



Interview: Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey

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# INTERVIEW

## ETIENNE BALIBAR and PIERRE MACHEREY

JAMES H. KAVANAGH and THOMAS E. LEWIS

*KAVANAGH:* What do you know of the effects of your work in England or the US? Do you know for example, the work of Hindess and Hirst? There have been a number of books written within an Althusserian theoretical discourse.

*MACHEREY:* But what is this "Althusserian theory"? Althusser is a Marxist. He is not an "Althusserian."

*KAVANAGH:* Is that not exactly the point under interrogation? There remain many who are interested in Marxism, who would identify themselves as Marxists, and who are now doing a certain critique of elements of "Althusserian theory," or what they call, if you will, "Althusserian theory": the concepts of structural causality, or of Althusserian epistemology, for example.

*MACHEREY:* But we are amazed to hear these words, because it is true that Althusser used these expressions in his initial work with us, that happened to become well-known, and that advanced the idea of Althusserian theory. But, in fact, one finds that Althusser has done many other things since then, which question in many ways this whole system.

*BALIBAR:* If it is a system. I recall an exchange of letters with the group in England organized around the journal "Theoretical Practice." (It is not in France that there were "Althusserian" groups.) I had sent them an article, a sort of self-criticism of *Reading Capital*, and they replied that they considered this self-criticism an error. The first Althusser – it is always, of course, Althusser who counts in this affair – was a very important theoretician, but the later corrections are without interest; they are regressions in relation to the earlier work.

I think one must confess that there is always the possibility of constructing a system from certain elements present in those texts, especially among those (like ourselves) who have a philosophical formation, and who are haunted by models of philosophical rigor.

*MACHEREY:* Yes, if one cuts off Althusser in '67, one can have a very coherent discourse, but this ignores the sense in which Althusser was engaged in the following years in deconstructing this system – not destroying it purely and simply, but trying to develop its internal contradictions, and to say some very different things.

*KAVANAGH:* But is there now, then, a theoretical discourse, a theoretical terrain, that one can call "Althusserian"?

*BALIBAR:* As Pierre said earlier, Althusser is not an Althusserian, he is a Marxist.

*LEWIS:* Marx said the same kind of thing.

*BALIBAR:* Yes, but let's not keep the symmetry; there remains an inequality.

The problem you pose is not just a theoretical problem, but a sociological

problem. The question of whether there now exists in France an Althusserian thought, an Althusserian problematic—that is, whether there exist those who work in this problematic—is indissociable from the question of whether there exists in France a Marxist thought, a Marxist theoretical terrain. The usefulness and utilization of Althusserian theory in France is indissociable from the general question of the situation of Marxism in France in its successive transformations. This question has philosophical, political, and academic dimensions.

It is true that no one can seriously seek to know the trajectory of Marxism in France during the last twenty years, and right now, without confronting Althusser. There probably never was, strictly speaking, an “Althusserianism” as a closed system, or as a “school,” in France. Because in France, as opposed to England, Althusser’s work preoccupied more than a small group of people, and, consequently, was inevitably taken up from the start in controversies and contradictory tendencies—from those who copied it, to those who attacked it, and those who tried to use it in a more or less debatable manner. In this respect, our work is not privileged simply because Althusser implicitly endorsed it by publishing it in his collection. Many of those who published in his collection, after all, very quickly found themselves taking divergent positions.

But, certainly, in the reality of French intellectual debate, even in the form of denials, there persists a whole series of questions raised by the ideas, even the words, introduced by Althusser, which leave a very deep trace. When you look at what’s going on in France, you will find here and there traces of Althusser’s intervention—very profound traces in my opinion, which do not from any perspective resemble a system.

KAVANAGH: This is exactly what we mean. It is not a question of Althusser himself, of constructing a mythology of Althusser, or of “Althusserianism,” as a closed system like that. But, we find that there has been, nonetheless, an important shift in the theoretical language of Marxism, effected by the sort of work that Althusser—and you as well—have introduced in Marxism. We understand that in France right now many people consider this work out of date, even if we find those same people speaking in discourses marked very clearly by Althusserian traces. But this work holds interest in a different way in the United States, where it is still something relatively new, with potential impact.

