

Althusser's Clinamen: Aleatory Materialism and Revolutionary Politics

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Since the posthumous publication of Althusser's *Philosophy of the Encounter*, scholars have grappled with what appears to be a discontinuity between the earlier Althusser of "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (hereafter referred to as "ISA essay") and *Reading Capital*, and the later Althusser who turns to Lucretius for a "philosophy of the encounter" or an "aleatory materialism." Antonio Negri characterizes the moment when Althusser explicitly turns to Machiavelli and Lucretius as a "Kehre," or turn, describing it as the point in which "the structural framework of Althusser's previous theoretical analysis is completely reversed."¹ Others, however, have attempted to stress the contrary, arguing that the two Althusser's cannot be so neatly separated. In this paper, I examine the concept of the "clinamen," as Althusser uses it in his later writings, to emphasize neither the continuity or discontinuity of Althusser's system explicitly, but rather the non-linearity of its function. This clinamen as "encounter," urges us to revisit his momentous ISA essay to find gestures toward revolutionary engagement, and it offers a new perspective on his oeuvre beyond the arguments of continuity and discontinuity.

Althusser's late work closes in on an important aspect of this encounter: the seeming arbitrariness, or, as he calls it, "aleatory" nature, of this swerve. This clinamen, as a primal encounter that is the "first cause" or origin of all things in Lucretius' Epicurean cosmology, comes prior to and serves as the "basis for all reality, all necessity, all Meaning and all reason."² The Epicurean world presumes "the idea that the origin of every world, and therefore of all reality and all meaning, is due to a swerve, and that swerve, not Reason or Cause, is the origin of the world."³ In this conception, Epicurus and Lucretius believed that "atoms, as their own weight bears them down / Plumb through the void, at scarce determined times."⁴ As Lucretius puts it, this motion eventually "mere changed trend" — a slight swerve, revolution, turn, which ultimately creates matter. Althusser notes that this swerve is completely aleatory in its occurrence — it "hath not a fixed necessity within."⁵ The clinamen

must be the original inclination and action of the falling atoms; it marks the “the impossibility of thinking an origin.”⁶ In similar terms, Lacan later describes his theory of the Real as a “missed encounter.” He posits the Real order as “beyond the automaton, the return, the coming back,”⁷ that is to say, beyond and before the originary swerve that lies before language and “reality,” since “the clinamen [for Lucretius] marks “the birth of things and the appearance of language.”⁸ Althusser sets the ground for his philosophy of the encounter by postulating that, following Lucretius’s reasoning, this originary swerve “may not take place, just as it may take place... no principle of decision determines this alternative in advance; it is of the order of a game of dice.”⁹ Althusser aligns himself with Lucretius’ narrative for a philosophical renunciation of any strains of teleology in both the realms of philosophy and of the class struggle.

Althusser’s “aleatory materialism” develops this concept not simply to re-examine the question of political praxis, but also to emphasize a certain philosophical and political ethos. This strategic conception of Marxist materialism blends Machiavellian political theory and Lucretian cosmology, a connection that has been discussed in depth in a recent collection edited by Filippo del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino.¹⁰ Mikko Lahtinen explains that Althusser “outlines a notion of an ‘aleatory Machiavelli’ and, with the help of the Epicurean tradition, a theory of materialist politics that opens up a view of politics as an action occurring in a conjuncture where each actor aims to organize and govern the effective truth.”¹¹ The political field, for Althusser, adopts the quality of the Machiavellian-Lucretian world — it is a perpetual state of disorder and, to use Marxist language, of struggle. There is no underlying guarantee of victory or any sort of political revolution, “even every ‘fixed’ political form of organization rests on an uncertain aleatory foundation.”¹²

The clinamen gestures towards the missing concepts that are not explicitly stated but play an integral role in Althusser’s thought since *Reading Capital*. The clinamen allows one to think Althusser’s thought as a “Machiavellian” philosophy, one that embraces the non-continuity of conceptual thought to emphatically pose it by means of its “effectual truth.” For Machiavelli, the effectual truth is different from ideal truths that have no place in reality. Effectual truth elicits concrete reactions and shifts paradigms, rather than naming unarmed concepts and dictums, just as the publication of *Reading Capital* has generated overwhelming effects and reactions in its conjuncture. To use Althusser’s own metaphor, if one wants to straighten a bent stick, one cannot merely bring about that change by bending the stick to its original verticality. One must bend it toward the other direction in order to straighten the stick.

