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# Knowledge versus “Knowledge”: Louis Althusser on the Autonomy of Science and Philosophy from Ideology

*William S. Lewis*

*As a Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser consistently argues that scientific knowledge is objective and real and that practical knowledge of objective political and cultural realities is knowable as well. If it is the case that these claims are defensible, then Althusser may have not only developed an epistemology supportive of Marxist philosophy and practice, but also may have suggested a tenable philosophy of science, one that resists the Scylla of positivism and the Charybdis of extreme cultural and historical relativism. This article discusses the limitations of Althusser's method for marking the distinction between science and ideology as well as the promise that this method holds for political practice when such critique is understood as a new method of Marxist philosophy.*

**Key Words:** Althusser, Marx, Marxism, Philosophy, Science, Ideology, Realism, Conventionalism, Social Science, Political, Social, History

In 1996, the “Sokal affair” focused the attention of the wider academic community on the critiques of science and scientific practice then popular in certain areas of cultural studies, sociology, linguistics, and philosophy. While the hoax perpetrated by Alan Sokal on the readership of *Social Text* may have been unethical, his argument against the tendency by theorists and philosophers inspired by “postmodern” theory to reduce scientific knowledge to the status of culturally and historically relative opinion was acknowledged by many philosophers to be a valid and necessary correction. As a physicist, Sokal was specifically concerned about the denigration of science that results from an exaggerated emphasis on the role discursive or ideological structures play in the production of scientific knowledge. In the explanation for his motives in perpetrating the hoax, he also made the point that such theory did not lend support to but actually undermined the leftist causes with which both he and the editors of *Social Text* were sympathetic. Sokal thought it did so because such theory was sloppy; it ignored “evidence and logic” that actually did provide reasons to engage in leftist activism.

Though as a physicist politics was not his main concern, Sokal could well have bolstered this contention on behalf of politics with an argument similar to the one that he made defending science. He could have done so because the very same

assumptions that serve to denigrate the epistemic basis of the physical sciences also serve to undermine the factual basis for political decision-making insofar as this is based upon social scientific research. A parallel can thus be drawn between certain critiques of science which seek to argue that scientific knowledge is culturally contingent and arguments such as those made by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Richard Rorty that political arguments are inherently subjective and cannot be derived from the analysis of objective social conditions (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Rorty 1989).

Sokal argues that much of the theory subject to this criticism originates with the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other French philosophers of the 1960s. Though Derrida and Foucault may not fit the caricature Sokal paints of them, it is true that the methods of deconstruction and genealogy lend themselves to arguments that emphasize the exclusively cultural production of knowledge (Zycinski 1994; Dews 1992; Norris 1998). Further, following Sokal, there is reason to be concerned that, with this emphasis, real theoretically and experientially verifiable knowledge is put under suspicion (as inherently biased) when it should be the case that such knowledge is exactly what we, as philosophers, as scientists, or as politically active subjects should attempt to acquire.

Althusser was a French philosopher from basically the same generation as Foucault and Derrida and who enjoyed the same *formation*. However, as a Marxist thinker, he explicitly and vehemently rejected the Nietzschean- and Heideggerian-inspired critiques of science and political progress promulgated by his peers. Instead, Althusser consistently argued that scientific knowledge is objective and real and that practical knowledge of objective political and cultural realities is knowable as well. If these claims be borne out, then it is possible that Althusser may have secured not only a compelling argument in support of Marxist philosophy and practice, but also may have suggested a tenable philosophy of science—one which resists the Scylla and Charybdis of positivism or extreme cultural and historical relativism. It is this possibility that will be critically examined in the course of this article.

No doubt, the claim that Althusser successfully argued in behalf of scientific and political realism is extremely debatable. Not only is there the legitimate question of the Lacanian influence on Althusser's theory of knowledge, but there are also numerous and manifold self-contradictions in Althusser's own exposition of the relationship between science, philosophy, and political practice. These contradictions are so glaring that not only have hostile critics pointed out the inconsistencies in Althusser's development in this respect, but even those philosophers most sympathetic to his project, including Gregory Elliot (1987) and Étienne Balibar (1991), have dwelt on this failing.

Althusser's opinion on the relationship between philosophy, ideology, science, and politics underwent significant changes during the course of his career. Reading Althusser, one can pick out at least two distinct stages in his views of this relationship. In those works for which he is best known, *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*, he is quick to say that Marxism is a science among other sciences and that all sciences produce objective knowledge of reality that is autonomous of cultural or ideological influences. In later works, such as *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* and *Lenin and Philosophy*, Althusser moves to the position that

philosophy is or should be theory in the service of science and that its task is to demarcate that which is scientific from that which is ideological. Despite this shift in philosophy's status, Althusser never jettisons his insistence that science is autonomous and that it produces true or correct knowledge of a real world, knowledge unlike and superior to the bourgeois 'knowledge' produced by ideology.

