

How To Think With Our Bodies: Althusser's Theoretical Practice Revisited

Cómo pensar con nuestros cuerpos: la práctica teórica de Althusser revisitada

Panagiotis Sotiris

University of the Aegean (Grecia)

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to revisit Louis Althusser's notion of theoretical practice in order to suggest that this points to a highly original attempt to think knowledge not as something that has to do with a 'thinking consciousness' as traditional theories of knowledge suggest, but as a collective material process and practice. In this sense, we might say that we are thinking with our bodies rather than our minds. To that end we also revisit Michel Pêcheux's work and his conceptualisation of knowledge as a process without a subject, before returning to Althusser's call for a new materialist practice of philosophy.

KEY WORDS: Louis Althusser; theoretical practice; body; ideology; theories of knowledge, philosophy

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es revisar la noción de práctica teórica de Louis Althusser para sugerir que esta apunta a un intento muy original de pensar el conocimiento no como algo que tiene que ver con una «conciencia pensante», como sugieren las teorías tradicionales del conocimiento, sino como un proceso y una práctica materiales colectivos. En este sentido, podríamos decir que pensamos con nuestros cuerpos más que con nuestras mentes. Para ello, también revisamos el trabajo de Michel Pêcheux y su conceptualización del

conocimiento como un proceso sin sujeto, antes de volver a la petición de Althusser de una nueva práctica materialista de la filosofía

PALABRAS CLAVE: Louis Althusser; práctica teórica; cuerpo; ideología; teorías del conocimiento, filosofía

INTRODUCTION

At one point in his autobiography, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, Louis Althusser explains how he realised the importance of using his body and exercising. This might sound as not very original, but the phrasing of this experience is interesting.

“That is where I began to 'think' with my body, something which remains with me still. It was no longer a question of thinking distantly and passively by merely looking, but 'thinking' actively with my hands, through the unbounded interplay of all my muscles and bodily sensations. [...] When I 'came into contact with' Marxism, I subscribed to it with my body; not simply because it represented the radical critique of all 'speculative' illusions, but because it enabled me to establish a true relationship with plain reality, by way of that same critique of speculative illusions. It further allowed me thereafter to experience the same physical relationship *within thought itself* (both in terms of simple contact but above all by working on social or other dimensions of reality). In Marxism and Marxist *theory* I discovered a system of thought which acknowledged the primacy of the bodily activity, and labour over passive, speculative consciousness and I thought of this relationship as materialism itself” (Althusser 1992: 213-215).

Interestingly enough Althusser links this conception of ‘thinking with his body’ to his own later attempt to conceptualize the very notion of theoretical practice.

“I at last discovered the primacy of the body and of the hand as the agent of transformation of all matter. This enabled me to eradicate the internal division between my theoretical ideal, derived from my mother's desire, and my own desire which had acknowledged

and then realised physically my desire to exist for myself, to have my own true existence. It was not a matter of chance that every category within Marxism was conceived by me in terms of practice, and that I put forward the notion of 'theoretical practice', which enabled me to fulfil my desire for a compromise between speculative, theoretical desire (derived from my mother's desires) and my own desire which was obsessed less with the concept of practices than with my experience of and desire for real practice, for contact with (physical or social) reality, and for its transformation via labour (the worker) and action (politics)" (Althusser 1992: 215).

The same preoccupation with the body is evident in how, again in his autobiography, he describes how it was exactly this that he found in Spinoza, namely a highly original conception of a thinking body.

"What struck me the most, however, was Spinoza's theory of the body, of which the *mens* (wrongly translated both by the word soul and the word spirit) is the idea, itself wrongly conveyed by this term. Though we are ignorant of so many of the body's capacities, he thought of it as a *potentia*, both as a force (*fortitudo*) and as an opening on to the world (*generositas*), a disinterested gift. Later on, I came across a startling prefiguration of Freud's concept of the libido in this same theory, as well as of the theory of ambivalence. It was startling inasmuch as Spinoza to give only one example thought that fear was the same as its opposite hope, and that both were 'sad passions' and the opposite of the vitally expansive and joyful *conatus* of the body and the soul, which were as inseparable as the lips and the teeth" (Althusser 1992: 218).

And indeed Spinoza has this highly original conception of the relation between body and idea that puts primacy on the body.

"From these [propositions] we understand not only that the human Mind is united to the Body, but also what should be understood by the union of Mind and Body. But no one will be able to understand it adequately, *or* distinctly, unless he first knows adequately the nature of our Body" (Spinoza 1985: 457=458 [*Eth*, II, P 13, scholium]).

Spinoza's thinking of the relation of the body to the mind and the way he posits a certain primacy of the body to the mind –not in their difference but in their interconnection– is one of the most important aspects of his work.

“If something is common to, and peculiar to, the human Body and certain external bodies by which the human Body is usually affected, and is equally in the part and in the whole of each of them, its idea will also be adequate in the Mind” (Spinoza 1985: 474 [Eth II, P39]).

Moreover, we are all aware about all the endless debates on the body-mind problem (or, in more traditional philosophical terms, the body-soul problem) and the big tradition of dualisms of this sort. However, what I want to suggest is that we can see another tradition in philosophy. What one could describe, following in a certain way Arthur C. Danto, the body/body problem (Danto 1999), namely a conception that avoids any such dualism.

By this I do not point to the well-known naturalistic and physicalist references to thought being just a biological process. Not that I disagree with such positions, but such reductionist materialism does not solve the problem, since it does not point to the specific social materiality of thinking, or, to remain within the title of this article, of thinking with your proper body.

Consequently, the crucial question is not to reduce thinking and thought to brain physiological and biological activity – which in a certain sense it is – but to see the actual social materiality of thinking, namely to treat thinking as a process, or better a collective practice, that entails bodies in their constant social interaction.

This use of the reference to the body is similar to the way Michel Foucault opted to refer to it in the 1970s. The following well-known passage from the introduction of *Discipline and Punish*, encapsulates this point:

“But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected

body. This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order. That is to say, there may be a 'knowledge' of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body" (Foucault 1977:25-26).

