

“Remaining ‘faithful’ to contingency” A Dialogue with Jacques Lezra

K: We have produced this issue on Lucretius from the theses on materialism upheld by Louis Althusser in his last writings. The latter proposes another tradition for Western philosophy, which he calls ‘the materialism of the encounter’, and which goes from ancient atomism to Heidegger and Derrida, through Machiavelli, Spinoza, Rousseau and Marx, among others. By highlighting the polemical stances those philosophers have taken against the concepts of ‘Meaning’, ‘Reason’, ‘Cause’ and ‘Origin’ in the name of ‘contingency’, Althusser also intends to oppose every materialism of the rationalist tradition, the materialism of necessity and teleology, that had been brought to the foreground by some commentators of Marx’s work. Althusser’s ‘aleatory materialism’, also labeled a ‘materialism of the encounter’, is in fact an ‘underground current’ within the materialist tradition in philosophy. Many of the thinkers of whom Althusser speaks have also contributed to your philosophy — Machiavelli, Spinoza, Marx, among others — notably to the development of your concept of ‘wild materialism’. What do you think of this ‘underground current’? Is there a ‘tradition’ of materialism? What place would Lucretius hold in that history then?

Jacques Lezra: I’d like to start by expressing my thanks for the opportunity to have this conversation about my work and about its relation to the urgent project of your extraordinary journal. Also, for your permission to express myself in English; my French would have been painful! I’d finally like to mention that I was able to expand many of the arguments in *Wild Materialism* separately, in a book published in Castilian Spanish last year titled *República salvaje: De la naturaleza de las cosas*--and I’ll allow myself, conscious of the unseemliness of the gesture, to refer Spanish readers to it for more fully elaborated answers to these questions.

You’ve been kind enough to pose a few questions and also to provide a set of prompts for the discussion; I’d like to take these on one at a time and see if they amount to anything systematic. Your first question concerns the materialist tradition. You recall for us that Althusser speaks of an underground current of the materialism of the encounter, and he lines up in this tradition the names Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Derrida, Heidegger. Presumably we’re to enroll Althusser himself, in particular the later work. What characterizes this tradition--and it’s important to ask whether

it constitutes *a* tradition, and a *tradition*, in the traditional sense of the term--is minimally a practice held in common: the displacement if not rejection of any forms of necessity that are understood to characterize how states of affairs arise, take shape, eventuate, and persist; and instead, the turn to understanding contingency as the primary device for describing states of affairs (their emergence, persistence, etc.). Just what "contingency" means is not of course given (neither is what "necessity" means; nor is the relation between the terms stable): the semantic field "contingency" covers includes modifiers (aleatory), substantives (chance, circumstance, case), as well as allegorical figures (Providence, Fortuna); it borders fuzzily on theology, "science," the business of business ("risk"), history and historiography; it's the handiwork of professional philosophers, merchants, consuming subjects, adventurers, theologians. What I refer to as Wild Materialism would on first blush appear to be a development, a step, in that long and disheveled tradition. Wild Materialism (and the book *Wild Materialism*) seeks to install contingency in the description of the production of concepts--and to that degree they follow closely the work of Althusser and Balibar, in being a radically historical, even historicizing program. Concepts, on my description, are objects produced, ephemerally and circumstantially, under determined conditions and to largely utilitarian ends. Conditions change, ends are achieved or not, use- and other forms of value shift; concepts degrade, dissipate, lose sense and value, are improperly translated, are misused. Each of these circumstances is the outcome of small battles, of entropic processes, even in some cases of explicit decisions. The "materialism" that emerges is, we might say, the defective concept of this dis-aggregation of the concept in general (the derogation of the "in-generalness" of the concept is entailed). And for this reason, because a Wild Materialism is the defective concept of the disaggregation of the concept, describing it isn't just a project bound to the locations where concepts are primarily valued--the domain of thought, academic institutions, "theory." A Wild Materialism is a materialism that can't be envisioned outside the frame of institutions -- and for this reason it is inseparable from politics, and from the critique of the concept of institution. My thesis is that in both these aspects--in its inseparability from politics and from the critique of institutions -- Wild Materialism eventuates in *terror*. "Terror" is the name not only of an affect, but also of what produces this affect--the dis-aggregation of the concept along the lines above.

