



Althusser's Object

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In a little text delivered at the moment of his death, I said that Althusser had been at once a philosopher and a communist *within the same theses*, without reducing one to the terms of the other. And among these theses, I mentioned this: "There is an epistemological break, in Marx or elsewhere." Today I would be tempted to add: perhaps nowhere else than in Althusser himself, in fact, if it is true that he alone tried effectively to produce its concept.

Such is indeed Althusser's singularity: for him, all philosophy "is political," but it is so only in the "last instance," as class struggle in the specific element of theory. One must therefore wonder what happens when discourse attempts to bring to light that normally invisible determination: does not philosophy, as such, disappear?<sup>1</sup> In the identification of philosophy with its own "political" determination, must not a difference survive, or reconstitute itself continuously, in order for philosophy still to be "philosophical" in its practice, thus in reality "political" in its effects, and not reduced to a *political concept of philosophy*?

It seems to me that one of the ways of reflecting on this difficulty is to analyze the "philosophical objects" produced by Althusser. As we know, this term itself comes from Althusser, who used it in a very striking fashion at the beginning of his course on Rousseau:<sup>2</sup> all philosophy would crystallize in a "philosophical object" that it would produce in order to be able subsequently to study its properties. Here, if we understand correctly, we would even have a criterion of existence for philosophy as such, which is characterized by the fact that it fashions an "object" *proper* to it,<sup>3</sup> and finds itself from that moment on subject to the "objective" constraints which precisely that object imposes, in that the object is by no means manipulable at will. This idea should be brought together with the thesis that Althusser borrowed from Kant and to which he gave great importance: there are "sciences without an object" (like theology or psychology). For their part, philosophical discourses belong neither to science nor to "sciences without an object"; rather, they themselves *produce* theoretical "objects" without any counterpart "in the real" (if you like, a particularly unyielding and particularly effective sort of fiction).

Let us formulate, then, the following working hypothesis: would not the "epistemological break" of which Althusser speaks, a notion that he developed from diverse philosophical and epistemological materials,<sup>4</sup> be precisely a "philosophical object" in this sense? Better yet: would it not be

the philosophical object of Althusser, that which distinguishes his philosophy? But an object constantly reworked, in a contradictory process, always torn between its elimination and its reinforcement: as if unbeknownst to him he had “produced” something other than what he “wanted,” or what he “believed.” This is a contradiction that one should not hasten to take as evidence disqualifying a notion’s theoretical scope, for in that deviation or difference between the intentions and the *factum* perhaps resides precisely the *index sui* of a certain *verum*, in relation to which there could not straight off be a “good distance”; one can only approach it, put it to work (and that is doubtless what one would observe in any true philosopher) by alternations of opposing excesses: here, theoreticism and practicicism (as, elsewhere, empiricism and apriorism, or psychologism and logicism—in short, a “struggle of tendencies” *within* each philosophy).<sup>5</sup>

Let us try therefore to retrace, once more, the voyage of discovery (of the “production”) of the epistemological break, then of its correction, in order to understand what is being played out in its contradictory modalities: by the invention of the “break,” followed by its correction, Althusser indeed emerged at a given moment from philosophy into that “non-philosophy” which determines it (politics, communism); but should one not admit that all this was still happening inside philosophy, in the elaboration of a philosophical object? Who does not remember the sentences of Marx and the harsh warning they contain? “As we hear from German ideologists, Germany has in the last few years gone through an unparalleled revolution. . . . All this is supposed to have taken place in the realm of pure thought.”<sup>6</sup> What holds for the Germany of the nineteenth century can hold as well for the France of the twentieth.

Where should we begin this voyage? Certainly not where he himself sends us when, for the first time, he coins the expression, that is to say, in Marx and in the commentary on Marx. For Althusser no longer belongs only to the history of “Marxian philology” in the 1960s and 1970s: his place, large or small, is in the history of philosophy. We must seek to understand the constitution of Althusser’s proper object in the field of historical “repetitions” and “displacements” of philosophy *tout court*. That object is the “break” elaborated by him on the occasion of a discussion on “Marxist philosophy.” We begin here precisely in order to be able subsequently to determine in what measure the reference to Marx and to the status of theory within Marxism was a necessary condition.

A few years ago, I recalled that the *concept* of “epistemological break” as Althusser proposed and implemented it was not purely and simply imported from Gaston Bachelard, in spite of the importance assumed here by Bachelard’s conception of a “recurrent history” of knowledge, in which discontinuity is tightly linked to irreversibility.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of

this article, this declaration is highly insufficient. Althusser, as we know, privileged a stronger philosophical model: that offered by Spinoza's distinction between a "first kind" and a "second kind" of knowledge: imagination and demonstration.<sup>8</sup> This shows from the outset that, like all true innovation, Althusser's "break" furnishes a guiding thread for a critical rereading of the history of philosophy. From that moment on, the question will no longer be simply to define the break, but, following the front lines of the *Kampfplatz* [battleground], to outline what distinguishes *one conception* of the break, among others.

What then would be the minimum of indispensable references? Where should one look for "breaks" in philosophy? Restricting ourselves at first to the modern period and to the most obvious encounters, it would be advisable once again to mention Kant: not only for the "Copernican Revolution," a "methodological" rupture with empiricism from which we also get the idea that the specificity of a practice of knowledge results from its *questions* (or its "problematic"),<sup>9</sup> but above all for the close association of the problem of the object and the objectivity of a science with that of the *domain* of validity of its concepts. Even the metaphor of "continents" open to scientific discovery is in some sense the reversal of a Kantian theme.<sup>10</sup>

But it would not be any less instructive to refer to Comte (about whom Althusser, after Canguilhem, was one of the few in his time to say, and to repeat, that he had been absurdly unappreciated *as a philosopher* by the University): for his antireductionism and his anti-empiricism or his "theoreticism" in particular, which were quite exceptional in the so-called positivist tradition (Bachelard, as we know, follows no less from Comte than from Kant when he theorizes "regional rationalisms" and the dialectic of the application of concepts, although he criticizes the "fixity" of reason common to these two authors). A close confrontation with the legacy of phenomenology would thus appear equally necessary, or at least a confrontation with the initial moment when phenomenology constituted itself as an alternative to psychologism *and* positivism.<sup>11</sup>

And yet all these references to the great currents of rationalist epistemology—let us say, better, of the *epistemology of the concept*—which we could seek to fill out (consider Cavailles) would still not be enough. Doubtless in Bachelard, Kant, Auguste Comte, or Koyré "there is some break": a moment of discontinuity in the determination of science as a practice irreducible to the simple generality of "knowledge." But in Althusser's break there is also manifestly something completely different: a *constitution* of the "subject" that takes the paradoxically negative form of its *dissolution* in action—one might be tempted to say its "continuous" dissolution (as there is in certain philosophers a continuous creation). Not only as empirical, psychological, or substantial subject, but as a function

of synthesis, as that gatherer, that owner of itself which modern philosophy has designated by the name of “consciousness.” Here we must go toward Freud in search of antecedents, in particular the famous thesis of the “three narcissistic wounds” inflicted on man by scientific knowledge, which expels him successively from the “center of the world” (Copernican cosmology), from “the goal of evolution” (Darwinian natural selection), and finally from the place of origin of his own thoughts (psychoanalysis). Althusser’s break was developed in connection with “Marx’s theoretical revolution,” but it constantly flirted with psychoanalysis according to an analogy that is at first *negative* or critical (the critique of economism goes together with that of psychologism). What relation does it maintain with the Freudian schema of the disillusionment of the subject in and by scientific knowledge?<sup>12</sup>

And, to finish up, there is still one reference that seems unavoidable: the oldest of all, and that which demands the most careful discussion. This reference is evidently to Plato. Everyone knows that the “kinds of knowledge,” even if these are defined in a totally new fashion as in Spinoza, come back in the final analysis to the “topography” of the *pathemata en te psyche* in Book 6 of the *Republic*. Now it is precisely there that we will find the first mention of a *temema*, the result of an operation of breaking or breaking up (*temnein*—more literally, “cutting” or “splitting”), which makes the progression of knowledge intelligible, the progression from the perceptible to the intelligible in a “dialectic” of rupture and of analogy.<sup>13</sup> Is not any “break,” and above all any *epistemological* break, fundamentally Platonic? Strange as the assumption may seem (for Althusser, unlike Koyré, never grounded theoretical practice on the difference between the perceptible and the intelligible), it should be present on the horizon of our inquiry, and we will find it again in the conclusion when we try to interpret Althusser’s “topography” as an apparatus of “politics in theory.”

Let us then take up the break in Althusser’s texts, remaining conscious of this philosophical background. This background will perhaps help us understand that, if it is difficult to confer a *single* meaning on the notion, this fluctuation is not simply owing to its author’s hesitations or qualms of conscience. It comes from a more distant source. We know the focus, at a certain moment, of Althusser’s criticisms directed at himself: the question of a “theoreticism” that would obscure or overturn the “primacy of the political” in Marxist theory from the conditions of its past development to those of its current deliverance or “escape from crisis”—which is perhaps nothing other than its capacity to know and to recognize its own crisis. Reading certain of Althusser’s texts (placed under the rubric of self-criticism), it would seem that the fundamental alternative was either “primacy of theory” or “primacy of politics.” In other words, it

is a matter of moving from the “theoreticist” password (which comes from Lenin), “no revolutionary politics without a theoretical moment,” that is decisive, the moment of science, permitting struggle against the “spontaneous” illusions inherent in class society, to the “activist” password: “no revolutionary theory without political practice,”<sup>14</sup> that is to say, without theorists involving themselves in class struggle through their participation in the Workers’ Movement (here Althusser, in general, uses capital letters). But it also seems that the stakes of the discussion (which might appear scholastic) are still concentrated finally on the intra-theoretical question of the “relation between the two disciplines” that constitute Marxism: the “science of history” and “philosophy.” How are they different? What is their conceptual “nature”: two sciences, or one science and one philosophy? Which is “primary,” the one on whose *existence the other* depends: is it science or philosophy? It is here, as we know, that the problematic distinction between *break* and *revolution* is introduced, and that one confronts the vexing difficulty of a “forgetting of the class struggle” by the science of class struggle itself, a difficulty that a “revolutionary” philosophical agency (revolutionary in both senses of the word) would be charged with preventing or repairing.

