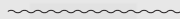


THE CONCEPT IN CRISIS

READING CAPITAL TODAY



NICK NESBITT, EDITOR

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Rereading *Reading Capital*

I do not believe there can be “Althusserians” in the strict sense of disciples of Althusser. One can only reiterate the questions he asked, and from them, fabricate others.

—YVES DUROUX

As he prepared his own contribution to the seminar that would become *Lire le Capital*, on October 2, 1963, Althusser wrote to Franca Madonia: “I’m working hard, and with good results; I’m reading *Capital* closely. Finally, I’m entering the citadel” (*Lettres à Franca* 459). After a period of intensive, even manic productivity in August–September 1962, in which he wrote many of the texts that would comprise *Pour Marx* in the span of a few weeks (and which Franca would translate in 1965), in the fall of 1964 Althusser set course with his “jeunes chiens,” the precocious group of students at the École normale supérieure de la rue d’Ulm gathered around him for a seminar in spring term 1965, undertaking the philosophical reading of Marx’s *Capital* that Althusser himself had previously called for in *Pour Marx*. The result, for the first time in Althusser’s experience, was a truly “collective work, a collective project in which each working on his own reaches the same results by the most unexpected paths” (*Lettres à Franca* 605). The seminar, collectively organized by Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Yves Duroux, Jacques Rancière, and Jean-Claude Milner, culminated in texts by Althusser, Balibar, Rancière, and Pierre Macherey (Roger Establet, absent from the École, would later submit a text on the structure of *Capital*). Working again at a frenetic pace by November 1963, Althusser could rightfully observe: “What I’m producing,” he wrote to Franca, “is incredible both in quantity and quality. I have so much to write, so much to say! . . . I’ve never been so conscious of the terrible danger contact with ideas represents—and at the same time the extraordinary power that it gives” (*Lettres à Franca* 482, 518). Each of the contributors produced works that, in

their originality, timeliness, and vitality, would come on the publication of *Lire le Capital* in 1965 to comprise one of the key interventions in twentieth-century critical theory.

Reading Capital marked a watershed in Marxist philosophy and critical theory more generally, constructing a dazzling array of concepts that still today can be said to constitute the syntax of radical philosophy and that continue to inspire philosophical reflection of the highest order. The volume constructed powerful critiques of Hegel, of expressive totality, of teleologies, of humanism, of empiricism understood in its broadest sense, of causality, of phenomenologies and psychologistic philosophies of conscious intentionality, of historicisms, historiographies, and historians of every stripe and color and their reliance on mere methodology; pursuing the path of philosophical orientation first delineated in Jean Cavailles's *On the Logic and Theory of Science* (1942), it undertook a Spinozist critique of phenomenology to pursue instead the construction of *concepts*, including the symptomatic reading, mode of production, overdetermination, the conjuncture, abstraction, structural causality, that of knowledge work as a form of production, of the necessity of contingency, of the very act of reading itself, and—in distinction to decades of reflexive and clichéd condemnation of Althusser's philosophy as somehow unable to think historical change—the construction of an array of critical concepts of a history with neither subject nor transcendental logic of transition.¹

In 1961, there occurred an encounter between a young, largely unknown philosophy professor, born in 1918, and a small group of apprentice philosophers, who were in search of theoretical guidance at the rue d'Ulm in order to pursue new directions in philosophy. The political conjuncture of the climax of the Algerian war pushed these students toward both a theoretical and political passion. Given their political militancy, they were particularly happy to discover in Althusser a Marxist philosopher in their midst at the rue d'Ulm. Duroux, Jacques Rancière, Balibar, and Macherey thus together first approached Althusser in 1961, intrigued by his first articles on Marx, to ask for guidance in their readings. They constructed a *plan de travail* for the next three years, a research project that would culminate in *Lire le Capital*. Among the crucial absences or gaps in the final product that is *Lire le Capital*, Balibar has noted that of Duroux, who never actually wrote up a contribution of his own following the end of the seminar, yet who was an essential participant at every stage of the seminar.²

Following close on the seminar itself, by March 1965, Althusser had decided to publish the volume with François Maspero, and in November 1965,

Maspero duly published *Lire le Capital* (*Reading Capital*) in two volumes, simultaneously with Althusser's collection of earlier essays from 1961 to 1965 as *Pour Marx*. By the standards of French academic publishing at the time, it was an immense and immediate hit, vaulting Althusser and his collaborators to prominence in Parisian circles of philosophical academia and communism, both within and without the Parti Communiste Français (PCF).

In early 1968, before the events of May, François Maspero approached Althusser with the idea of a second, abridged, more "accessible" paperback edition of *Lire le Capital*. At this point, the decision was made to eliminate fully half of the contributions from the original volume: those of Establet and Macherey, as well as Rancière's chapter "The Concept of Critique and the Critique of Political Economy from 'The 1844 Manuscripts' to *Capital*." This decision would fundamentally alter the reception of the book, as this second edition in fact served as the basis for the foreign translations of *Reading Capital*, including the Italian, Spanish, German, and English editions.³

The consequences, for those concerned, are evident: to mention only the most obvious, Rancière was ineluctably pushed in the direction his thought had already taken of a free-flowing critique of all intellectual Masters and inequality, the direct result of which was the brilliant and devastating polemic of his first book, *Althusser's Lesson*. Balibar, on the other hand, was confirmed and encouraged in his allegiance and fidelity to the Althusserian theoretical line, becoming, as he has stated, the "porte-parole" of Althusserian thought through the 1970s and 1980s.⁴