I was thus very happy to see your *Thesis XII*--a wonderful and wonderfully compact, even poetically compact, call for the critique of institutions. Your *Thesis* works in two times, with a double gesture: first, "Le pouvoir destituant ne reconnaît pas la légitimité des institutions représentant les intérêts du capitalisme contemporain. Pour cette raison, il concourt à leur extinction" and then, "En même temps," at the same time, "le pouvoir destituant contribue à créer les conditions pour l'émergence de nouvelles institutions qui resteraient fidèles à la contingence et garantiraient la nature infondée de la singularité générique. Des institutions capables de prendre en compte le statut provisoire de la singularité générique

et de sauvegarder la valeur de l'action politique en tant que refus." I'm particularly interested in the expression "en même temps", but also in the question what would institutions "faithful to contingency" be? (Not *which* institutions, but what is the *concept* of institution that can be faithful to contingency: is fidelity to contingency something we can take as understood, as a possible impossibility?) And what status does your phrase "le pouvoir destituant contribue à créer les conditions pour l'émergence de nouvelles institutions" have? Is it offered normatively? From my perspective – and this is in fact the book I'm finishing up now, titled "Defective Institutions, faithfulness to contingency" is a way of saying what I call "terror."

I said that a Wild Materialism is a materialism that can't be envisioned outside the frame of institutions--and that, for this reason, it is inseparable from the critique of the concept of institution. Let me give you an example. You ask me, "Le matérialisme, a-t-il une « tradition »?" I take your question to indicate a degree of discomfort at putting the word "tradition" side by side with the word "materialism": I share the discomfort. It's not *given* that there exists a materialist "tradition" in the classical sense; our first impulse is to declare that while there may be a history of approaches to "materialism," that the notion of tradition, and *a fortiori* of a tradition, is precisely not-materialist: it, tradition, speaks of what persists over time, informing the new with the gravity of the old; of rules, authority; a form of conduct, manners, conventions. Say we collect names--the names of philosophers who, in our view, make up an alternative "materialist tradition." We'll call the collection of names by a non-traditional name, the "underground current of the materialism of the encounter." Just what principles of order are we installing, alongside our names? For instance, this one: the name "Spinoza" stands in for the corpus of Spinoza's work (are there undiscovered works which will change what "Spinoza" means?); for the received understanding of that work ("received" by whom? Under what circumstances? There is no immediate or natural reception of "Spinoza"); for the position assigned, by the philosophical "tradition," to the name and to what it is made to represent, at different times and to different purposes, by groups who police the philosophical institution. "Spinoza" stands in for an *effect*. If this is so for "Spinoza" and for every other member of the "tradition," then we are installing, with these names and as their relation, a principle of semantic denominalization which, in its most consistent form, entails contingencies obtaining within and among the different senses, uses, semantic ranges, effects, pasts and futures of whatever-it-is that "Spinoza" designates. We'll say much the same about "Machiavelli," and so on. So, the "tradition" we're handling--in which my own *Wild Materialism* must surely be found--collects cases of contingent semantic denominalization. Is this principle of collection sufficient to count as a "tradition"? Not in a traditional sense. Would it be possible to *remain faithful to it* ("Spinoza" would have to fall out of our tradition at

certain moments, to certain ends, for one or another group; and a figure like Heidegger, whom you refer to below, would have to fall into it casually)? Again, not in a traditional sense.

