

Between Hegel and Marx: History and Theology in the Early Althusser

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In his 1949 'A Matter of Fact', after offering a sustained critique of the ideological status of the catholic church – which calls to mind, as Roland Boer has nicely pointed out, the fully developed theory of ideology that we get much later – Althusser offers a suggestion as to how the church can leave behind what he sees as its problematic ideological existence.¹ He argues that 'if the church is to speak to the men of our day, if it is to reconquer, at the price of an inner struggle, an authentic religious life, it must ... be freed of the domination of feudal and capitalist structures'.² In Althusser's analysis, the Church is like the proletariat before its emancipation, enslaved by capital and its own labor. As one might imagine, this emancipation is not the only thing that must be done. Althusser explains that 'secondly, this social emancipation must be accompanied by a real re-appropriation of religious life by the faithful themselves'.³ The language of appropriation (and re-appropriation) is, of course, familiar in Marxist discourse – think of Marx's own description, in the 1844 manuscripts, of communism as the '(re)appropriation of the human essence' by humans.⁴ But this is also and perhaps more importantly, a reference to Hegel.⁵ As is well known, at this point in his philosophical development, Althusser had not yet come to the sustained rejection of Hegel that he does in later works such as *For Marx*. Here in fact, it is precisely by employing a Hegelian theory of re-appropriation via history (and historical development) that Althusser seeks to save the church, a theory that later Althusser would reject as too humanist and too teleological (and thus itself ideological). Not that long after writing 'A Matter of Fact', however, Althusser begins to distance himself from the church, and, at the same time, from this Hegelian conception of history. This is, as we will

1 See Althusser 1997a. For Boer's discussion of the connections between this work and the latter, see Boer 1997, pp. 469–86.

2 Althusser 1997a, p. 193.

3 Ibid.

4 See Marx 1978.

5 Althusser 1997a, pp. 138–9.

see, clearly demonstrated in his famous 'Letter to Jean Lacroix' which was written in December of the same year as 'A Matter of Fact'.⁶

Here too, Althusser looks to a conception of history as part of his critique, but instead of endorsing the Hegelian notion of re-appropriation as he does in 'A Matter of Fact', he rejects this, and argues that Lacroix is wrong to attribute such a view to Marx. Althusser's claim in this piece is the one that is more familiar to readers of Althusser's later work, namely that the Hegelian notion of an end of history in the re-appropriation (or dis-alienation) of humanity from its essence is nowhere to be found in Marx and further, that such a conception is idealist in its core.⁷ I want to suggest in this chapter that one of the ways that we can best track the move from Hegel to Marx in Althusser's early work is to do so through his understanding of the role of history, and further, I want to argue that it is this thread that also best links his later philosophical concerns with his early theological ones (and also his later rejection of the theological).

Returning then to Althusser's early view, there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a natural convergence between his interest in Hegel and his Catholicism around the notion of history insofar as both – as Althusser understands them – offer us a view of history with an end or a goal. For Hegel, as noted above (and as we will return to below), this end is the reconciliation of humanity with itself at the end of history, and for the Catholic, this is the reconciliation with God. Though it is true that Althusser retains this view in his early writings, Warren Montag has recently argued that even in this early work, we can see in Althusser a struggle with the view of history as having such an end and that it is this ambivalent relationship that offers indications of his later view, namely the critique of conceptions of history that are teleological in this way. Montag locates the beginnings of this struggle in Althusser's very first published piece, 'The International of Decent Feelings', a text in which Althusser, as Montag rightly points out, is engaged in 'a critique of the messianisms, both secular and religious' that arose in the immediate aftermath of World War II.⁸ The messianisms that Montag speaks of here are those that Althusser locates in the likes of Camus, Malraux, Koestler, and Marcel (among others), all of whom, despite their differences, at this moment in history, share what he identifies as the thesis that the class struggle as described by Marx and Engels, the struggle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie under capitalism, has been eclipsed by a greater threat whose spectre becomes visible within the brutality of the

6 Ibid.

7 Althusser 1997a, p. 207.

8 Montag 2013, p. 193.

war itself – and in the early post-war period – and it is this threat that finds its expression in the proletarianisation of all of humanity:

Whereas the laboring proletariat is defined by sociological, economic, and historical conditions, this latter-day 'proletariat' would seem to be defined by a psychological state: intimidation and fear. And just as there is proletarian equality in the poverty and alienation of the workers, so too this implicit proletariat is said to experience equality, but in death and suffering.⁹

