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GREPH, Marx and the Politics of Teaching Philosophy

Abstract

This article seeks to locate the seminar series that Derrida delivered at the *École normale supérieure* during the mid-seventies within the broader political and theoretical aspirations of the *Groupe de recherches sur l'enseignement philosophique* (GREPH), particularly considering the group's thematization and politicisation of pedagogy in the history of philosophy and the philosophical establishment. It also aims to contextualise Derrida's recourse to a Marxian and Marxist problematic as part of these aspirations in view of his longer-term engagement with the question of philosophy in Marx and Marxism. The article brings together these two contextual dimensions of Derrida's teaching activities at the ENS through a close reading of the seminar series he delivered on the *agrégation* topic of Theory and Practice in 1976-7. This reading focuses specifically on how Derrida mobilised the Althusserian problematic to attempt to transform the role and function of the *agrégés-répétiteur* (a position he shared with Althusser at the ENS) within the frame of reference of his political work with GREPH.

Keywords: Althusser, *Theory and Practice*, Lenin, pedagogy, philosophy, Marxism

As the seminar series that Jacques Derrida delivered at the *École normale supérieure* (ENS) become available to us, we are gaining a clearer picture of his twined pedagogical and political investments during his GREPH (*Groupe de recherches sur l'enseignement philosophique*) years. This article seeks to locate these records of Derrida's teaching practice within the broader framework of GREPH's political and theoretical aspirations, particularly in light of the group's thematization and politicisation of pedagogy in the history of philosophy and the philosophical establishment. It also aims to contextualise Derrida's recourse to a Marxian and Marxist problematic as part of these aspirations in view of his longer-term engagement with the question of philosophy in Marx and Marxism. Jason Smith's text 'Jacques Derrida, 'Crypto-Communist?'' was one of the first to illuminate the broader trajectory of Derrida's direct engagement with Marxist philosophy and communist politics. Smith situates Derrida's better-known late intervention into the Marxist fray with *Specters of Marx* (1993) within an intellectual and political course that spanned the last thirty years of the century. In this regard,

he stresses the importance of Derrida's turn toward explicitly Marxian and Marxist reference points in his teaching between '72-7; that is, precisely during his GREPH years.

However, two cues raised in Smith's text remain underexplored. These are: the role played by the political-theoretical ambitions of GREPH, especially regarding philosophy and its teaching, in shaping Derrida's engagement with Marxism in his mid-seventies seminar series; and the broader significance of Derrida's use of Lenin to narrativise his inheritance from Marxism following the publication of *Specters*. Regarding both of these questions, it is instructive to bring Vivienne Orchard's detailed historical account of the political objectives and philosophical orientations of GREPH (Orchard 2011) to bear on Smith's outline of the trajectory of Derrida's engagement with Marxism between 1972 and 1993. In this article, I will pursue these avenues in order to provide a theoretical and contextual commentary of the seminar series *Theory and Practice*. Elsewhere, I have traced the broader political context within which GREPH formed and highlighted the role that Louis Althusser – Derrida's colleague at the ENS – played in establishing its program of activities. (Mozzachiodi 2022) This article extends this work by offering a close reading of the seminar series Derrida delivered on the *agrégation* topic of Theory and Practice in 1976-7. This will focus specifically on how Derrida mobilised the Althusserian problematic to attempt to transform the role and function of the *agrégés-répétiteur* (a position he shared with Althusser at the ENS) within the frame of reference of his political work with GREPH.

Derrida's Lenin

On the basis of a quote taken from a 1994 interview Smith makes claim that Derrida's avowed adherence to the "*crypto-communist legacy*" of a Leninist critique of spontaneism was consistent with his broader philosophical project. For Smith, Derrida's mistrust of the idealisation of structureless organisational forms that typified the political horizons of the student movement of 1968 was analogous to the principle philosophical thesis of deconstruction, namely that metaphysics was grounded on the structuring illusion of the retrievability of the self-presence of Being beyond all mediation. In that sense, Derrida foresaw "dangerous consequences" resulting from "the spontaneist eloquence, the call for transparency, for communication without relay or delay" that had been posited as the solution to the moribund institutions on the left. Such mistrust for the ideal of self-presence in direct expression was, according to Derrida, derivative of a Leninist inheritance. (Smith 2008, 268)

However, Smith's citation obscures the broader context that surrounded this declared inheritance. It was in the context of talking about the link between deconstruction and the apparatus of the institution that Derrida aligned his philosophical-political position with Lenin's critique of spontaneism in *What is to Be Done?* In the interview, Derrida explicitly periodises the moment when his work became centrally invested in the question of the institution "in terms of both theory and practice" (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 49). This periodisation confers a crucial role to a dimension of Lenin's thought in inflecting Derrida's response to the events of '68 and insinuates its continuation in the formation of GREPH. After Smith's citation ends, Derrida goes on to say in the interview:

what remains constant in my thinking on this question is indeed a critique of institutions, but one that sets out not from the utopia of a wild and spontaneous pre- or non-institution, but rather counter-institutions...The idea of a counter-institution, neither spontaneous, wild nor immediate, is the most permanent motif that, in a way, has guided my work. (50)

GREPH developed as a counter-institution to philosophy and its teaching. The institution of philosophy was, for Derrida, one in which "the subject of the institutionality of the institution ha[d] to remain open and have a future" (Ibid.) Indeed, Derrida's philosophy during his GREPH years – and here we must include his seminarsⁱ and the texts that were produced in light of the objectives that the GREPH situation imposed (GREPH 1977, Derrida 2002) – not only thematised the institutionality of philosophy and its teaching, but recorded a particular occupation of the institution of philosophy in the face of the ever-present forces of institutionalisation. This inhabitation of the institution of philosophy, both in theory and practice, intended to keep a space open that would permit a reflexive interrogation of institutionality in general but more crucially the institutionality of the site that makes this interrogation possible – namely, philosophy. And this was, Derrida tells us, a relationship to the institution that had, in its mistrust for a spontaneously resolved exteriority to institutionality, been inherited from a Leninist tradition.

