

# Strong Structuralism, Weak Subject: An Interview with Yves Duroux

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Peter Hallward (PH): Students at the Ecole Normale (ENS) launched two theoretical journals in the mid 1960s, the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes* and the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*.<sup>1</sup> The latter emerged through a split with the former towards the end of 1965. You were all students of Louis Althusser; what role did he play in the organization of the journals?

Yves Duroux (YD): Althusser always kept a certain distance from the connected projects of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* and the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*. His distance in relation to the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* was real, but the theoretical core of what Althusser said in *Reading Capital* (1965) for example vis-à-vis symptomal reading, is also to be found in our text 'Action of the Structure' (CpA 9.6), a text which circulated *before* the seminar on *Reading Capital*. Miller, Milner and I wrote this text; Miller was the one who wrote up it, but it involved discussions among the three of us. We were very interested at the time in Marx's work on labour and labour power, on the 'converted form [*forme apparente*]'<sup>2</sup> of labour power, which is one of the central points of this text, and which justifies the idea of *analysis*, in a very particular sense. Analysis meant: to seek out the point by which the imaginary element of the structure can be made to topple over. For us, subjectivity was *included* in the structure. It was not something...

PH: ...external, free...

YD: ... precisely. And this is why I maintain that there were two structuralisms. We distinguished our 'strong' structuralism from the 'weak structuralism' of Lévi-Strauss. (Today, on the contrary, I am struck by the fact that there are young people like Patrice Maniglier who totally rehabilitate Lévi-Strauss.<sup>3</sup> I have a hard time getting young people today to understand that Lévi-Strauss was not in fact our idol. This is why, in a rather perverse fashion, we opened up the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* to Derrida, in order to knock down Lévi-Strauss; and he was furious [*laughter*]). And why did we take a distance in relation to this first sort of structuralism? It had to do with Lévi-Strauss' theory of the model: he says that the model remains distant from experience. In our version of structuralism, by contrast, in our strong structuralism, experience is *included*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 'Marxism', *Concept and Form* website, [www.kingston.ac.uk/cahiers/concepts/marxism](http://www.kingston.ac.uk/cahiers/concepts/marxism) (accessed 3 October 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The German *die verwandelte Form* is sometimes translated in French as *la forme apparente*, for instance to translate a phrase in *Capital* volume 1, ch. 20: 'The converted form in which the daily value, weekly value, etc., of labour-power is directly presented is that of time-wages' (Marx, *Capital volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes [NY: Vintage, 1977], 683). The value of labour-power appears, in its converted or commodified form, as wages; again, 'money is precisely the converted form of commodities, in which their particular use-values have been extinguished' (251).

<sup>3</sup> Patrice Maniglier, 'Faire ce qui se défait: la question de la politique entre Sartre et le structuralisme', *Les Temps Modernes* 632-634 (July-October 2005), 425-448.

in the structure. This is why there is a redoubling of the structure: a virtual/actual structure. In a way it's quite Deleuzian: structuring/structured. It's quite Spinozist.

PH: Nature *naturans* and *naturata*.

YD: Yes. *Reading Capital* is one of Althusser's major texts, and in a certain way it is very close to this intellectual reference [*envoi*], this theoretical reference.

PH: And in certain respects, you and your friends anticipated it, and at such a young age.

YD: We had a sort of theoretical insolence. We were between 20 and 23 years of age. Miller was 20-21 years old. I was 23. For us it was a question of audacity, of theoretical audacity. Rereading this text 'Action of the Structure' (CpA 9.6), you can see that we were trying to be at the forefront of rigour and knowledge. We cite, for example, Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic*, which had come out in the spring of 1963. We cite him against Merleau-Ponty; we immediately saw Foucault as being against Merleau-Ponty. Ours was a double Foucault: simultaneously the Foucault of *Birth of the Clinic* and that of the *History of Madness*. This is why we referred to our initial project as theory of discourse, or discourse theory [*théorie du discours*]. We took Foucault's side on a rather contested point, which was his interpretation of the *cogito*, where there was ...

