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Concrete Analysis and Pragmatic Social Theory (Notes Towards an Althusserian Critical Theory)

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...la théorie marxiste est hantée, dans son dispositif même, par un certain rapport à la pratique, qui est à la fois une pratique existante, et en même temps une pratique transformée, la politique.

Louis Althusser
"Marx et l'Histoire"
5 May, 1975
IMEC, ALT2. A22-01.10

In 1965, Louis Althusser argued that, for the success of the worker's movement, everything depended on theory.¹ By 1976, however, he had abandoned this call to theory and had begun to argue that "everything...depends on "the 'concrete analysis of the 'concrete situation'."² The reasons for this change of emphasis are complex and have to do with revisions that Althusser made to his understandings of philosophy, science, politics, and ideology after his call for the French Communist Party [PCF] to be guided by theoreticians was rejected in 1966 and after he had come to the conclusion that his original schematization of material practices was flawed.³ These revisions included a rethinking of Marx's

¹ G. M. Goshgarian, Introduction to *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, by Louis Althusser, (London: Verso, 2003), xi-xii; and Louis Althusser, 1965, "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle," in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientist and Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1990), 37-42.

² Louis Althusser, 1978, unpublished typescript, "Que faire?," Fonds Althusser, ALT2.A26-05.06, Institut Mémoire de l'Édition Contemporaine, Caen, France, 1-2 (hereafter cited as Fonds Althusser).

³ Goshgarian, "Introduction to *Humanist Controversy*"; and William Lewis, "Knowledge versus 'Knowledge': Louis Althusser on the Autonomy of Science and Philosophy from Ideology," *Rethinking Marxism* 17, no. 3 (July 2005): 462-65.

historical materialist methodology, a disavowal of his previous claim for the conceptual unity of Marxist philosophy, and a radical revision of the ontological and epistemological claims he had advanced in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*.⁴ Though all of these revisions factor into and motivate Althusser's demand for Concrete Analysis, the most relevant are probably the revisions made to his ontology and to his epistemology. In regard to the former, Althusser modified his claim that economic, political, philosophical, ideological, and scientific practices develop in parallel and that they are conceptually and practically distinct. This claim was replaced with an assertion that, though we may analytically distinguish among them, these practices are always mixed and interrelated. In line with this revision, his epistemological claims that scientific practice produces truth and that philosophy guarantees the internal coherency of a science⁵ were replaced with a theory of inquiry which held that that scientific practice—though always compromised by ideology—tends in the long run to produce correct results due to its interaction with the material real. Now understood as a critical practice rather than as a truth guaranteeing or legitimating practice, post-revision, Althusser argued that philosophy's role was to help science with this excision, separating that which was ideological and incorrect from that which was scientific and correct.⁶ In line with this change, historical materialism was re-envisioned as that science which investigates the "conditions and forms of class struggle."⁷

Taking as a starting point the assumption that Louis Althusser's revisions to his original re-reading of Marxism were necessary corrections⁸ and that the method

⁴ Louis Althusser, 1977, "Avant-Propos du livre de G. Duménil, *Le Concept de loi économique dans <<le Capital>>*," in *Solitude de Machiavel*, ed. Yves Sintomer (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1998); and Louis Althusser, March 1978, unpublished lecture notes, "Cours sur le mode d'exposition chez Marx," ALT2.A28-01.05 (Fonds Althusser), 1-13.

⁵ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (New York: Verso, 1970), 42.

⁶ Louis Althusser, 1967, "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists," in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1990), 103.

⁷ Althusser, "Que faire?," ALT2.A26-05.06 (Fonds Althusser), 53.

⁸ Lewis, "Knowledge versus 'Knowledge'," and Étienne Balibar, "Althusser's Object" *Social Text* 39 (1994): 157-88. Some, including Gregory Elliott, in *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (New York: Verso, 1987), 270, might disagree and argue for his early work.

of Concrete Analysis advanced out of these corrections is not only of historical interest but that it also has something to offer political theory and democratic politics, this paper provides an exposition of Althusser's understanding of Concrete Analysis between 1976 and 1978. However, as Althusser himself only ever partially developed Concrete Analysis and because what he did say about it and its promise often contradicts that which he simultaneously maintained about the ability of social science to overcome ideological biases, this exposition cannot be a simple one.

In order to complete Althusser's unfinished work on Concrete Analysis as well as to illuminate and overcome its contradictions, this paper will draw upon recent work in the philosophy of the social sciences and particularly on Pragmatic Critical Social Theory. The hope is that, with this critique and reconstruction, the practice's usefulness to democratic decision making processes will be suggested. In line with this reconstruction, this paper will end with the claim that, if everything (including democracy) really does depend on Concrete Analysis, then that which democracy depends upon is a Pragmatic Critical Social Theory self-consciously advanced from a specific class position. Such a reconstructed critical theory must draw upon the best work in the social sciences to make its arguments. Its success, however, will be judged not exclusively by other social scientists but by its effectiveness in encouraging and enabling actual democratic changes to our socio-economic relationships.

