

Reading Capital

The Complete Edition

Louis Althusser

ÉTIENNE BALIBAR, ROGER ESTABLET,
JACQUES RANCIÈRE AND PIERRE MACHERY

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VERSO
London • New York

In 1973, Althusser and François Maspero wanted to expand these two volumes so as to restore the full text of the first edition. Jacques Rancière then asked for the republication of his own contribution to be preceded by a self-critical Preface entitled 'Mode d'emploi'. As not all the participants could agree, this was rejected by the publisher, and the text appeared in no. 328 of *Les Temps Modernes*, November 1973.¹³ As a consequence, Rancière's contribution, unmodified, made up volume III of *Lire le Capital* in the 'Petite Collection Maspero'. Volume IV contained the contributions of Pierre Macherey (revised and corrected) and Roger Establet (unchanged). This 'second edition' of *Lire le Capital* was thus completed in four volumes (1968 and 1973), and was again reprinted several times. Volumes III and IV were preceded by a Publisher's Note as follows:

It is in response to the desire often expressed by readers of the first two volumes of *Lire le Capital* published in the 'Petite Collection Maspero' that we have decided to publish these two new volumes, *Lire le Capital III* and *Lire le Capital IV*. The edition published in 1965 in the 'Théorie' collection, directed by Louis Althusser, has thus been fully restored.

The Publisher

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The present edition, being in fact the third edition of *Lire le Capital*, was prepared by myself with the assistance of Pierre Bravo-Gala and Yves Duroux, and with the agreement of the living co-authors and Althusser's heirs. The text follows that of the second edition, though the contributions have been placed again in the order of the first edition so as to restore the plan of the original book, and of the seminar from which it arose.

Étienne Balibar

¹³ This was published in English as 'How to use *Lire le Capital*', in *Economy and Society*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1976.

Part One

From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy

Louis Althusser

To citizen Maurice La Châtre

Dear Citizen,

I applaud your idea of publishing the translation of *Das Kapital* as a serial. In this form the book will be more accessible to the working class, a consideration which to me outweighs everything else.

That is the good side of your suggestion, but here is the reverse of the medal: the method of analysis which I have employed, and which had not previously been applied to economic subjects, makes the reading of the first chapters rather arduous, and it is to be feared that the French public, always impatient to come to a conclusion, eager to know the connection between general principles and the immediate questions that have aroused their passions, may be disheartened because they will be unable to move on at once.

That is a disadvantage I am powerless to overcome, unless it be by forewarning and forearming those readers who zealously seek the truth. There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.

Believe me,
dear citizen,
Your devoted,

Karl Marx
London, 18 March 1872

The following papers were delivered in the course of a seminar on *Capital* held at the École Normale Supérieure early in 1965. They bear the mark of these circumstances: not only in their construction, their rhythm, their didactic or oral style, but also and above all in their discrepancies, the repetitions, hesitations and uncertain steps in their investigations. We could, of course, have gone over them at our leisure, corrected them one against the other, reduced the margin of variation between them, unified their terminology, their hypotheses and their conclusions to the best of our ability, and set out their contents in the systematic framework of a single discourse — in other words, we could have tried to make a *finished* work out of them. But rather than pretending they are what they should have been, we prefer to present them for what they are: precisely, incomplete texts, the mere beginnings of a *reading*.

1

Of course, we have all read, and all do read *Capital*. For almost a century, we have been able to read it every day, transparently, in the dramas and dreams of our history, in its disputes and conflicts, in the defeats and victories of the workers' movement which is our only hope and our destiny. Since we 'came into the world', we have read *Capital* constantly in the writings and speeches of those who have read it for us, well or ill, both the dead and the living, Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, Stalin, Gramsci, the leaders of the workers' organizations, their supporters and opponents: philosophers, economists, politicians. We have read bits of it, the 'fragments' which the conjuncture had 'selected' for us. We have even all, more or less, read Volume One, from 'commodities' to the 'expropriation of the expropriators'.

But some day it is essential to read *Capital* to the letter. To read the text itself, complete, all four volumes, line by line, to return ten times to the first chapters, or to the schemas of simple reproduction and reproduction on an expanded scale, before coming down from the arid table-lands and plateaus of Volume Two into the promised land of profit, interest and rent. And it is essential to read *Capital* not only in its French translation (even Volume One in Roy's translation, which Marx revised, or rather, rewrote), but also in the German original, at least for the fundamental theoretical chapters and all the passages where Marx's key concepts come to the surface.

That is how we decided to read *Capital*. The studies that emerged from this project are no more than the various individual protocols of this reading: each having cut the peculiar oblique path that suited him

through the immense forest of this Book. And we present them in their immediate form without making any alterations so that all the risks and advantages of this adventure are reproduced; so that the reader will be able to find in them new-born the experience of a reading; and so that he in turn will be dragged in the wake of this first reading into a second one which will take us still further.

2

But as there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.