When I talk about thinking with our bodies, I refer exactly to how Foucault suggested that instead of distinguishing human bodies and 'human subjects', it is better to think of productive bodies and subjected bodies, as they are shaped by necessary contradictory historical technologies of power. Another quote from Foucault, this time from the 1972-3 lectures on the punitive society, also points to this specific thinking of the body.

"What activated the great renewal of the epoch was a problem of bodies and materiality, it was a question of physics: a new form of materiality taken by the apparatus of production, a new type of contact between this apparatus and those who make it function; new requirements imposed on individuals as productive forces. The history of penalty at the beginning of the nineteenth century is not essentially a matter of a history of moral ideas; it is a chapter in the history of the body. Or let's say, putting it differently, that by interrogating moral ideas on the basis of penal practice and institutions we discover that the evolution of morality is, above all, the history of the body, the history of bodies" (Foucault 2015: 261).

ALTHUSSER'S THEORETICAL PRACTICE REVISITED

I would like to suggest that it is here that we encounter the importance of Althusser's conceptualization of theoretical practice. Although Althusser would indeed later point self-critically to a certain idealistically tainted theoreticism (Althusser 1976), I believe that Althusser's thinking of theoretical practice, beginning with its original formulation in 1963, remains a materialist conception of thinking, avoiding both dualism and naturalist reductionism.

The first crucial point that Althusser raised is that when thinking about theoretical practice, we must first examine the very notion of practice. Practice for Althusser is not simply some version of praxis as expression or materialization or acting out of some subjectivity. Practice is a material production process. This is evident in the first definition of practice he offers in 1963:

“By *practice* in general I shall mean any process of *transformation* of determinate given raw material into a determinate *product*, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of 'production'). In any practice thus conceived, the *determinant* moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the *labour of transformation* itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilizing the means. This general definition of practice covers the possibility of particularity: there are different practices which are really distinct, even though they belong organically to the same complex totality. Thus, 'social practice', the complex unity of the practices existing in a determinate society, contains a large number of distinct practices. This complex unity of 'social practice' is structured, we shall soon see how, in such a way that in the last resort the determinant practice in it is the practice of transformation of a given nature (raw material) into useful *products* by the activity of living men working through the *methodically organized* employment of determinate *means of production* within the framework of determinate relations of production. As well as production social practice includes other essential levels: political practice -- which in Marxist parties is no longer spontaneous but organized on the basis of the scientific theory of historical materialism, and which transforms its raw materials: social relations, into a determinate product (new social relations); ideological practice (ideology, whether religious, political, moral, legal or artistic, also transforms its object: men's 'consciousness'); and finally, *theoretical practice*” (Althusser 1969: 165-166).

But what is the particular character of theory as practice? What kind of material process are we talking about? It is a material process of rupture with ideology that ends up producing knowledge.

“So a practice of theory does exist; theory is a specific practice which acts on its own object and ends in its own *product*: a *knowledge*. Considered in itself, any theoretical work presupposes a given raw material and some 'means of production' (the concepts of the 'theory' and the way they are used: the method). The raw material worked by theoretical labour may be very 'ideological' if the science is just coming into being; where an already constituted and developed science is concerned, it may be material that has already been elaborated theoretically, concepts which have already been formed. Very schematically, we may say that the means of theoretical labour, which are an absolute condition of its existence -- 'theory' and method -- represent the 'active side' of theoretical practice, the determinant moment of the process. The knowledge of the process of this theoretical practice in its generality, that is, as the specified form or real difference of the practice, itself a specified form of the general process of transformation, of the 'development of things', constitutes a first theoretical elaboration of Theory, that is, of the materialist dialectic” (Althusser 1969: 173).

If knowledge is a production process, this has serious consequences. Concrete reality, as really known concrete reality, is not the starting point of the process of knowledge, but the result of a production process. The real, as knowledge, as known real, as concrete in thought, is not the beginning but the outcome, in sharp contrast to any empiricist conception. Althusser's starting point is a paragraph from Marx's 1857 *Introduction*.

“It would seem right to start with the real and concrete, with the actual presupposition, e.g. in political economy to start with the population, which forms the basis and the subject of the whole social act of production. Closer consideration shows, however, that this is wrong. Population is an abstraction if, for instance, one disregards the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn remain an empty phrase if one does not know the elements on which they are based, e.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price, etc. If one were to start with population, it would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and through closer definition one would arrive analytically at increasingly simple concepts; from the imagined concrete, one would move to more and more tenuous abstractions until one arrived at the simplest determinations. From

there it would be necessary to make a return journey until one finally arrived once more at population, which this time would be not a chaotic conception of a whole, but a rich totality of many determinations and relations. [...] The concrete is concrete because it is a synthesis of many determinations, thus a unity of the diverse. In thinking, it therefore appears as a process of summing-up, as a result, not as the starting point, although it is the real starting point, and thus also the starting point of perception and conception. The first procedure attenuates the comprehensive visualisation to abstract determinations, the second leads from abstract determinations by way of thinking to the reproduction of the concrete" (*MECW* 28: 37-38).

Obviously, Althusser does not deny in principle the existence of reality. There is indeed 'something out there.' What Althusser is discussing, is how we *know* it. What is the practice, the production process, that produces the real as concrete in thought. It is in this sense that the concrete is at the end of a process, not at the beginning. Moreover, this conception of a production process is also important in another way. It points to how we think with our bodies. By this I mean that the traditional structure of classical theories of knowledge, is mainly about the encounter between an object and a subject. But this confrontation between an object and a subject is at the basis of all classical body-mind dualisms, both in their rationalist and empiricist variations. The crucial question is how to decentre the 'subject', or, to be more precise, to decentre this supposed encounter between a subject and an object towards a conception of the process of knowledge, a process that is not simply about a subject, or a 'mind' appropriating reality. This decentring is performed by Althusser's suggestion that the starting point of any production process of knowledges is not the concrete, is not 'reality', is not 'looking for "facts"'. The starting process is a process of transformation.

