

Red years

Althusser's lesson, Rancière's error and the real movement of history

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The dissolution of the organizational forms which are created by the movement, and which disappear when the movement ends, does not reflect the weakness of the movement, but rather its strength. The time of false battles is over. The only conflict that appears real is the one that leads to the destruction of capitalism.

François Martin and Jean Barrot (aka Gilles Dauvé),
Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement (1973)

'The return to Marx': today the erstwhile slogan of Althusserian theory is once again our watchword. *Why Marx Was Right* (Eagleton 2011); *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Harvey 2011); *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (Jameson 2011). A cursory scan of some recent publications will tell us that once again we are Reading *Capital*.

So it seems an auspicious moment for the long-overdue publication in English of Jacques Rancière's first book, *Althusser's Lesson* (1974), a searing polemic against his former mentor.¹ Over a decade after the inception of Althusser's return to Marx – and Rancière's formative participation in its theoretical programme – Rancière asks after the political effects of the Althusserianism in the wake of May '68 and the Red Years that followed. His answer, argued in a prose crackling with the heat of its times, is that Althusserianism had come to function as 'a philosophy of order': a Kautskyist apology for the division of political labour, an opportunistic affirmation of the academic hierarchy of roles and intellects, a reactionary theoretical orthodoxy. By the time the French edition of his *Reply to John Lewis* was published in 1973, Althusser's philosophy had become a discourse which 'cloaks its consecration of the existing order in the language of revolution' (AL 124). The goal of *Althusser's Lesson* was thus to put this discourse in its place:

to re-inscribe it in its history, that is, in the system of practical and discursive constraints that allowed it to be uttered at all; and to surprise its articulations by forcing it to answer other questions than those posed by the complacent partners it had picked out for itself, and by reinserting its argumentation into the concatenation of words used, now as in the past, to articulate both the inevitability of oppression and the hopes for liberation. (AL 123)

If this was Rancière's task in 1973, then the translation of his book in 2011 provides an opportunity not only to reconsider the place of Althusser's thought today but also to carry out a similar critical operation upon Rancière's own discourse – and to do so as we begin to assess the political effects of another return to Marx under different circumstances.²

Rancière's critique was prompted by a specific theoretical–political conjuncture, five years after May '68. On the one hand, the 1973 occupation and self-management of the Lip watch factory in Besançon marked, for Rancière, the high point of an ongoing effort to push forward the consequences of the French May. On the other hand, the publication of Althusser's *Reply* the same year – its defence of his anti-humanism under the banner of a Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy – signified a belated effort to reassert the ruined mastery of an exhausted discourse. 'At the precise moment when we were singing in Besançon that nothing would ever again be the same, we found ourselves being forced to face our illusions. Apparently, when it came to Marxist discourse, everything was exactly the same as before' (AL xx). *Althusser's Lesson* is Rancière's effort to insist upon what exactly could not be the same in the relation between theory and politics after May '68.

Today, debates developing within the political context in which Rancière was writing *against* Althusser – debates concerning discrepant traditions of left communism, the ultra-left, council communism, self-organization, and so on – are once again

at the forefront of communist theory. Of particular interest in this respect is a surge of interest in theories of *communization* as these have developed in France since the early 1970s, through the work of Gilles Dauvé and the group Théorie Communiste (TC) in particular.³ Renewed engagements with this current of communist theory by groups and publications such as *Aufheben* (UK), *Riff-Raff* (Sweden), *TPTG* and *Blau-machen* (Greece), or *Endnotes* (UK/USA) suggests a renewed practico-theoretical grasp of communism not as an ‘idea’ but as exactly what Marx said it was: the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.⁴

If this context returns us to the period in which Rancière’s critique of Althusser was written, how might it bear upon the position he stakes out in his text? What can we learn concerning the relation between theory and politics via Rancière’s critique of Althusser’s institutional commitments to the Party and the university? What is the relation between Althusser’s return to Marx and the return to Marx today? How can a re-engagement with Rancière’s first book help us to situate the limitations of his own political thought with regard to such questions?

My goal here is not to adjudicate a theoretical controversy between proper names or even theoretical orientations – a controversy now some forty years past. To lay my cards on the table: I am a sympathetic reader of Althusser who thinks that Rancière’s critique was more or less ‘right’ and that the consequences he drew from it were largely ‘wrong’. My interest is not in pointing out, with the benefit of hindsight, how different consequences *could have* been drawn, but rather in specifying how, within the context from which Rancière was writing, different consequences *were* being drawn, by others. So if I engage this controversy today, the point is not to defend Althusser, criticize Rancière or sift theoretical minutia. Rather, I want to situate their break within a certain historical, political and theoretical *movement* which unfolds unevenly between several years – 1965 (*For Marx*; *Reading Capital*); 1968 (the French May); 1973 (*Reply to John Lewis*; *Althusser’s Lesson*; the Lip conflict) – and which traces a circuitous path to the present.⁵ I want to traverse a chiasmus cutting across the Red Years by tracking the encounter of ‘Althusser’ and ‘Rancière’ as it divides into discrepant trajectories. And I want to elucidate the manner in which the traces of those trajectories can be read in relation to the theoretical and practical energies of the present moment, as the years of the twenty-first century bleed into red.