We were all philosophers. We did not read *Capital* as economists, as historians or as philologists. We did not pose *Capital* the question of its economic or historical content, nor of its mere internal 'logic'. We read *Capital* as philosophers, and therefore posed it a different question. To go straight to the point, let us admit: we posed it the question of its *relation to its object*, hence both the question of the specificity of its *object*, and the question of the specificity of its *relation* to that object, i.e., the question of the nature of the type of discourse set to work to handle this object, the question of scientific discourse. And since there can never be a definition without a difference, we posed *Capital* the question of the specific difference both of its object and of its discourse — asking ourselves at each step in our reading, what distinguishes the object of *Capital* not only from the object of classical (and even modern) political economy, but also from the object of Marx's Early Works, in particular from the object of the *1844 Manuscripts*; and hence what distinguishes the discourse of *Capital* not only from the discourse of classical economics, but also from the philosophical (ideological) discourse of the Young Marx.

To have read *Capital* as economists would have meant reading it while posing the question of the economic content and value of its analyses and schemas, hence comparing its discourse with an object already defined outside it, without questioning that object itself. To have read *Capital* as historians would have meant reading it while posing the question of the relation between its historical analyses and a historical object already defined outside it, without questioning that object itself. To have read *Capital* as logicians would have meant posing it the question of its methods of exposition and proof, but in the abstract, once again without questioning the object to which the methods of this discourse relate.

To read *Capital* as philosophers is precisely to question the specific object of a specific discourse, and the specific relationship between this discourse and its object; it is therefore to put to the *discourse-object* unity

the question of the epistemological status which distinguishes this particular unity from other forms of discourse-object unity. Only this reading can determine the answer to a question that concerns the place *Capital* occupies in the history of knowledge. This question can be crystallized as follows: is *Capital* merely one ideological product among others, classical economics given a Hegelian form, the imposition of anthropological categories, defined in the philosophical Early Works on the domain of economic reality; the 'realization' of the idealist aspirations of the *Jewish Question* and the *1844 Manuscripts*? Is *Capital* merely a continuation or even culmination of classical political economy, from which Marx inherited both object and concepts? And is *Capital* distinguished from classical economics not by its object, but only by its *method*, the dialectic he borrowed from Hegel? Or, on the contrary, does *Capital* constitute a real epistemological mutation of its object, theory and method? Does *Capital* represent the founding moment of a new discipline, the founding moment of a science — and hence a real event, a theoretical revolution, simultaneously rejecting the classical political economy and the Hegelian and Feuerbachian ideologies of its prehistory — the absolute beginning of the history of a science? And if this new science is the theory of *history* will it not make possible in return a knowledge of its own *prehistory* — and hence a clear view of both classical economics and the philosophical works of Marx's Youth? Such are the implications of the epistemological question posed to *Capital* by a philosophical reading of it.

Hence a philosophical reading of *Capital* is quite the opposite of an innocent reading. It is a guilty reading, but not one that absolves its crime on confessing it. On the contrary, it takes the responsibility for its crime as a 'justified crime' and defends it by proving its necessity. It is therefore a special reading which exculpates itself as a reading by posing every guilty reading the very question that unmarks its innocence, the mere question of its innocence: *what is it to read?*

3

However paradoxical it may seem, I venture to suggest that our age threatens one day to appear in the history of human culture as marked by the most dramatic and difficult trial of all, the discovery of and training in the meaning of the 'simplest' acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading — the acts which relate men to their works, and to those works thrown in their faces, their 'absences of works'. And contrary to all today's reigning appearances, we do not owe these staggering knowledges to psychology, which is built on the absence of a concept of them, but to a

few men: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Only since Freud have we begun to suspect what listening, and hence what speaking (and keeping silent), *means* (*veut dire*); that this 'meaning' (*vouloir dire*) of speaking and listening reveals beneath the innocence of speech and hearing the culpable depth of a second, *quite different* discourse, the discourse of the unconscious.¹ I dare maintain that only since Marx have we had to begin to suspect what, in theory at least, *reading* and hence writing *means* (*veut dire*). It is certainly no accident that we have been able to reduce all the ideological pretensions which reigned on high over the *1844 Manuscripts*, and still craftily haunt the temptations to historicist backsliding in *Capital*, to the explicit innocence of a *reading*. For the Young Marx, to know the essence of things, the essence of the historical human world, of its economic, political, aesthetic and religious productions, was simply to *read* (*lesen, herausslesen*) in black and white the presence of the 'abstract' essence in the transparency of its 'concrete' existence. This immediate reading of essence in existence expresses the religious model of Hegel's Absolute Knowledge, that End of History in which the concept at last becomes fully visible, present among us in person, tangible in its sensory existence – in which *this* bread, *this* body, *this* face and *this* man are the Spirit itself. This sets us on the road to understanding that the yearning for a reading *at sight*, for Galileo's '*Great Book of the World*' itself, is older than all science, that it is still silently pondering the religious fantasies of epiphany and parousia, and the fascinating myth of the Scriptures, in which the body of truth, dressed in its words, is the Book: the Bible. This makes us suspect that to treat nature or reality as a Book, in which, according to Galileo, is spoken the silent discourse of a language whose 'characters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures', it was necessary to have a certain idea of *reading* which makes a written discourse the immediate transparency of the true, and the real the discourse of a voice.

