Chapter One

The Moment of Reading ‘Capital’

1.1. ‘I can only think of Gramsci …’

Who has really attempted to follow up the explorations of Marx and Engels? I can only think of Gramsci.1

This remarkable recommendation was made by Louis Althusser regarding Gramsci’s explorations of the ‘theory of the specific effectivity of the superstructures’ in one of the central essays of For Marx, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination: Notes for an Investigation’.2 Althusser saluted Gramsci’s ‘new’ concept of hegemony as a ‘remarkable example of a theoretical solution in outline to the problems of the interpenetration of the economic and the political’.3 Reading ‘Capital’, published in the same year (1965), initially seemed to continue to speak of Gramsci with the highest praise. Althusser credited Gramsci with providing one of the most coherent formulations of a tradition of ‘revolutionary humanism and historicism’ that emerged from the experience of World War I and the Russian Revolution, including Luxemburg, Mehring, Korsch and Lukács;4 he

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1 Althusser 1969, p. 114.
2 Althusser 1969, p. 113.
4 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 120.
acknowledged that this tradition ‘was born out of a vital reaction against the mechanism and economism of the Second International’; he praised the ‘enormously delicate and subtle work of genius’ of Gramsci, and in particular, his ‘fruitful discoveries in the field of historical materialism’. However, it quickly became clear that Althusser had come not to praise Gramsci, but to bury him. Despite having profound misgivings and fears of being misunderstood, Althusser proceeded to announce his intention to formulate certain ‘theoretical reservations’ with respect to what he described as Gramsci’s ‘interpretation of dialectical materialism’. Such reservations, as André Tosel has noted, were ‘total’. Conserving the ‘the formal structure of Marxism-Leninism’—and, in particular, the division of Marxism into historical materialism and dialectical materialism—Althusser ‘mercilessly criticised the philosophical historicism of Gramsci’. A close analysis of not merely Gramsci’s ‘words’ but his ‘“organic” concepts’, Althusser argued, revealed the ‘latent logic’ of a humanist and historicist problematic (now expanded to include ‘usually a generous or skilful but “rightist” misappropriation’ of the original post-World-War I revolutionary leftism that re-emerged after 1956, encompassing the work of Sartre, Della Volpe and Colletti, among others). It threatened the very foundations of Marxism’s theoretical and political coherence.

Althusser’s critique focused upon an interpretation of one of the most famous passages of the Prison Notebooks. Here, Gramsci attempted to make his own distinctive contribution to the debates in the late 1920s about Marxist orthodoxy. These debates eventually issued in the consecration of the new (state-enforced) orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism, without hearing Gramsci’s submission. Gramsci argued that

there is no doubt that Hegelianism is (relatively speaking) the most important of the motivations for philosophising of our author, also and particularly because it attempted to go beyond the traditional conceptions of idealism and materialism in a new synthesis which undoubtedly had a quite excep-

5 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 119.
6 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 126.
7 Ibid.
8 Tosel 1995a, p. 9.
9 Ibid.
10 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 126.
11 Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 131.