As Althusser argues here, what unites these various views is the claim that the Marxist conception of class struggle and the oppression of the workers by those in power is merely a 'historical diversion' from the true equaliser (that exists throughout the social whole in the same way, regardless of economic and social class). This is the fear of all in the face of the possibility of suffering and the inevitability of death.¹⁰ So here, the goal of history is no longer the overcoming of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat, but rather the overcoming of class struggle full stop in favour of a universalised uniting of all of humanity against its 'true' enemy:

We have only one recourse left, they bluntly tell us, in the face of catastrophe: an holy alliance against destiny. Let men learn, if there is still time, that the proletariat of class struggle can only divide them, and that they are already united unawares in the proletariat of fear, or of the bomb, or terror and death, in the proletariat of the human condition.¹¹

The 'proletariat of the human condition' is nothing other than, as we have begun to see here, the proletariat of fear – fear of suffering, fear of death, fear of the atom bomb, fear of what is to come. It is this fear that is the uniting/universalising force according to the thinkers that Althusser identifies as belonging together here.

The problem with this view, argues Althusser, is that it leads very quickly to a kind of resignation. He argues that if the proletariat of the human condition is to eclipse the proletariat of class struggle, then what this will lead to is a turning away from the here and now – that is, the present – and a turning

9 Althusser 1997a, p. 23.

10 Ibid.

11 Althusser 1997a, pp. 23–4.

toward that which is in the future, or as Althusser himself puts it, 'the proletariat of the human condition is a proletariat of the morrow'.¹² The kind of fear identified with the 'human condition', as Althusser rightly points out here, is a psychological state that is determined by that which is not yet.¹³ It is future-directed and thus removed from the present. Furthermore, as he goes on to argue, such a fear is not overcome by one's becoming conscious of it – the fear remains in this case and thus is perpetually in existence. Whereas for Marx, there is an important outcome of the proletariat's becoming aware of its oppression and suffering because in so doing, it can come to have an influence over this oppression if and insofar as it becomes capable of harnessing the political power of the collective (and ultimately, overcoming it and changing its fate) the proletariat of the human condition cannot do this – or at least not in the same way – as such fear is ever present and death itself simply cannot be overcome. So ultimately, Althusser argues that those who propagate such a view do damage to politics and political movements that offer true emancipation. This is because such narratives:

Tear the men of this old world [the world of Marxist social and economic struggle] from the very reality of their existence, from their daily political and social struggles, and leave them in the clutches of the myths of fear ... The vast operation (of little matter whether conscious or unconscious) we are here exposing, tends to give men the sense that they cannot reconcile themselves with their destiny, that they will not succeed in mastering their technology, and will be destroyed by their own inventions, that far from emancipating them, their labor kills and enslaves them.¹⁴

In other words, the messianic narrative of the proletariat of the human condition (of fear) leads to a political quietism of the now in its relentless focus on the future. In this way, Althusser argues that this conception is nothing more than an 'abstraction ... something which has no reality beyond discourse and intentions'.¹⁵ It is here that he makes what looks like a curious suggestion (I will return to this below). He argues that recognising the abstract/mythological nature of this is particularly important for Christians (who themselves believe in a kind of messianism). Here are his comments:

12 Althusser 1997a, p. 24.

13 Ibid.

14 Althusser 1997a, p. 31.

15 Althusser 1997a, p. 27.

The proletariat of fear is a myth, but a myth that exists, and it is particularly important that it be exposed as such by Christians. For as Christians, we believe that there is a human condition, in other words, we believe in the equality of all men before God, and his Judgment, but we do not want his Judgment to be spirited away before our very eyes.¹⁶

Althusser drives a wedge between a good and true messianism – the theological – and a bad and false one, arguing that ultimately the messianism announced in the arguments under consideration in the text – those outlining the proletariat of fear – exemplify the latter, no matter how much they resemble those offered in Christianity. He does this by claiming that the proletariat of the human condition – or fear – is a myth in the precise sense that it is a conjunctural creation that masquerades as an eternal truth.