On the face of it, the counter-institution of GREPH represented a determinate iteration of this strategic appropriation of philosophy against the forces of institutionalisation within French academia. On this occasion, the institutionalisation comprised of two faces: the modernising pretensions of the French government's educational policy that sought to supplant the space of

philosophy with a positivistic realism and the defensive reflexes that aimed to preserve the French philosophical establishment in its present state. This dual front was made clear in *Where a Teaching Body Begins*, where Derrida claimed that “deconstruction cannot join in a liquidation of philosophy,” yet neither can it “cling to a given ‘defense-of-philosophy’ to a reactionary rearguard struggle to preserve a decomposing body that would only facilitate things for the enterprises of liquidation” (Derrida 2002, 74). GREPH then represented a facing-up to these institutionalising forces via the institution itself and therefore not by way of a disavowal or an escape, which was, in the Leninist tradition, a concession to spontaneity.

At each stage, this counter-position that formed in and against a set of determinate forces, traversed the distinct but articulated levels of the philosophical institution. This meant that it unfolded across the discursive dimension of philosophy as well as the broader apparatus that was its material and political support. (Derrida 2002, 72) Within this framing, the pedagogical institution, or what Derrida called the “didactico-philosophical inscription” (GREPH 1977, 434), was at the base of the articulation between the different levels of the French philosophical institution. Accordingly, the *agrégé-répétiteur* (the professional and pedagogical position occupied by Derrida) played a significant role in holding together, and reproducing, the whole didactico-philosophical edifice of the educational apparatus. This had become especially clear with the antagonisms mounted against the deeply centralised and elitist *agrégation* system following 1968, where issue of the social function of philosophy teaching, student formation, course content and teacher recruitment had all been brought into question.

Derrida’s reflexive interrogation of the role of the *agrégé-répétiteur* in ‘Where a Teaching Body Begins’ indicates that he did not take these questions lightly. Indeed, in both their form and content, Derrida’s *agrégation* courses of this period were theoretically and practically marked out by this overarching preoccupation with the socio-political function of the pedagogical institution. Throughout this period, the question of how to circumnavigate the stabilising relation between student and teacher intrinsic to pedagogical knowledge transfer formed the philosophical and political backdrop to his analyses of course material and his approach to teaching.

At the same time, the Marxist tradition, which indexed for Derrida something like the ultimate frontier within the didactico-philosophical institution, had, above all, to be subject to this critical practice. Within the history of philosophy and its corresponding institutional practices,

Marxism represented a key example of an enterprise aimed at destabilising a determinate didactico-philosophical inscription and its material support. In that light, it was consistent with the spirit of this Marxist enterprise to subject the institutionalisation of Marxism itself to this specific counter-institutional strategy so as to root out the vestiges of the didactico-philosophical inscription in its terms, references and conceptual paradigms.

In the initial years of GREPH's activities between 1974-75, Derrida would take up the itinerary plotted in 'Where a Teaching Body Begins' in his seminars at the ENS. In his teaching he would deconstruct Marx's conceptualisation of 'reproduction' so as to broach the reproductive logic of the pedagogical institution. In a seminar series entitled 'La Vie La Mort' of that year, Derrida pursued the proposition of posing the problem of the contradiction in Marx as a philosopheme within the context of scientificity of scientific discourse. The lecture series largely focused on the philosophical vestiges in the work of French biologist François Jacob (Derrida 2019b). In the same year, in a lecture series framed as part of GREPH's initiatives, entitled 'GREPH (le concept de l'idéologie chez les idéologues français)', Derrida gave a sustained reading of Althusser's 'Ideology' essay. There, Derrida routed his own philosophical-political ambitions with GREPH through Althusser's conceptualisation of the education system as the dominant ideological state apparatus. In Althusser's conceptualisation, the educational apparatus had taken over the religious apparatus in fulfilling the necessary function of reproducing the conditions of material and social production. (Althusser 2014) Derrida pitched his own agenda against the backdrop of Althusser's conceptual schema:

the most precise question becomes now: how the non-reproduction and the process of contradiction-transformation that takes place outside of the ISAs, before it or under it are inscribed in the ISAs by interrupting or cleaving or deforming or transforming the schemes of reproduction, or in any case by making it so that reproduction is quite heterogeneous or contradictory, not the repetition of the same, and by, for example, certain agents of the ISA then turning against ideology, against the system and against the practices in which they are engaged, some weapons that they can find in the history and the knowledge that they teach?ⁱⁱ

In this framing, Derrida questioned how an external crisis or break might be registered and harnessed by 'agents of the ISA' within and against the reproductive logic of the educational institution. In light of the broader context, the question alluded to the disturbance generated in the reproductive logic of educational apparatus by the recent attempted reforms within education policy – here conceived as a political symptom of a broader crisis of social

reproduction – and the subsequent initiation of GREPH and its counter-institutional praxis. The value of such a formulation was that it decentred the status of philosophical critique as the determining force of a transformation in the educational apparatus. But it also gave philosophy its own peculiar agential force. Indeed, from this perspective, it was the disruptive force of the Haby Reform that opened space for the agents of the educational institution to harness the contradictions that had infected the ideological state apparatus in which they functioned, so as to transform the reproductive logic of the pedagogical institution in philosophy and its teaching. It is significant then that Derrida would choose to turn to Marx on an occasion when he considered such a gap to have opened within the educational ISA.