PH: ... the famous debate with Derrida.<sup>4</sup>

YD: Absolutely, and we took Foucault's side. That must have been in spring '64. I recall very well the discussions we had at the time. We said: we will make Freud and Marx cohere together, but not at all as the Frankfurt School attempted to do, around alienation, etc., but around a theory of the structure and not around a theory of the subject. We did not want to redo what the Germans had tried to do in the 1920s-30s, at the time of the first Freud-Marx liaison. This question of the Freud-Marx relation has helped shape western critical thinking from the 1920s through to our generation. In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari take up the Freud-Marx question again, and Badiou comes back to it in *Being and Event*, when after distinguishing the three orientations of thought (constructivist or programmatic, generic, transcendent), at the end of this chapter he says a rather strange thing. He says: *but there is perhaps still something else around Marx and Freud*. It's very enigmatic.<sup>5</sup>

PH: This would be the path of the subject.

YD: He did not develop it again, but it is one more echo of the Marx-Freud relation. And, just a digression on Badiou: Badiou, who joined the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* later, did so from a stance that wasn't the same as ours. He was much more Althusserian than we were, in an almost dogmatic sense. When [in 'Mark and Lack', CpA 10.8] he

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<sup>4</sup> With Descartes, 'madness has been banished. While *man* can still go mad, *thought*, as the sovereign exercise carried out by a subject seeking the truth, can no longer be devoid of reason.' (Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa [London: Routledge, 2006], 47). Cf. Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness' [1963], in Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967); *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> 'A fourth way, discernible from Marx onwards, grasped from another perspective in Freud, is transversal to the three others. It holds that the truth of the ontological impasse cannot be seized or thought in immanence to ontology itself [...]. Its hypothesis consists in saying that one can only render justice to injustice from the angle of the event and intervention' (Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham [London: Continuum, 2005], 284-285).

criticizes Miller's article 'Suture' (CpA 1.3), he is criticizing two things. He is criticizing the idea that it is possible to deduce from Frege's logic anything for a theory of the subject. He thought that this wasn't true, that it was forced. He called it ideology. He said that it is necessary to refer logic to what it is, which was to say, at the time, simply the theory of formal writing [*théorie des écritures*]. It's quite incredible, when you reread these texts. The thing that is most caricatural is his *Concept of Model* [1969], the end of *Concept of Model*, it's astonishing. And, on the other hand, he considered that there was something ideological in Lacanianism itself. Why? Because he was against the idea of lack. This is a point, you know, that has always been a problem for Badiou. He is against this theory of lack – of the structuring lack. Later in his work this took very complicated forms, around the void, etc. But in any case, for us, the main idea was the redoubling of the subject; the subject, insofar as it is *absent* at the structural level, has effects of wholeness [*effets de plein*] at the structured level. It was very important for us that there could be this topological redoubling – to pass below the bar (in Lacan's sense of the term).

PH: And why, in order to understand this relation between subject and structure, is it necessary to take an analytic approach, specifically? Analytic and not, say, the sort of genetic or 'dialectical' method attempted by Sartre, for instance?

YD: An analytic approach is necessary because one always sets out from what is structured. One always sets out from the structured, but there is a point in the structured which represents, which is the place-holder, precisely, of the point of lack in the structure itself. Analysis is, precisely, the detecting of this point. It consists in locating what could be called the utopic point [*utopique*] or the infinite point.<sup>6</sup> This was connected to the ideas that Lacan had been advancing, namely that interpretation consists in grasping certain signifiers which weigh more than others, since it is on the basis of them that one might then reconstitute an unknown discursive chain, a chain of signifiers that remains unknown for its subject.

PH: And this point was a point of liberation in relation to what is structured?

YD: Well, this here is very complicated. Rather than a point of freedom, it is a point to be transformed. Our idea was that, for example, when Marx analysed labour and labour power, it was properly from there that he referred back to the question of exploitation, of the extortion of surplus labour. This point, of the extortion of surplus labour, is not seen – so there was an analytical grasp or clarification of this otherwise inaccessible point, a point which would then *open up* to the political point. The political point was an effect of the theoretical grasp or clarification (which is why all this was theoreticist...), the grasping of this theoretical point on the basis of which the structure could move, pivot, be transformed.

PH: And on the basis of which the proletariat could grasp itself as subject?

