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A Dislocation without a Subject. Althusser, Laclau and Spinoza

Abstract: *This article studies the relation between Laclau's concept of dislocation and Althusser's concept of structural causality, to demonstrate that the hegemonic articulation of identities cannot be ascribed to the operation of a subject, since it can only be sustained by a social force that can either block or mobilise processes of subjectivation.*

Keywords: *Laclau, Althusser, Spinoza, dislocation, structural causality, overdetermination.*

Resumen: *Este artículo estudia la relación entre el concepto de dislocación de Laclau y el concepto de causalidad estructural de Althusser, para demostrar que la articulación hegemónica de identidades no puede serle adscrita a la operación de un sujeto, pues solo puede ser sostenida por una fuerza social que bloquee o movilice procesos de subjetivación.*

Palabras clave: *Laclau, Althusser, Spinoza, Dislocación, Causalidad estructural, Sobredeterminación.*

Dislocation is, in Ernesto Laclau's work, the name for the fundamental condition of the political. The constitutive contingency of the social structure means that the construction and destruction of the equally impossible and necessary fullness of society becomes a matter of political action. In this article, I argue that a similar conception of the dislocation of the structure is already at work in one of Laclau's main

sources, Louis Althusser, and particularly in his interpretation of the Spinozist concept of immanent causality. The interest of this analysis lies in the link that Laclau establishes between the notion of dislocation and the idea that any social contradiction is always already overdetermined by all the other contradictions. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the latter idea is borrowed by Laclau and Mouffe from Althusser in order to put forth their central claim that any social identity is the result of its articulation to other identities. By bringing together the notions of dislocation and overdetermination, and by showing that the former is already present in the Althusserian account of immanent causality, I counter their main critique of Althusser: the affirmation of the essential incompatibility of the concept of overdetermination with the Spinozist basis of Althusser's thought. It is in fact precisely through the concept of immanent causality that Althusser is able to think the structure's constitutive dislocation and the necessity of overdetermination. The proximity of Althusser to Laclau will therefore become fully manifest by opposing Laclau's understanding of his own relation to the former. However, this investigation enables us to grasp a more fundamental point of separation between the two authors. In particular, I will claim that, from an Althusserian point of view, the structure's dislocation cannot immediately coincide with the subject, as Laclau asserts.¹

How does Laclau settle the problem of his relation to Althusser? In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Laclau and Mouffe argue that the concept of overdetermination implies



a comprehension of the social as a symbolic order. As such, the social lacks the ultimate literality of an essence and can never objectively and positively constitute itself as a totality. Its regularity consists in the precarious articulations of its elements –articulations that can always be undone and renewed by political action. Laclau, however, refuses Althusser's attempt to anchor these articulations of the social in the determination in the last instance by the economy. In fact, this unilateral determination contradicts the symbolic dimension entailed by overdetermination and prevents recognition of the fundamental lack that constitutes every social structure (2001, 97-105). According to Laclau, this aspect of Althusser's philosophy entails a conception of the subject as an effect of ideology, which ensures the reproduction of a fully objective and positive social structure. In *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Laclau explicitly links this contradiction to the Spinozist horizon of Althusser's philosophy:

In the Althusserian formulation –with all its implicit Spinozism– the central point is the production of the 'subject effect' as an internal moment of the process of reproduction of the social whole. Instead of seeing in 'identification' an ambiguous process that shows the limits of objectivity, the former becomes precisely the opposite: an internal requirement of objectivity in the process of its self-constitution (in Spinozian terms, the subject is substance). (1990, 186)

Laclau thus contends that Althusser's thought should be purified of all instances that undermine his account of overdetermination.² However, in what follows I will try to show that if Laclau is right to affirm that the Althusserian theory of the subject-effect does not allow thinking the subject as the constitutive lack of the positivity and objectivity of the structure, this does not mean that Althusser could not think this lack at all. On the contrary, Althusser formulates a concept of dislocation that is ultimately incompatible with the Lacanian notion of the subject advocated by Laclau.