Subsequently, in 1973, this truncated second edition of *Lire le Capital* was augmented in the *Petite collection Maspero* with two further volumes: volume 3, containing Rancière's chapter "Le concept de critique et la critique de l'économie politique des 'Manuscrits de 1844' au 'Capital'" (unrevised, but without the autocritique entitled "Mode d'emploi" Rancière had wished to append to it), and volume 4, containing Macherey's "A propos du processus d'exposition du 'Capital': Le travail des concepts" (revised) and Roger Establet's "Présentation du plan du 'Capital'" (unrevised). If this late rectification restored the totality of *Lire le Capital*, if only for Francophone readers, in those waning days of Althusserian Marxism and the rise of a poststructuralist politics of desire, how many beyond a few specialists and unreformed structuralists can have made it through a text that Rancière himself had virtually disowned, to press on through that final, obscure volume 4? This complete 1973 edition would then be reprinted in 1996 by PUF in their Quadrige series

(and which is still in print as of this writing), with a new introduction by Étienne Balibar and Pierre Bravo Gala (with the collaboration of Yves Duroux), a list of errata from the 1968–1973 edition, along with an appendix listing the variations between the first and second editions. Finally, more than a half-century after the initial publication of this central text of critical theory, complete editions of *Lire le Capital* have as of this writing been published in English and German editions in addition to the original French.⁵

We thus find ourselves in a moment of rediscovery of *Lire le Capital*, at least in the Anglophone world. For a number of reasons, the historical diffusion and reception of *Reading Capital* since the 1970s was decisively inflected by the altered state of the abridged second edition. By 1967, the brief formalist, theoreticist moment in Marxist philosophy in France explosively initiated by *Reading Capital*, and that would culminate in the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, had passed. Reception and discussion of Althusser since the 1970s has arguably been linked above all to the critique of *ideology*, with the theoreticist, epistemological focus of 1965–1967 (itself developed from the antiphenomenological tradition of Cavailles, Bachelard, and Canguilhem) largely dismissed as wrong-headed or simply ignored.⁶ To cite only the most immanent and well-known critique of Althusser, it is astounding to witness how Rancière's 1973 book *Althusser's Lesson* reduces the array of critiques and concepts listed a moment ago to the following statement of the central proposition of *Reading Capital*: "The major thesis of *Reading Capital* [is] the manipulation of the blind subjects of social practice," writes Rancière in his devastating polemic (53).

In fact, in the Anglophone world, *Reading Capital* is increasingly coming to be appreciated not so much as ideology critique but as a culminating moment in the twentieth-century French tradition of epistemology that extends from Bachelard, Cavailles, and Albert Lautman to Canguilhem, and Foucault and Althusser. This was a tradition of thought that always and explicitly placed itself in opposition to all phenomenologies of consciousness. It seems that we are rediscovering this tradition, finally refusing all anti-intellectual disparagement of so-called theoreticism.⁷ A raft of recent publications—from Warren Montag's *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, to Peter Hallward and Knox Peden's two-volume critical edition and translation of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, to Peden's *Spinoza contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze*—have undertaken a critical revalorization and exploration of this epistemological tradition in which *Reading Capital* stands as one of the key and indeed culminating interventions.

Though this introduction can only hope to invoke a few of the key elements of this tradition set forth in Althusser's introductory essay on the Marxian epistemology of science, the key intertext with which Althusser remains in covert dialogue is clearly Jean Cavaillès's magnum opus, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*.⁸ While Althusser rarely mentions Cavaillès in his writings, Knox Peden has shown that he took notes on the latter as a student after the war, becoming intimately familiar with Cavaillès's thought through the influence of his close friend and mentor Jacques Martin, "to whom," Althusser wrote, "I owe practically everything."⁹ Warren Montag has argued that, more generally, "Althusser, fascinated by what he would later call 'philosophical strategy,' chose . . . to pursue something like a guerrilla war in the realm of theory, that is, a strategy of infiltration and impersonation that would allow him to gain a position within its walls from which an effective attack could be launched."¹⁰ If this is the case for Althusser's Lenin (to whom Montag here refers), for his Spinoza, Mao, and countless other figures and interlocutors, I would argue that Althusser's attack on the citadel of existentialist phenomenology is waged above all with the arms Cavaillès had forged.¹¹

Even more perhaps than his famous invocation of the necessity of a "lecture symptomale" (symptomatic reading) of *Capital* or Bachelard's "epistemological rupture," the fundamental ambition set forth in this text is to articulate a novel conception of the object of science, via the Spinozist distinction between the "object of knowledge" and the "real object."¹² "The production process of the object of knowledge," Althusser writes, "takes place entirely in knowledge" (RCC 41). While Althusser holds rigorously to Cavaillès's Spinozist epistemology, distinguishing between these two objects which nonetheless remain "modes" (43) of a single, material substance, his signal innovation is to introduce Marx within this Spinozist lineage of the philosophy of science, drawing upon the 1857 introduction to the *Grundrisse*. Science, in this view, is characterized not by the (empiricist) "reproduction" or representation of a truth "abstracted" from a real object in which it is held to exist, but instead is "produced" (38–41). While some eight pages from Marx's voluminous notebooks undoubtedly constitutes a flimsy basis for inducting Marx within the pantheon of Spinozist rationalism, this in a sense is Althusser's point; Marx's *scientific* critique of political economy still awaits the construction of the constellation of *philosophical* concepts adequate to its analysis.¹³

