

## Epistemological Break

Following the definition of ideology from the previous chapter, the question we need to pose now is: how does ideology function? For Althusser, ideology always functions in opposition to sciences. Borrowing from Gaston Bachelard, a French epistemologist, Althusser employs the concept of the “epistemological break,” which he first used to periodize Marx’s work. Gaston Bachelard was a philosopher of science whose book *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* had a great influence on the postwar generation of French epistemologists, Althusser included. According to Bachelard, scientific knowledge should be understood and posed in the terms of obstacles. Scientific knowledge is entirely opposed to (popular) opinions because “nothing can be founded on opinion: we must start by destroying them.”<sup>1</sup> In terms of scientific knowledge, opinions are the first obstacle that has to be overcome. In other words, the scientific mind does not permit any compromise with the opinion, in the sense of having opinions on the object we do not fully comprehend. It is because “for a scientific mind, all knowledge is an answer to a question. If there has been no question, there can be no scientific knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, for scientific knowledge, general knowledge or general opinion is an obstacle. In other words, according to Bachelard, in order for scientific thought to be truly scientific, it has to go through various stages of epistemological obstacles. That is to say, an epistemological obstacle is the moment of

<sup>1</sup> Bachelard 2002, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

rupture, or the moment of break, that divides science (or scientific knowledge) from its prescientific past.

What did Althusser make of this concept? Althusser employed this concept in order to separate Marx's "ideological" period from its "scientific" one, which is to say the "idealist-ideological" Marx versus the "scientific" Marx (especially) of the *Capital*, marks the foundation of Althusser's "critique of ideology." Althusser begins by asking whether there was an epistemological break in Marx's oeuvre, and if yes, where is the very precise location of this break. He writes:

[T]he quotation in which Marx himself attests to and locates this break ("we resolved ... to settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience") in 1845 at the level of *The German Ideology*, can only be treated as a declaration to be examined, and falsified or confirmed, not as a proof of the existence of the break and a definition of its location.<sup>3</sup>

In Althusser's understanding, it was Marx himself who located the break, in the book which remained unpublished in his lifetime, *The German Ideology*. However, the *Theses on Feuerbach*, according to Althusser, "mark out the earlier limit of this break, the point at which the new theoretical consciousness is already beginning to show through in the erstwhile consciousness and the erstwhile language, that is, as *necessarily ambiguous and unbalanced concepts*."<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the epistemological break in Marx's work was inaugurated in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and executed in *The German Ideology*.<sup>5</sup> But, what does "epistemological break" in Marx's oeuvre really mean? Let us go with a longer quote from Althusser, which in this case is justified:

This "epistemological break" concerns conjointly *two distinct theoretical disciplines*. By founding the theory of history (historical materialism), Marx simultaneously broke with his erstwhile ideological philosophy and established a new philosophy (dialectical materialism). I am deliberately using the traditionally accepted terminology (historical materialism, dialectical

<sup>3</sup> Althusser 2005, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Although there seems to be a consensus on the existence of "epistemological break" in Marx's work, different authors tend to disagree on the exact location of the break. According to Moishe Postone, the "epistemological break" in Marx's work happened much later, when Marx returned to Hegel's *Science of Logic* for his critique of political economy.

materialism) to designate this double foundation in a single break. And I should point out two important problems implied by this exceptional circumstance. Of course, if the birth of a new philosophy is simultaneous with the foundation of a new science, and this science is the science of history, a crucial theoretical problem arises: by what necessity of principle should the foundation of the scientific theory of history *ipso facto* imply a theoretical revolution in philosophy? This same circumstance also entails a considerable practical consequence: as the new philosophy was only implicit in the new science it might be tempted *to confuse itself with it*. *The German Ideology* sanctions this confusion as it reduces philosophy, as we have noted, to a faint shadow of science, if not to the empty generality of positivism. This practical consequence is one of the keys to the remarkable history of Marxist philosophy, from its origins to the present day.<sup>6</sup>