As Machiavelli would have recognized, the politics of theory operate similarly. For one, a common criticism of the ISA essay is the seeming impossibility of any room for action and engagement in Althusser’s highly controlled world. But as Foucault pithily stated, in every system, “where there is power, there is resistance.”¹³ Foucault describes these “spaces of multifold resistance” in *The History of Sexuality*, speaking

of “points of resistance [that] are present everywhere in the power network.” For Althusser, the aleatory “encounter,” first posed by Epicurean philosophy, is the philosophical elaboration of these points of resistance. As the recent publication of the full manuscript of the ISA essay confirms, Althusser consciously deleted all references to these “points of resistance” in the essay’s original publication in order to “effectually” stress the difficulty of revolutionary action in the wake of the failure of May 1968.¹⁴ While this may have ultimately shown to be a flawed strategy, the ISA essay can be seen as enacting in practice what Althusser has later articulated as the philosophical basis for revolt through the *clinamen*. Michel Pêcheux describes the ISA essay as “a philosophical detour imposed by the class struggle, to dispossess Marxism-Leninism of its operating assumptions, to deprive it of them in the most radical way, and it is precisely this that is unpardonable in the eyes of some.”¹⁵ This claim that the ISA essay can challenge traditions of Marxist intervention to occasion a new theory of struggle and revolt can be counter-intuitive. But, to expand on Althusser’s reference to Pascal to emphasize the ritualistic and, more importantly, the bodily, nature of ideology (“Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”), these practices are predicated on the fact that “there is no ritual without break, failure, and cracking.”¹⁶

Pêcheux elaborates on this in “Ideology: Stronghold or Paradoxical Space?” The theses in the ISA essay must be “understood to mean that the processes of ideological reproduction are also conceived as spaces of multifold resistance where the unexpected continually appears. For any ideological rituals constantly run up against flaws, unsuccessful acts, and lapses of various kinds which befall and disrupt the ‘eternity’ of reproduction.”¹⁷ Against those who criticize Althusser for illustrating a world without agency or room for change, Pêcheux writes that ideology “does not comprise a fortress, but a paradoxical space.” It is significant to understand and develop the idea that ideology, even in the ISA essay, functions as a “paradoxical space.” It has become too common to treat ideology as an antithesis to revolutionary action, as a tight-knit apparatus that is impossible to subvert. Foucault has given us a strong critique against this rigidity of structure, but Pêcheux’s characterization of it as a “paradoxical space” expresses an even more nuanced point. Ideology, being paradoxical, is the breeding ground for real contradictions. It is a material space that only appears to generate an image of coherent structure; as Althusser writes in “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” it is one that is characterized by “a fusion of accumulation of contradictions” that gives it the form of being a “ruptural unity.”¹⁸ Pêcheux reminds us that “the dominant ideology never dominates without contradictions.”¹⁹ In Althusser’s later thought, by the time of *Machiavelli and Us* and *Philosophy of the Encounter*, the ruptural and revolutionary potential of this “paradoxical space” becomes the focal point of his research. Going beyond Foucault, Althusser’s *clinamen* attempts to philosophically explore the possibilities of these “encounters,” the system’s symptoms. The task to study the nuances of a new politics

of resistance led to an examination of philosophical practice itself.

Althusser's *Philosophy of the Encounter*, despite being published posthumously, delineates a certain political gesture that informed the undercurrents of his theoretical project throughout the course of his oeuvre. The publication of *Philosophy of the Encounter* made it "possible, if not inevitable", as Warren Montag puts it, "to see in such [earlier] works as "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and "Lenin and Philosophy" a philosophy of the conjuncture, according to which history... is the site of an infinity of encounters between heterogeneous forces the outcome of which could never be predicted."²⁰ This explicit turn towards Lucretian naturalism is a theoretical intervention — a political intervention, in fact — into the developments of Marxism in his contemporary French political and intellectual scene. Confronted with the rise of Stalinism and the failure of the May '68 protests, Althusser sought to re-examine the tenets of orthodox Marxism held by the dominant Marxist intellectuals of the day. What he discovered was a central tension in even the more progressive and theoretically rigorous Marxist movements — between the inevitable realization of the immanent complexity of the social conjuncture and the refusal to abandon a deterministic model of Marxism. Culminating in his explicit espousal of Epicurean philosophy and Machiavellian politics, Althusser in fact returns to Marx in order to show a more radical theory of political action through his theories of ideology and aleatory materialism. The clinamen elaborates the connection between ideology and aleatory materialism, testifying to the contingency and unpredictability of the moment of political transformation without sacrificing its "revolutionary" potential.

