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Que faire (with Discourse)? A materialist approach to discourse, ideology and politics in neoliberal conjuncture

Abstract: *Althusser's Que Faire? (2018) allows for a critical revision of the "discursive turn" in current social and political theory. As Pêcheux shows, the influences of Spinoza and Freud can be recognized and elaborated on to develop a clinical theory of discourse capable of taking into account overdetermination and class struggle in a rigorous way.*

Keywords: *Ideology, discourse, reformism, overdetermination, multiple temporality.*

Resumen: *El volumen póstumo de Louis Althusser, Que faire? (2018), hace posible una revisión crítica de "giro discursivo" en la teoría social y política actuales. Como Pêcheux expone, las influencias de Spinoza y Freud pueden ser reconocidas y desplegadas para desarrollar una teoría clínica del discurso capaz de tomar en cuenta los conceptos de sobredeterminación y lucha de clases.*

Palabras clave: *Ideología, discurso, reformismo, sobredeterminación, temporalidad múltiple.*

I. What is to be done (once again)?

Among his manuscripts, Louis Althusser left a ninety-page long essay under the title *Que faire?* (2018a), in which he critically revised the eurocommunist tendency, conceived as an

identity between the end and the means, and as a poor response to the crisis of communist thought and the popular *demands* of democratization in the URSS. Such a response risks being an empty proclamation which lacks a "concrete analysis of the concrete situation not only of the class struggle of the countries concerned, but of the whole world, capitalist imperialism and 'socialist countries included'" (130-131, my translation).

This is how Althusser, in the prime of the global neoliberalization process (Harvey, 2005), admonishes that the crisis of the international communist movement and, more broadly, leftist thought, are intertwined in a reformist tendency that will ultimately contribute to it. The suppression of the communist option, which is consubstantial with the abandonment of crucial concepts such as that of class dictatorship, far from providing some kind of shelter from the fledgling anti-democratic tendencies (such as the ones denounced in the countries from the old Soviet bloc, but also the dictatorships in Latin America, the place where the neoliberal reforms begun) leads to the risk of debasing the very idea of democracy. In this context, the PCF's official strategy of recovering Gramsci's theoretical contributions, which dispense with a concrete analysis of the situation, strengthens some theoretical risks that were already present in its thought – especially the politicist and historicist tendencies.



Althusser recognizes a series of shifts that operate around the concept of *hegemony* by associating the notion of “historical block” with the idea of a “concrete universal ethics” coined by Hegel, to replace the *historical* unity with an *ethical* unity, taking the conjuncture for the social totality, which should instead be conceived as its *ideological effect*: the “society effect”. The interpretation of economic exploitation as a mere component of “civil society”, coupled with a (corresponding) neglect of the “force” component in its conception of the State under the theory of “State as hegemony” (Althusser, 2018a, 135), tends towards a simplification of the heterogeneous, which leads to replace the concept of class struggle with that of “a struggle of hegemonies” and to a dissolution of the materiality of the State within the question about the hegemony of the dominant class (136).

The interest of the analysis offered by Althusser stems less from what he may elucidate of Gramsci’s thought—whose consequences should be qualified by the considerations that Althusser himself proposes in other writings—than from what it shows us about the Althusserian intervention itself and its critical commitment to its own conjuncture. If such intervention turns out to be more audible today than in the sixties and seventies, it is because the consequences of the theoretical-political torsion that Althusser denounced in the intellectual field that was his own, and whose avatars were understood by some of his colleagues and disciples (Badiou, 2008; Balibar, 1991), may today be read more bluntly. There, Althusser insisted on signaling the idealist turn in the international communist intelligence, which, shrouded as a supposedly ethical affirmation, abandoned the question of the historical determinations of the conjuncture (that of the long agony of imperialism that foreshadows the coming barbarity).

“Politician” is, in this context, the simplification of the concept of historical time in the hypertrophy of an “Absolute Present” of the temporality of the State: the flattening of two distinct levels, that of the (structural) stability of the dominant mode of production and that of the (imaginary) eventfulness of politics, under the historicist guise of permanent change, “without a

fixed point” (Althusser, 2018a, 66-67). “Change” may be another one of the images in whose name that ideology of time operates, rendering the *immanent exteriority* that constitutes any dominant ideology unthinkable and erasing the theoretical function of the concept of *class struggle*. This amounts to the simplification of the complex temporality of the historical concrete and a displacement towards a contemporary and homogenous conception of time in the shape of a *spiritual concrete* of the universal ethical unity. Politicism consists of a chain of reductions; of the complex of practices to the (philosophical) idea of political *praxis*, of political practice to political ideology and of the State to the dominant Ideology.

II. The theory of ideology as a rupture of the contemporaneity between history and discourse

Some of the ideas from 1978 had been anticipated in other passages of Althusser’s writings, especially in the notes for his course at the École Normale Supérieure, published as *Politique et Histoire, de Machiavel à Marx* (2006). There, we can see that Hegel’s theory of the State as the reality of the ethical idea—*die Wirklichkeit der sittlichen Idee*—(Hegel, 1955, § 237) constitutes the prehistory of Althusser’s theory of ideology because his theory of *ideological State apparatuses* is part of a break with the Hegelian theory of the State and, more precisely, with his idea of the State as the “universal in action” (see. Romé, 2011, 133-140). The emergence of Ideological State Apparatuses as the unseen in the visual field of Hegelian historicism grounds the problem of the relationship between *temporality* and *discourse* as part of the question regarding the theory of history.

