It should be pointed out that on 1 March 1987, Althusser sent Orfila the following short handwritten note regarding publication of his interview with Navarro:

Dear Orfila,
The text that Fernanda has in her possession is for Latin America ONLY – rights for all other countries are withheld.
I accord Fernanda the right to revise the text and publish it directly with your firm, even if I am unable to revise it.

Heartfelt thanks,
Louis Althusser

31 The French Communist Party daily. [Trans.]
32 Published in four instalments from 25 to 28 April 1978 in the daily Le Monde, and, in expanded form, in a book released in May: Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le parti communiste. The Le Monde articles have been translated into English by Patrick Camiller as ‘What Must Change in the Party’, New Left Review, no. 109, May–June 1978, pp. 19–45. [Trans.]
33 Althusser is referring to a new Spanish version of the interview comprising 104 typed pages. It includes several passages from an unpublished manuscript of his that Navarro had consulted while in Paris and later incorporated into the text of the interview, together with many of the arguments featuring in the ‘Preface’ of 82 typed pages, entitled ‘To my Latin American Readers’ and dated 20 May 1986 that he sent her in Mexico (see the letters of 2 and 23 June above).
34 LCW 14: 130. [Trans.]
35 Althusser is alluding to a topic discussed in the version of the interview that he criticizes here.
36 Appendix 1 of this ‘basic manuscript’, as established by Fernando Navarro in 1987, subsequently became Part 2 of the interview, ‘Philosophy–Ideology–Politics’. The second Appendix (which comprises the third chapter of the Mexican edition of Filosofía y marxismo) was withdrawn from the French edition and is not translated here. The preface that was ultimately published comprises the first two pages of the introductory section of ‘To my Latin American Readers’ (see note 33 above).

Philosophy and Marxism

INTERVIEWS WITH FERNANDA NAVARRO, 1984–87

For Mauricio Malamud, to whom I owe my ‘Epicurean’ encounter with Louis Althusser – the man, his life and his work

Fernanda Navarro

Preface

The text that follows is presented in the form of an interview. Fernanda Navarro, a young professor of Marxist philosophy, asks me questions to which I respond. I have not given the interview a particular slant by requesting that Fernanda ask me the questions I wanted to hear so that I could give the answers it suited me to give. It was Fernanda herself who chose the questions, and it was she who put the answers in written form.

She had come to see me in Paris during the winter of 1983–84. First we talked for a very long time, so that I had the leisure to explain my positions to her at length; she had a chance to read several of the unpublished manuscripts that I had written over a period stretching from the 1960s to 1978, and stored away in my files; she recorded, on one or two cassettes, a long conversation of ours – and then she returned to Mexico. She left me with a very positive impression of her philosophical discernment.

Of course, Fernanda’s intention was to arrive at a better understanding of the reasons for, and subjects of, my philosophical intervention in France from 1970 to 1978. She also wanted to understand, not only the philosophical and political significance of what I had set out to do, but, at the same time, the reasons for the (to some) surprising interest that it had generated in France and the rest of the world, and the motives for the equally lively, sometimes malevolent,
and always fierce hostility that it had aroused in many readers, communists first of all.

Yet Fernanda was pursuing another project as well: she hoped to publish, in the form of an interview, a short text for the use of students at the University of Michoacán. Hence she wanted simple, clear explanations, and, let us say, a brief text for non-specialists.

Two months ago, she sent me a seventy-page ‘interview’ in Spanish. Overall, I found this text to be pertinent and on the mark. Not long after I began reading it, I came to the conclusion that it was so good that it should be earmarked for a purpose other than the one she had in mind. I wrote to her straight away to recommend that she put a very few details to rights, and, especially, to suggest that she turn the interview into a short book. The book could, I thought, be published by my friend Orfila, the director of the publishing firm Siglo XXI in Mexico City, first in Spanish and then in Portuguese, for a readership of philosophy students and political activists in Latin America (Brazilians included), and exclusively for that readership. I reserve the right to publish this text in France at the appropriate time.

L. A.
July 1986

A PHILOSOPHY FOR MARXISM:
'THE LINE OF DEMOCRITUS'

You have, throughout your work, shown a marked interest in philosophy and its relation to politics. Could we begin our interview by talking about that?

Certainly. This interest was not restricted to the theoretical level, since, beginning in the late 1940s, I was both a philosopher and a political activist. Part of the reason for this lay in the historical circumstances that it was my lot to live through: the Second World War, Stalinism, the international peace movement, the Stockholm Appeal. This was in the days when only the United States had the atom bomb; we had to avoid a Third World War at all costs. I used to spend as much as ten hours a day doing political work.

What you say reminds me of what you wrote in the Introduction to For Marx about the postwar years. Let me quote you:

History: it had stolen our youth with the Popular Front and the Spanish Civil War, and in the War as such it had imprinted in us the terrible education of deeds. It surprised us just as we entered the world, and turned us students of bourgeois or petty-bourgeois origin into men advised of the existence of classes, of their struggles and aims. From the evidence it forced on us we drew the only possible conclusion, and rallied to the political organization of the working class, the Communist Party ... we had to measure up to our choice and take the consequences....

In our philosophical memory it remains the period of intellectuals in arms, hunting out error from all its hiding-places; of the philosophers we were, without writings of our own, but making politics of all writing, and slicing up the world with a single blade, arts, literatures, philosophies, sciences, with the pitiless demarcation of class....

[Later] we were able to see that there were limits to the use of the class criterion, and that we had been made to treat science, a status claimed by every page of Marx, as merely the first-comer among ideologies. We had to retreat, and, in semi-disarray, return to first principles.

I wanted to intervene in France in the French Communist Party, which I joined in 1948, in order to struggle against triumphant Stalinism and its disastrous effects on my Party's politics. At the time, I had no choice: if I had intervened publicly in the politics of the Party, which refused to publish even my philosophical writings (on Marx), deemed heretical and dangerous, I would have been, at least until 1970, immediately expelled, marginalized and left powerless to influence the Party at all. So there remained only one way for me to intervene politically in the Party: by way of pure theory - that is, philosophy.

Against the background of this dissidence, your critique bore on certain basic concepts that helped to sustain the official positions of the Communist parties. I'm thinking, for example, of dialectical materialism.

Yes, I wanted us to abandon the unthinkable theses of dialectical materialism, or 'diamat'. At the time, they held undisputed sway over
all the Western Communist parties, with the exception — a partial exception — of Italy (thanks to Gramsci’s colossal effort to criticize and reconstruct Marxist theory).

**What was your critique of dialectical materialism based on?**

It seemed to me essential that we rid ourselves of monist materialism and its universal dialectical laws; originating with the Soviet Academy of Sciences, this was a harmful metaphysical conception which substituted ‘matter’ for the Hegelian ‘Mind’ or ‘Absolute Idea’. I considered it aberrant to believe, and to impose the belief, that one could directly deduce a science, and even Marxist–Leninist ideology and politics, from a direct application of the putative ‘laws’ of a supposed dialectic to the sciences and politics. I held that philosophy never intervenes directly, but only by way of ideology.

**What, in your view, were the political consequences of this position?**

I think that this philosophical imposture took a very heavy toll on the USSR. I do not think it would be any exaggeration to say that Stalin’s political strategy and the whole tragedy of Stalinism were, in part, based on ‘dialectical materialism’, a philosophical monstrosity designed to legitimize the regime and serve as its theoretical guarantee — with power imposing itself on intelligence.

Furthermore, it bears pointing out that Marx never used the term ‘dialectical materialism’, that ‘yellow logarithm’, as he liked to call theoretical absurdities.

It was Engels who, in particular circumstances, christened Marxist materialism ‘dialectical materialism’. Marx regretted his own failure to write twenty pages on the dialectic. All that he is known to have produced on this subject (besides the dialectical play of the concepts of the labour theory of value) is contained in this fine sentence: ‘The dialectic, which has usually served the powers-that-be, is also critical and revolutionary’. When the ‘laws’ of the dialectic are stated, it is conservative (Engels) or apologetic (Stalin). But when it is critical and revolutionary, the dialectic is extremely valuable. In this case, it is not possible to talk about the ‘laws’ of the dialectic, just as it is not possible to talk about the ‘laws’ of history.

