Abstract: Philosophy and the Frontiers of the Political is the title of a biographical-theoretical interview between Emanuela Fornari and Étienne Balibar. The interview falls into three parts. The first part retraces the theoretical and intellectual climate in which Balibar received his education in the early 1960s: in this context the study of classical thinkers such as Spinoza went hand in hand with a radical rethinking of the relations between politics and philosophy, conducted in the context of an attempt to provide a critical reconstruction of Marxism that drew upon the revolutionary perspective of structuralism. Through his friendship and association with his teacher Louis Althusser, Balibar developed a specific conception of philosophy as a “Kampfplatz,” or battle-field, where we must struggle to forge a significant relationship between theory and practice, or between philosophy and politics. The second part of the interview focusses on questions of European nationalism and “neo-racism,” and the way in which these questions come to explode the classical perspective of Marxism. In this context Balibar discusses his intellectual relations with Jacques Derrida and with Immanuel Wallerstein, and his attitude to the latter’s theory of the “system-world.” Balibar explains how his own conception of the relation between ideological formations and processes of accumulation can be described as a disjunctive synthesis: as a heterogeneous union of problems that have no determining “final instance.” Finally, the third part of the interview is dedicated to a discussion of “cosmopolitics” and the role of Europe in the transition from the modern system of nation states to the new transnational and postnational constellation. Balibar’s approach essentially undertakes to reactivate, in the context of global modernity, a Machiavellian conception of “conflictual democracy” which identifies the very core of the democratic principle in the constant interaction between the logic of conflict and the logic of institutions.

1. Education and Early Studies: Philosophy as “Battle-field”

Fornari: I should like to begin our conversation by discussing the role and importance of the thought of Spinoza for your own investigations and those you conducted in collaboration with Althusser. I ask this question because the period in which you worked with Althusser and his other students coincided with a kind of renaissance of Spinoza studies in France, and one which led you to a productive appropriation that has been described (specifically by Perry Anderson) as a “systematic introduction of Spinoza into the historical
materialism” in the context of an extremely ambitious attempt to develop significant new theoretical directions for Marxist thought. You have written some very important texts in this connection – such as your book *Spinoza and Politics* or the ground-breaking essay *Spinoza, anti-Orwell: the Fear of the Masses* – and, on the other hand, we see today that various categories that are derived, directly or indirectly, from the philosophy of Spinoza have begun to circulate once again.

**Balibar:** In order to respond to your question, and to recall the sometimes enigmatic forms in which the thought of Spinoza circulated in those particular years, I would simply mention a couple of anecdotes regarding the archives in which the literary remains of Althusser have been preserved. In fact, the Althusser Archives were collected after his death and deposited in the Imec centre (*Institut Mémoires de l’Éditions contemporaines*) that was established around that time. The centre was originally the idea of certain leading French publishing houses (Seuil, Gallimard, etc.) that specialised in the field of literature and the human sciences, but in the course of time it evolved into an extremely important research centre that houses a large quantity of archival material in an abbey lavishly restored at the expense of the Normandy region. As you know, the holdings of the centre are quite remarkable: the Foucault archives, which have been transferred there, the archives of Roland Barthes, those of Marguerite Duras, of Gérard Genette ... And so it came about that the Althusser archives ended up there too. I handed over to Imec the few relevant things that I possessed and thought might be useful: some letters from my personal correspondence with Althusser – actually there were only a few letters since, seeing one another as often as we did, I never had the need for more extensive correspondence – and a few documents that were directly connected with our work together. After the publication of *Reading Capital*, in fact, we had formed a kind of clandestine philosophical group – there was an incredible fascination with such esoteric things at the time – which called itself the “Spinoza Group”: there was a slightly absurd mythology about all this, and one of the reasons for the secrecy of the group lay in the fact that some participants belonged to the Communist Party, and some did not, and indeed were violently opposed to the party. During this period, Althusser had suggested that we should produce on a book on general philosophy that would attempt to re-ground philosophy through an examination of all the most pressing questions of the moment, and especially through an examination of structuralism. The principal thematic around which the investigations of the period turned was the “theory of discourse,” a matter which at more or less the same time had also been addressed both by Foucault in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* and by the followers of Lacan. Our intention was specifically to
construct an Althusserian theory of discourse, although Althusser himself had never precisely presented or outlined such a theory. As a result, we worked on the task together, in genuine collaboration – an approach which was indeed quite characteristic of his work.

I preserved some relevant documents in this connection – and I was almost certainly not the only one – which I also donated to Imec, along with notes relating to different courses: not notes that were taken by myself, but Althusser’s personal notes (for he always carefully prepared his courses beforehand with great attention to detail). But these courses were never completely edited in advance precisely because he wished to leave himself the opportunity of improvising and developing the material further. To appreciate what I am saying here, one has to realise that Althusser was a very generous individual, and it was a “subjective” aspect of his communism that he was ready to share everything, although this naturally created certain difficulties too: we also know from psychoanalysis that total sharing is never devoid of problems, but, in the end, it also has some marvellous advantages. Thus when I began teaching as a young assistant at the Sorbonne, and had started by offering courses on the history of political philosophy, I happened to mention in conversation that I remembered some remarkable courses he had once given on Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (although the discussion of Rousseau had already been published in the form of a carefully argued article). It was at this point that he offered to give me his notes for the courses in question, which I preserved and donated to Imec after his death. François Matheron, the editor of the posthumously published writings of Althusser, has recently brought out an extremely interesting volume of Althusser’s courses in a series from Seuil which also includes previously unpublished courses by several other university teachers of the period, from Jankélévitch to Merleau-Ponty. The volume which contains Althusser’s courses includes some on Machiavelli, the ones on Hobbes and Locke that I had handed over, and various courses on the Encyclopédie and the philosophy of the Enlightenment, a subject to which he had dedicated a considerable amount of work. But the really strange thing is that there is absolutely nothing on Spinoza! Since everyone knows that Althusser was one of the most significant contributors to the Spinoza renaissance in France and Europe generally in this period, this is somewhat surprising to say the least. And especially since we – the students of Althusser during the 1960s and 1970s – clearly remember that he did give courses on Spinoza. Among his texts there were some highly allusive passages which mention the philosopher in passing, but nothing that seems developed in any depth. Yet as a university teacher he had certainly occupied himself with Spinoza.

Fornari: And how do you explain this apparent absence?
Balibar: I do indeed find it very strange. Only recently I was discussing this question in correspondence with a friend of mine, an American philosopher – Warren Montag – who has already published one book on Althusser and is now bringing out another, more extensive, study of his thought. He is undoubtedly one of those today who is most familiar with Althusser’s work, with his manuscripts, with the archive we have mentioned. How then, I asked him, do you explain that there are no notes on Spinoza in Althusser’s archive? And he replied that he cannot explain it either. So we thought about it a little more, and came up with the unverifiable hypothesis that the relevant notes certainly existed, since it is inconceivable that Althusser had given his courses on Spinoza without preparing such notes, and that he had probably given the notes for these courses to someone who did not wish to return them to the archive, or perhaps has died in the meantime, or has forgotten that he or she still possesses them. But during our conversation, Warren Montag told me that Imec did possess a six hundred page manuscript, a very strange one which is not a work on Spinoza, but a kind of Spinozistic lexicon put together by Althusser for his own personal use. A six hundred page manuscript! And yet he would sometimes claim, as in his Autobiography, that he was not that familiar with philosophy, and only possessed a relatively superficial acquaintance with the history of philosophy, and so forth … As far as I could gather, these materials are basically extracts from texts by Spinoza, accompanied by commentaries arranged, if I remember correctly, under concepts in the form of a vocabulary or lexicon. The interesting thing here is that Althusser is not the only one who worked in this way, for Deleuze did the same, in a more concise fashion, also constructing a personal Spinozistic vocabulary which he incorporated in his extremely fine and instructive little book *Spinoza: philosophie pratique*, which was published after his major work *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression*. At the centre of the shorter work there are approximately fifty pages that constitute a kind of Spinozistic vocabulary, and I think it would be a particularly rewarding exercise to compare the vocabulary produced by Deleuze with that compiled by Althusser, even if the dimensions are so different in each case.

These considerations furnish rather interesting testimony to the subterranean reflections that drew in one way or another on Spinoza during these years. I should also like to mention another episode that dates from the time when I was in Algeria in 1966. I spent two years there as a teacher employed in a kind of French “peace corps.” As a student, I was allowed to skip the normal military service, but had to take it up later after completing my academic studies. In this situation there were two possibilities open to a teacher, or an engineer, or a doctor, in short to anyone with some kind of professional qualification. One could work as a civil volunteer, under the nominal authority of the military, in one of the various countries of the world where France
maintained missions of technical cooperation. The treaties agreed after the end of the Algerian conflict permitted France to send large numbers of technicians, teachers, and so on, to assist in the reconstruction of the country. The only condition in this regard was that one had to commit oneself to a longer period of service: instead of doing military service for eighteen months, it was necessary to remain for two years. Naturally, this did not bother me at all, and I was happy to comply, and indeed was genuinely enthusiastic at the prospect. Thus during the period which I spent in Algeria as a teacher at the University (from the end of 1965 to the end of 1966) I continued to keep in touch with Althusser, and my old friends and associates, by letter. This was an extremely sensitive and significant period, in terms of French intellectual and political history, for it witnessed the birth of Maoism, and the debate on the “cultural revolution” in China, and all this prior to 1968. In these very years Foucault had published his book *Les Mots et les choses* [translated into English as *The Order of Things*], and indeed part of the correspondence which I donated to Imec was an exchange of letters between Althusser and myself regarding this book. In any case, during this period, Althusser told me that he was thrilled because he had invited Deleuze to hold a seminar on Spinoza at the École Normale Supérieure, even before Deleuze had published his major work on the philosopher which we mentioned earlier. The content of the seminar was basically the same as that covered in the subsequent book, except that in the seminar discussions Deleuze developed in some detail the material that eventually became the appendix to the book, and which Althusser regarded as a very important aspect of the work. I am referring here to the idea that there are two “Ethics” in Spinoza (a live issue in contemporary studies of his philosophy precisely thanks to Deleuze), that is to say, an Ethics of the demonstrations and an Ethics of the Scholia: whereas the former is theoretical, demonstrative, and mathematical in character, the latter is polemical, and thus directly political, in character. Being away at the time, I was unable to participate in the seminar, and when I returned to Paris I immediately told Althusser how sorry I was to have missed it. And Althusser, who always took perfect notes, told me then that he possessed an entire notebook in connection with this seminar of Deleuze, an entire notebook!. Naturally, he lent me the notebook, and in the manner of the time – about forty years ago now – I read it carefully and took my own notes on it in turn. A whole notebook of notes taken by Althusser during a seminar by Deleuze … and this too is lost, this too has disappeared!

Fornari: In a well-known essay (“La vie et la science”) Foucault once distinguished between two traditions in French philosophy: a philosophy of experience, of sense, of the subject (from Sartre to Merleau-Ponty) and a philos-
phy of knowledge, of rationality, of the concept. Do you think that this is a valid description of French philosophy during the period of your intellectual development? And if I might return to Spinoza and the role played by his philosophy at the time, I am forcibly reminded of a remark of Jean Cavaillès (“I am a Spinozist, I believe that we discover necessity everywhere. The chains of mathematics are necessary, the stages of mathematical science are necessary, even the struggle we are waging is necessary”) which expressed, albeit in an extremely enigmatic way, the emphatic commitment to the “Resistance” that was involved in such declarations of Spinozism.