The Theoretical and Political Context for Concrete Analysis

In 1976, when Althusser began demanding that the French Communist Party practice Concrete Analysis, the Party was (yet again) trying to de-Stalinize. Facing unfavorable comparisons with "westernized" or westernizing CP's in Spain and Italy and embarrassed by recent revelations regarding Soviet Gulags and other atrocities whose existence it had previously willfully overlooked, the PCF was desirous of shedding some of its more radical positions. These positions included its long-held insistence on the necessity of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat as well

as its fealty to the Soviet Union. Not for the first time in its history was the PCF in a directional crisis. At the time, and for its political survival, the Party was being forced to decide between continued loyalty to the Soviet Union and to certain traditionally accepted tenets of Marxism-Leninism or to pursuing a path that would make it more palatable to the broader French Left as well as more in step with the practices of "euro-communism." Althusser's call for Concrete Analysis was motivated by many of these same concerns and by his feeling that the PCF and the global communist movement were in crisis.⁹ However, instead of seeing these problems as merely political, he also believed that they were epistemological and methodological: if the PCF was to survive this crisis and to realize its goals, it needed to be certain of what the right moves were for it to make both in terms of dealing with its past and in terms of deciding future actions.

With his 1976 introduction to Dominique Lecourt's *Lyssenko: histoire réelle d'une science prolétarienne*, Althusser began to deal with the past in a fashion that was also indicative of the way in which he would soon argue that Marxists should settle questions about present possibilities. Specifically, he argued that Marxists must deal with the past and with the present in a Marxian fashion, that is, by providing a thorough historical materialist account of why certain events occurred and why certain structures were now in place. Seconding Lecourt's work on Lyssenkism as a move in the right direction, Althusser argued that historical materialism must account for why Stalin and Stalinism took place in Russia. This type of explanation, he argued, was precisely the business and responsibility of Marxists.¹⁰

Shortly after making these claims about the ability and responsibility of Marxists to use the resources of historical materialism to account for past events, Althusser began to argue that—given sufficient analysis of the contemporary situation and of the historical events leading up to it—historical materialism also

⁹ Louis Althusser, 1976, "The Crisis of Marxism, in *Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies*, (ed.) Il Manifesto (London: Ink Links Ltd., 1979).

¹⁰ Louis Althusser, 1976, "Avant-Propos" to *Lyssenko, histoire réelle d'une science prolétarienne* by Dominique Lecourt (Paris: Maspero, 1976). 9-19.

had the power to indicate what events might be possible. So then, in an attempt to (yet again) save the Party from thoughtless "revisionisms" based on ideological notions about human nature and political possibilities as well as in an attempt to save the Party from its reflexive Stalinism, Althusser advanced the claim that, for the Party to realize its goals and to emerge from its crisis, "everything...depends on "the 'concrete analysis of the 'concrete situation'."

Though manifestly an argument for pursuing a critical theoretical approach to social scientific investigation, this call was not motivated by an intellectual affinity with the Frankfurt School (of which his knowledge remained limited) but by Lenin's oft-repeated dictum that correct politics depends on the "concrete analysis of the concrete situation." After Lenin, Concrete Analysis was promulgated by Althusser as a social scientific method of research that would be able to explain why certain events had occurred and to suggest what events are now possible.¹¹ More than this, in its critical function, it would have the power to explain the existence of, and correct for, the faulty notions held by the proletariat and bourgeoisie about the nature of the world and about "what is to be done" politically. On the bourgeois side of the class struggle, these false ideas or "spontaneous philosophies" naturalized the status quo, making the norms that direct and validate bourgeois actions seem intuitive. Done well, concrete analysis was intended to de-naturalize these norms, showing how changes in the mode of production occasioned specific beliefs and how such values allow the capitalist mode of production to function. In contrast to Stalin, Althusser also maintained that those on the other side of the class struggle held false beliefs. As this "spontaneous ideology" all too often betrayed their actual self-interest, compelling oppressed peoples to look towards existing institutions and to dominant notions of justice, freedom, and equality as the means and ideals necessary to the realization of their goals, it too needed to be critiqued.

¹¹ See for instance Lenin's critique of Rosa Luxemburg for ignoring this step in "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/ch02.htm> (accessed 27, July 2006).