YD: No, we were totally against the idea of the proletariat as subject.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Action of the Structure', CpA 9.6: 97. Every structure includes a 'lure' or 'decoy' [*leurre*] which *takes the place* of the lack [*tenant lieu de manque*], but which is at the same time 'the weakest link of the given sequence', a 'vacillating point' which only partially belongs to the plane of actuality. The 'the whole virtual plane (of structuring space) is concentrated' in this vacillating point. The place of this function 'can be named the utopic point of the structure, its improper point, or its point at infinity' (CpA 9.6:97). These are the points at which the "transcendental" space of structuration intersects with 'experiential, structured space'.

PH: But then how are we to understand the 'transformation' in question? Is it a matter still of a properly revolutionary project (following Althusser's neo-Leninist logic: 'without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary movement')? The status of the theory-practice relation, I suppose, must have been a question that Robert Linhart (of the *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes*) often asked you?

YD: No, it was Rancière who asked it *après-coup*, in his *Althusser's Lesson* (1974). Rancière says: you are the philosopher-kings, and this is enlightened despotism. Rancière's text is magnificent. It's magnificent, but I'm against it, because ultimately it rewrites the prevailing idea of the time, which is: we must synthesize the ideas of the masses, rather than clarify a scientific understanding of the forces that oppress the masses and thus distort their ideas. It takes up again the elementary Maoism of the immediate post-'68 period, this Maoism which shattered the entire construction of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. This was the most violent point of struggle against Althusser – the idea that when push came to shove Althusser was locked away in his study and far from the masses. Hence, the importance of synthesizing the ideas of the masses, the revolt of the masses... In Rancière, this takes on more anarchist forms, whereby *all* theory represses revolt, etc. Our dear Alain Badiou also went along with this in the years 1971-73.

PH: So, returning to our *Cahiers*; to launch the journal you took points of reference from Marx, from Lacan: it nevertheless remains pretty abstract!

YD: That's the least one can say... I tell you, it is a masterpiece of theoreticism. You really have to admit that. It was the project of arrogant young people. It's for this reason that I say someone like Pierre Macherey was more pedagogical; he had more historical culture. Our a-historicism was terrifying, in a way. You need to understand: we were very young, and aspired to theoretical rigour – whence the investment in the word 'theory'. 'Analysis' was, I would say, a derivative of the word 'theory'. For Althusser, the word was theory, for us it was analysis, but it was the same thing, the same thing that we sought to render more operational. Analysis meant the grasping of this utopic point, the deployment of the structure, in order, let's say, to open a place for action on the structure. There is the action of the structure itself, which shapes ordinary reality, but action *on* the structure presumes that the action of the structure has been located and understood.

PH: And what is the relation between this action and that of the subject, the subject as it can be understood in the dialectical tradition, and even the subject in the sense of the Cartesian cogito, which Lacan reworks in certain respects?

YD: This would be a very long discussion by itself. I will simply say that the structured subject is the phenomenological subject.

PH: And therefore imaginary.

YD: That's it. It's the phenomenological subject, and we acknowledge it by saying that it can be understood as a description of what is structured. It's the same as that strange idea of Althusser's, suggesting that Husserl was very useful for explaining ideology.

PH: By phenomenology you mean, essentially, ideology and the imaginary, is that right?

YD: Exactly: Lacan's imaginary, Althusser's ideology, phenomenology as description (but not theory), a faithful description because it's blind...

PH: That is to say 'pre-scientific', or even 'Aristotelian' (from before the scientific revolution)...

YD: As Koyré said, an Aristotelian conception of things is undoubtedly the best theory of common sense; it's pre-Galilean, pre-Newtonian, the best description of lived experience. Koyré was very important for us, perhaps more important than Bachelard. If you reread our text ['Action of the Structure'] you'll see that Canguilhem's text on the concept appears right away (CpA9.6:94), on page two. This confirmed the idea that our theoretical work was about doing work on the concept, starting with the primary concept of *structure*, that is to say the concept of structure insofar as it *included* the concept of subject. This was very important for us: never separate the subject from the structure. We therefore had to redouble the subject. The problem is that we said nothing about practice. You raise the question of the subject as practical subject: we didn't say anything about it.

PH: At the time did you feel this to be an absence, or as something that wasn't immediately necessary? In the Marxist tradition, obviously, theory and practice go hand-in-hand...