It is Althusser's later position that many commentators find most theoretically consistent and compelling, and it is to this reformulation that this article will turn. However, given that this later work can be understood only as an emendation of the position developed in *Reading Capital* (see Elliot 1987, 205), it is first necessary to show how this stance developed both in respect to Althusser's project as a whole (securing the philosophical foundations of Marxism) and in contradistinction to the contemporaneous tendency in French thought to question the objectivity of scientific and politico-theoretical knowledge. Before concluding with a discussion of how Althusser's mature position on scientific realism both complements his "political realism" and marks out a new understanding of Marxist philosophy worthy of further exploration, this article will discuss the limitations of Althusser's method for marking the distinction between science and ideology.

When the essays that would comprise Althusser's first book, *For Marx*, began appearing in 1960, they were meant to challenge both Stalinist orthodoxy and the nascent critique of this orthodoxy that came to be known as Marxist humanism (Althusser 1979, 10). Directly then in *For Marx* and more obtusely in *Reading Capital*, Althusser argued that both Stalinist and neohumanist interpretations of Marx's philosophy were theoretically impoverished and incorrect. After 1956 and the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist party, the problems with Stalin's reductionist interpretation of Marxist philosophy were glaringly obvious. The timing of Althusser's critique thus made abundant sense. The problems with Marxist humanism, though, were less apparent. At the time, and even today, many philosophers would argue that reading Marx through his early works as a consistent humanist provides a way not only of combatting the most pernicious aspects of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy (economism, vanguardism, dogmatism), but also of establishing Marx as a "real" philosopher. For Althusser, however, both interpretations of Marx were suspicious. Even though they appeared to be vastly disparate readings—one dogmatic and scientific, the other subtle and philosophical—he often would lump them together as the twin mistakes of "economism/humanism." Their similarity consisted in the fact that both maintained *telic* ontologies. As such, they were both forms of idealism.

As a trained philosopher and as a Communist party member, Althusser knew that there were abundant problems, both theoretical and practical, with "Diamatics" and with its reduction of Marx's thought to a series of crude formulas as these were codified in Stalin's notorious "Short Course" (1938). In addition, and perhaps also again because he was a Party member well acquainted with the Political Bureau's consistent pre-1956 position on this matter, Althusser suspected that there was something wrong with humanistic interpretations of Marx that valorized his early work as the key to and truth of his philosophy (Althusser 1979, 52). Put succinctly, Althusser in the early 1960s believed that most contemporary readings of Marx were incorrect and that they served to misrepresent Marx's philosophy. Moreover, he was convinced that these misrepresentations occluded what was truly original in Marx's

thought: his founding of the science of history and his materialism. It was, then, in an attempt to uncover the truly original aspect of Marx's thought that Althusser began his systematic re-reading of Marx's texts begun with the essays in *For Marx* and reaching its apotheosis in *Reading Capital* (Althusser 1979, 31).

Against the Marxist humanist position espoused by such philosophers as Roger Garaudy and Henri Lefebvre, arguing that the key to reading and understanding Marx's philosophy lay in early works such as the *Critique of the Philosophy of Right* and the *1844 Manuscripts* (Garaudy 1949; Lefebvre 1940), Althusser vehemently argued that these writings were juvenilia and that they did not reflect Marx's "true" philosophy (Althusser 1979, 52). What such interpretations did do was make Marx into a Hegelian who, like Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach, was concerned only with philosophical anthropology. As a reasoned alternative to the contention that the key to understanding Marx's *oeuvre* is as a philosopher always concerned with the development of man into an unalienated subject, Althusser proposed that there is a radical break in Marx's thought. At a specific juncture, Althusser argues that Marx abandons metaphysical speculations on the telos and essence of man, replacing this speculation with an analysis of the materialist logic of economic and social structures in history. Althusser identifies this break as occurring with *The German Ideology* in 1845 (Althusser 1979, 32) or, alternatively and a bit earlier, with the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, which states: "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it [human essence] is the ensemble of social relations" (Marx 1977, 157).