As Althusser envisioned it, Concrete Analysis was meant to describe socio-economic relations, to explain why certain ideologies existed, to correct for these ideologies, and to thereby allow for un- or less distorted political judgments by the Party. As a summary of the Leninist theory that inspired Althusser's call for Concrete Analysis puts it

The specific objective of party theoretical work is to analyze economic and political conditions sufficiently concretely to provide the basis for an effective political line. The ability to carry out concrete analysis is the fundamental precondition for a Leninist political practice. If inflexible organizational and political formulae are substituted for conclusions arrived at by concrete analysis, then the practice of the party is reduced to just one more random element within a political process which is not understood by those acting in it.¹²

For Lenin in 1901, as with Althusser in 1976, the only hope for an effective political program—one that truly advanced communist goals—was one guided by a Party aware of historical possibilities and self-consciously reflective about its historical role.¹³

Unlike Lenin, whose polemics on behalf of Concrete Analysis seem designed to and did reinforce the authority of a Party elite, Althusser's calls for Concrete Analysis were made in the context of a critique of PCF leadership for its failure to follow the "democratic" part of democratic centralism.¹⁴ In unpublished work from 1976 and 1977 that would soon find its most stinging form in the pamphlet *Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le parti communiste*, Althusser argued that the lack of democratic discussion within the Party allowed for and encouraged the pursuit of ill-considered political projects and alliances such as the abandonment of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and opportunistic alliances with

¹² Anon., 1977, "The distinguishing features of Leninist Political practice," *Communist Formation*, <http://reality.gn.apc.org/polemic/leninism.htm> (accessed 27 July, 2006).

¹³ V. I. Lenin. *What is to be done?* (1901) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm#fwV05P384F01> (accessed 27 July, 2006).

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, *Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le parti communiste* (Paris: Maspero, 1978), 6ff; Althusser, *Les Vaches noires*, 1976-77, unpublished book draft, ALT2.A24-01.01, Folder 2 (Fonds Althusser), 19-19bis; and Elliot, *Detour of Theory*, 294, 304-05.

the Socialists.¹⁵ These projects and alliances relied upon the isolated, spontaneous ideological judgments of individuals rather than upon judgments based on concrete analyses and following from the public discussion of these analyses results.¹⁶ Such analyses, he contended, were necessary to inform democratic debate within the Party and to allow for correct decision making.

In one of these unpublished works, *Les Vaches noires* (1976), Althusser recorded his discontent with Party practices in the wake of the PCF's 22nd Congress. In a tone of obvious frustration, he noted that it was entirely possible for PCF congresses to be filled with debates but that these were too often squelched by calls for unity.¹⁷ Of those things that should have been debated (but were not) he lists four things. The first were resolutions on the Party's direction for the immediate future, the second were the theses that define the proper usage of terms in Marxist political theory, and the third was the Party's position in regards to governmental participation. The fourth thing that should have been debated (would that it had existed) was a "concrete analysis of the concrete situation."¹⁸

Though mentioned last, it is apparent from the attention paid in *Les Vaches noires* to Concrete Analysis' delineation that Althusser believed these analyses to be of primary importance. Such work, he maintained, was the only thing that would allow for correct resolutions to be adopted, for terms to be defined properly, and for the Party's strategic relationship to the state to be discerned. Not only were concrete analyses essential to informed democratic debate, Althusser insisted that they were also necessary if the Party wanted to resist its spontaneous impulses towards the adoption of certain platforms that could be deleterious to the movement as a whole. As he wrote: "Nothing about all of this [concrete analysis] is

¹⁵ G. M. Goshgarian, Introduction to *Philosophy of the Encounter and other Writings* by Louis Althusser (London: Verso, 2006), xvi-xxvii. Althusser, *Vaches noires*, ALT2.A24-01.01, Folder 2 (Fonds Althusser), 48-61. In "Notes de LA sur l'«Interview Imaginaire» ALT2.A24-04.01 (Fonds Althusser), Althusser diagrams the relations among Democratic Centralism, Concrete Analysis, and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

¹⁶ Althusser, *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 25.

¹⁷ Althusser, *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 19, 19bis.

¹⁸ Althusser, *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 22.

simple: but it is exactly because reality is complicated and highly contradictory that its analysis is necessary."¹⁹ In the end, it was only the practice of Concrete Analysis that would allow individuals to participate in an informed debate and to come to a correct, collective, and democratic decision about what programs to pass and what theses to adopt. Such analyses, Althusser argued, were infinitely preferable to the spontaneous judgments made by Central Committee members that, if they were not made for "pragmatic" reasons, were based on "Marxist principles" believed to be known in advance of any proper analysis.²⁰

Althusser's Original Formulation of Concrete Analysis

Thus far, this essay has focused on why Althusser believed that Concrete Analysis was necessary for the worker's movement and for democratic practice and it has also specified what he believed it to be capable of doing. To sum up: Concrete Analysis was necessary because it allowed for political judgments to be made and to be debated which might allow the Party to realize its goals and because it corrected for ideological distortions that would otherwise compromise these judgments. Obviously, if any analysis could achieve these things, it would be worth pursuing. The clear question, though, is what science is capable of advancing an analysis that, being both empirical and critical, is able to overcome ideological beliefs in order to correctly describe a historical situation and its possibilities?