The first person ever to have posed the problem of *reading*, and in consequence, of *writing*, was Spinoza, and he was also the first in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of

1 We owe this result, which has revolutionized our *reading* of Freud, to Jacques Lacan's intransigent and lucid – and for many years isolated – theoretical effort. At a time when the radical novelty of what Jacques Lacan has given us is beginning to pass into the public domain, where everyone can make use of it and profit by it in his own way, I feel bound to acknowledge my debt to an exemplary reading lesson which, as we shall see, goes beyond its object of origin in some of its effects. I feel bound to acknowledge this *publicly*, so that 'the tailor's labour (does not) disappear ... into the coat' (Marx), even into my coat. Just as I feel bound to acknowledge the obvious or concealed debts which bind us to our masters in reading learned works, once Gaston Bachelard and Jean Cavallès and now Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault.

the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true. This explains to us why Marx could not possibly have become Marx except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science, and why in the last analysis this foundation was consummated in the dissipation of the religious myth of *reading*. The Young Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* read the human essence at sight, immediately, in the transparency of its alienation. *Capital*, on the contrary, exactly measures a distance and an internal dislocation (*décalage*) in the real, inscribed in its *structure*, a distance and a dislocation such as to make their own effects themselves illegible, and the illusion of an immediate reading of them the ultimate apex of their effects: *fétichisme*. It was essential to turn to history to track down this myth of reading to its lair, for it was from the history in which they offered it the cult of their religions and philosophies that men had projected it onto nature, so as not to perish in the daring project of knowing it. Only from history as thought, the theory of history, was it possible to account for the historical religion of reading: by discovering that the history of men, which survives in Books, is however not a text written on the pages of a Book, discovering that the truth of history cannot be read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures. A reading of some of our expositions will show that, far from making metaphorical suggestions, I take the terms I am using literally. To break with the religious myth of a reading: with Marx this theoretical necessity took precisely the form of a rupture with the Hegelian conception of the whole as a 'spiritual' totality, to be precise, as an *expressive* totality. It is no accident that when we turn the thin sheet of the theory of reading, we discover beneath it a theory of *expression*, and that we discover this theory of the expressive totality (in which each part is *pars totalis*, immediately expressing the whole that it inhabits in person) to be the theory which, in Hegel, for the last time and on the terrain of history itself, assembled all the complementary religious myths of the voice (the Logos) speaking in the sequences of a discourse; of the Truth that inhabits its Scripture; – and of the ear that hears or the eye that reads this discourse, in order to discover in it (if they are pure) the speech of the Truth which inhabits each of its Words in person. Need I add that once we have broken with the religious complicity between Logos and Being; between the Great Book that was, in its very being, the World, and the discourse of the knowledge of the world; between the essence of things and its reading; – once we have broken those tacit pacts

in which the men of a still fragile age secured themselves with magical alliances against the precariousness of history and the trembling of their own daring – need I add that, once we have broken these ties, a new conception of *discourse* at last becomes possible?

4

Returning to Marx, we note that not only in what he says but in what he does we can grasp the transition from an earlier idea and practice of reading to a new practice of reading, and to a theory of history capable of providing us with a new theory of *reading*.

When we read Marx, we immediately find a *reader* who *reads* to us, and out loud. The fact that Marx was a prodigious reader is much less important for us than the fact that Marx felt the need to fill out his text by reading out loud, not only for the pleasure of quotation, or through scrupulousness in his references (his accuracy in this was fanatical, as his opponents learnt to their cost), not only because of the intellectual honesty which made him always and generously recognize his debts (alas, *he* knew what a debt was), but for reasons deeply rooted in the theoretical conditions of his work of discovery. So Marx reads out loud to us, not only in the *Theories of Surplus-Value* (a book which remains essentially in note form), but also in *Capital*: he reads Quesnay, he reads Smith, he reads Ricardo, etc. He reads them in what seems a perfectly lucid way: in order to support himself with what is correct in what they say, and in order to criticize what is false in what they say – in sum, to *situate* himself with respect to the acknowledged masters of Political Economy. However, the reading Marx makes of Smith and Ricardo is only lucid for a certain reading of this reading: for an immediate reading that does not question what it reads, but takes the obvious in the text read for hard cash. In reality, Marx's reading of Smith-Ricardo (they will be my example here) is, on *looking* at it closely, a rather special one. It is a double reading – or rather a reading which involves two radically different reading principles.

In the *first reading*, Marx reads his predecessor's discourse (Smith's for instance) through his own discourse. The result of this reading through a grid, in which Smith's text is seen through Marx's, projected onto it as a measure of it, is merely a summary of concordances and discordances, the balance of what Smith discovered and what he missed, of his merits and failings, of his presences and absences. In fact, this reading is a retrospective theoretical reading, in which what Smith could not see or understand appears only as a radical omission. Certain of these omissions do refer to others, and the latter to a primary omission – but even this

reduction restricts us to the observation of presences and absences. As for the omissions themselves, this reading does not provide reasons for them, since the observation of them destroys them: the continuity of Marx's discourse shows the lacunae in Smith's discourse which are invisible (to Smith) beneath the apparent continuity of his discourse. Marx very often explains these omissions by Smith's distractions, or in the strict sense, his *absences*: he did not *see* what was, however, staring him in the face, he did not grasp what was, however, in his hands. '*Oversights*' (*bévue*s) all more or less related to the '*enormous oversight*', the confusion of constant capital and variable capital which dominates all classical economics with its 'incredible' aberration. This reduces every weakness in the system of concepts that makes up knowledge to a psychological weakness of 'vision'. And if it is absences of *vision* that explain these *oversights*, in the same way and by the same necessity, it is the presence and acuteness of 'vision' that will explain these '*sightings*' (*vues*): all the knowledges recognized.

