

**JACQUES RANCIÈRE (2011) *ALTHUSSER'S  
LESSON*. TRANS. EMILIANO BATTISTA. NEW  
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Originally published as *La leçon d'Althusser* (1974), Rancière's first book has finally been translated into English. Emiliano Battista's translation is lucid, generously annotated and, therefore, highly informative. This edition includes a new foreword, as well as a short introduction to Rancière's 1969 essay 'On the Theory of Ideology: Althusser's Politics'. *Althusser's Lesson* comprises five chapters, or 'lessons' from Althusser/Althusserianism, which inter-connect within his thought from the 1960s to the mid-1970s; these are: Orthodoxy, Politics, Self-criticism, History, and Discourse.

*Althusser's Lesson* conceptualises knowledge and power. It focuses on the connection between Althusser the intellectual, theoretician and defender of science on the one hand, and the French Communist Party (PCF), whose political authority it perceives as reactionary, on the other. Such a conceptualisation of the relation between knowledge (Althusser's) and power (the party with which he travels) means that the book is a radical and original attempt to tackle the frictions, conflicts, and contradictions at play within Althusser's thought and legacy; to this end, *Althusser's Lesson* resorts to 'the soul of Marxism' (143) – i.e. a material analysis of a tangible situation – in order to pick out philosophy, theory, and politics in that thought and legacy.

This review aims to situate Rancière's critique of Althusser within a wider context by discussing the first three chapters of *Althusser's Lesson*, assessing Rancière's own lesson,<sup>1</sup> and concluding with thoughts on what *Althusser's Lesson* might mean to a contemporary readership.

**'A Lesson in Orthodoxy...'**

Althusser's orthodoxy, renewed and reintroduced into his thought over time,<sup>2</sup> taught that while the transformation of nature is simple, transforming knowledge of history is a complex matter. In other words, while the masses of workers do and must produce, they cannot grasp the intricacy of history; they cannot even self-organize to make history, let alone know history unless, that is, they put their faith in Marxist theory and the Communist Party to work out history for them.

One quickly suspects that Althusser was thus intervening in matters of 'Man', its essence and the making of history, but also with regards to where the 'subject' might stand in/between philosophy and political practice. In *Reply to John Lewis* (1973), Althusser argues that the bourgeois Humanists reacted to feudal providential ideology – i.e. God makes history – by declaring that it is Man who makes history. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Althusser goes on to say that in Feuerbach Man's 'Essence' is 'the Origin, Cause and Goal of history' (Althusser 1973: 97; quoted in *Althusser's Lesson*, 5). Even less unexpected is Althusser's claim that Marxist theoretical revolution is in the end an assessment of the subject, something which seems to ignore philosophers such as Schelling, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Structuralists and their attempts to dismantle the subject. For Rancière, these are 'manoeuvres' by Althusser, which can be summarised as follows:

[Althusser] imputes to the bourgeoisie a problem it does not have [...], attributes to Feuerbach a thesis that actually belongs to the young Marx, transforms a Marxist thesis into the core of bourgeois ideology, debunks this "bourgeois ideology" by way of an M[arxism]-L[eninism] that effectively restores a most banal materialism through its commendation of old principles and of the old wisdom of the rich [...] and transforms the fighters of Mao's army into the voters of the Union de la gauche. (21)

Rancière views this orthodoxy as unfaithful to Marx in that it reinstates the old, bourgeois materialism, the materialism of intellectuals without whose mediation history cannot be made or known (11). *Contra* Althusser, Rancière argues that the bourgeoisie never declares Man the maker of history. Instead the bourgeois

demonstrates how the human mind progresses within history, something which leads Rancière to conclude that Man is not the answer to the question 'who makes history?' Rather, Man is the object of the question '*what is man?*' (3) Therefore, what Althusser seems to have missed is that the opposition between God and Man cannot wholly determine bourgeois ideology. Althusser oversimplifies the complex ways in which this ideology relates to feudalism: Rancière writes, 'the central problem of the bourgeoisie is [...] human nature', while the thesis according to which Man makes history 'has, literally, no sense' (4, 8). Similarly, that Feuerbach has proclaimed the essence of Man to be the origin of history turns out to be false; instead, Rancière claims: 'an alienated human essence is the origin of Hegel's speculative history' (6). He adds that this essence is not historical, something which, in turn, may explain Marx's objection to Feuerbach: namely, that 'his subject has no history' (6). Last but not least, in Rancière's view the practice of critiquing this subject is futile because that practice is tentative and works by disconnecting declarations from their political and theoretical contexts. Differently put, not only is the class struggle real, but also, in order to investigate the political consequences of a specific thesis, 'we must oppose what practice itself opposes' (16; see also 20). In short, Rancière accuses Althusser of flying into what has been called in another context 'stratospheric weightlessness and irrelevancy' (Naficy, 2007: xvi).