In contrast to an empiricist conceptualisation of the knowledge as encounter between facts and the knowing subjects, Althusser insists that we are always dealing with 'Generalities', not with facts turned into generalisation. In this first definition of theoretical practice, Althusser described *Generalities I*, the starting point, as pre-existing scientific concepts and ideological elements. This shows how this process is by definition a social process, since the terrain of the formation of these pre-existing ideological or pre-scientific 'Generalities' is indeed social, it has to do with social interaction.

The reason that knowledge could be better described as a production process, is that it is a process of transformation, of elaboration. The means of production are '*Generalities II*', namely scientific concepts, concepts that

enable a break with ideology, an epistemological break, thus leading to the production of '*Generalities III*', which represent scientific knowledge, the concrete in thought.

“This first generality (which I shall call *Generality I*) constitutes the raw material that the science's theoretical practice will transform into specified 'concepts', that is, into that other 'concrete' generality (which I shall call *Generality III*) which is a knowledge. But what, then, is Generality I, that is, the raw material on which the labour of science is expended? Contrary to the ideological illusions -- illusions which are not 'naïve', not mere 'aberrations', but necessary and well-founded as ideologies -- of empiricism or sensualism, a science never works on an existence whose essence is pure immediacy and singularity ('sensations' or 'individuals'). It always works on something 'general', even if this has the form of a 'fact'. At its moment of constitution, as for physics with Galileo and for the science of the evolution of social formations (historical materialism) with Marx, a science always works on existing concepts, '*Vorstellungen*', that is, a preliminary Generality I of an ideological nature. It does not 'work' on a purely objective 'given', that of pure and absolute 'facts'. On the contrary, its particular labour consists of *elaborating its own scientific facts* through a critique of the *ideological 'facts'* elaborated by an earlier ideological theoretical practice. To elaborate its own specific 'facts' is simultaneously to elaborate its own 'theory', since a scientific fact -- and not the self-styled pure phenomenon -- can only be identified in the field of a theoretical practice. In the development of an already constituted science, the latter works on a raw material (Generality I) constituted either of still ideological concepts, or of scientific 'facts', or of already scientifically elaborated concepts which belong nevertheless to an earlier phase of the science (an ex-Generality III). So, it is by transforming this Generality I into a Generality III (knowledge) that the science works and produces” (Althusser 1969: 182-184).

For Althusser this is a very special kind of a specific social production process:

“(1) There is never an identity of essence between Generality I and Generality III, but always a real transformation, either by the transformation of an ideological generality into a scientific

generality (a mutation which is reflected in the form Bachelard, for example, calls an 'epistemological break'); or by the production of a new scientific generality which rejects the old one even as it 'englobes' it, that is, defines its 'relativity' and the (subordinate) limits of its validity.

(2) The work whereby Generality I becomes Generality III, that is -
 - abstracting from the essential differences that distinguish Generality I and Generality III -- whereby the 'abstract' becomes the 'concrete', only involves the process of theoretical practice, that is, it all takes place 'within knowledge'" (Althusser 1969: 185).

The 'within knowledge' part looks like a reference to something taking place only within theory, and this would seem to justify a reading that would treat it as a variety of idealistic theoreticism. However, I want to insist that the crucial aspect is that it is a *process*, which is not individual, but collective and social. Althusser's emphasis on the 'the qualitative discontinuity that intervenes or appears between the different generalities (I, II and III)' (Althusser 1969: 189) points to a process of transformation beyond the traditional categories of 'theories of knowledge.' At the same time, Althusser always attempts to draw a line of demarcation between knowledge and reality that has nothing to do with the traditional opposition between essence and appearance. And in *Reading Capital* Althusser even points at Marx making the mistake of treating this distinction in terms of an essence-phenomena relation.

"In his search for a concept with which to think the remarkable reality of the effectivity of a structure on its elements, Marx often slipped into the really almost inevitable use of the *classical* opposition between *essence* and *phenomenon*, adopting its ambiguities by force rather than merit, and *transposing the epistemological difference between the knowledge of a reality and that reality itself* into reality in the form of the '*inside and the outside*', of the real, of the '*real movement and the apparent movement*' of the '*intimate essence*' and its concrete, phenomenal determinations, perceived and manipulated by subjects" (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 190-191).

This distancing between knowledge as the outcome of a material process and reality might sound like a kind of idealism as well, but for Althusser this was his way of avoiding another idealism, one that would suggest a direct relation of a subject to reality, which would then be a version of a very traditional

mind-body idealism. In contrast, this distinction between knowledge and reality enables thinking knowledge as a material process of transformation. It is a complex process within which objects of knowledge are constituted, and it is also an uneven process, because in some instances even where objects of knowledge are constituted, the crucial conceptual tools are absent, because necessary concepts are yet to be produced.

“What made the mistake of political economy possible does indeed affect the *transformation of the object* of its oversight. What political economy does not see is not a pre-existing object which it could have seen but did not see -- but an object which it produced itself in its operation of knowledge and which did not pre-exist it: precisely the production itself, which is identical with the object. What political economy does not see is what it *does*: its production of a new answer without a question, and simultaneously the production of a new latent question contained by default in this new answer. Through the lacunary terms of its new answer political economy produced a new question, but '*unwittingly*'. It made '*a complete change in the terms of the*' original '*problem*', and thereby produced a new problem, but without knowing it. Far from knowing it, it remained convinced that it was still on the terrain of the old problem, whereas it has '*unwittingly changed terrain*'. Its blindness and its '*oversight*' lie in this misunderstanding, between what it produces and what it sees, in this '*substitution*', which Marx elsewhere calls a '*play on words*' (*Wortspiel*) that is necessarily impenetrable for its author” (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 24).

That is why Althusser insists on how knowledge is beyond simply 'seeing,' the real. This is important since visibility – and in turn non visibility – is the most traditional way of picturing the knowledge process in terms of a 'thinking mind'.