Every significant structuralist since Levi-Strauss (1987) shares the following basic assumptions that, as we shall see, are also present in the thought of Laclau. Any element of a structure is differentially defined by its articulation to the other elements; there is no transcendent element escaping this rule and granting closure to the system because such an element would have no relation to the structure. Therefore, the structurality of the structure, the fact that the structure is something more than a formless series of shifts from one element to another and has a certain unity, can only be granted by an element that is at the same time present within the structure as an articulated element and absent from it. This element stands for the existence of a demarcation of inclusion from exclusion –a demarcation that is as such emptied of any content. The structuration of the structure is precisely the temporary result of the both necessary and impossible attempt to produce a meaningful totality by filling in this absence, that is, by assigning some content to this empty element.

Alain Badiou (1967) shows that Althusser formulates a similar conception of the structurality of the structure.³ In the social whole, as Althusser conceives it, there are distinct and determined practices. Their distinction and determination are produced by their differential articulation to other practices. When a practice is connected to the others Althusser terms it an instance. He then adds that in the social whole, there is always a dominant instance that secures the unity of the whole by assigning a specific efficacy to its elements. The role of the dominant instance can shift from one instance to the other, inasmuch as it is not essentially assigned to any specific content. This articulation structured according to a dominant instance is what Althusser calls a conjuncture, and the reflection of this articulation upon every instance of the whole is what he calls overdetermination. In order to explain the production of this articulation, that is, the production of what Badiou calls 'the conjuncture-effect', Althusser has to introduce a new kind of determination: determination in the last instance. Yet this kind of determination cannot be produced by any of the articulated instances⁴ insofar as they are all defined by their

specific place in the articulated whole and cannot precede the conjuncture-effect. In fact, even the instance that is generally called economy cannot produce this kind of determination. From this standpoint, it is incorrect to claim that in Althusser determination in the last instance reintroduces a unilateral determination that erases overdetermination. In fact, the determination in the last instance can only be produced by an absence that is merely represented within the whole by a lieutenant: the dominant instance. This is why,

If no instance can determine the whole, it is possible on the contrary that a practice, considered in its specific structure, a structure, so to say, dislocated (*décalée*) with regard to the structure that articulates this practice as an instance of the whole, is determinant with regard to the whole in which it is present in a decentred form. (...) [T]he shifting of the dominant and the correlative distortion of the conjuncture is the effect of the fact that one of the instances is underlain by a structure-of-practice that does not coincide with the instance that represents it in the whole. (Badiou, 1967, 456)

Now, in order to understand how this determination works, it is necessary to approach it in the light of the Althusserian conception of structural causality. Here the philosophy of Spinoza becomes crucial. To explain this kind of causality, in *Reading Capital*, Althusser affirms that

The effects [of a structure] are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives *to imprint its mark*: [...] the structure is immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, [...] *the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*, [...] the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects. (Althusser and Balibar, 2009, 208-209)

Althusser contends that structures as well as their elements are the result of the process of structuration or of effectuation itself. Hence, the latter is a process producing interiority without

any preceding interiority that exteriorises itself. As recent research has shown, this idea is consistent with Spinoza's account of immanent causality. In fact, in contrast to Leibniz's inscription of the relation in the interiority of an essence, for Spinoza 'any interiority is constituted by relations that are external to their elements' (Lærke, 2009, 172). Spinoza thus replaces an interiority that 'imprints its mark' on a space of elements external to it, with the pure exteriority of relations that produce interiority by relating (and therefore producing) their own terms. The structure is immanent to its effects because it coincides with the process that produces these effects through the production of their relations. It thereby constitutes them as the internal elements of a whole that assigns to them their own interiority. Now, if this movement of articulation is not the expression of some underlying interiority, then the structure is always ridden by an instability preventing its closure and its infinite reproduction. As we shall see, it is in fact dependent on an exteriority that is constitutive of its interiority.

