



**Murdoch**  
UNIVERSITY

## MURDOCH RESEARCH REPOSITORY

*This is the author's final version of the work, as accepted for publication following peer review but without the publisher's layout or pagination. The definitive version is available at*

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304319409365619>

**McHoul, A.** (1994) *Not as stupid as all that: the Althusserian legacy*. Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media and Culture, 7 (2). pp. 375-401.

<http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/9723/>

Copyright: © 1994 Taylor & Francis

It is posted here for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.

# 'Not as stupid as all that: the Althusserian legacy'

Alec McHoul

Review of E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker eds, *The Althusserian Legacy*. London, Verso, 1993. viii+245pp. ISBN 0-86091-594-8 (pbk), \$34.95.

If [Toby Miller](#)'s introduction to this volume is correct - and I see no reason to think otherwise - then cultural/screen studies may still need (perhaps as a consequence of its history alone) an input from Marxism. But that input, it seems, in the face of an unremitting theoretical pluralism, will henceforth always be minor. Cultural studies remains "marxish" (though I still can't remember whether this is a term used *by* or *about* Eugene Kamenka). So what price Althusser, for us, today?

Like many in the humanities and social sciences in Australia, I was reading and writing about Althusser in the mid-1970s and, at the time, the main issues were culture/economy, overdetermination, representation and realism, ideology vs. Marxist "science" and the epistemological break, symptomatic reading, problems of subject and history, and the idea of a party and a politics after "Hegelian" (that is, idealist) Marxism. But by the early 1980s, it was pretty much over in this country. I remember sending a retrospective on Althusser to the *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Sociology*: the editors told me it was very nicely written, thank you very much, but Althusser is, after all, *vieux chapeau*.

Not so, it seems, in the USA which imported French poststructuralism without its antecedent and now needs to go back to do its homework - to catch up on a little intellectual history - and to search for that ever elusive American intellectual role-model: that Marxist which is not one. The catch-up is marked not only by this volume (coming cold on the heels of a 1988 conference in New York) but by a recent spate of US journals giving over special issues to Althusser - including the prestigious *Yale French Studies*.

Hence the retrospective tone adopted by most contributors, whether their topic is Althusser himself or his intellectual achievement. Alex Callinicos offers what is probably the best summary:

These...are the three respects in which I believe Althusser has made a lasting contribution - the critique of Hegelian Marxism, the conceptual clarification of historical materialism, and the elaboration of a realist philosophy of science. To stress these achievements is not to deny that there were others, but these - for example, his theory of ideology - seem to be generally cases where, after the mystical husk has been removed, the rational kernel proves to be rather small. (47)

Yet Callinicos also owes his distinction between the mystical and the rational to Althusser - at least to some degree. For is this not, after all, the remainder of Althusser: the idea or possibility of a "hard" Marxism, speaking at every turn against metaphysics (including empiricism) and at every turn in favour of science (as a form of purely theoretical grounding)? Or is the remainder of Althusser, instead, our realisation that such a position is impossible; that Althusser took this form of reasoning to its logical limit and saw, outside it, nothing less than the spectre of Hegel beckoning?

These are questions which are touched on in the most remarkable of the contributions to this volume: an article/interview by Derrida called "Politics and Friendship" which presages his most recent book *Spectres de Marx*:



*L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale.* In the interview, Derrida makes it clear why he never engaged in intellectual debate with the Althusserian Marxists who surrounded him in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s. He says that it was largely a question of quite distinct problematics and their policing: 'there was, let's say, a sort of theoretical intimidation: to formulate questions in a style that appeared, shall we say, phenomenological, transcendental or ontological was immediately considered suspicious, backward, idealistic, even reactionary' (188). In particular Derrida argues that Althusser's critique of historicism moves on too quickly, refusing to engage with 'the history of the meaning of being of which Heidegger speaks' (193) and this, Derrida goes on, is the ultimate reason why Marxism in France was washed up by the early 1970s - too simplistic a theory of being, hence too simplistic a conception of science and what could constitute "real" politics. Particularly shaky was its party manifestation, the PCF. 'The two alternatives were: either it hardened and lost out or else it softened and blended with the Socialist Party and there would be no more need for it' (211).