This break, when Marx ceases to think in terms of human essence and begins to think of the individual as socially produced, signals the simultaneous development of Marx's true philosophy and the inauguration of a new science. This science is the science of history and it consists in the retrospective analysis of social production. This philosophy is the necessary, if not yet explicit, theoretical background for the science. Though neither Marx nor Engels used these terms, this new philosophy came to be called, in Marxist-Leninist circles, "dialectical materialism" while the science of history was correspondingly termed "historical materialism" (Balibar 1995, 3). The relationship between philosophy and science was described by Althusser as such that the former provided the theoretical support and justification for the latter.

In most of his writings, Althusser chooses to preserve this distinction while clarifying just exactly how these two knowledges are related to each other and how they relate to philosophy and science in general. Here, one can get into a detailed discussion of what science and philosophy are for Althusser and how this definition changed during the course of his philosophic career. Althusser's original position on science and philosophy is comprehensible only if one sees that Althusser is consistent in maintaining that all human activity consists of practice and that Marx was the first to identify this truth. As he explains it, Marx's singular contribution was to replace "the old postulates [of essences and subjects] . . . by a historico-dialectical materialism of *praxis*: that is, by a theory of the different specific *levels of human practice* (economic practice, political practice, ideological practice, scientific practice) in their characteristic articulations, based on the specific articulations of the unity of human society" (Althusser 1979, 229).

Starting then from the insight that all human activity consists in the production and reproduction of social life (that is, practice), Althusser argues that Marx makes it possible to think about and analyze these practices in their specificity and in their relation to the social totality. *Capital* is such an analysis: it is an exposition of the practices of a social unity characterized by its relation to the production of surplus value. Though a theoretical framework for this analysis is latent in *Capital* and apt to be drawn out by the proper reading, Althusser argues that the framework or philosophy justifying such an analysis never becomes explicit. Althusser's project in *Reading Capital* is to make this framework explicit, to define the different levels of practice (economic, political, ideological, and scientific) and to show how they interact. In this way, Althusser hopes to answer the question: "What is Marx's philosophy?"

For Althusser, philosophy and science, like ideology, work, and politics, are practices and must be understood as such. The feature that they all share in common is that each consists in the alteration through labor of preexisting and real objects by specific methods in order to produce a new product (1979, 183–7). At the level of economic practice, this process is rather obvious: natural materials are subjected to labor power which, utilizing the available means of production, creates a new product. The level of political practice is a bit more abstract, but can be typified as the process of taking given social relations and doing political work (making arguments, organizing, protesting) that results in new social relations.

After political practice and economic practice, the characterization of practices becomes difficult. This is especially the case because things like ideology, philosophy, and science are usually considered conceptual or theoretical, not practical. Take ideology: it is not usually defined as something that we as subjects do but as that in which we are immersed. Nevertheless, Althusser insists that ideology exists as real only as it is performed and enacted. It consists of the "existing modes of representation by which our experience is organized" (Smith 1984, 10). Ideology is our *lived* experience in the world. We practice ideology when we use the stock of concepts it provides us with to make our way in the world. To pervert a Gadamerian formulation: ideology is the production and reproduction of social life at the level of prejudice; it is the necessary background that allows us to function in the world. As such, ideology is a sort of knowledge, a knowledge that is always present and is always being used (Althusser 1970). This does not mean, however, that ideology is static. It is also quite clear that specific ideologies can change when they are confronted with a different (or contradictory) ideology or when the material modes of production that are themselves productive of ideologies change. The result will not, however, be no ideology (the Marxist-Leninist dream); it will be a new ideology.

Science and philosophy are—like ideology, politics, and work—practices. But, in terms of their relationships to their objects and in terms of their effects, they are much closer to ideology than to politics and work. This is the case because science and philosophy are conceptual and social practices that, like ideology, are productive of knowledges. Unlike ideology, though, science and philosophy recognize their provisional status and are capable of creating new knowledges instead of merely reproducing prejudices. In the case of science, Althusser argues that it is capable of producing new knowledge when, drawing from a preexisting body of concepts (be

they scientific or ideological), those concepts are organized into a new theory with its own internal criteria of verification (Resch 1992, 160).

This process of organization is easy to see in sciences like mathematics, which do not necessarily require the application of their theorems in order to prove their validity. It is less readily apparent in the experimental sciences, which do seem to draw their validity from external sources. Despite this appearance, Althusser argues that external verification is not where truth is found. Rather, proof and demonstration are said to be “the product of definite and specific material and theoretical apparatuses and procedures internal to each science” (2003, 209). It is thus the internal production of new theory that allows questions to be posed. These, in turn, allow for the further definition and development of a science. The shift from Ptolemaic to Galilean astronomy provides one example of such a production. In this practice, already existing and sometimes contradictory concepts are organized into a new science: that of modern physics (Althusser 1979, 14).