“This opens the way to an understanding of the determination of the *visible* as visible, and conjointly, of the invisible as invisible, and of the organic link binding the invisible to the visible. Any object or problem situated on the terrain and within the horizon, i.e., in the definite structured field of the theoretical problematic of a given theoretical discipline, is visible. We must take these words literally. The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual subject, endowed with the faculty of 'vision' which he exercises

either attentively or distractedly; the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems. Vision then loses the religious privileges of divine reading: It is no more than a reflection of the immanent necessity that ties an object or problem to its conditions of existence, which lie in the conditions of its production. It is literally no longer the eye (the mind's eye) of a subject which *sees* what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which *sees itself* in the objects or problems it defines -- sighting being merely the necessary reflection of the field on its objects. (This no doubt explains a 'substitution' in the classical philosophies of vision, which are very embarrassed by *having* to say *both* that the light of vision comes from the eye, *and* that it comes from the object.)" (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p.25).

Consequently, the change in theoretical problematic cannot be seen as a form of a subjective decision or change. In contrast, Althusser has an immanentist conception of knowledge production as a contingent outcome of the very structuring of the terrain where the supposed object of knowledge is. Ontologically, real process and process of knowledge of this real process are distinct but not different. They belong to the same 'plane of immanence' to use a Deleuzian metaphor (Deleuze and Guattari 1994), in this case that of bodies in their social interaction.

"To see this invisible, to see these 'oversights', to identify the lacunae in the fullness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text, we need something quite different from an acute or attentive gaze; we need an *informed* gaze, a new gaze, itself produced by a reflection of the 'change of terrain' on the exercise of vision, in which Marx pictures the transformation of the problematic. Here I take this transformation for a fact, without any claim to analyse the mechanism that unleashed it and completed it. The fact that this '*change of terrain*' which produces as its effect this metamorphosis in the gaze, was itself only produced in very specific, complex and often dramatic conditions; that it is absolutely irreducible to the idealist myth of a mental decision to change 'view-points'; that it brings into play a whole process that the subject's sighting, far from producing, merely reflects in its own place; that in this process of real transformation of the means of production of knowledge, the claims of a 'constitutive subject' are as vain as are the claims of the subject of vision in the production of the visible; that the whole

process takes place in the dialectical crisis of the mutation of a theoretical structure in which the 'subject' plays, not the part it believes it is playing, but the part which is assigned to it by the mechanism of the process – all these are questions that cannot be studied here. It is enough to remember that the subject must have occupied its new place in the new terrain, in other, words that the subject must already, even partly unwittingly, have been installed in this new terrain, for it to be possible to apply to the old invisible the informed gaze that will make that invisible visible. Marx can see what escaped Smith's gaze because he has already occupied this new terrain which, in what new answers it had produced, had nevertheless been produced though unwittingly, by the old problematic” (Althusser 1970: 27-28).

This insistence on both the distinction between knowledge and reality and on them being part of the same plane of immanence, is also something that Althusser takes from Spinoza. This rejection of dualisms that does not end up as another variation of a reductionist monism, is one of the main Spinozist influences on Althusser.

Althusser considers any form theory of knowledge that is based on such a subject-object relation as empiricism. This points to an idiosyncratic conceptualization of empiricism, one that includes what we traditionally describe as empiricism, as rationalism and also some forms of realism.

“The empiricist conception of knowledge presents a process that takes place between a given object and a given subject. At this level, the status of this subject (psychological, historical, or otherwise) and of this object (discontinuous or continuous, mobile or fixed) is not very important. This status only affects the precise definition of the *variants* of the basic problematic, while the basic problematic itself is all that concerns us here. The subject and object, which are given and hence pre-date the process of knowledge, already define a certain fundamental theoretical field, but one which cannot yet in this state be pronounced *empiricist*. What defines it as such is the nature of the process of knowledge, in other words a certain relationship that defines knowledge as such, as a function of the *real object* of which it is said to be the knowledge” (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 35).

Moreover, Althusser suggested that such an empiricist conception is also based on a very particular ‘essence – phenomena’ ontological distinction. The

‘real object’ must in a certain way be structured in such a dualist ontological basis in order to be known by a ‘subject’, knowledge has to be *‘inscribed in the structure of the real object’*, in the form of the difference between the inessential and the essence [...] *This investment of knowledge, conceived as a real part of the real object, in the real structure of the real object, is what constitutes the specific problematic of the empiricist conception of knowledge.*’ (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 38)

In such a perspective the ‘knowing subject’ is a product of a very specific terrain of social relations, of a collective material practice.

“This system of theoretical production -- a material as well as a 'spiritual' system, whose practice is founded on and articulated to the existing economic, political and ideological practices which directly or indirectly provide it with the essentials of its 'raw materials' -- has a determinate objective reality. This determinate reality is what defines the roles and functions of the 'thought' of particular individuals, who can only 'think' the 'problems' already actually or potentially posed; hence it is also what sets to work their 'thought power' as the structure of an economic mode of production *sets to work* the labour power of its immediate producers, but according to its own peculiar mode. Far from being an essence opposed to the material world, the faculty of a 'pure' transcendental subject or 'absolute consciousness', i.e., the myth that idealism produces as a myth in which to recognize and establish itself, 'thought is a peculiar real system, established on and articulated to the real world of a given historical society which maintains determinate relations with nature, a *specific* system, defined by the conditions of its existence and practice, i.e., by a *peculiar structure*, a determinate type of 'combination' (*Verbindung*) between its peculiar raw material (the object of theoretical practice), its peculiar means of production and its relations with the other structures society” (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 42).

Also of great importance is the fact that Althusser did not propose, as part of his conceptualisation of theoretical practice, a traditional theory of knowledge, because he is discussing neither the ‘origin’ of knowledge, nor the guarantees of adequate knowledge and scientificity. It is a theory of the ‘mode of production’ of knowledge, not of what is the ‘truth’ of a statement. In Althusser’s words, it’s the mechanism, not the conditions that should interest us.

