



The Infinite Contradiction

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ETIENNE BALIBAR

The Infinite Contradiction¹

In the short time allowed for this presentation, I will provide you neither with a summary of what you have read, nor with a framework for whatever questions you may eventually want to pose. I will try instead to review the general issues whose insistence I now recognize, after the fact, in many of the texts that make up this file. What I am suggesting is not that these issues derive from some simple initial idea, but that a number of their hypotheses and formulations can now, I believe, be inserted in an on-going project. For the most part, this series of works has been driven by events and summations (or by events that I perceived to be summations), which means that it is governed by disparity and abounds in palinodes. I could try to confer a fictitious unity on these works, but that would not deceive anyone. Still, I would like to suggest that the necessity of presenting them together, and thus of linking them, comes at a moment when (maybe for the first time) I believe—and the feeling may turn out to be an illusion—that I am able to understand, in light of today's questions, what was and may remain of interest about, and some of the presuppositions of, the issues formulated twenty or thirty years ago in circles to which I belonged, and which have not all vanished, at least not as far as *I* am concerned.

Therefore, I would like this review to revolve around three themes: *philosophical practice*, the *construction of the subject*, and the theme

1. Except for the initial acknowledgments, which have been cut, this is the same paper I read to present the body of my work during my Research Director *habilitation* on 16 January 1993 at the Université de Paris I. Members of the jury included Olivier Bloch (Research Director), Paulette Carrive (President), Georges Labica, Gérard Lebrun, and Alexandre Matheron.

of *structural causality* and historical materialism. I will try to conclude with a few remarks or questions regarding the maxims of an ethics that seems indispensable to me when one proposes, with Marxism, but also against it, that there are truth effects in politics.

I. WRITING AND CONJUNCTURE

Philosophy *is* indeed a practice, even if it is not *practice* itself. To add that this practice is essentially “theoretical” is a useful but insufficient precision. It arms us in advance against the risks of empiricism or subjectivism that are bound to arise out of the inevitable use of such words as activity, operation, intervention, experience, and work. It also prevents us from getting lost in a pointless discussion on the means of overcoming (or, conversely, of preserving) the gap that is often thought to divide theoretical activities (especially philosophy) from practical activities—even in the form that consists in claiming that thought should be action and, therefore, nonphilosophical or postphilosophical, as with the Heidegger of the *Letter on Humanism*. Finally, it warns us that, if all practice requires matter exterior to it, this matter must nonetheless be transformed in a way that shows precisely its materiality as such, in the field of theory. Now, with regard to the undoubtedly diverse ways and means of such a truly philosophical transformation (a paradoxical one, to be sure, since in a sense it must be a nontransformation or, to parody Wittgenstein, a transformation that *leaves things as they stand*, which is to say, a transformation that *returns them to where they stood*) and notwithstanding any idealization, the expression “theoretical practice,” in its generality, does not yet tell us anything specific.

In the essays you have before you, I have tried to practice philosophy in a way that is surely not the only possible one, but that unquestionably assembled and addressed matter—a great deal of it—much of which came and still comes from outside what is officially defined as philosophy. And yet as I was reading, rereading, or translating philosophers among whom I was hoping to find my material or whose secrets I was hoping to whatever degree to penetrate (Kant, Marx, Spinoza, Descartes, Wittgenstein, and Fichte, among others), I formed a notion of the way they themselves practiced philosophy: frankly, no philosopher has held any interest for me as long as I was aware only of his ideas, and not of his practice. From the confrontation between what I was trying to achieve and what I perceived of our models, I drew a hypothesis

about the specific modality of theoretical practice in philosophy. I would put it this way: philosophy constantly endeavors to untie and retie from the inside the knot between conjuncture and writing, or if you will, it works from within the element of writing to untie the elements of conjuncture, but it also works under the constraint of conjuncture to retie the conditions of writing. This is the double materiality, both indissociable and heterogeneous, that I will briefly try to characterize by going back to some of the themes and examples that are scattered here and there in these texts.

I hold, then, that philosophy is never independent of specific conjunctures. It should be clear that I use this word in a qualitative rather than a quantitative sense, stressing by it the very brief or prolonged event of a crisis, a transition, a suspense, a bifurcation, which manifests itself by irreversibility, i.e., in the impossibility of acting and thinking as before. Without necessarily using this terminology, but always trying precisely to tie from within the register of the event and that of the theoretical intervention (however indirect, and however much performed primarily in the field of theory itself), I have analyzed a number of exemplary, even privileged conjunctures—for instance, the reversal of the relations between the State and the labor movement, which Marx and Engels “answered” by means of the “rectification of the *Communist Manifesto*,”² of the tendential change from the conception of “the party as conscience” to that of “the party as organization,”³ and of the distinction between *classes* and *masses*,⁴ or the Orangist Revolution of 1672, which can be interpreted, after the fact, as the Dutch aristocracy’s abandoning their efforts to organize the world economy into a free-trade network, which Spinoza “answered” by substituting a “science of the State” for a “democratic manifesto,” i.e., by moving from an ethic of freedom of expression to an ontology of absolute power.⁵ Finally, I have analyzed both the annihilation of German freedom under Napoleon, and the resistance it occasioned, including Fichte’s *Addresses to the German Nation*, both a stab at resistance and

2. Etienne Balibar, *Cinq études du matérialisme historique* (Paris: François Maspéro, 1974). [All other notes below refer to works by Balibar, unless otherwise indicated—Editor’s note.]

3. *Marx et sa critique de la politique* (in collaboration with Cesare Luporini and André Tose) (Paris: François Maspéro, 1979).

4. See “The Vacillation of Ideology” and “Politics and Truth,” in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 87–123; 151–74.