But is internal verification sufficient guarantee for the veracity of these scientific knowledges? An oft-repeated critique of Althusser’s philosophy of science is that, because science is defined only by criteria internal to itself and consists only of concepts, the knowledge that it produces has no external check (Lee 1982). A science, then, is what the scientists who practice it say it is and that which it calls “true” is merely that which meets the criteria for truth established by that science’s problematic. This seems to be both an extremely rationalist and an extremely conventionalist view of science. Althusser adds fuel to this argument when he states, for example: “the production of knowledge which is peculiar to theoretical [scientific] practice constitutes a process that takes place entirely in thought, just as we can say *mutatis mutandis* that the process of economic production takes place entirely in the economy” (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 42). When production takes place entirely in thought and the object that it works with consists exclusively of concepts, it is hard to see how such a practice can be externally verified.

The way in which Althusser attempts to get around the problem of external verification is by suggesting that philosophy is the practice that guarantees the internal coherency of science. As he defines it, philosophy is a theoretical practice whose objects are scientific concepts. Philosophy does its work of transformation on them. However, it does not change scientific concepts in order to create ones. Instead, it clarifies and makes explicit a science’s internal logic and sorts true scientific concepts from the ideological concepts in which they are embedded. Because it performs this role, Althusser identifies it as “the Theory of theoretical practices” or, alternatively, “the Science of sciences.”

At least in his work from the early 1960s, most of the descriptions Althusser provides of philosophy acting as the Science of sciences have to do with Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism) clarifying the science of history (historical materialism). As Althusser tells the story, Marx while writing *Capital* was too involved in scientific research to do anything but hint at the philosophy that underlay it. This does not mean that this philosophy is not there. Althusser’s contention is that such a thing can be teased out of *Capital* with a reading sufficiently attuned to its problematic—to the author’s intent, to the conditions of the book’s production, and to the prejudices of its reader. In the case of the science of historical

materialism, then, it is the work of Marxist philosophy to discover in works such as *Capital* “[b]y means of what concepts, or what set of concepts, it is possible to think the new type of determination” Karl Marx identified (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 186). By doing this type of exegesis, Althusser thinks he is able to make explicit and comprehensible notions like “structural causality” and “overdetermination” latent in Marx’s texts.

Though this is an example of how philosophy works to clarify science, it in no way provides an adequate response to the criticism that Althusser’s description of science and philosophy is excessively rationalist and excessively conventionalist. That these charges are warranted is fairly obvious. Lending further support to this contention is the fact that Althusser himself eventually recognized his philosophy of science to be inadequate. In a self-critical essay from 1972, he repudiated this philosophy exactly for its “theoreticist tendencies” and revised those aspects of it that could be called conventionalist. It is to that emendation that this article will shortly turn. First, though, it may be helpful to defend Althusser’s original position, just as he did during his 1975 doctoral defense, as a political act meant to combat other philosophies of science that made even worse errors (Althusser 1998b, 199–236). Doing so should clarify the reasons for Althusser’s original position on philosophy and science as well as provide a transition to understanding his revised position where he makes the claim that philosophy is a political intervention in the field of theory.

As Althusser described them at his defense, the arguments in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* were explicitly meant to preserve a certain autonomy for Marxist theory and for theory in general. This autonomy would “allow [theory] to develop in alliance with political and other practices without betraying its own needs” and without becoming a “slave to tactical political interests” (1990, 208). What did he mean by this “enslavement”? Specifically, Althusser was referring to Stalinist dogmatism and to this dogmatism’s alternative, Marxist humanism (208). The enslavement of Marxist theory by Stalinist dogmatism is rather easy to describe, that of Marxist humanism a bit more subtle. The philosophy of science dogmatically decreed by Stalinist Marxism and theorized by such Soviet scientists as Trofim Lysenko was based on two assumptions. The first assumption was that Engels was correct in his argument in *The Dialectic of Nature* that the laws of nature are dialectical. The second assumption is the Stalinist position that there are two sciences: one, a bourgeois science which is ideological; and the other, a proletarian science which discerns the truth of nature (Cohen et al. 1950). Were this to be correct, there would be a law of gravity for workers and one for factory owners. The absurdity of such a claim needs no refutation. However, it should be noted that precisely analogous claims were made by Soviet and French scientists throughout the 1950s. In claiming autonomy for theory—that is, for science both Marxist and traditional and for philosophy both Marxist and traditional—Althusser wanted to avoid precisely this type of absurdity. Dogmatic theory, he believed, should not drive scientific research and political action. That he combatted this theory with his own type of absurd theory, he would later admit (208).

