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Edited and translated by *G.M Goshgarian*

How to be a Marxist in Philosophy

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By Neal Harris

'A quoi sert Althusser?' Contemporary progressive readers may even insert a wistful inflection in the *soixante-huitards'* indictment. Indeed, what use is Althusser *aujourd'hui*? Even at the peak of his popularity, Althusser's explicitly Marxist thought was deemed incompatible with, and unyielding to, the demands of mundane material (European) praxis. Yet the desire to seek a 'use' for Althusser's prose in keeping with Marx's final thesis on Feuerbach, the last line of Althusser's text, will be anathema to many of today's 'radical' thinkers.

Yet *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy* does not simply pale before the demands of praxis. Indeed, this text may induce a form of practical change rarely precipitated by works of the genre. While the ultimate point (of course) is to change the material world, Goshgarian's admirable translation enables readers not just to challenge their convictions, but rather, through Althusser's anti-philosophy, to change the foundational method of their 'philosophising'. Thus, while this work will offer no satisfactory introduction to a 'Marxist philosophy', *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy* presents an incisive critique of Western philosophy, and outlines the key tenets of a dialectical, materialist, and scientific optic for furthering Marxist thought.

Althusser's primary submission (or 'position', as he would prefer) is perhaps a little hidden within his eclectic cast of characters, and his highly stylised, idiosyncratic delivery. At turns, the reader is presented with Bichat, Boutang, Democritus, Derrida, Moses and, of course, Lenin. There are detours of whimsy, before Althusser, stepping out of the pages, chastises himself for his lost focus, or (perhaps a tad haughtily) submits he 'doesn't have the time today' to furnish us with a conclusion to a line of thought (88-89). Perhaps that's uncharitable. What is undeniable is that Althusser's unique style, a product of his genius and encyclopaedic knowledge, and perhaps also his location, may take the reader a while to acclimatise to.

Before we reach the first chapter the reader is presented with a surreal prelude: Grushka's Donkey. A party is in full swing, with the key (Western) philosophers of the ages present. They are bickering, drinking, eating; booming laughs and ad hominem attacks: the full symposium. Althusser pithily condenses (or caricatures) the thought of each thinker he introduces, before moving onto his description of the next guest, each serving little more than a metonymic function. The discussion is a parody of the Western philosophical tradition, and it is only with Lenin that a truly developed passage emerges. Lenin regales the crowd with the parable of Grushka's Donkey: a simple man from the village is heartbroken that a beautiful tree has been ruined by being cruelly tied to a donkey. The elders listen to Grushka and advise him that the tree can be effortlessly rescued: merely untie the donkey. A 'stranger' (to Western philosophy) is at the party. He begins to commend Lenin's tale, perhaps realising what he is alluding to. Before the stranger has finished talking he is rudely interrupted by Socrates, the doyen at the soiree. For Althusser, this prelude serves to demonstrate that philosophy is 'its own myth' (9). Precisely what this means becomes truly apparent only towards the end of the text.

For Althusser, philosophy needs Marxism. Simultaneously, Marxism needs philosophy.

Yet this is not to suggest the existence of, or indeed the possibility of, a harmonious, mutually beneficial relationship. Rather, there exists a 'millennial trench war' of 'ruses and feints' (114). Philosophy, as Althusser repeatedly reminds us, has always been, first and foremost, a conflict. The primary belligerents are Idealism and materialism, and it is the former that has overwhelmingly triumphed to date. In contrast, Althusser advocates a sophisticated materialism: a materialism undergirded by Marxist insights. For the pied-noir 'anti-philosopher', Marxist materialism is always dynamic, truly dialectical. In a typically idiosyncratic analogy, the train is always moving for the Marxist, who enters the carriage on the run: there is no original, static, essential, unitary point of timed departure. But what does this all mean? It can be hard to follow Althusser's texts, which is one of the greatest ironies in an author who passionately appealed to the might of the workers and the dispossessed, yet who wrote in a manner at times impenetrable to a privileged doctoral student. In Althusser's (at times infuriating) style, 'come, let me show you what he meant...'

Althusser's argument can be surmised thus: the (philosophically weak) Idealism dominant across (Western) philosophy supported the development of legal rationality, which precipitated the dominant capitalist framing of the subject (104). This is but the crudest of summations but indicates the core argument presented in the first hundred pages of the text. The bourgeois, capitalist subject, of whom Kant can now be viewed as the 'supreme' progenitor, is a product of philosophy (104). For Althusser, the history of (Western) philosophy, dominated as it is by Idealism, has served to birth capitalist subjectivity itself. Indeed, over half the text of *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy* is dedicated to demonstrating the complicity of Idealism. It is only in the nineteenth chapter, nearly three-quarters of the way through the text, that a reconstructive project commences, where the possibility of a Marxist-oriented materialist alternative is forwarded.

Drawing on *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy and Capital*, Althusser submits (at long last!) that 'there exists a Marxist materialist philosophy, whose theses we must laboriously reconstruct, since Marx worked none of them out, a handful of exceptions aside' (112). As he establishes earlier in the text, these theses are best viewed as 'positions', yet our author contends that their dialectical progression can be accounted for with relative ease. The central theses are thus, unsurprisingly: (1) the primacy of practice over theory, (2) the primacy of matter/being over thought/consciousness, (3) the primacy of the real object of knowledge (internal to 2), and (4) the primacy of absolute truth over relative truth (which serves to exclude historicism). Such are the core tenets for Althusser's Marxist materialism, and, taken together with his lengthy critique of Idealism's complicity, represent the substantial content of the text.

Marx wrote in his afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* that he had discovered the 'rational kernel inside the mystical shell'. In contrast, Althusser's presentation for his 'grand reveal' is uncharacteristically explicit, lucid and understated. I expect a substantial critical discussion to follow on the utility of Althusser's laborious reconstruction. To my mind, he indeed succeeds in clearly presenting the foundations for a Marxist materialist philosophy, commensurate with Marx's dialectical approach to conducting social inquiry. As Althusser outlines, one can legitimately read the Idealist dominance in Western philosophy as nefarious, precipitating the ascent of capitalist subjectivity. Further, I find his outlined foundations for a Marxist philosophy worthy of his extended excavation.

What use then is Althusser? And what wry summation can we offer as to his function for Western philosophy as per his treatment of the great philosophers in the symposium of his prelude? How should his imaginary, as evidenced here, be pithily condensed before we move on to the next idiosyncratic Frenchman with whom he shares a cognac? Those sceptical of his insights from the 1960s and 1970s will not be convinced by this presentation.

Neither will those ideologically invested in the primacy of agency, nor those who draw heavily from Idealist philosophical traditions. Althusser is simultaneously blunt and cryptic. His style infuriating and endearing. Ultimately, the true merit of *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy* is that it presents the entirety of Western philosophy in a unique and critical light; forcing the scholar interested in Marxist ideas to radically reassess their own intellectual heritage. What use is Althusser? He makes us think, and he makes us think differently.

How to be a Marxist in Philosophy is thus essential reading for those invested in a progressive political agenda, and for scholars of social and political thought, philosophy, intellectual history, and sociology, whether they will enjoy reading it or not.

Neal Harris is a doctoral tutor and guest lecturer at the University of Sussex and a visiting lecturer at the University of Brighton. He is a Ph.D. student at the University of Sussex, where his research in critical social theory is supervised by Professor Gerard Delanty and Dr. James Hardie-Bick. His research interests include Critical Theory, ecology, and cosmopolitanism.