Balibar: Yes, I know the essay to which you allude: it is a late and certainly important piece of Foucault’s that was originally intended to provide the Preface to the American edition of George Canguilhem’s book *Le Normal et la pathologique*. And in fact Foucault’s trajectory also connected at various points with our own, with the concerns of this small group of Althusser’s students, although of course these trajectories can hardly be described as the same. In any case, Foucault was attempting in that essay to explain, both for himself and for his American readers, something of Canguilhem’s role and significance for French philosophical and intellectual life between the 1950s and the 1970s. At the time, Canguilhem was not particularly well known outside France (things would change considerably in this respect later on). This was partly because his published work was relatively small in quantity, and extremely challenging to read as well: psychologically speaking, Canguilhem was a rather complex personality, and it seemed as though he wanted not to become a widely read or celebrated author, but to remain a largely unknown one with the most restricted possible range of readers, readers who perhaps he even wished to select for himself. And again his work also appeared to be highly specialised: it did not expressly address issues of general philosophy and did not openly challenge (and certainly had no intention of challenging) the positions variously developed and defended by Sartre, or Merleau-Ponty, or even Lévi-Strauss. The work presented itself at least in appearance – and I would emphasise this last point – simply as that of a specialist in the history of science and epistemology. As a result, hardly anyone abroad, and especially in the United States, knew who Canguilhem was, or had the slightest inkling of his importance. The situation has changed entirely today, not only because much of his work has now been translated, but above all because the fame of some of his students and interlocutors – of Foucault in the first place, but also of Althusser himself – has helped to establish the idea that Canguilhem was a kind of “hidden master” for the modern French philosophical tradition. In one sense Foucault wrote his Preface specifically to encourage this idea, but in writing it he was also obliged to do something that he was naturally quite
capable of doing, but rarely practised himself, although this was a favourite exercise of Althusser’s: that is to say, to provide not only a general “picture” of the current philosophical situation (an exercise that is traditional enough), but also and above all a kind of “topic,” to deploy the quasi-Freudian vocabulary which we were fond of using at the time. This “topic” would simultaneously represent a distribution of problems and philosophical currents between different mutually competing poles, and a description of the relations of force, or lines of force, which are involved – an approach which corresponds to a strategic vision of philosophical labour, and in itself already furnishes a characteristic programme for this approach to philosophy.

There is certainly no reason to think that this approach was an invention of French thought, or indeed an invention of modernity. On the contrary, it repeats a rather classical model of the task of philosophy. The phrase to which Althusser would appeal so often was actually drawn from the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* where Kant describes metaphysics as a *Kampfplatz* or “battle-field.” And Kant is an extraordinary example – like Plato – of a thinker who presents the story of philosophy in strategic and polemical terms, namely as a confrontation between different currents and tendencies which leave, or perhaps fail to leave, a space where they might be resolved or overcome. Foucault did the same: he presented French philosophy as a *Kampfplatz*, a battle-field, where two tendencies allegedly confronted one another, and then located Canguilhem on one side or the other. All this is clearly a retrospective interpretation of events, at once highly illuminating and oversimplifying, for once we have constructed such a picture, we begin to recognise the existence of other unclassifiable discourses, discourses which cannot be accommodated within these types of classification, and which require us to rethink such classifications differently. Nonetheless, this kind of “topic” can retain considerable truth. And one of the secret advantages of this “topic” – of this strategic picture of French philosophy in the immediate post-war period – touches specifically on the question of Spinoza, or rather, on the role which this question played in polemical relation to other thinkers: especially, on the one hand, in opposition to Hegel (this is what principally interested Althusser), and also, on the other, in opposition to the Cartesian tradition. But we should also say a few words here about the conception of the Cartesian tradition that prevailed at this time – an idea which was certainly not shared by everyone, which was not indeed shared by Canguilhem (and this is a paradoxical fact in many respects), who was more Cartesian in outlook than we were, and was definitely not shared by Lacan who constantly referred back to Descartes. The Descartes in question (and here we were all more or less agreed) was basically the Descartes that was constructed retrospectively by the transcendental tradition of modern thought, that is, by
the Kantian and then the Husserlian tradition of philosophy. It was thus the
Descartes of Kant and Husserl: the Descartes whose *cogito* could be regarded as
the original foundation (still a metaphysical foundation of course, but none-
theless a revolutionary one) of the idea of the transcendental subject as the
necessary ground for all philosophical investigation. From this point of view,
the reference to Spinoza operated – to speak in purely philosophical terms –
on two fronts. One front concerned the struggle against Hegelian dialectics:
this was the inspiration for Deleuze, with various “offshoots” and implications
which were not the same for everyone (Deleuze thought of Spinoza as close
to Nietzsche, whereas Althusser thought him as closer to Marx, and indeed to
Machiavelli). The other front concerned the anti-Cartesian Spinoza, or per-
haps more profoundly, the Spinoza who offers a development of Cartesianism
which is radically different from that attempted by transcendental philosophy.
In truth, of course, Spinoza was hardly a new arrival on the French philo-
sophical landscape: he had already been a firm and permanent philosophi-
cal presence within earlier academic philosophy (Brunschvicg, Alain, and so
forth). And Sartre himself – and it was Deleuze who expressly cited him to
this effect – had already written some rather surprising and enigmatic things
in this regard in his remarkable early text *La transcendance de l’ego* (perhaps the
most important philosophical text he ever composed), a work which con-
cludes with some reflections, at once strange and penetrating, on the analogy
between consciousness and Spinoza’s conception of substance. The analogy
in question is grounded in an argument which is basically not so different
from that which also interested us at this time, for Sartre explains here that
the transcendental field of consciousness is one that is anterior to the emer-
gence of the “I,” that is to say, of the subject or the ego. Thus in fact there
was already a whole tradition in which we should have to contextualise that
remark of Cavaillès which he made towards the end of a fascinating and
enigmatic book – for this was a posthumously published book, composed
in the thick of war, wrung from a sense of political urgency, yet at the same
time entirely speculative in character, entirely abstract in nature, a book that
attempted at a single stroke to come to terms with mathematical logic, the
philosophy of Husserl, and epistemology in general. This remark effectively
told us that what is really necessary is not a philosophy of consciousness, but
rather a philosophy of the concept. And then there were the further declara-
tions of Cavaillès who expressly insisted: “I am a Spinozist; my philosophy is
Spinozism.” Now we were certainly no mystics, but this constituted a sort of
allegorical symbol that simultaneously represented a programme for intellec-
tual work (albeit in a completely indeterminate sense). It seemed to epitomise
in a single phrase all of those philosophical points of reference which, for a
variety of reasons, we all believed be essential: issues of epistemology, the his-
A biographical-theoretical interview with Étienne Balibar

Fornari: I should like to return to this definition of philosophy as a Kampfplatz, as a battle-field on which different lines of force converge, an image which Althusser derived from Kant, as you point out. Would it be legitimate to say that this partisan description of philosophical labour represented the symbol of your shared labours in the famous seminars at the École Normale that eventually gave rise to a book such as Reading Capital?

Balibar: Yes, indeed. We were essentially concerned with a permanent juxtaposition, with a permanent supraposition, of a very engaged form of political discourse – or, if you like, a kind of generalisation of the Marxist conception of class struggle or of partisan politics – and a form of philosophical discourse which was not only highly speculative (and thus in a certain sense highly abstract), but also highly autonomous in character. In order to understand all this properly, it is necessary to bear in mind that Althusser was a communist “in his very soul.” I certainly have no desire to offer a hardly disinterested eulogy on behalf of Althusser here, but one must realise that his seminars had an objective which was essentially political in the broadest sense of the term. There was certainly nothing institutionally controlling or regimental about these seminars. Althusser had been traumatised, truly marked for life, by particular episodes and experiences of his early life. If one is interested in this chronology today, I am referring here to the years which immediately preceded the period of our collaboration, that is, the years of the Cold War in which the relationship between philosophy and politics within the communist movement had been entirely perverted by Stalinism, and in particular by the official adoption of Zhdanovism and the associated theory of the two sciences. We are talking of an orthodox Marxism which turned philosophy into the ancilla politicae, the handmaid of politics, just as the Medieval era had regarded it as the ancilla theologiae, the handmaid of theology. This was an orthodoxy which placed philosophy in the service of a politics which was, in its way, also a kind of theology, albeit one that lacked the breadth and depth of Medieval theology. Certainly, there are many questions which could usefully be discussed in this connection. It is necessary to remember that, from this point of view, there were significant differences between the French Communist Party and the Italian Communist Party. At that time we had a certain tendency to idealise the Italian party. The French Communist Party had indeed inherited something from the traditions which also existed in Italy, but in the last analysis Gramsci’s thought (although it had been exploited
by Togliatti and the leadership of the Italian Communist Party) had nonetheless acquired a posthumous influence which helped, to some extent, to protect the Italian Communist Party from the dangers of reductionism: from the pure and simple instrumentalisation of culture and philosophy in the service of a particular political line. This also arose from an entirely different series of reasons which are highly ambiguous in character and the effects of which are still extremely ambivalent even today. It arose, for example, from the fact that the Communist Party in Italy not only played the role of a communist party as a branch – if I might put it in this way – of the Third International, but also the kind of national and republican role which in France had been occupied by other trends and currents during the 19th century. All of this, therefore, could not fail to encourage a quite different approach to philosophy itself. The French Communist Party at this time, by contrast, adopted a certain “workeris” perspective and aligned itself completely with the positions adopted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; it also revealed a tendency – a classic tendency on the part of the subalterns, or, as we might say, of the dominated – to prove itself the most zealous of all in imitating the Soviet model. This was the source of the party line regarding the two sciences, the Stalinist and Zhdanovist line that was imposed with exceptional enthusiasm, violence, and narrowness of vision between 1945 and 1965. Even more interesting in this connection is the fact that some of the French communist intellectuals of this period were quite brilliant minds. I shall mention only a single example, because it is the most interesting one to compare with Althusser for a number of reasons: because they were well acquainted with one other, enjoyed good personal relations, and at a certain point came into direct conflict with each other. I am referring to Jean-Toussaint Desanti, a phenomenologist and mathematician who liberated himself from all of this in the end. Desanti was then slightly older than Althusser, and for a period of fifteen years (from 1945 to 1960) he effectively played the part of the official philosopher of the Party. Later on Desanti explained that he was playing a rather Machiavellian game, that in fact he didn’t believe in it all, that he had adopted a cynical attitude which he could not afford to reveal in public. But the fact is that in those fifteen years he produced a number of philosophical texts (including in particular some virulent attacks on Merleau-Ponty and others) which were a perfect illustration of the Stalinist and Zhdanovist theory of philosophy. And according to this perspective, philosophy can be nothing else than an instrument in the service of the party view.

I am relating all this because when we arrived at the École Normale Supérieure in 1960 Althusser had published hardly anything: he was simply a professor of philosophy at the École, not even a full professor but an assistant professor; and we were simply students of his who still had to learn how to
produce our student’s papers. He gave courses on the history of philosophy, and was a notable, in fact a truly excellent teacher. But the particular conjunction of events at the time was very special, there was the war in Algeria, and suddenly Marxism became the point of reference for everything – Sartre, for example, now claimed that Marxism was the incontestable horizon of our time. For political reasons, rightly or wrongly, I became a communist; some of us remained communists for a considerable time, while others did not.