Between September and October 1975, some months after the official inauguration of GREPH, Derrida gave two interviews in *Digraphe*. There, he explained his rationale for this turn toward Marx. In the first, he reflected on the significance for other institutions, including the party – which in the context could only mean the PCF – of the disruptive rifts opening in the educational apparatus that had fermented a particular deconstruction. He said:

I tried to say or do something specific ... only from the moment I thought it possible to articulate together, in a more or less coherent fashion, a certain deconstruction, which had arrived at a certain state, a certain critique, and the project of a certain political transformation of the educational university apparatus. This transformation appeared to me possible and effective (and by effective I mean beginning to transform the scene, the frame, and the relations of forces) only on the condition of this coherence; finally, if possible, it would no longer pour discourses that stem from the revolutionary code or stereotype into the intact forms of teaching, its rhetoric, and its programs. These forms often force one, both within the educational system and outside of it (for example, in corporatist organizations, unions, and parties) to challenge educational reproduction. The difficulty – which needs to be constantly reevaluated – is in marking a distance from these programmatic forms (those of unions and of the parties on the left) without giving comfort to the common enemy. (Derrida 1995, 15-16)

For Derrida, running a revolutionary ideology through the existing organisational form of an ISA did not disrupt its capacity to reproduce the practices and positions constitutive of the apparatus and its knowledge-effect. Indeed, at a certain point in its lifespan, usually during periods of crises, these organisational forms actively stimulate and recuperate such ideological resistances. This was principally why Derrida was keen to distinguish deconstruction proper from the self-critical and sublative propulsion intrinsic to philosophical discourse. Here, Derrida was referring to the invariant which made it so that philosophy, in announcing its own

end from inside its own discursive domain, made very little substantial difference to the ‘scene, the frame and the relations of force’ that held in place the broader discursive and practical relations comprising the full scope of the philosophical institution and the didactico-philosophical inscription. (72)

In the theoretical deconstruction that had cohered conjuncturally with the political struggle taking place across the educational apparatus in France, Derrida saw an opening. He saw this opening as having significance well beyond the educational institution alone. Insofar as this deconstruction took aim at the ‘forms of teaching, its rhetoric and programs’ that supported the ideological apparatus as such, GREPH and Derrida’s work of this period had an indirect bearing on the organisational form of the PCF.

In the second interview, the question of the coincidence of Derrida’s turn toward Marxism in his teaching and his counter-institutional praxis was directly raised. In response, Derrida claimed deconstruction related to the Marxist canon, not as writings solely to be critically decoded but as heterogeneous discursive formations maintained in a state of hermeneutic insularity by relations of force that also had to be “taken into account practically and political.” (73) In that sense the GREPH initiative, in conjunction with Derrida’s teaching on Marx, was an effort to deconstruct the institution of Marxism via one ISA, the educational apparatus, in order to shift the practices corresponding to the Marxism of another apparatus, the party. This was by way of shifting the pedagogical form that was common to them both and which reproduced a circumscribed set of interpretive positions vis-à-vis Marxian and Marxist texts by maintaining a centralised and hierarchical arrangement of practices.

The enterprise of practically dislodging the structuring relation supporting the educational apparatus was for Derrida, therefore, fundamental to releasing Marxism from staid interpretive norms. Only in this way could there be a break in the generic conditions delineating a particular knowledge-effect in the name of Marx that preceded Marxist political practice. In his seminar series *Theory and Practice*, Derrida associated this effort to rehabilitate Marx with a broader tradition that was distinctly responsive to the concept of transformation within the Marxian problematic. In *Theory and Practice*, it was in Althusser’s re-conceptualisation of transformation that Derrida found the raw material for his own transformative gesture. Derrida treated Althusser’s theoretical trajectory as emblematic of the current state of the transformative in Marxism – one that he would necessarily have to deconstruct in order

adequately to respond to the transformative-interpretive tradition he was working within. But Derrida's reconfiguration of the transformative in Marx did not depend upon a resolute renunciation of the Althusserian iteration in total. And in that respect, it did not aim to reinvest the transformative with a new meaning in a vocabulary shorn of conceptual or semantic vestiges – such as one would expect to find in Althusser himself. Rather, aspects of Althusser's transformative engagement with Marx and the Party that had resulted in certain innovative conceptual offshoots regarding the transformative – including raising the question of the role of reproduction and of ISA's for the conceptualisation of transformation in Marx – were kept alive in Derrida's own conceptual and practical reconfiguration of the transformative in Marx. Indeed, Derrida's reformulation of the transformative in Marx depended crucially upon the conceptual paradigm that Althusser smuggled into the Marxian framework as part of his own transformative trajectory. This was Althusser's instantiation of superstructural forms, especially the educational system, with a particular type of agency over reproduction and therefore transformation.

