

## Abstract

Nils Anderesson: The Power of Thought?: The Philosophical Politics of Louis Althusser 1960–1978 (Tankens kraft?: Louis Althusser's filosofiska politik)

This dissertation in the history of ideas, also referred to as the field of intellectual history focuses on the philosophical practice of the French philosopher and communist party member Louis Althusser. This focus may seem peculiar; given that as a communist party intellectual Althusser was explicitly prohibited from carrying out political work since that was officially the preserve of the party leadership. The role of the intellectual, not least a philosopher of stature, was to legitimate the party's political outlook in more theoretical and systematic terms. Nonetheless, it is both possible and reasonable to claim that Althusser carried out political work through his philosophical activity – his philosophical politics.

The general perspective of the present dissertation fixes on Althusser's readings of Marx's well-known Eleventh Feuerbach thesis, according to which philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways, however now the point is to change it. Althusser took Marx literally, that is at his word; he sought to practice his philosophy politically, and worked out a theory on philosophy as political practice.

This entry into Althusser's work gives rise to three theses. First of all, I maintain that Althusser relativized his philosophy vis a vis given political situations, which might change from time to time. This appears when he insists that the correct philosophy is the one that is most appropriate for realizing a (particular and concrete) political goal. Secondly, I note that his concept of experience is more complex and plays a more significant role than is normally recognized or admitted. By bringing what Althusser says about philosophy and politics together with his theory of ideology, there emerges a philosophy in which experience and the active subject remain significant components. Finally, my third thesis pertains to ruptures and continuity. It is interesting to follow the chronology and historical line of development of his philosophy in order to identify the tension between these two elements. I find that continuity does not appear contingent on the content of his philosophy, which is frequently fraught with internal contradictions, but rather persists in the way his statements and theses always are related to the political environment around him. In this latter regard there is some kind of constancy.

Philosophy became for Althusser a political instrument, in as far as one could employ it to change people's consciousness, and thence influence politics directly. Intellectual inspiration deriving from two political figures, Machiavelli and Lenin, provided support for his thesis that philosophy is contingent on what is politically correct. Borrowing a metaphor from Machiavelli, Althusser maintained that one has to set one's sights higher than the actual target, or rather, one has to think in extremes if philosophical theses are to gain the desired effects. From Lenin's theorizing on just and unjust war he derived his measure for philosophical correctness. According to Lenin a war is just if its goal coincides with that of political line; what Althusser did was – in this postulate – to replace war with philosophy. In other words, philosophy is conceived as a continuation of political struggle by other means.

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