5. *Spinoza et la politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

a way to escape the repetitions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and to offer with the expression “interior border” a concrete solution to the aporia of the self and the “non-self.”⁶ But individual examples are not the only ones: *collective* examples, i.e., examples that show how philosophers see their discourses internally connected to one another (and connected to nonphilosophical, e.g., theological, legal, scientific discourses) in the same conjuncture, are in a sense more significant. For instance—and bearing in mind that these are in part the same examples as those given above—“the invention of consciousness” in the conjuncture of “1690” (the mechanistic or spiritualist Cartesians, Malebranche, Leibniz, and Locke);⁷ the invention of the “subject of history” (or of “historicity”) in the conjuncture of “1807–1809” (*Addresses to the German Nation*, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and Schelling’s “*Freiheitsschrift*”).

Such a notion poses the immanence of philosophical work to history, but it is resolutely opposed to all the variants of the notion of *Zeitgeist*, or of the “culture” or “spirit” of a time, including the form that Marx’s concept of “dominant ideology” gives it and the form Foucault gives it by means of the concept of *épistémè*. On the other hand, this notion seeks to link itself, freeing up the concept’s critical and analytical potential, with Foucault’s *points d’hérésie*—heretical points “shared by” a number of philosophies, insofar as these points designate in their very language what is at stake in their confrontation. Marx’s “contradictions,” Spinoza’s “aporias,” Descartes’s “ambivalence,” and so on, around which I have organized the study of their argumentations and concepts, should help to clarify one another as terms of a contradictory conjuncture and as reflection of these collective *points d’hérésie at the heart of* each philosophical discourse. This is why I proposed, in reference to Fichte, that “the philosophical text carries to an extreme contradictions that go beyond it, but that nowhere else find so constricting a formulation.”

This leads us to the second point: not only do philosophers always write *within a conjuncture*, but conversely, within the conjuncture, *they write*. They “think,” no doubt (how could they not?), but only through writing and in constant confrontation with the problems writ-

6. “La Frontière intérieure. Réflexion sur les *Discours à la Nation allemande* de Fichte,” *Cahiers de Fontenay* 58/59 (June 1990). An English translation appears in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 61–84.

7. “L’invention de la conscience: Descartes, Locke, Coste et les autres,” in *Traduire les philosophes*, ed. Olivier Bloch (forthcoming).

ing poses for them, while also benefiting from the terms and conveniences it offers. All philosophy is essentially written, and philosophers have a particular relation to writing that necessarily includes the issue of its forms, "technical" modes or genres (which Valéry rightly emphasized), or styles (which Granger rightly emphasizes). More: the philosopher's original relation to writing is determined especially by the fact that a singular experience of thought is always an experience of writing, and that "philosophical practice" is one that, consciously or not, seeks in and by means of writing to go back to the very constraints the latter imposes on thought.

I do not want to treat here the crucial question of knowing what happens to philosophers in their texts. Let me instead allude only to three increasingly constraining modalities under which I have come across it in my work:

First modality: *aporia*, in that it determines the need for a constant rewriting of the philosophical text. Allow me at this point to elaborate on the type of *incompleteness* [*inachèvement*] proper to philosophical texts—an incompleteness that my readings constantly illustrate, and that has led me to use the verb *to incomplete* [*inachever*] in the active form: Marx *incompleted Capital* (and toiled all his life to incomplete it); Heidegger *incompleted Being and Time*. At the risk of superstition, I have even proposed that there would be a certain logical benefit in reading the interruption of Spinoza's *Political Treatise* as if it were an active incompleteness, comparable to that of the *Regulae* or *De intellectus emendatione*.⁸ One might go even further and assert that the nature of a great philosophy is not only to incomplete itself, but to *incomplete others*, by introducing itself or by being introduced in their writing: thus, from the "Manuscripts of 1843" up to *Capital*, Marx prodigiously incompletes Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. And if it is true that the regulating idea of "system" is fundamentally a modern version of the old *imago mundi*, the meaning of all these aporetic undertakings is, if not to "transform," probably *to incomplete the world*, or the representation of the world as "a world."

Second modality: *dispersion* or *dissemination*, understood as the fact that no philosopher can write "the same book twice," not only because every book is undertaken in order to try to overcome the apo-

8. "Spinoza, l'anti-Orwell—la crainte des masses," *Les Temps Modernes* 470 (September 1985): 353–98. An English translation appears in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 3–37.

rias of the previous one, whether by reversing its point of view or by introducing a difference—even, perhaps, an imperceptible difference—in its project, but because each writing experience is an unpredictable adventure. Derrida would say: writing is opening up a trace (for oneself), in which the concept is exposed to after-effects, to the backlash of words, and especially of its own *names*. I have tried in particular to demonstrate that each of Spinoza's three great books, each of his great theoretical practices, is a singular experience of writing that leads to *other propositions*. I am ready to attempt the same demonstration in regard to Descartes, Marx, Hegel, or Kant. This does not mean that a philosopher has no doctrine, but that this doctrine lies nowhere but in the intersecting [*recouplement*] of his or her different writing paths.

Hence, finally, a third modality underlying the first two: the *intersecting of the signifying chain itself*. This point, which seems to me particularly important, was the last of these modalities to become explicit, in the course of efforts to reread Descartes's statement: *Ego sum, ego existo*.⁹ I had already used the same expression, however, in addressing the function of the word "dictatorship" in the history of the problem of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Marx and surrounding Marx.¹⁰ And in many respects, the portmanteau word I fashioned in "La Proposition de l'égaliberté"¹¹ is my own attempt both to intersect a signifying chain and simultaneously to make its existence manifest. Again, I am not proposing here a general theory that is nowhere to be found in my essays, but rather drawing attention to a fact of theoretical experience: in the practice of philosophical writing, the words and propositions around which aporias crystallize and inventions take place always belong to long signifying chains; most often they constitute its element of *Unruhe*, of uneasiness or uncertainty—the one that constantly returns to the "origins," i.e., to the necessity for new uses and interpretations.

