



## Theoretical Practices

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In a daring project like this, open questions remain. Chukhrov seems to oscillate between an explorative presentation and experimental provocations. The products of intellectual labour she focuses on, which reflect the conditions of life in socialism and embody the spirit of the common cause, can of course not be taken *pars pro toto* for conditions under RES. And how far did these conditions already represent actually dealienated conditions? Her suggestions, when taken generally, sometimes remain at the level of a provocative travesty of the western story and may be read as a parody of today's ideology. If the Soviet Union allegedly was not part of a 'common modernity' but was the 'absolute other' of modernity's legitimate representatives, it may follow that we can use its (counter-) image in a productive way. However, it is a merit of the ways in which Chukhrov's book tries to productively relate different levels that it goes beyond such mirroring. In this respect, Chukhrov insists, it needs to be asked why the Soviet experience was not taken into account in critical theories of the West? Why did that historical 'experiment' not become common knowledge, improving democratic conditions in the East and the West after 1989?

Her basic assumption throughout is that a society which abolished private property and surplus value along

with the libidinal economy did actually exist. We therefore have to concede that despite all its failures and shortcomings, RES has to be seen as the most advanced societal experiment to date.

The book is engaged not so much with the past as with the present and the future: it is a counterhegemonic undertaking reclaiming something like radical leftism from the false appropriations of anti-communist post-modernisms. It provides an insightful, estranging perspective that shifts the settled horizon beyond its given normality in order to appropriate experiences from an at least partly more 'advanced' societal formation. In this way, a new panorama opens up in whose light a whole set of realities appear that have been hidden from view. Indeed, this ideology-critical shift is the most important move that *Practicing the Good* practices: a debunking heuristic tool. To reject implicit Cold War settings also *within* Western (post-)Marxism, Chukhrov makes clear that dialectical universalism is a more promising way to think towards a communist ideal on a global level. Since her book delivers a basic deconstruction of the capitalist re-conditioning of critical theories along the lines of the postmodern, it is to be counted as one of the most important publications for leftist self-criticism in recent years.

Sascha Freyberg and Lukas Meisner

## Theoretical practices

Natalia Romé, *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time* (Lanham, Boulder, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). 206pp., £81.00 hb., 978 1 53814 764 1

Although Natalia Romé's book *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time* comes in the disguise of humble secondary literature, it is not just an account of Althusser's theory of temporality but also makes a claim for the power of theory in political struggle. She insists on the precise relation of theory and practice as central to Marxism. The book reengages with Althusser's most important question: how does theory accomplish the differentiation and demarcation that unites it with practice? In attempting to find an answer, Romé's book deals with what Warren Montag calls in his introduction Althusser's 'impatient' concepts: concepts, suddenly appearing only

to disappear again, concepts that are used as vehicles to get him through certain kinds of terrain. On this ground, Romé presents a detailed account of Althusserian theory, that flourishes in close readings of the Althusserian classics, as well as providing an account of texts that were only recently edited.

Romé introduces us into her reading of Althusser through the political experience of her home country of Argentina. This project is connected with a certain theoretical tradition of reading Althusser, but it also uncovers a field of political struggle, first against the dictatorship and then against the 'democratic' variation

of neoliberalism, especially the feminist struggles that broke out all over Latin America during the last decades. Romé describes her project as engaging with: ‘Not only Althusser’s writings, but also a wider Althusserian problematic that goes beyond Althusser himself and involves many names contradictorily connected and many “Marxist” fragments of still well-known “non-marxist” philosophies, returned as a sort of compass.’ To describe this conjuncture at the core of her book, Romé reminds us that the ‘historical block’ of neoliberalism was forged in the military juntas of Argentina and Chile, which were backed by the traditional ruling classes as well as US and European capital. These juntas did not just imprison, torture and kill thousands of leftists, but also pushed huge parts of their population into misery through the reduction of real wages, the dismantling of welfare-programs and the privatisation of huge parts of the society. The technique was not just the crushing of workers’ power through direct terror, but also the dismantling of working-class politics as an ideological wager, leaving the post-junta era as a deeply apolitical space. Romé states:

The condition was this: that no one would talk about class struggle anymore and, especially, that the civic-military dictatorship could no longer be thought of as the dictatorship of capital. The modality would no longer be censorship but, rather, over-information, the infinite pluralization of discourses.