We were all constantly occupied with politics, and at the same time we were young philosophers in search of a philosophical education. It is well known what tends to happen in this situation. One appropriates what one encounters, as long as it is sufficiently eloquent and, above all, intellectually exciting. For those who were somewhat older than myself – Alain Badiou, Emmanuel Terray and others – this was Sartre, or Heidegger, or Husserl. My particular circumstances, on the other hand, meant that, having become a communist and having begun to pursue philosophy at the same time, I also wished to be a communist in philosophy, like many others everywhere. And it was at this point that we found ourselves confronted by Althusser as a teacher, and there was something very strange, I would even say something almost schizophrenic about this. His teaching was certainly not schizophrenic, but it was absolutely anti-reductionist. Althusser never endorsed the notion that “one must illustrate the claims of Marxism in the medium of philosophy.” He argued exactly the opposite, claiming that “Marxism is the politics of our time” (he continued to believe this to the end and never changed his mind about it, for there was always something religious in his unswerving commitment to communism). But the conclusion to be drawn from this was certainly not that we should try to improve dialectical materialism, or anything of that kind. The conclusion was rather that we should simply set all of this aside, that none of this counted for anything: the very position that Althusser defended in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. It was this idea that we found so attractive: those things did not matter, there was no Marxist philosophy, Marxist philosophy does not exist, nobody knew what it would mean to be a Marxist in philosophy, and everything that presented itself under that name amounted to nothing, in every sense: either a mere theology, or a form of apologetics. And all this was clearly on the point of collapse: the 20th Party Congress, the end of Stalinism, and the rest. It was imperative to forget that tradition, to pursue philosophy by returning to the most authentic sources, to the most traditional sources, if you wish: to Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Husserl, and so forth, yet seeking to discover within them those elements which would allow us to construct a grand theoretical discourse. It is obvious that we were utterly fascinated by this approach, for it was effectively telling us: “this discourse must be at the same level as Husserl, or as Heidegger, but it cannot be either Husserl
or Heidegger.” Thus it was that we all set to work together, and began to do philosophy in a really intensive way. And by the time of the last seminars that we held together, and especially the seminar on Marx’s *Capital*, we believed that we had reached the point of engagement and convergence between the political and the theoretical or philosophical.

**Fornari:** In a certain way, therefore, this attempt to break away both from a specific philosophical tradition and from a particular political orthodoxy gave rise to a kind of double relation between Althusser and yourselves, as if you all provided Althusser with the opportunity of translating these tensions into explicit form. It is presumably not by chance, therefore, that his first theoretical writings on these questions were published in the years of his engagement with you and your other colleagues.

**Balibar:** Yes, I think this is true, and I have some particular memories in this regard. They are not all especially attractive, either, and no one should think that. They are memories with some shadowy areas, so to speak, yet, even speaking of them today, I cannot deny that I still find them uplifting too. Of course, I harbour a certain ambivalence about all this, and there is always a tendency to idealise one’s own youth, which is extremely dangerous. What is more, it all involved the activity of a tiny group of people, which like other such groups, and perhaps more than others, was tempted for a period to regard themselves as the centre of the world. Fortunately, it was not actually how it was. In the 1960s not everything in philosophy – and even less in politics – transpired within the walls of the École normale supérieure, at the heart of the Latin Quarter in Paris. On the other hand, I discovered *après coup* (and this is a mark of finitude, inevitable in a certain way) some of the characteristic deficiencies of the kind of intellectual training and education that I received. It is not that I and my friends were not good and committed students. For the names of this rather small group of individuals are almost all familiar today: Alain Badiou, Emmanuel Terray, Pierre Macherey, Jacques Rancière, Yves Duroux, Jacques-Alain Miller, and so on. We were very good students. I remember following all of the courses on the authors and issues that were part of the educational programme of the time. In retrospect, it is quite strange, for one notices that there were some extraordinary gaps in this respect. When I was a student, for example, I never followed a single course on Aristotle, which is astonishing. In fact this allowed me to read him with enthusiasm later, to study him precisely by teaching myself about him. But, in short, I was certainly a good student, and I received a good fundamental training in philosophy. But from the point of view of the task of thinking, and of the orientation of thinking, something quite strange happened: instead of
adopting – and a student inevitably adopts not indeed an orthodoxy but some current of thought – something that already existed (like phenomenology or existentialism, for example), I effectively adopted something that did not yet exist. Thus, in an instant, the knowledge and expertise that I had acquired were determined by anything but a criterion of utility. As I pointed out a little earlier, Canguilhem and Althusser were individuals who, although they possessed a strong intellectual orientation of their own, were entirely devoid of dogmatism, of intellectual narrow mindedness, and I basically followed their promptings and suggestions, or what I took to be such. This led to certain extremely one-sided, and in some respects rather restrictive, choices on my part. But this is certainly no worse than simply enclosing oneself, or passionately immersing oneself, in phenomenology. And it was even worse with the Heideggereans, who never read anything except Heidegger. I certainly owed an immense amount to Althusser, and I never denied this. But later I felt a certain anger when Althusser’s doctoral thesis on Hegel was published after his death. This was a remarkable text for a young scholar, comparable in many respects with the study of Hume which Deleuze produced at the same time, or with Derrida’s early study of Husserl that he published much later. At that moment I said to myself: “But this is quite incredible!” – for under the immediate influence of Althusser we had hardly read anything by Hegel, yet he himself knew this material by heart! In a certain sense he had deprived us of a source of philosophical inspiration which was very close to him. Perhaps this is why now, after all this time, I spend such a lot of time on Hegel, why I have rediscovered him après coup. In fact, I generally say that I encountered four great teachers in my years as a student. Taking them in chronological order, these were Hyppolite and Althusser in the first instance, Canguilhem immediately afterwards, and Derrida a little later. Fortunately, although there were certain points of contact and compatibility between all four of them, each had a different intellectual orientation and certain preferred areas of interest. And the fact that I followed a seminar of Hyppolite’s on Hegel’s Philosophy of Right for a year would assume great significance for me later, and I would say the same of the fact that in 1964 I participated for a whole year in Derrida’s seminar on Husserl’s Cartesian Meditations and on the relationship between phenomenology and psychology that underpins transcendental philosophy. It was the work in this seminar that paved the way for that extraordinary book Speech and Phenomenon.

Fornari: We were speaking of the essentially reciprocal relationship between Althusser and yourself and your colleagues: the fact that you all provided a sort of “occasion” for a theoretical elaboration that, until that point, had still remained to some degree implicit.
Balibar: Yes, it is true that something of this kind took place in 1961-62. It was immediately after I entered the École in 1961, that I, Yves Duroux, and Jacques Rancière became friends with Pierre Macherey and some other people older than we were. At that time Althusser was just about to publish a collection of his most original early articles in For Marx, including the article on “The Early Marx” and that on “Contradiction and Overdetermination.” We felt these texts contained great philosophical force, that they facilitated an encounter – and this is what particularly caught our interest – between Marxism (and through Marxism the domain of politics) and a certain form of epistemological rationality. All of this can be contested, and in reality the books of Althusser had nothing rational about them, yet it seemed to us that they did. This was not the sort of rationalism that was elaborated by Galvano della Volpe in Italy, and who was more influenced by the positivist tradition and who, at that time, would probably not have inspired any great interest on our part. At any rate, this particular combination of apparent contraries, this coincidentia oppositorum, that was fundamentally dialectical, though not in a directly Hegelian way, appeared to us at once enigmatic and fascinating. We would say to each other at this time: “It is a pity that Althusser is only offering us courses on Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, Condorcet, Malebranche – although all this was certainly very interesting – when his personal work is obviously concerned with very different matters, and these different matters are much more interesting to us.” And it was in this spirit that we specifically went to see him – I remember it well, and I believe those involved were Duroux, Rancière, Macherey, and perhaps François Regnault, who became a Lacanian and a theorist of the theatre. We saw Althusser and asked him to organise a seminar that would focus on certain texts of Marx. And he replied – this was the spring of 1961 – along these lines: “Listen, you just need to spend the summer reading and studying Marx, and then when you come back, if you wish, we can arrange a seminar.” He told us, in particular, to study the early writings of Marx which were then at the very centre of discussion and controversy as far as Marxist philosophy was concerned. I spent a part of that summer with Macherey working on the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844: in collaboration we wrote about a hundred pages on what we read, although this material is all lost now, and when we returned the following October we presented them to Althusser, who read them with considerable interest, and told us that as a result he was happy to organise a seminar. And so this is how things got started. We were the ones who suggested that he should arrange the seminar, but our proposal coincided with what he wanted to do himself, so that the seminar developed productively both for him and for us: in fact, he continued to produce certain texts on Marx which were then included in the collection For Marx, which was put together in these very
years; and together we had already begun to imagine the idea of a great collective seminar on Marx’s *Capital*, which did eventually take place in 1964–65 and resulted in the book *Reading Capital*, which, to my eyes today, is almost completely unreadable.

2. Philosophy and Politics: Nationalism, Racism, and Post-Marxism

*Fornari:* Perhaps what you now call unreadability is connected with what you and your colleagues used to call “theoreticism”? What is so striking about this approach is the way in which it combines a very ambitious theoretical project, and a highly abstract one (hence the “theoreticism”) with a practice of philosophical intervention that is always oriented to the actual conjunction of events, to the most pressing contemporary issues and problems. This orientation to events, which sometimes motivates a direct philosophical intervention in questions which the present immediately raises for critical reflection, seems to me to be a distinctive characteristic of your own work: from your texts of the 1980s on the question of “neo-racism,” in which you denounced the ambiguous posture of the French Communist Party on issues of immigration, through your work on the “nation form” and the emergence of a “European racism,” up to your most recent reflections on Europe, globalisation, the new forms of violence encouraged by the politics of identity, and the possibilities for a new universalism.

*Balibar:* We all felt—and I particularly felt—that we belonged to a broad philosophical tradition with numerous variants, most of them Marxist in inspiration, for which the relationship between theory and practice was a crucial issue. In truth, these two categories still appeared rather too vague to us. In particular, we replaced the notion of “practice” in general with that of “politics,” above all because we wished to resist the predominant influence of a certain post-Kantian kind of moral philosophy. But basically we belonged to a tradition of philosophy that most Anglophone thinkers would today describe as “continental,” and which would also include Foucault or the Frankfurt School. It is a tradition which begins by expressly rejecting the positivist and post-Kantian divorce between facts and values, between questions of truth and knowledge and problems of ethics and politics. Naturally, the difficulty we faced at that time was that Hegel constituted the great model and point of reference for a philosophy which wished to reunite the problem of knowledge with the characteristic problems of action, history, historicity, and practice, that is to say, with the problem of transforming society itself. It is very difficult not to be a Hegelian if one repudiates the antithesis between
facts and values, between knowledge and practice. It is not that we were (or that I am myself today) much more Hegelian than we wanted to admit, although the interpretation of Hegel is a very complex matter, and there are of course different ways of reading him. But if one wishes to keep faith with the orientation we have been discussing – and rightly or wrongly I have never wished to capitulate either to the positivism of the analytical tradition or to Kantianism or the post-Kantian dualism between theoretical and practical philosophy – one is condemned to a constant confrontation with Hegel. And one can also attempt to transform the philosophy of Hegel itself. This is the reason why the rediscovery of Althusser’s early writings on Hegel was so enormously significant for me. Of course, Hegel is not the only point of reference in this connection. But we must certainly recognise the full power of the position that is occupied by positivist or post-Kantian dualism in the universities. In the Anglophone world it constitutes an almost sacred premise of research, and it is gratifying to see how this position is now being contested from within (especially in the United States) by the emphatic return of the tradition of philosophical pragmatism, which is itself of Anglophone origin, though American rather than British. Richard Rorty, or Stanley Cavell in many respects, have gone back to explore the resources of the pragmatist tradition, and if one traces the latter right back to Emerson, one can even discover certain similarities with Nietzsche. In short, these philosophers have looked to pragmatism for a way of freeing themselves internally from the rigid orthodoxy of the fact/value distinction.