“When we pose the question of the *mechanism* by which the *object* of knowledge produces the cognitive appropriation of the *real object*, we are posing a quite different question from that of the conditions of the *production* of knowledge. This latter question is derived from a theory of the history of theoretical practice, which, as we have seen, is only possible given the application of the concepts which enable us to think the structure of that practice and the history of its transformations. The question we are posing is a new one, one which is precisely passed over in silence in the other. The theory of the history of knowledge or theory of the history of theoretical practice enables us to understand *how* human knowledges are produced in the history of the succession of different modes of production, first in the form of ideology, then in the form of science. It makes us spectators of the emergence of knowledges, their development, their diversification, the theoretical ruptures and upheavals within the problematic that governs their production, and of the progressive erection, in their domain, of a division between ideological knowledges and scientific knowledges, etc. At each moment of the history of knowledges this history takes knowledges for *what they are*, whether they declare themselves knowledges or not, whether they are ideological or scientific, etc.: for *knowledges*. It considers them solely as *products*, as results. This history really does enable us to understand the mechanism of the production of knowledges, but, given a knowledge existing at a given moment in the process of the history of its production, it does not enable us to understand the *mechanism* by which the knowledge considered fulfils its function as a cognitive appropriation of the real object by means of its thought object for whoever is handling it as knowledge. But it is precisely this *mechanism* which interests us” (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 61).

Consequently, Althusser, avoids a theory of the guarantees of knowledge, thus offering a radically novel way to rethink the question of knowledge. Instead of a theory of guarantees of truth and knowledge, we have a theory of the ‘knowledge effect’.

“Unlike the ‘theory of knowledge’ of ideological philosophy, I am not trying to pronounce some *de jure* (or *de facto*) *guarantee* which will assure us that we really do know what we know, and that we can relate this harmony to a certain connection between Subject

and Object, Consciousness and the World. I am trying to elucidate the *mechanism* which explains to us how a *de facto* result, produced by the history of knowledge, i.e., a given determinate knowledge, functions *as a knowledge*, and not as some other result (a hammer, a symphony, a sermon, a political slogan, etc.). I am therefore trying to define its specific effect: the knowledge effect, by an understanding of its *mechanism*. If this question has been properly put, protected from all the ideologies that still weigh us down, i.e., outside the field of the ideological concepts by which the 'problem of knowledge' is usually posed, it will lead us to the question of the mechanism by which forms of order determined by the system of the existing object of knowledge, produce, by the action of their relation to that system, the knowledge effect considered. This last question confronts us definitively with the *differential* nature of *scientific discourse*, i.e., with the specific nature of a discourse which cannot be maintained as a discourse except by reference to what is present as absence in each moment of its order: the constitutive system of its object, which, in order to exist as a system, requires the absent presence of the scientific discourse that 'develops' it" (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 68-69).

ALTHUSSER'S SELF-CRITICISM AND THEORETICAL PRACTICE

Althusser would later be more self-critical of his writings on a potential Theory of theoretical practice (Althusser 1976). However, he would not change position on theoretical practice, or on the position that knowledge is the outcome of a particular practice, conceived as a process of transformation and production, or on the anti-empiricist position that knowledge is not about extracting the real or 'gathering facts' but about conceptual transformations that produce concepts and notions that constitute objects of knowledge. What he abandoned was the idea of a Theory of this theoretical production process, conceived as a 'science of sciences', a position that would indeed very similar to the guaranteeing role that traditional philosophical theories of knowledge claimed for themselves. In contrast, Althusser would opt for a different theoretical status for philosophy, treating as more interventionist theoretical practice, one that does not produce knowledge of any kind and which mainly shifts the relations of forces between the ideological and the scientific inside scientific practice, an operation by definition political, '*in the last instance class struggle in the field of theory*' (Althusser 1976: 37).

However, Althusser would continue to defend a certain conception of theoretical practice and this idea that although in general terms the ‘concrete’ is the starting point, in fact it is always through the addition of concepts and abstractions that there is knowledge. In a manuscript from the 1970s, written as an ‘initiation to philosophy for non-philosophers’, this is more than evident.

“Yet the peculiarity of abstraction is to be something other than part of the concrete, since abstraction *adds* something to the concrete. What does it add? *The generality of a relation* (linguistic, legal, social, ideological) that concerns the concrete. Better: *this relation dominates the concrete without the latter’s knowledge, and it is this relation that constitutes the concrete as concrete*” (Althusser 2017: 57).

At the same time, Althusser in the 1970s would insist more on the primacy of practice of theory. As Althusser stressed in the same posthumously published manuscript:

“The fact that the primacy of practice over theory can be thus formulated in terms of movement, precipitation, stimulation and prolongation is crucial to breaking with the idealist opposition between theory and practice, which merely serves to isolate scientists and philosophers from ordinary people in order to entrust the former (and them alone: the theorists) with the possession, maintenance and dissemination of a Truth beyond the ken of simple ‘practitioners’, who are just barely good enough to come under the authority of this Truth” (Althusser 2017: 66).

It is in the same manuscript that Althusser attempted to return to a general definition of practice. He insists that practice both the aspect of Aristotle’s *poiesis* and of *praxis* and suggests that ‘the word ‘practice’ to designate *a social process that puts agents into active contact with the real and produces results of social utility*,’ (Althusser 2017: 81) but insists we proceed in this manner only on the condition that we ‘recognize *the existence of distinct, relatively autonomous social practices*.’ (Althusser 2017: 88)

Althusser maintained his position that scientific practice is a ‘process’. But in the 1970s he also made an important addition. It is a ‘process without a subject’. This is a notion that Althusser introduced in his texts on Lenin and Philosophy in 1968 (Althusser 1971). In these texts he insisted that what Marx took from Hegel was the notion of the process, but in a strictly anti-

teleological sense: history is a process without subject and End(s). Now this view is projected upon scientific practice. For Althusser, the researcher:

“is an agent of a process that goes beyond him, not its subject, that is, its origin or creator. The process of the practice – that is to say, of scientific production – is thus a ‘process without a subject’. This does not mean that it can dispense with the researcher’s labour-power or his intelligence, talent, etc.; it means that this process is subject to objective laws which also determine the agent’s – the scientific researcher’s – nature and role” (Althusser 2017: 102).

For Althusser, this is a structured and relational process and is by ideological and philosophical relations.

“A close look reveals that these relations are extraordinarily complex. The phenomena of experimental validation take place under the domination of these relations, which strictly define their conditions. The relations of theoretical production are not, however, the only ones to come into play; philosophical relations and ideological relations do as well. If idealist philosophers’ way of depicting the relations between philosophy and the sciences is mistaken, if these philosophers are mistaken, in particular, when they say that philosophy defines the elements of every scientific theory, they are not mistaken when they include philosophical and even ideological relations among the relations of scientific production” (Althusser 2017: 104).