This is why the structure is always dislocated. If the structure only consists in an actual articulation of relations that is not the expression of a preceding interiority, then the element lacking is its own ultimate consistency as a structure. Thus this void is the structure itself as an entity posed independently of its effects.⁵ If this is the case, the fixation of the dominant instance and the consequent overdetermination of all the instances is the precarious embodiment of the impossible consistency of the structure. This does not mean that overdetermination simply ensures the reproduction of the structure, as this would patently contradict Althusser's thought. It rather indicates the mechanism whereby a specific articulation of instances –the conjuncture– results in a structure in dominance that is reflected upon the instances in such a way as to determine their efficacy.⁶ While the structure depends upon a specific articulation of its instances for its existence, thus being necessarily dislocated, it is nonetheless reflected upon these instances, thereby gaining an unstable consistency.⁷ Determination in the last instance –the production of the conjuncture-effect– coincides with the dislocation of the structure with regard

to its effects, that is, with the process that produces the articulation of its elements. This dislocation creates a void whose efficacy is reflected in the overdetermined character of the whole. The consequence of this reading is that certain ambiguities concerning the last instance (and the very notion of instance) can be redressed. In fact, the economy has to lose any notional primacy because the representative of the void within the whole is only the shifting dominant instance that precariously fixes the dislocated structure. What on the contrary should be retained is the idea of a determination in the last instance by a 'structure-of-practice' which exists only in a dislocated form through the production of its effects and is therefore unidentifiable (or merely represented by a lieutenant) within the structured whole. In this sense, it is possible to reaffirm that 'from the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the "last instance" never comes' (Althusser, 2005, 113).⁸

Laclau's conception of the structurality of the structure seems consistent with this Althusserian theorisation of structural causality and overdetermination. In fact, Laclau claims that every particular identity is determined by its differential relations to other particular identities. However, 'without limits through which a (non-dialectical) negativity is constructed, we would have an indefinite dispersion of differences whose absence of systematic limits would make any differential identity impossible' (2007, 52). Since this systematic limit cannot be assured by a new difference,

The system [...] is present, if you want, through its absence. [...] [I]f that impossible object –the system– cannot be represented but needs, however, to show itself within the field of representation, the means of that representation will be constitutively inadequate. Only the particulars are such means. As a result the systematicity of the system, the moment of its impossible totalisation, will be symbolized by particulars which contingently assume such a representative function. (2007, 53)

The overdetermination that defines each element of the structure according to its relations

to the other elements of the structure is therefore produced by the very absence of the structure, as an entity independent from the process of structuration itself –an absence that can merely be represented by one element of the structured system.

However, even though they share a similar conception of the structurality of the structure, the structured elements that the two authors take into account are different. While Althusser focuses on practices, instances and contradictions, Laclau analyses discourses, identities and antagonisms. This difference leads to the problem of the materialist or idealist character of Laclau's thought. However, rather than insisting on this question, that has already been debated at length⁹ and whose treatment would at least require a precise identification of the 'dividing line' between materialism and idealism (is discourse less 'material' than economy or should we not admit with Althusser that 'matter can be discussed in many senses'? – the difference between materialism and idealism then lying in the way in which we understand the constitution of any object, as 'immaterial' as it may seem), I will concentrate on a problem that still persists in my account of Althusser's Spinozism and that could be instrumental in shedding some light not only upon it, but also upon what distinguishes it from Laclau's position.

My account of structural causality led me to acknowledge a fundamental relation between dislocation and the void of the structure. How is this conception of the void of the structure compatible with the Spinozist principle of the full positivity of being? In other words, how can the coincidence of absence with immanence be understood? The void of the structure marks the impossibility of the totalisation of the process of structuration of the social whole, that is, the impossible consistency of the structure itself. However, from a Spinozist point of view, this impossibility is not the result of an ultimate lack of being. Rather it results from the inscription of any process of structuration in the infinite and untalisable productivity of the substance that continuously ties and unties the temporary fixations of its modes. This means that the structurality of the structure depends on its capacity