YD: Just after this text ['Action of the Structure'], you must read the next text that Miller wrote, on theoretical training or formation [*la formation théorique*]; it was written around the same time, two months later, for the first issue of the *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes*.<sup>7</sup> It's another text at which Rancière, later on, would aim his bazooka. The basic idea was that rigorous traversal of the imaginary is what authorizes all practice. We said nothing about practice as such. It's on this idea that, in a way, the *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes* were founded, with some immediate tensions that emerged right away. We said that we would authorize practice, but what, which practice? In a certain way, I would say that there was a sort of equivocation between this theory of analysis, in the sense that I just mentioned (seek out the utopic point etc.), and the Leninist theory of the weak link that Althusser develops in his 'Contradiction and Overdetermination',<sup>8</sup> in the sense that it was necessary to identify on and cut the weakest link in the chains of domination. We were under the impression that there was a relation between this practice and the practice of analysis, the practice of analysis being itself a practice.

PH: Analysis here, you mean psychoanalysis?

YD: Yes, a practice that seeks out a certain number of signifiers...

PH: ... the signifiers that identify the weak link of the imaginary...

YD: ... through which one might cause the imaginary to topple over, the imaginary in which the subject will be able to re-establish itself, having traversed its illusions [*leurrés*] as so many symptoms. We could say that the theory of the symptom in Lacan was very close to this theory of redoubling – the symptom as return of the repressed,

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<sup>7</sup> Miller, 'Fonction de la formation théorique' (présentation des *Cahiers Marxist-Léninistes*), reprinted in Miller, *Un Début dans la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Louis Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster [London: New Left Books, 1969], 95-98.

etc. We had the impression that we held the world between theory and practice, via the *detour* of theory. What Lacan said against psychoanalysis understood as a blind practice of ego reinforcement echoed what Althusser had said against Marxism understood as a blind practice of humanism and of technocratism (which formed a couple for him). We had the impression that this new way of conceiving the structured and the structuring opened at last onto a new practice.

That was the philosophical kernel of the thing, which I might call, to evoke the atmosphere of the times, an *enthusiasm* for theory. We really thought that we had found some keys: the Marx of Althusser, the Freud of Lacan, and in a way, the work of Foucault, who was not yet well known (he was for us, but less for others).

PH: I suppose Foucault, too, was still quite young.

YD: He had written the *History of Madness* and the *Birth of the Clinic*: in each case it's the same gesture. In our texts of the time we would always say: Foucault's major work is *The Birth of the Clinic*. This lasted through to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, which Foucault wrote *before* 1968. And then at that point a cycle came to an end. It's true that May '68 brings all this to an end.

PH: Was the general idea, in the *Cahiers*, to open a space, to liberate the potential of a subject that might come to terms with or re-establish itself in a more genuine way in relation to the structured, in relation to everything that tended to imprison it in the imaginary, in its ego, in its illusions, etc? Did you think that Sartre, say, was unable to achieve this because his chosen point of departure was not theory but precisely a praxis which was *already* free, free in an ontological sense?

YD: Yes, we turned things upside-down: we set out from the subjugated subject, and conceived freedom as the end and never the beginning.

PH: You never prescribed what this freedom ought to do. And so there was no need to connect it ideas of justice, for instance, or with the universalization of freedom.

YD: No, the fundamental point was indeed the primacy of theory. Insofar as theory allows us, to put it crudely, to pass to the structuring dimension [*le structurant*], we need to act on this dimension.

PH: And the structuring dimension cannot be grasped except through a theory such as that developed by Marx or by Freud...

YD: Absolutely.

PH: Common sense experience, say, doesn't allow it to be understood; the real mechanics of capitalist exploitation cannot be grasped by experience alone?

YD: No. And it's on this point that everything turns upside down after 68, when things spin around 180 degrees, and people begin to say 'we must set out from the workers' consciousness', etc. – whereas Althusser had never stopped telling us that the workers, *like* the capitalists, were living under the same illusion. We didn't realize that, in the process, we were repeating a very old philosophical gesture. We repeated the Platonic trajectory, in our own way, under a very specific form. We were unaware of it. Actually, Althusser, who was a crafty old dog, was aware of it, but we were unaware, or much

less so. In the recent talk I gave on Rancière<sup>9</sup> I said that he had needed to commit a double parricide – of Althusser, and of Plato. It's true, and he said nothing to contradict me.

PH: As conceived in the aftermath of 68, practice won't have any further need of theoretical authorization.