For these grand alternatives, which have little by little become “Althusserianism’s” banalities, let us try to substitute a more refined approach: that of the unceasing *displacement* of an object of thought which quickly reveals itself to be irreducible to the theses in which it was initially presented. From which will follow *several phases* in which the word break will not produce exactly the same theoretical effects. I will distinguish five of these, including a “before” and an “after” that are perhaps the crucial moments.

### **First Moment: What One Might Call “The Break before the Break”**

In fact the term is only explicitly defined for the first time in the “Introduction” to *For Marx* (1965), that is, after the essays collected there. *For Marx*, a book written in the course of time (wherein writing therefore is all the more “necessary”), is doubtless itself the very record of the manufacture of the break, which comes into view with “theoretical practice” (in the essay “On the Materialist Dialectic”). But the break does not originate from nothing. We must look in the slender *Politics and History* (1959)—one of Althusser’s great books—even before the entrance on stage of this terminology, for the first of the decisive themes of his epistemology: that there is *no break without recasting*—or better, that the most important effect of a break depends on what comes *after the event*, in that it demands

and makes possible a recasting.<sup>15</sup> *Montesquieu* expresses this in terms of a “shift in terrain,” a “discovery of a continent.” Montesquieu not only initiated an objective knowledge of politics in determining the latter by certain historical “relations.” He also *raised*, irreversibly, the question of a science of social consciousness that would be the critical analysis of its relative efficacy. But this science would have to wait for Marx.

Now in *For Marx* we have quite simply the application of this fundamental schema *to Marx himself*. This schema will accompany Althusser’s entire intellectual history, all his presentations of the “break”: the schema of the *dislocation* between the revolutionary discovery and its critical effect on the very thought that produced it, an effect that intervenes only *after the event*. Althusser explains that in 1845 Marx “shifted terrains” in shifting problematics (in asking other questions, which are not the “inversion” of the preceding ones, but constitute a real “emergence”): from the terrain of *ideology* he passed to the terrain of the *real*, by the destruction of the illusory problematic of Feuerbach’s Man and of the Subject of History, and through the formulation of a problematic of the *real determinations* of the historical process (the infrastructure of the mode of production, the politico-ideological superstructure). But the essential content of this shift in terrain, which is carried out immediately after the “triumph of humanism” in Marx (in the early works, especially the “1844 manuscripts”), is the development of a knowledge (objective, scientific) *of ideology*. In sum, when we *leave* the ideological problematic, we are for that very reason constrained to *theorize ideology* as a historical reality, as a specific agency within the “social whole” and as a political force (bourgeois, dominant ideology). With this point Althusser indicates at once the criterion of Marxism’s radical novelty and the mark of its essential incompleteness, which obliges us to rethink in other terms that which Marx himself thought inadequate: the effect of ideological misrecognition, the illusion of “consciousness.” *After the event*, we know that this problem is the touchstone of the “scientificity” of Marxism, precisely because Marxism could neither resolve nor elude it.

## Second Moment: The Break Named, Identified

It is here, properly speaking, that the philosophical object is constructed, to the extent that the term “break” is no longer isolated, but rather is an integral, almost systematic part of the whole series of determinations of “theoretical practice”: every science transforms a “preexisting abstraction” according to the schema of the “Three Generalities” that conceptualize theoretical activity according to the model of production. We are thus at the farthest remove from any pragmatism, since the result of this

activity is the explicit distinction between the “real-concrete” and the “concrete-in-thought” or, to put it another way, between the singularity of facts and the singularity of concepts, which forbids their being confused and used to generate one another (as if the apple could generate its concept or would itself generate the concept of fruit) at the very moment when a relation of active equivalence is nonetheless being established between them, a relation that is knowledge itself. Let us underline this important point. It is in this that the Althusserian conception of “problematics” clearly takes its distance from any form of “constructivism” or relativism, even in the sophisticated form given to it by Foucault. The break is not the simple fact of discontinuity or incommensurability between problematics, between discursive formations, which would then be definable in themselves, each on its own. Rather, the opposite is the case. For Althusser, as for Bachelard and above all for Canguilhem,<sup>16</sup> science is identified with the scientific process of destroying obviousness or initial abstractions; its problematic is constructed in and by the break. For this reason, the *ideological abstraction*, the *initial* form of abstractions transformed by science understood as “theoretical practice,” remains the ground of the activity of knowledge throughout. It remains the moment of “self-consciousness” from which knowledge distances itself (ideology being the form of misrecognition par excellence, first and foremost misrecognition of its own assumptions in the form of “consciousness”).

In 1845, then, Marx “crossed the border” that separates ideology from science—which is to say that he crossed it not a first time, but irreversibly, “forever.”<sup>17</sup> Here, as we know, the difficulties begin. They result from the way in which Althusser joins the extreme generality of this theoretical schema with a description of Marx’s particular trajectory, that “extraordinary” intellectual “transformation,” that work on himself through which the individual named Marx “revolutionizes theory.” *To cross the border* that separates ideology from science is to transform the former in order to produce the latter by means of the famous “Generality Two.” What is, then, this “Generality Two,” whose concept Althusser forges through a kind of condensation of the Marxian “means of production” and the “common notions” of reason according to Spinoza?<sup>18</sup> How are they the “means” of a kind of syllogism of theoretical practice?

Let me suggest that this theme, crucial for Althusser’s whole conception of the break and which governs in particular the possibility of applying it to the field of the history of science (to read Galileo or Lavoisier or Mendel or Freud or Saussure as so many “breaks”), is also the point where Althusser finds himself closest to the Hegelian dialectic from which he seeks to distance himself: not, certainly, in confusing the real object with the object of thought, as speculative empiricism, but rather as “absolute method,” as a concept of science *preceding itself* in the produc-

tion of its own means of production, which in Hegel is precisely the concept (*Begriff*).<sup>19</sup>

Should we be surprised, then, that the “content” of the break described by Althusser is precisely the historical mutation of the dialectic, implicit according to him, in the emergence of any science, but shown in person with Marx’s discovery? The epistemological break is always the break with humanism, but subsumed under a much more general problematic: *the transformation of the structures of the dialectic*. Through the break (and not through inversion, as Marxist tradition might have it), we pass from the “Hegelian dialectic” to the “Marxist dialectic,” which is, to put it plainly, from a dialectic where contradictions are interiorized to a dialectic where they are overdetermined, from a dialectic whose originary unity is always to be rediscovered to a dialectic whose complexity is “always already given,” where any unity is, by definition, *nonoriginary*, and thus does not need to be rediscovered because it was never lost.<sup>20</sup> The question of the structures of the dialectic, an apparently formal question, governs then the critique of humanism, and more generally the departure from ideological obviousnesses. But between the two the link remains clear: as Marx suggested in *The German Ideology*, there is an identity of structure between the idealist dialectic and the humanist philosophy of consciousness. Basically, the former only generalizes in a speculative manner what the latter incarnates empirically. Thus we have a permanent back and forth movement that constitutes the entire history of post-Hegelian philosophies: from humanism to the positive essence of man, to theoretical anthropology, then from this last to the subject as founding category, from the subject to the question of origin, and from there finally to the dialectic conceptualized as the very movement of origin, its self-production or self-manifestation.<sup>21</sup> And back. Marx brutally interrupts this movement with his formulation: there is of course no philosophy without presuppositions, but the “real” presupposition is neither Man nor Consciousness (nor the Subject); it can only be the material or structural conditions of the production and transformation of these abstractions. And today, too, this remains the strong point of Althusser’s construction. *There are in fact two “dialectics”* that we have to choose between (as we have to choose between Leibniz and Spinoza): a dialectic of consciousness and a dialectic of production, even if these dialectics are combined in the history of philosophy and especially within Hegelian thought, as Althusser recognized later.

All difficulties, however, are far from being resolved. Let me recall three.

1. In passing from the general idea of Marx’s theoretical revolution to that of a transformation of the structure of the dialectic, has Althusser put the epistemological break in the service of Marxism, or has he put Marxism and the history of its genesis in the service of the break, which is to

say, philosophy? More concretely: does Althusser seek to be and declare himself “antihumanist” because Marxism, as a theory of “class struggle,” is fundamentally antihumanist? Or, rather, is he at bottom only “Marxist” (in philosophy) to the extent that Marxism or something in Marxism hooks up with theoretical antihumanism and gives it arguments? If it were absolutely necessary to choose this second thesis (and let us not delude ourselves: it has made the Althusserian undertaking the linchpin of the structuralist project in its totality), we would confront the formidable problem of a *generic* “antihumanism”: not only as a project floating in the air of the moment, common to all those who looked for it and found it here or there (in Marx, but also in Freud, in Nietzsche, in Pascal . . . in science, but also in politics or religion), but also as the founding theme of a true metaphysics, a *philosophia perennis* of antihumanism, forever struggling with humanism.<sup>22</sup>

The “resolution” of this difficulty is perhaps to make clear that *the ideology* par excellence, target of Althusser’s critique and standard by which he measures Marx’s innovations, is not simply humanism but rather the necessary combination of *humanism and economism*, discovered by Marx as a consequence of his analysis of the forms of commodity circulation generalized to all social relations. This combination connects with the dualisms of anthropology (the subject and his or her needs, consciousness and interest, etc.), but also with those of politics (the state and civil society), and finally with those of the theory of knowledge (subject and object). It is, in fact, starting with Marx that humanism and antihumanism appear not as eternal essences but rather as *determinate* theoretical positions.