to counter the dislocating forces of the 'field of productivity' in which it is inscribed. I must thus stress the importance of distinguishing Spinoza's God from Althusser's social whole.¹⁰ The latter is an unstable structuration of elements produced by a multiplicity of relations always contingent upon others relations. It is what Spinoza calls a complex individual. The former is on the contrary the name of the infinite productivity of the articulations of individuals itself, i.e. of relation as producing the related individuals.¹¹ This productivity is of course absolutely necessary because it cannot be determined by any free subject. However, this necessity is not that of an essence in which all its possible relations are always already inscribed, but of an essence that coincides with its relational potency, with its existence: an *actuosa essentia*. The arising of relations is thus necessary, but this necessity coincides with contingency inasmuch as it is not always already recorded in an order that reality ought to respect.¹² Only by taking this distinction between Althusser's social whole and Spinoza's God into account, can we understand the complex kind of determination implied by immanent causality and the role of dislocation in Althusser's theorization of the structure. Any structure is in principle dislocated (and thus void) because of its dependence on the excessive productivity of relations that unceasingly construct and destruct the temporary structurations that embody it. The attempt to embody the impossible consistency of the structure or to fill in its void, aims precisely to render a temporary structuration immune to these dislocating effects. From this point of view, the late Althusser is right to state that Spinoza's God is the ultimate void. Vittorio Morfino explains this idea by asserting that its infinite productivity 'lets reality in its entire facticity rise from the ashes of the great hypostasis of metaphysics' (Morfino, 2002, 151). In other words, Spinoza's God 'voids' any attempt to hypostatise a particular structure as an entity fully consistent and independent from the contingent process of its structuration. As the very principle of dislocation, it unceasingly produces the void of any structure.¹³

Even this conception of the substance does not seem too different from Laclau and Mouffe's

idea of a 'field of discursivity' in which every discourse is situated and that determines 'the impossibility of any given discourse to implement a final suture' (2001, 111). In fact, this idea implies that

Against the essentialist vision we tend [...] to accept the *infinitude of the social*, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an 'excess of meaning' which it is unable to master and that, consequently, 'society' as a unitary and intelligible object that grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility. (Laclau, 1990, 90)

This excess is understood by Laclau as a 'constitutive outside': 'there is always a constitutive outside which deforms and threatens the "system" and this very fact means that the latter can only have the status of a *hegemonic* attempt at articulation, not of a ground' (1990, 214).¹⁴ We can thus understand dislocation as 'the *disruption* of a structure by forces operating *outside* it' (1990, 50).¹⁵

Some doubts could however still be formulated as to the possibility of thinking the emergence of a structure, as unstable and precarious as it may be, out of the infinite and untotalisable productivity of the substance. By claiming that the void of the structure coincides with the infinite and untotalisable productivity of the substance, do we not risk erasing the specific efficacy of this void, namely the mobilisation of the impossible and necessary process of filling it in, which is the base of any form of unity? In Laclau's thought, at least after the adoption of Žižek's Lacanian critique,¹⁶ this problem is solved with the introduction of an idea that seems to entail a first essential difference with regard to a Spinozist perspective. According to Laclau, if the 'constitutive outside' is immediately constituted by the inside as a 'negativity' that both prevents and forces it to attain a full identity, it is because of a more fundamental lack that prevents every identity from being fully itself. Thus, this lack dialectically produces a tendency to its fulfilment. Inasmuch as he rejects the idea of an ultimate and constitutive lack of being,

