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INTERVIEW | *ENTREVISTA* | ENTREVISTA

AN INTERVIEW WITH WARREN MONTAG: NOTES ON ALTHUSSER, PÊCHEUX, AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Interviewer **Luciana Iost Vinhas***

In this interview, Warren Montag explores his intellectual journey, detailing his engagement with Althusserian Marxism, his interactions with key theorists like Michel Pêcheux and Pierre Macherey, and the development of discourse analysis. Although initially influenced by Lukács' Marxism, he gradually shifted toward Althusser's theoretical framework, focusing on the concepts of contradiction and overdetermination. A key theme of the discussion is Pêcheux's critique of Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* essay. While acknowledging its significance, Pêcheux believed the text leaned toward functionalism, making revolt appear structurally impossible. Montag argues that this critique is crucial for understanding Pêcheux's later work, particularly *Oser Penser*, where he seeks to reconcile discourse theory with historical materialism. He also highlights Pêcheux's emphasis on the instability of discourse—how language, due to its inherent performativity, is always exposed to errors, reversals, and reconfigurations.

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An important aspect of Montag's experience with Pêcheux was his translation of *Discourse: Structure or Event?*, the last text written by Pêcheux. Through this process, he gained invaluable insights into Pêcheux's thought process and theoretical influences, particularly his engagement with Althusser, Lacan, and Spinoza. Montag describes Pêcheux as an intellectual deeply immersed in discourse analysis, yet burdened by internal conflicts, as seen in his use of pseudonyms and his ambivalence toward academic recognition.

This interview raises significant theoretical questions for discourse analysts in Brazil, particularly those concerning the materialist foundations of discourse analysis. Additionally, it offers valuable information about Michel Pêcheux that helps us understand not only his intellectual work but also his personal dilemmas. The questions were sent in advance, and although the interview was not conducted in a structured manner, Professor Montag generously addressed every topic throughout the conversation. This discussion serves as a strong reaffirmation of the relevance of Althusser and Pêcheux in materialist philosophy while also highlighting Montag's important theoretical contributions within the Brazilian academic debate.

L. Vinhas:
First of all, I would like to thank you for receiving me here. It's a great honor for me to be able to talk to you. I have started reading your texts on law, and then I moved to the texts on literature. So, the questions concern both law and literature. We can start with the first question and then see how things go.

W. Montag:
I would say it's about how I got interested in Althusser. I would put the Pêcheux question at the end into that question, because they are related, and Macherey as well. As I've said in a couple of other interviews, when I first became interested in Marxism, and I mean as an activist, as well as theoretically, I had an orientation that was more centered on Lukács and "History and class consciousness", especially. I was very influenced by "La societé du spectacle", by Guy Debord, which is kind of a text that appeals to students, and I was very taken by Lukács' analysis of what he called positivism, which foreclosed the possibility of understanding the totality. For him, in that period, the totality is, as Hegel said, "the truth is in the whole". And Lukács' reading of bourgeois philosophy was that it foreclosed the possibility of understanding the totality. It was, in a certain way, designed, not by someone's intention, but it functioned in a way that made it impossible to understand the totality and the interrelations between different parts of the social whole. I was very taken by that and also, from a literary point of view, I was quite taken with "The theory of the novel", his early text. I mean, it was written a few years before "History and class consciousness"[1]. And it was similar in some ways. Now, I understand it was, in certain ways, traditional German historicism, in which he posited a Greek world, very idealized for him, which is the world in which the totality is available at any moment to all people and they inhabit the totality versus a later time under capitalism when the totality becomes unthinkable, and only very critical people who have a distance from bourgeois ideology could even imagine the problem of recapturing the totality in some way.

So, I was very taken with all of that, and because of the impoverished nature of US Marxism people talked about Althusser, but almost exclusively negatively. This is very different from England, UK, for whatever reason – probably the New Left Review and things like that. The only text I had read by Althusser, initially, was "Marxism and humanism", and the thing I focused on was the critique of ideology – which now I can see very clearly, I didn't understand. But, like many people, the idea that ideology is eternal was something that I thought was an outrage. It is some kind of Stalinist limit on knowledge or something, but I was wrong, obviously. And I just sort of, in a very stupid, careless way, rejected it. And then, just a few years later, I started reading Althusser again with Gary Goshgarian, who is a translator of Althusser into English. We were together in Los Angeles and we started reading Althusser together. We started with the phenomenology, just to get the basic, and I realized that it's quite different from what Marxism has to be: an operational philosophy. And then I read "Contradiction and overdetermination". I didn't understand everything. I was very open to Freud and that sort of thing, but I thought: there's something extraordinary here that struck me as true, but I didn't know why I felt that way. And I began to see the kind of complexity that Althusser was dealing with. It was far beyond Lukács. But I thought this is somebody that is looking at contradiction, and the kind of contradiction that is necessary to

[1] Note: "History and class consciousness" was published in 1923, whereas "The Theory of the novel" was published in 1916.