In the Hegelian *Philosophy of History*, the account of history is contemporaneous to the historical fact; it is a “common internal foundation” which makes them both manifest at once, because the history of the State lives in the memory of the individuals, to the extent that they are *possessed* by it (Hegel, 1967, 141).

The rupture with the *contemporaneity* based on a common foundation makes visible the *ideological efficacy* constitutive of the State's power, and reveals itself as a *material dispositive* of (idealist) Philosophy. This means, as the scene for the production of evidence that places in the same narrative temporality *some* subjects for *a* State.

The identity reconciled in the Absolute Knowledge is, from a materialist perspective, the *identification* between Philosophy and History. That is why the critique of ideology as a criticism of the contemporaneity between history and discourse, inaugurated by Marx in 1845 is, in another sense, Freud's too. In the context of a break with the so-called Philosophies of Consciousness, Althusser's first references to Freud are related to history and, more precisely, to an overdetermined conception of the dialectic that questions the concept of *contemporaneous time* (Althusser, 1965a).

Thus considered, the detour through psychoanalysis allows him to critically recover the Hegelian idea of the State, in order to recognize the core of its *ideological function* and conceptualize one dimension of the power of the State in the materialist terms of a complex of apparatuses, of which it consists along with its subjects while *narrating a common history*.

This theorization is already present in *Machiavel et nous* (1994), and developed strongly in *Que faire?*:

Everything is already in Machiavelli, the theory of the state, and its two moments, "the beast" (the force) and the man (the consensus), although there is in him more than in Gramsci, since in his thinking the beast divides, being both lion (brutal force) and fox (ruse and fake) [*ruse et feinte*], and finally the fox is nothing but the *virtù*, or capacity to use force and consensus (hegemony) at will, according to the exigencies of the conjuncture [...] this capacity of cunning is reduced in the end to the power to feign, to the power to pretend [*de faire semblant*]. (2018a, 106; my translation)

Machiavelli goes beyond Gramsci by forcing the division strength/consensus that remains captive in the inward/outward scheme proper to the

Philosophies of Consciousness on political theory. This withholds the primacy of force, to the extent that it stresses a dimension that is of the material order of force, but produces its effects in the "subjects' interiority". The figure of the *fox*, which Althusser identifies as "psychic violence" (110), allows us to point out the unconscious efficacy of the ideological instance. The Prince is not conceived as an empirical subject, but as a *political strategy*: man-lion-fox, a "*topique* that has no center, that has no 'I' that may unify the three 'moments', the three 'instances', that is never 'man', in other words, *moral subject, any more than being conditioned to seem one*" (112).

The strength/consensus dichotomy does not allow us to acknowledge that which constitutes the key of political power: "that force may be productive" and able to be part of a strategy, producing "effects of hegemony": as a *materiality* that produces *psychic* effects based on a compulsion that is not brute force. This is the way Machiavelli thinks the "political education of citizens through their amalgam in the army" in the sense of a psychic force that is constitutive of the powers of the State (113).

In order to account for their mechanism, Althusser speaks about the Prince's *semblance* as a mask or an image unified as the *State Ideology* (106). Closer to force than morals, the imaginary logic of the figure of the fox consists in its "power to feign" (*pouvoir de feindre*). That imposture, –or *representation*, according to Lefort (110)– is consubstantial with the State, but only to the extent to which the image that sustains it is "recognized" by the people. The power of the State does not exist without the people *recognizing themselves in the image* of the Prince.

We find thus a *theory of identification* with psychoanalytic resonances, which supposes a complex materiality of "bodies", "images", "*semblants*" and "psychic violence" that evokes the Freudian development of military corps in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), which is related to his theory of ideology as constitutive of State power and the weight that the function of *recognition* acquires within it. In it, he discovers the paradoxical *retroactive temporality* in which the effects of hegemony are

both the product and the condition for the birth of a new State (114).

That this force is productive is something Foucault rightly pointed out, and Althusser is aware of that; but Machiavelli says more when saying that force is productive *of ideology*.

III. Materialism of the imaginary. From Foucault to Pêcheux and Spinoza

The question about the status of discourse as a problem of the theory of history is formulated by Foucault (1969), in terms of the status of the *document* in historiographical labor. When it ceases being an inert piece of matter on which to attempt to rebuild what was said or done, the image of history as memory falls to pieces: history is a certain mode, for a society, to provide a status and elaboration to a mass of documents *from which it does not separate* (14).

Foucault discovers the solidarity between the transformation of the status of discourse and the problematization of the concept of *historical time*. The classical postulates thus challenged are those of a *general history: the possibility of establishing a system of homogeneous relationships*; one and only form of historicity between the diverse instances which subjects them to the same type of transformation (17-18).

In keeping with the ideas of *Lire le Capital* (1965a), Foucault places the “first moment” of this epistemological mutation in Marx and acknowledges the obstacles to ground that discovery in the subject’s foundational function: “as if we were afraid of thinking the *Other* in the time of our own thought” (21). Time is conceived of in terms of totalization and the revolutions are never anything but a *raising of awareness* (22).

And it is Althusser who takes on the task announced by Foucault of “thinking the Other in the time of our own thought itself”, by breaking with the Hegelian idea of the State as an incarnation of the Absolute in history. And opening up a theory of State ideology as the effect of a double identification based on the materiality of bodies

and apparatuses, which produces a temporal simplification that could be called “hegemony”.