In that sense, Derrida's early approach to the transformative in Marx pre-figured the motif of spectrality that would later characterise his approach to Marx. Already in his deconstruction of Althusser in *Theory and Practice*, Derrida showed an awareness of the difficulty of reviving the transformative in Marxism without a necessary detour through categorical oppositions such as living and dead, philosophy and non-philosophy, change and repetition and so on. In other words, Derrida was aware that he could not dislodge the meanings associated with the transformative such as they had been conceptualised by Althusser nor could he foster a disruption of the pedagogical institution by an outright break from these traditions. Putting an end to the philosophical reification of the transformative in Marx in order to bring it into being depended on moving through the philosophical institution. The realisation of transformation in this sense meant occupying the border between an ossified apparatus, with its staid chain of significations, and its absolute outside. This was the conceptual framework that informed Derrida's seminar series *Theory and Practice*.

Theory and Practice

Theory and practice, then.

Must be done [*Faut le faire*].

When I say *faut le faire*, what am I doing?

Of course, or so it would seem, I am heaving a sigh of discouragement, discouragement tinged with ironic protest at the curriculum that requires us to deal, in one year and in the form of a seminar, with such a question, if that is what it is. (Derrida 2019a, 1)

Of the secondary literature dealing with Derrida's GREPH years, few have given due attention to the form and content of Derrida's teaching of this period. It is important to look at this material through the prism of GREPH, not simply because Derrida explicitly advanced GREPH's political priorities in his treatment of course material during this period, but also because the seminars represent a pedagogical practice that sought to account for and transform the role of the *agrégé-répétiteur* within the educational apparatus. In the remainder of this article, I will carry out a close reading of *Theory and Practice* with a view to specifying the form and content of this counter-institutional inhabitation of the *agrégé-répétiteur*. In this light, I will be focusing on Derrida's treatment of the end of philosophy motif in relation to Althusser's theoretical trajectory.

In *Theory and Practice*, Derrida raises Althusser and Heidegger regarding their distinct treatment of the theory/practice pair without drawing them into direct critical confrontation. Inasmuch as *Theory and Practice* exists as a record of a pedagogical practice that aimed at preparing students for the *agrégation*, at the same time as it sought to re-route the function of the *agrégé-répétiteur*, the conventional features of philosophical argumentation are conspicuously lacking from the text. Such an absence is indicative of Derrida's effort to negotiate with what he claimed in his GREPH writing was the structuring principle of the philosophical institution reproduced in practice via the pedagogical relation: the 'didactico-philosophical inscription'. In *Theory and Practice*, therefore, Derrida refuses to present a clearly resolved and transferrable-repeatable position vis-à-vis the topic of the *agrégation*. This was how Derrida faced up to the responsibility of occupying the position of *agrégé-répétiteur* – a pedagogical role he considered central to the reproductive logic of the French philosophical institution but which he nonetheless refused to vacate.

From this perspective, and bearing in mind his fidelity to Lenin's critique of spontaneity, the refrain with which Derrida opens his seminar "must be done", that serves as the guide for the full movement of his pedagogical itinerary, reads as a subtle modification of Lenin's

interrogative “What Is To Be Done?” Among the various inflections attributed to it in the course of *Theory and Practice*, “must be done” can be read as a reprisal of Lenin’s critique of spontaneity in terms of Derrida’s counter-institutional inhabitation of the philosophical institution qua *agrégé-répétiteur*. At the same time, in its modified form in the imperative and without the determinate ‘it’, the phrase provides a figure for Derrida’s response to the charge of the *agrégé-répétiteur*. That response was an abstention from providing a place for ‘it’ while nevertheless attending to the obligation of doing something in the space proper to the *agrégé-répétiteur*. ‘Must be done’ is then also inflected by the sense of an obligation to do something rather than merely reproducing the philosophical institution qua *agrégé-répétiteur*, an inflection that recalls the sentiment of the eleventh of Marx’s theses on Feuerbach – a fragment that will gain due critical attention in the course of the lectures. (13-14)

Viewed from this perspective, we can read the text as a record of that other thing that Derrida did do in the space proper to the *agrégé-répétiteur*. It is a record of the methods he devised that were other than transparent philosophical argumentation, critique and opposition, to undo the didactico-philosophical inscription of the *agrégé-répétiteur*. Said otherwise, the text records Derrida’s response to the problematic of the end of philosophy. That is to say, Derrida’s political ambitions to counter the reproductive logic of the philosophical institution fell within a conceptual framework that tries to think the non-continuity of an existing conception/practice of philosophy and its replacement with something else. But as we will see, in the course of doing so, Derrida will characterise this impulse – to exceed the bounds of an existing modality of philosophy – as a gesture that remained all too philosophical. Indeed, he will argue that this dynamic – of an iterative recourse to a transcendent or external domain beyond the merely philosophical – is structurally integral, not simply to the end of philosophy problematic in Marx, but to Western philosophy as such. What Derrida will call “philosophical edging [*bordure*]” (16-17) is the propulsive dynamic internal to philosophy whereby a philosophical discourse anticipates its own overcoming in the process of circumscribing the boundaries of what philosophy currently is, and by positing a gesture or identifying itself as the gesture that moves beyond that limit point. Philosophical edging therefore refers to the structuring opposition internal to all philosophy that assumes the nature of the division between itself and its outside is irreducible.