MACHEREY: What is out of date is the idea of Althusser as the guardian of his own theory that takes everything into account. Those who imputed such an intention to him, afterwards reproached him for being unfaithful to this mission which he supposedly took on for himself, and which he was not able to fulfill. But in fact, from the beginning, the problem was not posed like that at all. Althusser never presented himself as a philosopher, as a *maître-penseur*. Thus, there is no Althusserian language, I think; there are some words pronounced by Althusser, in relation to which everyone now defines him/herself.

BALIBAR: Althusser has often considered, and has written a little about, the very specific way in which philosophical language functions historically, and, consequently, the immediate or delayed effect of the introduction of a word into the history of philosophy. There are some words that Althusser launched, and tried to insert in an argument with a systematic cast—what he calls a *dispositif*.

These words, then, are the sites of the most important equivocations. I will mention only one example: *theoretical practice*. At first sight, this looks like a simple play on words; the philosophical tradition to which Althusser refers—the Marxist tradition, and behind that the tradition of classical German philosophy—discussed for a century something called “theory and practice” and the “relation between theory and practice,” and Althusser seems content just to glue one to the other. This could be nothing more than a play on words. But Althusser invests this term in a theoretical framework [*un dispositif théorique*], and, in a specific historical conjuncture (this is not entirely an intra-discursive phenomenon), this seems at least to move the problem. At the minimum, it obliges us to re-read all these philosophical traditions in a different way. About this, there is no doubt.

At the same time, it is the site of maximal equivocation, since Althusser’s critics immediately concentrated on this expression, and made it say something which—as one can easily see if one reads the texts with a little honesty—is the contrary of what Althusser meant. They attributed to him the famous “theoreticism”—the notion that practice is subordinate to theory—even that, in the end, practice is no more than theory, its development, application,

etc. Whereas, in the text, Althusser literally says exactly the opposite: that theory exists as *such*, that we want to recognize its specificity, etc., and at the same time, we want to find a way to think of it as a practice – that is, as an aspect of what Marxism has always meant by practice.

The criticism directed against Althusser, then, is weak. But there is also a weakness in Althusser on this very point, which gives rise to his self-criticism. The fact that philosophy is not a closed system, and that politics breaks in on all sides, eventually led Althusser to recognize his so-called errors – which he did not really commit, or not really in the particular form suggested – and to read his own texts with the eyes of certain of his critics.

KAVANAGH: Perhaps we can take another example: the concept, or “play on words,” as you might call it, of “symptomatic reading”?

MACHEREY: “Symptomatic reading” is an expression that had particular significance in the specific cultural context of 1965–66. It expresses the idea of a dialectical reading of texts. At that time, rather than speak of dialectics, which was trapped in a wooden language of orthodox Marxism, it was necessary to speak of “symptomatic reading” to make oneself understood. But it’s basically a question of dialectics.

But this is not a concept, strictly speaking. It was taken from one domain into another, and I think that Althusser used it in a very specific conjuncture, to try to understand certain problems that he otherwise completely abandoned. He did not use it afterwards, and I do not think you will find it anywhere in what he did after 1968.

I think that, if there was something that all of us who worked with Althusser had in common, it was the refusal, precisely, of things like a methodology – that is, an abstract method, rules. We never had a method.

BALIBAR: But one cannot take this term in isolation. Earlier, we spoke a little too quickly of “words” dropped by Althusser, as if one had to reject all concern for systematicity. But let’s be careful: these words formed, if not a system, at least . . .

MACHEREY: It was rigorous. It wasn’t just anything at all.

BALIBAR: This notion was articulated, in a very coherent manner, with a certain number of other formulations – for example, in the preface to *Reading Capital*, with the idea of “theoretical production,” with the idea of an apparatus of thought or an apparatus of knowledge. All of this is certainly founded on some references; it does not appear out of nowhere. Among other things, it is an attempt to use simultaneously and productively, some advances of Marx and of Freud. “Symptomatic reading” is a term that functions with others in a systematic context to signal the importance of Freud as much as Marx. Althusser thought it necessary to draw on Freud to explain in a dialectical fashion the notion of theoretical production. There was something dialectical, something more explicitly or directly usable, taken from Freud rather than from Marx himself, something that Marxism needed. All of this stems from the idea, which could not be proven in advance, that Freud is a dialectician.