Foucault turns out to be an ally, but his theory leaves the problem of ideology vacant. Foucault thinks the relationship between materiality and discourse as the *productivity of force*; discourse is to him the power which one wishes to own (1971). Nonetheless, he lacks the necessary theoretical tools to go beyond a *descriptive* theory of power: 1. a theory of the *unconscious* that may account for the mechanisms of “psychic violence” in their materiality and 2. a theory of *class struggle* that may account for historical violence in its materiality. Ultimately, it is necessary to pursue a tradition that may enable exploring the *materiality of the imaginary* in its temporal complexity.

It is Michel Pêcheux who lays down the two theses that allow us to comprehend the problem of ideology adequately.

-To take seriously the reference to historical materialism means to recognize the primacy of class struggle in relation to the existence of classes themselves, and that entails, with respect to the problem of ideology, the impossibility of any differential analysis (of a sociological or psych-sociological nature) that attributes its own ideology to each “social group” before the ideologies enter into conflict, as each seeks to ensure its domination on the others. This also leads us to interrogate the notion of dominated ideology [...] in order to determine its characteristics given the primacy of class struggle.

-To take the reference to the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious seriously means to recognize the primacy of the unconscious over consciousness; and that entails, speaking still of ideology, the impossibility of any psychologistic conception that produces a consciousness [...]. To conceive ideological processes according to the form of such a pedagogical trajectory—auto- or hetero-determined—is quite simply to reject in practice the consequences of Freudian materialism (2014,1-2)

These theses trace the limits of the Foucauldian perspective. The proposition of the problem of discourse turns out to be insufficient to confront the idealist siege, and may turn into a new universal dialectic that imagines having the property of “producing its own matter” (Pêcheux, 1977).

What is at stake is “the mode of conceiving the concrete material forms under which ‘ideas’ enter the struggle of history” and this compromises the positions assumed by the different theoretical currents.

The *logical-formalist tendency* eliminates history (and the class struggle), as it conceives the human Spirit as a-historically transparent to itself, under the shape of a universal theory of ideas. And even if the historicist tendency conceives history as a “series of differences, displacements, transformations”, it “understands domination as a form of interiorization” and *subordinates division to unity*. Following Althusser (1973), Pêcheux calls this empiricist approach to the class struggle *reformism*. And that is where he places Foucault: the absence of the category of contradiction in Foucault is responsible for the return of notions such as *status, norm, institution, strategy, power, etc.*, which indefinitely outline the materiality of the State power, without being able to think the relationship of the concrete (discursive) formations of ideology and politics with the class struggle. Despite offering an approximation to the problem of the *materiality of the imaginary*, Foucault lacks a notion, even a practical one, of *contradiction*. That is why Pêcheux acknowledges a more solid forerunner in Spinoza, for whom the materiality of discourse is contradictory. By criticizing religious ideology in the name of religious ideology, Spinoza shows that it, in itself (and the discourse that realizes it), may not be taken as a homogenous whole identical to itself. And it is from Spinoza that Pêcheux draws the idea that ideology does not exist but *under the (material) mode of division*; it does not realize itself but within the contradiction that organizes its unity in itself and in the struggle of the contraries. This leads him to consider that

the concept of *discursive formation* should be submitted to a Spinozan “rectification”.

It is not possible to fully account for the material consistency of discourse if its historicity is not thought from a materialist point of view; this means, in terms of its *contradictory (over-determined) objectivity*. This is a crucial point to comprehend the bifurcation between the theories of discourse that embrace the constitutive problem of ideology and those that think about it as a secondary or subordinate question. And this allows us to point out that what is lost in this field, when the theory of ideology is blurred out, is precisely the relationship between discourse and history, in a material sense.

Reformism in the field of discourse is the name of a consideration of historical change that dispenses with structurally contradictory objectivity. A space of interiority is reaffirmed to be at the heart of the discursive formation, if its unity is not conceived of in its overdetermined condition (under the double primacy of the unconscious and contradiction). If it is not conceived in terms of an unequal, hierarchical and contradictory articulation, as much as it may be proclaimed as a pluralist critique of any form of metaphysical unity, the notion of formation loses its historical condition, because it turns into a category blind to the “ensemble system” that is its constitutive exterior: the “material objectivity” of the structure of subordination-inequality of the complex whole with the dominance of the ideological formations of a given social formation (see Pêcheux, 1982). If the discursive formation is thought of as an interiority, it acquires a structure isomorphic to the structure of consciousness, which exists in a temporality closed in on itself. A theory that enunciates such exteriority in terms of the relationship of a discursive totality with its symptom is not enough. Additionally, a theory of historical causality is necessary, i.e., a complex conception of time and the social totality capable to interrogate and conceptualize the real consistency of that exteriority and the relations between it and the imaginary interiority of the discursive formation. That means, a theory capable of accounting for the objective *materiality of the imaginary*.

