

The Symptomatic Reading Between Althusser and Heinrich

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Abstract

Althusser introduced the concept of *lecture symptomale* [symptomatic reading] in 1968 in *Lire le Capital* [Reading Capital], thus opening to a non-religious reading of Marx. In my intervention, I will try to show how Michael Heinrich, through the excellent interpretative and theoretical endeavour he carried out in the *Science of Value*, revives in all its radicality the concept proposed by Althusser. Heinrich precisely identifies the places in Marx's discourse and in the Marxist tradition where the Marxian *champ théorique* [theoretical field] is, so to speak, "occupied" or "invaded" by the discourse of Classical political economy, giving rise to ambivalences and inconsistencies. These latter must be overcome, and it is here that Heinrich's interpretative attempt to go with Marx beyond Marx is most original and deserves to be thoroughly discussed.

Keywords

Marx, Althusser, Science, Epistemological Break, Problematic, Political Economy.

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The syntagma "lecture symptomale" is extremely rare in Althusser. Despite its immense fame, both positive and negative, and the variety of interpretations and criticisms to which it has given rise, only three occurrences of it are found in *Reading Capital*. The first occurrence, the most famous, is to be found in paragraph 8 of *From Capital to the Philosophy of Marx*. Althusser identifies two modes of reading in Marx: in a first reading mode Marx reads the discourse of his predecessor (Smith) through his own discourse:

this reading is a retrospective theoretical reading, in which what Smith could not see or understand appears only as a radical omission. Certain of these omissions do refer to others, and the latter to a primary omission -- but even this reduction restricts us to the observation of presences and absences. As for the omissions themselves, this reading does not provide reasons for them, since the observation of them destroys them.¹

However, it is possible to find in Marx a second reading of his predecessors:

Such is Marx's second reading: a reading which might well be called 'symptomatic' (*symptomale*), insofar as it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a different text,

¹ Althusser, Balibar (1965), p. 18.

present as a necessary absence in the first. Like his first reading, Marx's second reading presupposes the existence of *two texts*, and the measurement of the first against the second. But what distinguishes this new reading from the old one is the fact that in the new one the *second text* is articulated with the lapses in the first text.²

The examples offered by Althusser are well known, the question about the value of labour in Smith and the blank spaces on which Marx's discourse is articulated, and Engels' parallel in the preface to the second book of *Capital* between phlogistic chemistry and political economy.

The first reading is a religious reading of which the empiricist conception of knowledge is no more than its secular transcription: it depends on a metaphysics of the subject characterised by vision and attention. The second reading, the symptomatic reading, is a radically anti-empiricist reading: far from being fascinating but vague, it brings into play with extreme rigour the articulation of the concepts that constitute the fundamental epistemological framework of *From Capital to Marx's Philosophy*: epistemological break, problematic [*problématique*], theoretical field, real object and object of knowledge.

It could perhaps be said that the entire epistemological construction of *Reading Capital* has the function of allowing the application of this second reading, of this symptomatic reading to Marx himself, in order to finally go beyond not only a religious reading but also an empiricist reading of Marx.

What entitles me to talk about Michael Heinrich's text as a symptomatic reading? As I have shown in the short note³ I wrote for the Italian translation of the text, if one considers Heinrich's judgements on Althusser throughout the course of the book, one cannot fail to notice a certain ambivalence: firm appreciations alternate with critical considerations. Of course, it would make no sense to reconstruct the Heinrichian image of Althusser from a handful of passages: Heinrich uses what he needs of Althusser for his work on Marx, and in this sense, it is undeniable that his preference goes to the Althusser of the 1960s, despite what Heinrich calls "exaggerations", and that he finds the Althusser of the self-critical writings far less interesting.

However, remaining at this level of analysis would give a misleading idea of Althusser's presence in the *Science of Value*: a critic cited among others, whose importance lies in specific contributions to the clarification of individual texts.

In order to understand the real relationship of Heinrich's theoretical work with Althusser's thought, it's necessary to emphasise two points, which constitute as many of Heinrich's debts to Althusser: 1) the scans in the reconstruction of Marx's theoretical path; 2) the identification of the specificity of Marx's theoretical revolution through the use of a series of terms whose origin is undoubtedly Althusserian.

As is well known, Althusser proposed to scan Marxian work through four stages, which he summarised in the preface of *For Marx* in these terms:

1840-44 : the Early Works

1845 : the Works of the Break.

1845-57: the Transitional Works.

1857-83: the Mature Works⁴.