The odds are good, then, that an intrinsic relation exists between

9. "Ego sum, ego existo: Descartes au point d'hérésie," a paper presented to the Société française de philosophie on 22 February 1992, and published in the *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 86/3 (July-September 1992): 81–123.

10. "Marx le joker—ou le tiers inclus," in *Rejouer le politique* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981); "Dictature du prolétariat," entry in *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, ed. Georges Labica and Gérard Bensussan (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982).

11. "La Proposition de l'égaliberté," *Les Conférences du Perroquet* 22 (November 1989); *Les Frontières de la démocratie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992). A partial English translation of *Les Frontières* appears in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 205–25.

the intersecting or overt reversal of a signifying chain that *lets itself be seen* more or less cryptically in the fabric of philosophical writing, and, on the one hand, the radical alternatives or *points d'hérésie* that divide philosophers; and, on the other hand, the lines of demarcation or forms of collusion between philosophical and nonphilosophical discourses (or between the philosophical and the nonphilosophical aspects of discourses—for instance, scientific, legal, or theological discourse).

We must therefore think through together both determinations of philosophical practice: its necessary relation to conjunctures (which leads philosophical texts to organize themselves into sets that are themselves dependent on a conjuncture) and its relation to writing as a permanent short-circuit or short-cut between the immediacy of thinking and its longer history. These two determinations entail two distinct but equally constraining materialities.

I see this conjuncture first of all in the way philosophy formulates historical or experienced divergences that require choices to be made in the creation of words and in the stating of propositions. Philosophy poses these divergences in terms of antinomies and introduces universal antinomies into each particular writing. Next, I see it in the fact that the great philosophical moments are those in which theoreticians (concurrently and against one another) bring back into play, in the heat of the conjuncture, the very forms or categories of the theoretical, as Althusser might say. Finally, I see it in the indirect but unique capacity of philosophical writing to show why, although not unintelligible, a historical conjuncture (in the strong sense of the word) is nonetheless fundamentally unmasterable: it always contains even *more divergent positions* than any strategic representation can apprehend (this is why philosophers, at least seemingly, constantly “shoot at their own camp,” be it revolutionary or conservative).

These observations lead me both to adopt the point of view of those who believe that a “hermeneutic of philosophy” is structurally impossible (which is not the case of a “pragmatics” of philosophy—a point on which I would agree with Pierre Macherey), and to assert that, if there can be no separation between philosophy and ideologies (and indeed, the “matter” we treat in philosophy is always, in a sense, ideological), there nonetheless remains between them a difference of practice. Unceasingly recreated, this difference of practice forbids any confusion between philosophy and ideologies. Let me then come to my second point.

II. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SUBJECT

With your permission, I will not justify at great length the fact that this part of my recent work, concerned with the comparative history of philosophy, turns upon the issue of the "subject" (more precisely, the confrontation between the notions of "subject" and "citizen"). Hints of this organizing question crop up in my earlier work, to be taken up again sooner or later. Foremost among these would be my attempt to reread Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* from the point of view of the "construction of the subject,"¹² which I undertook between 1982 and 1985. I could even go back as far as the notion of "forms of historical individuality," which in my contribution to *Reading "Capital,"* I argued to be a sort of touchstone for the relevance of structural Marxism—a notion that was, we can now agree, more a way of denying the need to address in specific terms the problem of the subject and the meaning of the concept, than a first sketch of or priming for such an engagement.¹³ I should also mention, however briefly, the relation of complementarity between this and other investigations (which you have in hand and which fall within the province of political philosophy, if you will) concerning past and present forms of nationalism and racism, and more generally what Wallerstein and I have called *the intrinsic ambiguity of individual and collective identities*.¹⁴ The meeting point of these issues of politics and the history of philosophy is finally the complementary light they try to shed on the moment of extreme uncertainty in which the intellectual and institutional figure of the "citizen" finds itself again today.

But all this will probably come up during our discussion. Let me instead give you some reference points about the origin of my work. What is the source of this incomplete investigation of the history of the concept of "subject" and, as a consequence, of the problems, forms, and meaning of anthropological questions in philosophy? It started with three successive moments of surprise, which I came to understand more clearly once they had reconfigured themselves around certain questions bearing upon conjuncture.

12. "Jus, Pactum, Lex: sur la constitution du sujet dans le *Traité théologico-politique*," *Studia Spinozana* 1 (1985): 105–42.

13. "The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism," in *Reading "Capital"* (in collaboration with Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, Jacques Rancière, Roger Establet), trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979), 201–308.

14. *Race, Nation, Class* (in collaboration with Immanuel Wallerstein), trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1992).

First surprise: there exists in Spinoza a causal theory of the construction of the subject (what one might call an etiology of the subject), presented essentially as the theory of the "first kind of knowledge" in that it is also a way of life, a structure of behaviors and images that give meaning to individual and collective existence. It does not characterize *first person* discourse as a mere way of taking (a) place in the imaginary, but demonstrates that it is itself conditioned by the existence of symbolic narratives, institutions, and representations: "*Jus, Pactum, Lex.*"

However, not only is this etiology not merely a reduction of the subjective moment (from the point of view of philosophy itself), but it coexists with two (and maybe three) resurgences of the "subject" that can be identified with similar philosophical movements (at least by analogy), even though their unity is far from obvious. Here, I am thinking of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and the insistent, irreducible reference to the *dictamen rationis*, or voice of reason, which is the basis for the establishment of the "regime of tolerance" that is both the goal of the State and the condition of its continued existence. I am thinking of the emergence of a transindividual subjectivity in the *Ethics*, understood as a practice of communication. The scientific use of "common notions" is no more than the base of such a practice, which also requires the sharing of certain active affects: the shared knowledge and love of bodies.¹⁵ Finally, I have in mind the way the *Political Treatise* directs the analysis of the institutional mediations of the monarchic and aristocratic regimes or the double process of democratization of equality and liberty, not only toward a theory of collective power, but toward a theory of decision. Thus, it is Spinoza himself, master of all the great critiques of philosophical subjectivism (whether it be the epistemology of the "I think" or the ontotheology of creation), who discovers for us in each of his works a horizon of subjectivization: an unremovable remnant, but also the priming, the first moment of a movement to pass beyond such subjectivization. But he discovers it almost at the margins of his writing and according to three apparently incompatible modalities. First surprise, first puzzle.