2. When Althusser applies the schema of the break to the periodization of the works of Marx, there is, you may recall, a kind of residue: what he calls the “works of the break” (*The German Ideology*, in particular), which are neither “before” nor “after” but rather between the two, at the very point of separation, and which distinguish themselves by what Althusser calls the use of “practical concepts” (for example, *real humanism*). The difficulty may be thought a formal one, classical, almost banal: in the description of a process, of a transformation, how do we materialize the very point of discontinuity, the passage as rupture? The difficulty is epistemological. In this decisive in-between space, it would be necessary to take into account both the nonideological effectiveness of certain “ideological concepts” and the ideological effects of certain “nonideological” (that is to say, scientific) concepts . . . again and always, then, science that precedes itself and that lags behind itself, the “noncontemporaneity with itself” not only of consciousness but of knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Above all, the difficulty is a political one. To this vacillation in the distinction science/ideology, Althusser joins the possibility of *acting on ideology*, taking the knowledge of ideology as the starting point to implement a true “ideological

politics” that would also be a politics of transforming ideology (replaying *ad infinitum*, in a sense, the historical passage from humanist politics to a politics of class struggle, from “All men are brothers” to “Workingmen of all countries, unite!”). But what would this politics be? Would it be a *use*, even an enlightened manipulation of ideological generalities? Or would it be a “realization” (*réalisation*), a “return” of the concept *home* into the obscure element of ideology, which is the very element of social practice and thus of politics? In this case, too, it is clear, we approach properly Platonic themes and problems.

3. Finally, let us note the very strong tension established between the two sides of the idea of the break as the transformation of the structures of the dialectic. In one case, the determinism of the “meaning of history” is criticized in the name of the singularity of conjunctures, in the name of “the concrete analysis of concrete situations”: the Leninist, and even more, the Machiavellian side of Althusser’s analysis (which is dominant in “Contradiction and Overdetermination”). In the other case, critique aims above all at the idea of the simple and expressive “totality” (emphasized by Lukács and his disciples) in the name of the complexity of the structure, of its unequal development and its variations: the truly structuralist side to Althusser, invested in the analysis of “modes of production” (which “On the Materialist Dialectic” tries to formalize). There are thus Althusserians of the Conjuncture and Althusserians of the Structure (this is still true today, even if some have changed sides). Perhaps this unresolved tension, somewhat obscured because it was imperceptible at the time, made it possible for the idea of the materialist dialectic to be developed to such an extent. At this early moment in Althusser’s elaboration of the problem, which is, however, also where he took on the dominant philosophical conceptions most forcefully, the “dialectic” extended over the entire field of problems (or it had that ambition). It is both a general theory of the complexity of “practices” (that is to say, the social being) and a reflexive theory of “theoretical practice,” that is to say, of effective knowledge, as passage from ideology to science. It constitutes a program of analysis of the real and a strategy of rupture.

We will see that this ambition could not be sustained. But first, it is necessary to see how Althusser initially thought it was possible to *generalize* the notion of the break.<sup>24</sup>

### **Third Moment: The Break Generalized**

This moment coincides with the composition of *Reading Capital*. But what is striking here is that the concept of the break is already troubled by the opposition of antithetical points of view at the height of its range and

its power of explanation. Perhaps, moreover, the break becomes truly “epistemological” in the sense of the constitution or sketch of a general *epistemology*, comparable to others in its function of theorizing scientificity as such, *because* of these simultaneous orientations. The break indeed is said to be a *theoretical revolution* in the Kantian manner. It is the critique that is constitutive of science (for example, the “critique of political economy”) that alone renders science able to *think its object*, in critiquing its ideological “obviousnesses,” the appearances of the “given” object. But this understanding of the break can be developed in two directions:

The direction of a *specificity of the break*: the break is not access to knowledge “in the real,” in general; it is only access to the *real of the determinate science*. For example, it is access to the reality of history, to the Continent History whose gateway is constituted by the critique of political economy, but which is not and will never be the “whole.” Each science has its proper object, as each science has its concepts, its problematic. Althusser’s insistent critique of reductionism results from this situation; the institutional counterpart to his critique is represented by his sarcasms concerning the discourse of “interdisciplinarity” (in the “Cours de philosophie pour scientifiques”).<sup>25</sup> The consequence which then emerges, and whose political significance is inescapable, is that a rupture with ideology certainly can occur neither with “ideology in general,” nor even with “bourgeois ideology” as such, but rather with a *determinate theoretical ideology*, or with a collection of theoretical ideologies making up the “prehistory” of a specific science—even in the case of historical materialism (which breaks with the concepts of the subject and the individual of the philosophy of history and of economic ideology).

The opposite direction of a *universality of the break*: Marx’s break, as original as its paths and effects may be, is only a particular case of the universal process by which every science is constituted. That is why there can be, from this perspective, a general theory of the history of sciences—which is none other than the epistemology that describes and explains this process. It is even possible to give the *general formula of this epistemology*, which distinguishes it from classical “theory of knowledge,” and which some of us tried to read equally in Spinoza, in Bachelard, and in Canguilhem: epistemology is the theory of the “production of concepts,” challenging empiricism and essentialism, or apriorism at the same time.<sup>26</sup>

Insofar as the discussion of Marx’s works is concerned, it must be noted that when and only when *Capital* acquires its unique significance is there the *true* moment of the “break.” *The German Ideology*, as striking as its references to “production” and to “real history” may be, can only be this text’s harbinger or its enigmatic anticipation: *The German Ideology* indicates that the break is indeed a theoretical undertaking, a *process* that occurs in the time of history and explodes it. What is important in the for-

mulations of *The German Ideology* is this relative inadequacy of the concepts of “productive forces” and “mode of exchange.” These concepts are still marked by the philosophy of history that they oppose, just as the “price of labor” anticipates in contradictory fashion the “value of labor-power” in the economic sketches of the same period. The difficulty concerning “practical concepts,” the ideological *residue* that I spoke about above, disappears then, at least formally, in this analysis of the break as *theoretical transition*, and as the work of transition. It is no longer a question of politics, of confronting theory with its exterior, but rather of the temporal reality of theoretical work, of what one of the greatest critics of Althusser—one of those who has *taken him seriously* as a philosopher—calls, in Hegelian fashion, the “patience of the concept.”<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, however, the question of *anthropology* is more central than ever to the description of the break, inasmuch as it concerned *Marx*. For not every break ruptures with an anthropology, and thus with a philosophy of the subject (following a mirror articulation of “Man” and “Subject” close to what Foucault, during the same period, will call the “empirico-transcendental doublet”): but it is the *Marxian* break, the break of historical materialism. Why this privilege? Certainly not because Marx and his theory of social formations are the only ones to have encountered the themes of anthropology and of the subject as “epistemological obstacles.” But Marx is the only one to have *gone upstream* from there back to the theoretical problematics that *imply* anthropologies: the bourgeois philosophy of history as a grand narrative of progress and of the self-education of humanity, economico-juridical ideology as a theory of the rational or irrational behavior of individuals (that is to say, in accordance or not with their interests). Here, consequently, *Althusser made a choice*: the opposite choice to that made by Lacan and the Lacanians (which will end up leading him to the rupture with their positions). In his critical investigation of the *constitutive structure* of the subject, he chose to generalize the concepts of Marx rather than those of Freud (even if he never stopped interpreting Marx by means of Freudian analogies). The *subject* is clearly foregrounded as the category with which historical materialism must break, precisely in order to think its constitution. But it is the subject as that abstract and philosophical *name* for man, or for the individual of anthropology, itself a concentrate of common effects of different bourgeois “theoretical ideologies”: philosophy of history, economics, natural law, all induced by the capitalist structure.<sup>28</sup> Correlatively, historical materialism is already thought of at this moment as the theory of historical processes “without a subject,” or whose pseudo-subject is a structure, a complexity of conditions of possibility that “distribute” and “arrange” practices in relation to each other. It is *in the process without a subject* that the “constitution of the subject” can have a meaning.

Once again it is fitting to call attention here to a strength in Althusser's theorization, singularly unappreciated by polemics that have been satisfied with recording a simple destruction or disqualification of the subject in his work or in structuralism more generally. I will go so far as deliberately to maintain the reverse. Whether it is the case of Lacan, of the late Foucault, or of Althusser—with the basic differences that oppose them (notably, as regards Lacan and Althusser, concerning the category of the “symbolic”)—none of the great “structuralist” *philosophers* were satisfied with disqualifying the subject. On the contrary, they all undertook to illuminate this blind spot that classical philosophy had installed in a foundational position, which is to say, they undertook to move the subject from a *constituting* function to a *constituted* position. This is eminently the case of Althusser, as elliptical and as aporetic as his suggestions may sometimes be.

It remains true that this situation could once again be read in two very different directions. The question of the subject may be itself only a “regional” question (or, as it would be translated in Althusser's terminology, a “continental” question). Thus the subject of the unconscious, or the speaking subject, is not the subject of history. Historical materialism could also, however, certainly be one science “among others” (from the viewpoint of theoretical practice): but it has for philosophy this notable privilege of being *the only science that has access to the material structures of the constitution of the “subject.”* We find here the above-mentioned tension, but we see that it comes back to a question on which the very possibility of founding an “epistemology” on the concepts of historical materialism will depend. What is the exact relation between these two “subjects”: the subject as a juridico-economico-moral category, referring to the world of politics and history, and the subject as a “transcendental” category, referring to the instance of truth in knowledge. This is the problem of *the knowledge effect*. That it is thought in negative terms does not prevent its insistence: in making the knowledge effect a canceling of the functions of consciousness in favor of those of the concept, Althusser extricated himself from the necessity of speculating on the psychological or sociological personality of the “subject of knowledge,” but he only made the articulation of practice and truth in knowledge itself more enigmatic. The “Introduction” to *Reading Capital* (which is its true “conclusion”), as we know, concludes with two open questions that are curiously parallel: the question of “the knowledge effect” and the question of “the society effect.”

