



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2015) Review of Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War by Warren Montag. *Foucault Studies* (20), pp. 317-319. ISSN 1832-5203.

Downloaded from: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/13846/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

BOOK REVIEW

Foucault's "Materiality of Ideology," a Review of:

Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 256pp., \$23.95 pb ISBN: 978-0-8223-9904-9.

Even within the controversial constellation of French Theory that includes Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, notes Warren Montag, Louis Althusser remains an outsider. Despite a significant degree of critical—in multiple senses of the term—attention from no less a pedigree than Jacques Rancière and E.P. Thompson among others, discussion of Althusser's work is often highly charged as debate rages around the seemingly "'spectral' quality" of his output (2). In *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, Montag moves the study of Althusser in a fresh direction, opting to centrally focus upon neither Althusser's antihumanism nor his writings on ideology but rather the "encounters" of Althusser's work with others in this constellation at three overdetermined "nodal points": "structure," "subject," and "origin/end" (10–13). While other openings have also recently presented themselves,¹ this results for Montag in a productive text that offers a stunning breadth in its account, covering ground from Montesquieu, Dilthey, Husserl, Lévi-Strauss, Marx, and Spinoza through to Deleuze, Lacan, and Foucault. Furthermore, locating Althusser's works at their points of contradiction and fracture offers Montag a route into these texts and their situation that would be afforded neither by a traditional linear biographical chronology nor by an exclusively textual methodology.

Readers who approach this book with the specific aim of appraising the place of a single other figure in Montag's range of philosophers will be both in for a treat and for some frustration. While it is not antithetical to Montag's method to approach this volume for its writing on Althusser's interaction with another persona, such as Foucault in this instance—these tensions do, after all, form the central pillar of the book's structure—it is worth noting that the material can seem a long-time coming and that this is one of the perils of Montag's breadth. *Althusser and His Contemporaries* has the look of a book that should please all-comers, a something-for-everyone work in which every reader can find his or her particular angle. Be assured/warned that this is not so. Montag has written a book that is distinctly about Althusser and to anticipate any award of privilege to one's own area of interest in such a volume can end only in disappointment.

With that preliminary warning shot fired, however, it is fair to say that the Foucault-

¹ Andrew Ryder, "Foucault and Althusser: Epistemological Differences with Political Effects," *Foucault Studies*, no. 16 (September, 2013), 134–53.

orientated reader of Montag's work has much to gain from this book. Most specifically, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* implicitly echoes so many of the questions that have dogged the study of Foucault, almost as parallel lives: what is his relationship to structuralism and post-structuralism?; how do we understand his politics in relation to Marxism and/or psychoanalysis?; and how should we, as readers, account for his changes of direction? These questions make for a good starting point and it is through them that this particular angle can best be explored.

Although I have already noted that Montag does not deploy a direct linear chronology, there is a historical element here that assists with the mapping of his work onto a Foucauldian perspective. This begins with a history of structuralism that has much to add to an understanding of Althusser's and Foucault's respective placements within this field. Foucault's rejection of his categorisation as a structuralist is one of his most well-known remarks on the topic and is vehement: "I have never been a structuralist."² Montag's alternative reading of the background of structuralism here, however, confirms the equally well-known counter-stance that Foucault definitively *was* viewed as sitting within the structuralist tradition. Indeed, Montag opens his pre-history of structuralism with a commentary on Althusser's correspondence with Franca Madonia in which it is noted that *Histoire de la Folie* featured prominently on Althusser's École course, "The Origins of Structuralism." Montag most interestingly argues, however, that any expression of surprise at this inclusion is misplaced and might betray a "facile definition of structuralism as an ahistorical formalism or functionalism" (25).

As Montag goes on to show, in a move that alters generally received understandings of "structuralism," and certainly those prevalent in literary studies, Althusser has a very different historical grouping in mind and progresses from Montesquieu and Dilthey, rather than the more usual Marx-Freud-Lévi Strauss trinity. The fault line that Montag suggests Althusser was here exploring centres around the way in which these practitioners, and particularly Lévi Strauss, end up proposing theories of possibility as theories of necessity but also how they rest upon "idealist notions of totality" (69–70). Indeed, it is the problematic legacy of Hegel and idealism more generally that Montag suggests Althusser wished to dispel, or at least reveal: "It is," writes Montag, "not difficult to see the way in which, for Althusser, Hegel's concept of historical time was 'still alive' [...] Althusser rejects the very problematic that defined structuralist activity [...] and] his critique of historicism [...] can be in no way a privileging of synchronic over the diachronic" (32). With this in mind, a clearer indication of Foucault's anti-Hegelian alignment with Althusser can more clearly be understood.

This, of course, leads well into an appraisal of Foucault's and Althusser's extremely different stances with regard to Marxism. While Montag necessarily highlights Althusser's ruptures from the Communist Party and his lack of orthodoxy in this respect, he also notes that despite the fact that "Ideology and the State Apparatus" "proclaimed its Marxism on every page," it was possible, "not so many years ago" to read this text in parallel to *Discipline and Punish* (161). This, certainly, is not now the case. Instead, what Montag brings to the fore is the fact that while many trumpeted Althusser's "pessimism" in the years 1964–1970 (when he was working on the ideological state apparatuses [ISA] and interpellation) there were few who

² Michel Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault," translated by Jeremy Harding, *Telos*, vol. 55 (1983), 195–211.

took seriously his formulations of ideology until the naïve hopes for unconceptualized revolution fell through, at which point these were simply uncritically appropriated. Foucault, conversely, in Montag's reading, was one who remained sceptical, one who took pains to "identify and criticize the inconsistencies" in the ISA piece and to "develop it beyond the boundaries of Althusser's thought" (160–161).

This is a terrain that Montag charts in a historical parallelism between Foucault and Althusser, noting that portions of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* appear to directly contest Althusser's early definition of ideology and also that Foucault's critique of ideology changes almost immediately after the publication of the ISAs essay. Furthermore, Montag adeptly points out the way in which *Discipline and Punish* can be read as a questioning of the viability of the distinction between Repressive State Apparatuses as violence and the ISAs as ideology. Instead, Montag points out that Foucault's studies are concerned with materialist conditions of institutional practices and the subjects that are thereby constituted. In Foucault's realm, "bodies [...] and not consciousness or interiority are at stake in the practices of subjection" (62–64). This, of course, is the fundamental premise behind Foucault's well-known statements on power-knowledge, but I have not, to-date, seen this so well articulated in contrast to Althusser's formulations. Foucault, in Montag's assessment, is best seen as reading "the materiality of ideology" (165), describing "the material conditions of the possibility of interpellation" (166), while Althusser's formations remain invested, despite his attempts to evade them, in the legacies of idealism.

Although Montag leaves his analysis of Foucault and Althusser with a slight retreat, noting that to escape "the language of consciousness and its illusions" is easier said than done, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* is a book that should prove useful to any scholar with an interest in the historical genesis of Foucault's ideas and the debates within which they were produced. As we continue to work within an era that proclaims the death of Theory (while contradictorily continuing to teach, produce and read works of that very same Theory), historicizing texts such as this grow in importance. While many of the disciplines to which Foucault has contributed have histories of disavowing such biographical approaches, it is only through such negotiations that we will come to grips with the forces within which Theory came of age. And, after all, it is only within such materialisms, as Montag's work on Foucault and Althusser shows us, that we can so do.

Dr. Martin Paul Eve
Birkbeck, University of London, UK
martin.eve@bbk.ac.uk