Althusser’s opportunism

Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary practice. We have repeated this sentence over and over again, thinking it might set our minds at ease. But now we must heed the lesson taught by the Cultural Revolution and the ideological revolt of the students: cut off from revolutionary practice, there is no revolutionary theory that is not transformed into its opposite. (AL 154)

This is how Rancière concludes his 1969 essay ‘On the Theory of Ideology: Althusser’s Politics’, included as an appendix to *Althusser’s Lesson*. It is this *transformation* of Althusserian theory which Rancière’s book studies at greater length. The basic point of the book is simple: Althusserianism had seemed radical; now we know it is not. What had been an internal challenge to the PCF has become an apology for the role of the intellectual within the Party. What had been a conduit to Mao is now not Maoist enough. What had inspired the young now makes us old. What had ‘led more than one person to the toils of combat’ had ‘died on the barricades of May ’68, along with many other ideas from the past’ (AL xix, xx).

But the hither side of the reactionary transformation of Althusserianism is, of course, Rancière’s own political transformation. The subtext of *Althusser’s Lesson* – sometimes submerged, sometimes rising to the surface – is self-criticism. But this self-criticism has its own subtext: like Althusser’s self-criticism, it is shadowed by implied self-congratulation. Althusserianism changed for the worse by remaining the same; Rancière lives out the radicality it promised by changing with the times. Althusserian theory was transformed by its static severance from practice; Rancière was transformed by the toils of combat. Althusserian theory died on the barricades of May ’68; Rancière’s theoretical vocation rises from its ashes. Althusserianism changed by remaining anchored to the Party and the university; Rancière changed by revolting against his place within the institutional hierarchy of knowledge. Althusserianism betrays its Maoism by failing to heed the lesson of the Cultural Revolution; Rancière affirms the Maoism it betrayed by wielding this lesson against his professor. Althusserianism becomes increasingly infantile the older it gets; Rancière grows up by recognizing the political maturity of the students. Althusserianism becomes reactionary by remaining Althusserian; the revolt against the *dispositif* of the university has taught Rancière to align himself with Foucault.

This double subtext – self-criticism shadowed by self-congratulation – makes things less simple. The

complication is that Rancière has to show the subversive current that allowed Althusserianism, at first, to deceive; but he also needs to establish that it has not changed, which is why it was transformed. All of its revolutionary innovations must also have been premised upon an internal logic that would lead it to counter-revolutionary ruin. 'Althusser had misled us, yes, but he had also opened paths that we might never have known without him' (AL xix). This *opening* of new directions is what made it possible for Althusser to *mislead* by drawing his students along with him into the chicanes of Theory. But Rancière also wants to show that these new paths were always leading nowhere. The category 'Althusserianism', that is, requires an *identity*, such that whatever was most subversive in it must also have been compromised from the outset, such that to remain faithful to itself will have been to forgo subversion. In breaking the faith, Rancière will have remained true to the subversive transformations of history.

At times, Rancière's effort to work through his early enthusiasm for the *politics* of Althusserianism results in a candid account of his complicity with its protocols of institutional privilege. At the centre of this account is Althusser's essay 'Student Problems', written in late 1963, in which he intervenes against calls by the students of the syndicalist Left for transformations of the institutional and pedagogical structure of the university. Althusser defends the 'fundamental pedagogic relation' that 'rests upon the absolute condition of an *inequality between knowledge and lack of knowledge*'.⁶ Althusser's article, Rancière writes, 'is in fact what convinced some of us to join the political battle inside the Union des étudiants communistes [UEC] to restore Marxist rigor as the way to chase out the prevailing eclecticism' (AL 41). Confronted with a choice between an institutional structure that favoured their immediate interests and a 'leftist' deviation that threatened them, Rancière and the Althusserian students of the ENS sided with 'science' against 'ideology', and also with the hierarchy of knowledge:

Treated like heirs to the throne by our professors, we had no objections to the 'pedagogic relation'; the winners of a fiercely selective competition, trained to compete from very early on, we could not but look upon the critique of individualism and the calls for collective work groups as the reveries of illiterate minds. (AL 41)

For Rancière, 'Student Problems' marks the point at which Althusser's theoretical problematic begins to exert immediately political effects, whereby the priority of theoretical rigour aligns with institutional protocols