A truly materialist conception of history implies that we abandon the idea that history is ruled and dominated by laws which it is enough to know and respect in order to triumph over anti-history.

**What did your theoretical and philosophical intervention in the Party consist of?**

I began looking, in the text of Capital, for what Marxist philosophy might well be, so that Marxism could be something other than the ‘famous formulas’, obscure or all too clear, which were endlessly quoted or recited without generating any real progress or, needless to add, any ‘self-criticism’.

**Were you able, without great risk, to interpret Marx’s ‘true’ theoretical thought in a party like the one you have described?**

Yes, I was, even if the Communist Party was very Stalinist, very hard, because the Party held Marx sacred. I proceeded somewhat — to compare great things with small — as Spinoza did when, in order to criticize the idealist philosophy of Descartes and the Schoolmen, he ‘set out from God Himself’. He began his demonstrations in the Ethics with absolute substance, that is, God, thus cornering his adversaries, who could not reject a philosophical intervention that invoked God’s omnipotence, since all of them, Descartes included, recognized it as an article of faith and a ‘self-evident truth’. For them, it was the fundamental Truth, revealed by men’s natural lights.

But, as Descartes too said, ‘every philosopher advances masked’.

Precisely, Spinoza simply interpreted this God as an ‘atheist’.

**What happened when you adopted this strategy?**

This strategy worked as I had expected: my Communist adversaries, both in the Party and in non-Communist Marxist circles, were unsparing with their virulent attacks, endlessly renewed, but utterly devoid of theoretical value. These attacks carried no weight — not merely from the standpoint of Marxism, but quite simply from a philosophical standpoint, that is, from the standpoint of authentic thought. It was on this narrow, unique, but fertile path that I first struck out; the result was the one I had been aiming for. I had clearly
adopted the only strategy possible at the time: a theoretical strategy that later gave rise (beginning with the Twenty-First and Twenty-Second Party Congresses, and in connection with, for example, the dictatorship of the proletariat) to directly political interventions. But now the Party could not expel me, because my directly political interventions were grounded in Marx, whom I interpreted in 'critical and revolutionary' fashion. Marx protected me even in the Party, thanks to his status as the 'sacrosanct Father of our thought'.

They never suspected anything?

I think they did. I know, in any case, that 'they' were terribly suspicious of me, that they kept me on the sidelines and even had me 'spied on' by students in the Communist Student Association at the École normale supérieure, where I taught; they were intrigued by the danger incarnated in this strange academic philosopher who dared to offer a different version of the formation of Marx's thought ... along with everything that implied. What is more, they suspected me of being a semi-secret, but very effective inspiration for the Maoist youth movement in France, which, in this period, developed in an original and spectacular way.

Marxist philosophy or aleatory materialism?

About your criticisms and questions: did you have an alternative to offer?

Not then, but I do now. I think that 'true' materialism, the materialism best suited to Marxism, is aleatory materialism, in the line of Epicurus and Democritus. Let me make it clear that this materialism is not a philosophy which must be elaborated in the form of a system in order to deserve the name 'philosophy'. There is no need to make it over into a system, even if that is not impossible. What is truly decisive about Marxism is that it represents a position in philosophy.

When you say 'system', do you mean a self-enclosed totality, in which everything is thought out in advance and nothing can be challenged without capsizing the whole?

Yes. But I want to emphasize that what constitutes a philosophy is not its demonstrative discourse or its discourse of legitimation. What defines it is its position (Greek thezis) on the philosophical battlefield (Kant's Kampfplatz); for or against such-and-such an existing philosophical position, or support for a new philosophical position.

Could you say something about Democritus and the worlds of Epicurus in order to make your notion of aleatory materialism clearer?

Yes, but first I would like to explain what has motivated my thinking about, precisely, Marxist philosophy over the last few years. I have come round to the idea that it is very difficult to talk about Marxist philosophy, just as it would be difficult to talk about a mathematical philosophy or a philosophy of physics, given that Marx's discovery was basically scientific in nature: it consisted in revealing the functioning of the capitalist system.

To that end, Marx relied on a philosophy – Hegel's – which was arguably not the one which best suited his objective ... or made it possible to think further. In any event, one cannot extrapolate from Marx's scientific discoveries to his philosophy. We, for our part, thought that he did not profess the philosophy which was actually contained in his research. This explains what we were doing in attempting to give Marx a philosophy that would make it possible to understand him: the philosophy of Capital, that of his economic, political and historical thought.

On this point, I believe that we missed the mark, in some sense, in as much as we failed to give Marx the philosophy that best suited his work. We gave him a philosophy dominated by 'the spirit of the times'; it was a philosophy of Bachelardian and structuralist inspiration, which, even if it accounts for various aspects of Marx's thought, cannot, in my opinion, be called Marxist philosophy.

Objectively, this philosophy made it possible to arrive at a coherent vision of Marx's thought. Too many of his texts contradict it, however, for us to be able to regard it as his philosophy. Moreover, on the basis of more recent research, such as that Jacques Bidet has published in his excellent Que faire du 'Capital?', we can see that Marx in fact never wholly freed himself of Hegel, even if he shifted to another terrain, that of science, and founded historical materialism on it.
Does that mean that the ‘rupture’ was never complete?

No, it never was. It was only tendential.

How, precisely, did you come to realize this?

As I have already said, Bidet’s research was decisive; it put Marx’s work in a new light. Bidet had access to a mass of material, including unpublished manuscripts, that we did not know of twenty years ago; this material is conclusive. A little while ago, Bidet came to see me and we had a long discussion.

What would you say today about Raymond Aron’s description of your work as an ‘imaginary Marxism’?

I would say that, in a certain sense, Aron was not altogether wrong. We fabricated an ‘imaginary’ philosophy for Marx, a philosophy that did not exist in his work – if one adheres scrupulously to the letter of his texts.

But, in that case, it could be said that very few authors manage to avoid the ‘imaginary’, especially when it is a question of something (such as philosophy in Marx’s work) which, if it exists, exists only in the latent state.

Perhaps. But, as far as we are concerned, I think that, after this instructive experience, we are faced with a new task: that of determining the type of philosophy which best corresponds to what Marx wrote in Capital.

Whatever it turns out to be, it will not be a ‘Marxist philosophy’. It will simply be a philosophy that takes its place in the history of philosophy. It will be capable of accounting for the conceptual discoveries that Marx puts to work in Capital, but it will not be a Marxist philosophy: it will be a philosophy for Marxism.

Had you not begun to develop this idea earlier? In Lenin and Philosophy, you declared that Marxism was not a new philosophy – at the heart of Marxist theory, you said, is a science – but that it involved, rather, a new practice of philosophy that could help to transform philosophy itself.

That’s right.

You had already begun to point out the paradox of Marxist philosophy in a lecture delivered in 1976 at the University of Granada, ‘The Transformation of Philosophy’. Marx thought, you said, that producing philosophy as ‘philosophy’, even in an oppositional form, was a way of entering into the adversary’s game, and helping to reinforce bourgeois ideology by validating its form of theoretical expression.

Exactly. It is to risk falling into the grip, in philosophy, of the party of the state, an institution Marx deeply distrusted. As for philosophy, it represents a form of unification of the dominant ideology. Both are caught up in the same mechanism of domination.

Is that not another of the reasons that help to explain why Marx refrained from producing philosophy as such, since, in a way, to produce ‘philosophy’ would have been tantamount to lapsing into the ‘glorification of the existing order of things’?

Bear in mind that when Marx thought about the form of the future state, he evoked a state conceived as a ‘non-state’ – in a word, a wholly new form which would induce its own disappearance. We can say the same of philosophy: what Marx sought was a ‘non-philosophy’ whose function of theoretical hegemony would disappear in order to make way for new forms of philosophical existence.

Does that not help us to bring out the paradox of a Marxist philosophy?