IV. Reformism and neoliberalism

Ironically, Althusser denounces this *reformist* position in relation to the political strategy in 1978, in terms of the idea of “class consciousness”. The visual operation that the image of the “self-consciousness” constitutes, which is internal to the ideological field, takes on a new consistency when the field itself closes up and denies the complex *ensemble system* that rules over it: “we see only what we see, and this does not go far enough [...] only, the rest is missing [...] the rest, that is to say the whole ensemble system that governs the concrete forms and the concrete means of the bourgeois class in its antagonism to the working class struggle, and which leads to this simple fact, which seems to go without saying.” (30, my translation)

The “proletarian point of view” may coincide (in an relation of interiority) with the “point of view of the State”, in spite of believing to oppose it or being its “alternative”, if the construction of that perspective is produced as an identitarian experience, in a phenomenological relation to *its world: as contemporaneity* between facts and its narrations. This is what Althusser calls insistently “to tell oneself stories”.

That is why he denounces the politician temptation of history that enshrines “change” in abstract terms. Not only because of the theoretical problems this carries along –on which he had insisted already in his criticism of historicism (see. 1965a)– but also because of the political consequences he supposes this could have in the conjuncture of the late seventies: “forms of enlarged reproduction are by no means technical forms [...] That our century is the century of speed is due to the needs of the bourgeois class struggle: to make capital circulate as quickly as possible to extract as much of surplus-value as possible” (Althusser, 2018a, 48, my translation).

In this context of accelerated change, commanded by the temporality of extended reproduction of capital at an unprecedented rhythm, materialist theory must acknowledge that the reasons for “change” are not to be found in what we simply “see” changing, and enunciating the historical condition of theory –submitting it to

the temporality of its object– only strengthens the “absolute historicism” that lacks an outside and, therefore, is interior to ideology (49).

These passages from *Que faire?* expose, with mastery and anticipation, some of the theoretical risks that compose a unity with the dominant ideological tendencies. On one side, the fascination with what we “see change”, as if that were in itself the “reason for change”, leads to a technological fetishism that believes itself to be a critical diagnosis of the neoliberal conjuncture, a renewed form of “biopolitical” economism that consecrates the Absolute Power. On the other, the production of intelligibility schemes of the conjuncture that fall into a certain “politician” optimism: a fetishism of popular *demandas*, taken immediately as political, blind to the complex ensemble that reigns over concrete historical formations in the struggle of the bourgeois class in its antagonism to the working-class struggle. A diagnostic that hypostatize the contingent aspects of the conjuncture, subsuming the structural ones, in a kind of ontologization of a determinate (technical or political) practice.

Those same concerns organize his posthumous volume *Sur la reproduction* (2011), whose main part emerged in a frenzy of writing in the months after the events of 1968. There, Althusser warns of the *politician deviation* that, under the generic term of “domination”, simplifies the Marxist problem of the relationship between economic exploitation and the political and ideological class struggle. And he recognizes its mirrored image in the technological fetishism that confuses the *social* division of labor for a *technical* one. He saw then a double simplification looming over theory which flattened the conjuncture between the “neoanarchist” denunciation of “Power” and an “economist or technocratic” fascination (2011, 68-69). When the climate of revolt would not allow to elicit the price the left would have to pay for unburdening itself from theoretical Marxism, Althusser would insist on the dependence of the vitality of Marxism on the rigorous development of what he called “the point of view of reproduction” based on a conception of *existence as duration*. Starting from the principle of the primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces,

determinant to a *social formation*, the “point of view of reproduction” is indispensable in order to account for any *concrete situation*: where the capitalist relation of production –as a structural relation of dispossession and separation of the labor force from the means of production (see Althusser, 2018b, 144)– is *abstract* with regards to the concrete and contradictory complex of relationships of production and superstructural formations in which its reproduction is given –*as duration and, as such, existence* (Althusser, 2011, 68).

In a social formation, there is not a single intervening mode of production, but one functions in a *dominant* mode in an articulated whole, wherein residual or emerging relations of production strive, but are conditioned by its dominance, in a *complex and contradictory unity*. In this sense, the determined social formation is, in its objective unity, a contradictory combination of temporalities.

In a mode of production, understood as the unity of productive forces and relations of production, it is the *relations of production which play the dominant role* and not the productive forces. And relations of production are not to be confused with either “work” or with “property”: the *social* division of labor is neither the technical division of labor nor the legal forms of its organization (2011, 69).

These two theses situate the historical existence of a social formation as a complex ensemble of concrete relations in which it *lasts*. In this development we find the framework that sustains Pêcheux’ thesis. His references to the French expression *ensemble* have a philosophical worth that Balibar discovers in Marx and develop in the terms of a *transindividual ontology*, underlining its double, material and imaginary, consistence (1993). Milner suggests this with the aporetic expression of *tese-objectivity* (2002). These developments, given the new dimensions starting from Pêcheux’s work, lead us to think that the development of historical materialism requires a (materialist) theory of the discursive processes and formations, to the extent that a singular need may not be conceived of but as a relation of relations in which the imaginary is a part of the concrete materiality (Balibar, 2018).

The Marxist historical totality itself supposes in its structure a double relation, which exists only as overdetermined in its temporal complexity and contradictory materiality. On this terrain, the possibility opens up to think the problem of ideology as an objective overdetermined complex of contradictory processes, and not only as a failed operation of domination or ideal universalization, or as a sociological opposition between two “worlds”. A scheme irreducible to a single interpretation (which would constitute the inversion of a false criticism of the spiritual totality) and the image of the total subsumption of subjects in the technical logic of capital.

V. Towards a materialist theory of discourse

Les vérités de La Palice (Pêcheux, 1975) lays out the consequences of these theses on the terrain of the problem of discourse. But, far from being a mere application, it advances the field of discourse in terms of a *Theory of discursive processes* and develops the problem of historical temporality (which other theories abandon by abandoning the concept of ideology). The category of *overdetermination* constitutes the philosophical framework of his program to develop a *non-subjectivist theory of the subject*, based on a theory of identification and the *material efficacy of the imaginary*.