In this direction, as regards his counter-institutional approach to pedagogical practice, Derrida provides a rationale for his unwillingness to stage the overturning of Althusserian Marxism via

the Heideggerian problematic. In the first lecture he summarises the path of his pedagogical trajectory. He says: “We’ll compare that genealogical discussion [the morphology of the theory/practice pair in the Marxist tradition] ... not in order simply to oppose it, but to relate it to it according to ... another interpretation ... of the theory/practice pair” (17) It is not to oppose one resolved body of knowledge against the other, that Derrida brings together these two distinct philosophical traditions that encircle the theory/practice pair. Rather, it is to show how the structure of this philosophical edging that is common to them both “produces effects in the content that are different, but structurally analogous when viewed from another genealogical orientation.” (17) In other words, Derrida’s teaching strategy aims to mark out this structure common to two distinct philosophical problematics each comprised of a discrete “semantico-philosophical genealogical” (5) sequence. It wants to do this in order to bring into relief mechanisms that repeat themselves across different philosophical languages while remaining inconspicuous within the boundaries of a particular conceptual idiomatic lineage. In *Theory and Practice*, this is specifically to identify a structure that presides as much over the end of philosophy motif in the Marxist trajectory, as it does over other the end of philosophy motif in other philosophical discourses. Therefore, it is an effort to countenance the problem of the end of philosophy in Marx not solely by way of the circumscribed pool of references associated with the Marxist idiomatic lineage but to travel away from the Marxist problematic to see it in light of another philosophical itinerary.

But with this shift of tact in addressing the theme of the end of philosophy more generally, Derrida does not assume a transcendental vantage over the foibles of particular conceptualisations of the end of philosophy. Yet neither can he avoid the impulse of assuming to his own discourse a step beyond the philosophical structure he designates, precisely by dint of designating it from without. Indeed, it is by outlining the structural constraints of this trans-philosophical aporia that recurs in distinct philosophical contexts, that Derrida wants to mark the line beyond which we must pass to avoid its repetition. And in doing so, in repeating the repetition by not repeating it, Derrida thereby concedes to the necessary “overflowing” of his own meta-philosophical gesture back into the philosophical as such.

According to this broader conceptual schema, Althusser’s status in *Theory and Practice* is not that of a strictly paradigmatic case in the Marxist semantico-philosophical genealogy. Rather, Althusser’s trajectory is, for Derrida, far more complex than others. It is more complex specifically in view of how it responds to the question raised by the eleventh thesis, namely:

“does the last Thesis mark the end of philosophy (which would have been satisfied with interpreting) ... or the end of only the philosophy that is satisfied with interpreting, so that what Marx calls for would still be a philosophy, but a philosophy that transforms the world” (14)? The distinction Derrida intends here is between an injunction that signals the end of philosophy as such – in which case philosophy *in toto* would be equated with mere interpretation – or an injunction that demands a new philosophy that does not repeat the function of philosophy as it currently stands (that is one satisfied with only interpreting the world), but instead establishes a new relation with the world, a relation that would be revolutionary.

The question raised by the eleventh thesis is important for Derrida’s broader pedagogical inquiry into the theory/practice pair. In his estimation, Marxism is the intellectual tradition that hinges much of its explanatory power upon an investment in the transcendental status of the theory/practice pair. It is the tradition that invests most patently in the explanatory power of a philosophy of the theory/practice pair, conceived as a foundational kernel accessible prior to any of its disciplinary regionalisations. Insofar as this Marxist semantico-philosophical genealogy can be traced back to the event of the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, the question of the status of the philosophical edging in the eleventh thesis has important ramifications on exactly how the theory/practice pair is defined. And that definition will serve as the conceptual determination used by Marxist discourse to explain all further sub-divisions of the theory/practice pair. It is to this question that Althusser’s trajectory represents a particularly complex response, even while it remains determined by the trans-philosophical structure of the philosophical edging that Derrida will come to identify by the end of the course.

To begin to elucidate the complexity of Althusser’s trajectory, Derrida lays stress on the hermeneutic relationship Althusser establishes between the eighth thesis,ⁱⁱⁱ which serves as the epigraph of Althusser’s ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’, and the eleventh thesis. Session three of the *Theory and Practice* lectures is the first that considers Althusser’s work in detail. Derrida begins by recounting that in the introduction of *For Marx* Althusser specifies the types of approaches that have been taken in the French Marxist tradition to ending philosophy in the name of Marx. (Althusser 2005, 28-30) According to Althusser, it was the “theoretically ambiguous language” (Derrida 2019a, 40) of the eleventh thesis that led all of these approaches astray toward the illusion of an end. This concise characterisation of the eleventh thesis forms the basis of Althusser’s philosophical trajectory in relation to the question Derrida associates with the eleventh thesis (whether Marx calls for the end of philosophy as such or the end of a

non-revolutionary philosophy). Indeed, for Derrida, this explains Althusser's bias toward the eighth thesis over the eleventh, and in fact clarifies how Althusser reads the eleventh thesis against its theoretically ambiguous language.