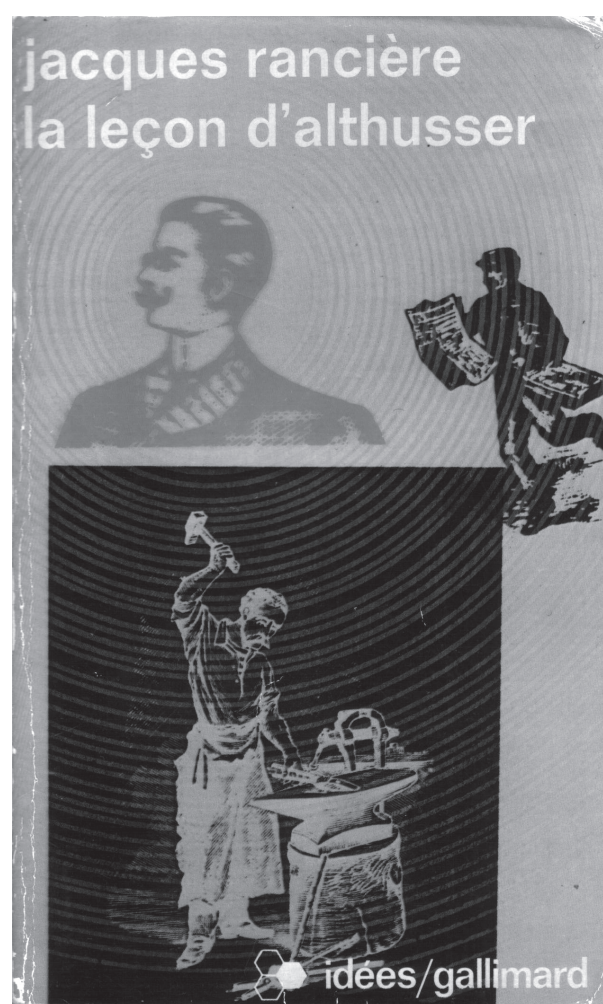
predicated upon the inequality of intelligences. He admits that the transformation of Althusserianism into 'theory's police force ... was established through our political actions within the Cercle d'Ulm' (AL 41). In practice, the defence of science against ideology amounted to an alignment with Party authorities and a repression of anti-institutional student radicalism within the UEC.

Among these candid remarks, however, there are occasions on which Rancière's effort to seal the fate of Althusserianism by stamping it with a fatal identity, while absolving himself of its destiny, leads his critique into paranoid reconstructions. Following the publication of 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and 'On the Materialist Dialectic', Althusser was famously censured for his Maoist sympathies in 1963, first in print by the Party's leading philosopher, Roger Garaudy, then at a meeting of the PCF's Central Committee in October and by the editorial board of *La Pensée* in November. 'The warning he got', judges Rancière, 'must have led him to choose his targets with a specific goal in mind: to bring about the coincidence of theory's long-term interests (the interests of rational politics, in other words) with the immediate interests of the Party, that is to say, with the fight against the dissolution sparked by the Party's politics.' According to Rancière, 'this is where Althusser's grand strategic design and his tactical calculation converged' (AL 36–7).

As a 'good illustration' of this 'convergence' – whereby Althusser seals the counter-revolutionary fate of Althusserianism by bringing his project into line with the immediate interests of the PCF – Rancière cites the critique of humanism. Strategically, he argues, anti-humanism was advantageous because it required the restoration of theory's primacy against the Zhdanovian subordination of theory to politics. Tactically, it was opportune in so far as it 'could serve to halt the Party's break to the right because it assumed the acceptable form of an attack against the 'right-wing' humanism of some communist intellectuals' (AL 37).

It is hard to see why we should read 'Marxism and Humanism' – written in October 1963, between one warning and another – as a tactical compromise with the immediate interests of the Party rather than as a refusal of such compromise. In terms of the theoretical conjuncture within the PCF, Althusser's 'target' is the same as it was in 'On the Young Marx' (1960), 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (1962) and 'On the Materialist Dialectic' (1963): the ideological categories of the young Marx which propped up an essentialist/expressivist account of historical determination advanced by Garaudy in such texts as *Human-*

isme marxiste (1957) and *Perspectives de l'homme* (1959). As Gregory Elliot points out, Althusser's critique of humanism unmistakably echoes the Chinese Communist Party's polemic against the CPSU's 1961 programme, which argued that the Soviet programme 'substitutes humanism for the Marxist-Leninist theory of class struggle and substitutes the bourgeois slogan of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity for the ideals of communism'.⁷ On this account, rather than constituting a 'good illustration' of a tactical decision to capitulate to the immediate interests of the PCF, 'Marxism and Humanism' exemplifies Althusser's willingness to reaffirm, against the same Party intellectuals who denounced him, the same Maoist leftism for which he was denounced.



How do we explain Rancière's contortions on this point? Despite the implausible nature of the illustration, why is it Althusser's *anti-humanism* that has to play the role of 'the cross of Althusserian philosophy' (AL 83), exemplifying the fatal convergence of his 'grand strategic design and his tactical calculation?' Most importantly, because it will be Rancière's turn towards a workerist humanism that will ground his archival investigations of *la parole ouvrière* in his

articles for *Les Révoltes logiques* (1975–85) and in his major study *Les nuits des prolétaires* (1981).⁸ The critique of humanism – or, more accurately, the proximity of its development to Althusser's political intervention in 'Student Problems' – will thus function as the linchpin of Rancière's critique, the theoretical commitment according to which his teacher will affirm the division of labour and the institutional hierarchy of knowledge against the equality of intelligences that will be the bedrock of Rancière's later work.⁹