But what is the peculiar transformation process taking point in theoretical practice? Althusser in 1963 pointed to theoretical practice already working on ‘generalities’, what in 1975-76 and the manuscript on the initiation to philosophy we already discussed, was also described as ‘abstractions’ linked to specific practices. In 1963 Althusser insisted that ‘Generalities I’ are mainly ideological conceptualizations. However, at that earlier stage Althusser did not have a fully developed theory of ideology. He more or less treated the ‘ideological’ as the opposite of ‘scientific’ and the vocabulary he used for ideology as ‘a matter of *lived* relation between men and their real condition of existence’ (Althusser 1969: 223), or as ‘imaginary relations between them and their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser 1969: 234), was still descriptive and tentative. This will be transformed into a more complex theorization of ideology in his 1969 manuscript on ideology from which the famous 1970 article came (Althusser 2014). Althusser would there

propose certain specific positions: The first is that 'Ideology represents individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence'. (Althusser 2014: 181). It is important to stress that here ideology represents an imaginary relation to real conditions, namely real relations. The second is that 'Ideology has a material existence' (Althusser 2014: 188). Material existence points to practices, rituals and Ideological Apparatuses of the State. But to that he added another dimension: 'Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects' (Althusser 2014: 188), which points to how ideology permeates all aspects of life. One might say that human beings are ideological animals *par excellence*.

I believe this is a very important point. Althusser points here to the specificity of human beings. It is much better that giving emphasis just to the symbolic aspect of human communication as *differentia specifica*, or to language, or to cognition and some form of 'self-consciousness' (the latter being repeatedly invoked in the debates about the possibility of a 'true' artificial intelligence). The specificity of human beings has to do with how ideology combines all these elements (language, representation, the symbolic, cognition) with social determination in social forms that traversed by antagonisms. Moreover, in a complete decentring of traditional philosophical imagery, subjectivity, instead of being 'primary' (cf. 'I think therefore I am'), becomes 'secondary', the result of ideological interpellation, that is of social processes.

Such a conception of ideology also offers a much better definition of 'Generalities I', than simply the 'before' of science. It is not simply falsity or *doxa*. It includes practical 'knowledges', lived experiences, traditions, stereotypes, but also aspirations, desires, even practical insights. Above all, it is not subjective, it is practical, inscribed in practice and rituals and reproduced by them, exemplified in Althusser invocation of Pascal: 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe' (Althusser 2014: 186). The only analogy can be found with Spinoza's first kind of knowledge.

"From what has been said above, it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions:

I. from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for [5] the intellect (see P29C); for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience;

II. from signs, e.g., from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things (P18S). These [10] two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination” (Spinoza 1985: 477-478 [*E*, II, P40, Sch 2]).

What is also important is Althusser’s repeated insistence on two points. The first is that ideology has no ‘outside’. This points to how our entire ‘lived’ experience is embedded in ideology, traversed by ideology, ‘lived’ *in* ideology. The other is that ideology has nothing but an outside. This points to how ideology is in fact the outcome of social practices, radical differences, class antagonisms, and political conflicts. Everything that ideology ‘incorporates’ obviously comes from outside of ideology. And this is very important because it points to how there is never a total ideological subjection, despite human beings being always already totally immersed in ideology. In this sense, ideology is never a fixed or closed structure. Rather it is always traversed by tensions, conflicting dynamics, gaps and silences.

THE TENTATIVE RUPTURE WITH IDEOLOGY

I think that it is here that we can see in what sense theoretical practice is transformation of this always pre-existing terrain of ideology and in certain moments ‘epistemological break’. This points to how it cannot be conceived as simple subjective insight. One might say that the ‘scientific’ emerges, in Althusser’s conceptualization and especially after the elaboration of the theory of ideology, not as the ‘true’ against the ‘false’, but rather as a tension and tentative (but never complete...) rupture inside the ideological (and in this sense a tension or rupture *of* the ideological), in a never-ending process, that has all the elements of a process without a subject and End.

This also points to how theoretical practice and in particular scientific practice is dependent upon and conditioned by a broader theoretical and ideological conjuncture, in its turn over-determined by the broader conjuncture of class struggle. Here is how Michel Pêcheux, one of Althusser’s students, but also one of the most creative linguists of his generation and a pioneer of discourse analysis, attempted to theorize this in the 1970s.

“I shall say that the specific material objectivity of the complex of theoretical ideologies constituting a given epistemological field lies

precisely in the relationships of unevenness-subordination which assign to each element (notions, representations, procedures, methods, etc.) of that field a determinate role in which are combined, each time .in specific forms, the character of *epistemological obstacle* and that of *raw material* or *instrument*, in different 'doses', such that certain elements constitute, at a given moment, pure obstacles, and others *the focal points of a transformation of the field* (the points where 'things are moving' and those where 'they're stuck'). This leads me to posit that, for a given 'scientific continent', every epistemological event (the break inaugurating a science, the 'discovery' and production of knowledges, 'recastings', etc.) is inscribed in a conjuncture historically determined by the state of the relationships of unevenness-subordination I have just evoked: there was no pre-epistemological 'stage' in which 'men' confronted the world in a state of complete ignorance, there was no epistemological 'state of nature' -or innocence" (Pêcheux 1982: 135-136).

What is also very important, is how Pêcheux attempts to describe the specificity of the process of the emergence of a new scientific 'paradigm' in terms of a process without a subject, exactly because it is not a subjective discovery but rather a complex, uneven and over-determined collective material practice. Moreover, it is important how scientific thinking is for Pêcheux the kind of thinking which at least tentatively 'excludes' the subject. Not only scientific knowledge is the outcome of a process without a subject, but it also represents the tentative cognitive reappropriation of a material process, namely a process without a subject. In his own words, it is

"a thought from which any subject is absent as such, so that the concepts of a science as such do not strictly speaking have a meaning, but rather a function in a process. 'Paradox' of a discourse and a construction (experimental devices) without a subject which, from the point of view that concerns us, and taking into account what has already been put forward, results in the realisation that in the conceptual process of knowledge, the determination of the real (the 'exterior') and its necessity, a necessity independent of thought, is materialised in the form of an articulated body of concepts which at once exhibits and suspends the 'blind' action of this same determination as subject-effect (centring-origin-meaning), i.e., as interior without exterior- or to which the exterior is subordinate produced by the determination of the real ('exterior')

and specifically by the determination of interdiscourse as real ('exterior')” (Pêcheux 1982: 137).