You ask me, then, about Lucretius's place in this "tradition": how does he fall into it, we might say? What happens to that "tradition" when the name Lucretius crops up on the list? Manifestly, for each of the writers, thinkers, philosophers, following Machiavelli, Lucretius's poem works as *the place* where Democritean philosophy is expressed most systematically: thus, a reduction of the poem to *place*, to the ground on which the reservoir, the lexicon, of atomist concepts may be plotted. This gesture precisely eliminates the novelty of Lucretius's encounter with Epicurus: that encounter takes place on different soil, in the soil of the poem. Marx's very early reading of Lucretius is definitive: he finds in the poem what cannot be thematized or emplaced; an alternative to philosophy as it is practiced in his day, and to historiography. When Lucretius's work joins the "tradition" of the materialism of the encounter it produces in that "tradition" a swerve *away* from the *naturalist* understanding of "matter." *Foedera naturae*, the laws or rules of nature, dictate that there *be* a swerve *within* and *away from* "nature." This paradoxical demand and ontology--for how would the rules of nature call for there to be a swerve, in "nature," that's both internal to "nature" and directed *away from* "nature"? is on offer throughout *De rerum natura*. It installs a non-standard logic, a defective logic, in which "faithfulness" to contingency can be imagined. Generations of readers of Lucretius have stressed the importance of the so-called "alphabetical paradigm" in the poem. This seems to me half right: it is indeed the logic of the signifier, the strange atomicity of the letter, that Lucretius brings to the "tradition" of materialism of the encounter. And this, surely, is part of why Lucretius's poem is not simply the *place* where Epicureanism is staged and set, for the Western tradition. But the strange atomicity of the letter in *De rerum natura* serves the major purpose of installing the defective antinaturalist logic I have described. If that component--that direction, that impulse, that drive--is not taken into account then Lucretius's uniquely disruptive place in the "tradition" cannot be understood. (This addresses, I think, your keen observation that "[I]l est inutile de vouloir « protéger » la nature, mais il est urgent de lutter contre les forces économiques et politiques qui fragilisent et détruisent les relations entre les choses, les tissages immémoriaux du vivant." I concur--though it is important to acknowledge, for reasons conceptual as well as political, that these "forces" are also modes of relation between things, and expressions of modes of relation between things. For that reason, the matter is, as you say, *political*: it is a matter of deploying one sort, even one modality, of relation, against another, from a position that is *itself* constituted relationally. Again, *Foedera naturae*, the laws or rules of nature, dictate that there *be* a swerve *within* and *away from* "nature.")

K: In a lecture you gave at Yale University, you present the paradoxical becoming of the materialist word which is doomed to fade away, not because it is pedagogically flawed, but because it is similar to other and any material things. More importantly, by tending to evade the order of immutable meaning, and therefore domination, it is doomed to repeat itself indefinitely so as to revive the dismissal of all sorts of tyrannical and fatal knowledge, thus making up what Althusser called the ‘underground current’ (subterranean tradition) of materialism. You concluded by stating that the political power of Lucretius’ poem lay in its infinite capacity to produce a love’s wound and to repeat it, which determined the subject to turn towards all others, because of the dissatisfaction of desire. Could you talk again about this crucial idea? Could we say then that the materialist word is a vector of desire? Doesn’t its political power derive from its incompleteness?

Jacques Lezra: You invite me to reflect again on my hypothesis that the political power of *De rerum natura* insists in its infinite capacity to produce what the poem describes as love’s wound, determining the subject always to turn toward others as a result of the dis-satisfaction of desire: to insist, to multiply the act of love, to cut again upon the wound so that, by multiplication of its objects and by a constant dissatisfaction, the lover avoids becoming fixed upon a single one. Is the materialist word the vector (in the verbal as well as the nominative senses: *vectorice* is your wonderful expression) of desire? Doesn’t its political power then derive from its incompleteness? It’s important to remember that Lucretius’s description of love’s wound has no overt connection to what’s called politics generally. The matter is anatomical; biological. The dynamics of fluid and blow, of *amor* and *umor*, are on display in the IVth Book, where this is taken up. It is tempting to insist on what you are calling *inachèvement*, but this does not quite catch the situation: as Lucretius describes it, every blow, every wound, every throw is complete (his verb is *iacere*, to cast; to throw: as in Suetonius’s account of Caesar’s crossing the Rubicon, *alea iacta est*), but also inadequate. (Like an atom swerving to collide with another--not all swerves but some, many--it doesn’t *take*: it exhausts the impulse but cannot saturate the superficiality of the image that produces the desire.) A specific construction of the *aleatory*, of what is thrown or cast, follows: the event that occurs, as thrown, as aleatory, is never adequate to a life (it is never *achevé*, it’s never *perfected* in a life) inasmuch, *and only inasmuch*, as it is completed. This means that the word steps into politics as bearer, *vectorice* or *Träger*, of a desire that *is* completed, *but is therefore inadequate to life*. A corollary: “life,” political life, is the condition of not-“taking” of the completed event. It is “completed,” inasmuch as a wounding swerve has taken place, and an encounter occurs; but it is in-completed inasmuch as the encounter doesn’t *take*, or, more to the our purposes, is *prevented from taking*. The difference from a quite-standard account of the incompleteness of desire is stark, and has obvious political-institutional implications. Rather than being imagined as