YD: Practice will figure as an abrupt emergence or apparition [*surgissement*] without cause.

PH: And without authority.

YD: An eruption without cause which in a way is authorized by its result. It is not authorized by anything preceding it. In a way, we wouldn't have been completely opposed to this idea, except that we absolutely needed it...

PH: ... to pass via theory.

YD: That's it. This is why our politics was never anything other, at least in the first instance, than theoretical training – consider again that small text, contemporary with the text 'Action of the Structure', which opens the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*.<sup>10</sup> We see clearly, in the end, why things ended up drifting apart. To begin with there was no separation between the projects of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* and the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*. But from the moment when people began doing their theoretical training, they said, that's all well and good, we've understood what you've said, and now what are we going to *do*? And there the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, precisely, had nothing more to say, we remained within the theory of discourse. And the best moments of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, by the way, are not the texts in it, but are the half-page or page that open each issue.

PH: The forewords.

YD: They are all in keeping with the inaugural text, 'Action of the Structure' (CpA9.6). That is why, in order to understand properly the trajectory of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, it is necessary, at least up until and including issue eight, to set out from this text from '64 and to understand that they all have the same theoretical filiation – and otherwise we filled out the issues as best we could. I should add that by this stage I was no longer there at the ENS; I was absent for one and a half years, then I returned.

PH: Why are the forewords signed with proper names? I imagine that the conversations around them must have been intense, a matter of collective invention. Why did you not keep them either anonymous or collective?

YD: Because Miller was too sensitive about the risk of concept theft. When the text from '64 was passed around it was not signed. And he reacted, after *Reading Capital*, because of Rancière's text (apropos of structural causality)...<sup>11</sup> Miller is someone who imposes himself – and I have the contrary tendency, which is absolute effacement. It

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<sup>9</sup> Yves Duroux, 'La Querelle interminable: Rancière et ses contemporains', in *La Philosophie déplacée: Autour de Jacques Rancière*, ed. Laurence Cornu and Patrice Vermeren (Paris: Éditions Horlieu, 2006), 17-26.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, 'Fonction de la formation théorique'.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jacques Rancière's interview in this volume, 000.

doesn't matter, the point was not decisive. It's true that intellectually this text was born in my head. And it's true that I made that grandiloquent comparison to a famous text of German Idealism which was co-written by Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin.

PH: The first programme, or manifesto?<sup>12</sup>

YD: Exactly. I said that it resembled it. No one knows who wrote this manifesto. Today people think it was Schelling – that Hegel dictated it, Schelling wrote it and Hölderlin laughed! I would place myself in Hölderlin's position, but of course this is all rather mythological.

PH: In any case, you all were part of a moment of transition. Did you see it as the moment after Sartre?

YD: On this score an event took place that was extremely important. The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* came out in September/October 1960, and in April '61 Badiou and Terray invited Sartre to the Ecole Normale Supérieure to talk about it. It's the last time that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty saw each other, because Merleau-Ponty died two months later [3 May 1961]. It was held in the Salle des Actes. I would say that it was the apogee of something, and also the end. It wasn't Althusser's article on the young Marx<sup>13</sup> that had this effect, as nobody had really noticed it; it was a small article in a journal of communist intellectuals, *La Pensée*. Nobody had noticed it. The most intellectually prestigious text was instead the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

In a way the year of 1961 was also the moment of the student mobilization for the end of the Algerian War, which would only come about the following year, in the month of April, when dreadful things occurred. There was the notorious demonstration by Algerians against the war, in which I was one of the rare French people to have participated. I was taken by a friend called Mathiot, whose father had helped the FLN. The French police threw people into the Seine. I was 40 metres away, so I saw it. It remains one of the traumas of my existence, to have seen such savagery. 200 people were killed. It was horrifying. And now it has been turned into a memorial site in France. There is a plaque on the St. Michel bridge; a film has been made. Right. I was barely 20 years old at the time, and it was a horrifying shock. In these circumstances there was an enormous political mobilization, though not one in which theory played much of a role. Sartre was as good a point of reference here as anything else.