This is to say, those who hold the view of humanity's unification-in-fear do not see that this very view is itself constructed out of the very real fear that exists in that moment in history in which the war had just ended, and it was quite clear, both in the events of the war itself as well as those which surrounded it, that humanity in fact does have much to fear, but this is a historical condition, not an eternal or ahistorical one. So here, the proletariat of the human condition is nothing other than an ideological form in a precisely Marxist sense. That is, it is ideological insofar as it is taken to be an eternal structure of existence rather than merely a historical phenomenon. Further, this ideology is the very product of humanity's own labour, as Althusser points out using the atom bomb (and the fear that results from its existence) as his example:

The bomb is simply a product of human labor, and the world in which humanity trembles before what it has itself wrought is an extravagant image of the proletarian condition, in which the worker is enslaved by his own labor; it is quite simply the same world. One sees, then, which proletariat encompasses the other, and one understands where the human may find a solution: the road to man's reconciliation with his destiny is essentially that of the appropriation of the products of his labor, of what he creates in general, and of the history of his creation.¹⁷

16 Althusser 1997a, p. 27.

17 Althusser 1997a, p. 31.

In this theoretically dense passage, Althusser turns the tables on those advocates of the jettisoning of the Marxist conception of the proletariat and of class struggle. We can – and should – take his example of the bomb and expand it to the generalised fear that Malraux and others take to be the human condition. This fear, like the bomb, is a human product; it is produced in and through human labour. In this case, the labour exists both in the building of the bomb itself, but also in the production of such fear through the wider cache of human labour involved in the war and its events. In this way, the real nature of the concept of the ‘proletariat of fear’ with its ideological notion of the human condition is not larger than the Marxist conception of the proletariat; rather it is merely a form that comes to exist as a result of the labouring activity itself and thus is ‘encompassed’ by the Marxist conception. Once again, Althusser invokes the Hegelian-Marxist notion of appropriation as a means of overcoming the ideological conception: it is only through the recognition of the fear one feels in the face of death and suffering as being that which is produced by humanity’s own labour (and the recent collective labour of society in wartime) that one can come to see that which one thought was eternal and ultimately out of one’s control for what it truly is – namely the product of the historically grounded work of human labour. So in the end, the fear that exists is precisely a historically grounded fear, and in this way, it is something that exists in – and is produced by – the present and not something to come. It is here and now.

Returning now to Montag’s reading of all of this, he argues that what Althusser does is here is empty the future of all determination and destiny – there is no longer the need for a messianic overcoming of this eternal fear as this fear is not itself eternal, rather, it is historical and the product of a particular historical moment.¹⁸ In this sense, the future – and history itself – is no longer determined in the way that it might have been in its ideologically generated interpretation. Humanity can act to overcome its fear because such fear is itself the product of human action in the same way that the condition of the labouring proletariat is the direct result of human action. It is also here that Montag rightly identifies a tension in the essay. If it is the case that the proletariat of fear really is a historically generated ideological form and there is no future or end of history at which such a fear will be reconciled, as it is rather something which is to be reconciled in this world, in the here and now through the recognition of its ideological status, then it seems that this is in tension with Althusser’s Christian belief in the reconciliation of humanity with God in

18 Montag 2013, p. 204.

Judgement as we saw above.¹⁹ Even if we draw a line between a 'good' messianism and a 'bad' one, there is a tension in the assertion of any messianism whatsoever:

The problem then becomes how does he, does one, distinguish between the true and the false end, between the event, no matter how universal and total the destruction that characterizes it (Matthew 24:2, 'there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down') and the Advent? ... How are we to understand Althusser's retention of an 'end that is close for every Christian' against the end declared by false prophets?²⁰

Montag's answer to this question is to say that it is precisely the end of the teleological outlook that Althusser has in mind as the true end.²¹ In other words, the end that remains after the critique offered in the 'International of Decent Feelings' is precisely the end of ends themselves, and with that the end of the kind of resignation implicated in the false messianism of the proletariat of fear:

In this strict sense, the end to which Althusser remains committed is thus the end of the end, the end of the future, the end of waiting as a mode of being and acting; it is the revelation that 'tomorrow will be a today', a pure present without a beyond but that is never the same.²²

I want to suggest another way of reading this seeming contradiction. One that more closely aligns Althusser's continued Christian leanings with both his developing Marxism and his slowly waning Hegelianism. Recall again the claim that I noted as curious above, where Althusser argues that it is particularly important for Christians to recognise the ideological myth of the proletariat of the human condition as a myth. He goes on to state that even Christians make the mistake of confusing a 'psychological truth' for a 'religious one'.²³ The division that is set up here is between that which is historical (the psychological truth) and that which is otherwise (the religious truth). The importance that Althusser attaches to the recognition of the distinction between the historical