Therein lies, without a doubt, the *new residue* of Althusser's theorization, which we could express as follows: Is a general theory of the epistemological break in and of itself a theory of the knowledge effect? Is it *sufficient* to take account of the double effect of scientific practice: to

suppress any instance of the subject that would function (under the name of method, consciousness, or rationality, among others) as a “guarantee” of truth, and at the same time *to constitute the subject* in the field of real history as an “object of knowledge,” belonging to the science of social formations and not to a simple interpretation or hermeneutics? But if this theory is not such a theory on its own, what is its contribution to the science of history? As if “driven away” by the aporias of the concept, we then emerge to find a last figure of the break.

#### **Fourth Moment: The Break “Corrected”**

Under this name (we could also say the “self-criticized” break), I gather the elaborations proposed by Althusser between 1968 and 1976 (from *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* to the “Soutenance d’Amiens” by way of *Lenin and Philosophy, Réponse à John Lewis, Eléments d’autocritique*), and I try to outline their common orientation. What is important, then, is not so much this or that isolated formulation but rather the sense of displacement and the constraints it expresses. The constraints are internal (Althusser came to accord historical materialism the task of thinking the conditions of the production of truth on its own *without*, for that reason, retreating at all from his critique of philosophies of “absolute knowledge.”) And the constraints are external (for our purposes, we need only recall the violence of the critiques simultaneously directed against Althusser at the time in practically identical terms by these warring brothers who held him in a pincer: the Communist Party and the Maoists). We all know, or can guess, that the effect of internal and external constraints must be exponential. But in keeping with my subject, I will limit myself to drawing attention to that aspect of the issue which subtends the great “self-criticism” that Althusser allowed on the subject of his “theoreticism,” and to explaining what is without a doubt its ambivalence.

This self-criticism scores a direct hit on the thesis of the break. First of all, Althusser stopped treating the “epistemological break” as a *theoretical concept*, which would belong to a systematic Theory of the history of sciences or a general Theory of the production of knowledges, whether or not it was identified with the “materialist dialectic.” From now on, the break is designated as a *metaphor* (see *Lenin and Philosophy*): is that to say, as a positivist perspective might naturally assume, that the break is now opposed to the concept? Let us say, rather, that it anticipates the concept, that it represents the concept’s approximation. The metaphor of the break (which, in order to suggest the incompatibility of problematics, the irreconcilable conflict of two theoretical discourses, takes the risk of projecting the break immediately into the time of the history of ideas, of identifying

it with a simple empirical discontinuity between a “before” and an “after”) must be corrected and reworked by the concept. But this work itself becomes less linear than might perhaps be desired, because of a second *negative* thesis: *there is no break in philosophy*. Philosophy is thus not a “science” (or a scientific theory), if scientificity continues to be defined by its own “break” with ideology. But it is “in the last instance the class struggle in theory.” Its effect is not to produce knowledge (or a knowledge effect) but to displace the fronts where the war is waged, or to overthrow them, and thus to overthrow the “relations of forces” in an eternal “struggle of tendencies.”<sup>29</sup> Upon reflection, it is clear that these two shifts are one and the same, or at least tend toward the same goal: to bring about a return in force of the agency and the very name of politics (what the struggle means concretely) in theory and in its history, but through the unavoidable mediation of philosophy. So much so that it will inevitably be asked if politics itself delays its entrance on stage in taking a detour through philosophy, or if philosophy, rather, borrows from politics the efficacy, the effectivity, of its antagonisms. This metaphorical play, which moves from the (epistemological) *break* to the *tracing of a line of demarcation* (a fundamental operation of philosophy, to the extent that it belongs to the realm of struggle, to the establishment and distinguishing of “camps”), in fact figures at the center of the formulations that Althusser was then seeking. At the very moment when Althusser says there is no break in philosophy (since philosophy is not a science), he joins together formulations of Plato, of Hobbes, and of Lenin to characterize philosophy as an art of carving up, of the judicious tracing of limits. The metaphor of the break in reality *circulates* between the two theoretical instances, the two discourses of philosophy (where choices, subjectless decisions that “represent the class struggle in theory,” are carried out) and science (where the effects of these choices are produced: the constitution of concepts, the repression of ideology).<sup>30</sup>

Let us not conclude that Althusser at the time abandoned all epistemological preoccupation in favor of a “politician” or of a generalized politicization of philosophy (finding himself, by a kind of *nemesis* of Marxist theory, back at that opposition between “bourgeois theory” and “proletarian theory” that he had so proudly challenged by proclaiming the rights of knowledge and the powers of the concept at the moment of his first public writings!). This preoccupation is expressed not only in the analyses of *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (to take the true measure of the project then underway, it would be fitting to add the unpublished course on truth, which is not taken up in this edition of the “Cours de philosophie pour scientifiques,” doubtless because Althusser wanted to rework it), but also in the totality of suggestions (culminating in “Soutenance d’Amiens”) that characterize knowledge as a

process of *infinite* production, at the same time irreversible and incomplete, precarious, thus risky. Only then, in a sense, does Althusser definitively exorcise his proximity to positivist formulations, to a conception of the demarcation between science and ideology that is itself positivist, including its subtle persistence in the Kantian thesis (itself metaphorical) of the “safe path” of science, which is to say, of the linearity of its progress. The radicality of the break between science and ideology, between imaginary and knowledge, is in no way attenuated, and neither as a result is the importance of the “point of no return” that a first conceptual step always constitutes for knowledge. But the break is put back in a field of forces that continue to act as long as knowledge itself works and progresses, which is to say, to infinity. Every break is at the same time irreversible and precarious, threatened with an impossible return to its ideological prehistory, without which it would not *last*, it would not *progress*. It is thus a *continuous break* (in the sense of continuation, not of continuity). There is no doubt that the deep reason for the alterations attempted by Althusser in no way lies in the temptation to subordinate work or scientific thought once more to some guiding philosophical instance that would impose its constitutive norms or simply its meaning (which is, moreover, a “political” meaning). Rather, such a subordination is far more the object of Althusser’s critique; it characterizes the “idealist” regime of domination of science by ideologies of nature, of the supernatural, or of history. Against these, materialism does not present itself as an opposing ideological *fullness* but rather as the insistence of ideological *emptiness*, of the emptiness of ideology that it is a matter of reconquering at every moment from its own “plenitude” (ideology abhors a vacuum). No, the deep reason for the alteration is the necessity to think the infinity of the process of knowledge as such, the infinite contradiction that characterizes it. But there is only an infinity of knowledge if philosophy—that metaphor of the struggle of the liberating classes—empties out ideology for it at every moment.

Given these conditions, it becomes clearer what articulates the thesis of the “continuous break” with the astonishingly *negative* formulations by which, at the same time, Althusser claims for philosophy the representation of *practice*, in truth the *primacy of practice* in theory. Carrying to its limit the model of “production” (this model of practice generalized as the “transformation of the world,” a model taken from Marx and which is an integral part of the entire tradition of historical materialism), Althusser ends up by overthrowing it. In contrast to the sciences, in the very constitution of their scientificity, the philosophy that these self-critical texts discuss certainly represents the instance of *practice*, but philosophy is that “practice” par excellence whose *effect is zero*, that is to say, which “transforms” nothing but itself, works only in itself, on preexisting philosophy,

in a philosophical “space” whose lines of force it displaces. This situation incontestably leaves room for differing interpretations (to the extent that it is not the first time that formulas of this kind spring from the pen of a philosopher).<sup>31</sup> *Negatively*, it could mean that only philosophical practice confers its effectivity on truth and its efficacy on scientific knowledge, and lets us speak of knowledge *effects*, in the strong sense of the term: because philosophical discourses are related to theoretical ideologies, which are related to practical ideologies, which are related to ideological practices, thus to political practices, thus in the last analysis to the class struggles which transform the world. Such an interpretation, it is clear, bears a great resemblance to the infinite regress in which each “practice” works only in itself, but “indirectly” produces effects on other practices, philosophy having the rather miraculous task of designating this succession of practical effects. The infinity specific to knowledge resolves itself, outside itself, into a “bad infinity”: an operation which never actually reaches its results. Is there not, however, another way of understanding what Althusser aims at here? To do so, it is enough to reinstate, as the middle term of the argument, a *positive* thesis that the “Cours de philosophie pour scientifiques” was trying to formalize. Not only does every scientific practice presuppose, include, and reproduce some philosophy (what Althusser calls the “spontaneous philosophy of the scientists”), but *every practice is philosophical*, or, to put it another way, there is philosophy *everywhere*, that is to say, in every practice (because what “is” are multiple practices). We would thus have an equivalent to Gramsci’s thesis that “everyone is a philosopher,” not by vocation or privilege or consciousness, but by the fact of being implicated in social practices that define him or her concretely. Better yet, we would have an equivalent to Spinoza’s axiom: “men think,” which is to say that there is always already ideology in all their actions and theory in their ideology. Ergo there is philosophy, or material to philosophize upon, conflictually. This situation, it is clear, gives a very strange meaning to philosophical “immanence,” to the idea that philosophical effects are always *internal* to philosophy, are produced “in” philosophy. Far from *shutting up* philosophy, its “practice,” its specific “effects” (beginning with the effect of the break it induces in the sciences) in a closed space, this interiority is itself immediately *absolute exteriority*. Philosophy, let us repeat, is “everywhere,” it is always already assumed by all the practices whose articulations, constraints, and conflicts it reflects. Philosophy is, as it were, the “absent cause” of any thinking about the relations of force in practices and between them. Fundamentally, it is nothing other than that. And we can understand why. Otherwise, philosophy would once more have a “domain” of its own, an “object” all the more specific because it would try to think itself under some name like “the object in general,” the “empty” object of an ontology, etc.<sup>32</sup>

With these specifications, did Althusser not purely and simply *exhaust* the possibilities of exploiting his own metaphor? Did he not, in another sense, come back to the real question, which is *to think as such the efficacy of “ideas” in history*, even if they appeared as their opposites (theoretical practices, “ideological apparatuses,” etc.)? It is tempting to think so in taking a close look at one final stage (at least if we confine ourselves to the *published work*).