It will surprise no one that the science Althusser judges capable of such results is historical materialism. Unlike "vulgar" sociology and economics (which study social and economic formations in their isolation and largely synchronically), Althusser believes that historical materialism can achieve these results because it takes the socio-economic whole to be constituted in and through history as a series

¹⁹ Althusser, *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 25. Translation is mine, all emphasis is Althusser's.

²⁰ Althusser, *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 25; and "Que faire?," ALT2.A26-05.06 (Fonds Althusser), 25-26.

of antagonistic class relations that are always in flux.²¹ If all that existed was change there would, of course, be no regularities and the social sciences would have nothing to analyze. Modes of production, however, presents themselves as relatively stable. What historical materialism studies, therefore, are the relatively stable structures (norms, technologies, modes of exchange, etc.) that allow societies to reproduce themselves as well as the class struggles that not only allow this reproduction but that drive the change of these relatively stable formations into different formations marked by different struggles.²²

Though historical materialism does not pretend to be a comprehensive science, Althusser certainly intended for the sub-section of it that generates politically useful knowledge (i.e., Concrete Analysis), to be understood as a multi-disciplinary pursuit marked by critical reflections on its results. That this is Althusser's understanding of Concrete Analysis is shown not only by his longstanding insistence that sciences produce knowledge of the real but also by his argument that the sciences need to be subject to self and external criticism,²³ Indeed, this understanding is apparent in his delineation of Concrete Analysis' necessary components in *Les Vaches Noires*. In this delineation, he states that, if Concrete Analysis is intended "to examine, from the class positions of the proletariat, at least the larger forms of actual class struggles,"²⁴ then the analysis it makes must be both comprehensive and critical. For Althusser, comprehensiveness includes quite a few things. First, it must provide a description of the actual forms of imperialism, of the resistances that imperialism faces from the third world, of the actual forms of struggle undertaken by workers in the developed nations, and of the possibilities for real convergences and contradictions between these resistances. Second, it must provide an analysis of the effects of these contradictions on political struggles at both national and international levels and as these are effected

²¹ Althusser, "Que faire?," ALT2.A26-05.06 (Fonds Althusser), 1; and *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 22.

²² Althusser, "Que faire?," ALT2.A26-05.06 (Fonds Althusser), 32-34.

²³ William Lewis. *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 193-198.

²⁴ Althusser, *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 22.

by changes to capital's economic strategy. Third, a full analysis must include a study of the effects of this economic and political class struggle on the ideological forms of the class struggle.²⁵ Fourth and finally, a comprehensive Concrete Analysis must include an examination of the political effects, and even the electoral effects, of this ideological struggle such that the Party might understand why, in certain instances, it has lost votes and why, in other situations and at other times, it has gained them.²⁶

Given Althusser's description of its method and what it needs to be comprehensive, every Concrete Analysis would have to involve a battalion of scientists and critics. At the very least, this would include historians, sociologists, psychologists, economists, and statisticians, not to mention numerous sub-specialists who would study such things as labor relations, the politics of developing nations, and the persuasive techniques of modern business and politics. Despite its size, this legion of scientists could only perform the necessary preliminary studies. In order to be sufficient to the task set for it, Concrete Analysis would also have to include a critical element. That is, the relations between its objects of study would have to be accounted for and an explanation given for why these forms of the class struggle indicate certain political possibilities and rule out others. Some group of critical theorists would also have to correct for the ideological biases of the scientists', prejudices that influence their empirical studies and that effect these studies' results.²⁷ But this is only the beginning of Concrete Analysis' critical task. It would not be finished until an account is provided of why certain political actions and certain goals are thought by certain groups to be

²⁵ Althusser, *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 22-23. Regarding the effect of the economic and political class struggle on the ideological forms of the class struggle, Althusser notes that sufficient analysis will show that these effects include: "the transformation of the contents of a dominant ideology that is well "obliged" to align itself with the imperialist forms of the economic and political struggle and to throw onto the market new expressions of political publicity in order to sell the most advanced forms of class collaboration and in order to buy the consent of the labor aristocracy and to gain the complicity of large sections of the petty bourgeoisie..."

²⁶ Althusser, *Vaches noires*. Folder 2, ALT2.A24-01.01 (Fonds Althusser), 23-23bis.

²⁷ Althusser, "Philosophy and Spontaneous" 133.

desirable when, in reality, they are not in their best interest. Thus a Concrete Analysis sufficient to provide direction and to overcome ideological biases needs to explain such things as why labor shortages leads to the increased acceptance of worker's demands for shorter days and benefits in some countries but not in others and also why some workers feel compelled to make this demand and others do not feel so compelled. It must then relate all of these various conditions or "forms of the class struggle" back to every other relevant instance such that individuals and groups might know when the political conjuncture is capable of being moved to satisfy a specific demand and also whether it is really in that group's or individual's best interest to make such a demand. Succinctly put, Concrete Analysis must provide an analysis of "whole" situations where the whole is understood to include all relevant ideological, political, economic, and scientific practices (or forms of class struggle) as well as the history of class struggles that have led up to this situation.