The paradox resided in the fact that Marx, who had been trained as a philosopher, refused to write philosophy; nevertheless, he shook all traditional philosophy to its foundations when he wrote the word ‘practice’ in the Second Thesis on Feuerbach. Thus, in writing Capital, a scientific, critical and political work, he practised the philosophy he never wrote.

By way of summary of what we have said so far, let us repeat that the task before us today is to work out, not a Marxist philosophy, but a philosophy for Marxism. My most recent thinking moves in this direction. I am looking, in the history of philosophy, for the elements that will enable us to account for what Marx thought and the form in which he thought it.

One last clarification: when I say that it is difficult to talk about Marxist philosophy, this should not be understood in a negative sense. There is no reason why every period should have its philosophy; nor
Do you consider aleatory materialism to be a possible philosophy for Marxism?

Yes, it tends in that direction. Now we can turn back to Democritus and to Epicurus’ worlds. Let us recall the main thesis: before the formation of the world, an infinity of atoms were falling parallel to each other in the void. This affirmation has powerful implications: (1) before there was a world, there existed absolutely nothing that was formed; and, at the same time, (2) all the elements of the world already existed in isolation, from all eternity, before any world ever was.

This implies that before the formation of the world, there was no meaning, neither cause nor end nor reason nor unreason. This is the negation of all teleology, whether rational, moral, political, or aesthetic. I would add that this materialism is the materialism, not of a subject (whether God or the proletariat), but of a process – without a subject – which dominates the order of its development, with no assignable end.

All this non-antiquity of Meaning is one of Epicurus’ basic theses, by virtue of which he stands opposed to both Plato and Aristotle.

Yes. Now the cliniamen supervenes: an infinitesimal declination that occurs no one knows where, or when, or how. The important thing is that the cliniamen causes an atom to ‘swerve’ in the course of its fall in the void, inducing an encounter with the atom next to it. . . and, from encounter to encounter – every time these encounters are lasting rather than ephemeral – a world is born.

Are we to conclude that the origin of every world or reality, of every necessity or meaning, is due to an aleatory swerve?

Absolutely. Epicurus postulates that the aleatory swerve, not Reason or the first Cause, is at the origin of the world. It must be understood, however, that the encounter creates nothing of the reality of the world, but endows the atoms themselves with their reality, which, without swerve and encounter, would be nothing but abstract elements lacking all consistency and existence. It is only once the world has been constituted that the reign of reason, necessity and meaning is established.

Can we think of any later philosophy that adopted these theses, rejecting the question of the Origin?

Heidegger comes to mind. Although he is neither an Epicurean nor an atomist, there is an analogous tendency in his thought. It is common knowledge that he rejects all question of the Origin, or of the Cause and End of the world. But we find in Heidegger a long series of developments revolving around the expression es gibt – ‘there is’, ‘this is what is given’ – which converge with Epicurus’ inspiration.

‘There is world and matter, there are people . . .’ A philosophy of the es gibt, of the ‘this is what is given’, makes short shrift of all the classical questions about the Origin, and so on. And it ‘opens on to’ a prospect that restores a kind of contingent transcendentality of the world, into which we are ‘thrown’, and of the meaning of the world, which in turn points to the opening up of Being, the original urge of Being, its ‘destining’, beyond which there is nothing to seek or to think. Thus the world is a ‘gift’ that we have been given.

A gift, it might be added, that we have neither chosen nor asked for, but which opens itself up to us in all its facticity and contingency.

Yes, but instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies.

My intention, here, is to insist on the existence of a materialist tradition that has not been recognized by the history of philosophy. That of Democritus, Epicurus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau (the Rousseau of the second Discourse), Marx and Heidegger, together with the categories that they defended: the void, the limit, the margin, the absence of a centre, the displacement of the centre to the margin (and vice versa), and freedom. A materialism of the encounter, of contingency – in sum, of aleatory, which is opposed even to the materialisms that have been recognized as such, including that
commonly attributed to Marx, Engels and Lenin, which, like every other materialism of the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is, a disguised form of idealism.

It is clearly because it represented a danger that the philosophical tradition has interpreted it and deflected it towards an *idealism of freedom*: if Epicurus' atoms, raining down in the void parallel to each other, encounter one another, it is so that we will recognize—in the swerve produced by the cliñamen—the existence of human freedom in the world of necessity itself.

*Could one say, then, that this philosophy, inasmuch as it rejects all notion of origin, takes as its point of departure ... nothingness [le néant]*?

Yes, precisely. It is a philosophy of the void which not only *says* that the void pre-exists the atoms which fall in it, but also creates the *philosophical void* [*fait le vide philosophique*] in order to endow itself with existence: a philosophy which, rather than setting out from the famous 'philosophical problems', begins by eliminating them and by refusing to endow itself with 'an object' ('philosophy has no object') in order to start from nothingness. We have then the primacy of nothingness over all form, the primacy of absence (there is no Origin) over presence. Is there a more radical critique of all philosophy, with its pretension to utter the truth about things?

*But then how, precisely, would you describe the position of aleatory materialism?*

On this subject, we can say that aleatory materialism postulates the primacy of materiality over everything else, including the aleatory: Materiality can be simply matter, but it is not necessarily brute matter. This materiality can differ quite sharply from the matter of the physicist or chemist, or of the worker who transforms metal or the land. It may be the materiality of an experimental set-up. Let me carry things to an extreme: it may be a mere trace, the materiality of the gesture which leaves a trace and is indiscernible from the trace that it leaves on the wall of a cave or a sheet of paper. Things go a very long way: Derrida has shown that the primacy of the trace (of writing) is to be found even in the phoneme produced by the speaking voice. The primacy of materiality is universal. This does not mean that the primacy of the infrastructure (mistakenly conceived as the sum of the material productive forces plus raw materials) is determinant in the last instance. The universality of this last notion is absurd unless it is brought into relation with the relations of production. 'It all depends', Marx writes in a passage of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* about whether the logically prior forms also come first historically. *It all depends*: an aleatory, not a dialectical phrase.

*Let us essay a translation: anything can be determinant 'in the last instance', which is to say that anything can dominate. That is what Marx said about politics in Athens and religion in Rome, in an implicit theory of the displacement of the dominant instance (something which Balibar and I attempted to theorize in *Reading Capital*). But, even in the superstructure, what is determinant is also its materiality. That is why I was so interested in bringing out the real materiality of every superstructure and every ideology ... as I showed with respect to the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). This is where the concept of the 'last instance' is to be sought, the displacement of materiality, which is always determinant 'in the last instance' in every concrete conjuncture.*

**The two histories**

*If, with your concept of 'aleatory materialism' in mind, we ask what the nature of an historical event is, do we not have to analyse it as the coexistence of histories that overdetermine each other?*

We can say that there are two types of history, two histories: to start with, the History of the traditional historians, ethnologists, sociologists and anthropologists who can talk about 'laws' of History because they consider only the accomplished fact of past history. History, in this case, presents itself as a wholly static object all of whose determinations can be studied like those of a physical object; it is an object that is dead because it is past. One might ask how else historians could react in the face of an accomplished, unalterable, petrified history from which one can draw determinant, deterministic statistics? It is here that we find the source of the spontaneous
ideology of the vulgar historians and sociologists, not to speak of the economists.

But is it possible to conceive of a different type of history?

Yes. There exists another word in German, Geschicht, which designates not accomplished history, but history in the present [au present], doubtless determined in large part, yet only in part, by the already accomplished past; for a history which is present, which is living, is also open to a future that is uncertain, unforeseeable, not yet accomplished, and therefore aleatory. Living history obeys only a constant (not a law): the constant of class struggle. Marx did not use the term ‘constant’, which I have taken from Lévi-Strauss, but an expression of genius: ‘tendential law’, capable of inflecting (but not contradicting) the primary tendential law, which means that a tendency does not possess the form or figure of a linear law, but that it can bifurcate under the impact of an encounter with another tendency, and so on ad infinitum. At each intersection the tendency can take a path that is unforeseeable because it is aleatory.

