CHAPTER 4

The Primacy of the Encounter over Form

From the theoretical point of view, the most important work Louis Althusser produced in the 1980s is most likely the manuscript that the editors of Althusser’s *Écrits* presented as the ‘The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter’. This is an extremely fascinating text in which the clandestine history of a materialism that refuses the classical opposition between idealism and materialism is outlined. Against this opposition that is internal to the history of Western metaphysics, we are presented with a materialism of contingency and of the aleatory that is not dominated by the great principle ‘*nihil est sine ratione*’ that has resonated, as Heidegger tells us, throughout the history of Western metaphysics before being formulated by Leibniz. The biggest risk posed by this text is in the very fascination it inspires: this text dazzles more than it enlightens; it is full of flashes of brilliance that break with philosophical commonplaces, full of intuitions that open up passages that, for the most part, are not followed up on with the patient work of the concept. The biggest risk, then, is to see in this text an abandonment of the powerful rationalism of the writings of the 1960s in favour of a philosophy of the event, of chance, or, worse, of freedom. The challenge is not so much to deny the ambiguities this text gives rise to but to recognise them and underline them, in order to cut through them with a theoretical *coup de force*, placing an unwritten thesis at the theoretical centre of the text: the thesis of the primacy of the encounter over form. The fundamental issue that immediately crops up is, what is the relation between this thesis and the thesis, repeated constantly in the 60s and 70s, of the primacy of the relation over the elements? Is there any contradiction between them? Does the first thesis allude to a pre-existence of the elements that the second thesis denies? At stake here is nothing less than the possibility of thinking a materialism of the aleatory without jumping the rails of rationalism.

1 The Primacy of Class Struggle

As mentioned above, the primacy of relations over elements characterises the works of the first Althusser. In this sense, Althusser’s position as it is articulated in his ‘Response to John Lewis’ is well known. In opposition to the humanist concept that man makes history while transcending it, Althusser affirms
that a) it is the masses that make history and b) that class struggle is the motor of history. The two theses are not, however, on the same plane, since the first must be subordinated to the second: ‘That means that the revolutionary power of the masses comes precisely from the class struggle’.¹ In other words, it is not possible to think the existence of classes outside the struggle between them: ‘You must therefore begin with the class struggle if you want to understand class division, the existence and nature of classes. The class struggle must be put in the front rank’. Then, just a few lines later, he concludes: ‘Absolute primacy of the class struggle’.²

As Stanislas Breton has underlined, the thesis of the primacy of class struggle over the existence of classes can be translated, in abstract terms, into the thesis of the primacy of relations over the elements.³ But here it is a matter of determining what, exactly, primacy means. It seems to me that the term can be read, in a first approximation, from the point of view of the Aristotelian tradition, as what is primary by nature: proto physei signifies a priority that is not temporal but ontological. But without going back to Aristotle, we can also understand the term in light of the first proposition of the first part of Spinoza’s Ethics: ‘A substance is by nature prior to its affection [Substantia prior est natura suis affectionibus]’.⁴ This is an ontological primacy that must be asserted on an epistemological level against a naive empiricism that considers the things appearing before a subject to be a subsistent reality. In this sense, the scholium to proposition 10 of the second part of the Ethics dedicated to the correct ordo philosophandi is decisive:

All must surely admit that nothing can be or be conceived without God. For all are agreed that God is the sole cause of all things, both of their essence and of their existence; that is, God is the cause of things not only in respect of their coming into being [secundum fieri], as they say, but also in respect of their being. But at the same time many assert that that without which a thing can neither be nor be conceived pertains to the essence of the thing, and so they believe that either the nature of God pertains to the essence of created things or that created things can either be or be conceived without God; or else, more probably, they hold no consistent opinion. I think that the reason for this is their failure to observe the proper order of philosophical inquiry. For the divine nature,

¹ Althusser 1976, p. 50.
² Ibid.
³ Breton 1993, p. 418.