For Romé, Althusser represents a remainder that could not be appropriated by this new form of post-dictatorship discourse: ‘his political prose and theoretical conceptualization did not lend itself to the processes of indoctrination, museumization, or aestheticization to which many others thinkers were subjected’. As she paraphrases Althusser: the very idea of ‘applying’ a theory to the ‘visible concrete’ cannot offer as a result any analysis of the concrete situation, but an ‘absolute philosophy’ that is supposed to already contain the truth of any conjuncture. She sees this tendency as both empiricist and historicist because it does not problematise its own concept of historical time (and therefore, of historical totality), and this impacts the way of ‘conceiving the relation between theory and strategy.’ Finding and marking this line of demarcation of theory and politics through Althusser’s complex concept of time itself becomes a political project:

It happens that, searching for the concept of time, capable of suiting Marxist dialectical materialism, Althusser’s anachronic theoreticism can expose one of today’s weakest flanks of critical theory facing neoliberal ideology’s force: the lack of a political desire for the true.

The book is composed of two parts. The first part, ‘Conjuncture’, is occupied with Althusser’s reading of Machiavelli and the problem of humanism. It sets as its goal the articulation of a plural temporality out of the concept of overdetermination. According to Romé, this is especially important in his analysis of state power, which Romé dissects carefully by navigating the complex interference between Althusser’s readings of Hegel through Marx and Freud, his readings of Machiavelli as theoretician of political practice in the matrix of historical time, and his heterodox Spinozism.

In the second part, ‘For Theory’, Romé unfolds her account of the complex conjuncture of theory and practice, that shapes Althusser’s thinking at its core. According to her, Althusser holds a materialist position *in* philosophy rather than pursuing materialist philosophy. His notion of overdetermination marks the paradoxical relationship between theory and practice, history and politics. The dual disposition of theory (aligned with the name of Marx) and practice (aligned with Lenin and Mao) does not function as a dualism but instead represents an effort to hold the space between two planes and make it consistent as problematic disjointed union. The struggle in theory is always already a struggle for practice; it is not a search for the one true truth, but for our position in the field of history and politics and therefore for our means to change it. Or as Romé puts it:

This reading is not the reading of a manifest discourse, the pursuit of a voice, but a reading of readings, the pursuit of symptoms and misadjustments: it is the reading of a topique, because starting with Marxist theory, the text of history is not a text where a voice speaks (the Logos); it is instead the ‘inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures’.

In these complex conjunctures Romé rediscovers the ‘political’ Althusser, an Althusser radically different from the ‘apolitical’, academic Althusser that is reduced to his ideas of reading, his stance against humanism or his concept of overdetermination. Against this kind of isolationist reading of single concepts, Romé favours a holistic

approach to Althusser, an approach that thinks in conjunctures and currents, an approach that stays faithful to Althusser's 'impatient' thought: a thought that gains its strength (but also its weakness) from concepts, that are never finished and absolute but temporal and fleeting, in order to structure a terrain that is itself only visible in its shifts and breaking points.

In this context, Romé's intellectual stance on the question of how to read Althusser is of a piece with her political stance on how to engage with politics through theory: it is not through the fixing of a static system of concepts but through fostering a radical openness of thought that we can engage in the political struggle for emancipation. An openness that is not relativist, but – on the contrary – bears witness to the complex network of modes and practices of reproduction that shape the capitalist social formation, which we strive to overthrow.