Can theory - especially Heidegger (!) - make such a difference? It's interesting what Derrida has to say on this point:

Marxist discourse of the time, including its Althusserian breach, was incapable of analyzing the socio-politico-economic reality of that time and of regulating its practice based on that analysis. I don't claim that if the Communists had read Heidegger it would have been otherwise: that would be stupid! Well, maybe not as stupid as all that! But I do claim that their concepts were not refined or differentiated enough and that cost them. It cost them politically. (209)

'Not as stupid as all that': but what of Derrida's political alternative, for which he now returns to the term 'deconstruction'? The answer is quite surprising, both here, and in *Spectres de Marx*. While the term can, Derrida says, be used to describe a scholarly or philosophical activity, it is better thought of as a process in what was once called 'real history'. The claim is remarkable and we may even wonder whether it is Derrida writing, and not one of his more messianic followers, when we read:

what is called 'deconstruction' in the sense of a relatively coherent set of discursive rules at a given moment in Western discourse is only a symptom - an effect of deconstruction at work in what one might call history (all of the geopolitical earthquakes: the 1917 revolution, the two world wars, psychoanalysis, the Third World, the techno-economic-scientific and military mutations, etc., etc., etc.). All this, this open and nonself-identical totality of the world is deconstruction. It's a deconstruction in act or at work. And this must be brought back into play without recourse to either a theory of reflection or of ideology (be it refined to the extreme) in order to analyze this relation between these "real" deconstructions and the apparently academic discourse to which we grant this name and which, moreover, is no longer or never was as academic as some people sometimes thought or allowed it to be thought. (226)

It would be naive, to be sure, to read in this passage a fully-fledged binary distinction between the discursive and the real: but it would be equally hard to argue that some avatar of such a distinction is completely absent from it. Claims are being made about real history, there is no doubt about it - so that, in *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida can begin to announce a new politics based, as was Communism, on an International (capital "I"). This new International will be comprised of an ensemble of men, women and children all of whom are suffering despite or because of the international spread of so-called liberal democracy. In this supposedly egalitarian "new world order", the apparent goal is the deletion of violence, famine, economic oppression, and so on. Yet the claims are false - particular and local forms of suffering are manifest everywhere, in every country, at every crossroads. Derrida's new International announces a bringing together of these local points which have (spectres of Weber?) lines of *affinity* rather than a common party, doctrine or ideology. The point of this is, in the end, a new deconstruction (in history): the irruption of a new form of justice whose name *is* 'deconstruction'.

Where Marxism finally foundered was on the sudden appearance of a massive plurality of struggles, outside the pure *idea* of an immediately and over-riding question of class. Struggles appeared around race, ethnicity and culture; around gender, sexual preference and sexual identity; around geo-social location, the emergent "worlds" (from first to fourth, from north to south); around questions of military power and its absence; around the various technologies, their ownerships and lack of ownership, and so on - the very stuff of cultural studies today. Class, that is, moved from being what seemed to be an immutable *fact* (around which a science could be mobilised) to being an *idea*, among many

others, for grasping a socio-culturally complex set of global issues, each with its own quite distinct forms of possession and dispossession. We have still not caught up with a form of calculating these - so local, perhaps, and so specific are their various identities - let alone have we contemplated ways of countering the forms of injustice they give rise to an every point.

It remains to be seen whether 'deconstruction' (in this new sense) will fare any better than Althusserian Marxism. Not to mention cultural studies. [Toby Miller](#) suggests Kenneth Burke - but I still haven't written off Michel Foucault. Neither has Derrida (231).

---

## **Work Cited**

Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres de Marx: L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*. Paris: Galilee, 1993.