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The Political Encounter with Louis Althusser: Introduction

Banu Bargu and Robyn Marasco

This special issue presents a collection of essays on the work of Louis Althusser. These essays commemorate Althusser's centennial and the publication of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* more than fifty years ago. Both texts have changed how we read Marx and how we make sense of the development of Marx's ideas. And both texts have contributed to the theoretical account of capitalist social formations and the politics of class struggle. True, much has changed about capitalism and its social relations in these past five decades. However, we believe that Althusser's thought remains as relevant as ever.

As the inequality between the wealthiest few and the rest reaches unprecedented proportions around the globe, as American cities organize in uprising against police violence and the streets of Paris erupt in protest against new taxes on workers, as the state apparatuses more aggressively reproduce populist nationalisms and assume a more authoritarian structure, understanding the complex politics of the masses and advancing class struggle have lost nothing of their urgency. With the concept and practice of science being altered by big data, looming planetary disaster continuously being dismissed as one narrative among many, and the emergence of a public discourse that thrives on post-truths, many of our conventional concepts and categories require rigorous rethinking and revitalization. These developments cast new light on Althusser's investments in the scientificity of Marxism, his revisions to a Lacanian idea of the Real, and his uncompromising antihumanism. As Marx's writings once again move into the mainstream of political debate and discourse, the positions that Althusser stakes out in reading Marx and reinvigorating Marxism demand serious consideration. And while the alt-right is galvanized by the specter of "cultural Marxism," a term that could also be applied to Althusser's thought and his celebrated concept of ideology, and while "democratic socialism" comes back into political vogue, the moment seems ripe for a re-assessment of his works.

Our aim in assembling this dossier is to put focus back on this prodigious Marxist philosopher. For us, what remains so compelling about Althusser's philosophy is the specific relationship it establishes to politics. We wanted to develop the *political* insights in Althusser's work, especially in light of the contemporary

conjuncture, and reconsider the relevance of his thought for our times. We were also interested to assess some of his important contributions to political theory by scrutinizing his encounter with different thinkers and how he enlists them for his own political and philosophical purposes. The contributing authors to this special issue take different approaches to Althusser and offer different ways of reading him, but each of them foregrounds political questions. Taken together, these essays suggest the primacy of politics in the encounter with Althusser.

Our intention in these pages is not to rehash old debates or rehearse the familiar controversies that surround Althusser's life and work. Instead, we see the time that has lapsed since Althusser's untimely withdrawal from public life as offering the possibility of reading Althusser afresh. This is not to say that all of his polemics remain relevant or that his denunciations of other left tendencies are definitive. In fact, certain features of his work remain significantly bound to an intellectual and political context that has long vanished. And yet, there are elements in his thought, ideas, and arguments that have gained further acuity, despite limitations and contradictions within his oeuvre.

This is why we hope to present his thought in a new light and in response to new problems. Some of essays in this issue deal with how Althusser inherits or engages other traditions and thinkers—Machiavelli, Rousseau, Hegel, Gramsci, Lenin, Freud, and Lacan, for example. Others put Althusser's thought in conversation with thinkers that he most certainly read and in turn influenced, though this influence was not always openly acknowledged—Foucault, most prominently. Our essays seek to articulate Althusserian concepts—the void, the police, interpellation, the state, the conjuncture—with new precision. Through these interventions, we hope to contribute to a larger conversation about Marxist philosophy and politics, perhaps in the collective spirit of Althusser and his core interlocutors, but with voices from beyond the inner circle of initiates. We hope to do this by clarifying the elements of a Marxist politics, identifying innovative strands for a materialist philosophy, forwarding class struggle, while also recognizing and attempting to address Althusser's limitations on such fundamental issues as race and racialization.

These essays pay tribute to Althusser's tremendous intellectual legacy without speaking to the much more difficult questions raised by his personal life, his struggle with mental illness, the death-by-strangulation of his long-time partner and wife, Hélène Rytman-Légotien, the complexities of his being declared unfit to stand trial, and his subsequent psychiatric internment and withdrawal from public view, which defined the last decade of his life. We are acutely aware of how his personal life has impacted the reception of his ideas and how this tragedy has been used to discredit not only Althusser himself, but also the entire tradition of Marxism of which he was a part. We have found it impossible to hold the personal and the philosophical completely apart, especially to the extent that Althusser's own psychobiography invites readers to think of them together. At the same time, we have also found the fusion of the personal and the

philosophical, in which one is the explanation for and condemnation of the other, unsatisfying and untenable. We began editorial work on the present collection before #MeToo brought this issue to the headlines, impacting every cultural institution and theoretical inheritance, including our own. Without presuming to speak for all the contributors to this issue, we as editors have felt the heavy burden of how to deal with Althusser the person while we continue to read and teach his works and draw inspiration from his thought.

Every encounter with Althusser is a political encounter. This is not just because of his life or his times or even his Marxism but because we believe, with Althusser, that materialist philosophy is a political weapon. Every theoretical practice has a philosophy, or a concept of truth, and every philosophy has a politics, or a concept of power. Mapping the relationship between them might be seen as the singular work of political theory. This is, in effect, the ambitious goal we have set for ourselves in reading Althusser today.