It is no exaggeration to say that this scan forms the basis of the analyses of the development of Marx's thought contained in the third ("Anthropology as Critique: The Theoretical Conception of the Young Marx") and fourth chapters ("The Break with the Theoretical Field of Political Economy") of *The Science of Value*. It is precisely in the detachment from Feuerbach's

² Ibid. p. 28.

³ Morfino 2023, pp. 71-86.

⁴ Althusser 1965a, p. 35.

anthropology that Marx becomes Marx: this is why, according to Althusser, in this followed by Heinrich, there is a discontinuity between the *Manuscripts of 1844* and *The Capital*; in the *Manuscripts* in fact the anthropologism that characterises both Feuerbachian thought and political economy is not questioned: Marx does not engage in a critique of anthropology, but, criticising “the hypostatisation of the commodity producer as man tout court”, he simply opposes man as *Gattungswesen* to it, denouncing it as an alienated figure, in other words he opposes one anthropology to another. However, if Althusser’s analysis dwells in particular on the early writings and only fragmentarily on the later works (much of these analysis can be found in texts published posthumously), Heinrich offers us an important contribution not only in clarifying some enormously important passages of the early period (the key role played by Stirner in Marx’s detachment from Feuerbach and the importance of the *Situation of the Working Class in England*), but above all in showing how the works of the maturity themselves do not constitute a unified and homogeneous point of arrival at all. Making use of the results of the MEGA2, Heinrich shows with great clarity the change of plan that occurred between the *Grundrisse* and *The Capital*, highlighting, for example, the theoretical reasons for Marx’s abandonment of the concept of “capital in general”, but also showing the weight of Engels’ intervention in the construction of the second and especially the third book, returning to the Marxian manuscripts – now published in MEGA2 – that formed the basis of his work, without, however, ever giving into the temptation to find a definitive answer in these: Engels often intervenes precisely where the elaboration is lacking, where the direction is unclear.

However, Althusser’s influence on the *Science of Value* is not limited to the historiographic hypothesis: if in fact the name “Althusser” appears sparingly and always with a critical measure, the same cannot be said of three Althusserian concepts that have a ubiquitous presence within the text: the term *Problematik*, the term *theoretisches Feld* and the term *Bruch*. These concepts are the fundamental strategic tools used by Heinrich to understand not only the scansion of Marx’s work, but also the revolution he produces with respect to the tradition of classical political economy by opening up a new theoretical field.

Althusser writes in the Preface:

Without a theory of the history of theoretical formations it would be impossible to grasp and indicate the specific difference that distinguishes two different theoretical formations. I thought it possible to borrow for this purpose the concept of a “problematic” from Jacques Martin to designate the particular unity of a theoretical formation and hence the location to be assigned to this specific difference, and the concept of an “epistemological break” from Gaston Bachelard to designate the mutation in the theoretical problematic contemporary with the foundation of a scientific discipline⁵.

The Bachelardian concept of *coupure épistémologique* and the concept of the problematic that Althusser attributes to Jacques Martin, a fellow student who died prematurely, are the two fundamental theoretical tools through which Althusser thinks about the scanning of Marx’s work and the foundation of a new science; in Heinrich’s terms, the scientific revolution he produces. These two concepts have an essentially anti-empiricist function: if it is perhaps superfluous to recall that the concept of epistemological break affects the idea of science as continuous progress and linear development, as an indefinite accumulation of knowledge/experience, it is important to understand the fundamental role played by the concept of problematic. The problematic does not have to do with the presence of certain themes and topics in a thinker, but with the constitutive unity of a thought, a constitutive unity that includes not only its actual thoughts but also its possible thoughts:

⁵ Ibid., p. 32. As is well known, Balibar spoke regarding Bachelard’s attribution of the concept of “coupure épistémologique” to a case of false recognition. After the publication of Jacques Martin’s thesis, the same could be said about the concept of “problematic”.

the problematic of a thought is not limited to the domain of the objects considered by its author, because it is not an abstraction for the thought as a totality, but the concrete determinate structure of a thought and of all the thoughts possible within this thought. Thus Feuerbach's anthropology can become the problematic not only of religion (*The Essence of Christianity*), but also of politics (*On the Jewish Question*, the 1843 *Manuscript*), or even of history and economics (the 1844 *Manuscripts*) without ceasing to be in essentials an anthropological problematic, even if the "letter" of Feuerbach is itself abandoned or superseded⁶.

It is therefore not the immediate content of the object on which reflexion is exercised, but the way of asking questions that characterises a particular thought. To this Althusser adds a further element that allows us to understand the importance of the concept of the problematic and at the same time the reason why the historian is never faced with a problematic as an empirical object: the problematic acts behind the individual thinker.