a Spinozist attempt to answer these questions has to go through another path that implies the idea that every thing strives to persist in its being.¹⁷ If any process of structuration is inscribed in, produced and dislocated by an untotalisable field, then for any individuality to persist in its being it is necessary to counter the process that unceasingly voids its own structure even though it is on this same process that its structuration depend. In order to explain how this is possible, a last central notion constructed by Althusser in the light of Spinoza's philosophy (namely of his theory of imagination) has to be introduced: the notion of ideology. In fact, any closed totality can only be the result of an ideological totalisation that fills in the void of the structure – a totalisation that, in other words, fixes the infinite productivity of the processes of structuration. The precarious result of a process of structuration, with its specific relations of dominance and overdetermination, is therefore turned by ideology into an eternal form bound to reproduce itself indefinitely.¹⁸ In my opinion, this is why Balibar has enigmatically wondered 'if in Althusser [...] ideology is not simply the other name of the structure' (2012, xiv): ideology, to play with an Althusserian expression, produces 'the sentiment' of the structure.¹⁹ In this sense, ideology, by entertaining a sort of mirror relation with the last instance, becomes hardly identifiable as one of the instances of the social whole; it rather permeates every instance and every practice, by expressing 'the way men live the relation between them and their conditions of existence' (Althusser, 2005, 233). The role of ideology is thus absolutely crucial: as Giorgos Fourtounis has claimed in a thought-provoking article on Althusser's immanentist structuralism, a serious immanentist perspective, veritably aiming to refute any form of transcendence, far from relying on a formless transitive causality, recognises and explains the existence of a 'transcendent remainder' that it strives to annihilate (2005, 116). This is why Althusser claims that science is always a science of ideology. The science of the conjuncture is in fact a movement that brings a structure – that is the ideological totalisation of a specific structuration of the social whole – back to its inscription in a wider field of

productivity, thereby unveiling its contingency, i.e. its structurality.

The question of ideology allows me finally to determine the most fundamental difference between Althusser and Laclau. It is here that the question of the subject plays a fundamental role. From an Althusserian point of view, ideology is that which grants consistency to a structure for a subject. The subject is thus conceived as the referent of ideology in its production of the totalisation of a process of structuration and is essentially linked to the reproduction of a structure. Laclau is right to state that a theory of the subject is absent from Althusser, if by 'subject' we mean the point where the structure's full determination is hindered, and to link this absence to Althusser's Spinozism. However, this lack of a theory of the subject does not mean that the structure is necessarily bound to reproduce itself indefinitely. The difference between the two authors resides in the fact that, in spite of accounting for the dislocation of the structure, Althusser would refuse Laclau's conceptualisation in which 'subject equals the pure form of the structure's dislocation, of its ineradicable distance from itself' (Laclau, 1990, 60).²⁰ Marking his distance from Lacan, Althusser insists precisely on this point in a text of 1967 called 'Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses': 'there is no *split, divided* subject; [...] next to the *Ich* there is a "*Spaltung*", that is to say properly an *abyss*, a precipice, a lack, a gap. This abyss is not a subject, but is something open *next to a subject*' (1993, 165).²¹ We can now suggest that this abyss is produced by the conflict between a particular structuration of the social that tends to close itself in a wholly structured totality and its inscription in the process of the infinite productivity of the substance. What we are dealing with here is thus not the opposition between the necessity of a structure and the opening of a variety of possibilities that a subject could freely seize, but with a wholly necessary process where a structural necessity is subverted by a force (reminiscent of Badiou's structure-of-practice). This is why I would suggest understanding this conflict in the light of the opposition between structure and force introduced by Derrida in *Writing and Difference*.²²

This notion of force is particularly useful because of its proximity to Laclau's concept of decision, a proximity which confirms what distinguishes him from Althusser and reaffirms points of their possible encounter. In fact, if Laclau refuses to conceive the subject as a self-determining instance by recognising the limitations imposed by the possibilities opened up by the structure's dislocation, he preserves the space for a free choice between those possibilities.²³ Equalling the structure's dislocation, the subject thus becomes 'the distance between the undecidable structure and the decision' (Laclau, 1990, 30). Here a problematic alternative opens up for Laclau: either these possibilities are all equally compelling and the decision is blocked by a kind of liberty of indifference, or one possibility is more compelling (Laclau would say 'credible') than the others. In the latter case, however, it is not a possibility anymore, but rather a force that captures the choice of the subject or is necessarily invested by the subject.²⁴ Only by assuming this second option, which entails the identification of decision with force and the separation of decision from choice, it is possible to claim, as Laclau does elsewhere, that the decision is 'a complex situation whose mechanisms –largely unconscious– escape the "subject" of the decision; and that this subject does not precede the decision, but is rather the product of the latter' (Laclau, 2004, 307). Decision thus becomes the inscription of one's agency in a force and subjectivation becomes the retroactive result of the stabilisation of the force as a structure. Hence, the proximity between Laclau and Althusser is operating even at the very core of their point of separation. Of course, this Spinozist conception, insofar as it deprives possibility of an ontological status, seems ultimately incompatible with Laclau's tendency to identify decision and choice. However, we should remember that the kind of necessity that this conception implies is neither unilateral nor blind. It is not unilateral because it coincides with the contingency of an essence that is only defined by its relations, thereby implying that other articulations can arise that untie the necessity of the given ones. It is not (at least not necessarily) blind because knowledge can intervene in it by linking the structure to the infinite field of