Marxism. It's not a beautiful, formal contradiction with its one side and the other, but overdetermined on that. And even though I really didn't understand it completely or that well, I knew that there was something very important there. So, I opened up my eyes to that and I think Goshgarian as well.

And so, we went on to read other things, and then we also read Macherey. This was going on the mid 70s, and Macherey's book ["Pour une théorie de la production littéraire"] had been out, not in English yet, but it was out in French in 1966, so we read that. And we were both literature students so we were very interested in how that would work in English. I think we really did understand it – not everything, but much of what he was saying made sense. He has a critique of the approaches to literature that existed up to his time. It really was quite extraordinary, because it was both a critique of the normative approach of literature, where you decide what's good and what's bad and why it isn't good enough or something (and Marxism was very caught up in the US in that kind of thing). It was more about denouncing than analyzing literary texts if they were bad or something, and, on the other hand, the various critiques of interpretation, looking for something hidden in the text, which was hugely important for everything else in Althusser. And we kept reading. I got a fairly good familiarity with that literature.

Now I'm jumping ahead to tell a story, but it's a funny story. It has lessons for younger people. Some years later, when I went to France for an extended period, I did something very naive – a very American naiveté. I thought: well, I'll just write to these people, and, of course, they'll respond or something. And they didn't respond. So, I wrote to three people: Élisabeth Roudinesco, who was very close to Althusser and was a Lacanian-althusserian type, very close to Pêcheux; Paul Henry, who didn't respond and I've never met him; and Michel Pêcheux. So, the only one who answered, and it was by chance, in a way, was Roudinesco, because she needed, for some reason, someone in Los Angeles to do some research for the history of psychoanalysis in France. I had to look up something, and that was my entree, in some way. She took me out to lunch, explained everything she needed and answered a lot of questions about Lacan and all that, and then we went back to her place, and I was about to say goodbye, and she said, "Well, who else did you want to see?". And I said, "Michel Pêcheux". Then she walked over to the telephone, dialed a number, and then said "Michel". I started to have anxiety, because I wasn't prepared for this. And she said, "Why didn't you respond to this nice man? He's a nice young man". Then she handed me the phone, and I was very anxious. And then he said, "Well, I'm very busy right now, because I'm going to a conference in the US in a couple of weeks where I have to give a paper, and I haven't written it yet. How well do you know my work?". And I said, "Well, I've read everything that I could find". And I named all the works. And he said, "How well do you know Althusser's work?". And I said, "I've read everything". And then he started asking me about Hegel, Lacan, Saussure, and I was answering the questions. Then the final question, I'll never forget this, he said, "Now, if you had to describe the appendix to part one of Spinoza's ethics, what would you say?". It was like an oral exam. And then I said, "It's a critique of teleology". He said, "That's right. Now, can you come over to my house and help me translate this talk into English?". And I did. So, I went over there for a week. I was at his house at least 10 hours a day, and he was writing in one room, and then his wife would bring me, page by page, his text, which I had to translate. I had done political translation, but it's not the same. It was not terrible, but it wasn't great, either. And so, I translated it, and he understood me anyway. And he said, "Okay, in return for what you're doing, you can ask me any question about anything in the intellectual world in Paris or any other things like that". For me that was like gold. So, I asked him a million stupid questions about Lacan, but it was very useful. He told me many things about Althusser, which are very important. This is like 1983, so, even though he didn't really have relations with Althusser anymore, he had read the aleatory materialism stuff, which nobody knew about at that time. And he said to me, "You know, there's a Nietzschean-lucretian element, or strain, in Althusser's thought that people didn't recognize". And it's true, even in "Contradiction and overdetermination". You can talk about the aleatory there, and the play of forces, factors, etc. That was enough to help me. I really could see Althusser in a different way after that. But it was also sad, because this was shortly before his suicide – and I didn't know that he was depressed or anything. On the last day, he was driving me back to the place I was staying, which wasn't that far away from him, it was late at night, and he pulled over to the side where he said, "I have to ask you a question: do you think I should give up intellectual labor in favor of manual labor?". I said, "No, why would you do that?". Because I had done something like that myself. That's when I was a young militant. And I talked to him about it, but I said, "Of course you shouldn't do that, you're in the middle of all this extremely interesting work. Why would you do something like that?". He wasn't serious, exactly, but I understand it was an expression of a self-destructive urge. And I was quite surprised. I understand it's a complicated situation, but he didn't seem incredibly depressed. He was quite productive, and was a very friendly person, very opened, had a good sense of humor. But he committed suicide about four-five months later. Roudinesco