The way in which Marxist humanism “enslaved” Marxist theory is harder to define in terms of its philosophy of science. This is because Marxist humanism really did not have a philosophy of science. Sartre, Morin, Axelos, and Garaudy were much more



involved with existential concerns revolving around human subjectivity than with scientific ones. This lack of involvement with or even an active shunning of science was precisely where Althusser saw a problem. Althusser believed that Marxism was a science and that this science had an object. This object is the social structure as a whole, its contradictions and its history. He did not argue that the analysis of subjectivity was an illegitimate philosophical pursuit; this was precisely with what his research on Ideological State Apparatuses concerned itself. However, this analysis could not be undertaken—as Marxist humanists wished—from a subjective position conceptualized in terms of alienation. For Althusser, the subject could only be comprehended in its relation to and overdetermination by the social totality. Put differently, the subject can be understood only in terms of subjectivization and not by way of a phenomenological analysis of human subjectivity. To ignore this structure and its effects, or to posit them as somehow external and unknowable, is to slip into a sort of subjective idealism, giving lip service to Marxism but ignoring its status as an objective science of social formations in history.

To combat Marxist humanism's denial of the scientific status of Marxism as well as to counter Stalinist philosophy, Althusser retrospectively maintained that he developed his radical theses on scientific and philosophical practice as a way to change the balance between these positions and to open up debate (Althusser 1990, 208). By doing so, he hoped to restore Marxism to its proper position as a science that, like other sciences, produced true knowledge of the world and gave real reasons for political action.

So far as the goal of opening up debate went, Althusser was inarguably successful. The publication of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* precipitated an explosion of academic literature debating the merits of his position (Aron 1969; Hobsbawm 1966; Hyppolite 1967; Lewis 1972; Nancy 1966; Poulantzas 1966; Thompson 1978). Probably more important, at least for Althusser, was that his "intervention" encouraged real discussion and soul-searching in what was, in the mid-1960s, still a very much Stalinized French Communist party. For the first time since the Popular Front, real debates about issues of dogmatism and humanism as well as about communism's relationship to the broader Left were taken up by the Communist party, and at the highest levels. This opening was in large part attributable to Althusser's influence (Geerlandt 1978; Goshgarian 2003, xxiv–xxxi).

Whether Althusser's writings on science and philosophy accomplished the goal of defending Marxism as a science that produces objective knowledge of the world and provides real direction for political action is subject to debate in a way his influence is not. Disagreeing with critics who characterize Althusser's revisions as a total failure (Majumdar 1995, 165), the remainder of this article will show how his later writings provide the rudiments of such a defense, even if they fail to formulate a method that infallibly separates scientific from ideological knowledge. It will do so by demonstrating how the philosophy of science Althusser develops in works such as *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* and *Lenin and Philosophy* solves the problems that his earlier theory had with rationalism and conventionalism while still providing for the (now relative) autonomy of scientific knowledge. Further, the piece will suggest how this new definition of philosophy clarifies the way in which philosophy may function in the social structure politically.

In *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, Robert Paul Resch makes the point that, throughout his career, there is a consistent tension between Althusser's "conventionalist view of science" and his "realist and materialist ontology" (1992, 160). Already in this article, much has been said about how Althusser's philosophy of science is conventionalist. Less has been said about Althusser's realism except to note that it is one of his basic assumptions. Even in Althusser's most theoreticist texts of the early 1960s, though, he never wavers in his endorsement of a realist ontology (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 161). The obvious conflict between this epistemology and this ontology is that whereas a conventionalist has it that scientists rationally define their object and name its truth, a realist holds that scientific truths exist independently of our thoughts about them and that scientists work to provide a description of the laws or regularities that underlie appearances. As these laws are known through experience, Althusser's is certainly not a notion of the real derived from Lacan. Though he flirted with Lacanian concepts and praised Lacan as a scientist (Althusser 1996, 17–20), it is clear from the way Althusser discusses laws, facts, and the material that he believed the real to signify more than the limit of our understanding (Althusser 2003, 43–7; Lacan 1977, 139–140, 169). Because Althusser believed reality could be known does not, however, resolve the conflict with his conventionalism.