relations, thereby opening the space for a force to impose itself on the subject –a force that, unknotting the stabilised forms of power, produces new articulations that could increase the individuals' acting potency.

In this article I have insisted on the affinities between Laclau's theory of dislocation and the Althusserian conception of structural causality. The latter, far from contradicting the overdetermined character of the social whole, explains the necessary dependence of the structure upon the contingent process of structuration of its elements, and therefore the fact that the structure is always dislocated. It consequently allows us to conceptualise overdetermination as the way in which the precarious result of this process, namely the structure itself, is in turn reflected upon its elements –a kind of reflection that always risks producing an ideological totalisation of the structure, ultimately erasing overdetermination. I have however shown that these affinities entail some essential differences and that, even more interestingly, these differences are reflected in Laclau's own thought in the form of a series of tensions.

The first difference lies in Laclau's conception of the constitutive lack or negativity of every identity as opposed to Spinoza's idea that the void of the structure is nothing but the effect upon its *conatus* of the positive forces of the infinite productivity of the substance. In Laclau's thought this difference is reflected in the tension between the idea of a 'constitutive outside', with all its resonances with a certain understanding of the Spinozist conception of the substance, and the idea of an ultimate lack in the subject. The second and most important difference lies in the Laclauian identification of dislocation with the subject as opposed to the Spinozist identification of dislocation with a force. This difference is reflected in Laclau's thought in the tension between force and choice that inhabits his concept of decision. In the light of this analysis, a last question should be posed: can the Spinozism of Althusser add something to (or eventually displace) Laclau's conception of the political? I would suggest that, instead of reducing political action to the interplay between processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation, Althusser's

philosophy summons it to turn its attention, both practically and theoretically, to its irreducible outside, that is, to the processes of dislocation that exceed, instead of simply overlapping with, those processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation, either blocking them or allowing them to be mobilised anew.²⁵

