But prior to this, we must go through and take seriously, whether we want to or not, the privileged lens through which Althusser, nearly from start to finish, undertook to treat (and rectify) the philosophy of the subject: his problematic of *ideology*, which he attempted to think “for Marx and against Marx.”

Let us move on, then, to the second trouble spot identified by de Ípola (in chapter 3). One might ask oneself, ultimately, given both the problems it encompasses (precisely those having to do with the *constitution of the subject*) and the method it unceasingly applies (which is always characterized, at bottom, by the search for a *double inscription of the ideological*, at once “within” and “without” the existing social formation, or knowledge, thus at the point where these are made and undone), whether ideology for Althusser is not another name for structure. I am tempted to think so, retrospectively, and to draw from this an argument in favor of the idea that, in his search for a “philosophy for Marxism” that would not be the existing “Marxist philosophy” (the centerpiece of which has always been the development of the *materialist concept of ideology*, which Marx named but immediately gave up in favor of considerations grounded in the search for the “language of real life” and in the power of the “ideas of the dominant class”), Althusser was destined sooner or later to run into a contradiction