KAVANAGH: And this notion of “symptomatic reading,” with its Freudian associations, could also form the basis of an analysis of ideological production in the literary text?

BALIBAR: Absolutely.

KAVANAGH: But that sort of expression: theoretical *production*, or ideological *production* in a literary text, is perceived by many as part of a specific theoretical terrain, a terrain many people call “Althusserian.”

BALIBAR: Well, then, those people have not read Marx very well, because such expressions are practically those of Marx himself.

LEWIS: But, for example, within Marxism there is the polemic in which you have intervened, or have been perceived to intervene, as upholding a notion of ideological *production* rather than ideological *reflection* in literature. To make this intervention, you used an ensemble of notions like “symptomatic reading.” What do you think now of these notions? What do you think is their value in analyzing the ideological problematic of literary texts?

BALIBAR: In order to address this issue adequately, it would be necessary to analyze very carefully, as we have tried to do a little, exactly what the classical texts of Marxism mean when they speak of “reflection.” But let us admit, to simplify things, that these are the alternatives. For us, this is effectively a polemic against what we take to be an inversion or a reversal of Marxist materialism, something which therefore cancels the reversal that Marxism itself attempted to operate on idealism, and which leads then to another kind of idealism,

even if presented in terms of “reflection” as a materialism. “Reflection” returns, by another path, to forms of non-dialectical materialism, which are really forms of camouflaged idealism.

We had always thought, and Pierre developed this particularly well in his book on literary production, that this idealism is centered most profoundly on one particular version of the notion of reflection – on a certain conception of *meaning*, the idea of meaning. The thrust of Pierre’s book is a polemic against all the variants of literary criticism, or of ideological criticism, or of the history of philosophy, which depend in one way or another on *hermeneutics*, and for which, consequently, the concept of meaning functions under some name or other as the central concept, defining the literary object or literary text as *that which must be interpreted*. This suggests that the notion of production, as opposed to that of reflection, would dispel this kind of reference to meaning, and therefore the problem of interpretation. And this means, very schematically and mechanically, that there is a completely different redistribution of the manifest and the latent.

I say all this in order to approach the notion of “symptomatic reading.” It’s a question of criticizing at once the idea that the literary text is something entirely given – in which everything is manifest, and at the same time something whose reason or hidden explanation must be sought for in a meaning that is elsewhere. Of course, this “elsewhere” can be anything that one wishes: either the depths of the “creative” artist’s soul, or the economic and social formation, or the class struggle (in the mechanical, pseudo-Marxist versions). It is a question of attacking at the two points at once, of saying, to the contrary, that there is no hidden meaning, but that the literary object is in a material relation with other texts, other discourses, other practices, etc.; and if one wants to explain it, one must really reconstitute, or analyze – that’s the only correct term – in every possible way, the complexity of those relations which, at the heart of its production (one might also say at the heart of its reading, its consumption, if you want a metaphor), *unify* it continually, always in a conflicted, contradictory form, with other discourses, practices, etc.

On the other hand, it’s a question of saying that the literary text is not that sleek, totally manifest ensemble, enclosed in its coherence, that a certain structuralism, among other methods of literary analysis, pretends to circumscribe, and to describe exhaustively. In fact, it is impossible to describe the literary text exhaustively because in reality it is not self-sufficient; it is full of gaps and absences, as Pierre said in his book, speaking of the “margins of the text.” In this sense, one cannot do a phenomenological reading of the text, one must do a “symptomatic reading” – “symptomatic” having above all a negative connotation, suggesting that all is not given.

LEWIS: Does this explain, then, the role of the concept of *absence* in your work?

MACHEREY: I do not believe it is a concept. It’s rather a word, embellished in metaphors, evoked in order to identify, to resolve, a problem. But I did not think – not at the time I wrote the book, and even less now – that this was a concept permitting me to construct a “theory of literature.” Remember that my book, which was very ambitious and very naive, was titled *Pour une théorie*. The English translation is mistitled; it should be translated as “Towards a Theory,” or something like that.

