Introduction\textsuperscript{1}

Louis Althusser is chiefly remembered today, when he is remembered at all, as the progenitor and leading exponent of structuralist Marxism, a curious hybrid which flourished on the left bank of the Seine in the 1960s and later enjoyed the status of an exotic import in the left-wing Anglophone academy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Structuralist Marxism was regarded as the convergence of two independent ‘conjunctures’: on the one hand, the ‘structuralist’ movement, whose emergence in post-Resistance French intellectual life seemed to offer the possibility of a powerfully unifying discourse across the ossified boundaries of the human and social sciences; and on the other, those currents within Western Marxism which were attempting to renew Marxist theory in the space opened up by the partial thaw of Stalinism following Khrushchev’s

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‘secret speech’ of 1956. Structuralism had been hailed initially as a decisive intellectual advance of potentially epochal dimensions (witness the famous closing lines of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*). But it was almost as quickly relegated to the dustbin of history, granted a lingering half-life as a pedagogical prop used in introducing students to post-structuralism. A similar fate awaited the work of Louis Althusser. The advent of Althusser’s ‘structuralist’ reading of Marx and of some of the central categories of Marxist theory seemed, for some at least, the necessary correlate at the level of high theory of the more general structure of feeling and revolutionary optimism now referred to by the title of ‘The Sixties’. But the Althusserian moment was soon eclipsed by a combination of international political events, tragedy in the personal life of its protagonist, and most importantly, a radical change in intellectual fashion. As Gregory Elliott notes,

The alliance Althusser had sought in the early 1960s between Marxism and avant-garde French theory unravelled after 1968 as the philosophies of desire and power tributary to May drove high structuralism from the seminar room. Althusserianism was thus doubly compromised – as a Marxism and as a structuralism.\(^2\)

Having ‘hitched [his] Marxism to structuralism’s rising star’, it seemed that Althusser’s thought was condemned to follow it into the archive of failed projects.\(^3\) Althusserianism passed into the memories (sometimes with fondness, more often, perhaps, with regret) of those Communists and New-Leftist intellectuals who had flocked to its banner in its heyday, while some of Althusser’s central texts, particularly the celebrated ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation’, subsequently became foundational texts in the post-1960s reformulation of the social sciences and cultural studies.\(^4\)

There was at least one Marxist theorist, however, for whom the equation of the Althusserian tendency with structuralism was far from self-evident: Louis Althusser himself. In his *Éléments d’Autocritique* of 1974 (published in English in 1976 in the volume *Essays in Self-Criticism*), Althusser explicitly

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\(^2\) Elliott 1987, p. 282.
\(^3\) Elliott 1987, p. 283.
\(^4\) The most comprehensive accounts of the fate of Althusser’s work can be found in Kaplan and Sprinker 1993 and Elliott 1994.