The scientific process of the exposition of a proof of necessity must in this view hold to two criteria: Spinoza's axiom of autonomy and adequacy (*verum index sui et falsi*) and Bolzano's assertion of *demonstration* as the proper

apodictic procedure to substantiate this indexification.¹⁴ In Cavallès's terms, "There is only one means of imposing an authority that borrows nothing from outside itself, there is only one unconditional mode of affirmation, demonstration . . . Science, if it is to be, consists entirely in demonstration" (39, 40).¹⁵ Althusser, following Cavallès's critique of Bolzano, adds to this assertion the problematic of history, of the relation, in other words, between the demonstration of an adequate and self-sufficient scientific truth and the norms of the demonstration of necessity holding at any moment in the history of thought: "The essential problem presupposed by the question of the existing type of *demonstrativity* is the problem of the history of the production of different forms in which theoretical practice . . . recognizes the validating norms it demands, [. . . norms that] at a given moment in the history of knowledge constitute the theoretical problematic . . . and hence the *forms* required to give the order of theoretical discourse *the force and value of a proof [démonstration]*" (RCC 50).¹⁶ For Cavallès and Althusser alike, the production and development of ideas is an infinite, nonteleological process. As a "structure of openness," the production of knowledge occurs necessarily, without ground or reference to consciousness (RCC 57).¹⁷

The key distinction inhering between Cavallès's and Althusser's epistemologies, however, centers on the relation of the object of thought to the "real" object. For Cavallès, focusing on mathematics as the paradigmatic instance of a post-Kantian, post-Husserlian science, the Cantorian revolution of set theory forces the construction of objects of knowledge that are inherently unimaginable, concepts (such as that of infinite sets) that bear no basis in empirical reality, yet which are rationally demonstrable.¹⁸ Althusser's focus on Marx's critique of political economy, in contrast, necessitates full consideration of the relation inhering between these two objects (of thought and the real). This problem forms the object of Althusser's critique of the Cartesian "closure of the ideological circle" in the concluding sections of his essay (53–73).

To carry through this critique, Althusser specifies the question to which his inquiry necessarily leads—"By what mechanism does the production of the object of knowledge produce the cognitive appropriation of the real object [*par quel mécanisme la production de l'objet de la connaissance produit-elle l'appropriation cognitive de l'objet réel*]" (58 [61])—but does so in terms that threaten to lead straight back into the empiricism he has just critiqued so powerfully. The term "appropriation," which Althusser takes directly from Marx's 1857 *Introduction*, clearly indicates a property-based relation between

the object of knowledge and a knowing subject who takes possession over a truth.¹⁹ This regression to an epistemological model of “appropriation” in the culminating sections of Althusser’s introduction makes it impossible for him to provide a substantial response to the Spinozist directive he has put forward: to “exclude any recourse to the ideological solution contained in the ideological characters Subject and Object.” This is clearly the case, insofar as the juridical category of appropriation remains ineluctably ideological, symptomatic of the “legal instance,” “laws,” and “legal recognition” he rejects on the very same page (58). Given this contradiction, it is hardly surprising that the final sections of Althusser’s text simply repeat this question (“by what mechanism . . . ?”) without offering anything approaching a substantial response.²⁰

That said, it is clear that a Spinozist, Cavallèsian construction of such a response would necessarily remain in the modality of knowledge and the production of concepts, even in demonstrating the structure of capitalism. It would presumably conclude that the concept of this structure is not “appropriated” from the empirical, from what Althusser terms its “raw material [*matière première*],” but is instead itself, like any concept, constructed or, more strongly, produced “entirely in knowledge [*tout entier dans la connaissance*]” (RCC 42).²¹ In this view, to pass between the Scylla of empiricism and the Charybdis of Idealism, knowledge of capitalism, as a complexly structured concept, could bear no recourse to a Subject of knowledge, but would refer instead to the development of apodictic knowledge as the open-ended, infinite construction of “new thought objects, ‘ideas’” (62), the production of the concept of capitalism as the idea of the idea (of capitalism), from Smith and Ricardo to Marx and beyond, but also, for example, conceptualizing such seemingly empirical categories as the idea of the historical condition of the English working class that Marx develops from Engels or the idea of the Commune.²² The subject of this knowledge, in turn, would not be attributable to a productive consciousness or even a transcendental subject, but would instead refer to the real materiality of a general intellect, to adopt Marx’s famous concept. One might interpret Alain Badiou’s fidelity to and development of the Cavallèsian epistemology of *Reading Capital* in precisely such terms, extending the compass of Althusser’s epistemology of the critique of political economy to include the domain of politics as an axiomatic logic of equality, one as devoid of moralistic guarantees and empiricism as it is to the empirical guarantee or foundation of “class struggle.”²³

In any case, and despite this significant difference in objects, Althusser and Cavallès’s texts share a final and preordinate imperative: the logical critique

and displacement of the founding role of consciousness in post-Husserlian phenomenology.²⁴ For Cavailles, it is always the case for phenomenology that “the reference to the primacy of consciousness permits in the end the suppression of [logical] difficulties. . . . It is the intentionality of consciousness—that is to say the ‘experience of having something in consciousness’—that explains and *guarantees* the duality between the intended object and the act that intends.”²⁵ Althusser, in turn, argues powerfully against any interpretation of *Capital* that would have recourse to “an idealism of consciousness, mind or thought” (RCC 41). Against post-Husserlian invocations of a “transcendental subject or absolute consciousness confronted by the real world as matter” or as “the faculty of a psychological subject,” Althusser understands knowledge itself as a structure [*Gliederung*], “the historically constituted system of an apparatus of thought” (RCC 42).²⁶ In this mode of production (of knowledge), the system “assigns [the] thinking subject (individual), its place and function in the production of knowledges” (RCC 42). The production of knowledge, in this view, is not the attribute of a phenomenological, productive subjectivity (whether Kantian, Hegelian, or Husserlian), but the unfolding of the autonomous movement of ideas.²⁷