KAVANAGH: Would you comment on the polemical thrust of your, and other Althusserian texts, in arguing that Marxism is a theoretical anti-humanism? This polemic often becomes the pretext for the charge that you are engaging in another form of Stalinism.

MACHEREY: A Stalinism without an apparatus is a contradiction.

BALIBAR: It’s not for us, of course, to give the final judgement on this subject. I quite understand – I do not think they are correct, but I understand – that even well-meaning people, having read the texts quickly, could say that Althusser and his collaborators were sincerely trying to produce an alternative to Stalinism, but that they were in fact much too timid, only devising very complicated schemes to hide from themselves the circle in which they were trapped; subjectively, perhaps they would be at the opposite pole, but in practice they have not done what would be necessary. And after all, as Althusser himself, and I (I can’t pass for his representative; he speaks for himself) have at different times proclaimed our fidelity to some form of Leninism, one only has to write the equation “Lenin equals Stalin” to be persuaded of our failure.

KAVANAGH: Would you still argue for the possibility of a “science” of the literary text?

MACHEREY: Yes, as a guiding idea, as an orientation, as a road to follow. Absolutely not as an idea of an already constituted science that one could simply develop and apply – that is, something that could be used to interpret one-by-one the ensemble of that which is baptized as “Literature.”

BALIBAR: The problem is the following: If you want to speak of a science *by anticipation* – either to announce it, or to prepare it – you perform an operation that is necessarily very ambiguous. But this is an ambiguity that one cannot generally escape. There is in such an affirmation a *materialist* aspect, which there is no question of renouncing, and which is simply the following: in our eyes, literary production – or texts, if you wish (I continue to use the term production, not in order to do away with the text, but in order to show that it is only an element, even if an essential one, of a process that one must be able to *know* and to *analyze*) – literary production is rightfully an object of scientific knowledge, just as any other objective phenomenon. Which does not mean that it does not have its specificity. On the contrary, it means that the text will become truly scientific, or that we will have a better scientific knowledge of it, to the extent that its specificity becomes clearer. But there is no question of returning to a kind of reductionism, which is a fantastic form of realizing the program of scientific knowledge, one which completely turns its back on practice.

I persist, then, in saying that it is materialist, in this sense, to affirm in advance, even by anticipation, that a scientific knowledge is possible of what one can call the *fact*, or the *phenomenon*, or the literary text, etc. – but that we, for reasons linked to Marxism, can envision designating rather as the *process of literary production*. That is materialist, even if the fact that you speak of it by anticipation inevitably results in your *going wrong*. It is impossible not to go wrong. You necessarily go wrong on the content, on the procedures, etc., of this science. You go wrong in a manner that can eventually be used for something. You go wrong, necessarily and in particular – in ways that are not always sterile – on the definition of the problem and of the object in question; because, inevitably you designate an object – literary production is an object – and it is probably that which is the most false, in any case, the most abstract. That is why we have had the feeling of making a little progress, even if it is still abstract, from the moment we said that the scientific knowledge in question is not a “science of literature” – even if a materialist, or Marxist science, even if literature is rebaptized “literary production” – but a certain domain at the frontiers, undefinable in advance, of the science of history.

MACHEREY: It is not a science of literature all by itself. From the outset, we refused to respond to the question: “What is literature?”

BALIBAR: But in a certain sense, we could not avoid at some moment acting as if we were giving such a response.

MACHEREY: No. On this point, I think we remained consistent. And all those who were working against us in similar fields at the time, they all raised again the question “What is literature?,” and proposed their answers. Look at Sollers.

KAVANAGH: Do you prefer the question: How can we construct a science of the literary text?

MACHEREY: Yes, but that is not at all the same question. And it is not a science of the literary text as such, as an isolated and autonomous phenomenon.

LEWIS: How would you characterize the productive analysis of literary texts?

MACHEREY: But what does one do when one speaks of literary texts? Are texts literary in themselves, by their own intrinsic characteristics, which distinguish them from non-literary texts? I think one must say that a text is literary because it is recognized as such, at a certain moment, under certain conditions. It may not have been so recognized before, and it may not be after. I did a lot of work on Jules Verne, at a time when no one spoke of him; now he has become an *author*, and everyone does his or her book on Jules Verne. He has been returned to “French Literature”; he is explained in class. But when I worked on him, he was not even a minor author; this was not “Literature.”