The development of his conception of the de-centred and necessarily repressed determinations that produce the subject effect as a cause of itself provides an account for the philosophical thickness (and political sense) of Althusser’s intervention that reintroduces the so-called Philosophies of Suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) in a genealogy that extends beyond the XIX Century, including Spinoza in the perpetual battle against idealism –distinguishing itself from Foucault in this respect. His materialist reading of discourse as an exercise of intellection of a constitutive forgetfulness (Haroche, Henry and Pêcheux, 1971) is the fiber that reunites what is only imaginarily experienced as separate: *discourse and decree* (Montag, 2015).

[...] ideology and the unconscious meet: in a forgetting deeper than any memory, because memory is nothing more than the forgetting of forgetting, the rendering absent of the absence that allows us to be stand-ins for ourselves, the disappearance of every gap into the density of a discourse without empty spaces, the writing without margins that covers the page, the uninterrupted murmur of incessant voices. [...] If ideology, in the concrete form of a specific ideological formation, rests on a “primal or originary forgetting”, like Freud’s *Urverdrängung*, it “frees” the subject from the memory of the command that determines what he can and must say. (§ 33)

Pêcheux sets himself the task of elaborating a materialist theory of discursive processes able to account for the *necessary material connexion* between repression and unconscious and ideological subjection. ‘Necessary material’ means that ‘discourse’ does not *exist* but in concrete discursive *processes and formations*. The concept of discourse does not denominate a discursive existence, but the atemporal mechanism of mutual consistency between a signifying articulation and the subject-effect. If the concept of “discourse” is to be upheld, it is in order to name this *material inscription of a double forgetting as a mechanism of subjection*. In this sense “*Trois notes sur la théorie des discours*” (Althusser, 1993) holds a certain familiarity with Lacan’s discourse theory developed in 1969-1970 (1991). Pêcheux, more carefully, uses the category of dispositive for this idea, which Althusser would turn to in order to discuss his “theoretical dispositive”, in his reading of Machiavelli (see Romé, 2019).

It is in this sense that the insistence on conceptualizing *langue* as *base* should be understood. This means understanding it as an atemporal structure, indifferent to history and, therefore, to the class struggle. Pêcheux avoids flattening the dimension of discursive practice onto the structure of *langue*, to uphold the materialist causality that affirms the immanence of the structure in its effects, which is the condition of a theory of history as a *necessity of contingency*

and as a temporal complex that avoids, simultaneously, historicism and formalism.

This is not about replacing the metaphysical and foundationalist image of a metalanguage with the equally metaphysical and foundationalist affirmation of its pure inexistence, in order to affirm a pluralist and relativist ontology of the contingency; it is about affirming the historical existence (*the presence of the absence* of metalanguage) in the contradictory and conflicting form of the class struggle that is fought on the discursive materiality. *Langue* is not a “metalanguage” (an over-structure or a Cause), but an absent cause; a structure that does not exist but in the contradictory complex of its effects.

As Althusser points out, *langue* has no function because *langue* does not exist as such. Only discourses exist, to which it provides the constitutive elements (1993, note 9). Even before the topography of base-superstructure, what Althusser sets in motion, according to Montag, is the rejection of any scheme that may imply an expressive causality, in order to substitute for it the concept of immanent causality inspired by Spinoza. *Langue* does not exist as the “discourse of discourses”: it disappears in the irreducible plurality of discourses (2015). It is the “irreducible plurality”, not of “discourses”, but of the *discursive formations* and *discursive processes* that constitute the concrete of a determinate (discursive) *conjuncture*. *Langue* cannot ever be simply a system governed by rules whose expression follows a legal model. And it only exists as an absence, in the material process of a systematic repression of what Gadet and Pêcheux (Pêcheux and Gadet, 1981, 51) will later call, following Jean-Claude Milner, gaps and contradictions that set this order against itself in a perpetual production of equivocality (Montag, 2015, §17).

Metalanguage is there the (imaginary) experience of significative unity, of an objective, contradictory complex in dominance, of discursive formations in which the structural unity of *langue* exists. Pêcheux inaugurates a theoretical program that enables us to think, at once, historical time and the symbolic order, not only thinking “the time of the Other in the time of our own thought” but inscribing it within a theory of history.

VI. Formation and discursive processes as *conjuncture*

Although Pêcheux does not speak of a “discursive conjuncture”, the idea acts in a practical mode in the concepts of *discursive process* and *discursive formation*. In order to keep the structural category of language from colonizing the discursive formations, thereby reinstating the expressive causality that would turn them into “phenomena”, he identifies the overdetermined action of three structures (the structure of language, the social totality and the psychic structure) in the discursive processes and formations.

Thus, he reintroduces the Althusserian idea of *conjuncture* at the heart of the problem of ideology and manages to comprehend the difference between the structural dimension of ideology –confusingly called “general ideology”– and the conjunctural dimension of historically determined ideological formations –called “particular ideologies” (2011, 209).

The idea of a *dominant ideology* –better understood as “State Ideology” (Althusser, 2011, 92)– is no longer to be confused with the “Ideology in general”, but comprehended as the imaginary effect where an articulated and contradictory material complex with a dominance over the ideological formations exists *as if it was “Ideology in general”*. This is the structural (atemporal) mechanism immanent to those formations, stuck between tendencies and counter tendencies with a dominance.