The phenomenological attempt to extract a core of truth from the objective world (“to abstract from the real object its essence,” in Althusser’s words), the attempt to “to know the world, to understand the world” is for Cavailles nothing less than a “renunciation of a necessity that links itself to nothing other than itself” (RCC 35; *Sur la logique* 34).²⁸ Cavailles’s summary final judgment regarding phenomenology in the closing pages of *Sur la logique* draws together the strands of his critique to underscore the fundamental subjective interiority in terms that Althusser will pursue in his critique of the Cartesian “vicious circle” of Reason (RCC 54):

The phenomenological method and point of view limits itself to analysing the acts and constitutive intentions of transcendental subjectivity, that is to say, to decomposing the complex of elementary subjective motivations and actions, without the logical entity itself being interrogated. It is evident, moreover, that it cannot be, since no consciousness is witness by an act to the production of its content.²⁹

In contrast to this interiority of the intentional, productive subject, the construction of a rationalist epistemology, understood as the production of an “absolute logic . . . can only draw its authority from itself, it is not transcendental” (Cavaillès 78).³⁰ Althusser’s own directive “to exclude any recourse to

the ideological characters Subject and Object” (RCC 57) in the construction of the concept demands nothing less.

Nietzsche, in one of the final aphorisms of *The Gay Science*, writes:

Prophetic human beings are full of suffering . . . Certain species, for example monkeys, have a prophetic insight about the weather . . . But we don't think of the fact that for them, their pains are prophets for them! When under the influence of an approaching, as yet far from visible cloud a strong positive electrical charge suddenly turns into negative electricity and a change of weather is impending, these animals act as if an enemy were approaching and prepare for defence or escape.³¹

In more than one respect, Louis Althusser was a Nietzschean genius of Marxist persuasion.³² Althusser registered with prophetic and anguished intensity in the years prior to 1968, I would argue, the imminent waning of the proletarian politics to which he had committed himself unreservedly since 1948, a decline—however one may judge and react to it—that has become ever more evident since 1989. The heresy of this “prophetic insight,” to borrow Nietzsche's phrase, is expressed in the fundamental distinction in Althusser's Marxist writings between two registers or modes of analysis: on the one hand, the antiempiricist, antiphenomenological rationalism of the purely Spinozist, depoliticized critique of capitalism articulated in *Reading Capital*, and a countervailing auto-critique and accompanying espousal of a Leninist politics of the class struggle and dictatorship of the proletariat in texts such as “Marxism and Humanism” and “The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy,” where Althusser first theorizes “the primacy of the class struggle in theory.”

From the first essay of *For Marx*³³ through its culmination in the essays of *Reading Capital*, this process, in other words, became manifest not as a historical claim or analysis of the waning of traditional Marxism-Leninism—to the contrary, Althusser famously struggled to remain faithful to the PCF, proletarian class struggle, and socialism through the 1970s—but rather as an unyielding axiomatic decision in favor of the pure, Spinozist truth of rational thought over the lived experience affirmed by empiricism and phenomenology alike, regardless of the consequences or implications for political practice as it had been understood in traditional Marxism.

This commitment to rational theory over the contingency of the political, a commitment to what was in essence a rigorous development and extrapolation to Marx of Cavallès's famous call for a “philosophy of the concept,”³⁴ reached its highest point of development in *Reading Capital*. It is not by

studying the phenomenal, empirical facts of history that we will understand capitalism, Althusser argues, but by reading *Capital* and comprehending the conceptual apparatus Marx develops therein, at once out of and against the empiricist, bourgeois ideology of Smith and Ricardo. This commitment culminates in Althusser's rigorous and provocative distinction between a generic "practice" that is abstractly opposed to so-called theory, each mere ideological categories—and the specificity of an infinite plurality of practices: "There is no practice in general, but only *distinct practices* . . . This dichotomy [between theory and practice] is merely an ideological myth in which a 'theory of knowledge' reflects many 'interests' other than those of reason." Althusser explicitly draws the manifest implication of this claim: that any political claim such as "the workers' cause" or "egalitarian communism," no matter its degree of "revolutionary vision," necessarily "remains ideological" (RCC 60).

With this, Althusser neatly eviscerates the relevance of political judgments and practice to the verification of a scientific practice including and above all the critique of political economy. Althusser's Cavallès-inflected Spinozism here rises to its highest, most heterodox pitch: "Theoretical practice is indeed its own criterion, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to validate the quality of its product, i.e., the criteria of the scientificity of the products of scientific practice" (RCC 61). Althusser assuredly confronts the implications of this Spinozist argument for traditional Marxism: against all pragmatism, all justification and guarantee by ideological categories such class struggle, the dictatorship of the proletariat, or any other political warrant, "the criterion of 'truth' of the knowledges produced by Marx's theoretical practice is provided by his theoretical practice itself, i.e., by the proof-value, by the scientific status of the *forms* which ensured the production of those knowledges. Marx's theoretical practice is the criterion of the 'truth' of the knowledges that Marx produced" (RCC 62).

When Althusser decisively (if briefly) bracketed the political teleology of socialism celebrated in the panegyrics of "Marxism and Humanism" to explicate Marx's *Capital* (and to delineate what he saw as the proper modality for this explication), he was roundly judged to have committed the cardinal sin of "theoreticism." For this, he was virulently proscribed by traditional Marxists of all stripes, in the face of which criticism he largely abandoned philosophical analysis of Marx's critique of political economy to (re)assert the "primacy of politics" and the intimate relation of philosophy and politics as "class struggle in theory."