When Althusser begins in the late 1960s to critique his theoreticism, one might expect his conventionalism would also be subject to revision. However, this was not the case. What does happen is that his understanding of science and its relationship to philosophy changes such that he is willing to promote the position that reality itself provides an external check on science's findings. What is gained in this revision is a check on conventionalism, not its renunciation. What is lost is the notion of epistemic truth for science. This is replaced with the concept of "correctness" or "*justesse*." Correspondingly, the attribution of autonomy to science is replaced with the supposition of relative autonomy (Althusser 1990, 103). Downgraded notions, both indicate scientific practice's ability to produce knowledge of the real world that differs substantively from ideology while simultaneously questioning science's ability to produce knowledge untainted by ideology.

Just as conventionalism and realism are preserved in the later Althusser's philosophy of science, so, too, is the distinction between science and ideology. In both *Lenin et Philosophie* (1968) and *Marx dans ses limites* (1978), ideology remains a source of error in the knowledge process and science is still the only practice capable of correcting these errors. Changed from his earlier writings is the relationship of philosophy to science and ideology. All three are still considered real practices. However, he now argues that the three are much more integrated than they were in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Described then as totally separate and only structurally related, now ideological structures are said to cover everything, including philosophy and science.

With the theory that science is a privileged discourse foreclosed, the alternative notion that science has no privilege at all, that it is just another form of ideological rhetoric, rears its head. However, this response is excessive. As Althusser frequently points out, there is reason to be suspicious of "idealist" arguments that emphasize the exclusively cultural production of knowledge and that deny the ability of science

to discover knowledge of the real. Because we enjoy both a “real relation” and an “imaginary” or “lived” relationship between ourselves and the world and because there is a discernible difference between these two relations, distinctions can be made between science and ideology. It is this difference that science uncovers. It is able to do so by the formulation of rules about the world that, unlike ideological truisms, are testable and subject to revision (Bhaskar 1978, 1979; Collier 1989; Resch 1992, 183). With this work, science does not produce “truth” as it formerly was understood to do so—that is, in the sense of epistemic certainty. However, it does allow the scientist to begin to know the world as it is, apart from ideology. Given this fact, what seems to be called for is not the total rejection of science’s privileged position in knowledge production, but a different understanding of what science is actually capable of doing.

Lest science’s abilities be over- or misrepresented, the “relative” in “relative autonomy” should be emphasized. The overdetermination of a subject by socio-economic processes makes it very hard to differentiate ideological from scientific knowledge. What appears “scientific” to one person or a group of persons may appear so only by dint of a specific ideological bias. This does not mean that a distinction between science and ideology cannot be made, but that *knowing* that the distinction is correct is extremely difficult (Amariglio 1987, 193). The omnipresence of ideology, then, does not mean that there is no way to “escape” from ideology and to do science (be it physical, social or theoretical), but that this escape is very hard and its success always uncertain. It also may mean that the “correctness” of some sciences (and particularly of critical social sciences such as historical materialism) may only be judged retrospectively, after their results are successfully applied (Bohman 1999, 461).

What is philosophy’s task if it is no longer understood as the guarantor of truth, if it is no longer the “Theory of theoretical sciences”? As Althusser describes it, philosophy should now be a handmaiden to science. In this rather Lockean position, Althusser argues that the role of philosophy is to help to distinguish for science which of its concepts are ideological and to make sure that a science’s results are not perverted in their reception (1990, 106). No longer is it that practice that guarantees a theory’s truth nor is it that logical framework undergirding and allowing scientific research. Philosophy still works on concepts, but it does not guarantee their veracity. Instead, philosophy is theory that intervenes in theory, marking divisions within it and producing theses. This intervention “draw[s] . . . a line of demarcation that separates, in each case, the scientific from the ideological” (106).

How does it perform this operation? As Althusser describes the problem whose solution is the intervention of philosophy, science would do quite well if it were not for the scientists who practice it. Because of the nature of their work with the real, they are, after all, “spontaneous materialists.” The problem with scientists, however, is that they cannot help but be products of a specific socioeconomic and historical conjuncture. With the questions they ask and in the interpretations of their results, scientists import into their research the ideology of the wider culture. In fact, it is this ideology that permits specific questions to be posed and certain answers to be understood. Because they work on the material real, some of this ideology will inevitably begin to be dispersed when the hypotheses science advances fail to be

borne out by experience and others that are borne out take their place. This is why science can be said to progress. However, ideology or error will never be totally excised from the body of concepts that allow the science to be established and developed because ideology will always exist. Philosophy, though, can help with this excision, analyzing scientific results and differentiating what in them is ideological and what scientific.