The “point of view of reproduction” names the analytic approach (of the situation) and is not to be confused with the point of view of the State (which does not distinguish conjuncture and structure). Pêcheux elaborates on this base an analytic of the concrete form of the conjuncture and the articulated and contradictory complexity of the temporalities that make it up.

The concept of *formation* gains theoretical weight with *Sur la reproduction*, from the very definition of *social formation* as a temporal complex, by holding the distinction (and disproportion) between the concepts of social formation and mode of production and affirming that there is always more than one mode of production

in any concrete historical formation. A *social formation* is a *tendentially unified temporal complex*. The diversity of social formations is not due to the existence of an inexhaustible multiplicity of modes of production, but to the singularity of its hierarchical articulation in a complex totality of superstructural formations, overdetermined by this *combination*.

Therefore, it is not possible to account for this complexity if not producing a detour through *conjuncture*. And this should be understood in two ways: 1. That of the *need* for a thought of the conjuncture and 2. a *conjunctural practice of thought*. The Althusserian reading of Marx consists of, first of all, an enterprise of shaping a kind of theory capable of assuming that there is no way of naming the historical complexity without embracing the concrete existence of a singular situation; the main principle of that kind of theoretical thinking is what Althusser calls overdetermination. Althusser laid out this question early on in writings like “*Sur la dialectique matérialiste*” (2005) where he holds that the Marxist problematic inhabits simultaneously Marx’s theoretical practices and the concrete thought of the Marxist political leaders obliged to mobilize the Marxist theory of history with regards to a singular case of the conjuncture they found themselves intervening in. Overdetermination names the *necessary combination* between two temporalities of thought: the thought of the “*fait accompli*” incarnated by the historian and the thought of the task, i.e., the thought of the *fact to accomplish*, which is typically that of man of politics (2005). Althusser returns in 1985 to this idea based on the Spinozist theory of the three genres of knowledge and proposes a kind of epistemology of Marxism and psychoanalysis as *clinical theories*: dispositives of knowledge whose laws do not constitute legal generalizations, but tendential ones, which aim to the singular. They are different from the *experimental test dispositive* of the physical sciences, but rigorous in a knowledge and treatment of the singularities, individual (medicine, analysis) or social (history of a people), already acting on history (politics) (Althusser, 1994).

This very idea of a “theoretical dispositive” appears in his reading of Machiavelli as a counter

mythical dispositive. But the material and spatial evocation of theory as *dispositio* is inspired by the Brechtian theory of theater (Althusser, 1995, 78). And we find it also in Pêcheux, in his conception of Marxism as an “experimental science of history”, articulated with the proletarian political practice: it is *experimental* (in the sense of *experiment*) and not subjective because it breaks with the spontaneous political functioning of the subject-form that is *experience* (*Erfahrung*) (Pêcheux, 1982).

The Pecheutian development of an analytic of discursive formations, and the immanent reading of the ideological mechanism that operates in them, is also produced in the universal-singularity of the case: Althusser arrives at the postulate of the mechanism of interpellation as an atemporal structure, as a result of the analysis of *the concrete complex of formations in which that mechanism exists*, under the dominance of the formation of a *legal ideology*. In the *analytical* sense (from the “*point of view of reproduction*”), the theory of ideology is actually the theory of *legal ideology*. The structural approach to the functioning of this formation will allow us to acknowledge what is atemporal in it: not only in terms of a mechanism that functions experientially as a circle without time, which enables us to understand what the specific ideological formation shares with others –dominant in *other times*– such as the ideological formation of (Christian) religion. But Ideology “in general” is not a *primary form*. The theoretical operation reads the structure immanent to the existing ones without ontologizing it, i.e., without turning it into an autonomous (metaphysical) form of this existence. In analytical terms, this is the “point of view of the State”, the mechanism/form of interpellation that imposes itself on the individuals (imaginarily) as if it were, and in that sense it is, necessary as a structure to the individuals that inhabit them. Any analytic that does not distinguish structure and formation grants either the structures or the empirical subjects a metaphysical priority, and is interior to the “point of view of the State” and, therefore, *reformist*.

This caution is indispensable to provide a dimension for both the materialist specificity and the philosophical and critical magnitude of

a notion of *materiality of the imaginary*, such as the one we have laid out. When Pêcheux distinguishes between Ideology in general, particular ideologies and dominant ideology, he allows us to return to that crucial writing of the Althusserian problematic that is “*Marxisme et humanisme*” (2005) and see that the reading Althusser extracts from that process of rupture brought along the structural features of the ideological mechanism he denominates “interpellation”; and that, therefore, the so-called “Ideology in general” is nothing but the immanent structure of the dominant ideological formation of capitalism: Humanism.

The theory of interpellation is a *clinical* theory in the sense of a reading of the concrete processes in which it exists as its structure. The question is that ideological efficacy consists in the necessary repression of its secondary order and the imaginary restitution of the immediacy of the “world” (forgetting of having forgotten, as Montag says). Thus, the theory of ideology discovers that the retroactive temporality of the State power –the circle Machiavelli discovers, as we pointed out earlier– meets the subject’s retroactivity, who is decreed as such through a double forgetfulness. It is the temporality of a *myth* that makes the narrative experience of existence possible.