What could possibly have been so upsetting to an entire generation of Marxists in the 1960s and 1970s, in Althusser's having produced an explication of Marx that Peden has called "the cumulative point of a trajectory of French Spinozism that has its roots in [Jean] Cavaillès"?³⁵ What made it imperative to vilify and denigrate this undertaking rather than critiquing it ("scientifically") or simply ignoring it? Perry Anderson, in his critique of Althusser in *Arguments with English Marxism* (1980), describes what was at stake under the stigmata "theoreticism" with stark simplicity: "Althusser's unilateral and remorseless stress on the overpowering weight of structural necessity in history corresponds more faithfully to the central tenets of historical materialism, and to the actual lessons of scientific study of the past—but at the price of obscuring the novelty of the modern labor movement and attenuating the vocation of revolutionary socialism."³⁶

To be sure, each of the contributors to this volume has articulated singular notions of the political and its relation to the categories essential to Althusser—the critique of political economy, Marxism, history, science, ideology, the contemporary world, and, of course, philosophy itself. That said—this at least is the conviction of this reader of Althusser and Marx—"the novelty of the modern labor movement" and "the vocation of revolutionary socialism"³⁷ no longer adequately define the subject of progressive politics, in the wake of the global events of 1968, the decline of trade unions and nominally "communist" political parties such as the PCF, the globalization and automation of production since the 1980s, the end of state socialism in 1989, and the exponential expansion of financialization, to name only the most obvious factors. At the same time, the various forms of "local" and "micro"-politics that took the place of proletarian class struggle on the post-'68 Left, for all their real accomplishments, have been largely unable to mount a consequential offensive against the ever-more-dominant structures of global capitalism, which has constantly proven capable of absorbing the assertion of difference as the repetition of subsumption to the objective demands of valorization. At the very moment when human misery and subjection to the obligation to valorize value has reached unparalleled extremities in a "planet of slums" (Mike Davis), when the need for an effective anticapitalist politics is felt more strongly than ever, both traditional Marxist-proletarian and multicultural political formations and tactics arguably remain inadequate to combat the distressing scope of global desolation.³⁸

That said, this attention to the separation between the conceptual analysis of capitalism in *Reading Capital* and Althusser's various philosophical excursions on political subjectivity is, I would argue, no mere retrospective speculation on my part regarding the destiny of Leninist class politics. It points as well to

an exacting analytical distinction that traverses Althusser's writings, a distinction implying that not only history, as Althusser famously claimed, but capitalism, and, above all, its critique, are a processes without a (political) subject, if by "subject" we understand the singular support (*Träger*) for a process in exception or excess to a given state of affairs or situation.³⁹ Any critique of political economy must, in this view, be meticulously distinguished from the analysis and conceptualization of political subjectivities and processes—though the outcome of such analysis must in turn inform any truly "anti-capitalist" politics. Marx himself maintained such a distinction in his late writings (witness the warrant of *Capital* versus that of *The Civil War in France* or the "Critique of the Gotha Program"), and the absence of a philosophy of political subjectivity in *Reading Capital* rigorously adheres to this fundamental analytical distinction, to its utmost advantage.

It is more urgent than ever to carry forward Marx's conceptual, categorial critique of capitalism and to move beyond the superficial empiricism and subjectivism of neoliberal economics as a prolegomenon to the invention of contemporary politics adequate to the realities of contemporary capitalism. "It is precisely," Althusser argues, "this *Gliederung*, this articulated-thought-totality which has to be produced in knowledge as an object of knowledge in order to reach a knowledge of the real *Gliederung*, of the real articulated-totality which constitutes the existence of bourgeois society" (*RCC* 49).⁴⁰ For this process, the singular arsenal of critical concepts and methodologies forged by *Reading Capital* offer essential purchase for the invention of new political practices for the twenty-first century.

Althusser and his students' 1965 volume effectively, if briefly, disregarded the Leninist problem of the seizure of political power by the proletariat and the struggle for socialism, to engage—at the most rigorous level demanded by the ideas of Spinoza, Bachelard, and Cavailles—Marx's conceptual critique of the political economy of capitalism. This move appears today not as mistaken lapse but as truly prophetic. If in the 1970s "Althusser's effort appeared hermetic, idiosyncratic, and to many downright bizarre,"⁴¹ today *Reading Capital* offers a protean theoretical vocabulary for the categorial critique of the structure and limits of capitalism as a mode of production dedicated to the ever-expanding valorization of value.⁴² In radical subtraction from all traces of neoliberal empiricism and phenomenological vitalism, *Reading Capital* articulates the promise for contemporary critique of the "idea of the idea" (Spinoza), that of a philosophy of the concept (of capital) that is arguably the necessary condition for any exit from capitalism itself.

The promise of rediscovering today the powerful theoretical and conceptual tools invented by *Reading Capital* lies far beyond mere antiquarian and scholastic curiosity. The real question is whether *Reading Capital* continues to allow for the production of new concepts, and whether, ultimately, it is possible and even essential today, after what Badiou has called the “obscure disasters” of the twentieth century, as postsocialist, neoliberal capital lunges in ever greater exhaustion from one crisis to the next, finally to read Marx’s *Capital* as *Reading Capital* was the first to insist upon: as the systematic, conceptual, and, yes, scientific exposition and critique of the capitalist mode of production. The answer the essays collected in this volume propose is a resounding yes, reinventing *Reading Capital* for a renewed communist philosophy and critique of political economy in the twenty-first century. Speaking with Badiou, is it not the case that *Lire le Capital*, like the prodigious masterwork that is its object of investigation, proves itself timeless in the truths it continues to interject into an infinite multiplicity of worlds, to be grasped, critiqued, and relayed in the endless movement of thought itself?