But this manoeuvre also covers over a symptomatic slip in the chronology of Rancière's account. 'It was only in 1965', he acknowledges, 'when our actions within the UEC started to give some intimation of the effects that were to follow, that a fraction of the Party apparatus came to perceive the appeal of going back to Marx and of the "autonomy of theory"' (AL 35). In 1965, a fraction of the PCF 'sensed the danger of Garaudy's humanism and the usefulness of a return to Marxist rigor' (AL 35–6). Evidently, Althusser must already have known, when he wrote 'Marxism and Humanism' in October 1963, that fractions of the PCF would be persuaded of the practical utility of anti-humanism in 1965, by the actions of his students. Thus his tactical calculation brought his grand strategic design into line with the immediate interests of the Party two years before the Party was aware of what its immediate interests would be. Althusser's critique of humanism could not have been, for example, a principled theoretical stand *against* the immediate interests of the Party in accordance with his own Maoist sympathies and the periodization of Marx's theoretical development he had articulated in 1960. Rather, Althusser's critique of humanism was the manoeuvre of an *opportunist* (and a prescient one at that). This is the crux of what is untenable in Rancière's account of Althusserianism: ultimately everything about Althusserian theory, from its grand strategic design to its local tactical calculations will *converge* upon Althusser's opportunism – the opportunism of a communist intellectual unwilling to forgo the authority of a place in the Party and the opportunism of a Professor anxious to keep his students in their subordinate place.

What this totalizing convergence achieves is the erasure of every genuine theoretical accomplishment of Althusser's work. Rancière's assessment of *Reading Capital* is that 'this reading of Marx via Althusser and Lacan does little more than give a new sheen to the thesis Kautsky had already defended: science belongs to intellectuals, and it is up to them to bring it to producers necessarily cut off from knowledge' (AL 47).

Structural causality? The theory of double reading, of the *bévue*? The relation between the real object and the object of knowledge, developed through a thinking of overdetermination via Marx's concept of the *Gliederung*? Althusser's critique of Hegelian Marxism? Rancière's own outstanding essay on the concepts of critique, process and fetishism? All of this amounts to 'little more' than a consolidation of the hierarchy of knowledge. Rancière's extraordinary assertion is that 'the major thesis of *Reading Capital*' was simply 'the manipulation of the blind subjects of social practice' (AL 53). This bizarre claim allows Rancière to argue that it was precisely the 'major thesis' of *Reading Capital* which resurfaced as a political thesis at the beginning of May '68: 'the students are being manipulated by a social-democratic conspiracy' (AL 53). Every Althusserian concept and position is converted into yet another instance of a grand strategic design to prop up Althusser's own position within the consistency of roles and places. In this sense, Rancière's desire to impose a cynical, unitary political logic upon every aspect of Althusserian theory results in a practice of paranoid reading.

What do I mean, then, when I say that Rancière's critique is 'more or less right'? I mean that it is indeed a sad spectacle to watch Althusser, in the *Reply to John Lewis*, attempt to reconsolidate his theoretical authority by appealing to the letter of 'Marxism–Leninism' upon the irrelevant ground of a debate between members of national Communist parties. I mean that Althusser's 'left-wing critique of Stalinism'¹⁰ within the PCF was a hopelessly rearguard battle that was ultimately doomed in advance, by its institutional commitment, to undermine any radical relation to political practice. And I mean that Rancière is correct to identify and destroy the Kautskyist implications of Althusser's position on the 'pedagogic relation', as it bore upon the relation of theory to the Party to the mass movement (though it is *not* correct to identify this position with Althusser's theoretical anti-humanism). I mean that by 1973 Althusserianism is a sitting duck, and Rancière's aim is good enough to blow it out of the water. On its own terms, as a conjunctural effort to assess the political effects of Althusserianism, *Althusser's Lesson* is a devastating intervention. In my opinion, it remains Rancière's best book.

So much, then, for this brief reckoning with Rancière's critique of Althusser. Let us turn to the consequences he draws from his *Lesson*, in order 'to surprise its articulations by forcing it to answer other questions than those posed by the complacent partner it had picked out for itself' (AL 123).

The Lip affair

In 1964 Rancière chose sides: with Althusser and against the syndicalist left. By 1973 he seems uncritically won over to the cause of the latter.¹¹ In *Althusser's Lesson*, Rancière's major reference to a political sequence which exemplifies everything he has learned since May '68 – and everything Althusser had failed to learn – is the 1973 occupation, takeover and self-management of the Lip watch factory in Besançon. 'Men don't need masters' (AL 90), Rancière wants to show, so he puts down all his chips, against Althusser's critique of humanism, on 'Lip 1973'. Invoking the appropriation of the instruments of production by tailor-workers in 1833 as an instance of the autonomy of producers, he argues that 'the new chain initiated there leads straight to our present. Lip 1973: workers are not people one can separate and displace how one pleases.' As 'a weapon to remember this by', Rancière offers the song of the Lip workers: 'It is possible: we produce, we sell, we pay ourselves.' 'A future is outlined there', he judges; 'an "economy that serves man"' (AL 90). Lip 1973 is the bearer of the humanist future of the workers' movement, juxtaposed against the dead past of Althusserian anti-humanism.