VII. Mythical dispositive and theater of consciousness

The Pecheutian theory of discursive processes is the theory of temporal processes necessarily repressed in the discursive formations, with the subject-effect as *causa sui*, which requires the double repression of the de-centred –social and unconscious– determinations that constitute it. Thus, it reads the mutual consistency of the “evidences of the subject and meaning” that are at work in the discursive processes as operations of simplification of the complex historical temporality. Double simplifications: simplification of the procedural complexity of the times articulated in the conjuncture that is lived as the “Present”; and simplification of the temporality

of the subjectivation processes in the retroactivity that enables the subjects' experience as if they were "always already" subjects, which Pêcheux describes as "metaphysical figures" of the type of *Münchhausen* (1982, 101-109).

The combination of these two orders of simplification is at the core of the imaginary scene identified as the "theater of consciousness", which the Althusserian concept of *interpellation* has the merit of exposing. In it, we find once again the relation between image and force as a relation between State power and "psychic violence":

This figure, associated both with religion and with the police ("You, for whom I have shed this drop of my blood" / "Hey, you, there!"), has the advantage, first of all that, through this double meaning of the word "interpellation", it makes palpable the superstructural link [...] between the 'subject in law' (he who enters into contractual relations with other subjects in law, his equals) and the ideological subject (he who says of himself: 'It's me!') It has the second advantage that it presents this link in such a way that the theatre of consciousness (I see, I think, I speak, I see you, I speak to you, etc.) is observed from behind the scenes, from the place where one can grasp the fact that the subject is spoken *of*, the subject is spoken *to*, before the subject can say: 'I speak'. (1982, 105-106)

Interpellation, as a concept that exposes the *scenic* backdrop of consciousness, exposes the mechanism through which the experience of identity operates in a phenomenological space and a non-dialectical time, whose condition is the forgetting of the superstructural (overdetermined) bond between the (legal, ideological) apparatuses and the structures of certain discursive formations ("Hey, you...", "You, for whom...") and the divergent process of identification, whose result is a subject "identical to itself".

The theatrical metaphor constitutes a strong claim in the effort to read the mutual consistency of eccentric (historical) determinations of ideology and the eccentric (unconscious) determinations of the psyche. Drawing on Brecht,

Althusser uncovers the *topique* of the *phenomenological drama*, that:

[...] gave us tragedy, its conditions and its 'dialectic', completely reflected in the speculative consciousness of a central character [...] What is the ideology of a society or a period if it is not that society's or period's consciousness of itself, that is, an immediate material which spontaneously implies, looks for and naturally finds its forms in the image of a consciousness of self living the totality of its world in the transparency of its own myths? (2005, 144)

Every myth describes a spatial interiority and a non-dialectical temporality or a fake circular dialectic that produces an experience of its own situation under the dramatic-dialectical mode. Against this concentric topography, Marx's materialist principle of historical time warns us that "there is no dialectic of consciousness: no dialectic of consciousness which could reach reality itself by virtue of its own contradictions; in short, there can be no 'phenomenology' in the Hegelian sense" (144).

It is no coincidence that the theatrical evocation and the reference to the structure of myth also meet in the genealogy of the Freudian concept of "original phantasies" (*Urphantasien*) – whose naturalist predecessor are the "original scenes" (*Urszenen*). Like Marx, Freud inherited and challenged at once the epistemic distinction between the imaginary and the real, starting with the problem of *temporality*.

Fantasies are "imaginary scripts" in which the subject finds itself present and in which it represents its origin (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1974). "As collective myths", they attempt to provide a solution to the enigma of the origin (and its suspended temporality): they *stage* the moment of emergence of the individual, as the "origin of a history...". It is so that they represent its Cause: "[they] represent, in a shape more or less deformed by defensive processes, the realization of a desire and, ultimately, an unconscious desire" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1974). "Scenes" in which the subject is always present, including the primary scene (of its conception) from which it would seem to be excluded and in which

it participates through the permutation of roles, attributions and syntactic changes, like Freud outlines in the neurotic's family romances [1909].

Fragments of "Family romances" were integrated through quotations and paraphrases in the work of Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1909) which affirms that the manifestation of the intimate relationship that exists between dream and myth fully justifies the interpretation of myth as the dream of a people. "The child's self-behaves like the hero of the myth, and the hero should actually be always interpreted simply as a collective self..." (1909, 63-68).

The myth functions as a discursive dispositive that allows to identify the tautological effect of the *retroactive* temporality of interpellation, in whose paradox the subject is produced as if having *always already been a subject* and the social order as if derived from an anthropology: "the 'evidentness' of identity conceals the fact that it is the result of an identification-interpellation of the subject, whose alien origin is nevertheless 'strangely familiar' to him'" (Pêcheux, 1982,107)

That said, what Pêcheux enables us to think and contributes substantially to the materialist approach to ideology is that the Freudian temporality of estrangement in the experience of the sameness, which consecrates the effect of the interpellation as the reunification of a mis-adjustment, finds its existence in the discursive materiality of the syntactic incrustation –called "preconstructed" (107). A repressed temporal separation, distance or gap in the phrase, between what is pretended to have been thought before, elsewhere or independently, and what is contained in the global affirmation of the phrase. This is the *material* reason of the paradox of the indetermination of first names: they reject any determination (in spite of requiring it *by necessity*) because other terms, without being such, offer a placement from which they support their imaginary effect of singular designation: "designation by a proper name correlatively implies the possibility of designating 'the same thing' by a periphrasis like 'he who...'" (65). Pêcheux reaches thus the syntactic level of discursive formations to re-inscribe the conflictive consistency of the imaginary materiality in their *dispositio*.