Notes

1. See François Regnault’s comments on the Althusserian critique of phenomenology in Aliocha Wald Lasowski, *Althusser et nous* (Paris: PUF, 2016), 255.

2. In conversation with the editor, New York, December 4, 2013.

3. Étienne Balibar, “Althusser,” in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, 380–84 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); “A Philosophical Conuncture: An Interview with Étienne Balibar and Yves Duroux,” in *Concept and Form, vol. 2: Interviews and Essays on the Cahiers pour l’analyse*, ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (London: Verso, 2012), 169–86; Étienne Balibar, “Althusser and the rue d’Ulm,” trans. David Fernbach, *New Left Review* 58 (July–August 2009). See also the descriptions of the seminar in the interviews with Balibar, Duroux, Rancière, and Macherey in Lasowski, *Althusser et nous*, as well as the outstanding dossier on Althusser in *Viewpoint Magazine*, “A Struggle without End: Althusser’s Interventions,” and in particular contributions from William S. Lewis discussing the newly available digitized recordings of the 1964–65 seminar held at the IMEC and an extensive and meticulously detailed and knowledgeable interview with the figure perhaps most responsible for the recent revival of editorial interest in Althusser, G. M. Goshgarian. Accessed August 29, 2016, <https://viewpointmag.com/2016/07/18/a-struggle-without-end-althussers-interventions/>.

4. In conversation with the editor, New York, December 4, 2013.

5. See Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016); *Das Kapital lesen* (Münster: Westfälisches

Dampfboot, 2014). Though the studies in this volume predate the publication of the new, complete English-language edition of *Reading Capital* by Verso in spring 2016, it has been possible to update the majority of the chapters in reference to what is henceforth the standard English language reference.

6. This disparagement of a conceptual reading of Marx's *Capital* such as that first proposed by Althusser remains in force today. Witness the manner in which Gareth Stedman Jones, in his otherwise well-documented discussion of Marx, offhandedly dismisses *Capital* with the mistaken and simplistic claim that Marx directly "attempted to employ Ricardo's concept of value" in an effort, by Marx, "to make the value of labor measurable" (379). Bemoaning the increasingly objective and scientific character of Marx's various drafts of *Capital* and their increasing focus on "impersonal and inevitable processes, detached from the actions of human agents," Stedman Jones offers in conclusion the seemingly absurd judgment that the work's "most distinctive and lasting [quality is *Capital's*] fact-based depiction of the development . . . of the relations between capital and labor, mainly in England" (428). In his summary description of Marx's magnum opus, Stedman Jones assures readers that Marx did not "succeed in identifying the 'laws of motion' of capital," and instead reduces the value of its four-volume analysis to a mere descriptive compendium of nineteenth-century (English) working conditions (429). See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

7. See the comments of Pierre Macherey and Jean-Claude Milner on Althusser's so-called theoreticism in Lasowski, *Althusser et nous*, 189–90, 220. Peter Osborne has written more generally of a "reproach of abstraction," by which he refers to both a sense of melancholic despair over the lost real object, along with a feeling of shame accompanying the repression of a putatively more vital lived experience. Peter Osborne, "The Reproach of Abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 127 (September/October 2004), cited in Mark Abel, "Radical Openness: Chord Symbols, Musical Abstraction, and Modernism," *Radical Philosophy* 195 (January/February 2016): 30.

8. Jean Cavaillès, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science* (1942; reprint, Paris: Vrin, 2008). Althusser only mentions Cavaillès once in *Lire le Capital*, in a brief note listing the "few remarkable exceptions" to what he sees as the dominant "ideological conception of history": "Koyré, Bachelard, Cavaillès, Canguilhem, and Foucault" (2016: 529). Peden, however, demonstrates how Althusser's philosophy forms the pinnacle of a rationalist Spinozist tradition of antiempiricist, antiphenomenological epistemology extending from Spinoza and Bolzano through Léon Brunschvicg, Cavaillès, Martial Geroult, and ultimately Althusser, Deleuze, and (I would add) Badiou, a tradition in which Cavaillès's thought articulates the fundamental problematic. Peden argues, furthermore, that the entirety of Althusser's philosophy remains faithful to this imperative to develop a "philosophy of the concept" (Cavaillès) in opposition to post-Husserlian phenomenology. See Knox Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

9. Cited in Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology*, 139.

10. Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 50.

11. In *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, Warren Montag discusses the multitude of figures of thought with whom Althusser engaged. These were intellectual personae whose ideas he variously attacked, ventriloquized, and contorted to his own ends, or whose preexisting bastions of thought he willfully occupied (in the sense in which one occupies a territory in battle). Cavaillès, I am arguing, was for Althusser a figure of the latter type: to sustain Althusser's and Montag's bellicose imagery, the theoretical armature the philosopher-Résistant had forged was left abandoned by his untimely death, and Althusser readily took up these arms in his wake under the influence of Jacques Martin. Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries*.