### **Fifth Moment: Disappearance of the Break**

By this formulation, I do not only want to indicate that, in the final texts, Althusser no longer mentions the “epistemological break,” neither as concept nor as metaphor. I want to suggest that, taking into account all that has come before, this disappearance is not a pure and simple abolition. It leaves a fixed, positive trace, which would hardly be a paradox to consider as its final configuration, in a sense “the break after the break.” I would thus like to correct the almost purely destructive view of Althusser’s evolution as he neared the great catastrophe that shattered his life in 1980—a view that I offered in an earlier article.<sup>33</sup> Or rather, I would like to show that this destruction *also* has a positive side. Of course, contingent circumstances have made the formulations of the essay on “Marxism Today”<sup>34</sup> Althusser’s “final” theorizing for us. But whatever the causes—the culmination of an internal logic, the pressure of events, or again a conjunction of the two—the fact remains that these formulations effect a true inversion of perspective, finally opening up on its own a question that, we will discover, had never ceased to haunt the margins of his discourse.

To understand this inversion of perspectives, we must return to the theme, briefly invoked above, of the *Marxist topography*, and observe the following: “break” and “topography” never stopped being studied by Althusser together, but in the end their relations were practically *reversed*. The dominant theme became subordinate and vice versa.<sup>35</sup>

What is the “topography” at the outset? It is the conceptual metaphor, borrowed from Freud, by means of which Althusser tried to *generalize* the Marxist problematic of the capitalist “mode of production” in order to extract from it a new formalization of the dialectic. It is thus an interpretation of the Marxian distinctions between “base” and “superstructure” (themselves redoubled by the complex play of different agencies: productive forces, relations of production, the state, etc.) as an original *scheme of causality*, absolutely irreducible to the idealism of emanation or expression, or to physicalist mechanism, and permitting us to analyze the distinctiveness of conjunctures (their “overdetermination”), which is

the sole reality of history.<sup>36</sup> But this scheme of causality does not permit us only, negatively, to leave behind the aporias of evolutionism and Marxist catastrophism or, positively, to trace the program of a concrete analysis of the effects of ideology and politics upon the “historical tendencies” of the capitalist social formation. In its theoretical form it already constitutes a reformulation of the dialectic or, if you wish, of the “motor of history,” absolutely incompatible with Hegelianism. Althusser stated it strongly: *in Hegel, there is no topography*, or rather, the only “topography” that Hegel knows (that of the spheres or successive circles of realization of the absolute spirit, whose image is the system of spheres of the state’s “exterior” and “interior” life) is in reality a *nontopography*, that is, a means of *abolishing the real distinctions* among agencies of reality, among practices, and among historical forces, so as to restore them finally (teleologically) to the unity of a single Idea, of which they will no longer represent anything more than the phenomenon. We can contrast to this the distinctiveness and the irreducible complexity of agencies articulated among themselves in the Marxist explanation of historical movement (concretely, of class struggles), under the primacy of the mode of production that “distributes” their efficacy from one conjuncture to the other, but which can never “negate” or “sublate” them (*aufheben*). This explanation introduces the materialist viewpoint into the very heart of dialectical thinking, that is, into the thinking of historicity, of the transformation of the real.<sup>37</sup> Althusser thus inscribes the *materialist topography* of social relations and of their “differential efficacy” in the very heart of his definition of Marxist theory as scientific theory. As a result, this topography immediately illustrates the significance, the effect of the break.

It is easy to verify this by taking one more quick look at the stages we have distinguished. As early as 1959, the theme runs beneath the surface of Althusser’s description of the revolutionary characteristics of Montesquieu’s “new science”: the distinction of “nature” and “principle” in political regimes, the reciprocal effect of the latter against the former in the explanation of their evolution. It becomes explicit in *For Marx*, the stage that I have called “the break named”: there, according to Althusser, Marx achieves a recognition of the complexity of the historical factors *at the same time* that he identifies the “real basis” of social formations. It is precisely this fact that permits him to escape from ideology, in particular from the idea that history is the progress of consciousness, to the extent that he even begins to *think* ideology as such. Finally, it is triumphantly exposed in *Reading Capital* (at the stage I’ve called “the break generalized”) where Marx’s science, “historical materialism,” a “science-within-a-topography” par excellence, becomes the very theory itself of the structures of historicity. One can even imagine that the privilege of Marxism, within a project of general epistemology, what makes of it in some sense

the “queen” of the sciences, stems from this explicit formulation that it allows of the idea of a structural causality, or an “overdetermination” of causes. Indeed, even if he did not exactly *say* it at that moment, Althusser did more than suggest (and that was perfectly consistent with his ambition to construct a Theory of theoretical practices) that the social “mode of production” model could also, at a sufficient level of generality, apply to the “mode of production” of knowledges. We have seen, however, Althusser point out in his last words—the clue to an essential difficulty—that such a theorization would still leave open the question of the “knowledge effect.” And this question was in immediate relation with that of the functioning of the *apparatus of thought* (close kin to Freud’s “psychic apparatus”), that is, with another “topography,” another “game of instances.” Here one would have to be able to articulate the “kinds of knowledge” or the “modes of thought” themselves from the viewpoint of their “primary” or “secondary” character and their respective conditions of efficacy (by this I mean, their effects of impeding or supporting the transformation of thought, whether individual or collective, inasmuch as thought passes through knowledge and nonknowledge, and even through the “production” and “appropriation” of truth).

But is this thematic not exactly what, at first indirectly, increases gradually in importance in Althusser’s “corrections,” even through some tense discussions on “theoreticism” and the “priority of class struggle,” and what finally determines the *inversion* I discussed in the respective functions of “break” and “topography”? Beginning in 1968, in fact, in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, the idea of topography shifts its application, if not its meaning. From this point on it no longer indicates only “the complexity of the social whole,” the object of theory, but the *double position of theory*, which “is itself part of the conjuncture in which it intervenes.”<sup>38</sup> From here on this question will never cease to engage Althusser. It will engage him directly in the form of a reflection on the conditions of the “power of ideas,” or the “efficacy of theory.” (The efficacy of theory could be summed up by saying: theory should not only *break* with the dominant ideology but also *act upon* ideology, that is to say, ultimately upon “consciousness,” and in order to do so it must *make itself into ideology*, in other words, transform itself into its “opposite,” provided that it finds a form of ideology that is neither religious preaching nor moral instruction nor scientific pedagogy.) This question will also engage him indirectly in the form of a discussion and a political critique of the *forms of organization* in which Marx’s “critical and revolutionary” theory invested itself (and, with some exceptions, was lost, and even turned against itself)—that is to say, the famous “historical fusion of Marxist theory and the workers’ movement.” Finally, Althusser organizes the last presentation he gave of Marxism<sup>39</sup> around this question: Marx’s material-

ism, or, better still, the materialism that we can construct from a critical reading of Marx, is not the *contents* of a theory of history. It is not even the *logic* of presentation of these contents, which could be described as a “logic of singularity” adequate to the analysis of social practices and especially class struggle. Rather, Marx’s materialism consists in the *fact* that Marx inscribed in theory itself the *limits*, and thus the *conditions*, imposed on its historical efficacy by the fact that theory consists of “ideas,” or, if one prefers, results from an activity of knowledge that takes ideological forms as its raw material and must eventually return to them.

Thus it is possible to say—this is what I called “the break after the break”—not that all distinction between science and ideology has been abolished, not that Althusser has renounced the *objective* he pursued in his theorizations of “theoretical practice” and “epistemological break,” but rather that *the topography has become the fundamental concept*, that it has *subordinated* the problem formerly indicated by the name of “break.” The reversal of perspectives is indeed complete, since there is no longer any question of making the materialist topography (or Marxist thinking about topography, as opposed to idealist thought about the origin, the subject, consciousness) into a simple *content* of the revolutionary problematic put in place by an epistemological break. Rather, we must consider that the question of topography, of its variations, of the space that it arranges for knowledge and action, or organization, *commands* all reflection on “theoretical practice.” And in fact what Althusser describes by this name is *at the same time*, indissolubly, a social and historical structure (permeated by class struggles) and an apparatus of thought, a structure of the production and of the realization of thought, before any distinction between “individual thought” and “collective thought”; Althusser also tries to illustrate the topography’s implications in the history of the workers’ movement. This correction was part of a sort of “remorse” when confronted with politics (remorse at having “forgotten the class struggle” in what was called his theoreticism). At first it led him to put all theoretical and scientific determinations back in a situation of dependence on *revolutionary* practice, though still by the mediation of *philosophy*. But should we not conclude that this correction finally led Althusser to find, for the duration of a few lines, formulations that no doubt “resolve” nothing but that succeed astonishingly—in their very impurity—in *posing together*, and in the same words, the immediately political question of a *revolutionary thinking of the masses* (which is not their “spontaneous” thinking, but which is a thinking they can appropriate *themselves* in order to control its effects, including arming themselves against their “supreme power”) and the eminently philosophical, indeed speculative, question of the *reality of thought*. Better still: of the reality of thought *about the real*, which is a problem because if the real did not “redouble” itself, if thought and above all true thought did

not *distinguish itself* from the real, at least “momentarily,” it would not *think* the real at all, but would only “reflect” it in a specular fashion.<sup>40</sup>

I will not go further in this description of Althusser’s “drift” with regard to the “epistemological break,” which in any case, as far as we know, stops here.<sup>41</sup> But in conclusion I would like to come back to my point of departure—the question of Althusser’s philosophical object—and examine a few of its singularities.