19 Montag 2013, p. 206.

20 Montag 2013, pp. 206–7.

21 Montag 2013, p. 207.

22 Ibid.

23 Althusser 1997a, p. 27.

and the religious in this context for those who are religious can be seen in that it marks a key feature of the religious for the Christian – namely that the religious truth is separate from the historical. Knowledge of the properly religious is purchased through the dialectical critique that Althusser himself is offering here – he is showing how individuals (secular and Christian) could be taken in and duped by the historical/psychological truth that is expressed in the post-war conjuncture and how they can subsequently come to see it as ahistorical. But it is also the case that Althusser wants to show how the Christian (and presumably anyone else), with proper mode of critique, can come to recognise that what she first took to be religious is in fact not; and thus she can, through the dialectic that emerges here, come to understand the distinction between the religious and the historical in the negative.

By seeing the historical as historical, the Christian can get a better sense for the religious in that what the religious is, is precisely not identifiable with the historical. Coming to recognise this through the dialectical process at play here is deeply Hegelian – it is in the negating of the content that one first took to be true that one comes to have a better understanding of the object (in this case Christianity itself). Where Montag sees an argument that pushes toward the rejection of ends as such, I would say that one can also see an argument that does not do this, but rather pushes toward what Althusser sees (at this time anyway) as the proper knowledge of the religious.

This view also leaves intact the arguments that in recognising the historical conditions of the psychological state of fear, we are again able to attend to the present via returning to the proletariat of class struggle. At the same time that we become able to do this, the religious is preserved in that it remains different from the ends that drive the present. This is to say, if we read Althusser's point in this way, it turns out that one can be both Christian and at the same time a Marxist and participate in class struggle. So what first looked like a contradiction looks less so from this vantage point. Further, returning to the text of 'A Matter of Fact', which as we know was written just a few years after the 'International of Decent Feelings' (and was mentioned at the outset of this chapter), Althusser will argue here that the Church must align itself with the proletariat in precisely the way I have been describing in order to escape its own ideological determination.²⁴ So we can see a convergence and a carrying forward of these themes in this latter essay.

I will return to this in a moment, but first I want to pause here to briefly note that what we seem to get in this partitioning of the psychological fear

24 Althusser 1997a, pp. 193–4.

generated in the post-war conjuncture (and its manifestation in ideology) and the religious is a structure that in some ways also mirrors the much later conception that Althusser builds of the relation between the ideological and the scientific wherein there exists, in the words of Alain Badiou, an ‘impure’ relation between science and ideology as it is the case that the two are bound up together in a process of relational differentiation.²⁵ As noted above, it is in the critique of the conception of the proletariat of fear as ideological that we become able to mark the distinction between the true and false religious at all. In the same way that in Althusser’s later view there is a deep affiliation between ideology and science, there is here a connection between ideology and the religious – which we have already partially demonstrated above – insofar as it is by identifying the one that we are able to begin to understand the other. More importantly, however, we should recognise that Althusser’s arguments here, when addressed to his fellow Christians, make a critical distinction, one that is internal to Christianity itself in that the proletariat of fear is presented by Marcel and others as being an expression of the religious and Althusser’s analysis of this remains also within this realm, so we have a split that emerges within the religious between the historical and the eternal. So here again, the contradiction is not one between an argument that states that there is no end or telos and a belief that requires one, but rather it is within the belief that requires an end that Althusser finds the contradiction that differentiates the true from the false end.

With all of this in mind, we can direct our attention back to the connection we began to draw above between the ‘International’ essay and ‘A Matter of Fact’. It should be no surprise, based on what we have been describing above, that Althusser identifies in this latter essay yet another form of ideology that exists within the religious, but here he is interested in the ideology that exists not simply in individual believers (as was the case with the ideology that was under consideration in the earlier essay) but rather within the Church as an institution.