Second, and to a certain extent, contrary surprise: there can be no doubt that Marx is, among other things (as Althusser helped us under-

15. "Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality," a lecture delivered in Rijnsburg on 15 May 1993, forthcoming in *Medelelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis* 71.

stand), a philosopher of the subject in the most classical sense. More precisely, Marx is a philosopher of the self-construction of the subject and its liberty in and by means of revolutionary practice. From this point of view, Marx belongs to the great tradition of historical idealism, where he follows and intervenes at the same speculative level as Kant, Fichte, Hegel, even Schelling, clarifying finally (if it were indeed necessary to do so) the intrinsic relation between modern, Idealist philosophy of history and the trace of the revolutionary event as well as the anticipation of its accomplishment. All this is expressed quite clearly in the *Theses on Feuerbach*: and the schema thus constituted will never be refuted [*récusé*].¹⁶

Now, the category in which we spontaneously conceive this self-construction of the subject is obviously that of the "subject of history"—theme of the impassioned discussions of our youth. In Marx, the Proletariat is the subject of history—like Humanity in Kant, the People in the Fichte of the *Addresses to the German Nation*, or the World-Spirit in the Hegel of *Lessons on the Philosophy of History*. And yet, however much you may search for the "subject of history" in the young or old Marx, I challenge you to find it expressed *in so many words*, i.e., in its explicit theoretical wording. The term's absence "in the flesh" [*en personne*] (as Althusser would have put it) is not the only surprise encountered when Marx's texts are read *to the letter*: for you will be equally unable to find other expressions that, rightly or wrongly, have been attributed to Marx—for instance, "proletarian ideology" or "class consciousness." It is unquestionably in Marx's intellectual wake that we philosophize and write the history of philosophy in terms of *Subjekt der Geschichte*. This category, however, is nonetheless not to be found and may in fact be impossible in his writing, however clearly we think we discern it between the lines of many published or unpublished pages. Neither is it to be found in Kant, or in Fichte, or especially in Hegel—although again we cannot help but discern it between the lines. According to my preliminary investigations, the *inventor* of the "Subject of history" is none other than Lukács—quite specifically in *History and Class Consciousness*. And the round of debates on this issue, or of theoretical innovations related to this problematic, ends with Althusser's "process without subject."¹⁷

16. *La Philosophie de Marx* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993).

17. "Le Non-contemporain," in *Ecrits pour Althusser* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), 91–118.

It is therefore a history quite internal to Marxist circles (although it is decentered and delayed vis à vis the development of Marxism), and yet of an order of necessity and universality such that all of the modern philosophy of history can no longer be perceived without at least an implicit reference to it. Second surprise, second puzzle.

The third and last moment of surprise comes when, distancing ourselves from the traditions of spiritualism, neo-Kantianism, Hegelianism, and phenomenology (which are convergent on this point), we ask ourselves when and for what reasons we *began to read in Descartes a philosophy of the subject and, a fortiori, of the "sovereignty of the subject,"* when, once again, such a term is radically not to be found in his writing—is, indeed, I think I have shown, impossible in his thought. I began to study the problem myself some years ago when Jean-Luc Nancy formulated, in deliberately paradoxical terms, a question that forced me to make old inquiries crystallize with new preoccupations and to take up, as much the enlightened amateur as I could be, areas of history or philology that philosophy has always in fact *presupposed*.¹⁸ The question was "Who comes after the subject?" And the answer—to my mind, the inescapable answer, inescapable not in speculative or moral terms, but from the point of view of historical facts themselves—was this: *after the subject comes the citizen*. For the "subject," which has haunted the whole problematic of liberty and of the individual [*personne*] for fifteen centuries, is not an ontological figure, that of an *objectum* or *hypokeimenon*, but a legal, political, theological, and moral figure, that of a *subjectus* or *subditus*, i.e., a dependent, believing, and obedient individual.

What—or rather *who*—comes after the subject (first around 1789–93), is the universal, national, and cosmopolitical citizen who is indissociably both a political and a philosophical figure. And here my surprise, or, if you prefer, my third puzzle comes into focus: there is no doubt that with the revolutionary event the *subjectus* irreversibly cedes his place to the *citizen*; that the humility of the one who listens to the Voice of an external or internal "master" gives way in principle to the autonomy of a collective legislator: this break is recorded in the insurrectional *negativity* of the Proposition of Equaliberty as "*de jure fact*" and "truth effect," from then on ineffaceable even as they are

18. "Citoyen Sujet—Réponse à la question de Jean-Luc Nancy: Qui vient après le sujet?," *Cahiers Confrontation* 20 (1989). An English translation appears in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 33–57.