Could we sum this up by saying that present history is always that of a singular, aleatory conjunction?

Yes; and it is necessary to bear in mind that ‘conjunction’ means ‘conjunction’, that is, an aleatory encounter of elements – in part, existing elements, but also unforeseeable elements. Every conjunction is a singular case, as are all historical individualities, as is everything that exists.

That is why Popper, Lord Popper, never understood anything about the history of Marxism or psychoanalysis, for their objects belong not to accomplished history but to Geschichte, to living history, which is made of, and wells up out of, aleatory tendencies and the unconscious. This is a history whose forms have nothing to do with the determinism of physical laws.

It follows from this that what culminates in materialism, which is as old as the hills – the primacy of the friends of the Earth over the friends of the Forms, according to Plato – is aleatory materialism, required to think the openness of the world towards the event, the as-yet-unimaginable, and also all living practice, politics included.

... towards the event?

Wittgenstein says it superbly in the Tractatus: die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist, a superb sentence that is, however, hard to translate. We might try to render it as follows: ‘the world is everything that happens’; or, more literally, ‘the world is everything that befalls us’ [tome dessus]. There exists yet another translation, which has been proposed by Russell’s school: ‘the world is everything that is the case’ [‘the world is what the case is’].

This superb sentence says everything, for, in this world, there exists nothing but cases, situations, things that befall us without warning. The thesis that there exist only cases – that is to say, singular individuals wholly distinct from one another – is the basic thesis of nominalism.

Did Marx not say that nominalism was the antechamber of materialism?26

Precisely; and I would go still further. I would say that it is not merely the antechamber of materialism, but materialism itself.

Certain ethnologists have made a striking observation: that in the most primitive of observable societies, those of the Australian Aborigines or African Pygmies, nominalist philosophy seems to hold sway in person – not only at the level of thought, that is, of language, but also in practice, in reality. Conclusive recent studies have shown that, for these societies, there exist only singular entities, and each singularity, each particularity, is designated by a word that is equally singular. Thus the world consists exclusively of singular, unique objects, each with its own specific name and singular properties. ‘Here and now’, which, ultimately, cannot be named, but only pointed to, because words themselves are abstractions – we would have to be able to speak without words, that is, to show. This indicates the primacy of the gesture over the word, of the material trace over the sign.

This ‘pointing’, which appears as early as the Sophists, in Cratylus and Protagoras...

Of course; it can be said that philosophical nominalism is already to be found in Homer, Hesiod, the Sophists, and atomists such as Democritus and Epicurus, although it did not really begin to be
II

PHILOSOPHY–IDEOLOGY–POLITICS

Could you explain why you have put such emphasis on the triad philosophy–ideology–politics throughout your work?

I think it would be appropriate to begin my answer by discussing my conception of ‘philosophy’, of its emergence and function. Historically, philosophy emerged, in a sense, from religion, from which it inherited remarkable questions which were then converted into the great philosophical themes, albeit with different approaches and answers: the questions, for example, of the origin, end, or destiny of man, history and the world.

I nevertheless maintain that philosophy as such, philosophy in the strict sense, was constituted with the constitution of the first science, mathematics. This was no accident, since the constitution of mathematics marked, precisely, the transition from the empirical to the theoretical state. From this moment on, people began to reason in a different way about different objects: abstract objects.

Do you hold that philosophy could not have come into existence if a science had not existed first?

I do not think it could have, because philosophy took something of inestimable value from science: the model of rational abstraction that is indispensable to it.

In fact, philosophy came into being when mythological and religious ways of reasoning, moral exhortation and political or poetic eloquence were abandoned in favour of the forms of theoretical reasoning that are constitutive of science. In short, philosophy cannot appear unless there first exists a purely rational discourse, the model for which is to be found in the sciences.

What other characteristics have impressed its specificity upon philosophy over the course of its development?

Traditional philosophy assigned itself the irreplaceable historical task of speaking the Truth about everything: about the first causes and first principles of everything in existence, hence about everything that is knowable; about the ultimate purpose or destiny of man and the world. Hence it set itself up as the ‘Science’ of the totality, capable not only of providing the highest and most indubitable knowledge, but also of possessing Truth itself. This Truth is logos, origin, meaning…. Once the originary identity between logos and speech, between Truth and Discourse, has been posited, there exists, in this world, only one means of making Truth known: the discourse-form. For this reason, philosophy is absolutely incapable of foregoing its own discourse, which is the very presence of Truth as logos.

As for the composition/constitution of a philosophical system, there exist rigorous connections between all its theoretical elements, for example, its theses (or philosophical propositions) and categories. Could you explain what these are, and what their function is?

Thesis means ‘position’ in Greek. That is why a thesis calls forth its antithesis. As for categories, which are the most general concepts, the illustrations that come to mind are ‘substance’ and ‘subject’. The category of ‘subject’ is of special interest. Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, one finds, above all, the category of ‘subject’ used to account for a considerable number of ideologies and the corresponding practices. This category arose on the basis of juridical
ideology and commodity relations, in which each individual is the legal subject of his juridical capacities as an owner of property, and so on. The same category invades the realm of philosophy with Descartes (the 'subject' of the 'I think'), and, later, that of moral ideology with Kant (the subject of 'moral consciousness'). It had long since invaded the political realm with the 'political subject' of the social contract. This demonstrates one of the theses that we defend: philosophy 'works on' categories capable of unifying the encounter of the ideologies and the corresponding practices.

Philosophy: a battlefield

And the functioning of philosophy?

Without claiming to be exhaustive, I maintain that every philosophy reproduces within itself, in one way or another, the conflict in which it finds itself compromised and caught up in the outside world. Every philosophy bears within itself the spectre of its opposite: idealism contains the spectre of materialism, and vice versa.

You have often pointed out that Kant calls philosophy a 'battlefield' [Kampfplatz].

Yes. One of the goals of philosophy is to wage theoretical battle. That is why we can say that every thesis is always, by its very nature, an antithesis. A thesis is only ever put forward in opposition to another thesis, or in defence of a new one.

While we're on the subject of this theoretical battle, do you maintain that the philosophical field is divided into two great blocs or contending positions, materialism and idealism?

No. I think that, in any philosophy, one finds idealist and materialist elements, with one of the two tendencies dominating the other in a given philosophy. In other words, there is no radical, cut-and-dried division because, in philosophies described as idealist, we can come across materialist elements, and vice versa. What is certain is that no absolutely pure philosophy exists. What exists are tendencies.

Can you cite a philosopher to illustrate what you say?

Pascal is an interesting, because paradoxical, instance. By way of the religious problems that he raises, epistemological problems also appear, problems of the theory of the history of the sciences and a theory of social relations, so that we may affirm that he exhibits profoundly materialist features. I was surprised to see, rereading Pascal over the last few years, that, without realizing it, I had already borrowed a few philosophical ideas from him: the whole theory of ideology, of misrecognition and recognition, is to be found in Pascal. When I asked myself where this encounter with him began, I suddenly realized that the only book that I had read in the five years I was forced to spend in a German prisoner-of-war camp was Pascal's Pensées. In the interim, I had completely forgotten this.

Pascal has written surprising things about the history of the sciences. He was a great mathematician and a great physicist; he invented the adding machine; finally, he worked out a whole theory of the history of science.

We see here what you said a moment ago: every philosophy bears its own antagonist within itself.

Of course. Moreover, contradiction in philosophy is not contradiction between A and non-A, or between Yes and No. It is tendential. Hence it is traversed by tendencies. In reality, every philosophy is only the realization – more or less complete – of one of the two antagonistic tendencies, the idealist tendency and the materialist tendency. Outside each philosophy, what is realized is not the tendency, but the 'antagonistic contradiction' between the two tendencies.

How do you explain this?

This has to do with the very nature of philosophical war. When a philosophy sets out to occupy its adversary's positions, it is crucial that it 'capture' at least some of the enemy 'troops', that is to say, that it besiege its adversary's philosophical arguments. If one means to beat the enemy, one has first to know him, so that one can then take possession of not only his arms, troops and territory, but, above all, his arguments – for it is with their help that the great victories will be won.
I am reminded of a line from Goethe: ‘He who would know the enemy must go into the enemy’s territory.’

