CHAPTER 11

From the ‘International of Decent Feelings’ to the International of Decent Actions: Althusser’s Relevance for the Environmental Conjuncture of Late Capitalism

Jana Tsoneva

Written in 1946, The International of Decent Feelings is Althusser’s first political intervention prepared for publication in the Catholic journal Cahiers de notre jeunesse.\(^1\) It was rejected.\(^2\) I cannot stress enough the appropriateness of this word: intervention in a given political and ideological conjuncture, from within, is what constitutes the proper Althusserian gesture. Intervention seems to provide for a line of continuity within Althusser’s otherwise greatly diverging oeuvre; in his later work, Machiavelli and Us, intervention in a given conjuncture was masterfully theorised, but this is so only because Althusser already practiced it, since his youth, through the production of texts like the International, which ulcerated the publishers, and triggered in them a violent rejection. Thus, as Montag argues, ‘the fact that it takes the form of what Althusser would later call an intervention demonstrates his own maxim that practice precedes theory as its precondition and that a method must be practiced before it can be stated or theorized’.\(^3\) In that sense, while at the level of the enunciated, the ‘young Althusser’ certainly espouses very different interests from what he is famous for (i.e. aleatory materialism, the virulent attacks against the Marxist humanists, his approach to Das Kapital, and the theory of ideology, etc.), nevertheless, at the level of enunciation, there is a manifest continuity even if we are only able to discern that retroactively; that is to say, after having become acquainted with his work on Machiavelli, and theory of ideology. (Nevertheless, we should be aware that the mere positing of such continuity in his oeuvre already seems like an anti-Althusserian gesture: if theory, for Althusser, is always rooted in a particular conjuncture, how can there be a continuity in theory piercing through all possible and divergent conjunctures?)

---

1 Montag 2013, p. 192.
2 Elliot 2006, p. 335.
3 Montag 2013, p. 192.
As Montag demonstrates, the crucial feature of Althusser’s interventions is that they happen from within a given field. In other words, the Catholic Althusser, waging a critique of eschatology, does not commit ‘apostasy’, any-more than his break with post-1956 Communist party orthodoxy made him anti-communist. Rather, Althusser’s gesture introduces a dividing line within the field to which he belongs, rendering simplistic oppositions between Self (same) and Other wholly inoperative, and showing that otherness is already constitutive for any alleged selfsame One. (We can discern the same habit of introducing divisions within his field also in his approach to Marx known as the ‘epistemological break’).

In the *International*, Althusser discusses the brightest minds of the immediate post-war era, who he taxes with fear as their chief psychological feature, and whose ideational content is permeated by a sense of despair and urgency.

Man, know thyself: your condition is death (Malraux), is to be a victim or an executioner (Camus), is to draw steadily closer to the world of prisons and torture (Koestler), or to nuclear war, your total destruction, or to the end of what makes you man and is more than your life: ... the very struggle for freedom. Humanity, says Camus, is racing towards the abyss like a train hurtling ahead at full speed, while the passengers pursue their petty quarrels.

These diverse groups of individuals, and movements, form an International of a universal ‘proletariat’ of the human condition ‘shaped into a collectivity not by the means and relations of production but precisely by the means and relations of destruction’. It is worth dwelling a bit more on the stark contrasts between both proletariats, before I take the discussion to our own predicament:

This ‘International’ of humane protest against destiny rests on a growing awareness that humanity is threatened, and has become, in the face of the threat, a kind of ‘proletariat’ of terror. Whereas the labouring proletariat is defined by sociological, economic, and historical conditions, this latter-day ‘proletariat’ would seem to be defined by a psychological state: intimidation and fear.

---

4 Montag 2013, p. 193.
5 Althusser 1997a, pp. 22–3.
6 Montag 2013, p. 195.
7 Althusser 1997a, p. 23.