denounced. Still, *nothing changes* (or very little), except for a slight displacement, inscribed in a play on words—although this play on words fits into a very old and long signifying chain almost indissociable from the history of universal languages and law in the West. I mean by this displacement the transition from the *subjectus* to the *subjectum*, or *Subjekt*. Nothing changes unless everything does, and *this* is the puzzling nature of what is called “modernity,” for the individual can be a citizen effectively only if he or she *becomes a subject again*. It is to this end that institutions and discourses, including philosophical discourse, then seek a “psychological,” a “moral,” or a “legal” subject dissociated or united in the figure of the “transcendental subject,” according to the schema that Michel Foucault characterized so aptly as the “empirico-transcendental doublet.” Thus, for two centuries the history shared by institutions and anthropological discourse has been that of the *becoming-subject of the citizen* and of the denominations and conflicts of its “*subjectivity*”—an endless task, but always already under way, engaged, in truth, from the very moment of the break.¹⁹

I said that nothing (or hardly anything) changes, for, in this production of the citizen as subject or of the “subject Citizen,” the *subjectus* is still and always present, submitting to the inner voice of “consciousness” that informs him or her of his or her responsibility. But I also said that everything (or almost everything) changes, for we know that the permanence and insistence of the *subjectus* in the *subjectum* in the last two centuries have only been possible in conjunction with and maybe under the domination of quite different modalities of subjectification and subjection. I am thinking here not of schemata of transcendence, but of immanent ones, like the inscription of the individual within the framework of norms, normalities, capacities, and disciplines—whose other face, as we know, is the individual or transindividual outcome of anomies, deviances, inferiorities, minorities, and incapacities.²⁰ I have in mind also mainly *communal* schemata that combine immanence and transcendence—in particular, the two great rival schemata of “nation” and “class,” both secretly haunted by a third schema (the schema of “race”) producing what we call identities through the play and investment of anthropological differences.²¹

19. “Ce qui fait qu’un peuple est un peuple: Rousseau et Kant,” *Revue de Synthèse* serie 4, 3/4 (July-December 1989): 391–417.

20. “Crime privé, folie publique,” in *Le Citoyen fou*, ed. Nathalie Robatel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 81–104.

21. “Cultura e identità” (an Italian translation of the keynote speech for a confer-

Enough philology, however. What conclusions have I drawn from this investigation, some of whose themes I have just evoked? Let me offer two, and run the risk of being too cavalier after having been too fragmentary.

First of all, I have convinced myself, not that the question of the subject is or should be the specific object of philosophy—far from it; but nevertheless that *on the issue of the subject* (inextinguishable as such, and anything but circumscribed in an “age of subjectivity,” precisely because it is not univocal) only *philosophical* work can be critical work. The history of the figures of the subject, of subjection, subjugation, subjectivity, and subjectification (we now know that all this is not “the same thing,” but that it is the same problem) is to a certain extent nothing but philosophy ruminating on the great “historical play on words,” *subjectus/subjectum*, and a few others that are closely linked to it, like *conscience/consciousness/self-consciousness* or *Gewissen/Bewusstsein*, or the double meaning of *Beruf* (“election” and “profession”). Philosophy has no metatheoretical position or external vantage point in relation to the signifying composites that constitute it. It is, however, quite illusory to rely on disciplines other than philosophy in order to display the margin of freedom or *capacity of variation* that these problematic notions conceal, and thus to point toward what I called earlier the contradictions or *points d’hérésie* of a conjuncture. Perfectly illusory, *unless*, under the name of this or that discipline, what is really taking place is philosophical work—as is the case, to offer some notable examples, in Max Weber, Kelsen, Mauss, Freud, Benveniste, and Lacan. Fundamentally, this criticism is always already philosophical, since, being immanent to writing, it can neither resort to an analytical metalanguage nor bring about a reduction to external processes. To put it concretely, this means that we will always learn more on this point from philosophers themselves (whatever they call themselves) than with the nonphilosophical users of philosophy for whom the philosophical text is merely an element of an archive or the reflection of another structure.

And this means that by rereading philosophers with “the greater force of the present,” i.e., with the uncertainties and questions of *our* conjuncture, in which *we too* want to philosophize or, in Alain Bad-

ence organized by the Division de philosophie et des Sciences Humaines de l’UNESCO, Paris, on 14–15 December 1989), in *Problemi del Socialismo* 3 (1989): 13–34.

ieu's wonderful expression, to "take another step" [*faire un pas de plus*] in philosophy, we are bound not only to rectify preconceptions but always to discover something new, perhaps even something unknown. Thus, after I thought I had made sure that the reading of Descartes as a "philosopher of the subject" and a "philosopher of consciousness" could only be a Kantian and Cousinian philosopheme, I had to ask myself what, in Descartes, occupied the space that had thus been as it were cleared out. I came to understand that it was the far more radical thesis of a *nonsubjective freedom*. This led me to surmise (contrary to what I—along with many others—had believed for twenty-five years on the strength of an almost unanimous French and German academic tradition) that Descartes and Spinoza were not that incompatible (as prototypes of the "philosopher of the subject" and the "philosopher of substance"), or, more precisely, that they *were* irreconcilable, to be sure, but also indissociable, so that it is most unlikely that we will ever be able to choose between them—for instance, on such issues as the personality and impersonality of thought.

My second conclusion is that the major task of the philosophical or philosophico-philologico-historical work in which we are involved is to establish a program of investigation of *modes of subjection*.

I use this term (perhaps provisionally) for several reasons. First, because the two aspects of the issue before us need to be subsumed under a single two-sided word: subjugation in its different forms (*servitus*, as Spinoza used to say) and subjectification—or becoming a subject on one's own—in its different forms (*esse sui juris*, as Spinoza also used to say). The terminology that we need should include both activity and passivity, and consequently raise, in itself, the problem of their difference and the movement of this difference. All philosophies of liberation have been reflections, each in its own way, on the conditions and forms of this *conatus*, or transition, that differentiates activity from passivity as such.