I began from a double hypothesis. Althusser, in imitation of what he himself proposes as the core of the activity of past philosophers, forged and elaborated a philosophical “object” which is the “epistemological break.” But in its generality this object reveals itself to be different from the idea of which it realizes, rebelling to some extent against its projected use. Thus it is necessary to take it up again, that is, to transform it unceasingly into another object in order to be able to continue to think it. On the first point at least, this is just what we observed. The ideological break in Althusser is a theoretical “fiction” enabling him to displace the play of traditional philosophical oppositions. In this way, a place is arranged for the recognition of what remained unthinkable in philosophy (the scientificity of the theory of class struggle), but a new problem is also opened up (the problem of the original structures of a materialist dialectic, or, if you will, the problem of a logic of the real complexity of conjunctures). Althusser ended up clearly recognizing that he was doing philosophy in the sense that he, too, was constructing a “philosophical object” (like the *cogito* or the *contract*). He recognized that the epistemological break was not so much *the concept of an object* (which would be the general process of “theoretical production,” of the “transformation of ideology” into its opposite, science) as the presentation *of the concept as object*. In other words, the epistemological break is the figuration, in the abstract imaginative space proper to the philosopher, of the most salient properties of the “concept,” or of conceptual knowledge, in particular its conflictual relation to ideology, that is, to anything that is thought and that is given to itself in the form of a “consciousness.” This recognition coincides very precisely with the moment when Althusser begins (begins again) to consider the “break” as a *metaphor*, consistent with the play of other metaphors that exist in philosophy. All these “philosophical objects” are also metaphorical objects, or rather, they are constructed from metaphors, verbal or perceptual, whose meaning is taken seriously and made autonomous. But here we come to the second aspect of Althusser’s philosophical object. From the moment when Althusser recognizes the philosophical essence of the “break” and undertakes to make it work in its relation with other philosophical metaphors (“demarcation,” “inversion”), he also begins to dissolve or *undo the object he had constructed*. This is what I had formerly

interpreted as self-destruction, which is the limit, in terms of subjective incapacity, of Althusser's ability to hold the position thus conquered, both arranged and occupied by that object (the position of "theoretical practice," the Althusserian position of theory as from the outset a practice, that kind of practice which necessarily passes through theory). I will henceforth retain from this somewhat too pathetic, indeed nihilistic interpretation only the idea that there was something *untenable* in Althusser's first position, but not the idea that its abandonment opens onto nothingness. Indeed, the dissolution of the "break" as philosophical object, as dominant metaphor, in no way suppresses what is essential to the "break," which is the active difference of the concept and of ideology (or of theoretical humanism) in all its forms, inscribed in the very progression of the sciences. But this is no longer the philosophical object around which a virtual "system" could be organized. Not only is the break *restricted* in its field of application (it does not concern philosophy where, as in politics and ideological struggle, there are only revolutions and inversions, but no "breaks," that is, no radical conceptual innovation), but it is henceforth subordinated to another question, that of the functioning of the *topography*, or of the ideo-logico-social apparatus that determines the conditions of thought's efficacy. It becomes simply *one of the moments* of the process of thought, which distributes itself according to a topography's lines of force.

Is this to say, as one might suggest, that Althusser has henceforth *changed objects*, constructed another "philosophical object," which would be the "topography"? This is by no means impossible. After all, there are examples of such a move in the history of philosophy. After constructing the Cogito, Descartes constructed *the union of the soul and the body* (metaphorically, the "pineal gland"). After constructing the "I think," Kant constructed the *categorical imperative*. After constructing the *Dasein*, Heidegger constructed *ontological difference*. And so on. But something holds us back from truly considering the "topography" as a "philosophical object" in the same sense as earlier. In part this something is the fact that its construction is barely sketched out (while Althusser continues to devote himself, on the other hand, to the "deconstruction" of the form that Marx had given to the presentation of *his* topography: the "architectural metaphor" at work in the famous text of the 1859 *Introduction*. But above all the "topography," or the *theme* of the "topography," indicates the opening of a series of questions and their problematic unity rather than organizing a philosophical discourse. These questions concern the imbrication of an apparatus of thought and a play of social forces, as we have seen, and also (I have spoken of this elsewhere) the "analogy" between the problematic of class struggle and the problematic of the formations of the unconscious.

I do not therefore believe that, having dissolved his own philosophical object, Althusser sought to construct another. But this non sequitur is nonetheless extraordinarily interesting for the “play” it introduces into the philosophical tradition and its relation to politics. I noted right at the start of this article the impossibility of reflecting on the theme of the “epistemological break” without evoking Plato, at least in the background. This reference to Plato now becomes more and more insistent: for *in the final analysis, the theme of the “topography” is itself Platonic in origin*.<sup>42</sup> Now Althusser’s situation in relation to Platonism is not at all equivocal. One can even say that it is less and less equivocal: it is a pure and simple *opposition*—not only in a generic way, because of his declared materialism, because of Althusser’s insistence on the viewpoint of immanence, his refusal of any autonomization of the intelligible, indeed any identification of thought with a simple system of *ideas* (we recall his insistence that “ideology is not made of ideas”). His reasons are more precise. Althusser never stops combating the idea of a “guarantee” of knowledge, whose prototype is evidently the Platonic *idea of the Good*, which joins in its own “identity” truth and value. As a result he uses every means to combat the resurgence, within Marxism itself and more generally in politics, of this inveterate “Platonism” that subordinates politics to a presentation (if not an inculcation) of the True, or, I would even say, subordinates the truth effects of politics to the invocation of the name of truth. To borrow the title of Emmanuel Terray’s excellent book, in a way that is I think in keeping with its spirit, Althusser’s politics is essentially a “politics inside the Cave,” simply because the Cave has no exterior.<sup>43</sup> And this is precisely what he expresses, against Plato, when he takes up the Platonic theme of the “topography.”

This point is all the more important because *there was* incontestably an element of Platonism in the “epistemological” conception of the break—an analogy between the ideology/science pair and the perceptible/intelligible pair, reversing in a sense the analogy that Marx established in *The German Ideology*, following Aristotle, between materialist science and the perceptible, between idealist ideology and autonomization of ideas. And by way of consequence, there was a reminiscence of the “philosopher-king” in the figure of “Theory,” a result of the break, and in the figure of the “theorist” who brings it about, that has not failed to draw protests. It is all the more remarkable that, finally dissolving the object of the “break,” Althusser is not satisfied with self-criticism on this point, but comes to reflect on the question of the “topography” for itself, that is, the question of the *places of thought*, the places that thought traverses and invests in different forms, in different “genres.” Thus he tries to describe the system of these places not as a *hierarchy* (which would go from the perceptible to the intelligible, and from there toward a principle

of distinction itself, “ahypothetical”), but as a *limitation of efficacy*, which insists that conceptual thought does not act on its own conditions of existence where it recognizes itself as true, but always “elsewhere,” where, as a “material force,” it is relatively indistinguishable from its ideological Other.

There is thus something very original in the reversal of Platonism sketched out by Althusser in terms of “topographies.” It lies neither in the reversal of values that rehabilitates the perceptible at the expense of the intelligible or the many at the expense of the one, nor in the abolition of the distinction of “places” or “regions.” Rather, Althusser’s originality here consists in a deliberate use of that distinction (or the distinction of the “modes of knowledge,” via Spinozism) and of the notion of the *theoretical* to assign to philosophy the task of thinking that which puts philosophy itself outside itself, in its immanent relation to politics: classes, masses, ideologies. Must one say, moreover, “assign to philosophy”? One will hesitate, without any doubt, as I suspect here that Althusser never ceased to hesitate. But he did so for excellent reasons that have nothing arbitrary about them. For it has become commonplace to think and to say that the entire history of philosophy, at least the history of the decisive philosophical “gestures” that rekindle all its conflicts, is nothing but *the history of the inversions of Platonism*, from Aristotle to Marx, from Epicurus to Nietzsche, etc. Inverting Platonism is exactly what must be done in order to continue philosophy (and also, by way of consequence, in order to furnish other philosophers with the occasion to *recover* or *restore* Platonism). But it is perhaps less obvious that, in each of these reversals, philosophy finds itself forcefully brought back to the initial “choices” that determined it, to the necessity of “choosing” again between philosophy and nonphilosophy (whether the latter be called sophistry, materialist science, politics, history, theory of the “passions” and of the “unconscious,” etc.). Althusser indisputably holds to this same line with his “materialist topographies,” repeatedly questioning the causes of the power and the impotence of ideas (those opposites that sometimes reunite in the imaginary of “omnipotence”). He is thus certainly not *outside* philosophy, caught in the illusion of escaping it or of having an absolute hold over it. But neither is he inside what he calls “philosophical rumination” (another name for that shrewd naiveté that looks for means to start philosophy up again or to bring it to an end). More than a philosopher—which he was (for the condition of philosopher cannot be recognized by the mass of the collected works), and which he could always have become again—I would like to suggest that at the end of that intense and rapid conceptual experiment conducted in a sense on himself, he was, he is, that very insistent voice, very peculiar, yet almost anonymous (or which will become almost anonymous), which warns us better than any other to *beware the effects*, the

consequences, when we decide either still to construct discourses and philosophical objects or to rejoin the “real world” of politics and history, the world that believes it has finished with philosophy.