Nonetheless, such dualism still maintains a formidable institutional power. Evidently, this may protect philosophers from many of the dangers which we fell into, but it certainly does not protect them from every form of politicisation. And, in addition, it does not protect them at all from that scholasticism which I can only regard as a degenerated form of philosophical speculation. From the perspective of post-Kantian thought, matters are much more complicated, principally because the dualism of Kant is only one aspect of the Kantian philosophy itself. The interest which the second half of the 20th century has shown on all sides (in France, Italy, and Germany) in the later Kant, that is, in the Critique of Judgement, in his aesthetic theory, and in his philosophy of history, reflects the rediscovery of that dimension of Kant’s own thought which constituted an overcoming of his original dualism: or the “dialecticisation,” as I should be tempted to say, of his original dualism. All at once, therefore, we see significant part of contemporary philosophy interrogating his thought for means of developing a post-Hegelian, or a post-Heideggerian, form of Kantianism: a philosophy of persisting tensions, or one that facilitates a dynamic approach to problems that move back and forth between the question of knowledge and the question of politics, one which
is neither the philosophy of Hegel (who believed that he had overcome the *Critique of Judgement* once and for all, whereas he actually was rooted there) nor the philosophy of Heidegger. At the time when I was a student in France, this Kant was totally unknown. The Kant with which we were familiar – a version of Kant which was very powerful in Italy, in Germany, and effectively everywhere – was a Kant of two halves, defined in terms of the antinomies of pure reason, and specifically the third antinomy of the “Transcendental Dialectic” which implies the impossibility of reconciling the concept of nature with the concept of freedom. Thus on one side we have the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and on the other side the *Critique of Practical Reason*. And then again, on the one side we have the first part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that is to say, the positive – not positivist – theory of the constitution of experience, of the necessary connection between sense perception and science (there is no question of positivism here since the facts are not given as such, but have be constructed: this is a transcendental constructivism), and on the other side we have the “Transcendental Dialectic” which is what Wittgenstein would call a kind of philosophical therapy. It is a philosophical therapy which would teach us how to proceed if we wish to avoid confusing problems of freedom with the problems of nature, and thus free ourselves from the problem of the subject treated as a substance and from the problem of God, not to speak of that of religion. Then we would move on to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and address the question of the Categorical Imperative as presented in this text, and so on. When we began to study the *Critique of Judgement* in earnest, and this was rather later in France than elsewhere, we realised that Kant had not simply stopped with the first two *Critiques*, or more precisely, that this dualism was not a simple exclusive dualism at all. But all this required a good deal of work on our part.

Fornari: You mentioned Derrida before, describing him – along with Hyppolite, Althusser, and Canguilhem – as one of the significant “masters” that you encountered during your years of study. How would you describe the relations between Derrida and yourself over the succeeding years? And in what way, above all, have your intellectual paths crossed in this regard?

Balibar: Derrida is a rather singular phenomenon, for even today the question of how to define the political dimension of his thought remains highly controversial. In fact I am currently hoping to write a book on Derrida – initially I was thinking in terms of a relatively short essay, because I had already participated in a series of conferences held in honour and remembrance of Derrida, because I am one of his older students, because we enjoyed extremely cordial relations, especially during the second half of his life, and again because I was
invited to teach in the United States at the same university where Derrida himself had taught. So I began with a few things in homage to Derrida, but what I actually wrote (and which initially seemed rather obscure even to me) gradually ended up by assuming the proportions of a much more ambitious project in my own mind. One of my objectives in this connection is precisely to try and explain to myself and others where the political dimension of Derrida’s thought really lies, though not of course by presupposing any conception of “politics” in the narrow sense, in terms of political parties or immediate political slogans. Of course, Derrida himself assumed certain political positions on a variety of issues, just like everyone else, and he participated very strongly in political initiatives – using the word “political” in the broad sense – in France in the period after 1968, especially in relation to the institutional role of philosophy and the creation of the Collège International de Philosophie. He expressed his views on the Palestinian question, and played a principal role in establishing groups that gave support dissidents in the former Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe generally. But the usual polemic goes on in the same old way: for some Derrida is too political, for others he is not political at all. In the American academic context in particular, the philosophy of Derrida and European post-structuralist thought as a whole, but especially the French version, is often regarded as a rather diabolical combination of politics and abstruse speculation that threatens to pervert any serious approach to the study of philosophy. For a number of European commentators, on the other hand, Derrida should really be regarded as a moral philosopher rather than a political one. According to this line of interpretation, it was the supposed “ethical turn” of Derrida’s philosophy which allowed him to address a certain number of political questions, though always on a sort of moralising basis. In this connection there is also a marked tendency to identify Derrida almost entirely with the positions of Lévinas, and thus to associate him with an implicitly theological source of inspiration. I have absolutely no intention of denying that Derrida was very close to Lévinas, in spite of having subjected him to powerful criticism in a celebrated early essay, so much so that Lévinas was said to been almost traumatised as a result. There is no doubt that Derrida learned much from Lévinas and that they personally discussed many matters of shared concern. And nor is there any doubt that there is a strong moral, or if you prefer ethical, dimension to Derrida’s thought, especially during his final period. But I am not very comfortable with the idea of a caesura between the early and later Derrida, perhaps precisely because my own association with him began when I followed one of his courses which was concerned with Husserl’s Cartesian Meditations, and thus with issues of historicity and intersubjectivity. I think there is a relationship, which I may perhaps attempt to formulate explicitly, between his initial point of departure, one
completely internal to phenomenology, and the way in which he later tried to address the question of community in a critical manner that could also be described in many respects as paradoxical or oxymoronic. The true difficulty is to avoid concentrating exclusively upon these oxymoronic formulations, however important the role which they play in this connection. Derrida has proposed the expression “the Messianic without Messianism,” even though he rejected the expressions “communitarianism without community” or “community without community” which were being deployed around the same time by other thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy. He was thereby seeking to establish his own position. And he attempted to do so speculatively, through commentaries and re-readings of the philosophical tradition which serve to broach questions which have always been crucial, in Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Fichte, and so on. Crucial questions that lie in a space between speculation and political practice, and which, in my view, have always constituted a privileged and contested terrain where these latter meet, such as the question of nationhood, of nationalism, or the question of religion. I have worked specifically on the question of nationalism, a matter I discussed expressly with Derrida at the time when I wrote Race, Nation, Class in collaboration with Wallerstein. At the same period I gave a course on the same issues, a small excerpt of which was published as part of a text on Fichte’s Speeches Addressed to the German Nation. For his part, Derrida also held a seminar, in which I did not participate in person, but which we did discuss together. It was specifically concerned with philosophical nationalism, with nationalism in philosophy (I am sure there must be some transcript of the seminar in question). But he also published a few pieces in this connection, including a remarkable text on the nationalism of German Jewish philosophers, such as Hermann Cohen, which parallels the nationalism of French Jewish philosophers like Bergson. This was one of our shared areas of interest, and although we did not work together directly on this question, we certainly discussed it a good deal. As far as religion and theology (whether positive or negative theology) are concerned, this was a longstanding area of concern for Derrida. Without attempting to establish a precise parallel between our respective writings, I can certainly say that religion has long been an object of interest for me too. That one can hardly work on Spinoza for a significant part of one’s life without being interested in the theologico-political dimension is evident. And when I wrote La Crainte des masses, and other texts, I made certain allusions in this direction. Finally, and more recently, for reasons which are obvious, I have become especially interested in the theologico-political problem, and particularly in the entire question that Derrida addressed under the sign of the “nouvelles Lumières,” and thus in the internal transformation of the very idea of secularism and secularisation.
As you can see in this case – and maybe this is something that I took from Althusser, and from the experience, at once positive and negative, of our period of close collaboration – my thoughts tend almost automatically to return to the purely philosophical aspect of a given problem – not in order to forget the political domain, but in order to look for concepts one can use. To look for concepts also means looking for ways of varying our concepts, of transforming them, but this “detour” is an absolutely indispensable one. The terrible thing that happened with Althusser, that happened to Althusser, was that the situation immediately following the publication of *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* was one of unbearable and absolutely destructive political pressure. Somehow this pressure threw Althusser back in the very direction from which he had wished to escape: I am not speaking of Stalinism, or the “two sciences,” of course, but of the complete politicisation of philosophical discourse, of an immediate, unthinking, unreflective politicisation. Thus, all of a sudden (and this forms part of his personal drama, in conjunction with certain psychological aspects of an entirely different order) Althusser spent ten years – and I, and others, with him – from around 1966 attempting to construct a philosophy that could be read and interpreted immediately in terms of politics. And this clearly destroyed him, really destroyed him, although when, after his death, his book on Machiavelli was discovered amongst his papers – a book that remained incomplete, and indeed, since it was impossible ever to bring it to completion, structurally incomplete – it became clear that, in secret, he was looking for new concepts too. He looked for them in Machiavelli, by engaging in dialogue with Machiavelli, just as he had formerly looked for concepts in the work of Spinoza, and perhaps in Hegel. Thus in reality he had secretly resisted that reductionism, that politicisation to which I have referred.

*Fornari:* And how have you come to understand the relationship between philosophy and politics?

*Balibar:* The problem is that the relationship between philosophy and politics is an originary one, and which therefore must never be dissolved. If we believe that we can do philosophy without doing politics, we are merely deluding ourselves, as Althusser used to say, although this is precisely the creed of logical positivism, which also does politics in its way. And if we believe we can do politics without doing philosophy, without theory, we indulge not only in an immediate politics, but in a repressive and confining politics: a politics which has no purchase on “power knowledge,” as Foucault would say, that is, no purchase on the institutional discourses within which philosophy has always been crystallised, institutionalised, and in a certain sense concealed, and thus unconsciously imposed. So although the relationship between philosophy and
politics is indeed originary, it can never be simply immediate. And this is why I always say to my students, or the younger friends with whom I discuss these things, that when we find ourselves in a dramatic political situation – and we are always, but today more than ever, in dramatic political situations for which the solutions are at once pressing and unidentifiable (I am thinking here of Europe as an idea that is both necessary and impossible, or of the contemporary forms of European neo-populism, and so on) – the most urgent thing is precisely to permit ourselves time to do that for which we have no time, that whose time does not exist at all, that for which we are not given time. It is necessary for us to seize this time. It is necessary to demand it. Evidently, we never have enough time, we are always obliged to anticipate responses which we do not yet possess. Thus I have written numerous texts on the question of Europe, on community, on citizenship, which represent provisional formulations as it seems to me, formulations which have not yet been completely expressed or elaborated. But it is also necessary to accept the necessity of putting one’s own ideas to the test of contradiction and political contestation, if we are to know what they might mean or in what direction they might move.

