

Siarhei Biareishyk: THE OVERDETERMINATION OF THE WHOLE

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ZfL

26/11/2018

The conception of the whole as a system, that is, as a totality determined by one principle or idea, has dominated the philosophical tradition from Kant and Hegel to Marxism—and, as Louis Althusser’s critique of Hegelianism shows, not without implicit social, political, and ideological consequences. The possibility of breaking with the idealist tradition in all of these respects rests on the articulation of an alternative conception of the whole. Althusser advances the notion of the social whole as a complex unity that is constituted through its own effects—what he calls “overdetermination.” Such overdetermination of the whole displaces the conception of the whole as totality (Hegel) in favor of Spinoza’s notion of modal unity—the whole as singularity.

The idealist tradition knows two forms of the relation of parts to the whole. In the *aggregate*, according to Kant, the parts precede the whole; in the *system*, the whole precedes the parts. While an aggregate is a contingent whole, the system is characterized by necessity, insofar as the form of the whole is constituted by *one principle* or *one idea*. Whereas Kant is concerned with the idea of the whole solely as an epistemological category, for Schelling, this conception of the whole gains ontological significance. For Schelling, not only is the whole of nature determined by one principle, but this principle animates each of its parts:

“Animation is the imprinting of the whole in the individual.”[1]

Formally, Hegel’s whole is also such a totality constituted by a single principle as essence [*Wesen*] (whether as *Idee* or *Geist*). Hegel’s decisive intervention, however, consists in thinking the whole as a specifically *social* whole, and thus as a historical product: the existence of each part of the social totality is the expression of the historically unfolding essence of the whole. As Althusser characterizes it, “the Hegelian whole has a type of unity in which each element of the whole, whether a material or economic determination, a political institution or a religious, artistic or philosophical form, is never anything more than the present of the concept with itself at a historically determined moment.”[2]

Thus, the whole is not only substance, it is also subject;[3] what for Kant is the necessity of the system, in Hegel, due to temporalization of the whole, becomes its *teleology*. Hegel’s whole, in turn, implies a conception of historical time characterized by contemporaneity and homogeneous continuity: it is “a continuum *in which* the dialectical continuity of the process of the development of the Idea is manifest” (RC 104). Each moment of this development entails an existence of social totality that is contemporaneous with itself: “all the elements of the whole always co-exist in one and the same time, one and the same present,” while each element “contains in the immediate form of its expression the essence of the totality itself” (RC 104).

As an alternative, Althusser posits a plurality of relatively autonomous structured levels in the social whole—e.g., the economic, the political, the aesthetic—each of which comprises its own particular causal and historical existence. Each structured level entails its own singular historicity, “a *peculiar time*, relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent”; this means that

“it is no longer possible to think the process of the development of the different levels of the whole *in the same historical time*” (RC 110-111).

Yet, the analysis of different temporal rhythms risks losing sight of the social whole itself, if this plurality comprises a mere aggregate (in the Kantian sense) of different times. For this reason, Althusser insists on the *relative* autonomy of structured levels: their peculiar historicities must be grasped *differentially* with respect to the whole through their encounters and harmonizations. Thus, Althusser advances the notion of the whole as “a structure in dominance”: in their temporal and causal differentiations, some levels prove to be dominant over the others (e.g., industrial production over simple commodity production). In order to think temporal torsions and displacements of the semi-autonomous levels as *functions* of the whole, Althusser puts forth the thesis of the “determination in the last instance” by the economy (RC 111). Thus, the social whole, though decentered in the plurality of semi-autonomous levels, is in this way nonetheless structured.

The demand to think the coexistence of differential temporalities *and* to maintain their articulation in a social whole poses a problem of the specific unity of this whole and its own temporality. In thinking “backwardnesses, forwardnesses, survivals or unevennesses” of different levels of the whole, does one not necessarily “institute a reference time in the continuity of which we should measure these unevennesses” (RC 118)? How can one think a social whole as a “structure of structures,” as Althusser sometimes puts it, without instituting a single base time, i.e., without assuming Hegelian homogeneity and contemporaneity of time? Does the notion of “the determination in the last instance” not indicate an instance of closure akin to Hegel’s totality? And if not, what would be the form of such a whole?