That’s right. Thus it is that every philosophy has to carry its defeated enemy within it in order to be able to constitute itself as a new philosophy. It can then parry all objections and attacks in advance, because it has already installed itself inside its enemy’s disposition and works on it, thereby modifying it, in order to carry out the task of absorbing and dominating its adversary. So it is that every philosophy of the idealist tendency necessarily contains materialist arguments, and vice versa. I repeat: there is no absolute purity. Even ‘Marxian’ materialist philosophy cannot claim to be exclusively ‘materialist’, because, if it were, it would have given up the fight, and abandoned, in advance, the idea of conquering the positions occupied by idealism.

What you say recalls Hobbes’s Leviathan, the state of perpetual war.

Yet this ‘philosophical war’ is not quite ‘the war of all against all’ in the seventeenth-century England discussed by Hobbes. It is a war not between individuals, but between philosophical conceptions, and therefore between the philosophical strategies that, in great political and cultural conjunctures, battle for philosophical hegemony in this or that country or continent, or, ultimately – now that the world has practically become one big economic totality – across the globe.

Is this related to your latest definition of philosophy as ‘class struggle in theory’?

Yes, as a theoretical form assumed by class struggle. But you have left out a crucial component of the definition: ‘in the last instance’.

This ‘in the last instance’ must not be forgotten, for I have never said that philosophy was purely and simply class struggle in theory. The reservation ‘in the last instance’ is there to indicate that that there are things in philosophy besides class struggle in theory. But it also indicates that philosophy does indeed represent class positions in theory, that is to say, in the relations it maintains with the most theoretical forms of the human practices and, through them, the most concrete forms of the human practices, class struggle included.... And I have shown that, in philosophy, class struggle takes the form of contradictions between theses and antitheses, between positions of the idealist tendency and others of the materialist tendency.

There is an example in the history of philosophy which proves that philosophy is, ‘in the last instance’, class struggle in theory. Take Kant’s terms, which I have already cited: philosophy is a battlefield. We see Kant setting out to construct a philosophy that is not polemical, not in a state of struggle. When Kant draws up the project of replacing the perpetual battle between philosophies with a ‘perpetual peace’, he does not evoke class struggle, yet he clearly recognizes the polemical nature, the agonistic nature, of any philosophy. In setting himself the goal of attaining a conflict-free philosophy, in perpetual peace, he recognizes – in the form of a denegation – the existence of a struggle in philosophy.

One last remark: in connection with the conflicts that philosophy has provoked in the course of its history, there appear margins or zones that can escape unequivocal determination by class struggle. Examples: certain areas of reflection on linguistics, epistemology, art, the religious sentiment, customs, folklore, and so on. This is to say that, within philosophy, there exist islands or ‘interstices’.

The ‘philosophy of the philosophers’ and materialist philosophy

To conclude on this subject, could you sum up the specific features that distinguish these two philosophical positions or tendencies?

Certainly. But when people say ‘philosophy’, they always mean traditional philosophy of the idealist tendency, the ‘philosophy of the philosophers’. This time, I shall take the materialist position in philosophy as my point of reference.

To talk about ‘materialism’ is to broach one of the most sensitive subjects in philosophy. The term ‘materialism’ belongs to the history of our philosophy, which was born in Greece, under Plato’s patronage and within his general problematic. It is in Plato that we find the primary, fundamental distinction between the ‘friends of the Forms’ and the ‘friends of the Earth’. Both terms in this pair are posited as essential to its constitution, in which each term commands the other.
Thus there exist friends of the Earth only because there exist friends of the Forms; and this distinction and this opposition are the work of the philosopher who inaugurates our philosophical history and considers himself a ‘friend of the Forms’ opposed to the ‘friends of the Earth’, among whom he ranges the empiricists, sceptics, sensualists and historians. It should nevertheless be pointed out that, in the pair of opposites idealism/materialism, idealism – inasmuch as it is the dominant tendency in all of Western philosophy – has become the basis on which the pair itself is founded and constructed.

When we set out from what Heidegger says about the domination of logocentrism over all of Western philosophy, this is not hard to explain: one can readily see that, every time it is a question of pronounced materialism in the history of our philosophy, the term ‘materialism’ reproduces as, so to speak, its negation and mirror opposite, the term ‘idealism’. Heidegger would say that idealism, just like materialism, obeys the ‘principle of reason’, that is, the principle according to which everything that exists, whether ideal [ideel] or material, is subject to the question of the reason for its existence.⁹

I would therefore say that, in the philosophical tradition, the evocation of materialism is the index of an exigency, a sign that idealism has to be rejected – yet without breaking free, without being able to break free, of the speculare pair idealism/materialism; hence it is an index, but, at the same time, a trap, because one does not break free of idealism by simply negating it, stating the opposite of idealism, or ‘standing it on its head’. We must therefore treat the term ‘materialism’ with suspicion: the word does not give us the thing, and, on closer inspection, most materialisms turn out to be inverted idealisms. Examples: the materialisms of the Enlightenment, as well as a few passages in Engels.

What other features might be said to characterize idealism considered as the opposite pole required by materialism?

We can recognize idealism, I think, by the fact that it is haunted by a single question which divides into two, since the principle of reason bears not only on the origin, but also on the end; indeed, the Origin always, and very naturally, refers to the End. We can go further still: the question of the Origin is a question that arises on the basis of the question of the End. Anticipating itself, the End (the meaning of the world, the meaning of its history, the ultimate purpose of the world and history) projects itself back on to and into the question of the Origin. The question of the Origin of anything whatsoever is always posed as a function of what one imagines to be its end. The question of the ‘radical origin of things’ (Leibniz)¹⁰ is always posed as a function of what one imagines to be their final destination, their End, whether it is a question of the Ends of Providence or of Utopia.

Have any philosophies escaped the idealism–materialism pair?

I would say that if certain philosophies escape this materialism–idealism pair, they can be recognized by the fact that they escape, or attempt to escape, questions of origin and end, that is, in the final analysis, the question of the End or Ends of the world and human history. These philosophies are ‘interesting’, for, in avoiding the trap, they express the exigency to abandon idealism and move towards what may be called (if you like) materialism, thus distinguishing themselves, I repeat, from every philosophy of Origin – whether it is a matter of Being, the Subject, Meaning or Telos – since they hold that these themes fall to religion and morality, but not to philosophy.

There are not many of these non-apologetic, truly non-religious philosophies in the history of philosophy: among the great philosophers, I can see only Epicurus, Spinoza, Marx, when he is well understood, Nietzsche and – Heidegger.

Refusing the radical origin as the philosophical bank of emission means that one also has to refuse the currency emitted by this bank in order to elaborate other categories, such as those of the dialectic.

I know that Spinoza is one of the philosophers whom you most admire – for, among other things, his contributions to the materialist position. I would like to ask you if you think that he escapes the temptation of Truth?

Yes, absolutely. Spinoza speaks, clinically, of the ‘true’, not Truth. He held that ‘the true is the index of itself and indicates the false’. It is the index of itself not as presence but as product, in a double sense:
(1) as the result of the labour of a process that discovers it, and (2) as proving itself in its very production.

With this immanent conception of Truth, then, Spinoza leaves the problem of the criterion of Truth to one side.

What is more, he rejects the questions of the Origin and the Subject which sustain theories of knowledge.

What other distinctive features might a materialist philosophy be said to display?

To begin with, it does not claim to be autonomous or to ground its own origin and its own power. Nor does it consider itself to be a science, and still less the Science of sciences. In this sense it is opposed to all positivism. In particular, it should be pointed out that it renounces the idea that it possesses the Truth.