Fornari: In speaking of Derrida, you have drawn attention to the problem of nationalism, and to your collaboration with Immanuel Wallenstein, which initially took form as a shared seminar, and then as the celebrated volume on Race, Nation, Class. Can you say a little more about the origins of your collaboration with the major representative of a line of thought which is so different from that which shaped your own intellectual development, and that of your French friends and associates, and which presents itself as a (sociological, historical, and economic) theory of the “world system.”

Balibar: We are not speaking of the same kind of situation here. Wallerstein is a friend that I got to know in India in 1981. I have visited India twice in my life: the first time was in 1981, and the second, twenty-six years later, was in 2007. I had gone to India in 1981 in order to attend a conference which Wallerstein himself had instigated and helped to organise – a large scale conference in New Delhi on the subject of class – I believe the actual title was Social Class and Status Groups in the World System – to which the Maison des sciences de l’homme founded by Fernand Braudel had decided to send a small delegation. I was well acquainted with the French historian who was the Assistant Director of the Maison des sciences de l’homme at the time, and who suggested that I should form part of the delegation in question, which was made up of several other historians and anthropologists. This was the specific context in which I first got to know Wallerstein. Of course, I already knew a little about his work, for in the years before I had shown some interest along
with others, although perhaps less than others, in what was then known as the “Third World” current of Marxist thought, the school of thought which was primarily concerned with issues of development and under-development, with an analysis that focussed on the distinction between the “centre” and the “periphery.” No one who spent much of their early years in the struggle against colonialism, or was merely oriented to Marxism in the 1970s, could fail to have heard about this particular current of thought – even if, as usual, the culture in France was slow to respond to such issues. Thus I had already read a little of Wallerstein’s work, but I did not know him personally. He was slightly older than I was, was Professor of Sociology at the Columbia University of New York in 1968, and, not by chance, had been one of the most active participants in a kind of autonomous “commune” at Columbia University. He also had a specialist background in African studies, and his earliest writings were concerned with the post-colonial situation in Africa. And it was on account of these interests that he subsequently came into contact with Braudel. In fact, Braudel often claimed that he owed more to Wallerstein than the other way round, but it is quite clear that there was a two-way relation of reciprocal influence between them. At any rate, in the following years Wallerstein forged what one can rightly call his “system.” And Wallerstein is a man with a “system.” It is a system which adapts itself, which develops, which grows, but – in the final analysis – it is always a question of system. Not indeed a philosophical system, but still a system: a general theoretical model for the human sciences the proper object of which, avant la lettre, is the phenomenon of globalisation. And the point of departure for this theory is that the process of globalisation is coextensive with capitalism, a thesis which was, in a certain sense, already presented in the Communist Manifesto of Marx, although it has never been taken sufficiently seriously by Marxists themselves.

Fornari: So this is when your collaboration with Wallerstein actually began?

Balibar: Not exactly. After meeting in India we established a cordial personal relationship. But it was two or three years later that we met up again in Paris. Wallerstein used to visit Paris in connection with the sessions of the Maison des sciences de l’homme on account of his very close relationship with Braudel, and, in this sense, he could be regarded as one of the founders of the Maison des sciences de l’homme. He really got involved in things, and put in an enormous amount of work. At that time he was Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York, where he set up what is known as The Fernand Braudel Center. As I said, he used to spend four months in Paris every year, and when I learned he was there I went looking for him, or perhaps it was the other way around. When we did re-establish contact he asked me what I was
then really interested in. I remember this very well – it was towards the end of 1983. This was the year in which a kind of resurgent racism started to organise itself politically in France, in the form of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s neo-fascist party Le Front National. Le Pen was a veteran of the movement Algérie française – with which we had already had a number of violent confrontations in the Latin Quarter in my youth, with Left wing groups confronting the groups of the extreme neo-fascist Right which were active even then. Anyway, Jean-Marie Le Pen became the leader of the Front National and they began to score some electoral successes. In particular, it was in 1983 – to our profound consternation – that the Front National, in coalition with other parties of the Right, succeeded in winning the municipal elections in a medium-sized city in the vicinity of Paris. They had waged a xenophobic campaign against immigrants and pilloried the Socialist mayor of a neighbouring town, a well known feminist of the time, whom they accused of having “prostituted” herself with the Arabs of the town, and other things of the kind. The Front National had conducted a violent openly racist and misogynistic campaign, and they had won; not on their own, but with other parties of the Right that were prepared to follow Le Pen down this road. So I said to Wallerstein: what preoccupies me, what interests me, is the rise in France of a post-colonial neo-racism avant la lettre. In 1984 I published a detailed article in Les Temps modernes – which I may republish in a forthcoming volume – under the title “Subject or Citizen,” in which I anticipated in my own way a debate which is explicitly unfolding today. Of course, I was not the only one to anticipate this debate, but I have always believed that the continuity between French colonialism and contemporary forms of racism directed specifically against immigrants was a crucial issue. That is why I told Wallerstein that these were the themes that interested me, and interested me not only – and this was obvious – from the political point of view, but also for the reason I indicated earlier, that is, because it is always necessary to undertake a theoretical detour in order to speak of such matters in an adequate manner. And in this case, the required theoretical detour naturally raised another problem, one that lay at the basis of our decision to collaborate with each other in the first place: I was, in fact, a representative of that current of critical Marxism, or of that attempt to reconstruct and reground Marxist thought, which was indeed principally initiated by Althusser, but had nonetheless, as you know, effectively been a collective project. Thus one of the questions I asked myself, though not the only one, was to understand how one could use not merely a vocabulary, but above all a system of categories that are derived from Marxism in order to address problems connected with racism, and therefore with nationalism. At the time, colonial history and the history of liberation from colonialism represented a rather neglected area of research, but I had always been very
clear in my own mind about the extremely close relation – though certainly not a simple relation – between the question of racism and the question of nationalism. From this point of view I always had a certain disagreement with Wallerstein, and one that was never in fact resolved. I do not wish to caricature his position in this regard, but Wallerstein has a tendency to regard nationalism in a less contradictory, or less ambivalent, way than I do myself. In any case, the struggle against that institutionalised form of racism that colonialism represented has itself been conducted in the name of nationalism, in the name of different nationalisms.

I explained that these were the problems that especially concerned me, and Wallerstein clearly expressed his interest too. When I asked what he was principally concerned with at the time, he replied: “ethnicity.” This was more or less the time when in the United States “Race Studies” or “Race Relations Studies” were changing their language and general orientation, whether for political reasons or because some group of anthropologists and sociologists were proposing – as happens all the time in universities in Britain and North America – a certain “change of paradigm” that would go beyond the previous “Race Relations” paradigm. In fact, however, this earlier paradigm remained largely intact in the British context, although at this time I was not particularly familiar with the field of “Cultural Studies,” or even, surprisingly, with the work of Stuart Hall, who had been one of the major protagonist in the debates of the 1970s, with Poulantzas and others, and had written a good deal on Althusser in the course of developing his own point of view. Thus Wallerstein told me that the Americans at this time were moving away from the category of “race” to that of “ethnicity,” and that he wanted to understand the potential implications of this for the transformation of “world system.” In the United States, in particular, this change of paradigm corresponded to the idea that the constellation of “cultural conflicts” – this is how people were already beginning to describe the situation – could not be defined in a binary relation determined by the “colour line” to which many American Marxists used to refer. This was at the end of “Black Power,” a movement with which Wallerstein had been closely associated through his acquaintance with several theorists and militants – a part of his political history that is far less known, I have to say, than the general story of his intellectual development. People were thus beginning to endorse the idea that there is no single “colour line,” but rather a multiple system of conflicts and differences (although we were not yet familiar with the whole language of “difference” which would emerge subsequently), a system of cultural, sociological, and thus also political, differences, and that it was also necessary to take account of the native Americans, or of the Latino population, who were becoming a massive presence within the United States in terms of sociology, urban habitation, culture, and lan-
We just looked at one another, and he said: you are interested in racism in France, and I am interested in “ethnicities” in the United States and the rest of the world. And that is why we decided to organise a joint seminar, which convened over three successive years at the Maison des sciences de l’homme. The title of the book which resulted from all this reflects the actual development of the seminar, because we dedicated the first year to the question of race, the second to the question of nationhood, and the last to the question of class. But it was particularly striking to note that the numbers in the audience diminished at a steady rate as we proceeded, and this was certainly not because the level of our discussions was any worse at the end than it had been at the beginning. For we both spoke in turn at the seminar and, above all, had invited other people to speak as well. This experience was very interesting for me, since what transpired at the Maison des sciences de l’homme opened up certain possibilities for me that I did not enjoy in the usual university context. At the very same time I was continuing to give courses on Aristotle, and on Spinoza, and this was all very good, yet the seminar in question allowed us the opportunity to invite speakers from other disciplines. One of Wallerstein’s great qualities – and this derives both from his personal character and from his general theoretical outlook – is that he takes a completely interdisciplinary approach to the work of the social sciences. Hence we were able to call on a broad range of historians, anthropologists, ethnologists, and sociologists from France and elsewhere. I believe that the first year of the seminar facilitated a particularly fortunate meeting of minds (not unlike the period of collaboration which led to Reading Capital, although naturally for quite different reasons). And this derived from the fact that, once again, France was behind the times in some respects, even though at the same time there were various people there – in different disciplines, in different universities – who were working on the question of race. Everyone had the impression that this was important, largely for reasons I have indicated, in relation to the increased awareness, après coup, of the problem of decolonialisation in the French political context and everything that flowed from it. This awareness also corresponded, in point of time, to the emerging discussion and debate concerning the deportation of the Jews in France and the anti-Semitic policies of the Vichy regime. There were therefore plenty of people who were examining this entire complex of questions, but they were completely isolated from one another at the time. In France today, like everywhere else in the world, there are many seminars with a specific focus on these issues, and this is now a highly organised area of research, but there was really nothing of the kind then. So when Wallerstein and I announced that we were going to organise a seminar on this basis, and asked if the prospect would provoke much interest, everyone said they would like to take part, whether as speakers or auditors.
There is no doubt that the first year of the seminar was extremely successful: there were a large number of participants, the atmosphere was intense, and work went very well. For the second year we decided to focus on the question of nationhood, and since there were a lot fewer people interested in this, we lost many participants, although we attracted two or three students. In the third year we addressed the question of class, and we could hardly find anyone to participate for the question class did not seem to interest anyone. We had organised the seminar by focussing on forms of exclusion and inequality, and although we were just about able to proceed, in truth the moment for such discourse had not yet come. It arrived only later, with the work of Robert Castel and those like him. In 1986–87 nobody was interested in the question of social classes, but we nonetheless collaborated on the issue and produced the resulting book that you know.

Fornari: One could say that in that work you explicitly addressed an entire range of problems that has only acquired its full urgency today, not only through the analysis of the connections between racism, nationalism, and the struggle between classes, but also through the introduction of a notion of an implicitly “differential racism” (or of a “racism without race”): a racism which concentrates on the presumed irreducibility of cultural differences and therefore resists every form of anthropological or psychological “reductionism.” In your own writings – and here I am thinking particularly of the 1991 text Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa [There is no State in Europe] – you have emphasised how racism is also effectively an “institutional” phenomenon, a “psychological structure of the state,” rather than simply a perversion of our relation to diversity. In what sense have these more recently articulated positions affected or modified your Marxist orientation? And, speaking more generally, could we say that you and Wallerstein effectively anticipated a discussion that has become prevalent today?