Both Althusser and Pêcheux repeatedly stressed that there no practice without a subject, but this does not mean that any practice is the practice *of* a subject, *of* its action, thinking, volition, decision (even if actions, thoughts, volitions and decisions are involved). The notion of the subject involved here is this ideological idea of a sovereign, self-sufficient and primary subject. In contrast, what we are dealing with is how we end up with the subject as produced, as outcome, as result. And it is very interesting how Michel Pêcheux attempted to also think what an antagonistic form of subjectivity (one conscious of its determination and overdetermination) would be. Althusser refers to this as the possibility of 'bad subjects', but he did not elaborate much. In contrast, in Pêcheux we have at least some hints, since for him in the case of 'bad subject',

“the *subject of enunciation* 'turns against' *the universal subject* by 'taking up a position' which now consists of a *separation* (distantiation, doubt, interrogation, challenge, revolt ...) *with respect to what the 'universal Subject' 'gives him to think':* a struggle against ideological evidentness on the terrain of that evidentness, an evidentness with a negative sign, reversed in its own terrain. The reversal leaves linguistic traces: '*what you call* the oil crisis', '*your* social sciences', '*your* Virgin Mary' (as one might say '*your* hangup!'), etc. [...] In short, the subject, a 'bad subject', a 'trouble-maker', *counteridentifies* with the discursive formation imposed on him by 'interdiscourse' as external determination of his subjective interiority, which produces the philosophical and political forms of *the discourse-against*” (Pêcheux 1982: 157).

However, even this is not enough. For Pêcheux this 'counter-identification' with ideological discourse is still the first step 'bad subjects' should make. There is also another more crucial step, that of disidentification. This modality of the relation of subject and discourse is

“characterised by the fact that it integrates *the effects of the sciences and of proletarian political practice on the subject-form*, effects which take the form of a *disidentification*, i.e., of the *taking up of a non-subjective position*: this disidentification is the corollary of the fact already mentioned that scientific concepts do not have 'a meaning' graspable in the operation of a discursive formation, which implies at the same time that, as concepts, they

have no corresponding 'representations'.[...] Let me add that this is equally true, and for reasons I have already explained, for the 'political organisations of a new type' which constitute what I have called historical devices of experimentation-transformation" (Pêcheux 1982: 158).

Consequently, for Pêcheux,

"Dis-identification (and the resulting non-subjective takings of positions) is effected paradoxically in the subject by a subjective process of appropriation of scientific concepts (representation of necessity-real in necessity-thought), a process in which ideological interpellation continues to operate, but as it were against itself.

Thus the production of knowledges consists of the transformation of ideological 'raw material' into materialist objectivities *through the development of new ideologies and new forms of ideological interpellation*" (Pêcheux 1982: 195).

THINKING WITH OUR BODIES

This points to how a conceptualization of theoretical practice as process without a subject along with a theory of ideology and the terrain for the formation of what we traditionally call 'subjectivity', remains indispensable in any attempt to rethink the production of knowledges in a non-metaphysical manner as a material social process, as a process where we collectively think with our bodies in their constant social interaction, a process that has not to do with 'ideas' or 'minds', or any other dualistic conception of intelligibility, but with the social relations and antagonisms and the particular manner they traverse ideology as a specifically social material terrain of practices, rituals and apparatuses. This means treating thinking as a social process, neither subjective nor individual, even if it includes individual subjects. It also suggests that to understand this particular social interaction of thinking bodies that theoretical practice is, it is important to actually 'decentre' the whole process and move beyond any thinking of 'subject-object' or 'mind-problem' relation. What we have is a social process, a kind of a permanent, never-ending but also never-complete tension and rupture within the terrain of ideology, one that is based on how the ideological is traversed by the realities of production, class struggle, and desire, a tension that imposes the emergence of new discursive formations, new concepts and notions, that enable the collective cognitive

reappropriation of elements of reality, in a process where the very materiality of the real process tentatively manages to impose itself on the evidentness of the ideological.

It is in this sense that we are not thinking with our 'minds' but with our bodies: our socialised and socially disciplined productive bodies, our subjected (and subsequently subjectified) bodies, our sexualized and fantasized bodies, our constantly interacting and constantly struggling bodies.

And this is important for two reasons. On the one hand, it suggests how to exit a dualist metaphysical logic and engage more with the social and –in the last instance– political character of thinking in general and of theoretical practice in particular. This points to the possibility of a different way to rethink epistemology and engage in it.

The other is that it also points to the possibility not only of non ideological theoretical political practice, but also of non ideological mass political practice, namely the question of the production of 'bad subjects', or of militant subjects. Althusser pointed to that direction and attempted to rethink it as the possibility of an informed and educated mass proletarian ideology, one that would still 'ideological' in its discursive structure, yet transformed and emancipatory. As he would formulate it in the 1976 'Note on the ISAs':

"The working class, for its part, recognizes itself - even if it is receptive to elements of religious, moral and legal ideology - above all in an ideology of a political kind: not in bourgeois political ideology (class domination), but in proletarian political ideology, that of the class struggle for the abolition of classes and the construction of communism. It is precisely this ideology, a spontaneous ideology in its earliest forms (utopian socialism) and, later, after the fusion of the workers' movement with Marxist theory, an informed ideology, which constitutes the 'kernel' of proletarian ideology" (Althusser 2014: 228-229).

It was in this sense that Althusser pointed to the antagonistic character of proletarian ideology after its encounter with Marxism and the communist movement.