In Derrida's reading, the eighth thesis intimates a conceptual continuity between Kant and Marx. This continuity bears upon the principle they share around the status of practical reason as one of the two modalities into which an anterior unified reason is distributed: theoretical and practical.⁽²⁴⁾ For Kant and Marx, practice is better suited to defending reason than, in its theoretical modality alone, can be led astray into mysticism. In the eighth thesis, it is human practice that provides the rational solution – i.e. returns theory towards this unified rationality – to theoretical mysticism. This, as Derrida points out, is not the same as saying that theory as such is mystical. Rather, it means that the path toward mysticism is cleared by theory alone and only practice returns it toward reason. According to Derrida, it is this conceptual heritage that is summoned by Althusser in his citation of the eighth thesis, and it is this heritage he will use against the theoretical ambiguity of the eleventh thesis to provide a rational solution to the 'end of philosophy'. Derrida says about the eighth thesis:

This Thesis, then, seemingly very *practacist*, nevertheless contains this practicist within very rigorous limits, and I suppose that Althusser wanted to draw attention as much to the practicist as to its limits and conditions when he placed this Thesis as the epigraph to a text that, at the time and in that specific situation, must have functioned as a call to theoretical rigor and to the practical imperative of that theoretical rigor for Marxist discourse and Marxist practice. (22)

Here, the practicist that Althusser wanted to foreground is the one that results from a reading of the eleventh thesis that recognises in it a demand for a dogmatic adherence to the practical imperative as such, without theoretically reckoning with the specificities of that practice. This reading, which assumes that Marx is opposing the practical imperative (the transformation of the world) to theoretical interpretation permits the peculiar theoretical mysticism of practicist to go unchecked. It does this by deeming practice in general sufficient to defending reason from the mystificatory force of a profaned theoretical realm rather than from what specifically leads it astray, as per the eighth thesis. In other words, this reading posits that the practical imperative is to change the world practically rather than theorise it as such. Doing it in practice rather than in theory is *the* practical imperative. It thereby blocks the way for the practical imperative to take on the specific content of a recourse to theory that might attend to specifying

what the practical imperative ought to be vis-à-vis whatever has led theory to mysticism. For Althusser, therefore, the practical imperative, the human practice that was necessary at that moment to find the solution to what had led theory to mysticism, (i.e. practicism), was theoretical practice.

In this light, Derrida emphasises what Althusser says in the introduction of *For Marx* about such a misreading: “It was, *and always will be*, only a short step from there to theoretical pragmatism.” It is on the strength of this statement that Derrida proposes the link between Althusser’s condemnation of the death of philosophy reading in the introduction and the intentions behind his use of the eighth thesis as the epigraph of ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’. Derrida glosses the statement, maintaining that it is the eleventh thesis, with its theoretically ambiguous language, “which breaks down even the theoretical or theoreticist guardrails of the eighth thesis” and which “leads to theoretical pragmatism.” Then, a bit later, he notes that:

the pragmatism that is denounced as a deleterious, politically harmful effect of this headlong rush toward death of philosophy, in making a religion of the 11th thesis and its theoretically ambiguous content, this pragmatism that is denounced (empiricism, opportunism, tacticism without strategy, improvisation, relativist casuistry etc.)...is a theoretical pragmatism, occurring within theory. Not only *activist* pragmatism. (40/43)

In the death of philosophy reading of the eleventh thesis, it is a specific theory – one that totalises the conception of the practical imperative by opposing it to theory as such – that leads theory in general astray, and that consequently stifles practice. In this way, practice is theoretically delimited according to a negative attribution of whatever is deemed to be theoretical. And here the theoretical can be made into a storehouse for any and all practices that call into question the practical nature of a practice subordinated to a theoretical pragmatism. For this reason, it was necessary for Althusser “to arm theory against pragmatism”. But at the same time, he had to remain committed to the principle that it is in human practice alone that there is a rational solution to what has led theory astray. Derrida summarises Althusser’s conditions for a satisfactory response to the practicist reading of the eleventh thesis: “one is going to have to arm theoretical practice against theoretical pragmatism and bring out the theoretical and practical conditions of a non-pragmatic practice, a non-pragmatic theoretical practice.” (40) The eighth thesis, therefore, provides these strict

conditions that are obscured by the theoretically ambiguous (conditionless) language of the eleventh thesis.

Let us return to the questions that launched Derrida's appraisal of Althusser's trajectory. He asked whether in a particular Marxist discourse the event of the eleventh thesis is considered to mark the end of philosophy as such or the end of a particular configuration of philosophy, and on that basis, how the theory/practice pair is made to function. We have seen that, according to Derrida, Althusser did not consider the eleventh thesis to mark the end of philosophy. Responses that took the end of philosophy route were in thrall to an implicit theoretical pragmatism. For that reason, Althusser abandoned thinking the death of philosophy as such. Instead, he pursued the configuration of a Marxist philosophy that would establish a new relationship to the world, precisely as an enactment of the practical imperative, i.e. as the practical solution to whatever had led theory astray. In Derrida's reading, the peculiar features of Althusser's philosophical construction were conditioned by the imperative to seek recourse to practice in order to find the rational solution to what led theory toward mysticism, as is advanced in the eighth thesis. And Derrida notes how this recourse to practice presided over what appeared to be simply a return to philosophy against the wishes of the eleventh thesis: "Notice that Althusser, underlining the present of the formula "it is always only a short step," indeed intends, at the moment he intervenes, to take a position in a current, determinate situation, in relation to current political effects. That is important if we are to read this text appropriately." (43) The determinate nature of Althusser's intervention – the necessity to reject the end of philosophy reading and confront the challenge of constructing a Marxist philosophy in spite of its Stalinist baggage – was therefore indicative of its practical responsiveness to the demands of reason.