### **'A Lesson in Politics...'**

This irrelevancy is carried over to the lesson in politics that Althusser the 'communist philosopher' taught; in addition, the theoreticism of Althusserianism emerging from Althusser's 'self critical essays' (2) produced conflicting political effects to which he was oblivious. Indeed, Althusser's post-1968 theoretical texts are shot through with 'the omnipresence of singularity, rupture and discovery' (32).<sup>3</sup> In so doing, the political intervention of Althusserianism becomes a 'ruse' according to which political problems can be resolved through theory and, while theory is being thought through, we are all left in indecision (in Rancière's words, we are giving ourselves 'the autonomous time of theory') (32). Granted, by 1968 Althusserianism had been tilted towards structuralism by events such as the end of the Algerian war of independence (1956-1962) and its consequences on both the student left and student syndicalism in general.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it is precisely that novel element or 'beginning of a certain fissure within the

intellectual world' of 1963 that should have made Althusser see 'the appearance of politics in a new form – in the question of knowledge, its power and its relationship to political power' (39).

Althusser's blindness to that new is the basis on which Rancière mounts his most scathing attack: 'The logic of Althusserianism implied a certain suspension of political judgement' (32), a postponement which, in turn, transformed indecision into a badge of honour. Here, Rancière may have a point given that the post-Algerian-war fissure created another war (this time, a civil one) between intellectuals on such scale that 'whether or not one *should* be committed could no longer be asked' (39).

### **'A Lesson in Self-criticism ...'**

The end of 1967 and beginning of 1968 saw Althusserian philosophy enter a rectification mode: it displaced politics at the same time as it displayed a 'forgetfulness' of the present and the past (58). Indeed, Althusser's theoreticist texts were written in relation to the aftermath of the PCF's twentieth congress, a time of ideological variations (the present). But the texts also rested upon and triggered interplay between past political-ideological experiences because they were about ways in which lessons from the Zhdanovian era and "proletarian science" could be applied to the 'conjuncture of "de-Stalinization"' (the past) (58).<sup>5</sup> Equally, Althusser's partisan philosophy seemed to shed no light on 'the conjuncture of Marxist philosophy' at a moment characterised by the Chinese Cultural Revolution and 'the rise of the leftist movements in France' (the present); nor did his *Lenin and Philosophy* (1972) and his 'Philosophy Course for Scientists' refer once to "proletarian science" (the past) (58).

One must therefore wonder where, amid late 1967-early 1968 uncertainty and unquestionable commitment to concrete political struggle, Althusser's term 'denegation', which he assigns to philosophies that interpret the world, might have fitted. Rancière is adamant that Althusser's scathing partisanship concealed 'the denegation of the political effects of Althusserianism' along with Althusserianism's desire to restrict philosophical activity so as to protect it from the hazards of political action: by early 1968, Althusser's advice to those actively involved in political struggle was that they should 'learn to wait, to step back, learn to take the time of theory' (57).

It does not make sense to introduce a notion into one's problematic by cancelling out the political conditions that produced the notion in the first place. Yet, this is precisely what Althusser's 'theoretical heroism' seems to accomplish through his theory of ideological (state) apparatuses – for Rancière, 'the theory of universal illusion' (77)<sup>6</sup> – and, in turn, becomes shockingly out of touch:

*May 68 did not exist. It is instead [...] Althusser who discovers – as he treads the arduous path of his research – the idea, which he presents as a stunning hypothesis [...] but which no one following the May movement could have doubted, of the dominant character of the academic apparatus. (Italics in original; 74-75; see also 76-77)*<sup>7</sup>

What justifies Rancière's overall attack on Althusser and Althusserianism? Answers can be found within the paradoxes out of which *Althusser's Lesson* was born.