## Notes

This article is adapted from a talk delivered at the conference “The Work of Louis Althusser,” University of Paris VIII—Saint-Denis, 29–30 March 1991. This text (which appears in *Politique et philosophie dans l'œuvre de Louis Althusser*, ed. S. Lazarus [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993]) picks up and completes the work presented during the “journées de Saint-Denis,” entitled “Is There an ‘Epistemological Break’?”

1. We remember the famous formulation in *For Marx* (New York: Vintage, 1970): “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes” (113).

2. “Sur le contrat sociale: Les Décalages,” a course from 1966 published in *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, no. 8 (1968), as “L’impensé de Jean-Jacques Rousseau.”

3. In “Lenin before Hegel,” published in *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971), Althusser gives other examples of such particular “philosophical objects”: Feuerbach’s Man, Descartes’s Cogito, Kant’s Transcendental Subject, Hegel’s Idea.

4. See my study, “From Bachelard to Althusser: The Concept of Epistemological Break,” *Economy and Society* 7, no. 3 (August 1978).

5. Pierre Machery, “L’histoire de la philosophie considérée comme une lutte de tendances,” *La pensée*, no. 185 (January–February 1976).

6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 39.

7. Balibar, “From Bachelard to Althusser,” 215.

8. See, in particular, the “Soutenance d’Amiens,” in *Positions* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1976), 154; translated into English as “Is It \_\_\_\_ to Be a \_\_\_\_ in Philosophy?” in *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 163–207.

9. Althusser states that he borrowed the term *problematic*, with its obviously post-Kantian overtones, from his friend Jacques Martin (translator of *L’esprit du christianisme et son destin*, by Hegel). Might it not come from Heidegger (see, for instance, *Sein und Zeit*, §25)? Another important reference to Kant and *problematic* is in Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 218. Later, Foucault very likely recalls all this when he defines philosophy as an analysis and a practice of “problematization.”

10. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant described the domain of knowledge, that is to say, possible experience, as an “island” surrounded by the unknown, by dangers, and by the deadly mirages of an ocean covered with mist. Althusser inverts the metaphor: the “constitutive” limits are, on the contrary, those which allow us to set off, without fixed itinerary, *toward the interior*, with the guarantee only of discovering something new.

11. It is known that Koyré was the student of Husserl. The only real attempt to fashion a “theory of the break,” functioning as a metatheory of the history of

science, found its support in Koyré rather than in Bachelard (despite the convergence they thought it important to underline when confronted with positivism and continuism). I refer to the theory of François Regnault in the “Cours de philosophie pour scientifiques” given at the École Normale Supérieure in 1967–68 under the direction of Althusser. In particular, we owe to this effort the expression “point of no return,” an expression designating the formulation of the problems of science that breaks with its “prehistory.” Husserl, Heidegger, Koyré, each in his own way describes the expansion of the principle of reason in modern science as an expansion of the principle of calculability, as a mathematization of the world. But it would be more correct to dwell on the divergence that opens up rather than on the analogies. In Koyré, as in Bachelard, indeed perhaps even more so, “science thinks,” to the same extent that it calculates. Better: science could not calculate if it did not think. Koyré implicitly condemned the solidarity that joined Heidegger with positivism on this point. Heidegger never stopped *granting to positivism* his description of science as the nonthought, which is extravagant. On the difficulties with Koyré’s program, see a recent discussion that is as precise as it is abrasive: Ernest Coumet, “Alexandre Koyré: La révolution scientifique introuvable?” *History and Technology* 4 (1987), 497–529.

12. In mentioning this reference, we sketch yet another genealogical lineage, for the Freudian thesis of the “three narcissistic wounds,” stated notably in chapter 18 of the *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, is itself delineated in Haeckel, *Histoire de la création naturelle ou doctrine scientifique de l’évolution* (1868), second lesson (French translation of 1874, p. 29). At a certain time, did not Althusser want to substitute Marx’s “theoretical antihumanism” for the antipsychologism of Freud (or better: to subsume the second under the first, the critique of *homo psychologicus* under that of *homo oeconomicus*)? The system of the three scientific continents (mathematics, physics, history), opened to knowledge by the same number of breaks, is then substituted for the system of the “three narcissistic wounds.”

13. Plato, *Republic*, 509e, 511d–e. In *Lenin and Philosophy*, Althusser also referred to *The Sophist*.

14. Recall the double-edged maxim that some of us borrowed from Mao not so long ago: “whoever has not conducted an investigation has no *right* to speak” (answering the scientific and authoritarian version of this maxim found in Kautskyism-Leninism: “to *import* science into the worker’s movement”).

15. Louis Althusser, *Politics and History* (1959; rpt. London: New Left Books, 1972).

16. See my study, “Science et vérité dans la philosophie de Georges Canguilhem,” in *Georges Canguilhem, philosophe, historien des sciences* (Albin Michel: Bibliothèque du Collège International de Philosophie, 1992).

17. Althusser, *For Marx*, 245 (translation amended).

18. The converse effect of these formulations of Althusser on the reading of Spinozism will be found above all in Pierre-François Moreau’s *Spinoza* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 81ff.

19. In the subsequent lecture, “Marx et Lénine devant Hegel” (“Lenin before Hegel”), Althusser will define “Generality Two” as precisely *transformation transforming itself*.

20. I note that recently there has been a lot of excitement around the “paradigm of complexity,” as if it were a radical innovation. At the very least, one might reread Althusser, for whom this theme is central, by means of the concept alone, which is to say, without the need for physico-biological metaphors.

21. And even its infinite withdrawal: the “negative” version.

22. It is curious that in concluding his book on *L'antihumanisme au dix-septième siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1987), Henri Gouhier refers to Foucault but not to Althusser, although some of his definitions are much closer to the latter: “Bérulle indeed seems to want to mark the break between Christian thought and pagan philosophies . . . which has as consequence a categorical imperative: the abasement of the self” (48). And somewhat later: “In a note scrawled on a slip of paper whose expansion in his ‘Apologie de la religion chrétienne’ would have established an outline of the ‘shortcomings of Montaigne,’ Pascal treats the presence and absence of original sin as marking a radical break between anthropologies which seek to be Christian and those which are not, even if, as in the case of Montaigne, they leave the religious structure standing in the neighborhood.” It seems to me, however, more accurate to read here the retroactive effect (very illuminating) of formulations introduced by Althusser rather than the index of a “Christian source” to his philosophy (the philosophy of Althusser, a great reader of Pascal, has Christian sources, as does everyone’s).

23. In a passage from the *Traité de la réforme de l’entendement* (The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect), frequently cited by Pierre Macherey, Spinoza had resolved the difficulty with a negative argument which works by analogy: that a knowledge formally requires previous knowledge does not allow us to conclude that it cannot exist, any more than it can be concluded that men have never fashioned anything from the fact that, in order to work, it is already necessary to have fashioned tools. We must assume that men began by using objects which were not tools as such. This constitutes the whole secret of the idea of method.

24. One of the best “reconstructions” of this moment of Althusserianism is found in the essays of Maria Turchetto: “Per la critica di un’autocritica: Riflessioni sul significato di ‘Filosofia,’ ‘Scienza,’ ‘Ideologia’ nell’elaborazione teorica di Louis Althusser,” in *La cognizione della crisi: Saggi sul marxismo di Louis Althusser*, by M. Giacometti et al. (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1986); “Storia della scienza e scienza della storia: La storia della filosofia come problema nella lettura Althusseriana del *Capitale*,” in *La storia della filosofia come problema*, Seminario 1985–1987 a cura di Paolo Cristofolini, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, 1988. An abridged English translation of the second essay is available as “The History of Science and the Science of History,” in *The Althusserian Legacy*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1993), 73–80. Turchetto systematically defends this moment against later “self-criticisms.”

25. See Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 1990), 84ff. This point helps explain, notably, the importance of Althusser’s epistemological intervention for certain practitioners of the “human sciences”: linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, even, paradoxically, economists. He pushed “structuralism’s” challenge to its maxims of clarity: to tear these disciplines away *both* from the rapidly growing technicism of “models,” *and* from all ideologies of humanism and the humanities, to *constitute their scientificity*, but starting from *their own concepts*, without any biologizing or physicalizing reduction. See the writings of Michel Pêcheux, notably “La sémantique et la coupure Saussurienne: Langue, langage, discours” (1971), in *L’inquiétude du discours* (Paris: Editions des Cendres, 1990). See also J.-C. Milner, *L’amour de la langue* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978): “I used to barely believe in epistemology” (10). For Milner (who aligns himself with Koyré and Lacan, and later Popper), the theme of scientific continents (and its correlate, the theme of breaks) constitutes a new resurgence of the Aristotelianism that

finds pre-Galilean axiomatics (the prohibition of the *metabasis eis allo genos*). See as well his *Introduction à une science du langage* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989).

26. It must be noted that Althusser and Althusserians have not had the monopoly on this investigation: others have tried it in their own fashion. See, for instance, some of the texts collected by Desanti in *La philosophie silencieuse* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975).

27. Gérard Lebrun, *La patience du concept: Essai sur le discours Hegelien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) (see 342–54 for an intensive discussion of Althusser's critique of the Hegelian “expressive totality”).

28. Let us indicate in passing a subject of investigation that remains completely unexplored: the confrontation of Althusserian analyses of “juridical ideology” as an anthropological problematic with the critiques of “the ideology of natural law” in the tradition of juridical positivism and notably in the work of Kelsen. As we know, Althusser had closely read and utilized the work of Eisenmann at the moment that he composed his *Montesquieu*.