Balibar: Well, in effect, each of us asked certain questions, from our own points of view. I discussed this in the Preface to Race, Nation, Class: I tried to explain two things which nonetheless went hand in hand. The first is that “race” and “nation” represented two blind spots in Marxism, and since we were both Marxists, although not in the same way, this problem was of great concern to both of us. The difference was that Wallerstein already had a broader version of Marxism at his disposal, in which he had basically introduced what could be described as a neo-Marxist theory regarding the construction of nationality. I am very struck by how much this account resembles other theories regarding the function of the nation in the historical context, and the emergence of nationalism and internationalism, within the contemporary socio-
logical tradition. One could thus compare Wallerstein with Michael Mann, Ernst Gellner, Anthony Giddens, or Charles Tilly. In short, for Wallerstein it is the paradigmatic opposition between centre and periphery that constitutes from the start the hermeneutic context for the discussion of this problem. But I was not entirely sympathetic to this approach. Fundamentally, I was struck by the fact that Althusserian Marxism had changed absolutely nothing – this is how I am tempted to put it – with regard to the incapacity of Marxism to address the problem of the national community, and this in spite of Althusser’s attempt to reflect specifically on the structures of ideology and ascribe to them a function that is just as important as that envisaged by the question regarding the means of production. That is why I have worked so closely on these questions. Confronted with the task of organising a seminar, one is obliged to frame a certain problematic, to propose specific means of analysis, and for this reason it has been necessary to present the result of my reflections in a provisional form. And this result was that the task is not so much that of elaborating a Marxist theory regarding the formation of nationality, but in reality of doing almost the opposite. This is why I have had a certain influence in the field of “Cultural Studies.” For basically I believe – and I think this has now been well understood – that Marxism will never succeed in constructing an adequate theory of the formation of nation-states. Of course, Marxism will be able to clarify a whole range of aspects connected with the construction of nationality, and Wallerstein is quite right about that. But Marxism, by definition, tells us nothing about the subjective roots, about the processes of collective subjectivity, which find institutional expression in national terms. Thus the fact of working so intensively on the questions of race and nationality serves not to complete Marxism, but to explode it. It does not destroy Marxism, but, as I say, it explodes it.

In this way, I have in some measure rediscovered something that Althusser himself had attempted to say. I spend much of my time thinking about how closely involved I have always been with Althusser in one way or another, but this is no longer an embarrassment for me today. I am speaking of one of the texts that he wrote towards the end of his life, before he lost his mind, a text that has been published in Italy. I always have a tendency to confuse two texts from 1979, which are the very last texts published by Althusser before the catastrophe, before he strangled his wife and was confined to psychiatric hospital. One of them is the article entitled *Marxism* which he wrote specifically for the *Enciclopedia Garzanti*, the other was published, I believe, in the pages of *il manifesto*, or in one of those collections edited by Rossana Rossanda or one of Althusser’s other friends or associates. This latter text is entitled *Marxismo come teoria “finita”* [Marxism as a “finite/finished” Theory]. This is more than another play on words designed to disturb the reader. If we describe Marxism as a fin-
ished theory, does this mean that there is no longer such a thing as Marxism, that Marxism is finished? Althusser would reply: “No, Marxism is certainly not finished, I have never written that Marxism is finished.” I subsequently took up precisely this thesis, namely that Marxism is finished, understanding the term “Marxism” in the sense of an institutionalised theoretical system. But Althusser was declaring: Marxism is not finished, we are not standing at the end of Marxism, as the ideologists of liberalism proclaim. But Marxism is a finite theory in the sense that it has its limits. It is certainly a finite theory, not an infinite one, which means in turn that it has an outside. And if one concedes that Marxism has an outside, this implies that Marxism is not a form of “absolute knowing,” is not a totality that could ever close in upon itself. And this immediately opens up a whole series of political and anthropological questions, or better put, allows us to rediscover the anthropological dimension of these problems. It is clear that Althusser never used such terminology, although basically this is precisely what he was talking about. In other words, we realise that there is no historical problem that can be discussed solely from the Marxist point of view, and that it is always necessary to combine things that are internally heterogeneous. Even if I am no Deleuzian, I like the Deleuzian expression “disjunctive synthesis”: it is necessary to produce disjunctive syntheses, heterogeneous unities in our problems. One can try and justify this position in a speculative manner, and argue that the real itself is heterogeneous. I have ended up defending an idea that pushes Althusser rather beyond what he would have been prepared to admit with respect to the concept of over-determination, namely that the “ultimate instance” always has several levels, or at least two, on which historical causality develops, but in such a manner that each constitutes the presupposition of the other. Or to put it in an other way, the development of capitalism represents an economic tendency – Marx rightly captured this in his formulations in *Capital* – but, as Althusser used to say, the hour of the “ultimate instance” never strikes since it is necessary to recognise the over-determination that derives from ideological factors and decelerates the entire process. It is in this sense that Althusser attempted to construct a theory of ideology which he claimed was in fact the only one compatible with Marxism and yet was not itself Marxist.

Fornari: And this is what you call, in Freudian language, “the other scene”: the scene of identities and identifications (individual, collective, ideological, cultural etc)?

Balibar: Yes, we are speaking of what I call “the other scene.” But this must be taken in two senses, and it is here that the advocates of “Cultural Studies” have somewhat misunderstood what I was trying to say. In the American
universities, in fact, I constantly meet people who are interested in what I am doing but tell me they do not really understand why I have collaborated with Wallerstein, given that he is such an orthodox Marxist, a classical Marxist, and so forth. And I tell them that actually Wallerstein is not an orthodox Marxist, even if he is in fact an economist, and perhaps that what they fail to appreciate is that my own perspective is by no means an attempt to translate Marxism into “culturalist” terms, that is, to explain in a unilateral way that the effective power of economic tendencies is realised exclusively through cultural forms. Rather the reverse is true: I do not remotely believe in the autonomy or self-sufficient power of those processes of collective subjectivisation that could be defined as cultural or ideological, or claim that they unfold on the scene of the unconscious – on the scene of the symbolic or the imaginary – for the mediations in question are always economic in character. Perhaps all of this is not sufficiently grounded from the speculative point of view, and is a philosophy “bricolée.” But in this way we arrive at a notion of overdetermination without an “ultimate instance,” or, more simply expressed, with two “ultimate instances”; we arrive at the idea that ideology is a “basis” in the same manner as “accumulation” or the “mode of production.” In other words, we arrive at a form of Freudo-Marxism. The search for a convincing synthesis of Marx and Freud has been, as it were, the “philosopher’s stone,” and perhaps also the great illusion, of two generations of Western critical theory. That is precisely what Foucault denounced so violently. For this is effectively an impossible synthesis, unless it is conceived in the “disjunctive” sense we have mentioned. For indeed it was Deleuze and Guattari themselves who provided the last great attempt at Freudo-Marxism with their work *Antit-Oedipus*. And to create this final form of Freudo-Marxism they claimed that they were forced to retranslate both Marx and Freud into the language of a new metaphysics of life. I do not have the power, and above all I certainly do not have the intention, to attempt such a thing. I prefer to remain with a disjunctive synthesis. If in fact Marxism is a finite theory, Freudianism and psychoanalysis are expressions of a finite theory too, and it is at the point of intersection between both theories that everything must constantly be interrogated, from the perspective of the present, without appeal to any pre-existing schema of causality. All of the problems of contemporary politics are concentrated at this point, to the extent that they are an inseparable consequence of the unanticipated forms which capitalist accumulation has assumed, and of the equally unanticipated though perhaps entirely repetitive developments of what we may call the collectivisation of the unconscious (repetitive in the sense of the *Wiederholungszwang* or “repetition compulsion”).

I should like to add a further comment here. If the first thing that I attempted to explain in the aforementioned Preface was that our problem
was that of clarifying, each in his own way, the “blind spot” of Marxism, the second thing I mentioned was the fact that there was a certain problem regarding the title, or more exactly the subtitle, of the book. There was no problem with “Race, Nation, Class,” but there was supposed to be a subtitle as well. Wallerstein proposed “Ambivalent Identities,” although I entertained certain reservations about that. It was not a matter of imposing my own view or position, since what interested me was also essentially the ambivalent political effects of nationalism: national liberation on one side, colonialism and imperialism on the other. And all of this was particularly interesting to me since from the perspective of Wallerstein – whose problematic was rooted in the history of the great movements of de-colonialisation in the Third World in the post-war years, from the 1950s through to the 1970s – nationalism appeared as an “anti-systemic” movement, to use his own terminology. There has always been a disagreement between us on this point, for I think that Wallerstein underestimates the risks of internal perversion that nationalism brings with it as a model or ideal of resistance to capitalist modernisation. All of this is naturally more relevant now than ever, and it is a problem that has always preoccupied me. This is why I have worked so much on Fichte. I have never shared the anti-German phobia of so many French intellectuals of republican sympathies, who believe they are universalists and can only see the tradition stemming from Herder, and later emphatically adopted by all the cultural nationalisms of Eastern Europe, as something diabolical, as irrationalism, vitalism, particularism, and so forth. But while I certainly do not share this phobia, I cannot simply regard nationalism as a liberating ideology, and I am very struck by the fact that this same debate is being restaged today on a larger scale in the context of postcolonial studies. When I debate with Dipesh Chakrabarty, I point out to him that what strikes me as so strange is that the critique of Western universalism which he has developed on the basis of an analysis of commodities, and of the philosophy of history, is one that derives all of its theoretical methods from German romanticism, and basically from Herder. So the question I ask him is: what exactly is so non-Western in all of this?

But to return in conclusion to Wallerstein, I was saying that he wanted to adopt “Ambivalent Identities” as the subtitle of our book, and I pointed out that this would not work well in French since people would either not understand the phrase at all or would actually misinterpret it. So I proposed “Identités ambiguës,” which came out in English of course as “Ambiguous Identities.” Wallerstein accepted the proposal, but obviously his own idea was not quite the same as mine, as I explain in the Preface: I was not thinking of the contradictory uses of the same national discourse, for example, but of the multiplicity and conflictual character that is internal to these collective identities.
3. Cosmopolitics and “Conflictual Democracy”

Fornari: We have spoken of nationalism, and of how nationalist ideologies are characterised in your view by a structural and irresolvable ambiguity, whether we think of the “anti-systemic” tendency of nationalism or of the opposite and specular tendency to promote the reactionary identitarian fantasies that are so feared and distrusted by republican thinkers. In your more recent writings, on the other hand, you have come to interpret globalisation as a radical way of renouncing utopian ideas, as a sort of “real universality” (to use your own terminology) that has nothing to do with an “intensive” and egalitarian form of universality. From your current perspective, is it still possible to speak of “cosmopolitanism” without falling back into simply utopian projections, or would it be preferable to appeal – as you have done in recent interviews – to a new form of “cosmopolitics”? In other words, on the basis of your current reflections on citizenship, on borders, on the edifice of Europe, are you not offering a critique of a certain tradition of classical cosmopolitanism?

Balibar: At the moment I am attempting to rethink the character of these different categories, beginning with the categories of democracy, citizenship, and probably communism as well. This is a question about which I have not had an opportunity to speak very much for some time now, and which has direct historical connections with the problem of internationalism in relation to the work of Marx and the Marxist heritage generally. Thus in order to answer your question, I have to take a step back, and yet also run ahead at the same time … The critique of cosmopolitanism, from my perspective, is not a purely negative one; on the contrary, this is a critique that seeks to determine the form in which a certain cosmopolitical tradition can still retain a meaning for today, and can still play a central political and philosophical role. One cannot therefore present my position simply as an attempt to repudiate cosmopolitanism altogether.