### **Paradoxe: Rancière's trajectory and thought**

One such paradox is the 1960s - the context of Rancière's formative years: 'it prepared and organized a tipping of the balance, from 1968 onwards, from a scientific position that fetishized concepts to a "practitioner" position that fetishized action and the immediate ideas of its agents' (Badiou 2012: 102). That paradoxical context may explain why parts of *Althusser's Lesson* make clear that at some point Rancière must have seen Althusser as a theoretico-political mentor, or as a helpful and useful thinker. For example, Rancière recounts how in 1963-1964 the Cercle Ulm 'put to work politically' some of Althusser's concepts (171, footnote 43).<sup>8</sup> Althusser taught them that the role of intellectuals was neither to be consumers of culture nor the conscience of the world; rather, that role required them, '*as intellectuals,*' to transform the world (43; Italics in original). Moreover, to these young communists keen to have theoretical control over their political and syndicalist struggles, as well as be freed from the PCF's discourse, Althusser was a 'liberating authority' through whom they got rid of the petit-bourgeois guilt of being caught 'in the dilemma of submission or betrayal' (48). Althusser was the first to respond to their interrogations 'with repression, but the important thing is that he answered them' and thereby superseded the PCF's apparatus (48).<sup>9</sup>

The 'practitioner' aspect of the 1960s paradox undoubtedly came to bear on Rancière's anti-orthodox trajectory, for, during the latter part of that decade, the trajectory began to oppose Althusser's distinction between science and the history of ideology. Much later, practicism culminated more decisively in Rancière's notion of the non-relation envisaged as a relation in the context of 'the singularity of transmission in the undoing of an instituted relation between knowledge and power' (Badiou 2012: 108). This is, perhaps, where Rancière's dialectic might best be located and understood, not least because notion and context display Rancière the thinker-activist's dual, two-front struggle: on the one hand, Rancière fought/fights against the 'left' (e.g., Althusser and the PCF) in a struggle maintaining the status of politics 'as a declaration, its discursive consistency, and its status as a figure of exception' (Badiou 2012: 115); on the other hand, Rancière struggled/s against bourgeois, capitalist and/or imperialist power: it is on this latter front that, in order to break with Althusser, Rancière wrote *Althusser's Lesson*.

### More Lessons

*Althusser's Lesson* seeks linkages (present and future) between the intellectual and the worker; it is militant because, akin to what Badiou sees as the entailments of being militant, *Althusser's Lesson* 'take[s] on the trajectory, [...] redefine[s] the limits, [and] draw[s] improbable connections' (Badiou 2012: 126). Indeed, a crucial book in terms of its capacity to help one grasp three main things: the formative years of Rancière the radical thinker, French philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s, and the relevance of Marxism (as thought and method) to contemporary political analyses.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> By 'Rancière's own lesson' I mean: his formative years, his trajectory up to writing *Althusser's Lesson*, and his overall thought.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, how in the 1960s Althusser's orthodoxy was founded on Marx's texts (not on the words of Joseph Stalin) and intended, in Rancière's words, 'to keep [the PCF's] politics from being contested'; in short, a warning: by trying 'to "modernize" Marxism, one might actually restore the tendencies of bourgeois humanism' (35).

<sup>3</sup> His 'discovery' that the school is an ideological state apparatus is mentioned therein.

<sup>4</sup> The student left channelled power gained during the anti-war protests towards its own struggles, one of which was to question the purpose of academic knowledge while at the same time demanding student wages.

<sup>5</sup> Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov (1896-1948) close collaborator of Joseph Stalin and founder of the Soviet propaganda office Cominform (1946). Zhdanovism (c.1946) was an anti-western, extreme, and orthodox cultural policy which tightly controlled the arts and intellectual life in the Soviet Union.

<sup>6</sup> '[T]he representation of an enormous, despotic machine that subjects every individual to its functioning' (77); 'the masses live in illusion. Ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects." And these subjects, or course, *work*.' (75)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. with Badiou (2012: 11), who calls Althusser and Althusserians nihilists, 'counterfeiters [...] prebendaries of false Marxism. [...] for them, quite plainly *nothing happened* in May '68' (italics in original).

<sup>8</sup> Cercle Ulm, to which Rancière belonged, was the circle of communist students at the *École Normale Supérieure*.

<sup>9</sup> Soon, these communist students became too radical for Althusser and the PCF (see 51).

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