Montag locates in the Spinozan background the ambivalence between demand and decree –which Freud was also aware of– in order to bring out the politicity that is inherent to discourse. In syntax, one finds "the paradoxical *retroactive temporality* in which the effects of hegemony are at the same time product and condition for the birth of a new State" (Pêcheux, 1982, 65). Then, the dimension of the *command* that any *demand* conceals is deactivated when its discursive form is made visible.

To read the discursive form, reality, is for Pêcheux to reformulate it as command, thereby inscribing it in a scene of discipline and punishment: one cannot ignore a command without impunity. [...] the command present itself as an act of both illocutionary and physical force : it is expressed in such phrases as "everyone knows that..." or "as anyone can see" (...) To formulate the command as command, to translate it into itself, is to disobey one of its most important orders : it is thus both the cause and effect of a shift in power relations. (Montag, 2015, §29)

But, to the extent that any ritual is forced to come to pass, to repeat itself materially, it is –says Montag– exposed to "infelicities", "mis-statements" that may be the *occasion* for something new: "*il n'ya cause que de ce qui cloche*" (2015, §12).

Pêcheux allows us to understand politics in the strong meaning of a radical transformation, without replacing the concept of class struggle for autonomy of politics turned ontology. In this sense, the opportunity (the *chance*?) is inscribed as an *internal distance* in the *complex assemblage of the existent*, –only to be experienced as a *familiar strangeness*. A liminal space, the immanent border that indicates an *irrepresentable* limit in the discursive materiality that systematically escapes and marks thought with real historical tensions, while it symptomatizes its incapacity to capture them immediately and to offer its Concept.

And the –necessarily displaced– presentation of the irrepresentable is the point where, reading Machiavelli, Althusser (1995 [1972-1986], 54; see Romé, 2019) discovers the suspended

temporality of that *unsettling familiarity* that evokes the Freudian notion of *Unheimlichkeit* and allows us to outline the opening of the conjuncture to the opportunity for political action.

VIII. Concluding remarks

With Pêcheux, disperse and fragmentary developments could be brought together through the weak but suggestive thread that connects the critique of idealist and empiricist epistemology under the “religious myth of reading” of a manifest discourse (Althusser, 2005); materialist critiques of classic theater, inspired by Brecht and Bertolazzi (Althusser, 2005); critiques of the political anthropologies of the “State of Nature” that replicate the scheme of the *Edenic Myth* (Pêcheux, 2014 [1978]); and the references to the *theoretical dispositive* in Machiavelli (1995 [1972-1986]). It is a weak connection, where the discursive questions are invoked apropos other questions, regarding science, theology, politics, etc.

The Pecheutian operation *produces* the discursive question that pushes the Althusserian theory of ideology forward. The emphasis on the *scenic* condition of interpellation brings forth the weight of fantasy and desire as constitutive components of the materiality of power—the “psychic violence” of the decree—both in the ideological operation as well as in its discursive existences. It takes the interweaving of ideology and discourse to an extreme point that allows us to recover the epistemic sense of *conjunctural thinking*.

The materialist stake of a theory of discursive processes is rooted at the same time in the Freudian theoretical novelty, which, among other things, exposes the bond between fantasy and unconscious repression, and in the Marxist theoretical novelty, which, among other things, breaks away from the myth of the small producer by developing its theory of primitive accumulation. In both cases, a complex, plural and non-contemporaneous conceptualization of temporality is set in motion. It is that complexity which remains ignored in the theories of discourse that only ask the question about its mechanism, ignoring

the problem of the origin (or pretending to resolve it with an ontological jump toward an affirmation of pure contingency). The reading of the mythical fantasy as a dispositive of discursive production clarifies that it requires the repression of the material objectivity of the imaginary; in other words, the complex transindividual, overdetermined—hierarchical and unevenly articulated—*ensemble* of apparatuses and real discursive formations of a given conjuncture (educational, moral, legal, etc.) whose concrete existence as a *contradictory unity in dominance* is a product of the determined state of the class struggle, in the context of a given social formation. The class struggle does not respond to any kind of sociological position, nor to a *combat between ideologies* (neither “proletarian and bourgeois”, nor “dominant and subordinate”), as Althusser denounces as a reformist reading of the Gramscian theory of hegemony (2018a). The primacy of the class struggle may only be read in the concreteness of an order of *formations* that exists as a (metastable) equilibrium between contradicting relations of production and the transformation of the articulated complex in dominance. That means, in a determinate conjuncture, and never “in general”: never in a structural comprehension of its formal mechanisms, which, flattened onto the conjuncture (without a concrete analysis of the situation) reproduce the “point of view of the State”.

Pêcheux understands better than Althusser his thesis about the clinical theory of temporality in the analytic of the “case”: “it is only possible to give a content to the concept of historical time by defining historical time as the specific form of existence of the social totality under consideration, an existence in which different structural levels of temporality interfere” (Althusser and Balibar 1970, [1968] 109).

And he produces *avant la lettre* the critique of the process that operates today as the supposed “overcoming” of the concepts of class struggle and unconscious, not only in the images proper to common sense, but also in the abstractions and ontologizations that slip into the field of allegedly critical thought.

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