In what sense then could it be said that Heinrich's work reactivates the practice of the symptomatic reading? After all, if one wanted to summarise the whole point of the introduction to *Reading Capital* we could say: from Marx's symptomatic reading of Smith to Althusser's symptomatic reading of Marx.

Now, it seems to me precisely that the resumption of this gesture, which, as mentioned, takes place through the resumption of the family of concepts that produces its operation (epistemological break, theoretical field, problematic, real object, object of knowledge), that constitutes the starting point of Heinrich's work, the one that allows him to identify a theoretical field common to the classicals and neoclassicals (anthropologism/essentialism, individualism, ahistoricity and empiricism) and, at the same time, to grasp all the power of the Marxian break with this field, a break that founds what Heinrich calls "Marx's scientific revolution". However, Heinrich adds:

In examining the *Critique of Political Economy*, I have come to the conclusion that even in Marx's most developed economic theory, i.e. in *Capital* and the strictly preparatory works, two different discourses permanently intersect. On the one hand, Marx makes a break with classical political economy – he does not criticise individual theories, but an entire science; Marx is not simply the creator of a new theory, but the protagonist of a scientific revolution that opens up a radically new theoretical field. On the other hand, the discourse of the classicals continues to be present in central passages of his work. Already Althusser, in fact, had noted that "Marx did not actually come to think the concept of the difference that distinguishes him from classical economics [...]"⁷.

From this perspective Heinrich seems to me to go with Althusser beyond Althusser. In the first part devoted to the theoretical field of political economy, Heinrich criticises the Marxian recognition of Smith and Ricardo as precursors. The error lies in the fact that Marx recognises in both a non-empirical theoretical level that they did not actually possess. Admittedly, Marx in *Theories of Surplus Value* constructs *après coup* "a history of precursors", as Heinrich writes. However, what is crucial about this reading, about the identification of these Marx's oversights, lies in the fact that they are symptoms of "certain deficits in Marx's conception":

Certainly, Marx succeeds in breaking with the theoretical field of political economy, and his insistence that he does not do political economy, but critique of political economy, shows that what mattered to him was exactly this break. However, he could not sufficiently develop the concept of this theoretical field, and this means, conversely, that he could not have complete clarity about the status of his own theory either, which, as shown in the previous chapter, is particularly true with regard to the non-empirical content of his theory of value and surplus value. This insufficient clarity about the status of his own theory also makes it possible for certain elements of the classical discourse to penetrate Marx's discourse⁸.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

⁷ Heinrich 1999, p. 17.

⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

It is precisely this thesis of Heinrich, in its extraordinary radicality, that opens up some of the most interesting and original conclusions of the third part of the *Science of Value*, *The Ambivalences of the Fundamental Categories of the Critique of Political Economy*: these ambivalences are the effect of an insufficient clarity on the status of his own theory, of the radicality of the scientific revolution operated in relation to classical economics. Firstly, with respect to the theory of value, thanks to which Marx breaks with the field of classical economics by understanding it in a monetary sense, while at times falling back into a pre-monetary conception – which earns him a whole series of criticisms that share “the fact of situating Marx’s argumentation within an empiricist problematic” – from which the insoluble question of the transformation of values into prices is generated. But not only that, with respect to the theory of absolute rent, the theory(s) of the crisis and the law of the tendential fall of the profit rate, Heinrich’s analysis – I repeat, of exemplary clarity from both a historiographical and a theoretical perspective – has the merit of showing where the discourse of classical economics and the empiricist problematic that dominates it penetrate the Marxian theoretical field, distorting its meaning. However, the clarity that Heinrich brings to the structure of the Marxian theoretical field never leads him to certain Althusserian exaggerations (for example in the repetition of Lenin’s motto “Marx’s theory is omnipotent because it is true”): it is not only a question of freeing Marx’s discourse from the misunderstandings and misinterpretations produced by a reading that prevents one from grasping its radical novelty (misinterpretations from which Marx himself is not exempt), but also of measuring its insufficiency and limitations where these arise. A good example in this sense is the treatment of interest capital and credit with respect to which Heinrich notes on the one hand an insufficient theoretical elaboration on the part of Marx, and on the other hand the fact that the capitalist mode of production that presented itself before his eyes was not already so developed in terms of the money and credit system as to make possible an investigation at the level of abstraction to which Marx aspired. It is precisely from these limits, within the theoretical field opened up by Marx, that the work is to be taken up.

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