There was an encounter; there were heterogeneous elements which came together and merged at a given moment. Althusser, who had been turning things around in his head for a long time – why did he make that alliance with Lacan? He made the alliance with Lacan for a reason which is to my mind very important. It is because he realized that there was something at stake in psychoanalysis which could not be reduced to the reductive notion that the Marxists had of it – namely an engagement with the implications of Georges Politzer's work. The Lacanian critique of Politzer was very important. Politzer had written his *Critique of the Foundations of Psychology* (1928) along the following lines: Freud is brilliant, but his metapsychology is worthless. What is required is the *concrete* of psychology (and this is why the words 'concrete' and 'lived experience' became our number one enemies). Freudian metapsychology, according to Politzer, is a sort of abstract machinery which has no relation to lived experience. Lived experience, the concrete – all this was very Sartrean. Politzer was a major figure and his book was the *shibboleth* of the day, everyone had read it.

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<sup>12</sup> This is the so-called earliest or 'Oldest System Programme of German Idealism' (1796).

<sup>13</sup> Althusser, 'On the Young Marx' [1961], in *For Marx* (1965).



The critique of Politzer made by a student of Lacan, Jean Laplanche, in a 1961 text in *Les Temps Modernes*, played a decisive role.<sup>14</sup> Althusser always told me that this is what had turned his ideas about psychoanalysis (and thus also about Lacan) upside down, enabling him to forge that Freud-Marx junction in an entirely original way.

PH: And, by implication, did this critique also bear on Sartre, on the primacy of praxis in relation to the theoretical? And on the political as much as on the philosophical level?

YD: Yes, but wait, not on the political level, on the contrary. We found Sartre very good on the political level, for instance we really liked his text on Franz Fanon.<sup>15</sup> Sartre's political commitment is something we found remarkable, impressive. We simply thought that he lacked the theory of his commitment.

PH: So was your aim to supply the theory of that commitment?

YD: Yes, and by supplying it, commitment for us became a consequence. I would say that we viewed the abstract energy of commitment from afar, since it did not serve us as a foundation. The major word was 'detour'. There's no getting round it [*c'est embêtant*], the *detour* of theory. As Plato said, it is a matter of 'the second navigation'.<sup>16</sup> One does not confront the hard reality [*la dureté*] of the world directly. It is necessary to take the detour of theory. Ultimately that was our project.

PH: And if it is confronted directly, what happens?

YD: If you try to confront it directly then in a certain way you are broken by it. At best one makes a heroic assault. In French national memory this is symbolised by the *cuirassiers de Reichshoffen*: in the war of 1870 between France and Germany, the Germans had machine guns and the French charged, swords drawn. They all died.

PH: The English version is 'the charge of the Light Brigade...' And someone like Sartre, then, appeared as someone who wanted to confront the world directly?

YD: At bottom the problem was that we couldn't have cared less about the Communist Party [PCF]. We need to be honest. We were in the Union des Étudiants Communistes [UEC], which was something completely different to the PCF. It was a place of great freedom, which the party regarded with a great deal of mistrust. It was made up of young students, mainly the humanities groups from the Sorbonne. At the very most, it must have had seven to eight thousand student members. That's all there was at the time – whereas today there are 200,000 students in the central Paris universities.

PH: Yes, though how many communists?

YD: Alright, but at the time things were different. There was a student movement which was organized by a student union and within this student union was the UEC, which precisely had been preoccupied by this question of the war of Algeria. It was the place

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, 'L'Inconscient: Une étude psychanalytique', *Les Temps modernes* 183 (1961); 'The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study', trans. Patrick Coleman. *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972), *The French Freud*, ed. Jeffrey Mehlman, 118-175. Laplanche and Leclaire's text emphasises 'how far the contribution of psychoanalysis is from descriptions given in the realm of phenomenology' (129).

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface, Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. Constance Farrington (New York, Grove, 1968; <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/1961/preface.htm>).

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Plato, *Phaedo*, 99d.

where everything happened. I never joined the Communist Party, but Etienne [Balibar] did. So he reflected more on the strategy of the Communist Party. I was never really interested in that. Miller and I were not interested in the Communist Party itself. For us, it stood condemned in advance. So this is ultimately why our project was politically – it must be admitted – rather imaginary. If I take a retrospective view, I would say that, and taking our foregrounding of theory into account, it was politically speaking imaginary. At the limit, as imaginary as Sartre's own conception of things, Sartre who also saw himself as a fellow traveller of the PCF, to which he wanted to add something. He wanted to add praxis, a foundation of freedom, let's say, to the worthy cause of the Communist Party– that worthy cause of the party that could nevertheless be thrown off track by bureaucratism, etc.