'It is possible', Rancière repeats: 'the whole ideological struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is played out there' (AL 90). But what is 'it'? This simple question suffices to reopen every problem Rancière's 'Lesson in History' wants to ignore.¹² Isn't the whole ideological struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat played out over the question of *what* is possible? 'We produce, we sell, we pay ourselves': it doesn't require too rigorous or patrician a Marxism to see exactly what is wrong with the limits of possibility for which Rancière is willing to settle in order to secure his indubitable respect for the speech of 'the man workers' (AL 92). It was not the destruction of wage labour or of capital that was said to be possible at Lip; it was *preservation* of wage labour and the *management* of capital that was at issue.

This, at any rate, is the point made by another text written in 1973 and published in the journal *Négation*, 'Lip and the Self-Managed Counter-Revolution'.¹³ Rather than linking together an uninterrupted chain between 1833 and 1973 and triumphantly holding up the human possibility of selling goods within a capitalist market economy in order to pay ourselves, this is a text which analyses the *limits* of the possibilities attained by the Lip workers, which historicizes those limits in terms of periods of formal and real subsumption (thereby *differentiating* between the situation of the workers' movement in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries), and which draws from this analysis conclusions not only pertaining to the consciousness of the workers or the particularity of their struggle, but pertaining to the historical movement of the form and content of struggles in which the Lip conflict was situated.

According to this analysis, the Lip affair became a self-managed counter-revolution not because of the subjective consciousness of the workers ('it would be wrong to suppose they could have chosen more radical methods. They acted in conformity with their real isolation from other workers in struggle against the loss of their livelihood'), but because of the objective conditions under which their struggle took place:

In the absence of any real solidarity movement the workerist character of the struggle prevailed over its proletarian origin as the conflict developed. In their isolation the Lip workers were unable to go beyond the immediate conditions they had faced from the outset, and it was from this narrow basis that they rushed into the struggle. Attached to their isolated factory, they strengthened their consciousness of themselves as producers and attempted to realize in practical terms that consciousness. They resumed the production of watches. The 'Lips' – and that is the origin of their disgusting popular nickname – became a collective capitalist.¹⁴

For example, the workers advertised in their catalogue that 'the sale price of the watches includes the price of parts, value-added, tax, depreciation and replacement of machinery, the workers' salary, and even the owners' profit.' Asking after the objective reason for this decision, since the workers had no intention of accumulating capital, *Négation* concludes that 'there were no other reasons for their decisions about salary and price than their desire to have everything go on as before: the preservation of their wages required the preservation of the firm's capital.' The problem, however, was that the firm's capital could not be preserved through the cycle of reproduction, since this would have required firing excess labour power: exactly what the workers hoped to avoid by taking over management.¹⁵

Négation's conclusion is thus rather more considered than Rancière's workerist cheerleading:

'We produce, we sell, we pay ourselves – it is possible' the Lip Action Committee sang along with the confused Ultra-Left and Maoist tail-enders who helped with a good deal of the publicity. But no, it wasn't possible. The development and socialization of the productive forces by capitalism forbid any return to any such low level mode of production and mercantile exchange, unless, in limited or

general crises (with other developments), it is used as a means of hiding the impossibility of continuing the cycle of capitalist reproduction. In that case, the end of the workers' movement immediately has as its content the legacy of this development: the reconversion of its theory and practice into the potential counter-revolution. This should astonish only those who haven't taken into consideration the historical movement or the direct link between revolution and counter-revolution.¹⁶

Since we know that Rancière has taken the link between revolution and counter-revolution into consideration, it must be the historical movement for which he has failed to account. Referring us to the Lip slogan, 'The economy should serve man, not man the economy' (AL 83), he asks, 'are these workers perhaps still living in 1844?', sarcastically citing the year prior to Marx's epistemological break with the early humanism of his *Manuscripts*. But the question is badly posed. It isn't that the workers are still living in 1844. The problem is that they are living in 1973, while the form and the content of their struggle relied for its success upon conditions proper to the nineteenth century. This conditioned its limits. While Rancière can only see a triumph of workerist humanism, *Négation* concludes that the Lip affair 'reflects the end of the workers' movement as a progressive historical force'.¹⁷

What is at stake in juxtaposing Rancière's analysis of the Lip conflict with that of *Négation*? First and foremost, the movement of debates concerning council communism and the ultra-left in the wake of May '68. These were debates over, among other things, the problem of *organization* – debates in the context of which Althusser's Leninist commitment to the party form and the role of Marxist philosophy in the construction of a 'general line' would have been laughable. But how can we situate Rancière in relation to those debates, and what theoretical developments does his effort to resituate Althusserianism in 1973 not bring into view?

By way of conclusion, let me quickly trace some of these up to the present moment.