But I also use the expression *modes of subjection* because there are, or used to be, *modes of production*. At this point, however, we should back up: in most of the texts I have submitted to you under the common label "essays in philosophical anthropology," we are dealing with a determined *mode* of subjection, whose transformations have at times been announced and at times reflected after the fact by modern philosophy. Because of the closeness of its conflicted relation with theology (even when the point has been to denounce it), classical phi-

losophy has naturally privileged the schema that Althusser called “the interpellation of the individual as a subject,” and that I call the schema of the “inner voice,” i.e., the schema of transcendence, of the Law that always remains withheld behind the mouth that utters it. This is only *one* mode of subjection, or rather, it is the trait shared by a series of modes of subjection. By isolating and privileging it, modern philosophers have built the fiction that the evolution of thought followed a single path—which easily grants it the allure of a goal or a destination. No doubt I risk contributing to this fiction by focusing my research on the revolutionary relieving and replacing of the subject by the citizen, and on the becoming-citizen of the subject. And yet, even in the rough sketch of a phenomenology of this becoming-subject, there appear already, as we have just seen, irreducible forms of subjection, whose history should also be recounted. Clearly, there are *modes of subjection other than the “inner voice”* that, similarly, may combine relations of power, an economy of language, and imagination of the body and soul.

This would have become apparent, I think, if instead of comparing Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Fichte with one another, we had confronted them with, say, Aristotle—the first of the great structuralists in whom the egalitarian figure of the *politès* is studied and defined against a quite different relation of subjection (characterized by what I call *unilateral discourse*), distributed according to the triple inequality of man to woman, master to slave, and father to son, i.e., to disciple.

It would have become apparent, too, if, rereading Marx’s texts (especially his analysis of “fetishism”) from this angle, we had looked not only for a critique of alienation, but for a similarly structural theory of the articulation of commercial and legal forms of exchange, which establishes individuals as carriers or holders of value and thus creates *within* the very fabric of their activities an empire of objectified signs, working indeed like a “spiritual automaton,” like an *a priori* material form of generalized equivalence or a language of things, a “language-object.”

But since I have just evoked Marx and time is running out, I will now take a new short-cut or short-circuit and discuss briefly the way I studied him and how I use him today, deferring any further elaboration to my answers to whatever questions you may wish to pose on this point.

III. MARXISM AND STRUCTURAL CAUSALITY

I worked continuously and almost exclusively with Marx's texts, and often with his very words, for nearly twenty years. Needless to say, I would not write any of the studies I devoted to him in precisely the same way today, either because they seem abstruse and dubious to me, or because the positions they uphold now seem quite untenable. And yet, there is not one of my previous studies (at least those I kept as part of the thesis I submitted five years ago and which, under other circumstances, you have before you again) from which I would not retain some element. So I would not write that historical materialism is a *science* (as I did in the late 1960s),²² or that class struggle is in itself the instance of the irreconcilable in the materiality of history and, consequently, the "engine" of its irreversible transformations (as I did in the 1970s),²³ although I am certain that any explanation of historical process, sequences, or conjunctures should be principally causal and that the effectivity of class divisions and struggles (even overdetermined by other structures) is harder than ever to overlook or ignore today.

Similarly, I would not write (as in my 1976 book, *Sur la Dictature du prolétariat*)²⁴ that the general form of development for democracy beyond its class frontiers lies in the dismantling of the State apparatus and generally in the decline of the State. For the political experience of the 1970s and 1980s has taught me (or so I believe) that the existence of a social movement "outside the State" is a contradiction in terms. Indeed, it is on this very issue that I began to part company with Althusser in 1978.²⁵ And the course of thought I have tried to follow for the past ten years or so, either alone or in collaboration with Immanuel Wallerstein and others, which focuses on present and past forms of racism and nationalism, and their ambiguous combinations with class struggle, has suggested to me that class struggle experienced, thought, and organized *under its own name* is the exception, not the rule. Today I believe that what can be called the theoretical anarchism shared by Marxism and the entire libertarian tradition (whether socialist or not)

22. "La Science du Capital," in *Le Centenaire du Capital*, Décades de Cerisy-la-Salle: Exposés et Entretiens sur le marxisme (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1967).

23. "A Nouveau sur la contradiction," in *Sur la Dialectique*, ed. Guy Besse (Paris: C.E.R.M.—Editions Sociales, 1977).

24. *Sur la Dictature du prolétariat* (Paris: François Maspéro, 1976).

25. "Interrogativi sul partito fuori dello Stato," in Louis Althusser et al., *Discutere lo Stato: posizioni a confronto su una tesi di Louis Althusser* (Bari: De Donato, 1978).

is mainly responsible, at least from the standpoint of its theoretical component, for its inability to size up the crisis it has faced since at least the years of its confrontation with Nazism, and from which it has never emerged.²⁶ And I believe, *a fortiori*, that it is not on these grounds that we are likely to contribute intellectually to solving the crisis of democratic politics that today threatens in different ways to open a new door to various neo-Fascisms.

However, this in no sense leads me to abandon the idea that a new practice of politics is a mass practice. On the contrary, knowing that such a notion is necessarily ambivalent, I believe that it is all the more indispensable to include the "insurrectional" dimension (or, if you will, that aspect of movements of collective liberation that exceeds the functioning of institutions and apparatuses) in any reflection on democratic citizenship. Neither does this lead me to consider as meaningless one or another of the issues that Marxist tradition has subsumed under the notion of "communism" and to which from the start I had attached particular importance: for instance, what classical theoreticians called the "end of the division of manual and intellectual labor," and which did not fall within the domain of a description of the forms of nineteenth-century industrialization so much as it referred to one of the underlying anthropological forces of the transhistorical division between governors and governed.²⁷

If I wanted to give a brief, schematic recapitulation of the successive stages of my work on Marx, I would say that the first task, undertaken with Althusser, was to *reconstruct* or remodel Marxism: in a sense, to complete it or to find at last the shape of its coherence and systematicity. This program was widespread at the time, although oriented in directions contrary to one another.