This single logic of sighting and oversight thus reveals itself to us as what it is: the logic of a conception of knowledge in which all the work of knowledge is reduced in principle to the recognition of the mere relation of *visions*; in which the whole nature of its object is reduced to the mere condition of a *given*. What Smith did not see, through a weakness of vision, Marx sees: what Smith did not see was perfectly visible, and it was because it was visible that Smith could fail to see it while Marx could see it. We are in a circle – we have relapsed into the mirror myth of knowledge as the vision of a given object or the reading of an established text, neither of which is ever anything but transparency itself – the sin of blindness belonging by right to vision as much as the virtue of clear-sightedness – to the human eye. But as one is always treated as one treats others, this reduces Marx to Smith minus the myopia – it reduces to nothing the whole gigantic effort by which Marx *took* himself from Smith's supposed myopia; it reduces to a mere difference of *vision* this day in which all cats are no longer grey; it reduces to nothing the historical distance and theoretical dislocation (*détailage*) in which Marx thinks the theoretical difference that nevertheless separates him from Smith for ever. And finally, we too are condemned to the same fate of vision – condemned to see in Marx only what he *saw*.

5

But there is in Marx a *second quite different reading*, with nothing in common with the first. The latter, which is only sustained by the dual and conjoint observation of presences and absences, of sights and oversights, can

itself be blamed for a remarkable oversight: it does not see that the combined existence of sightings and oversights in an author poses a problem, the problem of their *combination*. It does not see this problem, precisely because this problem is only visible in so far as it is invisible, because this problem concerns something quite different from given objects that can be seen so long as one's eyes are clear: a necessary invisible connection between the field of the visible and the field of the invisible, a connection which defines the necessity of the obscure field of the invisible, as a necessary effect of the structure of the visible field.

But in order to make what I mean by this more comprehensible, I shall leave this abrupt posing of the question in suspense for the moment, and make a detour back to it through an analysis of the *second kind of reading* we find in Marx. I only need one example: the admirable Chapter 19 of *Capital*, on wages (Vol. 1, pp. 675ff.), secretly reflected backstage in Engels's extraordinary theoretical remarks in his Preface to Volume Two (pp. 97-102).

I therefore quote Marx, *reader* of the classical economists:

Classical political economy borrowed the category 'price of labour' from everyday life without further criticism, and then simply asked the question, how is this price determined? It soon recognized that changes in the relation between demand and supply explained nothing, with regard to the price of labour or any other commodity, except those changes themselves, i.e. the oscillations of the market price above or below a certain mean. If demand and supply balance, the oscillation of prices ceases, all other circumstances remaining the same. But then demand and supply also cease to explain anything. The price of labour, at the moment when demand and supply are in equilibrium, is its natural price, determined independently of the relation of demand and supply. It was therefore found that the natural price was the object which actually had to be analysed. Or a longer period of oscillation in the market price was taken, for example a year, and the oscillations were found to cancel each other out, leaving a mean average quantity, a constant magnitude. This naturally had to be determined otherwise than by its own mutually compensatory variations. This price, which ultimately predominates over the accidental market prices of labour and regulates them, this 'necessary price' (according to the Physiocrats) or 'natural price' (according to Adam Smith) can only be its value expressed in money, as with all other commodities. 'The commodity,' says Smith, 'is then sold for precisely what it is worth.' In this way, the political economists believed they could penetrate to the value of labour through the medium of the accidental prices of labour. As with other commodities,

this value was then further determined by the cost of production. But what is the cost of production ... of the worker, i.e., the cost of producing or reproducing the worker himself? The political economists unconsciously substituted this question for the original one, for the search after the cost of production of labour as such turned in a circle, and did not allow them to get any further forward at all. Therefore what they called the 'value of labour' is in fact the value of labour-power, as it exists in the personality of the worker, and it is as different from its function, labour, as a machine is from the operations it performs. Because they were concerned with the difference between the market price of labour and its so-called value, with the relation of this value to the rate of profit and to the values of the commodities produced by means of labour, etc., they never discovered that the course of the analysis had led not only from the market prices of labour to its presumed value, but also to the resolution of this value of labour itself into the value of labour-power. Classical political economy's unconsciousness of this result of its own analysis and its uncritical acceptance of the categories 'value of labour', 'natural price of labour', etc. as the ultimate and adequate expression for the value-relation under consideration, led it into inextricable confusions and contradictions ... (Vol. 1, pp. 677-9; translation modified after the French edition).

I take this astonishing text for what it is: a protocol of Marx's *reading* of classical economics. Here again it is tempting to believe that we are destined to a conception of reading which adds up the balance of sightings and oversights. Classical political economy certainly saw that ... but it did not see that ... it never arrived at a sight of ... Here again, it seems as if this balance of sights and oversights is found beneath a grid, the classical absences revealed by the Marxist presences. But there is one small, one very small difference, which, I warn the reader straight away, we have no intention of *not seeing*! It is this: what classical political economy does not see, is not what it does not see, it is *what it sees*; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is *what it does not lack*; it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is *what it does not miss*. The oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but *the sight* itself. The oversight is an oversight that concerns *vision*: non-vision is therefore inside vision, it is a form of vision and hence has a necessary relationship with vision.