12. "Spinoza warned us that the object of knowledge or essence was in itself absolutely distinct from the real object, for, to repeat his famous aphorism, the two objects must not be confused: the idea of a circle, which is the object of knowledge must not be confused with the circle which is the real object" (RCC 40). For Cavaillès, the object of knowledge is "un objet sui generis, original dans son essence, autonome dans son mouvement. Elle n'est pas plus un absolu qu'un élément dans le système des existants . . . La science est un volume riemannien qui peut-être à la fois fermé et sans extérieur à lui" (*Sur la logique*, 36, 38). In contrast to Cavaillès's and Althusser's radical Spinozism, Bachelard's related defense of constructed concepts and corresponding critique of empiricism remains a logic of the "abstraction" of concepts from the real. See Gaston Bachelard, *La formation de l'esprit scientifique* (1938; reprint, Paris: Vrin, 2011), 8–11. See also Dominique Lecourt, *Marxism and Epistemology: Bachelard, Canguilhem, Foucault* (New York: New Left Books, 1975).

13. Althusser's analysis in fact focuses on a single section of the Grundrisse's 1857 introduction, constituting a mere 8 pages out of 882 in the English edition (101–8).

14. See Bernard Bolzano, *Théorie de la science* (1837; reprint, Paris: Gallimard, 2011). See also Léon Brunschvicg, *Les étapes de la philosophie mathématique* (1930; reprint, Paris: PUF, 1947).

15. "Il n'est qu'une façon de s'imposer par une autorité qui n'emprunte rien au dehors, il n'est qu'un mode d'affirmation inconditionnelle, la démonstration . . . La science, si elle est, est toute entière démonstration." Cavaillès goes on to specify the characteristics of any apodictic demonstration: "unité, progression nécessaire et indéfinie, enfin fermeture sur soi" (*Sur la logique*, 39).

16. Compare with Cavaillès on Bolzano: If "la véritable science ne quitte pas le démontré, . . . le problème qui se pose alors est d'appréhender ce principe dans son mouvement générateur, de retrouver cette structure non par description mais apodictiquement en tant qu'elle se déroule et se démontre elle-même" (*Sur la logique*, 40). In his discussion of "scientific rigour," Pierre Macherey places a similar emphasis on the demonstrable: "Making a science of economic reality means constructing an exposition by way of concepts; a theory is an arrangement of concepts into propositions, and of propositions into chains of propositions in a form of demonstration" (2016, 182, my emphasis). If in "A propos du processus d'exposition du Capital,"

Macherey's argument for the radical distinction of the real and conceptual orders is essentially identical to Althusser's, of the two Macherey's is the analytically more rigorous, developed, and penetrating exposition of this problem. I discuss Althusser's introduction here because it is by far the better-known and influential text, while I discuss Macherey's analysis in my contribution below.

17. "L'incomplétude et l'exigence de progrès [de la science] font partie de [sa] définition. Seulement progrès autonome, dynamisme fermé sur lui-même, sans commencement absolu ni terme, la science se meut hors du temps—si le temps signifie référence au vécu d'une conscience" (*Sur la logique*, 37).

18. "Avec l'infini commence la véritable mathématique" (*Sur la logique*, 85).

19. The *Robert* defines *s'approprier* as "s'attribuer la propriété de quelque chose," while the German term Marx uses, *aneignet*, is closely related to terms such as the juridical *Aneignungsrecht* (right of appropriation).

20. Alberto Toscano analyzes the degree to which this critique of bourgeois juridical ideology will become predominant in Althusser's later texts *Être marxiste en philosophie* (2015 [1976]) and *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* (2014 [1978]), both recently edited by G. M. Goshgarian and forthcoming in English translation. Alberto Toscano, "The Detour of Abstraction," *Diacritics* 43, no. 2 (2015): 68–90. Henryk Grossman, in his remarkable interpretation of the reproduction or "value" schema of volume 2 of *Capital*—though hindered, like Althusser, by a pre-critical distinction between the conceptual order and so-called economic reality—proposes precisely such a theory of the schema as conceptual "mediators" between the structural abstractions of volume 1 and Marx's objective phenomenology of the various forms of appearance of capital developed in volume 3. "We have surplus values in the reproduction schema," Grossman writes, "but not in reality. Surplus value is 'invisible,' while in the reality of capitalism only different forms of profit such as profit of enterprise, interest, commercial profit, and ground rent occur" (110). See Henryk Grossman, "The Value-Price Transformation in Marx and the Problem of Crisis" [1932]. *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 1 (2016): 105–34. On the concept of an "objective phenomenology," which I would argue constitutes—as opposed to Grossman's crude references to "the reality of capitalism"—the appropriate mode for understanding the conceptual categories of *Capital* volume 3, see Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009).

21. Alain Badiou investigates this problematic in Althusser's introduction in his contribution below.

22. Cavaillès formulates this imperative to grasp conceptual production unfolding entirely within the realm of ideas in typically stark terms: "Il faut soit l'absolu d'intelligibilité qui légitime la superposition spinoziste de l'idée de l'idée, soit la référence à une conscience génératrice dont c'est la propriété de se saisir immédiatement dans ses actes authentiques" (*Sur la logique*, 34, my emphasis).

23. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II* (London: Continuum, 2013).

24. Étienne Balibar has recently described the critical project of *Capital* as one in which "an analysis of objective categories and a phenomenology of lived experience are

combined and complete each other [such that] the articulation of surplus-labor with surplus-value (with the antagonism it engenders) must be thinkable at once on the level of the society as a whole . . . and at the level of the smallest unit of exploitation” (“Critique in the 21st century: Political economy still, and religion again,” *Radical Philosophy* 200 [November–December 2016]): 18. While this is undoubtedly an accurate description of Marx’s project, I am arguing here that while analysis and discussion of the lived experience of capitalist exploitation has never abated since Marx’s time, Althusser’s emphasis on the antiphenomenological structuralism of Capital identifies a contemporary critical imperative demanding development at the level of rigor Marx first formulated.