The concept develops an understanding of Marxism's revolutionary potential by the very emphasis on its necessity and creative possibilities. In other words, while various theorists tend to obscure the role of a revolutionary break in their attention on other phenomena, like hegemony or ideology, Althusser's engagement with these concepts led him back to reconsider the question of revolution in its full force. The moment of revolution is a groundbreaking act of creation and re-creation; Althusser's turn to Lucretius toward the end of his life signifies his total commitment to this central philosophy of Marxist praxis and revolution that has been increasingly obscured by the various forms of "post-Marxism" throughout the years. But, as Althusser is fully aware, the physical motion of the clinamen as a "swerve" or "deviation" indicates that inscribed in the very possibility of revolution is also a potential for error. As Althusser writes, "The possibility of such errors, just like the possibility of deviations, is written into the contradictory relations dominating the class struggle." The concept of the clinamen thus is an "error without truth and deviation without a norm" — as the clinamen itself is a contingent deviation from the beginning, without precedent. He describes the clinamen as "an unmastered fault, a hesitation, aberration... which slowly develops or suddenly gapes in the midst of reality, a reality without truth or norm."²¹ Its movement is revolutionary because of the radical abruptness of its becoming; it is an uncontrolled force of change because it has no and can have no

precedent or “norm.” The clinamen has a revolutionary form precisely because of the unpredictability of its appearance.

In a very material sense, the physical motion of atoms swerving and deviating, whether as the smallest gesture or historical revolution, reminds us of the capacity for change in ideological systems. I quote here at length a passage from Robert Linhart’s autobiographical narrative *The Assembly Line*, where he recounts his experience of working in a Citroen factory in Paris:

“And suppose... that you need only get used to making the same movements in the same way in the same period of time, aspiring to no more than the placid perfection of a machine? But life kicks against it and resists. The organism resists. The muscles resist. The nerves resist... Life shows itself in more rapid movement, an arm lowered at the wrong time, a slower step, a second’s irregularity, an awkward gesture, getting ahead, slipping back, tactics at the station; everything, in the wretched square of resistance against the empty eternity that is the work station, indicates that there are still human incidents, even if they’re minute. This clumsiness, this unnecessary movement away from routine...”²²

The potential for error is also the potential to disrupt repetition; the swerve constitutes the very capacity for revolutionary transformation, as breaks in the system. The clinamen is a worker’s wrong gesture or the masses’ descent into societal disruption, functioning as a new language that is incomprehensible to the dominant ideology. Unprecedented and revolutionary, the smallest swerve can threaten to create all matter anew.

As Lucretius’ concept shows, the ideological “fortress” is at the end a “paradoxical space,” with immanent contradictions and aleatory sites of resistance. Pêcheux writes that the “unprecedented” swerve or revolution “constitutes the tendential fusion of the revolutionary practices of the workers’ movement with the scientific theory of class struggle.”²³ In a similar vein, Althusser’s own oeuvre shows that the theoretical effects produced from his thought do not come linearly. Rather than attempting to offer different interpretations of the “narrative” of his work, we must instead, as the clinamen indicates, learn to cultivate different manners of reading. This essay is not to show that the philosophy of the encounter and the clinamen have always been there throughout Althusser’s oeuvre, as a hidden or esoteric truth to be uncovered. As the clinamen poses as the philosophical basis for resistance, it also serves as a reminder to consider the breadth of Althusser’s thought as one of aleatory potential. By reading him differently — thinking the non-linear points of resonance and dissonance of the text against the narrative, dwelling on the cracks and symptoms of the narrative — one may discover a creative multiplicity of thought. As Pêcheux suggests, “the spaces of multifold resistance” and of revolutionary change are sites “where the unexpected

continually appears.”

Notes

1. Antonio Negri, “Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser,” *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 1996) 54.
2. Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978-87* (London: Verso, 2006) xxxv.
3. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter* 169.
4. Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. A. E. Stallings (New York: Penguin, 2007) 66.
5. Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*.
6. Hanjo Berressem. “Incerto Tempore Incertisque Locis: The Logic of the Clinamen and the Birth of Physics,” *Mapping Michael Serres* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 57.
7. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Routledge, 1998) 53.
8. Berressem, “Incerto Tempore Incertisque Locis” 65.
9. *Philosophy of the Encounter* 174.
10. *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language*. eds. Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015)
11. Mikko Lahtinen, “Machiavelli Was Not a Republicanist, Or Monarchist: On Louis Althusser’s ‘Aleatory’ Interpretation of *The Prince*,” *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language*. ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015) 403.
12. Lahtinen, “Machiavelli Was Not a Republicanist, Or Monarchist” 403
13. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 95.
14. Warren Montag. *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013) 159.
15. Michel Pêcheux, “Dare to Think and Dare to Rebel! Ideology, Marxism, Resistance, Class Struggle” *Décalages* 1.4 (2014) 16.
16. Pêcheux, “Dare to Think” 18.
17. Michel Pêcheux, “Ideology: Stronghold or Paradoxical Space?” *Minnesota Review* 23 (1984) 161.
18. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London and New York: Verso, 1996) 99.
19. Pêcheux, “Dare to Think” 17.
20. Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* 16.
21. Louis Althusser, “Unfinished History’ in *Proletarian Science* by Dominique Lecourt” (London: NLB, 1977) 10.
22. Robert Linhart, *The Assembly Line* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) 17.
23. “Dare to Think” 12.
24. Pêcheux, “Ideology: Stronghold or Paradoxical Space?” 161.