

# ALTHUSSER'S STRUCTURALIST MODEL

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## SUMMARY

Many Marxists in recent years have tried to resist an economic reductionist interpretation of historical materialism, but at the same time insist that the economic is in some sense ultimately determinant. Most of them view society as a complex whole in which the various instances of society are closely connected. Since this view of society is often mixed up with Weberian multi-causalism, these Marxists have to distinguish their interpretations of historical materialism from multi-causalism. The French philosopher Louise Althusser is probably the most influential one among those Marxists.

Unlike the usual interpretation of historical materialism, which is based on an essentialist, two-tiered explanatory model, Althusser's model--like the multi-causalist model--is anti-essentialist and one-tiered. The only difference between Althusser and the multi-causalist is that, for Althusser, the society or the social formation is, as Althusser calls it, a structured whole, in which the economic is determinant in the last instance. Under this model, things are not explained by a single, pure contradiction, but always by the whole structure.

### 1. CONTRADICTIONS, HEGEL AND MAO

Althusser argues that Hegel's dialectic is inseparable from his idealist system, and thus Marx's dialectic, the "inversion" of Hegel, must have different characteristic determinations and structures. For Althusser, the "rational kernel" of Hegel's dialectic refers to the basic conception of history as a process motored by the contradictions internal to it. Following Mao, Althusser holds that the nature of a thing is determined basically by the principal aspect of the dominant contradiction. Conditions or circumstances are nothing but the effectivity or expression of the principal aspects of contradictions.

### 2. ALTHUSSER'S OVERDETERMINATION OF STRUCTURAL CAUSALITY

Like Hegel, Althusser wants to articulate the notion of the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts. His conception of causality, structural causality, is that the effects of the structure are not outside the structure, and thus are simply the existence of structure itself. Hence, "structural causality" means that things are explained by referring to the

structure of the whole.

### 3.STRUCTURE IN DOMINANCE AND OVERDETERMINED CONTRADICTION

A Social Formation is a (global) structure consisting of four different instances--economic, political, ideological and theoretical -- that are also (regional) structures among which the economic structure is determinant in the last instance, while other instances have relative autonomy. And this relationship of structures is the invariant within all social formations.

Althusser's theoretical practice starts with Mao's descriptions of contradictions, which as scientific raw materials are already given. Mao's analysis of contradictions implies the existence of a complex process. Furthermore, the complex whole is specified as a "structure in dominance", for it is structured by a "dominant/subordinate" relation. The significance of the fact that the complex whole is a structure in dominance is that it amounts to saying that every contradiction is "overdetermined".

The effectivity of a contradiction is always relative to the complex structured whole. In other words, the effectivity of a contradiction is always the effectivity of the contradiction under some circumstances or conditions that are not external or contingent to the contradiction; these circumstances or conditions are internal and necessary because they are simultaneously the existing conditions and the conditions of existence for the effect. Each contradiction reflects in itself the structure in dominance.

Many Marxists in recent years have tried to resist an economic reductionist interpretation of historical materialism, but at the same time insist that the economic is in some sense ultimately determinant. Most of them view society as a complex whole in which the various instances (aspects) of society are closely connected. Since this view of society is often mixed up with Weberian multi-causalism, these Marxists have to distinguish their interpretations of historical materialism from multi-causalism. The French philosopher Louis Althusser is probably the most influential one among those Marxists.

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## **I. CONTRADICTIONS, HEGEL AND MAO**

In the postface to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx claims that Hegel's dialectic is in a mystified form and must be 'inverted' in order to discover "the rational kernel within the mystical shell" (103). The traditional interpretation is that the rational kernel refers to

Hegel's dialectic, which sees society as a manifold of aspects or instances among which one is primary. This traditional, Englesian interpretation further maintains that while Marx holds that the productive aspect of the whole is primary, Hegel holds that the normative aspect is primary. In other words, both Hegel and Marx share the same method of dialectic, but they disagree on which aspect or instance of society should be the primary.

Rejecting the Englesian interpretation above, Althusser argues instead that Hegel's dialectic is inseparable from his idealist system, and thus Marx's dialectic, the "inversion" of Hegel, must have different characteristic determination and structures (*For Marx*, henceforth, FM, 91-93). But what then is the "rational kernel" that Marx was referring to? Well, Althusser is not at all explicit or clear about this. Nevertheless, I agree with Callinicos that for Althusser, the "rational kernel" refers to "the basic conception of history as a process motored by the contradictions internal to it" (Callinicos 40; also cf. FM 214). But Althusser advocates a theory of contradictions very different from that of Hegel.