eventuating in completeness, or as working to assure the persistence in time of the accomplished desire, political power—perhaps this is what you mean by *destituent power*—is, on this description, exercised improperly where the completed event is made to “take,” and properly, that is, in concert with “life”, where it takes the shape of mechanisms and defective institutions intended to keep the completed event from “taking.” Politics, and political institutions (and what institutions are *not* political?), are the project of incompleting desires that *take*: this, I think, is what Balibar is getting at when he asks about my project’s reliance on, or kinship with, the notion of the death drive. As a project for thought, it is, as I remarked above, the project of producing the defective concept of the dis-aggregation of the concept in general. For it is not enough to remark, with Lucretius, on the necessary degradation of concepts *qua* material objects (for instance, concepts foundational to association, relation, authority—the classic lexicon of politics): that way lies quietism, the pathological form of Epicurean serenity. My view, though, is that there’s more at stake in Lucretius’ poem, and in the materialist tradition in which his work stands (and my own too, I believe), than a thought-project. The project of incompleting desires that *take* is dynamic: it is a task; it is undertaken as a condition of political subjectivity; and it entails instituting and institution. Whatever-institution this task produces and whatever-institutions make this task possible and serve to guard such subjectivities are defectively rather than conventionally structured—they are not repetition-machines, they are not autopoietic, they are not *productive* machines.

K: The role that Althusser attributes to Heidegger in this current is quite problematic when considering a ‘materialist’ thought. Even Althusser wonders whether we can still speak of ‘materialism’ when we include Heidegger in this tradition. Why does Althusser —known to be a Marxist — speak of Heidegger, but also of Pascal and Mallarmé? Why does he come so close to nihilism?

We are particularly interested in this question because our journal focuses on the notion of ‘destituent power’ that we base, precisely, on the link between nihilism and politics. Indeed, on the one hand, an ‘ontology of relations’ — to quote Etienne Balibar’s words on Marx — is taking shape in Althusser’s text; but, on the other hand, by using words and concepts like ‘rain’ and ‘deviation’, Althusser puts into play the possibility of dissolution, of fragmentation or of an absence of center, where all the elements fluctuate in the void, where can only be found singular centers of force, namely, ‘energetic’ atoms.

Obviously, such a constellation of thoughts is reminiscent of Nietzsche, or even of Giordano Bruno — to whom the Number 4 Issue of our journal is dedicated — because of his conviction that the universe was infinite and could have no center. That is the reason why the question of the philosophical void becomes key for Althusser and, *si parva licet*, for us to develop our concept of ‘destituent power’. It is around this question of ‘the void’ that Althusser meets the ancient atomism by proposing to interpret it

in a way that differs from the proponents of classical Marxism. And it is from this question, shared among the atomists, that Althusser can dialogue with Nihilist thinkers in quite an unexpected way, going as far as mentioning the name of Max Stirner.

Jacques Lezra: Curiously, the reason may have to do with a bracketing, in both and at a specific juncture, of the question of matter. Althusser has seen in Heidegger common ground with Marx in that both balance the question of the history of Being on the matter of the *foundation* of questioning. And for neither is this foundation something that exists *as matter*. Both Heidegger and Marx, in different but compatible ways, set naturalism and historicism aside. (I'm thinking now for instance of *Satz vom Grund* in Heidegger's case, and of Marx's formula, never far from his mature work, regarding the primacy of species-being [*Gattungswesen*], from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.) Different *dispositifs* take its place (I'd like to say: they swerve into its place), but that gesture installs in both a kind of originary, irreducible bracketing, what Althusser calls in a different place a *décalage*, that is, inasmuch as it is infinitely productive, in a way quite the opposite of nihilism. My sense is that when Deleuze refers to Lucretius's *naturalism* (in *Logic of Sense*) he has in mind just this—that the poem not only does not bracket, but indeed pursues as far as is possible, the materialization of the foundation of questioning.

Finally, you urge the thought of catastrophe: we are in it, and you suggest Lucretius as a great thinker of catastrophe. I agree. My own sense is that *De rerum natura* is to be read backward from the catastrophe—from the plague, from the vantage point of despair. Nothing Epicurean, it would seem, about that! But also—and in this way I return to Balibar's assessment of my work as in some ways offering a *tragic* materialism—also nothing in the way of a *sacrificial* sense of the catastrophe. Lucretius's catastrophe has this summary form: that the time and location of the event are uncertain, *incerto tempore, incertisque locis*, does not exclude, rather entails, its necessity.