It is on the issue of how Althusser aimed to found this new philosophy that the question of the function of the theory/practice pair is addressed. Derrida cites the final paragraph of the introduction of *For Marx* where Althusser appends a proviso to the advent of this new Marxist philosophy: that it must gain "theoretical consistency". With this, Derrida clarifies the specificity of Althusser's gesture, beyond traditional efforts, to found a philosophical system. He says:

To give theoretical consistency to Marxist philosophy doesn't simply mean that there is – or must be – a Marxist philosophy to be constructed or elaborated, that Marxist philosophy is a *constructum* to come; it

also means that Marxist philosophical construction must have theoretical consistency, in other words that the theoretical recourse is the principle one, the tribunal of last resort for judging the philosophical character. The theoretical is no longer one aspect, one side, a determination of the philosophical, but the opposite. The philosophical appears before the theoretical tribunal and constitutes a region of the theoretical, of the theoretical in general, or of theoretical practice in general. (45)

What Derrida claims here is that since Althusser has refused to equate the theoretical as such with philosophy, by abandoning the end of philosophy reading of the eleventh thesis, the theoretical domain continues to offer its services to him, even if certain modalities of theory, certain philosophies, do not. And it is on the basis that the theoretical domain is anterior to particular philosophies, that philosophy is merely one of its sub-domains, that theory is able to serve as the judge of whether Marxist philosophy “*has any theoretical right to existence?*” (48)

We saw earlier that Derrida put forward the claim that what distinguished the Marxist semantico-philosophical genealogy was its investment in the explanatory power of a philosophy of the theory/practice pair. What appears to occur in Althusser’s trajectory, however, is a complete reversal of this paradigm. It is no longer philosophy alone that provides access to the ontological status of the theory/practice pair prior to all subsequent disciplinary regionalisations. Rather, it is the domain of theory that presides over philosophy – philosophy becoming one of *its* sub-domains – and which is therefore invested with the explanatory power to judge the sufficiency of a philosophy. But what Derrida detects in this gesture is a reversal that, in spite of its unconventional trajectory, is driven by the same demand for “philosophical self-responsibility” (49) that accompanies all philosophical efforts to authenticate a philosophical system. In this manoeuvre, by which theory is promoted to a transcendental position where it can judge the adequacy of philosophy, Derrida observes a repetition of the “circle of self-foundation ... that defines the philosophical as such.” (50) In other words, every philosophy contains this internal relation of dependency within its own discourse. Derrida adds that every “philosophy puts itself to the test of circular self-responsibility, every philosophy practices or tries to practice the test of the self-reflexive circle that consists in taking itself for its object.” (51) Yet, even if Althusser was unaware of the continuation of this trait of philosophy into his own enterprise, which Derrida suspects he was not, his insistence that “Marxism is the only philosophy that theoretically faces up to this test” (61) advances a claim on the exceptional status of Marxism regarding this self-responsibility. Althusser considered Marxism as the body of thought that uniquely fulfils the conditions for its own self-foundation.

Yet, paradoxically, the conditions that Marx's philosophy would have to face up to had not been theoretically elaborated until Althusser himself carried this out. How is it possible to attribute such a status to Marxism if this test of self-responsibility has to be applied from without?

Althusser's response was that Marxism faced up to this test by having already specified its philosophical distinctiveness from Hegelian philosophy. However, this specification remained in a "practical state" and had not gained "theoretical consistency"; it had not undergone the test of theory, such that Marxist philosophy could secure this right to exist. (Althusser 2005, 164-65) Since theory, according to Althusser, presides over its theoretical sub-domain, philosophy, it was theory alone that could judge the sufficiency of Marxist philosophy. But no sooner does Althusser constitute the criteria for this theoretical test than he advances a whole series of unquestioned philosophical determinations (production, technique, humanity, labour) as the final recourse of theoretical accountability. In other words, the envelopment of Althusser's theoretical criteria by certain philosophemes surreptitiously re-places philosophy into the dominant position of the dependency relation between theory and philosophy. Derrida follows the consequences of this subtle philosophical envelopment:

What, then, has happened? Well, at least this (another dialectical circle recognised as independently necessary): that producing the definition of Theory, comes back, by the end of this definitional excursus, to the place out of which all of these definitions were produced or emitted, namely to the Theory (uppercase) of dialectical materialism. Indeed if, Theory (uppercase) is dialectical materialism, another name for Marxist philosophy in its specificity, it is also, and I am quoting, "the Theory of practice in general", that is to say the Theory of all those definitions. It is defined and defining, the general condition of all those definitions and one defined object among all those definitions." (Derrida 2019a, 66)

By the end of "On the Materialist Dialectic", Althusser's theoretical domain, like the domain of philosophy over which it presides, has become subordinate to its own definitional transcendence. Althusser confers upon the theoretical domain, as an object of his discourse, the value of ultimate explanatory recourse but does so within that very theoretical domain. In other words, the theoretical realm that attributes to theory a transcendental status is bestowed its own credentials as a result of its own defining practice. This move is only possible by mobilising philosophical shibboleths. For Derrida, this is a circularity that ascribes an irreducible jurisdiction to a domain whose sovereignty is founded on tautology.

The uncovering of this tautological structure was of course registered within Althusser's own trajectory. It was the "theoreticist deviation" (69) which was at the heart of his previous definition of philosophy: Theory of theoretical practice. If the practical imperative that initially inspired Althusser's response had been the need for a theoretical practice that could correct a prevailing practicist deviation, it had unfortunately resulted in a swing towards a new theoreticism. Just as the end of philosophy adherents had observed their absolute rejection of the theoretical domain, necessarily without theoretical grounds – other than those that make practice its own self-reference – so Althusser's theoretical response to the eleventh thesis made theory its own self-reference by leaning on certain unexamined philosophemes.