Philosophy of a materialist tendency recognizes the existence of objective external reality, as well as its independence of the subject who perceives or knows this reality. It recognizes that being or the real exists and is anterior to its discovery, to the fact of being thought or known. In this connection, it is sometimes asked how we can be certain that philosophy is not the theoretical delirium of a social class in quest of a guarantee or rhetorical ornaments. Many amateur theoreticians have, in all that they have produced over the centuries, fashioned a philosophy out of their individual fantasies, delusions or subjective preferences—or, simply, out of their desire to theorize.

Can we not say, precisely, that the materialist position marks a radical turn from the philosophies of representation that continue the specular tradition of idealism, according to which we know only the ideas of things, not the things themselves?

One consequence follows from what we have said: materialist philosophies affirm the primacy of practice over theory. Practice, which is utterly foreign to the logos, is not Truth and is not reducible to—does not realize itself in—speech or seeing. Practice is a process of transformation which is always subject to its own conditions of existence and produces, not the Truth, but, rather, ‘truths’, or some truth [de la vérité]: the truth, let us say, of results or of knowledge, all within the field of its own conditions of existence. And while practice has agents, it nevertheless does not have a subject as the transcendental or ontological origin of its intention or project; nor does it have a Goal as the truth of its process. It is a process without a subject or Goal (taking ‘subject’ to mean an ahistorical element).

Thus practice shakes traditional philosophy to its foundations and enables us to begin to clarify what philosophy is, since practice is also rooted in the possibility of changing the world.

The irruption of practice is a denunciation of philosophy produced as ‘philosophy’. It categorically affirms—in the face of philosophy’s claim to embrace the entire set of social practices and ideas, to ‘see the whole’, as Plato said, in order to establish its dominion over these same practices—it categorically affirms, in the face of philosophy’s claim that it has no outside, that philosophy does indeed have an outside; more precisely, that it exists through and for this outside. This outside, which philosophy likes to imagine that it has brought under the sway of Truth, is practice, the social practices.

We have to grasp the radical nature of this critique in order to perceive its consequences. It flies in the face of the logos, that is, the representation of a supreme something called ‘the Truth’.

If the term ‘Truth’ is taken in its philosophical sense, from Plato to Hegel, and confronted with practice—a process without a subject or Goal, according to Marx—then it must be affirmed that there is no Truth of practice.

Practice is not a substitute for Truth for the purposes of an unshakeable philosophy; on the contrary, it is what shakes philosophy to its foundations; it is that other thing—whether in the form of the ‘variable cause’ of matter or in that of class struggle—which philosophy has never been able to master. It is that other thing which alone makes it possible not merely to shake philosophy to its foundations, but also to begin to see clearly just what philosophy is.

You said a moment ago that practice enables philosophy to acknowledge that it has an outside.

Yes. Hegel’s remark is well known: self-consciousness has a back, but doesn’t know it. This remark finds an echo in François Mauriac’s confession that, as a child, he didn’t think grown-ups had behinds.
The irruption of practice attacks philosophy from behind. We shall see how.

To have an outside is the same thing, it will be objected, as to have a behind. But having a ‘behind’ means having an outside that one doesn’t expect to. And philosophy doesn’t expect to.

Has philosophy not brought the totality of what exists within the compass of its thought? Even mud, said Socrates; even the slave, said Aristotle; even the accumulation of wealth at one pole, said Hegel, and dire poverty at the other.

From that point of view, everything is indeed contained within philosophy.

Where, we might ask, is the exterior space? Does the real world, the material world, not exist for all philosophies, even idealist philosophies? Why, then, are we levelling these groundless accusations against philosophy? In order to bring all practices within the compass of its thought, and in order to impose itself on them with the objective of announcing its Truth to them, philosophy cheats: when it assimilates them and reworks them in accordance with its own philosophical form, it hardly does so with scrupulous respect for the reality – the particular nature – of such social practices and ideas. Quite the contrary: in order to affirm its power of truth over them, philosophy must first subject them to a veritable transformation. How else can it adjust them all to, and think them all under, the unity of one and the same Truth? The ‘philosophers of philosophy’ who set out to master the world by means of thought have always exercised the violence of the concept, of the Begriff, of ‘seizure’ [de la mainmise]. They assert their power by bringing under the sway of the law of Truth (their truth) all the social practices of men, who continue to toil and to dwell in darkness.

This perspective is not foreign to some of our contemporaries.

Not, at any rate, to those who seek, and, as a matter of course, find the archetype of power [puissance] in philosophy, the model of all power [pouvoir]. They write the equation knowledge = power, declaring – modern, cultivated anarchists that they are – that violence, tyranny and state despotism are all Plato’s fault. In the same way, it used to be said, not so very long ago, that the Revolution was all Rousseau’s fault.

The best way to reply to them is to go further than they do into the nature of philosophy, always through the scandalous breach opened up by practice. This is where Marx’s influence is, perhaps, most profoundly felt.

Moreover, it must be borne in mind that power is not ‘power for power’s sake’, not even in politics; it is nothing but what one makes of it, that is, what it produces as its result. And if the philosopher is indeed ‘the man who sees the whole’, he sees it only for the purpose of putting it in order, that is, of imposing a determinate order on the elements of the whole.

A final difference from idealism is Marx’s concept of ‘unity’. It must not be supposed that there exists only one model of unity: the unity of a Substance, an Essence or an act, confused notions that are present in both mechanistic materialism and the idealism of consciousness. Marx’s unity is not the simple unity of a totality. The unity of which Marxism speaks is not the simple development of a unique essence or an originary, simple essence. It is the unity of complexity itself, which the mode of organization and articulation of complexity converts into unity. The complex whole has the unity of a structure articulated in dominance.

To conclude on this point, I would like to remind you of the ingenious illustration of the two tendencies that you once provided by drawing a humorous comparison with the passengers on a train.

Yes, I said that the idealist philosopher is a man who, when he catches a train, knows from the outset the station he will be leaving from and the one he will be arriving at; he knows the beginning [origin] and end of his route, just as he knows the origin and destiny of man, history and the world.

The materialist philosopher, in contrast, is a man who always catches ‘a moving train’, like the hero of an American Western. A train passes by in front of him: he can let it pass [passer] and nothing will happen [se passer] between him and the train; but he can also catch it as it moves. This philosopher knows neither Origin nor First
Principle nor destination. He boards the moving train and settles into an available seat or strolls through the carriages, chatting with the travellers. He witnesses, without having been able to predict it, everything that occurs in an unforeseen, aleatory way, gathering an infinite amount of information and making an infinite number of observations, as much of the train itself as of the passengers and the countryside which, through the window, he sees rolling by. In short, he records sequences (séquences) of aleatory encounters, not, like the idealist philosopher, ordered successions (conséquences) deduced from an Origin that is the foundation of all Meaning, or from an absolute First Principle or Cause.

Of course, our philosopher can conduct experiments on the successions (conséquences) of aleatory sequences that he has been able to observe, and can (like Hume) work out laws of succession, 'customary' laws or constants, that is, structured theoretical figures. These experiments will lead him to deduce univeral laws for each type of experiment, depending on the type of entities that served as its object: that is how the natural sciences proceed. Here we again encounter the term and function of 'universality'.

But what transpires when it is not a question of objects which repeat themselves indefinitely and on which experiments can be repeated and rerun by the scientific community from one end of the world to the other? (See Popper: 'A scientific experiment deserves the name when it can be indefinitely repeated under the same experimental conditions'.) Here the materialist philosopher-traveller, who is attentive to 'singular' cases, cannot state 'laws' about them, since such cases are singular/concrete/factual and are therefore not repeated, because they are unique. What he can do, as has been shown by Lévi-Strauss in connection with the cosmic myths of primitive societies, is to single out 'general constants' among the encounters he has observed, the 'variations' of which are capable of accounting for the singularity of the cases under consideration, and thus produce knowledge of the 'clinical' sort as well as ideological, political and social effects. Here we again find not the universality of laws (of the physical, mathematical or logical sort), but the generality of the constants which, by their variation, enable us to apprehend what is true of such-and-such a case.

The question of the functions of philosophy also arises here. Which of its functions do you consider the most important?