Notes

1. While it would be worthwhile to expound on the optimal approach to Spinoza, Althusser and their relation in order to avoid some easy misunderstandings, I will have to limit myself to briefly indicate that to understand Spinoza's importance for Althusser, it is crucial to remove the Hegelian glasses through which the former is usually read (and which Laclau himself wears in the rare passages of his work where Spinoza is mentioned). This means that Spinoza should not be interpreted as the first, insufficient step towards Hegel and subsequently as entirely belonging to the same rationalist tradition. The fact that, as Hegel said, Spinoza's substance is not subject, does not mean that Spinoza's substance is contradictory unless it is turned into its own subject, as Hegel did, but that his conception of the substance is simply incompatible with the one of Hegel. The most important attempt to read Spinoza from this point of view is still Macherey (2011). See also Montag and Stolze (1997).
2. To sum this up in another way I could say that, in the eyes of Laclau, if his own work can be considered as a radicalisation of some themes developed by Althusser (Laclau, 1990, 178), this is true only insofar as the Althusser of 1962, that is, the author of 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (2005), is concerned, while the Althusser of 'On the Materialist Dialectic' (2005), *Reading Capital* (2009) and 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' has to be radically criticised (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 98).
3. Emilio de Ípola proposes an in-depth analysis of Badiou's interpretation by confronting it to its Lévi-Straussian and Lacanian sources and to the conception of the structure that Jacques-Alain Miller was developing at the same time (de Ípola, 2012, chapter 2).
4. If this was the case, we would have a kind causality such that we would be either unable to fix the infinite series of determinations and thus to introduce any kind of unity, or forced to fix this series by hypostatizing one of its elements – for example, the economical instance.
5. If the structure were separated from its effects, a kind of 'expressive causality' would be reached, where a transcendent principle is imprinted in every element of the whole. It would be easy to show how transitive causality (see note 4) and expressive causality ultimately communicate: they both result in a kind of hypostatisation.
6. From this analysis I could infer that rather than simply coinciding, as Althusser himself sometimes suggested, structural causality and overdetermination are better described as the two sides of the same coin. They account for the same process by approaching it respectively from the point of view of the structure and from the point of view of its effects. This idea could eventually lead to also distinguish structural or immanent causality from metonymical causality as expressing the same process from two different points of view.
7. In this sense, overdetermination is at work both when the specific articulation of the instances produces a situation of 'underdetermination' and when it produces a 'condensation' of contradictions, that is, when the reproduction of the structure is in danger.
8. We could therefore reintroduce the distinction between economy as a specific instance of the structure and production as the absent and immanent cause of the social whole. Laclau himself proposes such a distinction in one of his early works (Laclau, 2011, 75-76). This article could of course be opposed to my interpretation of the Althusserian conception of the last instance. In fact, it criticises Balibar's (and indirectly Althusser's) conception of the last instance as it is developed in *Reading Capital*, asserting that 'Balibar accepts the notions of "economic base" or "economic level"' as simple synonyms of "level of production"' (74) thereby introducing a kind of self-sufficient 'economy' as the transhistorical embodiment of the last instance. This is why 'economy' plays the role of determining which instance has to ensure the extraction of surplus labour; that is, which instance is dominant. The level of generality that I assume in this article by studying the relation between Althusser and Spinoza obliges me (or rather allows me) to avoid this crucial problem that would require a global reassessment of the Althusserian reformulation of historical materialism and an in-depth analysis