I then undertook a long and, in a sense, opposed process of *deconstruction* of the Marxist text. The most significant thresholds of this second task were crossed when I too came to realize that the contradictions of Marxism—as a political theory and as a historical movement—cannot be accounted for outside of Marx's own contradictions, for they are nothing other than these contradictions rendered effective. It then

26. "Fascism, Psychoanalysis, Freudo-Marxism," in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 177–89.

27. "Sur le concept de la division du travail manuel et intellectuel," in *L'intellectuel, L'intelligentsia et les manuels*, ed. Jean Belkhin (Paris: Anthropos, 1983). See also my article "Division du travail manuel et intellectuel," in *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, second edition, 1985.

became clear that, in its strongest realizations, the history of Marxist theory itself is nothing but a displacement or evasion of certain fundamental *aporias* whose trace and terms must be sought in the very texture of Marx's writing—the most fundamental of all these aporias, the one which in fact governs the whole fate of Marxism (as Althusser had perfectly understood and shown), being the aporia of the concept of ideology.

Aporia does not mean error, of course, but the *double bind*²⁸ of a discovery or simply of a revolutionary theoretical question, posed in the very terms of its denial or in the impossibility of its solution. I believe that in commenting upon and analyzing Marx's texts, and beginning as early as my 1974 essays included in *Cinq études du matérialisme historique*, but especially in those published in 1979 (*Marx et sa critique de la politique*) and most clearly in those of the early 1980s (my articles from the *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme* directed by Georges Labica and my study on *La Vacillation de l'idéologie dans le marxisme*),²⁹ I established the close correspondence in Marx between the aporia of ideology (that is, the complete impossibility of conceptualizing the ideology of the "proletarian masses" that, Marx tells us, make history) and the successive, conjunctural versions of his critique of political economy and theory of the State apparatus, dictatorship of the proletariat, and revolutionary party. From my point of view, this first negative result is attained, and it helps us understand how the historical cycle of dogmatic and critical Marxisms circled back upon itself.

This work of deconstruction, however, which is never by definition finished and which has much to gain in not limiting itself to a confrontation with Marx alone, was never an end in itself. It only makes sense to the extent that it allows us to think otherwise, i.e., to tease out positively, affirmatively, *another problematic*, or, to rely upon our old terminology, another topic or another schema of historical causality. For the concept of ideology in Marx has more than a merely descriptive or even critical function: as the very concept of the *discrepancy* between tendencies [*tendances*] and events, it represents the key moment of the interworking—*Wechselwirkung* or *Rückwirkung*—of

28. In English in the original text—Translator's note.

29. See the following entries in the *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*: "Appareil," "Bakouninisme," "Classes," "Critique de l'économie politique," "Contre-révolution," "Dictature du prolétariat," "Droit de tendances," "Lutte de classes," "Pouvoir." See also "L'idée d'une politique de classe chez Marx," in *Marx en perspective*, ed. Bernard Chavance (Paris: E.H.E.S.S., 1985), 497–526. An English translation appears in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 125–49.

causes and effects upon each other; it is therefore the touchstone of everything that has taken the name of "historical materialism."

Can we then "take another step"? I believe so; indeed, I even think that we can describe what such a schema would ideally consist of. It would not be the sum of a "base" and a "superstructure," working like a complement or supplement of historicity, but rather the combination of two "bases" of explanation or two determinations both incompatible and indissociable: the *mode of subjection* and the *mode of production* (or, more generally, the ideological mode and the generalized economic mode). Both are material, although in opposite senses. To name these different senses of the materiality of subjection and production, the traditional terms *imaginary* and *reality* suggest themselves. One can adopt them, provided that one keep in mind that in any historical conjuncture, the effects of the imaginary can only appear through and by means of the real, and the effects of the real through and by means of the imaginary: in other words, the structural law of causality in history is the *detour through and by means of the other scene*. Let us say, parodying Marx, that economy has no more a "history of its own" than does ideology, since each has a history only through the other that is the efficient cause of *its own effects*. Not so much the "absent cause" as the cause *that absents itself*, or the cause whose effectivity works through its contrary.

This, then, is the theoretical point of view, if not properly the *object*, of *Race, Nation, Class* and *Les Frontières de la démocratie*: not the object, for these two collections of essays do not seek only to illustrate methodological postulates, but to question events and describe tendencies [*tendances*] so that a democratic practice can arise in them. It is a theoretical point of view, then, whose validity can only be tested in its practice. Indeed, in these texts I illustrate again and again the idea that only imaginary communities (including political communities) are "real." I suggest also, however, that collective formations of the imaginary and their symbolic frame (therefore all *traces* of the ideological past fraught with the most ambivalent effects: nationalism, patriotism, institutional or cultural racism, but also religion and socialism) do not prescribe any future outside present-day constraints of accumulation, the State, and class struggle.

The problematic that is thus undoubtedly outlined is not conceivable without the totality of intellectual experiences and issues raised by Marxism, but it deliberately plays *Marxism against itself* as much as against its adversaries. In this sense it is irreversibly post-Marxist,

though the more pedantic “meta-Marxist” might make clearer that the issue is not to declare “out of date” or surpassed—in a historicist way—the concepts and issues of Marxism, but to confront them with their antithesis.³⁰ Precisely because it is radically *causal*, such a problematic has no part in any *deterministic* representation of the course of history. No one who has tried to school himself or herself in the work of Spinoza can confuse the two notions. Besides, we know that determinism is indeed a teleology. In contrast, to the extent that it opens the way to a philosophy of history, or better, a philosophy *in* history, the conception of causality I am advancing can only allow a *conjectural* philosophy: not an attempt to compute probabilities of events, but an attempt to diagnose the configurations of forces that will face the political and the symbolic issues that will divide it within itself.