What Derrida registers in Althusser's shift following his acknowledgement of his theoreticist deviation, is that the new definition of Marxist philosophy as a "new practice of philosophy" (Althusser 2001, 42) continues to posit the place of philosophy from within a philosophical register. But on this occasion the philosophical register "is no longer simply that of philosophy defining or situating itself; rather, this defining discourse is itself also an act, a political gesture, a practice, it is no longer a purely theoretical language, nor even an essentially theoretical practice." (Derrida 2019a, 71) In other words, Althusser converts the theoreticist self-reference – the fact that philosophy constitutes itself as subject and object of its own defining – into grounds permitting yet another definition of philosophy as practice. However, unlike his theoreticist definition of philosophy this one places the determining instance beyond its own referential domain. But this altogether new effort to overcome philosophy, this attempt to relocate the determinant instance outside of its theoretical jurisdiction (class struggle in 'Lenin and Philosophy'), overflows back into the philosophical, insofar as it remains convinced by the authority of its instantiative power. Derrida explains:

The Althusserian definition of Marxist practice of philosophy intends...to overflow the philosophical as such, once that is defined and even situated in a field (for example class struggle) that it doesn't control ...[But] the utterance proposing that the definition or situation of philosophy is not in itself philosophical is always difficult, unstable. Nothing is more philosophical than the act of defining or situating the philosophical within the general field of what is, of being as this or that, here production or practice. (73)

A theoretical register that re-inscribes the determination of philosophy beyond its own limits while assuming to itself a non-philosophical but nonetheless authoritative value is one that

spills back into philosophy. It returns to itself on two accounts. First, it converts the non-philosophical determination of philosophy into a philosopheme, i.e. it brings the determinant instance (being as practice, class struggle, the economy and so on) into the ambit of the known in order then to exteriorise and authenticate its determining force. Second, it accords its own theoretical voice license to define philosophy in this way.

For Derrida, these unintended concessions to the sovereignty of philosophy reflect a symptomatic effect of the structure of the ‘inner edge’ of philosophy. By ‘inner edge’ Derrida means the structuring opposition internal to philosophy which assumes that the division between itself and its outside is irreducible. Derrida will go on to identify this structure in the Heideggerian problematic following his lengthy excursion across Althusser’s trajectory which began with his response to the death of philosophy motif in Marx. And indeed, this impasse that plagues philosophies or anti-philosophies predicated on the existence of the inner edge of philosophy (philosophy/non-philosophy, theory/practice, interpretation/change, knowledge/being) will form the principal concern of his teaching in this *agrégation* course on Theory and Practice. In one of the few moments when he reflects on his own pedagogical itinerary in the *Theory and Practice* lectures, Derrida says:

Naturally, the problematic I am proposing here by referring to the inner edge of the philosophical is not, as I see it, meant to produce ... reassuring oppositions such as: here you have what is on this side, here you have what goes beyond...On the contrary, this problematic takes aim at the edge, it aims to problematize the security that a border provides...In the end the question would be... What is the structure of something like an edge? (71)

In the course of his seminars, therefore, Derrida’s aim had been to avoid reproducing the symptoms that were common to both Althusser and Heidegger’s efforts to overflow the edge of philosophy. The way he had tried to do this was by tracing to a common structure the irresolvable contradictions that their two problematics ran into. This structure corresponded to the line within philosophy that demarcates the existence of two distinct realms: the philosophical and non-philosophical, or inside and outside.

Derrida’s gesture, then, would be to put this edge, the fact of its functionality, into question, without necessarily determining a place where this edging would be overcome. This he did in a context where the politico-pedagogical ambitions that the GREPH situation imposed, played

a central role in shaping the form and content of Derrida's pedagogical practice. This pedagogical gesture, which demonstrated a profound familiarity with the death of philosophy motif in its Marxist instantiation while flagging the conceptual paralysis that punctuated Althusser's trajectory, was one that sought to realise the rehabilitation of the transformative in Marx. Correspondingly, it was one that attempted to counteract the reproductive logic of the institution of philosophy by way of an inhabitation of the *agrégé-répétiteur* position. In *Theory and Practice*, Derrida's thematization of the structural impasse linking particular self-negating philosophies was a transposition of his own confrontation with the structural constraints of the *agrégé-répétiteur* as a medium for self-abolishment.

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Notes

ⁱ The 1974-75 seminar series "The Concept of Ideology in the French Ideologues" is nominally identified as corresponding to the objectives of GREPH, and publicised in a GREPH bulletin as part of Derrida's text 'Where a Teaching Body Begins and How It Ends', as is the 1976 "Seminar for GREPH on Gramsci". Of the seminar sessions published in French from the period: "Life Death" (1975-76) and "Theory and Practice" (1976-77) were *agrégation* topics; in both, Derrida directly orients his lectures around questions raised by the GREPH initiative.

ⁱⁱ Notes taken by Samuel Solomon from 'GREPH (le concept de l'idéologie chez les idéologues français)," 1974-1975' in *Jacques Derrida papers* held at the Special Collections and Archives, University of California, Irvine Libraries.

ⁱⁱⁱ "All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice." Derrida's translation and extended discussion on p. 22.