25. “La référence au primat de la conscience en fin de compte permet de supprimer les difficultés [logiques . . .] C’est l’intentionnalité de la conscience—c’est à dire l’expérience d’avoir quelque chose dans la conscience’—qui explique et garantit la dualité entre l’objet visé et l’acte qui le vise” (*Sur la logique*, 69, 70, my emphasis).

26. Cavallès’s understanding of structure is perfectly Spinozist, defined in terms that clearly announce Althusser’s concept of structural causality: “En définissant une structure de la science qui n’est que manifestation à elle-même de ce qu’elle est, on précise et justifie les caractères [théoriques] précédents . . . par une révélation qui n’est pas distinct du révélé, présente dans son mouvement, principe de sa nécessité. La structure parle sur elle-même” (*Sur la logique*, 39).

27. “Pour la phénoménologie, . . . le moteur de la recherche et le fondement des objectivités sont la relation à une subjectivité créatrice” (Cavallès, *Sur la logique*, 78).

28. For Husserlian phenomenology, Cavallès continues, “entre l’évidence rationnelle d’une démonstration mathématique et l’évidence sensible de la perception historique d’un objet il y a l’homogénéité profonde qu’elles sont l’une et l’autre pleine lumière de la même conscience, que, par suite, des relations de conditionnement mutuel sont possibles et justifiables par une analyse des actes qui procurent l’une et l’autre. A la fois légitimité des rapports et le moyen de leur découverte se trouvent dans une prise de conscience par la conscience même de ce qu’elle accomplit. La vérité est une [pour Husserl] sous ses aspects multiples, parce qu’il n’y a fondamentalement qu’une connaissance qui est la conscience” (*Sur la logique*, 70).

29. “Avec la méthode et le point de vue phénoménologique, elle se borne à analyser actes et intentions constitutifs de la subjectivité transcendentale, c’est à dire à décomposer des enchevêtrements de motivations et d’actions élémentaires subjectives sans que l’entité logique elle-même soit interrogée. Il est évident qu’elle ne peut l’être puisque aucune conscience n’est témoin de la production de son contenu par un acte” (*Sur la logique*, 87).

30. Cavallès’s critiques of Kant and Husserl are in this sense analogous. In the Kantian concept of the faculties, “interviennent fondamentalement les notions d’action, de pouvoir, qui n’ont de sens que par référence à une conscience concrète . . . La nécessité des règles—c’est à dire leur caractère normative inconditionné—reste donc subordonnée à l’absolu d’une conscience dont la présence et la structure essentielle—ce qu’est la conscience en soi—sont un irréductible qu’aucun contenu rationnel ne définit . . . [Pour Kant,] il n’y a pas de science en tant que réalité autonome et caractérisable come telle, mais

une unification rationnelle, suivant un type fixe, d'un divers organisé par l'entendement" (*Sur la logique*, 18, 30). Similarly for Husserl, reference to consciousness, like that of the "world," remains unable to "rendre compte ni du progrès effectif [de la science] ni des structures et des entités qui le jalonnent . . . Le point de vue phénoménologique . . . se borne à analyser les actes et intentions constitutifs de la subjectivité transcendente . . . sans que l'entité logique elle-même soit interrogée" (*Sur la logique*, 87).

31. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 178.

32. On Nietzsche's reactionary antipolitics, see Dominico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, philosophe réactionnaire: Pour une biographie politique* (Paris: Delga, 2008).

33. "Those of us who were the most militant and the most generous tended towards an interpretation of the 'end of philosophy' as its 'realization' and celebrated the death of philosophy in action, in its political realization and proletarian consummation, unreservedly endorsing the famous Thesis on Feuerbach which, in theoretically ambiguous words, counterposes the transformation of the world to its interpretation. It was, and always will be, only a short step from here to theoretical pragmatism" (*For Marx*, cited in Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology*, 144).

34. Cavailles, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*, 90.

35. Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology*, 145.

36. Cited in Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology*, 142.

37. Cited in Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology*, 142.

38. Kurz, Lahoff, and Trenkle's despondent critique of this paradox is characteristically ironic and unsparing: "Class struggle is finished because the society of work is as well. As the system [of valorization] implodes, the classes reveal themselves as the mere sociofunctional categories of a single fetishistic system . . . It only remains for people to humbly propose their services as ultra-cheap workers and democratic slaves to the fortunate winners of globalization. These 'working poor' are thus free to shine the shoes of the last surviving businessmen, to sell them contaminated hamburgers or guard the shopping centers of a moribund work society." Robert Kurz, Ernst Lahoff, and Norbert Trenkle, *Manifeste contre le travail* (Paris: Editions Léo Scheer, 2002), 56, 19.

39. Étienne Balibar says as much when he writes that "the social process of production [is] a process without a subject" (*RCC* 2016, 439). On such a notion of political subjectivity and its distinction from critique, which relies upon the philosophy of the subject that traverses the entirety of Badiou's thought, see in particular Badiou (2016).

40. Althusser continues, justifying precisely this necessity of a return to reading *Capital*: "The order in which the thought *Gliederung* is produced is a specific order, precisely the order of the theoretical analysis Marx performed in *Capital*, the order of the liaison and 'synthesis' of the concepts necessary for the production of a thought-whole, a thought-concrete, the theory of *Capital*" (*RCC* 49).

41. Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology*, 174.

42. I develop this point in relation to *Reading Capital* in my essay below.