An example of this process with regard to a physical science is given by Althusser in an analysis of a lecture given by the French biologist Jacques Monod at the Collège de France in 1967 (Althusser 1990, 145–65). Althusser argues that Jacques Monod is essentially correct in his thesis that the discovery of DNA must cause us to rethink teleological assumptions in evolutionary science and to think in terms of the emergent complexity of biological organisms as aleatory. These assertions are correct because there is abundant and real material evidence for this claim. Monod does not, however, stop with this claim, but goes on in his lecture to assert that “humanity is born” when the “latest of these [biological] accidents could lead to the emergence in the heart of the biosphere of a new realm, the *noosphere*, the realm of ideas and knowledge which was born on the day when the new associations, the creative combinations in an individual could be transmitted to others through language, rather than dying with him” (Althusser 1990, 150).

It is this move, when Monod transposes the logic of biology onto human society with his argument that “language created man,” where Althusser sees ideology enter into and distort what was a scientific analysis. What this move does is to “arbitrarily impose upon another science—which possesses a real object, different from that of the first—the materialist content of the first science” (151). As Althusser points out, this is a classic idealist and therefore ideological move to make: Monod assumes that there is a universal logic or content (in this case, biological) which describes each and every process, no matter how materially disparate they may be. At this point, Althusser maintains, it is the job of philosophy to step in and to mark out that which in the argument is ideological and that which is scientific. Though not stated explicitly, this intervention is basically logical: philosophy demonstrates how specific, scientifically derived concepts are incompatible with other assumptions and concepts a scientist holds.

In addition to being logical, the intervention by philosophy in science is always political; it is an attempt to control the way in which scientific knowledge is received by the wider social sphere. However, it seems a long way from the assertion that philosophy always makes a political intervention to the claim Althusser makes in his “Reponse à John Lewis” (1972) that “philosophy is the class struggle in theory.” Nonetheless, it is a consistent claim, albeit one obscured and injured by the excessively Leninist rhetoric Althusser adopts in his more polemical pieces. It is also an argument that only makes sense in the context of Althusser’s ontology and in line with his understanding of class. If one follows Althusser and considers the world to be constituted exclusively of practices and if one rejects essentialist notions of class for a notion of class as an abstract scientific category, then saying that “philosophy is the class struggle in theory” begins to sound less like a Leninist apologia and more like an apologia for philosophy. By this claim, Althusser means to assert that philosophy always takes a theoretical position and that it defends this

position against other theoretical positions (Althusser 1976). If the theoretical terrain is thereby reconstituted by this intervention, it cannot help but affect other practices, including those of scientific, ideological, political, and economic reproduction. Philosophy is thus able to transform the relations between classes (and is thus “the class struggle in theory”) because “philosophical discourses are related to ideological practices, thus to political practices, thus in the last analysis to the class struggles that transform the world” (Balibar 1994, 173).

Of course, if one still thinks of class in vulgar Marxist terms, then this argument makes no sense. It is certainly not the case that a historically determined group, the proletariat, will inevitably overthrow the bourgeoisie and that philosophy is the weapon that it will use. However, it is the case that there is a relation between the role that one performs in the economy, the geographic area that one lives in, the school and mosque that one attends, the political party that one votes for, and the values that one cherishes. These affiliations can be recognized, abstracted, and generalized as those of a “class.” It is also the case that these values and practices come into conflict with those of others and that these antagonisms may be described not only in their singularity but also in terms of the conflicts between groups of people who maintain certain common practices against other groups of people who do not. As ideology runs deep and because it guides and allows these social practices and affiliations, its critique by philosophy can be particularly politically powerful (Althusser 2003, 215). By marking out some parts of a discourse as correct and scientific from other parts that are incorrect and ideological, philosophy gives “ammunition” to that group of people whose practices are guided by science and it erodes the ideological fortifications of those guided by prejudice.

Looking at a nearly completed “struggle” may provide a clearer example of philosophy’s potential effect than its abstract description. Take, then, as exemplary the cultural and scientific battle fought these last few centuries over the notions of “primitive” and “civilized.” Because anthropological evidence has shown that cultures do not progress linearly from simple to complex, from primitive to civilized, these concepts are clearly untenable. Though now obvious, much anthropological research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was dedicated to observing indigenous cultures and to locating each somewhere on the grand historical path to civilization. By calling attention to the complexity of indigenous cultures and by developing a notion of culture as plural in works like *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), Franz Boas made it less possible to be a respectable social scientist while claiming that some races and some cultures are more advanced than others. This and complementary interventions buttressed, supported, and in some ways made possible the indigenous, civil, and cultural rights movements that followed in its wake (Pierpoint 2004). Marking as ideological the notion that some cultures are more advanced than others takes the force out of the argument that, because a culture is primitive, there is reason for it to be assimilated, removed, patronized, or just treated differently. Of course, one philosophical intervention is not enough to change complex, interrelated, and self-sustaining ideological, economic, and political practices. However, combined with other changes (including those initiated by scientists themselves), it can make a difference and it can do so by “clarifying or obscuring the reality and stakes of [a] struggle” (Montag 2003, 153).