Fornari: That is why I referred here to the term “cosmopolitics,” which I have encountered in a number of your works, precisely in order to express your distance with regard to other contemporary forms of cosmopolitanism, like that defended by Habermas for example, which are still closely connected to the Enlightenment and Kantian paradigm.

Balibar: The Habermasian position is also an attempt to transform cosmopolitanism into what I call cosmopolitics, although Habermas too is obliged to reflect on the transformation that is produced when political institutions are essentially national in character, and when they are beginning to assume a
post-national character. I certainly do not wish to caricature Habermas’s position, especially since I believe that his work is very important, and that the public positions he has taken on a number of questions are very courageous and very instructive. But there are two things, to simplify matters a little, which leave me particularly unsatisfied about Habermas’s position, from both a conceptual and a historical point of view. In the first place, I think there is a fundamental and unresolved problem with his interpretation of globalisation, and in particular with the way in which he interprets the relativisation of the autonomy of nation states and the overcoming of the traditional system of national sovereignty. I say this because we have basically reached a moment when some of the intentions which lay at the heart of classical cosmopolitanism, and especially of Kantian cosmopolitanism, now have the means to be translated into reality, to be actually realised. And all of this can certainly be justified. And yet – simply to present my conclusion before introducing the relevant premises – I am tempted to claim exactly the opposite, namely, that the overcoming of national sovereignty neither creates the conditions for realising the utopian cosmopolitan idea (and I am not using the term “utopian” in a pejorative sense here), nor simply multiplies the obstacles that lie in the path of realising it, obstacles that might be merely empirical ones. I would argue, on the contrary, that this overcoming permits us to understand the complementary role that the cosmopolitan utopian idea used to play in relation to the system of national sovereignty, and thus to understand in what sense Kantian cosmopolitanism – and Enlightenment cosmopolitanism more generally, for it is also necessary to investigate the contradictions and internal differences of cosmopolitan thought – constituted a sort of complement and counterpart to the older system of nation states. For in the last analysis, there is a kind of solidarity between classical cosmopolitanism and national sovereignty. Kant himself was well aware of this, and this basically the reason why he moved away from the first version of his cosmopolitan approach – the version of 1784, composed before the French Revolution, under the title Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View, which envisages a sort of transition from the individual state to the universal state, to a world state – to the second version of his theory, which is expressed in the essay Towards Perpetual Peace and in the concluding paragraphs of the “Doctrine of Right” in the Metaphysics of Morals, where cosmopolitanism no longer represents the idea of a single state, but constitutes the ideal limit of the sovereignty of states, and thus relativises that sovereignty. It seems to me, therefore, that when the system of the absolute sovereignty of nation states enters into crisis (leaving aside for the moment the relationship of this system to European imperialism), as indeed this is happening today, then the cosmopolitanism that is its complement or counterpart, rather than being liberated and reinforced in the process,
also enters into crisis itself. Perhaps it is easier to demonstrate this with regard to internationalism than it is with regard to classical cosmopolitanism of the liberal kind, but it remains the case that there is an extremely close relationship between both of them. What has complicated matters in relation to the Kantian conception of cosmopolitan law – and Habermas knows this perfectly well and often speaks of it himself – is that the subsequent historical period has developed a kind of international law that did not exist before, and brought particular institutions of international law with it (the Society of Nations, the United nations, and many others besides). Thus the modern complement to the sovereignty of nation states is much more institutional in character, and assumes material forms which go far beyond what Kant called “hospitality.” But this does not alter the fact that this development is based upon a kind of absolutisation of the form of the nation state. My second problem with Habermas (which is connected with the first) is that, as a result, he is effectively forced to return from Kant’s later position to the one he formulated first. Habermas actually wishes to preserve what could be called the characteristic dimension of the later Kant’s philosophy of history, but precisely in order to envisage the overcoming of the form of the nation state he is obliged to resurrect and endorse the perspective Kant defended in 1784. We are thus confronted with the question of a Weltinnenpolitik, of a “world domestic policy,” so to speak. In an essay which is certainly meant ironically in many respects I suggested that the effects of this strange combination of utopianism and institutionalism are all too evident in Habermas’s approach to the question of a united Europe, the question concerning the unification of Europe as this was conceived and discussed some years ago. I am referring here to the idea on which he laid so much emphasis, and according to which the European Constitution would represent an intermediate stage between national politics and Weltinnenpolitik properly speaking, a “world domestic policy” where the public sphere is genuinely world wide. I wrote that, curiously enough, this reminds me of the way in which soviet Marxists used to defend with greater or lesser sincerity – and Habermas is certainly sincere – the idea of socialism in one country, and then of a broader socialist camp that would constitute a transitional intermediate phase between capitalism and communism through which we would have to pass. This example alone clearly indicates that the construction of an intermediate phase does not necessarily lead to the realisation of the desired objective. Naturally I am not saying that Habermas really shares this Soviet outlook, for it is quite evident that he does not, but I felt justified in pointing out that there is a similar difficulty in his own scheme since it too envisages a linear progression on the path of development.

But I shall finish with one further remark in this connection. I have spoken too much about Habermas: he is not close to me theoretically, but his
work is an increasingly indispensable point of reference for a whole range of important considerations that are unfolding today with regard to the issue of rights and the further extension of rights. And not only with regard to human rights. To some extent we are all Arendtians from this point of view, in the sense that what is at issue here is not so much human rights, but the rights of the citizen: rights of the citizen beyond the imperialism of national and political borders. Thus we are all in search of a public sphere, a space of political reciprocity with regard to rights and duties, in which individuals are not classified pure and simply in terms of their nationality, their membership of a particular state, and evidently even less in terms of their national origin. A whole range of such reflections are based, in some degree or other, on the perspective that has been articulated by Habermas. And here too – as in the case of many important thinkers, and most especially Hegel – there is a spectrum of interpretations. There is what we might rather flippantly call a Right-Habermasianism that is marked by a more conservative and traditionally liberal approach. And there is a Left-Habermasianism that evinces a more critical approach that encourages systematic investigation into the problems of a post-national constellation and the prospects of genuinely overcoming the framework of political nationalism. This is clearly the approach of Seyla Benhabib, with whom I share many central concerns, though hardly the same method. It is not the same with Sandro Mezzadra, and others with whom I have often discussed these matters, who starts on the contrary from the problem of our single interconnected world, does not defend an institutionalist perspective, and does not in any case endorse a juridical approach in Habermas’s sense. I believe that all of this is extremely pertinent, and I therefore ascribe all the more importance to a critique of what seems to me to be a fundamentally utopian element at the heart of the conception of cosmopolitanism, a critique that can liberate, by contrast, what we could call, as I have said, the problematic of cosmopolitics: a problematic of political action in the context of the social relations and institutional problems of our globalised world.

But we must do justice to Habermas, for his thought is always evolving. After the events of 9/11 he has introduced a number of corrections and modifications into his approach, and it would be highly instructive to continue the debate with him since he has acknowledged that the question of sovereignty was not as obsolete as he believed.

Fornari: I should like to remain with this issue a little longer, but turning specifically to that “phenomenology of borders” which constitutes I think a very important aspect of your continuing reflections today (the reformulation of universalism, the analysis of changes in our concepts and representations
of the “stranger,” the theoretical intervention in the question concerning the possible future of Europe). Can one say that an analysis like your own, which starts from the concept of the “border” rather than from “molar” institutions (which may be nation states or supra-national institutions) is an analysis that privileges the transnational over the postnational? Do you believe that this conceptual shift opens up significant critical potential?

Balibar: This is partly a semantic question. I have also spoken of the “postnational,” of the “postnational epoch,” in the general or generic sense of the epoch in which the absolute status of the “state as nation” has been put in question. There are other senses in which I am tempted to use the expression “postnational.” Around the time of the book Race, Nation, Class, which we have already mentioned, I remember writing something, not of course without specific reflection on the matter, but also in a slightly hypothetical form that presented certain subjective intuitions as material for further discussion. I suggested that the period in which we have entered since the end of de-colonialisation (which is not the end of the effects of colonialism and imperialism with respect to social relations and relations of power on a world-wide scale) was undoubtedly one when it was too early to know what political forms might replace the nation state, but also too late to develop nation states, in the classical sense, where they did not yet exist. By nation state in the classical sense I do not simply mean formal political examples of sovereignty, and not simply the fact of being represented at the United Nations and things of that kind. It also refers to the construction within specific national borders of the same kind of cultural hegemony and centralised state power that characterised the nation states of Europe in its classical phase, forms of organisation which in the final analysis remain the model in terms of which the nation state is still discussed today. I have certainly not abandoned this idea, but I have been obliged to acknowledge that it is not necessarily welcomed by interlocutors in the old “Third World” since it can create the impression that this is another way of continuing to frustrate their own aspirations: to contest Western imperialism and thus to acquire autonomy and independence, and ultimately power. On the other hand, it is also necessary to realise that this way of presenting the situation still involves a postulate of linear advance, of linear progress, which can no longer be sustained in the specific circumstances in which we find ourselves today: circumstances which have seen the emergence of new poles of power that are at once economic and military, and therefore inevitably cultural as well. It is possible to verify this claim: after all, China, India, Brasil, and other countries too, are perhaps great nation states, or super-nations, in our contemporary world. For this reason, one cannot simply replace the expres-
sion “postnational” with the expression “transnational.” The question of the post-national has yet to be posed in a really adequate fashion.

Fornari: You believe therefore that a perspective that is focussed on the transnational (in the manner of those studies, for example, which derive from an analysis of frontiers and boundaries, of processes of translation that transpire within and across such spaces: “border studies” or post-colonial studies) is not so different from – or rather, in the last analysis, is directed at the same object as – those perspectives that are focussed on the postnational condition, conceived as an overcoming of the post-Westfalian system of nation states?

Balibar: I think that the expression transnational basically has a double objective: a local and a global objective. The local objective lies in concentrating our attention on problems of law, of identity, of political action, and ultimately also on ethical problems, all of which are crystallised along the traces of frontiers which still exist today: along the traces of the frontiers and the paradoxical spaces which are organised around these frontiers, especially there where the frontiers are simultaneously frontiers of civilisation, as we say today, where they separate economic spaces of extremely unequal levels of development. In this connection I have come across a remarkable expression in a German economist (I believe it was Georg Vobruba). He described these frontiers as zones of décalage, of disparity in levels of prosperity (Wohlstandsgefälle). It is obvious that the Mediterranean, for example, is a zone of this kind. I have also been much encouraged in developing this perspective through the growing influence of the claims advanced by Samuel Huntington. Huntington describes these zones as “fault lines” and suggests that they are zones of inevitable war or conflict in the world we are entering today. While I certainly do not claim that they are zones of peace, I argue that they are precisely the zones in which cosmopolitics – and the practical internationalism of today – confronts at once the gravest challenges and the most pressing demands. But there is also another level, which is the global level: not only that of international institutions, but also that of movements for an alternative world. We are speaking in effect of a level of hypothetical convergence – or perhaps we should say of a utopian one – between two different lines of development. One concerns the evolution of international institutions, which today are increasingly transnational rather than merely international institutions: when the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund intervene in the workings of the Argentinian economy, or the economy of some other country, we are confronted with a transnational rather than an international question; and the questions relating to human rights are also transnational in character, as are the issues connected with humanitarian aid, and so on. Europe is not protected against
things of this kind, it is not automatically on the side of those that intervene, rather than on the side of those that become the objects of intervention. In any case, there is an whole range of problems here which certainly merits close consideration. Thus I was saying that we are facing the problem of convergence between the evolution of global institutions which are already transnational ones (whether we are speaking of economic institutions or international courts) and social movements, ideological movements, and, in the final analysis, political movements.