Althusser offers a notion of the social whole as *conjunction*—the binding of elements into an uneven and overdetermined complex social unity. For Hegel, the form of the whole is determined by a principal contradiction: the ideological, political, and aesthetic levels of the whole are mere *phenomena* of this one overarching contradiction. As opposed to this, Althusser argues that the *determinate* contradictions (as opposed to a principle contradiction) existing in their peculiar temporalities are the very conditions of the existence of the social whole. As such, the whole is nothing other than an accumulation and fusion of determinate historical contradictions in their unevenness.[4] In this way, the form of the social whole is *overdetermined*: the whole as totality gives way to “the structured unity of a complex whole” (FM 168). This decentered conjunction of disparate social elements does have a structure, but this structure consists in the “displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity” (FM 143). Thus, the “structure” of the whole is no longer conceived as a “hidden order” regulating the diversity of its particular phenomenal manifestations; as a fusion of contradictory elements,

structure consists in the persistence of a complex whole *in its actual disorder*. This means that the structure of the whole does not pre-exist the conjunction of its contradictory elements. Rather, the complex unity, as Althusser writes, is

“a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, [while] the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects” (RC 209).

With Spinoza, one can further specify Althusser’s understanding of the whole as a structure in dominance and elucidate its inherent difficulties. The overdetermined whole in Althusser, Warren Montag points out, “names the possibility of thinking the peculiar conjunction of contradictory elements as an individual in Spinoza’s sense.”[5] This is because for Spinoza a mode—an individual or a singularity—is always a composite individual, which can combine with other individuals to comprise a greater singularity *without any change in its form*. Unlike substance, which is conceived through itself, a mode or an individual is conceived through something else: it is determined and reproduced differentially through the relations to other individuals. Insofar as the individual preserves its form, it is considered a whole in its peculiar temporality;[6] insofar as the reproduction of its form depends on differential relations with other individuals in a greater whole, it is considered a part. The individual, thus, is inherently internally agonistic and constitutively unstable. The relative stability of the individual depends solely on its effectivity. When the constituent parts cease to combine in a way that produces a unity through the overdetermined effects of this binding, the singular whole is dissolved. Considered on this level, Althusser’s conception of the whole as structure in dominance means that the dominance of a certain element (e.g., of the economic over the political) does not comprise an absolute or normative hierarchy, but a “hierarchy of effectivity” (RC 110). Read through Spinoza, this means: the form of Althusser’s overdetermined whole is unstable, while its dominant element is itself subject to variance.

Althusser’s overdetermined whole, thus, must be located on the level of modes in Spinoza’s ontology. Spinoza’s fundamental distinction between substance and modes (or individuals) undermines Hegel’s identification of the whole with substance as subject. The whole is no longer associated with totality, but with modal unity. Neither should one locate totality on the level of Spinozan substance, since it is not a total sum of its modes; rather, substance designates nothing other than the *process* of perpetual individuations in its inherent instability.[7] Hence, Althusser’s designation of the social whole as a “structure of structures,” likewise, must be displaced. The social whole as a composite singularity is irreducible to a structure of all structures, since its location on the modal level renders it inherently provisional. The form of the whole is not only decentered and unstable, but this instability and dynamicity is the very condition of its persistence in being—the process that Spinoza understands under the category of substance. If the articulation of the overdetermined social whole for Althusser depended on the thesis of “the determination in the last instance” by the economy, then the function of Spinozan substance can be located in Althusser’s following claim:

“the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.” (FM 76)

[1] „Beseelung ist Einbildung des Ganzen in ein Einzelnes.“ F. W. J. von Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. by Karl-Friedrich-August Schelling, 13 vols. (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1856), I, II, p. 364, my translation.

[2] Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (RC), trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 105.

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (= *Werke* 3) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), S. 22-24.

[4] Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (FM), trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), S. 171.

[5] Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013), S. 95. See further Montag's analysis on the significance of the debates around Spinoza for Althusser's shift in his conception of structure.

[6] On the theory of plural temporality in Spinoza and its relation to Althusser's conception of the social whole see Vittorio Morfino, *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory between Spinoza and Althusser* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), S. 148-64.

[7] See Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality* (Delft: Eburon, 1997).

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VORGESCHLAGENE ZITIERWEISE: Siarhei Biareishyk: The Overdetermination of the Whole, in: ZfL BLOG, 26.11.2018, [<https://www.zflprojekte.de/zfl-blog/2018/11/26/siarhei-biareishyk-the-overdetermination-of-the-whole/>].

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13151/zfl-blog/20181126-01>