First of all, Althusser accepts the descriptive analysis of contradictions by Mao, who categorizes contradictions according to the extent of their effect as principal (dominant) and secondary (subordinate) contradictions, and categorizes contradictions according to the nature of their effect as antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions. Moreover, a contradiction is comprised of principal and secondary aspects of the contradiction, and a contradiction is always developed unevenly in the sense that principal and secondary aspects of a contradiction always tend to dominate each other and tend not to remain in a state of equilibrium (Mao 297). Mao also asserts that the principal contradiction could convert into a secondary contradiction so that the latter at the same time converts into the

former. This possible relation of mutual conversion holds also between the antagonistic and the non-antagonistic contradiction, and between the principal aspect and the secondary aspect of a contradiction.

What Althusser makes explicit Mao's analysis of contradictions is the mutual dependency between the principal and the secondary, which is suggested by the possible mutual conversion between the principal and the secondary. For the mutual conversion suggests that the principal (dominant) and the secondary (subordinate) are two invariant place holders of a structure; that is, the principal and the secondary are mutually dependent in the sense that the structure is invariably comprised by the relations of dominance between the principal and the secondary. Hence, the nature of a contradiction could be variant from time to time, since (i) its principal aspect might convert into the secondary aspect or the other way around, and (ii) its status within the structure could convert into its opposite status (for example, a principal contradiction could convert into a secondary one). But this structure of dominance between the principal and the secondary remains invariant; the principal cannot do without the secondary--the former depends upon the latter--and vice versa.

The idea that a society or social formation is just such a structure of dominance between the principal and the secondary, which are mutually dependent, allows Althusser (following Mao) to contend that although the nature of a thing is determined basically by the principal aspect of the dominant (principal) contradiction, it is also determined in a lesser degree by the secondary aspects of the principal (dominant) contradiction, and by all the other secondary contradictions as well. Or to put this in another way, the nature of a

thing is determined by the (principal aspect of the) principal contradiction under the conditions or circumstances of the principal contradiction; while these conditions or circumstances are nothing but the secondary contradictions upon which the principal contradictions depend. Or to be precise, when we talk about the effectivity of a contradiction under some conditions and circumstances, we are actually considering the effectivity of all contradictions--one of them is the contradiction in question, and the rest contradictions are the conditions or circumstances of its existence.

## **II. ALTHUSSER'S OVERDETERMINATION OF STRUCTURAL CAUSALITY**

This brings us to the central notion concerning Althusser's theory of contradictions--overdetermination, a notion he borrows from Freud. Usually, overdetermination is characterized as the convergence of causal factors, that is, causal factors that are capable of producing the same effect come together in generating the said effect. Overdetermination in this sense will have a "redundancy" problem: since the same effect is produced by many causes, it is only a matter of quantitative, instead of a qualitative, difference between the effect that is overdetermined by, say, two causes and that by three causes. This implies that some effect or cause might be redundant and thus superfluous. When Freud talks about the overdetermination of effects, he is apparently using overdetermination in this sense (Freud 517-8). However, sometimes Freud uses the notion of overdetermination in such a way that the redundancy problem will not arise at all.

For example, when he talks about condensation of the elements of the dream content, Freud insists that each and every dream (manifest) element is overdetermined by each and every dream thought (318). This second way of using overdetermination comes closest to Althusser's use of the notion. But Althusser's use of overdetermination has an aspect which is entirely foreign to Freud; that is, the causality involved in the determination has to be understood as "structural causality".

The concept of structural causality becomes clearer if we contrast it with the two other conceptions of causality. The first is a Cartesian theory of "transitive", "mechanistic" or "linear" causality according to which the relation between cause and effect is external, as in the billiard ball model. The second conception is a Leibnizean or Hegelian theory of "expressive" causality, according to which any part of a whole is the expression or manifestation of the inner essence of the whole. This Hegelian whole or totality is not a structured whole because, Althusser argues, the essence/phenomenon dichotomy could be applied anywhere in the totality (*Reading Capital* 186-87).