In an unpublished work on Gramsci and Machiavelli from 1978, Althusser actually attempted such an analysis. However, it is pursued in a less than rigorous manner. In this "concrete analysis of the concrete situation," he bases his conclusion that Italian auto workers should not engage in revolutionary struggles (even though many of these workers "know" this to be the best course of action) on loose speculation about the relationship between local factory conditions, the workers' ideology, fordism, national production, and global capital flow. All of the data used to justify this conclusion and to suggest the utility of Concrete Analysis is gathered by Althusser from a single television documentary.²⁸

Critique of Concrete Analysis

Obviously, this "couch potato" critical theory does not represent the best attempt at performing a concrete analysis. Nonetheless, there is good reason to suspect that—even given enormous scientific and critical resources—an analysis

²⁸ Althusser, "Que faire?," ALT2.A26-05.06 (Fonds Althusser), 4-10.

that takes into account all relevant historical and present forms of the class struggle bearing on a certain conjuncture would never be achieved. Indeed, when Althusser shared his argument for Concrete Analysis with two thinkers who often shared his political commitments, their responses were that he should abandon his demand that the Party pursue such studies. One of them, the sociologist Michel Verret, argued that Concrete Analysis' scope was too broad, that it seems to include everything, and that it does not limit itself to any definite historical period. Because its scale is so big, Verret suggested, there will inevitably be component parts of the critique that are judged by specialists to be incorrect. These mistakes, he advised, would permit the dismissal of the study as a whole before it was ever thoroughly examined.²⁹ Like Verret, the philosopher Étienne Balibar also communicated to Althusser that he feared the contradictions, inevitable lacunae, and dead-ends which would inevitably accompany any such study would be used to invalidate it. He then advised Althusser to not be in a position of "preaching for concrete analysis without ever furnishing it."³⁰

No doubt, any person who is even moderately conversant with contemporary philosophy of social science could single-out flaws in Althusser's delineation of Concrete Analysis in addition to those pointed out by Verret and Balibar. Perhaps chief among these would be Althusser's assumption that, correctly done, Concrete Analysis will allow us to know in advance the correct political action to pursue. In this claim, Althusser seems to imply that, even though it is arrived at critically, the knowledge that Concrete Analysis establishes is somehow positive, objective, and even predictive. As the general opinion regarding social scientific knowledge is that it is conditional and historical: people might and do change their practices and their self-understandings such that yesterday's truth about their beliefs and behaviors may today no longer be so, this last feature may be particularly surprising. To anyone familiar with the history of Althusser's thoughts on the relationship between ideology, science and politics, the other two

²⁹ Michel Verret to Louis Althusser, 12 September, 1976, ALT2.A24-04.08 (Fonds Althusser)

³⁰ Étienne Balibar to Louis Althusser, 20 September, 1976, ALT2.A24-04.08 (Fonds Althusser).

features seem equally strange. From his juvenilia on through to his last remarks on aleatory materialism, Althusser never argued that science established positive knowledge. What's more, after 1967, he repeated the claim over and over again that all knowledges are contaminated with ideology and that every knowledge claim advances a class position.³¹ Consistent with this position, he does indicate in *Les Vaches noires* that Concrete Analysis is always done from the class position of the proletariat. However, his argument as a whole suggests that the knowledge which results from this analysis is one mostly purged of both bourgeois and proletarian ideology.

Given all of the criticisms to which Concrete Analysis is vulnerable, it is no wonder that Althusser took Verret's advice and did not publish his work on the subject (though he continued to develop Concrete Analysis in private and published theoretical work propaedeutic to it on Marxist methodology).³² To a certain reading of Althusser, one that sees him as advancing progressively weaker claims about the power of historical materialism to explain history, it would be easy to argue that Althusser himself gave up on his grand ambitions for Concrete Analysis and that those interested in reconstructing such a flawed project should do so as well. However, Althusser himself never gave up on historical materialist forms of explanation³³ and, despite Concrete Analysis' manifest failings, there are very good reasons to attempt to preserve and reconstruct this method. This is the case because a Concrete Analysis advancing much more modest claims might still be very useful politically and because the knowledge that it produces may still have some pretension to scientific status. This is especially the case if one champions a Concrete Analysis that, unlike Althusser's original formulation, is consistent with his larger claims about the relationships between philosophy, science, ideology, and politics.

³¹ See especially *Réponse à John Lewis* (Paris: Maspero, 1973).

³² "Que faire" being the primary example of the unpublished work and the "Avant-Propos du livre de G. Duménil" a good example of the methodetic.