What Althusser finds here is, like in the critique of the ideology of psychological fear, a church doctrine that has taken a historically grounded set of ideals, concepts, and material structures built around these concepts – founded in the thirteenth-century thought of Aquinas and Augustine – reified them and taken

25 Badiou 2012, p. 145. For more on the relation between science and ideology, see, for instance, Althusser 2010, and for some further discussion of the conception of an impure relation between science and ideology that Badiou attributes to Althusser, see Pfeifer 2015, chapter 2.

them to be the eternal doctrines upon which the Church remains founded.²⁶ So here, the Church as an institution acts to reproduce these structures (as noted at the outset of this chapter, the relation to Althusser's later theory of ideology as grounded in institutions should not be missed here).²⁷ In exposing the ideological nature of this, Althusser argues:

We have to trace these matters back to these concrete structures in order to understand the tenacity of obsolete concepts in religious ideology. Moreover, we have to expose these structures in order to help bring them to their appointed end, and to help the men who are brought up in them overcome them and become contemporary with their times.²⁸

As we saw above, one of the ways Althusser recommends that this be done is through an alliance with the proletariat, since 'only the organized proletariat (and its allies) is capable of combating, in a concrete sense, precisely those feudal and capitalist structures responsible for the Church's alienation'.²⁹ So here the weight of history must be lifted in exposing the historical nature of the structures that are holding the Church back, according to Althusser. We should be able to see yet another connection here between this view and the one expressed in the 'International' essay. Not only is it up to the Christian to align with the proletariat, but once again, even within the religious, there is a now, a present moment which must be attended to and so once again, the Althusserian view is one which rejects a religious resignation in favour of a view of history that allows for individuals to act as agents of change and this is – again – offered within the religious itself.

So what of the complete turn to Marxism and the rejection of the theological? Given what we have been arguing so far, one might think that this comes out of nowhere. Althusser has been making space for both of these systems in his theoretical world by offering arguments that attempt to de-link the more politically relevant concerns of the present from the more religious concerns of the future, claiming, as we have seen, that even though the Christian conception of an end in God's Judgement is true, that is no justification for denying the present and the human conflicts that exist within it, and in fact the Church and its believers would do well to become involved in such matters. This is, of course, as we have seen, found in Althusser's repeated insistence that it is the

²⁶ Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

²⁷ For more on Althusser's later conception of ideology, see Althusser 2008, pp. 127–88.

²⁸ Althusser 1997a, p. 189.

²⁹ Althusser 1997a, p. 194.

Marxian proletariat that is the true catalyst of change in the present – both within the Church and outside of it. It is here also, however, that we can see how the stage is set for Althusser's transition away from his more theological concerns.

It is precisely through the arguments described here that the theological concerns become more and more distant from the political concerns of the present. In the constant foregrounding of the role of the proletariat we see the recession of the theological and the conception of humanity's reconciliation in God's judgement. Reconciliation becomes more and more a human matter, until in the 'Letter to Jean Lacroix' we finally see Althusser rejecting altogether the idea that the most important judgement is God's:

When we say that Hitler was a criminal, or that Trotsky or Pétan, etc., was a traitor, we pronounce an historical judgment; we do not say, Hitler, etc., will be damned, but that Hitler, etc., confronted history and tried to turn it against humanity ... The Judgment we pass on him is the judgment history passes on him by way of the revolt of his victims, the subjugation of his people and ours, his defeat and the freedom the subjugated people wrestled back. We remain within history. Let God, if he exists and if he so desires, damn or save Hitler; that is not our affair.

It is that last line that is most critical, insofar as Althusser is signalling his rejection of, or at least his lack of interest in, the theological judgement of history. It is here where Montag's arguments to the effect that Althusser rejects the teleological view find their most relevance, for at this moment in Althusser's theoretical life, that is exactly what happened. Along with the rejection of God's judgement as meaningful and the concomitant calls to remain within history, we also see the more familiar Althusserian arguments rejecting the idea that one can find the theoretical basis for the view that Marx champions the idea of an end of history.³⁰ Though this will not become fully developed in Althusser's thought for quite some time, it is here that we see the beginnings of the more robust position in which history becomes, what the late Althusser will refer to as, 'history *au présent*' or history in the present.³¹ This is the conception of a history which is unfinished and unmoored from both the past and the future – past events are only partially determined, they become what they are in the present through the ways in which the present world interacts with those past events

30 Althusser 1997a, p. 207.

31 Althusser 2006, p. 264.

and reacts to them, and the future remains radically undetermined insofar as there is no end to which the present is headed. All there is, is the present. The importance of this should not be overlooked; it is in history *au présent* that the action of political agents, such as those of the organised proletariat, become possible. In his shrugging off of the theological conception of an end, Althusser opens up the space that makes possible the political as such, and further, the possibility of a truly revolutionary moment.