I will mention just a few. For example, that of serving as a guarantee or basis for the defence of certain theses that the philosopher needs in order to reflect on scientific discoveries or some other kind of event.

Another function of philosophy consists in tracing 'lines of demarcation' between the scientific and the ideological in order to free scientific practice of the ideological domination that impedes its progress.

Again, philosophy may be likened to a laboratory in which the ensemble of ideological elements are unified. In the past, religion played this unifying role; even earlier, the myths of primitive societies did. Religion contented itself with grand (ideological) Ideas such as the existence of God or the creation of the world; it used them to order all human activities and the corresponding ideologies, with a view to constituting the unified ideology that the classes in power needed to ensure their domination. There is, however, a limit: the dominant philosophy goes as far as it can in its role of unifier of the elements of ideology and the diverse ideologies, but it cannot 'leap over its time', as Hegel said, or 'transcend its class condition', as Marx said.

Philosophy fulfils another function in the political realm. Traditionally, it has played an apologetic, reactionary or revolutionary role with regard to the dominant political system, whether it has done so 'masked' or openly.

This connection to politics has been obvious since Plato – both at the theoretical level, in The Republic, and at the practical level, when he agreed to become the counsellor of the tyrant of Syracuse.

That's a good example. I think it is important to point out that, even when these philosophies adopted an apologetic stance vis-à-vis the authorities [le pouvoir], they attributed the dominant position, a position situated above everything else, to themselves, on the pretext that they were the guardians of the right arguments for upholding authority. The complicity involved here could be direct, but in the philosophical tradition, philosophy presented itself as the guardian of
Truth—until Marx, who allows us to put philosophy in its proper place. As such, it thought that the real power, in some sense, belonged to it: the power of knowledge.

Does philosophy act directly in the real world?

It may seem that philosophy inhabits a separate, remote world. Yet it acts, in a very special way: at a distance. It acts, by way of the ideologies, on real, concrete practices—such as the sciences, politics, the arts and even psychoanalysis. And, to the extent that it transforms the ideologies, which reflect the practices even while orientating them in a certain direction, these practices can be transformed in their turn, depending on the variations or revolutions in social relations. Philosophical theses do indeed produce many different effects on social practices.

Here we must emphasize the fact that antagonisms (I do not say ‘contradictions’, because I am suspicious of this category, which is used every which way) are inevitable. If there exist philosophies that oppose each other in antagonistic fashion, it is because antagonistic class practices exist—fortunately.

The last few questions will serve as our transition to the problem of philosophy’s relation to ideology. The connection you are making contradicts the traditional conception of philosophy as a self-contained, autonomous world standing above reality. Could you please say something more about this relationship between philosophy and ideology?

This is a subject on which I have been working for a long time, with an eye to elaborating a theory of ideology. But we ought first to explain what we mean by ‘ideology’.

We can do so by directly citing a few of the definitions of it that appear in your texts.

- ‘Ideology is necessarily a distorting representation of reality.’ ‘It is the imaginary representation that men make of their real conditions of existence.’
- ‘Ideology is a system of unified ideas that act on men’s consciousness.’
- ‘Ideology performs a social function: that of ensuring the cohesion of the members of a society.’

I would like to add two clarifications. First, man is so constituted that no human action is possible without language and thought. Consequently, there can be no human practice without a system of ideas (I would prefer to say a system of notions inscribed in words; this system thus constitutes the ideology of the corresponding practice). Second, I insist on the fact that an ideology is a system of notions only to the extent that it refers to a system of social relations. It is not a question of an idea produced by an individual imagination, but of a system of notions that can be projected socially, a projection that can constitute a corpus of socially established notions. Ideology begins only at this point. Beyond it lies the realm of the imaginary or of purely individual experience. One must, then, always refer to a social reality which is singular, unique and factual.

But could you explain how the ‘consciousness’ of a concrete individual can be ‘dominated’ by an ideological notion or a system of ideological notions?

I could begin by responding that this mechanism operates whenever a consciousness ‘recognizes’ these ideological notions to be ‘true’. But how does this recognition come about? We already know that it is not the mere presence of the true which causes it to be perceived as true. There is a paradox here. It is as if, when I believe in a notion (or a system of notions), I were not the one who recognizes it and, confronted by it, could say: ‘That’s it, there it is, and it’s true.’ On the contrary, it is ‘as if’, when I believe in an idea, it were the idea that dominated me and obliged me to recognize its existence and truth, through its presence. It is ‘as if’—the roles having been reversed—it were the idea that interpellated me, in person, and obliged me to recognize its truth. This is how the ideas that make up an ideology impose themselves violently, abruptly, on the ‘free consciousness’ of men: by interpellating individuals in such a way that they find themselves compelled ‘freely’ to recognize that these ideas are true—compelled to constitute themselves as ‘free’ subjects who are capable of recognizing the true wherever it is present, and of saying so, inwardly or outwardly, in the very form and content of the ideas constitutive of the ideology in question.

That is the basic mechanism of ideological practice, the precise mechanism that transforms individuals into subjects. Individuals are
always-already subjects, that is to say, always-already-subject to an ideology.

It follows from what you have just said that man is by nature an ideological being.

Absolutely, an ideological animal. I think that ideology has a transhistorical character, that it has always existed and always will exist. Its ‘content’ may change, but its function never will. If we go back to the beginning of time, we can see that man has always lived under the sway of ideological social relations.

So much for ideology ‘in general’, then. As early as 1970, however, you drew a distinction here, affirming that particular ideologies plainly do have a history, even if it is determined, in the last instance, by class struggle.

Granted; but I continued to maintain that ideology in general has no history. The theory of ideology concerns itself with that which is the hardest to understand and explain in any society: society's self-consciousness, the idea it forges of itself and the world. This is not a set of ideas about the world, but a clear representation of the world of ideas as a social product.

I am reminded of something that Robert Fossart once said to you on this point. Since the split in the international Communist movement (1961–70), the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the crisis of May 1968, it has become obvious that the ideological question has a certain autonomy and specificity. These events very clearly exposed the contradiction – or system of contradictions – of Marxism or the various Marxisms.

Indeed. Since then, it has become even harder to imagine that particular, regional ideologies have no history, whatever form they may have – religious, moral, juridical or political.

Finally, let me point out that it is not a question of observing society in so far as it produces or organizes, but, rather, in so far as it represents itself and its world, real or imaginary.

What can you tell us about the form of existence of ideology, the form in which it is materialized?

When we observe the social existence of ideologies, we see that they are inseparable from the institutions by means of which they are manifested, with their codes, languages, customs, rites and ceremonies.

We can affirm that it is in institutions such as the Church, School system, Family, Political Parties, Associations of Doctors or Lawyers, and so on, that the practical ideologies encounter their conditions and material forms of existence, their material support, or, more precisely, their material forms, since this corpus of ideas is inseparable from this system of institutions.

Can we say that the ideological apparatuses are a creation of the dominant class?

No. They existed earlier. What happens is that, under cover of the various social functions that objectively serve the purpose of social unity, these ideological apparatuses are invested and unified by the dominant ideology.

I would like to add a word about the dual nature of ideology. In reality, no ideology is purely arbitrary. It is always an index of real problems, albeit cloaked in a form of misrecognition and so necessarily illusory.

You have spoken of the ‘ideological subject’. What, precisely, do you mean?

I mean the subject considered as an effect of structures that precede and found its existence – considered, that is, as an individual subjected or determined by ideological social relations.

It is a fact that social reproduction is not realized exclusively on the basis of the reproduction of labour, but, rather, presupposes the fundamental intervention of the ideological. Let us take an example: a worker who goes to his workplace has already travelled a long road through the social conditions – individual or collective – that induce him to come, voluntarily or involuntarily, and offer his services in exchange for the purchase of his labour-power: time, energy, concentration, and so on. And although the material means of reproducing labour-power is wages, they do not suffice, as is well known. From his school years on, the worker has been ‘formed’ to conform to certain social norms that regulate behaviour: punctuality, efficiency, obedience, responsibility, family love and recognition of all forms of authority.
This formation presupposes subjection to the dominant ideology. In other words, he is a subject structurally subjected to the dominant – or non-dominant – ideology; that is to say, to a society’s hegemonic or subaltern norms and values.