Programmatism

In 1973 François Martin and Jean Barrot (aka Gilles Dauvé) published *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, a collection of their writings since 1968.¹⁸ In a subsection of their 1969 essay 'Leninism and the Ultra-Left' titled 'Managing What?' they link the role of workers' councils for the ultra-left to that of the party for Leninism: 'the councils act as the fighting organs of the workers under capitalism and as

the instruments of workers' management under socialism. Thus the councils play the same central role in the ultra-left theory as the party in the Leninist theory.¹⁹ This is, roughly, the position on workers' councils that we find retained in *Society of the Spectacle*, for example. Dauvé's effort to move beyond the ultra-left involves clearly identifying the problem with this theory of organization in terms of Marx's critique of political economy:

The theory of workers' management analyses capitalism in terms of its management. But is capitalism first of all a mode of management? The revolutionary analysis of capitalism started by Marx does not lay the stress on the question: who manages capital? On the contrary: Marx describes both capitalists and workers as mere functions of capital: 'the capitalist as such is only a function of capital, the laborer a function of labour power'. ... In other words, the manager is at the service of definite and compelling production relations.²⁰

Despite their humanist rhetoric, this is what the workers at Lip found out, due to the impossibility (without lay-offs) of preserving the firm's capital (and therefore their wages) through the cycle of reproduction. And this is why communist theory needs to think revolutionary struggle in terms of the contradiction between labour and capital (not between workers and capitalists) – and, more specifically, in terms of the double cycle of reproduction (of labour power and capital) structuring that contradiction, which Marx termed the *Zwickmühle*, or 'double mill'.²¹

Emerging from the same context as *Négation* and Dauvé, and in conversation with them, it is the Marseille-based group *Théorie Communiste* (TC) which has done the most to develop a theory of *communization* in such terms since the mid-1970s.²² Perhaps their signal contribution has been a periodization of what they call 'cycles of struggle'²³ according to the distinction between formal and real consumption, a theory which offers a sophisticated structural account of the end of the workers' movement as a progressive historical force and the development since the 1970s of a new period of class conflict.

TC assigns the name *programmatisation* to the period of class struggle in which 'the proletariat finds, in its drive toward liberation, the fundamental elements of a future social organization which become the *program to be realized*'.²⁴ In the period of *programmatisation* the revolution is 'the affirmation of the proletariat, whether as a dictatorship of the proletariat, workers' councils, the liberation of work, a period of transition, the withering of the state, generalized self-management, or a "society of associated producers."'²⁵ This cycle

of struggle thus encompasses both the party and self-management as organizational forms, forms which affirm class-belonging as the foundation of a transition towards communism. On this account, what Rancière heralds as the future – 'an economy that serves man', managed by workers – is in fact an aspiration proper to the internal *limit* of a period of struggle that was ending as he wrote.

Programmatism ends with a counter-revolutionary restructuring of relations of exploitation during the 1970s and 1980s corresponding to a second period of real subsumption and to the defeat of workers' identity, communist parties, unionism, self-management and autonomy. Within the cycle of struggles emerging from this restructuring, 'the proletariat no longer carries a project of social reorganization as an affirmation of what it is.'²⁶ Rather than an *affirmation* of proletarian class identity through political mediations or self-organization, the dynamic of class conflict tends towards an overcoming of revindicative struggles, and thus towards the calling into question by the proletariat of its reproduction as a class. A movement towards revolution as communization is *presaged* within struggles whenever this confrontation of the class with itself takes place, whenever 'to be a class is for the proletariat the obstacle that its struggle as a class must overcome/abolish'.²⁷ This is the nature of the current cycle of struggles. In this confrontation of dynamic and limit, class-belonging is experienced purely as an external constraint, against which the proletariat struggles. The dynamic confrontation with this 'obstacle' appears as a 'swerve' within class struggle: the action of a class, as a class, against its being a class.²⁸

TC's primary example of such a struggle is the Greek riots of 2008, which they analyse in their 2009 text 'The Glass Floor'. What they present in that text is a structural account of the internal *limit* of that struggle, and also of the historical *movement* within which the dynamic of that limit unfolds. What their mode of analysis is intended to resist, like Althusser's, is any reference 'to some kind of humanity underneath the proletarian or to human activity underneath work'. Such a reference, they maintain,

not only traps itself in a philosophical quagmire, but always returns to the consideration that the class struggle of the proletariat can only go beyond itself insofar as it already expresses something which exceeds and affirms itself. The sweaty labourer has been replaced by Man, but the problem has not changed, which remains that of *Aufhebung*.²⁹

In other words, what TC has developed, in moving beyond debates surrounding councilism and self-

management during the Red Years, is a meticulously theorized and historically specific anti-Hegelian structuralist anti-humanism, by way of a rereading of Marx (though without any patience for the PCF). What Rancière's wholesale post-Althusserian embrace of workerist humanism could not grasp in 1973–74 is exactly what TC have been able to articulate: a historically specific thinking of the present that, rather than linking a chain straight from 1833 to 1973, *situates* class struggle according to both limits and dynamics that unfold within a historical movement.³⁰