We have reached our real problem, the problem that exists *in* and is posed *by* the actual identity of this organic confusion of non-vision in vision. Or rather, in this observation of non-vision, or of oversight, we are no longer dealing with a reading of classical economics through the grid

of Marx's theory alone, with a comparison between classical theory and Marxist theory, the latter providing the standard — for we never compare classical theory with anything *except itself*, its non-vision with its vision. We are therefore dealing with our problem in its pure state, defined in a single domain, without any regression to infinity. To understand this necessary and paradoxical identity of non-vision and vision within vision itself is very exactly to pose our problem (the problem of the necessary connection which unites the visible and the invisible), and to pose it properly is to give ourselves a chance of solving it.

6

How, therefore, is this identity of non-vision and vision in vision possible? Let us reread our text carefully. In the course of the questions classical economics asked about the 'value of labour' something very special has happened. Classical political economy '*produced*' (just as Engels will say, in the Preface to Volume Two, that phlogistic chemistry '*produced*' oxygen and classical economics '*produced*' surplus-value) a correct answer: the value of 'labour' is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the reproduction of 'labour'. A correct answer is a correct answer. Any reader in the 'first manner' will give Smith and Ricardo a good mark and pass on to other observations. Not Marx. For what we shall call his eye has been attracted by a remarkable property of this answer; *it is the correct answer to a question that has just one failing: it was never posed.*

The original question as the classical economic text formulated it was: what is the value of labour? Reduced to the content that can be rigorously defended in the text where classical economics produced it, the answer should be written as follows: '*The value of labour (...) is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of labour (...)*'. There are two blanks, two absences in the text of the answer. Thus Marx makes us see blanks in the text of classical economics' answer; but that is merely to make us see what the classical text itself says while not saying it, does not say while saying it. Hence it is not Marx who says what the classical text does not say, it is not Marx who intervenes to impose from without on the classical text a discourse which reveals its silence — *it is the classical text itself which tells us that it is silent: its silence is its own words.* In fact, if we suppress our 'suspension points', our blanks, we still have the same discourse, the same apparently 'full' sentence: '*the value of labour is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of labour*'. But this sentence means nothing: what is the maintenance of 'labour'? what is the reproduction of 'labour'? The

substitution of one word for another at the end of the answer: 'labourer' for 'labour', might seem to settle the question. '*The value of labour is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the labourer*'. But as the labourer is not the labour, the term at the end of the sentence now clashes with the term at the beginning: they do not have the same content and the equation cannot be made, for it is not the labourer who is bought for the wages, but his 'labour'. And how are we to situate the first labour in the second term: 'labourer'? In even uttering this sentence, therefore, precisely at the level of the term '*labour*', at the beginning and end of the answer, there is something lacking, and this lack is strictly designated by the function of the terms themselves in the whole sentence. If we suppress our suspension points — our blanks — we are merely reconstituting a sentence which, if it is taken literally, itself designates in itself these *points of emptiness*, restores these suspension points as the marks of an omission produced by the 'fullness' of the utterance itself.

This omission, located by the answer in the answer itself immediately next to the word '*labour*', is no more than the presence in the answer of the absence of its question, the omission of its question. For the question posed does not seem to contain anything by which to locate in it this omission. '*What is the value of labour?*' is a sentence identical to a concept, it is a concept-sentence which is content to utter the concept 'value of labour', an utterance-sentence which does not designate any omission in itself, unless it is itself as a whole, as a concept, a question *manqué*, a concept *manqué*, the omission (*manque*) of a concept. It is the answer that answers us about the question, since the question's only space is this very concept of 'labour' which is designated by the answer as *the site of the omission*. It is the answer that tells us that the question is *its own omission*, and nothing else.

If the answer, including its omissions, is correct, and if its question is merely the omission of its concept, it is because the answer is the answer to a *different question* — which has the peculiarity of not having been uttered in the suspension points of the answer — precisely in the answer's suspension points. That is why Marx can write:

The result the analysis led to, therefore, was not a resolution of the problem as it emerged at the beginning, but a complete change in the terms of the problem.

That is why Marx can pose the unuttered question, simply by uttering the concept present in an unuttered form in the emptinesses in the answer, sufficiently present in this answer to produce and reveal these emptinesses as the emptinesses of a presence. Marx re-establishes the continuity of

the utterance by introducing/re-establishing in the utterance the concept of *labour-power*, present in the emptiness in the utterance of classical political economy's answer – and at the same time as establishing/re-establishing the continuity of the answer, by the utterance of the concept of labour-power, he produces the as yet unposed question, which the as yet un-asked-for answer answered.

The answer then becomes: 'The value of labour-power is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of labour-power' – and its question is produced as follows: 'what is the value of labour-power?'

This restoration of an utterance containing emptiness and this production of its question out of the answer enable us to bring to light the reasons why classical economics was blind to what it nevertheless saw, and thus to explain the non-vision inside its vision. Moreover, it is clear that the mechanism whereby Marx is able to see what classical economics did not see while seeing it, is identical with the mechanism whereby Marx sees what classical economics did not see at all – and also, at least in principle, identical with the mechanism whereby we are at this moment reflecting this operation of the sighting of a non-sight of the seen, by reading a text by Marx which is itself a reading of a text of classical economics.

7

We have now reached the point we had to reach in order to discover from it the reason for this *oversight* where a *sighting* is concerned: we must completely reorganize the idea we have of knowledge, we must abandon the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as a production.