Althusser is correct in pointing out the break in Marx's oeuvre; however, what he is missing is that the very distinction between science and ideology is, in the last instance, an ideological position par excellence. What Althusser is missing is the very Hegelian-inspired tendency that led to that break. That is to say, Marx's critique of political economy, or more precisely, his *Capital* could be written only after Marx reread Hegel's *Science of Logic*. In this sense, the "epistemological break" occurred but for the exact opposite reasons as thought by Althusser himself. This said, the thesis I want to propose can be formulated as following: yes, there was an "epistemological break" in Marx's work, but the break that occurred is, in the last instance, a rupture in his path that permitted him to conceptualize his "critique of political economy." While Althusser assumed that the concept of "science" that Marx was using in *Capital* came from Darwin and physics, it in fact is better understood as the concept of science used by Hegel in *Science of Logic*, which starts with a clear statement that a scientific inquiry is not merely one which does not presuppose anything, no essence and no being, but which examines the presuppositions which come with what is posited, its "ontological commitments." This is precisely what Marx does in *Capital*: he analyzes the presuppositions that are being posited by the logic of *Capital* itself, rather than mimic a physicist or a biologist who observes impartially the object that he is trying to analyze. The science proper of Marx is the science of letting the commodity speak its own story, and not the science which, beginning with Galileo, requires the planets to be "mute."

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 33–34.

Let us proceed further with examining how Althusser employs this concept. As Balibar argues, “it seems to me that in reality it is instead an original concept which Althusser introduced between 1960 and 1965, a concept which, it is true, owes ‘something’ to Bachelard and which does indeed rest on certain common philosophical presuppositions but which in fact has a quite other object and opens a quite other field of investigations.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, *Capital* is the work “by which Marx has to be judged,” and this is the work in which Althusser puts most of his effort: to the “scientific work” of Marx, and especially his *Capital*, with the *philosophical thesis* which would suit best his (Althusser’s) scientific project. In this enterprise, Althusser’s task was that of “determining the type of philosophy which best corresponds to what Marx wrote in *Capital*,”<sup>8</sup> which would result not in a Marxist philosophy, but in a philosophy *for* Marxism. Hence, his famous statement that it is difficult to be a Marxist in philosophy. As a result, one of the possible ways of constructing the philosophy for Marxism is through the critique of ideology. The logical question to be posed here: what is the function of philosophy for Althusser?

The main task of philosophy is to draw lines of demarcation between scientific practice and ideological propositions. Philosophy is defined in its double relation to the sciences and ideologies. In this regard, philosophy is *a dividing activity of thought*. It thinks of demarcations, distinctions, and divisions, within the realm of thought. Therefore, philosophy has an intervening role by stating *theses* that contribute to “opening the way to a correct” way of formulating the very problems in which it intervenes. According to Althusser, by stating theses (which should be understood as positions), philosophy produces *philosophical categories*. When he defines philosophy as the “class struggle in theory, in the last instance,” Althusser is being very precise: philosophy functions by intervening not in the matter, or bodies, nor in the class struggle, but *in theory*. This intervention provokes or produces theoretical effects. In other words, the “enigma of philosophy is contained in the difference between the reality in which it intervenes (the domain of the *sciences* + theoretical *ideologies* + philosophy) and the result that its intervention produces (the distinction between the *scientific* and the *ideological*).” The indispensable result is what he calls *philosophy-effect*. In this sense, philosophy does not think either sciences or politics. Philosophy’s function should “serve sci-

<sup>7</sup> Balibar 1978, p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> Althusser 2006, p. 258.

ences, rather than enslave them,” and to reiterate this in Badiou’s vocabulary, philosophy has the task of articulating and criticizing the effects of the events of the class struggle. Therefore, everything that happens in philosophy has “in the last instance, not only political consequences in theory, but also political consequences *in politics*: in the political class struggle.”<sup>9</sup> Taking all this into account, the intervention in the two distinct realities (that of scientific and ideological) is internal and the *philosophy-effects* produce changes within themselves. Based on this, how are we to rethink Althusser’s theory of the critique of ideology? Here, I want to argue that in a certain way, his entire theory of the critique of ideology is at the service of this thesis, which in his idea of rethinking Marxism is meant as a means for proving it right, supplementing it, and rendering it compatible with his project of rereading Marxism. The entire Marxist enterprise in philosophy is centered on the possibility of distinguishing between science and ideology, not only in their realities, but also in reference to the work of Marx himself. This thesis led Althusser to conclude that “Marx could not possibly have become Marx except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science.”<sup>10</sup> In this respect, I would argue that Althusser’s philosophical project of reading Marx philosophically is centered on the concept of the “critique of ideology.”

<sup>9</sup>Althusser 1976, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup>Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 17.