Like Hegel, Althusser wants to articulate the notion of the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts. Since the whole is posed as structured, it is impossible to place the determination of the elements by the structured whole within the category of expressive causality. What Althusser proposes is a third conception of causality, i.e. structural causality which can account for the effects of a structure on its elements or on its subordinate structures. This conception is Spinoza's conception of an "immanent cause". Althusser claims that the structure (the "cause" ) is immanent in its effects; that is, the effects of the structure are not outside the structure, and thus are simply the existence of

structure itself (*Reading Capital* 188-191). This conception of causality neatly does away with the usual presentation of reality a two-tiered--cause/effect, deep structure/surface structure, essence/phenomenon, latent/manifest--and presents the structure of explanation as one-tiered. And it is exactly this one-tiered explanatory model that differentiates Althusser from other so-called "structuralists", including Freud.

Hence, "structural causality" means that things are explained by referring to the structure of the whole. But if the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, then how can we explain the effects by referring to something whose existence consists of the effects? To answer this question, we have to first explain Althusser's view of a social formation (a whole structured "in dominance") and the concept of the overdetermined contradiction, which goes hand in hand with the concept of structural causality.

### **III. STRUCTURE IN DOMINANCE AND OVERDETERMINED CONTRADICTION**

A social formation is a (global) structure consisting of four different instances--economic, political, ideological and theoretical--that are also (regional) structures (Althusser, *Reading Capital* 182; also see Smith 519) among which the economic structure is determinant in the last instance, while other instances have relative autonomy (*For Marx* iii). And this relationship of structures is the invariant within all social formations.

When Mao analyzes or describes various categories of contradiction, he does not treat



his analysis as something that requires a proof. Likewise, Althusser accepts Mao's analysis or description of contradictions as a matter of fact (FM 194). In fact, Althusser's theoretic practice starts with Mao's descriptions of contradictions, which as scientific raw materials are already given.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, Mao's analysis of contradictions, especially the "principal/secondary" ("dominant/subordinate") relations between contradictions or aspects of contradictions, implies the existence of a complex process; i.e. it indicates that, as a matter of fact, the whole is complex, since the relations within the whole are complex. Furthermore, the complex whole is specified as a "structure in dominance", for it is structured by a "dominant/subordinate" relation (henceforth, "d/s" relation). Also in Marxism, the "d/s" relation cannot be contingent, but must be essential to the complexity. This implies that everywhere in the structure, one will find the dominance relation. Since the analysis of contradictions is presented as given, the social formation is, presented as an always-already-given complex whole structured in dominance (FM 195-199, 201-2).

What is the significance of the fact that, the complex whole is a structure in dominance? The significance is that it amounts to saying that every contradiction is "overdetermined". Consider the "d/s" distinction. It is clear that a dominant contradiction cannot be a dominant one if there is no subordinate contradiction, or that the latter is just the phenomenon of the former.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the subordinate contradictions must constitute the

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<sup>1</sup> To produce scientific knowledge is the purpose of theoretical practice, which starts with the concrete-in-thought, the already given raw material of science (what Althusser calls "Generalities I"). This has something to do with Althusser's radical epistemology, and his interpretation of Marx's "concrete-abstract-concrete", which I cannot explain fully here.

<sup>2</sup> Althusser argues that subordinate contradictions cannot be just the pure phenomena of a general contradiction in FM (100).

conditions of existence for the dominant contradiction, and vice versa. Since every contradiction is either a dominant or a subordinate one in either the global or the regional structure, every contradiction constitutes a condition of existence of other contradictions. Every contradiction determines, and is determined by, every other contradiction, that is, determines and is determined by the structure in dominance. In short, every contradiction is overdetermined.<sup>3</sup>

Let me make the notion of overdetermined contradiction even clearer: The effectivity of a contradiction is always relative to the complex structured whole. In other words, the effectivity of a contradiction is always the effectivity of the contradiction under some circumstances or conditions that are not external or contingent to the contradiction; these circumstances or conditions are internal and necessary because they are simultaneously the existing conditions and the conditions of existence for the effect (FM 207). Take any contradiction, say, the contradiction between the productive force and the productive relation; it cannot be effective and cannot even be, if it lacks the political, legal, ideological and other conditions to support it.

Here then is the key notion: those (supporting) conditions or circumstances are in fact "the (real, concrete, current) existence of the contradictions." (FM 207) That is, as I have said in Section II, they are the expressions of other contradictions. By that I mean that the real, concrete, current existence of the contradictions is always expressed or manifested by the principal aspects of the contradictions, which constituted the conditions in question. Althusser puts these ideas together and says:

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<sup>3</sup> In Althusser's social ontology, contradictions, as "essential articulation of the structure" (FM 205), are the building blocks of social formation, instead of some abstract "causes". The "cause", for Althusser, is just the structure that is nothing but the effectivity of contradictions. There is always a danger in characterizing Althusser's "overdetermination" as "the convergency of causal factors" or "many causes produce the same effect". For the word "cause" usually is associated with the linear causality. Hence, for Althusser, the overdetermination is always the overdetermination of contradictions.