What made the mistake of political economy possible does indeed affect the *transformation of the object* of its oversight. What political economy does not see is not a pre-existing object which it could have seen but did not see – but an object which it produced itself in its operation of knowledge and which did not pre-exist it: precisely the production itself, which is identical with the object. What political economy does not see is what it *does*: its production of a new answer without a question, and simultaneously the production of a new latent question contained in relief in this new answer. Through the lacunary terms of its new answer political economy produced a new question, but '*unconsciously*'. It made '*a complete change in the terms of the (original) problem*', and thereby produced a new problem, but without knowing it. Far from knowing it, it remained convinced that it was still on the terrain of the old problem, whereas

it '*unconsciously changed terrain*'. Its blindness and its '*oversight*' lie in this misunderstanding, between what it produces and what it sees, in this '*substitution*', which Marx elsewhere calls a '*play on words*' (*Wortspiel*) that is necessarily impenetrable for its author.

Why is political economy necessarily blind to what it produces and to its work of production? Because its eyes are still fixed on *the old question*, and it continues to relate its new answer to its old question; because it is still concentrating on the old '*horizon*' within which the new problem '*is invisible*' (*Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 680). Thus the metaphors in which Marx thinks this necessary '*substitution*' suggest the image of a change of terrain and a corresponding change of horizon. They raise a crucial point which enables us to escape from the psychological reduction of the '*oversight*' or '*unconsciousness*'. In fact, what is at stake in the production of this new problem contained *unconsciously* in the new answer is not a particular new object which has emerged among other, already identified objects, like an unexpected guest at a family reunion; on the contrary, what has happened involves a transformation of the *entire* terrain and its *entire* horizon, which are the background against which the new problem is produced. The emergence of this new critical problem is merely a particular index of a possible critical transformation and of a possible latent mutation which affect the reality of this terrain throughout its extent, including the extreme limits of its '*horizon*'. Putting this fact in a language I have already used,² the production of a new problem endowed with this *critical* character (critical in the sense of a critical situation) is the unstable index of the possible production of a new theoretical *problematic*, of which this problem is only a symptomatic mode. Engels says this luminously in his Preface to Volume Two of *Capital*: the mere '*production*' of oxygen by phlogistic chemistry, or of surplus-value by classical economics, contains the wherewithal not only to modify the old theory *at one point*, but also to '*revolutionize all economics*' or *all chemistry* (Vol. 2, p. 98). Hence what is in balance in this unstable and apparently local event is the possibility of a revolution in the old theory and hence in the old problematic *as a totality*. This introduces us to a fact peculiar to the very existence of science: it can only pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its problematic, which constitutes its absolute and definite condition of possibility, and hence the absolute determination of *the forms in which all problems must be posed*, at any given moment in the science.³

2 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Verso: London 2006, pp. 46, 66–70, etc.

3 Auguste Comte often came very close to this idea.

This opens the way to an understanding of the determination of the *visible* as visible, and conjointly, of the invisible as invisible, and of the organic link binding the invisible to the visible. Any object or problem situated on the terrain and within the horizon, i.e., in the definite structured field of the theoretical problematic of a given theoretical discipline, is visible. We must take these words literally. The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual subject, endowed with the faculty of 'vision' which he exercises either attentively or distractedly; the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection⁴ between the field of the problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems. Vision then loses the religious privileges of divine reading: it is no more than a reflection of the immanent necessity that ties an object or problem to its conditions of existence, which lie in the conditions of its production. It is literally no longer the eye (the mind's eye) of a subject which *sees* what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which *sees itself* in the objects or problems it defines — sighting being merely the necessary reflection of the field on its objects. (This no doubt explains a 'substitution' in the classical philosophies of vision, which are very embarrassed by *having* to say *both* that the light of vision comes from the eye, *and* that it comes from the object.)

The same connection that defines the visible also defines the invisible as its shadowy obverse. It is the field of the problematic that defines and structures the invisible as the defined excluded, *excluded* from the field of visibility and *defined* as excluded by the existence and peculiar structure of the field of the problematic; as what forbids and represses the reflection of the field on its object, i.e., the necessary and immanent interrelationship of the problematic and one of its objects. This is the case with oxygen in the phlogistic theory of chemistry, or with surplus-value and the definition of the 'value of labour' in classical economics. These new objects and problems are necessarily *invisible* in the field of the existing theory, because they are not objects of this theory, because they are *forbidden* by it — they are objects and problems necessarily without any necessary relations with the field of the visible as defined by this problematic. They are invisible because they are rejected in principle, repressed from the field of the visible: and that is why their fleeting presence in the field when it does occur (in very peculiar and symptomatic circumstances) *goes unperceived*, and becomes literally an undivulgeable absence — since the whole function of the field is not to see them, to forbid any

4 'Relation of immanent reflection': this 'reflection' itself poses a theoretical problem which I cannot deal with here, but which will be outlined at the end of this introduction (section 19).

sighting of them. Here again, the invisible is no more a function of a *subject's sighting* than is the visible: the invisible is the theoretical problematic's non-vision of its non-objects, the invisible is the darkness, the blinded eye of the theoretical problematic's self-reflection when it scans its non-objects, its non-problems without seeing them, *in order not to look at them*.

