Althusser’s Materialism

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While rereading my notes for this presentation, I asked myself if it was not a way to settle philosophical accounts with Althusser. Then I told myself, no, for since 1962, when I first met him, our relations have always been filled with both strong affection and lively conflicts.

When Althusser read the manuscript of *Le passage au matérialisme*,1 he wrote me a note in which he said, ‘you have understood what I have tried to say about things that no-one has understood’ – but he published my text in a supplementary series of his collection ‘Théorie’, the series ‘Analyses’. Then again, as a true honour, he offered me the collection ‘Algorithme’, in agreement with François Maspero, which he did for no-one else – but it was also a way to make me publish outside of ‘Théorie’.

Our relations have been of reciprocal use, acknowledged loans, but also, on his part, with respect to me as well as other philosophers, important requests, unacknowledged loans, primary research, and, sometimes, backdated revisions have taken place regarding important points. A sort of philosophical war…

Philosophical War

And it is precisely philosophical war as Althusser conceived it and its evolution in this regard that I want to discuss here.

In ‘Lénine et la philosophie’ (1968)2 – in 1963, when I mentioned [Lenin’s] *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* to him Althusser told me he did not see any philosophical interest in it – he used the vocabulary of struggle, of combat, of

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1 Raymond 1973.
2 Translated as Althusser 2011a.
confrontation. With an external stake: ‘scientificity’, which was good for the proletariat.

In *Éléments d’autocritique* (1972), he added: battlefield, front, attack, defence. And he indicated that every philosophical tendency is present in the other, because each occupies the other’s positions, internalises the conflict in order to master it. With the possibility of a failure, due to the presence of the outside, the class struggle, in philosophy.

In ‘Soutenance d’Amiens’ (1975), he introduced the word ‘war’, qualified as perpetual and preventative. Each philosophy only exists by occupying the adversary’s positions. And it was a question of a preventative ‘encroachment [empiétement]’ of positions on one another.

In *Sur la philosophie* (texts from the 1980s published after his death), in the course of ‘Interviews’, he said that every philosophy must win over part of the opposing forces, borrowing the other’s arguments, occupying them. And in a letter of 19 July 1984, taking up again the vocabulary of war, of position and prevention, indicating, moreover, that every position is an anti-position, an encroachment on the opponent’s positions, and that this explains by itself alone the opponent’s presence in itself, he finally claims: the idealism/materialism pair is therefore specular, circular, each term is defined by its place in the opposing pair. Is each term only defined in this way? We shall see Althusser’s response.

In this list I have not included ‘Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants’, because it was revised by Althusser between the 1967 course and its 1974 publication.

Althusser thus passed from a struggle in which tendencies ‘fundamentally’ confront one another to a struggle in which confrontation is only circularity, in which each term is only the other’s opposite, from an open struggle – in which each tendency can utilise the tactical internalisation of the other, without this being essential – to a specular struggle, in which the struggle is reduced to this tactical internalisation, an enclosure of terms within a pair. The adjective ‘specular’, initially reserved for the idealist pair of Subject and Object, is transferred to philosophical struggle. The philosophical relation then resembles the ideological relation between the dominant ideology and the dominated ideology, in which the dominated, moreover, would be only the image of the dominant.

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3 Translated as Althusser 1976.
4 Translated as Althusser 2011b.
5 Translated as Althusser 2006a, 2006b and 2011c.
6 Translated as Althusser 2011d.