KAVANAGH: Are texts *ideological* in themselves? Are there certain intrinsic characteristics that define them as ideological?

MACHEREY: Ideology is present in texts as a material from which they are constructed. In this sense, it is something internal.

BALIBAR: It's ideology that is not being defined clearly. You are playing with two mean-

ings. There is a spontaneous, idealist aspect of the term ideology, which appears again for political reasons at this moment – a period of defense of the rights of man against “systems of ideology,” meaning the world of ideas more or less directly and consciously tied to politics. This sense of the term implies at once, in a contradictory fashion, something profoundly illusory and weak, and something extremely dangerous and powerful, because it holds men and women in an oppressive society. The meaning of the term ideology that we have tried to use from Marx, in the way Althusser began to specify it, was, from the beginning, totally different from this.

**KAVANAGH:** How do you place yourselves in relation to other French thinkers – *maîtres-penseurs*, if you will – who have been very influential in the United States – such as Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault? How do you understand Marxist theoretical work in relation to theirs?

**MACHERY:** One thing is certain about the three names you have cited: they are three very different, completely independent cases, who have no influence on each other, who interest completely different audiences, who do not work with the same people.

**KAVANAGH:** Certainly, one can see a complementarity between Althusser and Lacan – in the importance of the “imaginary” in Althusser’s theory of ideology, and in the notion of the ideological interpellation of the subject.

**BALIBAR:** It would be necessary to make a judgement on the way Althusser used this. It is not very simple; it’s even a little contradictory. He used Freud in a certain manner, and in the French context at the time, he inevitably crossed paths with Lacan, recuperated his work, eventually coincided with him on certain points – perhaps because they had common enemies at the time. In relation to Foucault, to speak very superficially, there is, on the contrary, a seemingly striking difference; Foucault sought by many interesting routes to be a kind of counter-Freud.

**MACHERY:** Foucault addressed some interesting challenges to Marxism. Not conscious, perhaps, but real. In fact, all his work bothers me deeply, in the problems it poses for Marxism – even if it gives very different answers on important points.

**BALIBAR:** I do not have any difficulty admitting that in a certain sense Foucault, for example, is theoretically stronger than most French Marxists, ourselves included. This is not to applaud him. I think that until now we have had a fairly healthy relation to Foucault, which has allowed us to avoid the discomfort of a sterile polemic. At some point we have all learned something in Foucault, things that were not necessarily useful as they were, but which appeared essential to us. And, of course, his work is unequal, subject to re-evaluations. *Les mots et les choses*, for example is an extraordinarily brilliant book, in which there is finally nothing very original.

There is a dated variant of Foucault, historically comparable to Althusser on certain points. When *Les mots et les choses* appeared, I remember that I was very excited, and I wrote a letter to Althusser in Paris (I was away at the time), saying: “This book is, in sum, what you seek to do in speaking of the problematic, the apparatus of thought, of ideological production, etc. Foucault calls it something else, and that is not completely innocent; that is because there are some aspects of Marxism he does not want. But he is in the process of doing it.”

I understand very well, retrospectively, why things could appear like that to me. At the same time, if I reread this text today, I have the feeling – not that it’s worth nothing, it’s worth as much and more than most books – but that it’s missing the originality of Foucault’s thought. There was someone who saw that admirably: Canguilhem, in an article full of praise but containing all that is necessary for the critique, an article called “Les épuisements du cogito, ou la mort de l’homme” in *Critique*. He said of *Les mots et les choses* that, in a language peculiar to Foucault, it was a version of American culturalism. But, *L’Histoire de la folie*, *La Naissance de la clinique*, and *Surveiller et punir* – we won’t say anything about *L’Histoire de la sexualité*, one can see very well that it is a program of work. It is a manifesto, an anti-Marxist, anti-Freudian manifesto, with – as always in Foucault – something either very brilliant or very interesting, but purely programmatic.

– June, 1980

– translated by James H. Kavanagh