Of course, the structure of subjection pre-exists the subject. When he is born, the conditions, institutions and apparatuses that will subject him already exist.

Precisely. There emerges a special relationship between ideology and the individual. It is established through the mechanism of interpellarion, the functioning of which subjects the individual to ideology, assigning him a social role that he recognizes as his. What is more, he cannot fail to accept this role.

The efficacy of his acceptance of this role is guaranteed by the mode in which the constitution of the subject as a social being operates. If he is to succeed in identifying with himself, the subject needs – in order to be constituted – to identify with an ‘other’ who is his peer [semblable]; he recognizes himself as existing through the existence of the other and through his identification with him. It would seem that ideology here functions as the image of the ‘other’, an image that has been brought into conformity, socially and familially [conformé socialement et famillement], with what the family/society expects of every individual who comes into the world, beginning in infancy. The child assumes this prefigured image as the only possible way he can exist as a social subject. This is what confers his individuality upon him. The individual/subject demands that he be recognized as an individuality and a unity, as a ‘someone’. But the ‘one’ (the subject) must be recognized by the ‘other’. It seems that one has a psychosocial need to identify with the ‘other’ in order to recognize oneself as existing.

Thus, in practice, individuals accomplish the roles and tasks that have been assigned them by the social image of the look-alike [semblable] with which they have identified, and on the basis of which the process of their constitution as social subjects has been initiated. The reproduction of the social relations of production is guaranteed in this way.

What has been said so far paves the way for an important theoretical advance, both because this approach to the question of individual behavior permeates the unconscious (which Freud left in the neutrality of ideological impartiality) with politics, and also because it takes us beyond psychologic-individualistic explanations of history. But does it not presuppose a determinism which treats the individual as an effect of the already existing structures that found his existence?

That is why one of the central concerns of our theory is somewhat to reduce the theoretical gap between the determining and the determined.

Using the whole set of your theoretical instruments, can we think the transformation of subjects not only at the level of self-consciousness, but also at that of the consciousness of reality and the need to transform it?

Yes. Otherwise there would be no change, and people would never take positions that challenge and oppose that which is established, that which is dominant. There would be no ‘revolutionary subjects’. But a subject is always an ideological subject. His ideology may change, shifting from the dominant ideology to a revolutionary ideology, but there will always be ideology, because ideology is the condition for the existence of individuals.

Why is it indispensable that the ideologies, taken together, receive their unity and orientation from philosophy, under the domination of categories such as truth?

To understand this, it is necessary, in Marx’s perspective, to bring into play what I shall call the political form of the existence of ideologies in the ensemble of social practices. It is necessary to bring class struggle and the concept of the ‘dominant ideology’ into play.

As we have known since Machiavelli, in order for the power of the dominant class to endure, this class must transform its power from one based on violence to one based on consent. By means of the free consent of its subjects, it has to obtain the obedience that it could neither attain nor maintain by force alone.

It holds violence in reserve, as a final resort. This is one of the objectives accomplished by the system – the contradictory system – of the ideologies.
Does the class that takes power immediately forge its own ideology, and does it succeed in imposing it as the dominant ideology?

No. Historical experience shows that it takes time – sometimes a long time – to do so. We have only to consider the case of the bourgeoisie, which needed five hundred years, from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth, to accomplish this. But we need to bear something else in mind here. It is not simply a question of fabricating a dominant ideology by decree because one is needed, nor simply of constituting one in the course of a long history of class struggle. A dominant ideology must be constructed on the basis of what already exists, starting out from the elements and regions of existing ideology and the legacy of a diverse and contradictory past, while passing through the surprises represented by the events that constantly surge up in science and politics. Amid the class struggle and its contradictions, it is a question of constituting an ideology to overcome all these contradictions, an ideology unified around the essential interests of the dominant class for the purpose of securing what Gramsci called its hegemony.

Let us return to the subject of the relation between philosophy, ideology and politics.

If we understand the reality of the dominant ideology in this way, we can grasp the characteristic function of philosophy. Philosophy is neither a gratuitous operation nor a speculative activity. The great philosophers had a very different conception of their mission. They knew that they were responding to the great practical political questions: how is one to orientate oneself in thought and politics? What should one do? What direction should one take? They even knew that these political questions were historical. They might have believed that they were eternal questions, but they knew that these questions were posed by the vital interests of the society on whose behalf they thought.

It seems to me – this is what Marx enables us to grasp – that it is impossible to understand the determinant task of philosophy except, first and foremost, in relation to the central question of hegemony, of the constitution of the dominant ideology.

In sum, the task which philosophy is assigned and delegated by the class struggle is that of helping to unify the ideologies in a dominant ideology, guardian of the Truth.

How does philosophy help to perform this task?

Precisely by proposing to think the theoretical conditions of possibility for the resolution of existing contradictions, and thus for the unification of the social practices and their ideology. This involves abstract labour, a labour of pure thought, pure theorization.

In carrying out the task of unifying the diversity of the practices and their ideologies – which it experiences as an internal necessity, although this task is assigned it by the great class conflicts and historical events – what does philosophy do? It produces a whole array of categories that serve to think and situate the different social practices under the ideologies. Philosophy produces a general problematic: that is, a manner of posing, and therefore resolving, any problem that may arise. Lastly, philosophy produces theoretical schemes or figures that serve as a means of overcoming contradiction, and as links for connecting the various elements of ideology. Moreover, it guarantees the Truth of this order, stated in a form that offers all the guarantees of a rational discourse.

It follows from all this that philosophy does not stand outside the world or outside historical conflicts or events.

Even in its most abstract form, that of the works of the great philosophers, philosophy is situated somewhere in the vicinity of the ideologies, as a kind of theoretical laboratory in which the fundamentally political problem of ideological hegemony – that is, the constitution of the dominant ideology – is experimentally put to the test, in the abstract. The work accomplished by the most abstract philosophers does not remain a dead letter: what philosophy has received from the class struggle as a demand, it gives back to it in the form of systems of thought which then work on the ideologies in order to transform and unify them.

Just as we can empirically observe the conditions of existence historically imposed on philosophy, so we can empirically observe philosophy's effects on the ideologies and social practices.

Could you cite a historical example?

Seventeenth-century French rationalism and Enlightenment philosophy, in which the results of the work of philosophical elaboration
passed into ideology and the social practices. These two phases of bourgeois philosophy are two constitutive moments of bourgeois ideology as a dominant ideology. It was constituted as a dominant ideology amid a struggle, in which philosophy played its role as theoretical cement for the unity of this ideology.

We are witnessing another case today, under the influence of Anglo-Saxon imperialism. A displacement of domination is underway. What dominates is no longer the theoretical vapidity of the ideologies of human rights, nor even bourgeois juridico-moral ideology, but — this shift began as early as 1850 — a neo-positivist, logicist, mathematicized ideology of Anglo-Saxon origin, laced with social biologism, pragmatism and behaviourism. From this standpoint, the truly dominant ideologies in actual practice (I do not mean dialectical materialism) are quite similar in the USSR and the United States.

In the present ideological conjuncture, our main task is to constitute the kernel of an authentic materialist ideology and of a philosophy that is correct, accurate [juste, correct], in order to facilitate the emergence of a progressive ideology.

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Notes

2. FM 21–2.
3. See p. 18 and note 24 on p. 152 above.
4. See p. 211 and note 3 on p. 248 above.
5. See p. 45 note 63 on p. 155 above.
9. See p. 170 and note 11 on p. 204 above.
10. See p. 174 and note 11 on p. 204 above.
13. Compare ‘QMT’ 9: ‘Spinoza ... discovers generic and not “general” constants.’ [Trans.]
14. A sociologist whose work on ideology was influenced by Althusser’s. He is the author of the multi-volume *La Société*. [Trans.]
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LOUIS ALTHUSSER

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