But if the conditions are no more than the current existence of the complex whole, they are its very contradictions, each reflecting in itself the organic relation it has with the others in the structure in dominance of the complex whole. Because each contradiction reflects in itself (in its specific relations of unevenness with the other contradictions, and in the relation of specific unevenness between its two aspects) the structure in dominance of the complex whole in which it exists, and therefore because of the current existence of this whole and therefore of its current 'conditions', the contradiction is identical with these conditions: so when we speak of the 'existing conditions' of the whole, we are speaking of its 'conditions of existence'. (FM 208)

The idea that each contradiction reflects in itself the structure in dominance reminds us of Leibnizean monads, of which each reflects the whole universe. But Leibnizean monads "have no window"; that is, the seemingly apparent interactions of monads are actually non-existent and are explained by a pre-established harmony. On the other hand, Althusser's contradictions, unlike Leibnizean monads, have interactions-- in fact, they are overdetermined. This comparison can help us to clarify one question: do we always offer the same explanation, since we always refer to the whole structure? The answer is no. Just as each monad has its own perspective, each contradiction has a specific relation with every other contradiction and with its own two opposing aspects. In the explanation of an event, one contradiction (or its principal aspect) will be held directly responsible, so to speak, for that event, and other contradictions will be seen indirectly responsible.

It should be clear by now that Althusser's structural model is based on the "principal/secondary" ("d/s") relation between contradictions or aspects of contradictions, which is taken as given. This given distinction also excludes the possibility of an even development of contradictions and the aspects of them: Every contradiction or aspect is

either dominant or subordinate; it is not the case that two contradictions or two aspects of a contradiction could have equal forces so that neither of them is dominant or subordinate. This unequal relationship, Althusser seems to think, is vital because if two contradictions or aspects can be shown to be not in the "d/s" relations, which means that they are not internally related, then it follows that the society can not be a whole structured in dominance, which is then contrary to Althusser's claim. However, I think that Althusser would also admit that sometimes there could be a temporary evenness (equilibrium), even though this evenness will soon become uneven, because its existence is within a structure in dominance. In other words, unevenness may not be an absolute; there may be exceptions, even though only temporarily.<sup>4</sup>

As I have mentioned, for Althusser, a social formation has four instances (economics, politics, ideology, theory), of which one is dominant and others are subordinate; nevertheless, the dominant could convert into the subordinate, and vice versa. This implies, for example, that the economic contradiction may be the dominant or principal contradiction in ideology, or that the ideological contradiction might have been the principal contradiction in politics, but the political contradiction, once a subordinate contradiction, later converts into the principal contradiction in politics. The mutual conversion of the "d/s" relationship described above is certainly not uncaused; it is determined in the last instance by the economic. For Althusser, the economic is the

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<sup>4</sup> Bukharin has claimed, among other things, that there could be a temporary evenness. The political implication of Bukharin's view is that sometimes the conflicting parties on both sides could co-exist peacefully for a while. Also it would be interesting to see if Althusser's assumption fits reality or not. For example, the unevenness implies that either the form of the state (justice) or the function of the state (reproduction) is dominant--both aspects cannot have the equal forces.

determinant instance and the determinant contradiction, which is comprised of two aspects--the force of production and the relation of production--that are in a "d/s" relation. Althusser has made it clear that the economic might not be the dominant instance or the principal contradiction, and the determinant aspect of the economic contradiction, which for Marxists is the force of production, might not be the dominant aspect.<sup>5</sup> Although the economic may not be the dominant, the economic, as the ultimately determinant, determines which contradiction or aspect would be the principal and would convert into the secondary, and so on; that is, the economic ultimately determines the very process of mutual conversion of d/s relation.

Althusser's theory concerning the distinction between the dominant and the determinant has seemingly a paradoxical consequence. Since the economic is also dependent upon other instances or contradictions, the mutual conversion of the d/s relation, which in effect is the whole structure, is not just determined by the economic alone, but also other contradictions, since the latter are the conditions of the existence of the economic. To say that the whole structure is determined by the economic as well as other contradictions is amount to saying that the whole structure is determined by the whole structure, or that the structure (the cause or the determinant) is immanent in its effect, which is the existence of structure itself. This is precisely the somewhat paradoxical idea of "structural causality", which we introduced earlier.