As for us, in a way, we were not interested in the relation to the Communist Party. Not at all. That was where Althusser's strategy (and perhaps it wasn't deliberate, I'm not sure) of saying 'the science of Marx, the theory of Marx' allowed things to fall into place. And so, in a way, we fabricated (because after all it was a sort of fabrication [*fabrication*]) what I'm calling that strong programme of structuralism, in opposition to the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and of Roland Barthes.

PH: You set out from the fact that in the work of Lévi-Strauss, and of Barthes also, there was precisely no place for the subject?

YD: Right, clearly there was no place for the subject. We considered that the most important problem was to reintroduce the subject into the structure; whereas they made a structure without subject. That's what they say, plain as day.

PH: And when Althusser said, for example, that 'history is a process without a subject', etc.?

YD: Yes, but the 'process without subject' is the Althusser afterwards, the Althusser of the *Reply to John Lewis* (1973).<sup>17</sup> In any case, it is a process without subject in the sense that the action of the structure is not itself the action of a subject. So, for us, it was exactly the same thing. Simply, to reintroduce the subject appeared indispensable to us in order to have the duality of the structuring and the structured. The action of the structuring is precisely not the action of a subject. At the level of the structuring there is a lack. This lack is *represented* by an imaginary. And this lack is the pivoting point of the structure. The goal is to reach or touch this pivoting point. For us, for example, it was the point touched by the analysis of the extortion of surplus labour in Marx, and, let's say, the point indicated by the primary signifiers in psychoanalysis, according to the way we saw things at the time. The same goes for the seminar of Serge Leclaire (CpA1.5; CpA3.6; CpA8.6). This is why Leclaire interested us; he was seeking this sort of primary signifier. Leclaire went looking for this sort of signifier at the point closest to the lack, which it was necessary to attain in order to be able to operate. And in our approach it was linked with the idea of the weakest link, in Lenin. That would not be entirely rigorous today (and was not even at the time). But that, in short, was the idea.

If the question of the subject concerns you, you should note that we cut it into two, in order to treat the phenomenological subject as an imaginary subject—imaginary, yet obviously indispensable for human existence. It is not possible to do otherwise. We never considered that it did not exist, on the contrary. It was an effect, granted, but an

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<sup>17</sup> See Althusser, 'Reply to John Lewis' [1973], in his *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock [London: NLB, 1976], 50-51; cf. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 2002), 121-124.

effect exists as much as its cause. We were not neo-Platonists; we were Spinozists. The effect's mode of existence follows that of the cause.

PH: But it remains an effect deprived of any power of transformation.

YD: Of course, since it is imaginary. As for transformation at the level of the structuring; there are nodal points, and these points are the sites of a practice.

PH: And it would thus be possible to shed light on the stakes of that practice in accordance with the detour of theory.

YD: Exactly. The basic idea – formulated in an unbelievably speculative way, it must be said – was that there are sites where practice ought to intervene. This is also the idea of the link, as I've said, of the weakest link, of the *kairos*, of the important moment.

PH: This remains, by the way, the guiding idea of Badiou's philosophy. In certain ways he has remained entirely faithful to this project.

YD: What's very strange thing is that at the time of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* this was not Badiou's own position, not at all. Back then he was Althusserian in an almost caricatural way. He had therefore not understood what was really happening in our project, and he rediscovered it by his own means, beginning with his *Theory of the Subject* ([1982]) onwards. In some ways his thinking continues today in the same vein. It's become more sophisticated, developed, etc., but he remains pretty close to the initial project. It's true, then, that in a sense Badiou is the most faithful to this project. That is why he maintains that there are ultimately two paths, in contemporary philosophy: on the one hand, Lacan and Althusser, and, on the other, Deleuze and Foucault. But then he never cared much for Foucault.

PH: But he does not understand Foucault, in my opinion.

YD: No, he doesn't understand him at all. I agree.

PH: He believes (or believed) that Foucault was merely a 'classifier of encyclopaedias', etc. whereas that is not at all what matters to him. What matters in *The Order of Things* are the moments of transition: the moments of Sade, of Cervantes, and then of himself and his contemporaries. These are moments in which the structured field starts to break up, in which everything is liberated from the established rules. It's just as you said: a certain moment of saturation arrives, and there are points at which the structuring operations begin to crack.