- of Althusser's (and Balibar's) self-criticism. For such a reassessment, see Bruschi, 2020. I would only say that it is in my view possible to establish a continuity between *Reading Capital* and the last works of Althusser on the 'materialism of the encounter' (2006), which radically erase every possibility of subordinating the contingent structuration of a mode of production to the rule of some transhistorical instance preceding this structuration. The principle of such a 'retroactive' reading of *Reading Capital* could be founded for instance upon the idea that 'there is no *immediate* grasp of the economic, there is no economic "given", any more that there is any immediately "given" effectivity in any of the levels. (...) The identification of the economic is achieved by *the construction of its object*, which presupposes a definition of the specific existence and articulation of the different levels of the structure of the whole, as they are necessarily implied by the structure of the mode of production considered. (...) It is probable that the majority of the difficulties of contemporary ethnology and anthropology arise from their approaching the "facts", the "givens" of (descriptive) ethnography, without taking the theoretical precaution of constructing the concept of their object: this omission commits them to projecting on to reality the categories which define the economic for them in practice, i.e., the categories of the economics of contemporary society' (Althusser and Balibar, 2009, 197-198). If we link this idea with the affirmation that the Marxian 'discovery' of the concept of surplus value destroys political economy's vision of economy as a self-sufficient homogenous space (Part II, Ch. 7-8), we understand how Althusser aimed to bring to light the dependence of economy upon a specific structuration of production which is always 'political', thereby disrupting any 'fixed' distinction between instances and the identification of a self-sufficient transhistorical 'economic' instance as the last instance. Of course, it could still be possible to claim with Laclau that, in *Reading Capital*, Balibar has nevertheless not gone far enough in this work of theoretical construction.
9. For a critique of Laclau from an Althusserian point of view that insists on this problem, see Lewis, 2005. Laclau and Mouffe have also directly approached the question of materialism and idealism in 'Post-Marxism without Apologies' (Laclau, 1990).
 10. The importance of this distinction has been underlined in Thomas (2002).
 11. Here, the unavoidable spatial figurations that I will employ (in particular the distinction between inside and outside) encounter their limits. The outside in which a structure is inscribed is in fact the very relation between an inside and an outside, preceding and producing these two terms.
 12. This idea seems to contradict the Spinozist text, where contingency (along with possibility) is opposed to necessity, deprived of any ontological status and conceived as a mere lack of knowledge. However, inasmuch as this lack of knowledge concerns the essences of things (and not their causes as in the case of possibility) and since, as I have stated, these essences are produced by the intertwining of relations that do not respect any teleological or even logical order, I can risk the hypothesis that contingency is something more than a mere lack of knowledge: it indicates the absence of reason or aim in the arising of necessary relations. In fact, since the very beginning of the *Ethics*, with the introduction of the quasi-contradictory concept of *causa sui*, Spinoza tries to rethink the classical antithesis between necessary and contingent: 'the substance as *effectus sui* has a cause, thus its existence is necessary; as a *causa sui* it does not have a cause, thus its existence is radically contingent, is the pure fact without reason of its existence; moreover, the mode, isolated from totality, is contingent, only exists referred to something else, to the absolutely necessary, that is, to the substance, but this substance only exists as the necessity of the modal contingency, that is, as the infinity of necessary relations that the contingent existences engage in' (Morfino, 2002, 68).
 13. See Bruschi 2015.
 14. See also: 'if all objectivity is systematically overflown by a constitutive outside, any form of unity, articulation and hierarchisation that may exist between the various regions and levels will be the result of a contingent and pragmatic *construction*' (Laclau, 1990, 186).
 15. What I stated in note 11 about Spinoza is of course also valid here: the spatial figuration (inside/outside) can only partially account for the kind of relation that Laclau tries to construct. The 'constitutive outside' is the very relation between inside and outside that implies the impossible 'internal' achievement of the structure.
 16. See his article 'Beyond Discourse-Analysis', published in Laclau, 1990.

17. Let me underline that the answer proposed by Žižek and Laclau could still be considered as unsatisfactory. For example, Judith Butler writes that ‘it seems that Žižek and Laclau also converge at the Hegelian assumption that lack produces the desire and/or tendency toward the effect of being or substance. Consider the unproblematic status of “tending” in the following claim by Laclau: “...we find the paradox dominating the whole of social action: freedom exists because society does not achieve constitution as a structural objective order; but any social action *tends towards* the constitution of that impossible object, and thus towards the elimination of the condition of liberty itself” (Laclau, 1990, 44)’ (Butler, 1993, 278). The idea that the fundamental lack that constitutes every identity mobilises a process of totalisation, seems therefore to be an assumption that Laclau cannot ultimately justify.
18. In this sense, overdetermination could be understood as the product of the tension between dislocation and ideology.
19. Laclau proposes a similar conception of ideology: ‘the ideological (...) would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture. (...) The ideological would be the will to “totality” of any totalizing discourse’ (Laclau, 1990, 92).
20. This idea is essentially linked to the affirmation of the constitutive lack of being of every identity.
21. This is a not so implicit critique of Lacan. On this question see Bruschi (2014).
22. Derrida introduced the notion of force in order to counter the structuralist tendency towards a kind of ‘preformism’ or ‘teleologism’. See Derrida, 2001, Ch. 1, in particular 22 and 30-31.
23. This conception of freedom and possibility is summed up in (Laclau, 2007, 18-19).
24. This idea can be generalised in such a way as to counter the impression that the individual’s *conatus* is a purely defensive stance that is haunted by an external force. As I have indicated above (see note 11), it is on the contrary the very relation between the interior and the exterior that determines in the last instance the eventual rise of a force and the disruption of a structure.
25. I would claim that it is only from this point of view that the question of the relation between idealism and materialism in Laclau’s thought could be posed anew.

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