³³ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 194, 264.

It is these contentions that will be fleshed out in the remainder of this essay. However, so that we know what needs reconstructing, it might be best to single out some of the lacunae, aporiae, and contradictions in Althusser's incomplete theorization of Concrete Analysis. First, it is apparent that Althusser did not sufficiently work out the link between the empirical practice of gathering information about social, political, economic, and ideological formations and the critical function that it must also perform. The question of how one legitimately goes from empirical analyses to policy recommendations or ideological critique was thus never answered. A related question to the one about ideological critique is that of how Concrete Analysis is able to correct for the ideological distortion caused by the perspective of the individual scientists.³⁴ There are also the problems of scope of analysis and of the choice of its methods. Why, for instance, should one, pick out a specific historical period as that which is relevant to a given question of political action? Also, why should some sciences be deemed relevant in a study (for instance: history, economics, and sociology) while others (such as biology) are deemed irrelevant? Further, why are some effects seen as more important than others and why are some causes given priority over others in what are always already overdetermined socio-economic formations? historical materialism, has usually privileged economic practices but Althusser himself has argued that this should not always to be the case.³⁵ How then do Concrete Analysts decide whether or not religion or the economy dominates peoples' relations and how do they describe these relations? Finally, there is the problem of verification of the claims made by Concrete Analysis. Althusser does suggest one means of verification: the prosecution of a successful transition to communism via the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. However, short of this ultimate end being realized, how does one judge that the judgment about the correct political line to take

³⁴ Though it must be said that, with "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists," Althusser has given much thought to this question.

³⁵ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*. (London: New Left Books, 1977), 103-107.

arrived at by Concrete Analysis and democratic debate is better than that provided spontaneously, by ideology?

Reconstructing Concrete Analysis

Though respectable cases can be made for them, two understandings of social scientific practice can be rejected outright for the reconstruction of Althusserian Concrete Analysis. This is due to the fact that their ontological and epistemological assumptions differ so radically from Althusser's as to be inassimilable. The first of these is the classical realist understanding of social science which holds that there exist social scientific laws that are external to the knower and that can be discovered by the proper methods of investigation and description. Though in the rhetoric surrounding Concrete Analysis Althusser sometimes suggests that it is capable of achieving these kinds of positive results, it is apparent from the bulk of his theoretical work that he rejects this sort of discovery as a possibility. The second school of thought in the social sciences that is inassimilable to Althusser's is that which has variously been labeled the "post-modern," "discursivist," or "neo-pragmatist," perspective on the social sciences. While the naïve realist position suffers from excess positivism, these explanations of scientific knowledge suffer from excessive conventionalism and would be rejected by Althusser for not accepting the Marxian premise that there is a distinction between our "real relation" and our "imaginary" or "lived" relationship with the world. For Althusser, it is this difference that science uncovers and it is able to do so by the formulation of rules about the world that are testable and subject to revision. This is not the case with ideological principles.³⁶

Currently, there are two schools of thought in contemporary philosophy of social science that offer resources towards Concrete Analysis' reconstruction. Like Althusser's philosophy of science, these theories combine methodological naturalism with hermeneutic skepticism. These two theories are the Critical Realist

³⁶ Lewis, "Knowledge," 467.

understanding of social science pioneered by Roy Bhaskar in the mid-1970s and the pragmatist perspective developed by James Bohman starting in the early 1990s.³⁷ Both schools strike a happy balance between naïve realist and discursivist understandings of social scientific practice. In that both also suggest that social scientific analysis and reflection upon its results is capable of performing the empirical and critical work that Concrete Analysis demands, both also share certain affinities with Althusser's critical theory as a whole.

Not a few commentators have suggested that Critical Realism is the logical heir to the Althusserian critical project.³⁸ Because it seems to share the bulk of Althusser's ontological commitments, including that to causal realism, it does seem a very likely choice as a theory to fill-in Concrete Analysis' holes and to overcome some of its contradictions. However, Critical Realism's insistence that social science is dependent upon the pre-existence of social regularities is hard to gibe with an Althusserian philosophy which holds that social scientific laws or generalities are realized rather than discovered.³⁹ This is especially true of the "transcendental realist" position as originally formulated by Bhaskar. It is also mostly true of those who more recently have tried to argue for a Critical Realism that does not rely upon transcendental argumentation.⁴⁰ Further, those theories that are most successful in ridding Critical Realism of its reliance upon transcendental justification get closer and closer to advancing a pragmatist understanding of social science.⁴¹ As that branch of Critical Realism that is most compatible with

³⁷ Peter Manicas in *A Realist Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) suggests a theory that also seems compatible but which cannot be considered here.