While Rancière looked to the future, in 1973, in terms of a period of class struggle which had encountered its limit, *Négation*, Dauvé, TC and others thought *through* councilism, self-management and self-organization as a part of the legacy of the ultra-left that had to be pushed beyond. TC, in particular, has done so in a way that certainly does not 'return' to Althusserianism; but from 1975–2011 they have developed a post-ultra-left theory that draws more lessons from Althusser than one might think could be gleaned from a Marxist philosophy that 'died on the barricades of May '68'.³¹

Once again, it is a structuralist anti-humanism that sparks debates at the cutting edge of communist theory and that inspires communist students (though not students willing to fight on behalf of 'the pedagogic relation'). See, for example, *Communiqué from an Absent Future: On the Terminus of Student Life* (2009), which draws its anti-reformist conclusions, its refusal of political mediations and its tactical decisions in part from a periodization of struggles closely influenced by TC's.³² Of course, the Marxist rigour of TC's account has also been subject to accusations of theoreticist obfuscation and structuralist determinism.³³ Real history returns, and with it a renewed intensity to debates over the relation between theory and politics. But the theoretical articulation of history's real movement doesn't pass through *The Emancipated Spectator*, darling of *Artforum* and the Venice Biennale. Rather, it passes through conjunctural analyses by groups like TC and TPTG/Blaumachen as they try to situate the significance of sequences like the Greek riots in terms of the dynamics of proletarianization in the twenty-first century, or in relation to the current cycle of struggles.³⁴

From the Red Years following May '68 to the red-dening of the twenty-first century, the impasse that TC finds a way through, in my opinion, is precisely that which Rancière reproaches Althusser for walking into. Their supposed determinism is actually a sober reckoning with the place of theory, which cannot 'guide' a revolutionary movement by telling the proletariat what

it should have done differently or what it should do now. Theory can, however, compare, analyse, synthesize, periodize and arrive at a tendential and *structural* account of the concrete situations in which we are historically and geographically immersed. It can do so in a way that emerges *from* particular struggles, and this can help us to situate those struggles in relation to a movement that traverses and exceeds them, a real movement that cannot be guided by 'a general line' or prescriptions from party philosophers. Nor will any effort to situate our struggles be aided by what Rancière has to offer: an abdication of structural analysis and a theory of politics as the unaccountable interruption of 'a freedom that crops up and makes real the ultimate equality on which any social order rests',³⁵ of politics as what unaccountably 'occurs whenever a community with the capacity to argue and to make metaphors is likely, at any time and through anyone's intervention, to crop up'.³⁶ This is a theory of the relation between politics and 'the police', as a game of whack-a-mole.

Notes

1. Jacques Rancière, *La leçon d'Althusser*, Gallimard, Collection Idées, Paris, 1974; *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista, Continuum, London, 2011; cited hereafter in text as *AL*.
2. Emiliano Battista's translator's notes are a helpful guide to this context.
3. The journal *Endnotes* 1 (2008) offers a succinct characterization of Dauvé and TC's shared understanding of revolution as communization: 'According to this shared view, the transition to communism is not something that happens after the revolution. Rather, the revolution as communization is itself the dissolution of capitalist social relations through communist measures taken by the proletariat, abolishing the enterprise form, the commodity form, exchange, money, wage labour and value, and destroying the state. Communization, then, is the immediate production of communism: the self-abolition of the proletariat through its abolition of capital and the state' (209).
4. See the following websites. Aufheben: <http://libcom.org/aufheben>; Riff-Raff: www.riff-raff.se/en/info2.php; TPTG: www.tapaidiatissalarias.org/?page_id=283; Blaumachen: <http://libcom.org/library/introduction-blaumachen>; Endnotes: <http://endnotes.org.uk/about>.
5. To be precise about dates: Althusser's *Reply to John Lewis* first appeared in English in 1972, translated by Grahame Lock and published in *Marxism Today*, the journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain. It was then published in France as a book in 1973. *Althusser's Lesson* was written by Rancière in 1973, in response to the French publication of *Reply to John Lewis*. It was published in 1974.
6. Althusser, 'Student Problems', *RP* 170, p. 14, above.
7. Communist Party of China, *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement*, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1965, pp. 91–2; quoted in Gregory Elliot, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (1987),