But does philosophy always get it right; does it mark the “division between the sciences and the ideologies” exactly and in every case (Goshgarian 2003, liii)? Certainly, it does not. As the positions that philosophy defends are always conceptual, philosophy can defend ideological error; it can “obscure the stakes of a struggle.” In fact, for Althusser, the defense of the dominant historical ideology—with few exceptions—constitutes the history of philosophy. However, Marx changed all that by providing a check on ideology. With his inauguration of the science of history, it became possible to recognize such philosophical defenses as ideological and erroneous; one could now analyze the objective social conditions that caused specific ideologies to emerge. What’s more, this theoretical practice makes it possible to continue this type of analysis in the present, separating correct materialist concepts based on the real from ideological concepts that are erroneous (Althusser 1971, 61). This does not mean that, in every case, philosophy can differentiate the scientific from the ideological or that it can do so all on its own. Rather, with the aid of scientific research in fields like history, economics, sociology, psychology, and biology, philosophy can identify the historical relationships that produce certain ideological notions and point out where these notions are incompatible with experience and with correct, scientifically derived concepts.

With the case of Monod, an example of this technique is given above in terms of an intervention in the physical sciences. Here, philosophy was mustered to defend against “idealist” assumptions about the origins of human culture and to demand that human culture be studied in its autonomy and integrity, not reduced to or explained by concepts developed for biology. Though this example dealt with a physical science, there is no reason that this technique cannot be applied to the social sciences as well. This is so because, like the physical sciences, the human sciences are concerned with real objects (Althusser 1998, 43–58). In the case of the human sciences, this is with systems of social practices that exhibit regularities and tendencies and that manifest their relations to the socioeconomic totality (Collier 1989, 178).

As in the physical sciences, to go beyond the description of these actual structures as they are or as they have become is to go beyond the purview of science and to slide into idealism (Althusser 2003, 28–9). The task of Marxist philosophy is to point out when this happens and to make a distinction between ideological notions and those based upon scientific observation and study. Correspondingly, it is the task of historical materialism to research and understand the material relations that produce specific historical effects. Of course, because we are ourselves always within an ideology, we can never be 100 percent certain of the distinctions we make or of the conclusions that any science draws. Nonetheless, because there is a real that determines us and because this can become an object of study, we have the ability to correctly differentiate ideological knowledges from scientific knowledges. This is how philosophy intervenes politically in the field of science.

Marxist philosophy does not, however, stop at making political interventions in the field of science. According to Althusser, it also has the complementary role of representing “scientificity in politics” (1971, 65). Marxist philosophy and philosophy in general is thus understood by Althusser as something of a referee. It is not science, nor is it politics. However, by dogmatically declaring its theses, it makes theoretical

interventions in each and effects the way in which these practices play out (1990, 74–5). As demonstrated above, this means pointing out what in a scientific discourse is ideological and what is true. For politics, though, this theoretical intervention means taking a side in the class struggle from the perspective of the Marxist science of historical materialism. This, Althusser indicates, is not a “(new) philosophy of *praxis*, but a new practice of philosophy” (1971, 68).

Not coincidentally, an example of this “new practice of philosophy” and its operation is Althusser’s own intervention in Marxist theory in the early 1960s. Though *Lire le Capital* and *Pour Marx* fell short of securing a firm and unassailable foundation for Marxist philosophy and for science, they did draw upon the resources of historical materialism to reconfigure debates about the status of Marxist philosophy such that, for a time, people were led to think beyond Stalinism and humanist Marxism. The results were not earthshaking; no revolution was made possible by Althusser’s intervention. This, however, is consistent with his conclusions about the status and role of Marxist thought. Althusser’s intervention made clear that Marxist philosophy could no longer be understood as a dialectical formula for realizing political goals, but must instead be understood as the articulation and deployment of a materialist critique that may have the effect of “assist[ing] in the transformation of the world” (Althusser 1971, 68). This may be a downgrading of the status of Marxist philosophy and one that puts it worlds away from a formula for revolution or from a theory of human liberation. In fact, it puts it much closer to the position of cultural critique. However, with its realism and concomitant ability to distinguish between scientific truth and ideological error, Althusser goes a long way to restoring or reconfiguring Marxist philosophy as a practice that is able to suggest, given present realities, what events are possible.

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