³⁸ Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality* (London: Verso, 1989), 187-88; Andrew Collier, *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), ix-x; and Ron Heisler, "Response to the Modern Ranters: A Layman's Naive Thoughts on the Cult of Roy Bhaskar" *What Next?* no. 18 (2001). <http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/Back/Wnext18/Bhaskar.html> (accessed 26 July, 2006).

³⁹ Althusser, "Cours sur le mode d'exposition chez Marx," ALT2.A28-01.05 (Fonds Althusser), 9.

⁴⁰ Stephen Kemp, "Critical Realism and the Limits of Philosophy," *European Journal of Social Theory*. 8, no. 2, (2005): 171-191.

⁴¹ Paul Lewis, "Realism, Causality and the Problem of Social Structure," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 30, no. 3 (2000): 249-268; and Tuuka Kadesoja, *Journal of Critical Realism* 4, no. 1 (2005): 28-61; and Jan J. J. M. Wuisman, "The Logic of Scientific Discovery in Critical Realist and Social Scientific Research" *Journal of Critical Realism* 4, no. 2 (2005): 366-394.

Althusser's is tending towards pragmatism anyway, it may be simpler and more efficacious to bracket Critical Realism's discussion and to skip directly to the consideration of a philosophy of social science that seems immediately compatible: namely, Pragmatic Critical Social Theory.

As mentioned above, the critical social theory that this paper maintains has interesting affinities with Althusser's understanding of the relationship between philosophy, politics, science, and ideology is the pragmatist one developed over the last decade, principally by James Bohman but also and more recently by Osmo Kivinen and Tero Piiroinen.⁴² Recognizing an explicit debt to the Deweyan understanding of social science as the best means by which useful knowledge about our social relations is discovered and emphasizing the utility and necessity of social scientific knowledge to democratic political formations,⁴³ this understanding of social science does not immediately announce itself as compatible with a theory like Althusser's predicated upon the existence of class struggle. However, when one looks at its features more closely, Pragmatic Critical Social Theory not only shares many features with Concrete Analysis, it also corrects for some of Concrete Analysis' more obvious flaws and renders its theory and method more compatible with Althusser's statements between 1967 and 1978 about the relationship between economics, politics, science and ideology.

In Bohman's description of it in the essays "Theories, Practices, and Pluralism" and "Democracy as Inquiry, Inquiry as Democratic," Pragmatic Critical Social Theory appears designed to function politically much like Althusser's Concrete Analysis.. By drawing on the best resources of contemporary social science, Pragmatic Critical Social Theory is presented as capable of performing ideological critiques and of supplying knowledge about human social relations that can inform democratic deliberation and that can be put to practical use. However,

⁴² Osmo Kivinen and Tero Piiroinen, "The Relevance of Ontological Commitments in Social Sciences: Realist and Pragmatist Viewpoints" *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 34, no. 3(2004): 231-248.

⁴³ Peter Manicas, "John Dewey and American Social Science" pages 43-62 in: Larry Hickman (ed.), *Reading Dewey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

unlike Althusser's description of Concrete Analysis in *Les Vaches noires* which puts the critic in a position of epistemic authority, Bohman maintains that every scientist and every critic is socially embedded and that their evaluative frameworks are influenced by this position.⁴⁴ In addition to solving the problem of latent positivism in Althusser's formulation of Concrete Analysis, it also solves the problem of the necessary scope of Concrete Analysis' research. By dint of their subject positions, any researcher or group of researchers will pick out certain problems as worthy of investigation and they will pick out certain domains of scientific investigation whose objects seem related to the problem.⁴⁵ For example, present concerns about public health and the spread of HIV could motivate a study of conspiracy theories among African-Americans regarding the virus and about how these beliefs function in a specific community.⁴⁶ Such a study could then be combined with historical, epidemiological, economic, and psychological studies to indicate how, in what way, and to what extent attitudes and behaviors might be altered such that the virus be contained. This does not mean that the scope of any particular investigation cannot be expanded when time periods, practices, sentiments, or events that at first did not seem relevant now appear to be related. It also and especially does not mean that the scope of an analysis cannot be expanded after the investigation is completed. If, in democratic dialogue between groups and individuals about the results of an inquiry, it is pointed out that a Concrete Analysis missed considering relevant practices or beliefs, then the analyst has a duty to go back and investigate these phenomena.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ James Bohman, "Critical Theory as Practical Knowledge" in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, (eds.) Stephen Turner and David Roth (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 96-98; and James Bohman, "Democracy as Inquiry, Inquiry as Democratic: Pragmatism, Social Science, and the Cognitive Division of Labor," *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 2 (April 1999): 593, 605.

⁴⁵ James Bohman, "Theories, Practices, and Pluralism," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 29, no. 4 (1998): 472.

⁴⁶ William Paul Simmons and Sharon Parsons, "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Among African Americans: A Comparison of Elites and Masses," *Social Science Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (Sept 2005): 582-598.

⁴⁷ Bohman, "Theories," 478.

