Introduction: Althusser’s Christian Marxism

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In 1988, while talking about Althusser’s ‘non-contemporaneity’, Étienne Balibar argued about the nature, and the character, of his philosophical project. According to Balibar, Althusser’s work was programmatic, “‘premises without conclusions’, and ‘conclusions without premises’”.¹ For these reasons, his work is ‘heavily dependent on a certain context’ because it has an ‘intervening’ character and ‘the fate of any intervention is to wither away in its own effects’. Therefore, Balibar is doubtful in his conclusion apropos Althusser’s legacy: ‘In a sense it is too early to decide whether something from these interventions will remain influential, i.e. active in philosophical thinking: another generation is needed to give an objective account’.²

Let’s begin from these two premises established by Balibar: (1) the programmatic nature of Althusser’s philosophy; and (2) its enduring effects.

Yes, Althusser’s philosophy is grounded on the formula ‘premises without conclusions’ and ‘conclusions without premises’, and all of this has temporary effects, but precisely in this lies Althusser’s greatest lesson: namely that as materialists, it is idealistic to create philosophical systems that would somehow endure the corrosion of time. It is intervention that is the point of materialist philosophy, not its lasting effects in idealist systems of philosophy. Intervention is what changes the co-ordinates of a certain situation and its effects can be traced directly in the material world, and not in ideal systems. In other words, what is at stake for Althusser’s understanding of philosophy is not ‘its demonstrative discourse or its discourse of legitimation’; rather it is defined by the position it occupies within the already occupied positions in a philosophical battlefield, ‘for or against such-and-such an existing philosophical position, or support for a new philosophical position’.³ Althusser’s conception of philosophy was that of the theoretical intervention within a certain ideological, and political, conjuncture. As he put it himself, in one of his seminars at École normale supérieure:

the person who is addressing you is, like all the rest of us, merely a particular structural effect of this conjuncture, an effect that, like each

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¹ Balibar 1993, p. 3.
² Ibid.
³ Althusser 2006, p. 257.
and every one of us, has a proper name. The theoretical conjuncture that dominates us has produced an Althusser-effect ... 4

The implications here are far-reaching. It is a certain political and ideological structure that produced one of the most important philosophical projects in Marxism in the previous century, which, at the same time, enabled its ‘effect’ to intervene in itself. But what is an Althusser-effect? In his own words, Althusser is a particular structural effect of the conjuncture. In this sense, if the purpose of the intervention is to disappear in its effects, as Balibar argues in following Althusser, then we are approaching one of the most important descriptions, or rather, qualifications, of Althusser as a philosopher. Althusser was a philosopher, and he always remained one; however, he was a philosopher of a very peculiar type. Althusser’s philosophy was not systematic (and he wasn’t very fond of developing for himself a philosophical system, or of philosophical systems as such), but it was a theoretical intervention in the philosophical and political domains. Because it is not systematic, it is therefore programmatic, and it exists in a theoretical field under a specific set of conditions. The question is therefore as follows: how can we conceptualise Althusser’s project? If there is no Althusserian systematic philosophy, nor an Althusserian School, doesn’t his philosophy stand for the philosopher who immediately disappears in his effects? In this sense, Althusser is a vanishing mediator par excellence. Althusser’s theory cannot be fully grasped, or understood, precisely because it was him who could not (or did not) fully grasp and/or develop his own thought. This brings us to two questions:

(1) Will Althusser’s thought survive or not?
(2) What are we to make of the effects of his interventions?

Althusser was opposed to formalisation, which he considered to be an exemplary form of modern philosophical deviation. Philosophy, in Althusser’s understanding, exists in those societies in which social classes and science exist. In other words, ‘in order for Philosophy to exist, the two conditions that we have mentioned must obtain: the necessary condition (the existence of classes) and the sufficient condition (the existence of a science).’ 5 At the same time, these two conditions are also the causes of the great transformations in philosophy:

4 Althusser 2003, p. 17.