And since, to use terms adopted from some very remarkable passages in the preface to Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, we have evoked the conditions of possibility of the visible and the invisible, of the inside and the outside of the theoretical field that defines the visible — perhaps we can go one step further and show that *a certain relation of necessity* may exist between the visible and the invisible thus defined. In the development of a theory, the invisible of a visible field is not generally *anything whatever* outside and foreign to the visible defined by that field. The invisible is defined by the visible as *its* invisible, *its* forbidden vision: the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible (to return to the spatial metaphor), the outer darkness of exclusion — but the *inner darkness of exclusion*, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure. In other words, the seductive metaphors of the terrain, the horizon and hence the limits of a visible field defined by a given problematic threaten to induce a false idea of the nature of this field, if we think this field literally according to the spatial metaphor⁵ as a space limited by *another space outside it*. This other space is also in the first space which contains it as its own denegation; this other space is the first space in person, which is only defined by the denegation of what it excludes from its own limits. In other words, all its limits are *internal*, it carries its outside inside it. Hence, if we wish to preserve the spatial metaphor, the paradox of the theoretical field is that it is an *irfinite* because *definite* space, i.e., it has no limits, no external frontiers separating it from nothing, precisely because it is *defined* and limited within itself, carrying in itself the finitude of its definition, which, by excluding what it is not, makes it what it is. Its *definition* (a scientific operation *par excellence*), then, is what makes it both *irfinite in its kind*, and marked inside itself, in all its determinations, by what is excluded from it *in it* by its very definition. And when it happens that, in certain very special critical circumstances, the development of the questions produced by the problematic (in the present case, the development

5 The recourse made in this text to spatial metaphors (field, terrain, space, site, situation, position, etc.) poses a theoretical problem: the problem of the validity of its *claim* to existence in a discourse with scientific pretensions. The problem may be formulated as follows: *why* does a certain form of scientific discourse necessarily need the use of metaphors borrowed from non-scientific disciplines?

of the questions of political economy investigating the 'value of labour') leads to the *production* of the *fleeting presence of an aspect* of its invisible within the visible field of the existing problematic — this product can then only be *invisible*, since the light of the field scans it blindly without reflecting on it. This invisible thus disappears as a theoretical lapse, absence, lack of symptom. It manifests itself exactly as it is: invisible to theory — and that is why Smith made his 'oversight'.

To see this invisible, to see these 'oversights', to identify the lacunae in the fullness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text, we need something quite different from an acute or attentive gaze; we need an *informed gaze*, a new gaze, itself produced by a reflection of the 'change of terrain' on the exercise of vision, in which Marx pictures the transformation of the problematic. Here I take this transformation for a fact, without any claim to analyse the mechanism that unleashed it and completed it. The fact that this '*change of terrain*', which produces as its effect this metamorphosis in the gaze, was itself only produced in very specific, complex and often dramatic conditions; that it is absolutely irreducible to the idealist myth of a mental decision to change 'viewpoints'; that it brings into play a whole process that the subject's sighting, far from producing, merely reflects in its own place; that in this process of real transformation of the means of production of knowledge, the claims of a 'constitutive subject' are as vain as are the claims of the subject of vision in the production of the visible; that the whole process takes place in the dialectical crisis of the mutation of a theoretical structure in which the 'subject' plays, not the part it believes it is playing, but the part which is assigned to it by the mechanism of the process — all these are questions that cannot be studied here. It is enough to remember that the subject must have occupied its new place in the new terrain,⁶ in other words that the subject must already, even partly unwittingly, have been installed in this new terrain, for it to be possible to apply to the old invisible the informed gaze that will make that invisible visible. Marx can see what escaped Smith's gaze because he has already occupied this new terrain which, in what new answers it had produced, had nevertheless been produced though unwittingly, by the old problematic.

6 I retain the spatial metaphor. But the change of terrain takes place *on the spot*: in all strictness, we should speak of the mutation of the *mode* of theoretical production and of the change of function of the subject induced by this change of mode.

Such is Marx's second reading: a reading which might well be called '*symptomatic*' (*symptomale*), in so far as it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a *different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first. Like his first reading, Marx's second reading presupposes the existence of *two texts*, and the measurement of the first against the second. But what distinguishes this new reading from the old one is the fact that in the new one the *second text* is articulated with the lapses in the first text. Here again, at least in the way peculiar to theoretical texts (the only ones whose analysis is at issue here), we find the necessity and possibility of a reading on two bearings simultaneously.

In the papers you are about to *read*, and which do not escape the law I have pronounced — assuming that they have some claim to be treated, for the time being at least, as discourses with a theoretical meaning — we have simply tried to apply to Marx's reading the '*symptomatic*' reading with which Marx managed to read the illegible in Smith, by measuring the problematic initially visible in his writings against the invisible problematic contained in the paradox of *an answer which does not correspond to any question posed*. You will also find that the infinite distance which separates Marx from Smith and in consequence our relation to Marx from Marx's relation to Smith, is the following radical difference: whereas in his text Smith produces an answer which not only does not answer any of the immediately preceding questions, but does not even answer *any* other question he ever posed anywhere in his work; with Marx, on the contrary, when he does happen to formulate *an answer without a question*, with a little patience and perspicacity we can find *the question itself elsewhere*, twenty or one hundred pages further on, with respect to some other object, enveloped in some other matter, or, on occasion, in Engels's immediate comments on Marx, for Engels has flashes of profound inspiration.⁷ And if, as I have dared suggest, there is undoubtedly in Marx an