But how can we make sense of this notion of "structural causality", and in what sense is this theory not just paying lip service to the ultimate determination of the economic? It

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<sup>5</sup> This is clearly a defense of Mao's claim that the relation of production sometimes could be dominant (Mao 300).

seems to me that Althusser could only reply that when we conduct concrete analyses of a social formation, (like what Marx did in *THE EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE OF LOUIS BONAPARTE*), we will end up demonstrating that the economic is determinant in the last instance, for this is the essence of every social formation. In the concrete variation (mutual conversion) of contradictions, one can "see" the invariant (a structure in which the economic determinant in the last instance), but this invariant structure is not a deep structure apart from the variation of contradictions, because (according to the thesis of "structural causality") this variation is the existence of that invariant (FM 213). Similarly, the question posed at the end of Section II (i.e. if the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, then how can one explain the effects by referring to something whose existence consists of the effects?) would be answered in this way: In Althusser's explanation of the effects by the existence of structure which consists of the effects, he is not using the variant to explain itself; instead the invariant structure is, in some sense, revealed in the explanation process. But at the same time, Althusser paradoxically argues, the structure of his explanation is not two-tiered: it is not the case that the variant is explained by a deep structure that is said to be the invariant.<sup>6</sup>

But this kind of reply cannot be coherently maintained. We want to know in what sense the invariant is revealed or how one can see the invariant in the variant. For if the invariant can be revealed or seen, then there would be a two-tiered structure (deep/surface). Althusser's difficulty is similar to that of the pantheists, who hold that God is immanent in the world and has no transcendent reality. But if God's essence is identical with the world,

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<sup>6</sup> Note that to use the invariant structure to explain the variant is typically Structuralist.

the postulation of God's existence is superfluous. There is another version of pantheism which argues that God is both the final cause and the material cause of the world in the sense that the world is becoming God; God will emerge at the end of human history. Perhaps Althusser's theses can be interpreted similarly in order to at least render his position coherent. That is to say, the invariant will emerge eventually (which means that what is determinant will eventually become the dominant): the variant is becoming the invariant. The problem of this line of defense is that one has to postulate a vision of "the end of history" in order to claim that the convergence of the dominant and the determinant (i.e., the conversion of the determinant into the dominant) is for good and is not a temporal phenomenon. Yet the vision of "the end of history" seems to contradict with the very idea of a Marxist dialectics, which Althusser tries to articulate.

The attempt of Althusser's whole project is to preserve Marx's original thrust that the economic is the ultimate determination, in the face of the facts that the economic may not always be a dominant contradiction, and that there is a relation of mutual conversion and mutual dependence between the dominant and the subordinate. We have seen the difficulty in Althusser's heroic but feeble attempt. Apparently, the difficulty will be removed if we give up the Marxist idea of ultimate determination all together and just hold on to the idea of dominant determination, that is, if we give up the notion of "structural causality" but retain the notion of "structure in dominance". But this notion of "structure in dominance" can no longer imply the *a priori* unity of the structure (the complex whole), otherwise it will leave the unity or the totality of the structure remains unexplained. And as long as we assign an *a priori* unitary structure to society, there will be a reductionist

need to explain the unity in terms of ultimate determination. For *a priori* unity implies that society is ultimately constituted by a single underlying principle, to which society in one way or another should be reduced.

Althusser's claim, that social formation is an always-already-given complex whole structured in dominance, is right in rejecting the idea that society has an origin (meaning a contradiction or an instance which does not depend upon other contradictions or instances). But it would be wrong for Althusser if he also postulates the unity of the structure as always-already-given. For this postulation will lead to the reductionist thesis of ultimate determination, and eventually to incoherent notions such as structural causality. Hence, the post-Althusserians, post-structuralists' insistence that the unity of social structure is not given but made<sup>7</sup> seems to point to the right direction.

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<sup>7</sup> Many of the post-Althusserians stress that the unity of social formation is made in discursive practice, which is characterized by various concepts such as "articulation", "suture", etc. Moreover, they see Althusser's "overdetermination" as meaning that any kind of social relation is constituted in a symbolic way (Laclau 253). This eventually leads to the conclusion that the social is radically indeterminate and ultimately nonfixed; thus, the unity of the social is impossible.



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