Here it is the radical politics of feminism, that Romé has in mind: 'Feminism can be in this sense as one of the most powerful weapons to fight against the forms of neo-

liberalization of the leftist intellectual field'. Seemingly at odds with Althusser himself, who can hardly be regarded as a feminist, Romé argues that within feminism as a historical plurality of interlinked struggles, we can find practices that combine revolutionary practice and theoretical analysis of the movement and the conditions it tries to overthrow in an exemplary manner: 'the long-term history of feminist movements and positions is in itself a permanent part of feminist research, critical analysis, and debates'. For Romé, the feminist struggles that have erupted with new force and ferocity all over Latin America during the last decade, are exemplary for this Althusserian approach: the struggles in themselves are often heterogeneous, sometimes even antithetical, but, through their interconnectedness with other struggles (like the struggle for the rights of indigenous people or the disenfranchised working-poor of the 'poblaciones') they become a vehicle for true social change – something that radically distinguishes this revolutionary feminism from the neoliberal brand of '#girlboss-feminism'.





All this means that Romé has written a highly complex book, and one can easily get lost in the richness and vastness of the terrain covered. It is therefore recommended to read the parts as essays in themselves and only afterwards discover the monograph, the thread that unites them as a whole. In this sense, the Althusserian gesture of thinking is repeated in the book itself: rather than writing a monograph on 'Althusser's politics of time', at the end of which we would find a definition of this concept, we find a complex network of approaches to a certain problem: the *problem* of a politics of time; politics of time as time of reproduction, of time as historical time and of time as means of categorical epistemology.

In this approach through problematisation, rather than through definition, we find Romé's true faithfulness to Althusser (a faithfulness that is radically different from an empty indebtedness). She invites us to reengage with Althusser's writings, because she reminds us that, far from being just another toothless dead white man that litters the European canon, reading him can be a dangerous endeavour that calls into question not just how we think the conjuncture of politics and theory, but our very position as political beings inside a complex structure of reproduction; reproduction of subjectivity, of knowledge, of power and – first and foremost – the reproduction of temporality itself.

Till Hahn

## Estranging capitalist estrangement

Mattin, *Social Dissonance* (Falmouth: Urbanomic/Mono, 2022). 256pp., £14.99 hb., 978 1 91302 981 4

Both a reconstruction of the notion of alienation and a partisan reflection on the relationship between experimental art and a social world, *Social Dissonance* could be considered the first work of 'Brassierian Marxism'. If the study of Wilfrid Sellars led Ray Brassier to a profound engagement with Marx's revolutionary contribution to thought, Mattin builds on his work, along with Thomas Metzinger's, to enrich traditional Marxian theories of alienation, complementing the 'alienation from above' instituted by the 'spectral objectivity' of value with a highly original rendering of the 'alienation from below' that constitutes the self as a sort of necessary appearance.

Much ink has been spilled discussing the proper role of the concept of alienation in Marx's work. Soldered, according to some, to a metaphysical notion of 'human essence' soon abandoned; crucial, according to others, as a reminder of Marx's deep humanist commitments. The entwinement of the debate with practical political problems has often served to occlude what was theoretically at stake in the first place.

What is perhaps most valuable about Mattin's contribution is his ability to vindicate both the cogency and enduring importance of the concept of alienation whilst circumventing most of the problems traditionally associ-

ated with Marxist humanism, be it its troubling nostalgia for a pre-alienated wholeness or its various appeals to an unhistorical 'essence' that contradicts Marx's own flattening of the latter into the 'ensemble of social relations'. Although he draws on Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, Mattin avoids some of that text's most flagrant flaws, such as the invocation of the 'soul of the proletariat' as an unmediated source of resistance against generalised reification. He instead resorts to Brassier's rendering of 'essence' as self-relating negativity. This interpretation salvages the notion whilst shattering any articulation of the latter as a substantial identity.

Mattin's appeal to the *externalisation* of alienation combines a farewell to any illusion of an estranged immediacy, either predating capitalism or coming after its demise, with a call for the supersession of its *specifically capitalist* forms. Communism, in short, is not a 'reappropriation' of any kind, but the *estrangement* of capitalist estrangement. Moreover, his rigorous – and equally Brassierian – deployment of the dialectic of immediacy and mediation circumvents a further contentious point of Lukács's work: his tendency to depict *praxis* as an essentially *free* activity lurking behind the reified immediacy of capitalist social forms. This interpretation fatally severs the link between social practice and social