"The conditions of existence, the (productive and political) practices and forms of the proletarian class struggle have nothing to do with the conditions of existence, the (economic and political)

practices and forms of the capitalist and imperialist class struggle. This gives rise to antagonistic ideologies, which, like the (bourgeois and proletarian) class struggles themselves, are unequal. This means that proletarian ideology is not the direct opposite, inversion, or reversal of bourgeois ideology - but an altogether different ideology that is the bearer of different, 'critical and revolutionary' 'values'. It is because proletarian ideology is, all the vicissitudes of its history notwithstanding, already the bearer of such values, which are already realized in the organizations and practices of workers' struggle, that that ideology prefigures what the Ideological State Apparatuses of the transition to socialism will be and, for that very reason, also prefigures the abolition of the state and Ideological State Apparatuses under communism" (Althusser 2014: 231).

In a similar manner, for Pêcheux this points to both an antagonistic practice of politics and new forms of political practice of the working class and of 'organisations of a new type'.

"That is why the proletarian struggle *inside* the ideological state apparatuses is at the same time also a struggle *against* their structure and their operation, in so far as the subjective appropriation of proletarian politics paradoxically implies, as we have seen, a disidentification, linked to a subjective transformation in imputation, representation and meaning: the relationship to history as a process, to the masses making history and to the Communist Party as a political organisation of a new type, cannot be a relationship of identification (compare Althusser's remark as to the impossibility of designating the masses 'subject' by saying 'that's it!'), because this relationship tends to abolish the link of representation dividing representatives from those represented (cf. on this point the disidentificatory operation of a mass demonstration)" (Pêcheux 1982: 170).

And what about philosophy? What's philosophy's role in this rethinking of theoretical practice. We all know very well that Althusser was very self-critical of the way he attempted to define a 'Theory of theoretical practice' and also of the way he suggested that this philosophy, which resembled the ambition of a 'science of sciences', was already existing in a practical form in Marx's theoretical revolution in *Capital*. He thought that this was a form of 'theoreticism' and in contrast to it he would proceed with a profound rethinking of the very notion of philosophy and in particular materialist philosophy, which he considered to be not a 'theory' that produces

knowledges and 'truths' but rather a form of practical intervention, a political intervention in theory that 'in the last instance' represented class struggle in theory. This was indeed a rather 'negative' and 'deconstructing' role for materialist philosophy, or, as he formulated it, a new materialist practice of philosophy, one that would constantly redraw the line of demarcation between materialism and idealism within specific theoretical (but also social and political) conjunctures, leaving no trace other than that this constantly shifting and under perpetual renegotiation line of demarcation.

But there is at least one text by Althusser that points to a different more positive conception of this new practice of philosophy. This is the famous lecture on 'The Transformation of Philosophy.' The first point that Althusser raises is that Marx had the same distrust of both the State and Philosophy, in the sense of a traditional practice of philosophy.

"It is quite possible that Marx always had the same distrust of philosophy and the State (for the reasons that connect traditional philosophy with the State and caused him to foresee the abolition of the State). In no way did this involve an anarchist rejection of the State, despite certain affinities between Marx and the anarchists; nor, by the same token, did it involve a rejection of philosophy. On the contrary, it involved a profound mistrust of an institution - the State - and a form of unification of the dominant ideology - philosophy - which appeared to Marx to be profoundly linked, in so far as both are involved in the same mechanism of bourgeois class domination. For my part, I believe that this is why Marx abstained from all philosophy produced as 'philosophy': in order not to fall into the 'glorification of the existing order of things'" (Althusser 1990: 264).

And this was the major challenge: not only new political forms and institutions but also a new practice of philosophy.

"If this is true, Marx has bequeathed Marxists (cruelly instructed by the counter-experience of Stalinist ontology) an especially difficult undertaking. Just as he left the workers' movement with the task of inventing new forms of 'commune' that would convert the State into something superfluous, so Marx left Marxist philosophers with the task of inventing new forms of philosophical intervention to hasten the end of bourgeois ideological hegemony. In sum: the task of inventing a new practice of philosophy" (Althusser 1990: 264).

And this for Althusser meant a philosophy that could be a non-philosophy in an analogy with the non-state of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

“To support our argument by comparison with the revolutionary State, which ought to be a State that is a 'non-State' - that is, a State tending to its own dissolution, to be replaced by forms of free association - one might equally say that the philosophy which obsessed Marx, Lenin and Gramsci ought to be a 'non-philosophy' - that is, one which ceases to be produced in the form of a philosophy, whose function of theoretical hegemony will disappear in order to make way for new forms of philosophical existence. And just as the free association of workers ought, according to Marx, to replace the State so as to play a totally different role from that of the State (not one of violence and repression), so it can be said that the new forms of philosophical existence linked to the future of these free associations will cease to have as their essential function the constitution of the dominant ideology, with all the compromises and exploitation that accompany it, in order to promote the liberation and free exercise of social practices and human ideas” (Althusser 1990: 264-265).

What is needed is a new – and overtly political – practice of philosophy that would help the liberation of subaltern collective practices.

“And as with the perspectives on the State, the task assigned Marxist philosophy is not one for the distant future. It is an undertaking for the present, for which Marxists ought to be prepared. Marx was the first to show us the way by putting philosophy into practice in a new and disconcerting form, refusing to produce a philosophy as 'philosophy' but practising it in his political, critical and scientific work - in short, inaugurating a new, 'critical and revolutionary' relation between philosophy and the social practices, which are at one and the same time the stakes and the privileged site of class struggle. This new practice of philosophy serves the proletarian class struggle without imposing upon it an oppressive ideological unity (we know where that oppression has its roots), but rather creating for it the ideological conditions for the liberation and free development of social practices” (Althusser 1990: 265).

In a certain sense, this is the challenge that we are still facing today, if we really want to engage in this thinking with our militant and agonistic bodies, as part of our struggle for social emancipation.

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Panagiotis Sotiris es profesor asistente en la Universidad del Egeo (Grecia) y es miembro del consejo editorial de la revista *Historical Materialism*. Doctor en Filosofía, es autor de distintos trabajos sobre Althusser, Gramsci y los problemas de la filosofía, la política y la hegemonía en la tradición marxista. panagiotis.sotiris@gmail.com