29. Just as he was always preoccupied with the Kantian question of the “object of the sciences” and of “sciences without an object” (perhaps as a reaction to the way in which R. Aron had claimed to bring a critical solution to the antinomies of historical knowledge in his famous *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*), so Althusser always tried to take up and rework the metaphor of philosophy as an “arena” or “lists,” battlefield (*Kampfplatz*). In his conceptualization of “philosophical struggle,” he subjects it to a double deviation. On the one hand, the struggle no longer has an “end” or a conceivable “solution” (which also means that there is no “exit” from metaphysics or dogmatism). On the other hand, the very configuration of the fronts is not *given*, once and for all, by some grand antinomy of reason (which would for that reason itself anticipate the solution, or which would make the struggle of tendencies the simple projection of its own structure, as is the case, among others, of Kant, with the symmetry of empiricism and rationalism). Rather, it is *produced*, in recurrent fashion, from internal or external events that rend the fabric of philosophical arguments and disturb the game of the “positions” available in philosophy. As a consequence, the confrontations are always binary, but never overlap exactly. This new Althusserian description of the philosophical field, of a “decisionist” character and thus, contrary to the preceding one (philosophy as Theory or science of sciences), profoundly immoralist, was even more vigorously impugned than the preceding one by the philosophical guild, which enthusiastically accused it of leftism and terrorism.

30. While the “generalized break” that we previously discussed in connection with *Reading Capital* is Bachelardian in orientation, at least in the way it subordinates more than ever the philosophical side to the scientific side in the unity of the two (Bachelard sought in contemporary *science* a guiding thread for philosophy), the “corrected break” that we are describing now seems rather *to come back to the side of Koyré*, for whom scientific practice (and notably the inaugural revolution of modern science) always depended on internal *philosophical conditions*. It does so with a notable exception. The *philosophical position* regulating the break is not Platonism, the primacy of mathematical intelligibility over the perceptible world, but rather, on the contrary, “materialism.” I will shortly come back to this complex and tense relation between Althusser's last formulations and Platonism.

31. It is well known that this point, particularly, has tempted some readers of

the “second Althusser” to reconcile him with the “second Wittgenstein,” who wrote that, “Philosophy . . . leaves everything as it is” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §124). See, for instance, the discussion between Grahame Lock and Jacques Hoarau in the special issue of the journal *M: Mensuel, marxisme, mouvement* (January 1991), devoted to Althusser.

32. See the amplifications inspired by this orientation in Dominique Lecourt, *La philosophie sans feinte* (Albin Michel: J. E. Hallier, 1982).

33. Etienne Balibar, “Tais-toi encore, Althusser!” included in *Écrits pour Althusser* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1991).

34. Published in Italian (“Il marxismo oggi”) in the *Enciclopedia Garzanti* (Milan: Garzanti, 1978), and in French in *M* (January 1991).

35. Althusser had himself already reflected on this inversion in the following manner. In the beginning, it was a question for him of restoring the *primacy of the dialectic* over materialism (on the condition, of course, of reorganizing the dialectic to uproot it from Hegelian idealism); at the end, in contrast, it was a question of restoring the *primacy of materialism* over the dialectic against all the variants, theoreticist or not, of the (“hallucinatory”) belief in the “omnipotence of ideas”—including, and above all, “correct ideas” (Mao)—with their political consequences. This materialism was a “materialism” of events, practices, and relations of forces, and not, obviously, a “materialism” of an evolutionist or physicalist type. Now the idea of the “break” (like that of revolution) indisputably belongs to a dialectical theorization, even while Althusser continues to designate “Marxist topography” (as elsewhere “Freudian topography”) as *the* materialist category par excellence.

36. In *For Marx*, Althusser calls this schema of causality “complex unity [*tout complexe*] in dominance”; in *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 1979), “structural causality” or “efficacy of the absent cause.”

37. This is not the place to take up again the whole discussion of the Althusserian categories of the dialectic. One can nevertheless ask *in what way* the “always already given complexity” of instances, or the “overdetermination” of causes and effects, constitutes a *materialist* thesis. It seems to me that this is basically the case, from Althusser’s point of view, because such notions are opposed to any “recovery,” any “synthesis” or “recollection of meaning” of historical events in the unity of a *consciousness*, even virtual. This constitutes, then, a negative reason, whose relevance to the philosophical debates of the 1950s and 1960s we need not underline. But one can, nonetheless, wonder whether this reason does not imply a circle, since it assumes as established that the “form of possible consciousness” is the general form of the ideology of the meaning of history or of the idealist dialectic. This same conception, it will be noted, made Althusser’s reevaluation of the role of Hegel possible, after 1968 (or, what comes to the same thing, an updating of the contradictory aspects of the Hegelian dialectic, which cannot be reduced to the idea of the “meaning of history” or to the usage of the “negation of the negation”), from the moment that it was also possible to read in his work an idea of the “process without a subject” (and consequently, a fortiori, without self-consciousness).

38. Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, 59.

39. Althusser, “Il marxismo oggi.” See, notably, in the French edition:

The materialism that Marx professed also applies to him. Consciousness is not practice, consciousness is not even thought in its real forms. . . . Here is one more example that history, as a good materialist, surprised and out-

stripped the thought of Marx. Marx differentiates himself from all idealist political philosophy to the extent that he never had illusions about the “omnipotence of ideas,” including his own ideas. (Lenin is the one who will rashly write in the heat of polemic: “Marx’s ideas are all powerful because true.”) Marx’s position is clear beginning with the *Manifesto*, and he will never change it: the way to communism as a “real movement” will be opened by the general movement of the class struggle of the proletarians against the capitalists. The influence of ideas is only the subordinate expression of a relation of forces among classes. The extraordinary thing is that Marx takes account of this materialist thesis in the disposition of his own ideas. We can see this just as clearly in the *Manifesto* as in the *Introduction* of 1859, where the presentation takes the form of a topography. This means that Marx presents his own ideas twice there, and in two different forms.

He presents them first as principles of analysis of the whole (either a global conjuncture—the *Manifesto*—or the structure of a social formation—the *Introduction* of 1859). Here his ideas are present *everywhere*, because it is a matter of using them to explain a global reality. And they are here present in their theoretical form. But Marx has his ideas appear a second time, situating them this time in a determined and limited place in the same reality of the whole. Let us say, to take up the formula of the *Introduction* of 1859: among “the ideological forms where men become conscious of (class) conflict, and fight it to the end.” In situating them thus, in a definite place in social and class relations (the superstructure), Marx considers his ideas no longer as the principles of explanation of the given whole, but rather only from the viewpoint of the relation of their possible action in ideological struggle. And as a result of this fact, they also change shape: they move from the theory-form to the “ideology-form.”

Marx’s materialism is measured not so much by the materialist content of history, but rather by the acute consciousness and practice of conditions, forms, and limits in which these ideas can become active. This situation results in their double inscription in the topography. It results in the crucial thesis that ideas can never be historically active in person, even if they are true and formally demonstrated, but rather are active in the ideological forms of the mass, which are caught up in class struggle.

And yet, by an astonishing inversion of history, Marx was not able to conceive that his own thought could itself also be diverted and subjugated to the fate of the “omnipotence of ideas” and serve its politics. . . . The materialism of the double disposition of ideas in the topography, and the subordination of ideas to class struggle, can indeed never be enough to think the efficacy of ideas in class struggle. For it is still necessary for ideas to rediscover themselves in the “ideological forms” of the mass, something which is not possible with propaganda alone, but requires the organizations of class struggle. “Workingmen of all countries, unite!” means, practically, “organize yourselves!” Now it seems that for Marx the fact of organization posed no special theoretical problems.

40. On this point, see also the formulations in “Soutenance d’Amiens,” 127ff.

41. I refrain from speculating about the contents of the “unpublished” writings of Althusser both before and after 1980, which will perhaps be published, as well as about the conditions in which they were written. The only text after 1980 that comes from discussions that he oversaw is, to the best of my knowledge, the

1984 interview published in Spanish translation by Fernanda Navarro and entitled “Filosofía y marxismo,” *Siglo 21* (1988).

42. As we know, Althusser claims that he borrowed the idea of the “topography” from Freud to apply it to Marx, “comparing” the *instances* of social formation, historical class struggles, to the *instances* of the Freudian psychic apparatus. But this in no way contradicts its Platonic ancestry, at least an indirect one. When Freud distinguishes the sites where thought, both “individual” and “trans-individual,” is formed and applied, as he does from the time of the distinction between the “conscious” and the “unconscious” and a fortiori with the distinction among the id, the ego, and the superego, he in fact goes back beyond the psychic unity (or the subjective unity, whether this unity is substantial or intentional) posed by the entire tradition that goes from Descartes and Locke to Kant, Hegel, and Husserl. He even goes back beyond the organic unity posed by Aristotle between the different “souls,” to *reopen the Platonic question* of the “relations of forces” among the “parts of the soul,” of their effects of knowledge [*connaissance*] and misrecognition [*méconnaissance*], of their ethical stakes. If we need to sketch the shortest distance from Freud to some philosopher on the subject of the “topography,” would it not be, above all, to Plato?

43. Emmanuel Terray, *La politique dans la caverne* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990). It is clear then, in contrast, how the form of the Platonic topography expresses a “class position.” If the cave has no exterior, if there is *no exit* (no transcendence) from the Cave, toward the idea of the Good that is also the idea of the True (the idea of the True as Good), it is no longer possible to *inculcate* the light of truth in those who live “among the shadows.” It is precisely a question of a class position *in theory*, and *in relation* to the theoretical function.