Must such a problematic be *given a name*? Instead of the terms “sur-rationalism” (used by Gaston Bachelard) or “sur-materialism” (coined on the same model by Dominique Lecourt), and especially “surrealism” (the first and best term of the series, but which might have us confused with poets or lunatics), it may be worth reviving the word *structuralism* (and I must say I am increasingly tempted to do so). The term is certainly not that old, though nobody (or almost nobody) today seems to want to have anything to do with it—so much so, indeed, that someone recently thought it possible to chronicle its history in a few hundred pages as, and I quote, the story of a “collective shipwreck.” Structuralism, then—provided, however, that we understand it not as a combinative or hierarchical schema for constructing sets or totalities, but, on the contrary, as a problematic of differential identities; an analysis of the double inscription of causes and their excess of productivity within the representation of functionalities; finally, as an infinite topic of the noncontemporaneity of events to themselves.

* * *

If you grant me a few more minutes to conclude, I will propose not an argument, but a number of theses on the ethical attitude that is implied, it seems to me, by this way of philosophizing within what I have called the infinite contradiction of history.

One cannot propose that history is causally overdetermined with-

30. In the same spirit, see my “Foucault et Marx: l'enjeu du nominalisme,” in *Michel Foucault philosophe: rencontre internationale, Paris, 9, 10, 11 janvier 1988* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989). An English translation is available in *Michel Foucault, Philosopher*, trans. Timothy J. Armstrong (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

out positing that there are truth effects in history.³¹ All materialism (and I intend to propose ways of remaining within materialism) is incompatible with any relativism. It does not, though, seek the antithesis of relativism in some eternal truth or in what is no more than a lay version of such a truth, a law of evolution, i.e., some guarantee or *a priori* that anticipates a consensus. It seeks the truth effect only in the irreversibility of certain breaks, in the incoercible character of certain issues. Let me hazard in passing that I believe it to be a sort of intellectual point of honor, for someone who subscribed for years to a doctrine or ideology whose flag bore the inscription "Marx's theory is all powerful because it is true," not to abandon this position through any relativism, historicism, or pluralism, but instead by means of a renewed effort to understand the mode of existence of truth in history. That history is not the process of effectuation of truth does not mean that it is the process of its constant destitution.

Still, one can only posit that the structure of this historic causality is that of a double scene (real/imaginary) or that it is "surreal," if one presupposes that truth effects in history are first negative—in other words, that such effects make institutional constructions possible only by their capacity to interrupt or suspend the course of events. I believe I identified this formal characteristic in the proposition of equaliberty, as well as in its anticipations and reiterations. This means precisely, not that equaliberty is "empty," but that it is an *issue* or a question, and that this issue *is there*, whether one likes it or not. It fits, irrepressibly, into the history of subjection. It represents a point at which the history of economico-political systems of production reverses course. It transforms the whole of philosophical writing.

Finally, one cannot posit that because history is structural it is therefore conjectural, without—like Spinoza and, to a certain extent, like Hegel and Marx—reversing the terms of the classical issue of liberty and necessity (whose relation to theological narratives of subjection is well known): there will not be a leaving of the "reign of necessity" for the "reign of liberty," that land of milk and honey or wine and roses in which there will be neither social relations nor ideology, but, on the contrary, the *realization of liberty*, a *Verwirklichung* of the maximum of liberty *within* the field of necessity.

31. See *Theses*, defended on 11 December 1987 before the jury of the Université de Nimègue (Netherlands), for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Published in French in *Raison présente* 89 (1989): 15–17.

Better yet: the realization of the conditions for maximal liberty within the field of necessity. In other words, the proposition that because history is structural it is therefore conjectural supposes the *becoming-necessary of liberty* [*devenir nécessaire de la liberté*]. This means, and I admit it unreservedly, that politics is also ethics. Not in the sense of an *amor fati*, nor because the political would be subjected to moral means and ends, but in that politics acts so as to render liberty necessary, within the broadest possible limits and for the longest possible time.

Such a position is consistent—or I believe it to be—with the thesis I have maintained in the field of historical materialism: that formations of the imaginary or subjective formations are not the reflection or superstructure of economy and politics, but rather their psychic material—a material that cannot be manipulated at will. To act is therefore not to “master,” it is not to *shape*, it is not even to *organize* history or humanity even by means of the law, science, and institution—as Hobbes and so many after him believed. Nor, however, is it to limit oneself to resisting heroically the immemorial attraction of the human species to “evil.” Instead, to act is to play a game with many players, sometimes tricking or finessing, with and against the risks of ideology and economy.

Such a position is thus not incompatible with Gramsci’s famous maxim (who claimed to have taken it from Romain Rolland): “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”—an injunction that one should be careful not to interpret as a mere combination of activism and fatalism. Nor does it contradict Max Weber’s seemingly opposite and no less famous maxim urging the joining of “the ethic of conviction” with “the ethic of responsibility,” i.e., (if I understand it correctly) the *presumption of truth* with the *attention paid to effects*, or consequences. Such maxims, however, opposed both to the rationalist ideology of inevitable progress and to the mysticism of imminent catastrophe, should not be repeated too often. You have probably guessed that I would readily apply to them the last statement of the *Tractatus*, which, by definition, is also a rule concerning judgment in ethics: “Those things about which we cannot speak, we must pass over in silence.” A contradictory injunction, of course, and therefore an ironic one, which could be glossed as: one should not make speeches [*faire des discours*], nor, even less, should one theorize about such an injunction; still, it should be set forth at least once (for it is neither a secret

nor an initiatory rule), and even be made a thesis: silence should therefore be broken. Hence the compromise solution that I practice: we should talk about it as little as possible, or, if I may put it this way, we must speak about “those things” as little as possible, and make as much “silence” as possible.

—Translated by Jean-Marc Poisson with Jacques Lezra