7 If I may invoke my personal experience, I should like to give two precise examples of this presence *elsewhere* in Marx or in Engels of the question absent from its answer. At the cost of a decidedly laborious investigation, the text of which (*For Marx*, pp. 89ff) bears the mark of these difficulties, I succeeded in identifying a pertinent absence in the idea of the 'inversion' of the Hegelian dialectic by Marx: the absence of its concept, and therefore of its question. I managed to reconstruct this *question* laboriously, by showing that the 'inversion' Marx mentions had as its effective content a revolution in the problematic. But later, reading Engels's Preface to Volume Two of *Capital*, I was stupefied to find that the question I had had such trouble in formulating was there in black and white: Engels

important answer to a question that is nowhere posed, an answer which Marx only succeeds in formulating on condition of multiplying the images required to render it, the answer of the 'Darstellung' and its avatars, it is surely because the age Marx lived in did not provide him, and he could not acquire in his lifetime, an adequate concept with which to think what he produced: the concept of the effectivity of a structure on its elements. It will no doubt be said that this is merely a word, and that only the word is missing, since the object of the word is there complete. Certainly, but this word is a concept, and the repercussions of the structural lack of this concept can be found in certain precise theoretical effects on certain assignable forms of Marx's discourse, and in certain of his identifiable formulations which are not without their consequences. Which may help to illuminate, but this time from within, i.e., not as a relic of a past, a survival, a raffish 'flirtation' (the famous 'kobettieren'), or a trap for fools ('the advantage of my dialectic is that I say things little by little — and when they think I have finished, and rush to refute me, they merely make an untimely manifestation of their asininity!' — Letter to Engels, 27 June 1867), the real presence of certain Hegelian forms and references in the discourse of *Capital*. From within, as the exact measurement of a disconcerting but inevitable absence, the absence of the concept (and of all the sub-concepts) of the effectivity of a structure on its elements which is the visible/invisible, absent/present keystone of his whole work. Perhaps therefore it is not impermissible to think that if Marx does 'play' so much with Hegelian formulae in certain passages, the game is not just raffishness or sarcasm, but the action of a real drama, in which old concepts desperately play the part of something absent which is nameless, in order to call it onto the stage in person — whereas they only 'produce' its presence in their failures, in the dislocation between the characters and their roles.

If it is true that the identification and location of this omission, which is a philosophical omission, can also lead us to the threshold of Marx's philosophy, we can hope for other gains from it in the theory of history

expressly identifies the 'inversion', the 'setting right side up again' of the chemistry and political economy which had been standing on their heads, with a change in their 'theory', and therefore in their problematic. Or again: in one of my first essays, I had suggested that Marx's theoretical revolution lay not in his change of the answers, but in his change of the questions, and that therefore Marx's revolution in the theory of history consisted of a 'change of elements' by which he moved from the terrain of ideology to the terrain of science (For Marx, p. 47). But recently, reading the chapter of *Capital* on wages, I was stupefied to see that Marx used the very expression 'change of terrain' to express this change of theoretical problematic. Here again, the question (or its concept) which I had laboriously reconstituted out of its absence in one precise point of Marx's, Marx himself gave in black and white somewhere else in his work.

itself. A conceptual omission that has not been divulged, but on the contrary, consecrated as a non-omission, and proclaimed as a fullness, may, in certain circumstances, seriously hinder the development of a science or of certain of its branches. To be convinced of this we need only note that a science only progresses, i.e., lives, by the extreme attention it pays to the points where it is theoretically fragile. By these standards, it depends less for its life on what it knows than on what it does not know: its absolute precondition is to focus on this unknown, and to pose it in the rigour of a problem. But the unknown of a science is not what empiricist ideology thinks: its 'residue', what it leaves out, what it cannot conceive or resolve; but *par excellence* what it contains that is fragile despite its apparently unquestionable 'obviousness', certain silences in its discourse, certain conceptual omissions and lapses in its rigour, in brief, everything in it that 'sounds hollow' to an attentive ear, despite its fullness.⁸ If it is true that a science progresses and lives by knowing how to hear what 'sounds hollow' in it, some part of the life of the Marxist theory of history perhaps depends on this precise point where Marx shows us in a thousand ways the presence of a concept essential to his thought, but absent from his discourse.

9

This then is the guilt of our philosophical reading of *Capital*: it reads Marx according to the rules of a reading in which he gave us a brilliant lesson in his own reading of classical political economy. Our admission of this crime is deliberate, we shall fetter ourselves to it, anchor ourselves in it, cling fiercely to it as the point which must be hung on to at all costs if we hope to establish ourselves on it one day, recognizing the infinite extent contained within its minute space: the extent of Marx's philosophy.

We are all seeking this philosophy. The protocols of *The German Ideology's* philosophical rupture do not give us it in person. Nor do the earlier *Theses on Feuerbach*, those few lightning flashes which break the night of philosophical anthropology with the fleeting snap of a new world glimpsed through the retinal image of the old. Nor, finally, at least in so far as their immediate form is concerned, however brilliant their clinical judgement, do the criticisms in *Anti-Dühring*, where Engels had to 'follow Herr Dühring into that vast territory in which he dealt with all things under the sun and some others as well', the territory of

8 Pierre Macherey, 'A propos de la rupture', *La Nouvelle Critique*, Paris, May 1965, p. 139.