YD: Exactly, that was precisely our position. Rancière, on the other hand, was the one who took the most distance from our project. He did this through the liquidation of theory altogether. His project became the negation of theory. Rancière's major book is the *Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987).<sup>18</sup>

So today the question is to know where we are to go from here. We are in a very curious situation. The thread of those years exists, in a way, you are right, with Badiou and Žižek, but for me this configuration remains obscure. I do not really know if there are any others. Okay, there is Rancière. He opened another path. But I don't know if there's anything else. I do not know enough about the international arena. I am German-

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<sup>18</sup> Rancière, *Le Maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* (Paris: Fayard 1987); *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

speaking and don't know what's happening in the Anglo-Saxon world in relation to such things. I don't like the idea that there is now merely a sort of 'critical thinking', I don't care for these overly generic expressions. So the question is: is there anything that is in confrontation with Badiou, Žižek etc.? That is to say, in strong confrontation.

PH: It seems to me that what is missing is an insistence on political *will*, on the practice which is committed to changing the world – an insistence which follows Marx, in knowing that what *matters* is to change the world, and not only to interpret it. We need an account of such a transformative will, but one that is firmly related to the determinate, historical world, the world to be transformed. Badiou proposes a powerful theory of transformation, but in my opinion his ontology is too abstract and the additions or concessions he makes in *Logics of Worlds* also remain too abstract. The crucial mediations are still missing. Everything that has to do with society, with the economy....

YD: Alain despises all that, and always has. We were 21-22 years old at the time. Later on we learned a thing or two. Later I left for Madagascar where I was confronted with armed struggle. I have memories of arms shipments arriving from Zanzibar, and of the Malagasy who had to be prevented from doing things that would have got them killed immediately. My friends and students when I was there were among those who later launched an insurrection in 1972 (now they're all neo-liberals; at the time they were Maoists). Balibar was in Algeria. So, we learned some things about the world. Meanwhile, when the university at Vincennes was created, many of my students were from Latin-America. My courses were typed up and given to miners in Bolivia, you see. These were ultra-theoretical courses on *Capital*. So we continued in this way, but we could see that the world was a lot more complicated than we'd thought.

What happened is that in a certain way someone like Alain Badiou persisted, I would say, in a sort of philosophico-theoretical distance or gap [*écart*]. In order to give this gap as much consistency as he could, he was obliged, in a way, to cut himself off from the rest of the world, and so to have, undeniably, a rather superficial view of the world. In a sense he kept something, but he lost the world.

At a certain level everything we fought for in those days was defeated. The Cultural Revolution was defeated and communism in general was defeated, since it disappeared from the face of the earth. I think that everything now has to be rebuilt. I've come to recognise that the function of philosophy is much more complicated than we originally thought. Philosophy cannot cut itself off from the world.

PH: How do you conceive of philosophy, now, in its relations with politics, for example, or with the sciences?

YD: Philosophy, in my opinion, has to pass through [*traverser*] the social and human sciences. Why? Because the social and human sciences are and have always been disciplines for apprehending the world. What did Marx do? He passed through the political economy. Had he not passed through it, what would he have done? He would have remained with the slogans of the *Communist Manifesto*, which were not especially original. He admitted that himself. For me this point is still very important. Philosophy cannot be isolated from the world and from politics. The question of its relation with this passing through, for me, is open. I know that this is the theory-practice question, but that is also an overly abstract question, in a sense. Philosophy *connects*. I don't think it's up to philosophy to exhort. Badiou is still somewhat drawn to the idea that philosophy should exhort, should fulfil a protreptic function: to give sermons or be prophetic.

I think, then, that there is a politics of knowledge [*savoir*], and a politics of knowledge can be a knowledge of politics. Philosophy's task is to draw out of this points of intersection, points of dislocation, etc. I think that the knowledges of the human sciences are knowledges of investigation, and that philosophy *articulates*, you see. What did Foucault do? Foucault, as he liked to say, introduced 'philosophical fragments into historical building sites'. I've always liked this expression – along with the political meaning it had for Foucault, who tried to problematise our contemporary situation, our actuality.

Translated by Steven Corcoran.