Of course, one could say that this is always the same story: those on the Left can never give up their dreams for the development of an alternative, quite different sort of world, one which remains merely embryonic. But in truth we are discussing the possible shape of such a world, and this shape changes and develops. After Porto Alegre, the World Social Forums have come to serve as important meeting places for engaged individuals of every kind, from feminists from every part of the world to ecologists, to representatives of the media and the press. Examples such as *Le Monde diplomatique* began to present themselves as “organisers,” in the sense in which Lenin claimed it was necessary to create the kind of political paper capable of organising social movements in the context of an entire country. Thus *Le Monde diplomatique* deliberately attempted to become an organising agency on the political level, that is, a forum for political discussion for what I have described as an “alter-globalising” perspective. It did not work out after all, but the result was not entirely fruitless: the movements in question have not disappeared, and the problem of communication and convergence has been explicitly posed. The Internet alone can certainly not create a public sphere on a world scale, but it is evidently a significant technological resource which political movements and transnational opinion-forming movements are capable of using with advantage. Thus I deploy the term “transnational” to describe a range of phenomena, some of which arise from below and some of which proceed from above, or rather: some of which concern the logic of institutions and some of which concern the logic of conflict and contestation. It is in this way that I try and participate with others in reflecting upon the hypothetical convergence between both.

Fornari: Your description reminds me of the dialectic between movements and institutions that you expressed in a “formalised” way when you spoke of a certain “theorem of Machiavelli,” of an exemplary kind of “conflictual democracy” grounded in an unstable equilibrium between sites of conflict and institutions, or rather in a permanent reproduction of conflict and its concomitant translation into institutional forms. This schema seems extremely clear and pertinent in historical terms as well, on the level of the evolution
of the European nation state, but I ask myself how it could be translated onto a supranational or postnational level. Or, in very simple terms, even if I am fairly clear about what we may call the “constitutive” aspect of this issue on a global or transnational level, I am by no means so clear about what the institutional aspect of all this might be (with regard to the EU, the UN, International Law Courts, etc).

Balibar: Indeed, you read matters closely, and put your finger on the sensitive point here. In effect, I was encouraged and motivated by a book that is not very well known outside the immediate French context, and indeed is now almost completely forgotten in France as well, except for those specialists in political science with a particular interest in the history of institutions in 20th century France. I am thinking of a book on the French Communist Party by Georges Lavau, which I always cite when I talk about “conflictual democracy” and the “theorem of Machiavelli.” Since I was myself a member of this party for twenty years, albeit a critical member, the questions he raised could hardly fail to interest me. I do not remember exactly when the book was published, probably in the 1980s, but I should have to check whether it came out before or after 1989, although I think it was actually before. It was a book that attempted to understand the evolution of the Communist Party after the Union de la gauche came to power in 1981. Lavau explained how the world of the French Left rested on a precarious and extremely suspect equilibrium of forces between the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. This was an equilibrium in which each of them had agreed a pact in the hope, or the intention, of dominating the other, or, in a sense, of devouring or incorporating the other. Towards the end of the 1970s I had participated myself in certain militant movements which could be described as “post-68,” in which we attempted to ascribe greater importance to democracy from below in the processes of the Union de la gauche. These attempts did not achieve very much, indeed they didn’t really achieve anything. In the end we had a government of two rival parties, and the communists were certainly the losers. One can look at all of this from a purely tactical point of view, and claim that Mitterand was far more intelligent than the leaders of the French Communist Party. But in reality it was necessary to consider in the light of a much broader historical phenomenon, one that was only gradually comprehended, the general phenomenon of the declining importance of the communist parties in Western Europe. This is precisely what Lavau tried to explain, and he thereby attempted to understand the power of the French Communist Party during the 1970s and that of the Italian Communist Party. And he formalised his explanation specifically by reference to Machiavelli. What he was thinking about in this connection is something that we all
basically knew, and can be explained in different ways: the combination of the revolutionary language of the French Communist Party – or, rather than the revolutionary language, of the revolutionary aspirations of the communist militants – with the entirely reformist policies that resulted in practice. Instead of interpreting these things simply as a consequence of betrayal, of hypocrisy, of a deliberate double language, and so forth, Lavau explained them by arguing that the political structures themselves exhibited a conflictual logic, a logic that was simple but also paradoxical. And this paradoxical logic basically corresponded to a logic which Machiavelli had described in a truly remarkable fashion in the famous chapters of his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy* where he examines the function of the institution of the tribunes in Roman politics. Lavau called this the “tribunal” function: the tribunal function does not simply consist in the fact (too simple and insufficient on its own) that it allowed a specific form of political representation to the people who are oppressed and always in principle capable of rebellion or revolution, and thus succeeded in “domesticating” the people by incorporating them within a network of institutions. We are referring rather to the unstable equilibrium between the capacity for institutional integration and the capacity for contestation, opposition, or radical antagonism on the part of the popular majority. This schema presents aspects of enormous interest, with many advantages, but it also has certain limitations. One limitation which has not been sufficiently recognised or examined, and of which both Livy and Machiavelli were well aware – indeed Machiavelli expresses it very clearly – is that it was Roman imperial conquest that permitted the institutionalisation of internal conflict. On a quite different level, one could say something rather similar about the case of France and Italy, but I prefer to bracket this problem here. The other difficulty, the other unsettled question which has greatly preoccupied, and not by chance, much political philosophy, not only in France, was the necessity of reformulating the concept of class struggle in new terms. In other words, it was finally necessary to introduce a fundamental dissymmetry between the objectives of the two classes into the way in which the class struggle was conceived. I believe that this is the deepest, but also the most difficult, aspect of the question. This dissymmetry is present in Marx himself. Marx never claimed that the working class had the same objectives as the bourgeois class; on the contrary, he maintained that the objectives of the proletariat are quasi “mythical,” if not mystical, in character. The objective of the proletariat is not to create a new form of class domination, but to eliminate all class domination. And this is what Machiavelli said when he claimed that the rich wish to oppress and the poor wish not to be oppressed. All of this indicates that for him the institution of the tribunes represented a kind of permanent corrective which prevents a
certain form of class domination from becoming an absolute tyranny: a kind of democratic corrective in the functioning of institutions. This is an idea which can appear, according to circumstances, as either very limiting – for in the last analysis nothing changes in the system which is thereby permitted to perpetuate itself indefinitely – or as extremely challenging, as pointing far beyond what we can observe today in the functioning of existing democracies since it implies that democracy cannot be grounded in consensus.

Fornari: Does this critique of the notion of democracy based on consensus not bring your own position into proximity with the paradigm of “radical democracy” defended by theorists such as Ernesto Leclau and Chantal Mouffé?

Balibar: I have the impression that Chantal and I actually share very similar preoccupations, and that we employ conceptual tools, at once philosophical and political, that are much the same in certain respects, and are designed to articulate what I have called “conflictual democracy” and what she has described as “agonistics.” One of our common points of reference here is obviously Foucault: not only the Foucault who was so interested in the notion of “micropolitics,” but also the Foucault who pioneered an analytic of power and the relations of force. And then there is also Gramsci, who offers an anchorage in the Marxist tradition, or alongside that tradition, who was so concerned, not by chance, with providing a re-reading Machiavelli, even if Gramsci’s objectives were certainly not the same. And finally there is Carl Schmitt. The difficulty here, it seems to me, is not the supposed unacceptability of drawing on a thinker like Schmitt, or the thought that, as a Nazi, he was also stupid. On the contrary, precisely to the extent that his philosophy was indeed elaborated in the middle of what we can the European “civil war” of the 20th century, it furnishes a fundamental resource for theoretical reflection on the significance of these events and the effects of this civil war, and especially so if we wish to oppose in the most radical way the kind of political perspective defended by Schmitt himself. No, my real difficulty here springs from the impression that Chantal has exploited a somewhat sanitized version of Schmitt’s thought. By this I mean that she has essentially adopted the critique of political consensus, that is, the idea that there is no politics without conflict. It is clear that this idea is indeed central in Schmitt, but in a rather surprising way Chantal tends to ignore Schmitt’s true objective, which was precisely that of neutralising conflict within the political space of the state in order to project conflict outwards instead. I do not believe that it is possible to take over one half of Carl Schmitt while passing over the other half in silence. In other words, it seems to me that Schmitt’s thought is far more antinomic and, to put it bluntly, far more violent than Chantal
wishes to admit. This said, we are speaking of a secondary exegetical ques-
tion here, and it is obvious that the reasons why we are both interested in Schmitt have nothing to do with the notion that either of us could be called “Schmittians” in the ideological sense of the term. But they have everything to do with the analytical significance of the problems expressly raised by Schmitt within the historical context of 20th century European thought. I certainly do not claim to speak for both of us in this connection, but I main-
tain – as I have argued in the Preface to the French translation of Schmitt’s *Leviathan* – that what renders Schmitt unavoidable for us is not his critique of liberalism in general, but the fact that the liberal societies in which we live have a violent and conflictual reverse side to them which cannot be denied if we are to think the space of the political in an adequate fashion. That is precisely why we must address the thought of those who have actually taken this conflictual character seriously, even if they espoused a reactionary and anti-democratic form of thought themselves.

I have said all this by way of returning to your original question, which asked how we might translate what I called the “theorem of Machiavelli” (or “conflictual democracy”) onto a supranational scale. This remains an open question, and I am certainly not the only one who has reflected upon it. There is an entire current of thought and political philosophy today – which we could describe as “post-Marxist” – which has become Machiavellian in the sense I have explained, that no longer believes in a linear scheme with regard to the transition from capitalism to socialism, and from socialism to communism. Yet it still asks the question as to how we are to understand the function and the significance of antagonism, and thus of popular struggles, in the functioning of our current societies and political systems. But to return to what you asked me, and to conclude our discussion on this question: the extreme difficulty of transposing the “theorem of Machiavelli” to a future situation, one “yet to come” – such as a constructive European contribution to, and a fortiori a democratisation of, international institutions – lies, or so at least it seems, in the necessity of addressing both sides of the problem at the same time. One cannot exclusively develop the conflictual side, and assign legitimacy to this alone, for it is equally necessary to imagine institutions of public “power,” as it were, to which the “common people,” and the “tribu-
nal of the people,” can bring a democratic corrective. I therefore find myself moving in a circle here, and I would attempt to argue that this is a virtuous rather than a vicious circle. Thus as far as the role of Europe is concerned, I have always been convinced that Europe will survive, if it proves to be more democratic than the nation states in which we currently live. I certainly do not believe in the possibility of developing effective and legitimate supranational and transnational institutions that are even less democratic than the
system of nation states. The fundamental difficulty is clearly that we shall have to create such supranational or transnational not from above, that is to say, starting from the vantage point of the state, but by starting from the fact of conflict itself, from the social movements involved. One may claim that this remains a highly unrealistic perspective to take. I do not indeed offer it as a solution, but I persist in reflecting on it nonetheless.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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