- Haymarket, 2009, p. 22.
8. *La parole ouvrière* is the title of a selection of texts produced by the workers' movement in French from 1830–1851, published in a volume edited by Rancière and Alain Faure in 1976 and reissued by La Fabrique éditions in 2007. Rancière's articles for *Les Révoltes Logiques* are collected in *Staging the People: The Proletarian and his Double*, trans. David Fernbach, Verso, London, 2011, and in a forthcoming companion volume, *The Intellectual and His People. Les nuits des prolétaires* (Librarie Arthème Fayard, Paris, 1981) was first published in English as *The Nights of Labor*, trans. John Drury, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1989. A second edition is forthcoming under the title *Proletarian Nights* (Verso, London, forthcoming 2012).
 9. See, in particular, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 1991.
 10. Anonymous, 'Dr. Althusser', *Radical Philosophy* 12, 1975, 44.
 11. What remains between 1963 and 1973 is, of course, Rancière's Maoism, which unifies his early devotion to his professor with his later partisanship for the ideological revolt of the students.
 12. 'A Lesson in History: The Damages of Humanism' is the title of Chapter 4 of *Althusser's Lesson*.
 13. *Négation* was a successor of the council communist group Arnichoir, formed in Grenoble in 1968, with close ties to the group Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières. They left the ICO in September 1972 and produced three issues of their own journal. 'Lip and the Self-Managed Counter-Revolution' was translated into English by Peter Rachleff and Alan Wallach and published as a pamphlet by Black & Red in 1975. It is available at libcom.org: <http://libcom.org/library/lip-and-the-self-managed-counter-revolution-negation> (accessed 14 September 2011).
 14. Ibid., pp. 28–9.
 15. Ibid., pp. 30 (my stress), 25, 27.
 16. Ibid., p. 36.
 17. Ibid..
 18. *Eclipse and Re-emergence* was published in French in 1973 and in English in 1974 (Black & Red, Detroit). I cite the Anarchist Library edition, available at: http://theanarchistlibrary.org/HTML/Francois_Martin_and_Jean_Barrot_AKA_Gilles_Dauve_Eclipse_and_Re-emergence_of_the_Communist_Movement.html.
 19. Ibid., p. 53.
 20. Ibid.
 21. Marx deploys the metaphor of the *Zwickmühle* in the last paragraph of chapter 23 of *Capital*, Volume 1. The term has gone untranslated in English editions; in French it is translated as *double moulinet*. On the provenance of the metaphor in Marx and its relevance for *Théorie Communiste*, discussed below, see 'Beyond the Ultra-Left', *riff-raff* 8, 2006, www.riff-raff.se/en/8. See also *Endnotes* 1, 2008, p. 212.
 22. Before coming together as a group in 1975, members of *Théorie Communiste* participated in the publication of *Cahiers du Communisme de Conseils*, edited in Marseille between 1968 and 1973, a publication linked to Informations et Correspondance Ouvrière (ICO). The first issue of the journal *Théorie Communiste*, still running today, was published in 1977.
 23. See Roland Simon, 'On the Concept of the Cycle of Struggles', <http://libcom.org/library/concept-cycle-struggles-roland-simon>.
 24. *Théorie Communiste*, 'Much Ado About Nothing', *Endnotes* 1, October 2008, p. 155. Programmatism includes two major periods (which are also internally subdivided): (1) 1790–1848; 1848–1871; 1871–1914 (formal subsumption); (2) 1914–early 1970s (first period of real subsumption). TC's account is much more nuanced than the cursory overview I can offer here.
 25. Ibid.
 26. *Théorie Communiste*, 'Who We Are', www.theoriecommuniste.org.
 27. *Théorie Communiste*, 'The Glass Floor', <http://libcom.org/library/glass-floor-theorie-communiste>.
 28. For a detailed analysis of the relation between limit and dynamic, see TC's most systematic text, *Théorie de l'écart*, http://theoriecommuniste.communisation.net/spip.php?page=imprimer_articulo&id_article=2 (part 1), and http://theoriecommuniste.communisation.net/spip.php?page=imprimer_articulo&id_article=3 (part 2).
 29. *Théorie Communiste*, 'Who We Are'.
 30. For a better sense of the anti-humanist, anti-Hegelian, structuralist stakes of TC's position, see the first issue of the radical communist journal *Endnotes* (2008), titled *Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the Twentieth-Century*. Here TC criticizes *Troploin* (Gilles Dauvé and Karl Nesic) for analysing the 'failures' of past revolutionary struggles in terms which render communism a normative, ahistorical invariant and endow the proletariat with a communal human essence which will either be realized as communism, or not, in any given instance. In other words, TC criticizes *Troploin's* *expressivist* rather than *structural* thinking of historical causality.
 31. Roland Simon, of TC, acknowledges the influence of Althusser (and early Rancière) in a 2005 interview published in *riff-raff* 8, 2006, www.riff-raff.se/en/8/interview-roland.php: 'And finally, with a lot of precautions ... Althusser in his critique of Hegelian Marxism, and his critique of humanism. I think that there Althusser, Balibar and sometimes Rancière, are essential. It's not for all that that we are going to take up his theory of the epistemological break, or treat Marxism as a science. But there is a lot to be learnt in the critique of humanism.'
 32. The *Communiqué* was an influential text in the 2009/10 California occupation movement, distributed in September 2009 and subsequently translated into six languages. Available at: <http://anticapitalprojects.wordpress.com/2009/11/26/communiqué-from-an-absent-future-on-the-terminus-of-student-life>.
 33. See TPTG, 'The Ivory Tower of Theory', www.tapaidiatisgalarias.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/ivory.pdf.
 34. See TPTG and Blaumachen, 'Like a Winter with a Thousand Decembers', www.tapaidiatisgalarias.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/LIKE-A-WINTER-e.pdf (accessed 15 September 2011, and TC, 'The Glass Floor', <http://libcom.org/library/glass-floor-theorie-communiste>.
 35. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 16.
 36. Ibid., p. 60.