Not only is the recognition that any specific Concrete Analysis will be limited by an individual's or group's subject position a more reasonable assumption (as well as one seconded by recent work in feminist philosophy of science),⁴⁸ it also is more Althusserian in that it accords with his theories of ideology and overdetermination.⁴⁹ This does not mean (for Bohman or for Althusser) that scientific knowledge and ideological knowledge are indistinguishable. However, both would maintain that those who engage in sincere social scientific inquiry are more apt to be able to manage their lives and to direct society to desired conclusions than those who do not. Both would also maintain that the most useful knowledge does not result from solitary scientific investigation. Rather, as indicated by Althusser's inventory of the social scientific and critical work needed to give a useful picture of the relations between various class struggles in *Les Vaches noires* and as stated explicitly by Bohman in his article "Theories, Practices and Pluralism," critical social theories rely on a plurality of investigators inquiring into many domains of human conduct.⁵⁰

Not only are there many affinities between Althusser's and Bohman's views on the constitution of political or ideological subjects and of the relation of these subjects to scientific research, but there are also marked similarities between Concrete Analysis and Pragmatic Critical Social Theory in their understandings of what criticism does and of when and how the knowledge that criticism produces can be judged to be correct. Bohman assigns the scientifically informed pragmatic critic the role of calling to peoples' attention when their self-conceptions and their conceptions about the behavior of others does not jibe with scientific knowledge.⁵¹ He also charges them with providing possible explanations based on critical

⁴⁸ Jaggar, Allison. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" *Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (Sept 1989): 151-176; and Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 62-82.

⁴⁹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971); and "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in *For Marx*. London: New Left Books, 1977.

⁵⁰ Bohman, "Theories," 469.

⁵¹ Bohman, "Critical Theory," 102.

analysis of why these beliefs do not match.⁵² This role is very similar to that assigned to the philosopher by Althusser during his course on the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists (1966). Here, he argued that—insofar as they act as a liaison between scientists and the public—the role of the materialist philosopher is to intercede in politics on behalf of science such that ideological positions that inform politics and that retard political change might be overcome.⁵³

In regard to Althusser's and Bohman's understanding of when a critical social theory can be judged to be correct, Bohman provides a criterion that seems much more attainable than that of attending a successful transition to communism. As Althusser had given up the dream of full human freedom long before his championing of Concrete Analysis in the late nineteen-seventies,⁵⁴ this more modest measure is also consistent with Althusser's mature understanding of history and ideology. In addition, Bohman's criterion that we see critical social theory to be correct when people use its insights to change their lives is realistic in the Althusserian (and, indeed, Marxian) sense of the term: the real is what is realized. By appealing to this manifestly pragmatic criterion, it has the advantage of avoiding problems with external verification that plague positivist and constructivist understandings of scientific truth.

If Bohman's work on Pragmatic Critical Social Theory pretty much gets it right and corrects for the more obvious holes and contradictions in Althusser's method of concrete analysis and if, in the process, it delivers a tenable critical social theory, then why take the long detour that this paper has made through the theory of Concrete Analysis, a theory that Althusser himself never fully developed? Well, in addition, to the historical value of such a study, there is reason to emphasize and support certain of Althusser's claims that differ from Bohman's. These differences remain even after—with Bohman's help—Concrete Analysis has been reconstructed so as to be more in line with contemporary philosophy of social

⁵² Bohman, "Critical Theory," 96.

⁵³ Lewis, "Knowledge," 464.

⁵⁴ Louis Althusser, 1967, "The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy" in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. François Matheron (London: Verso, 2003), 185-190.

science and with Althusser's mature understanding of the relationship between philosophy, science, ideology, and politics. The most prominent of these differences is Althusser's insistence that there is an overarching science, historical materialism, that structures and allows critical social scientific investigations. Bohman rejects the idea that such a comprehensive science exists and argues that a Pragmatic Critical Social Theory gains nothing from it. He also argues that it and similar notions prematurely prejudice an investigation and its results.⁵⁵ As it would be extremely difficult to conceive of an Althusserian Critical Theory that does not depart from Historical Materialist premises, this is an important difference between Bohman and Althusser and one that warrants investigation.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, this distinction does not detract from this paper's overall argument that the method of Concrete Analysis, reconstructed to be consistent with Althusser's understanding of the relationship between philosophy, science, ideology, and politics looks very much like a Pragmatic Critical Social Theory. Nor does it detract from this paper's larger argument that critical social scientific inquiries of the sort suggested by Bohman and by this paper's critical reconstruction of Concrete Analysis are useful to democratic decision making. However, it does preserve something of Marx's understanding of science and history that are worth holding on to both for the sake of democratic practice and for democracy's achievement.

⁵⁵ Bohman "Theories," 468

⁵⁶ A future paper will examine what role Historical Materialism has to play in Pragmatic Critical Social Theory.