wrote me and told me about that. So that was sad and dramatic, but it was a very good exchange, and that's how I came to translate the text ["Discourse: Structure or Event?"] of the conference "Marxism and the interpretation of culture".

Then through Roudinesco, the next year, I met Macherey, and I was supposed to meet Althusser, but it turned out that, unfortunately for me, his manic episodes, which were very severe, very psychotic overtones, were worsened at the beginning of the Summer, in June. I went over to see her, she said, "I'm sorry. He's having a bad episode". She played on her answering machine this old message from Althusser, and he was talking very rapidly. I could barely even understand what he was saying (something about the World Cup). It was completely insane. I didn't meet Althusser, but that's when I got to know Macherey. Then I translated something by him on Balzac not too long after that, and he liked it. One of the things that people don't exactly understand is something that Balibar has put to me in a very particular way. He used to say, "It's not as if you have to pass a test for us to accept you", is what he meant. But that's exactly what happened, if you think of the Pêcheux exam that he put me through. You have to show, no matter how much you like them or love their work or whatever. For Pêcheux and for Macherey I passed the test. And then even Balibar.

After that, I had to go through his test, and I gave a talk on Spinoza and Althusser at Stony Brook University in New York, at a conference on Althusser with very interesting people there. Just before I was going to speak, I said, "Well, it's very influenced by you [Balibar] and Pierre Macherey". He said, "Well, we'll see, we'll see how you do". It was very intimidating. I found out that if you sit next to him at a conference, it's kind of dangerous, because he'll talk in the middle of somebody else's presentation. He didn't do something like that with me, but he was saying, "Oh yes, that's right". He's saying this out loud as I was speaking! He was looking at me and saying: "Yeah, he's right!". But he liked it and I was in after that, I was accepted.

I've translated a number of things by all of them, including Althusser, Macherey, Balibar, and Pêcheux, and I had some correspondence with his widow, Angélique Pêcheux. For "Décalages"[2], we did that multiple translation of "Oser penser", which I really liked. It's a late piece, very late for him, but I really like it. I didn't do the translation, but I was very happy to put that out there. And it's hard. Pêcheux's work, as Macherey said, is quite difficult, because he is mingling together a number of fairly distinct approaches, disciplines, that sort of thing. And you have to know theories of syntax, general transformational grammar, etc., to really understand at least a lot of his work, and then you have to know the philosophical stuff. There's a kind of foreboding quality, because it's very overwhelming and not easy to follow. So, in certain ways, it has prevented his work to be taken seriously, which is unfortunate. But you can see that's not an accident. I don't want to get into a psychoanalysis of Michel Pêcheux, but he wrote under pseudonym, which is also very weird, and I asked people about it, and they said there's no reason that he had to do that. It wasn't like he was going to be repressed or something, especially in that period, and he was coming from Althusser, but it was part of his, let's say, mental problems, wanting to hide in certain ways. But he's a huge influence on me. And there are many things that I still think of when I think about it: his way of thinking, which is very close to Althusser. All of them have their own sort of version or interest in what's in Althusser, but I very much identify with him in that way, and I agree that his work needs to be better known, which is not easy, because of the nature of the work. So, I think to try to make it accessible is a big thing, because it's amazing. I think he's put together the beginning of a sort of foundation for looking at discourse – what is discourse and what do we mean by that. I think it's very valuable. And I hope there'll be more of that.

And Macherey, it's very similar. He's written a ton of stuff, and I think it's more accessible. I mean, it's not easy. He's done a tremendous amount of work on Spinoza, which is very important, but I think also his work on literature. He has actually two books on Proust, more recently on Jules Verne, which is also very interesting and different from what he said in his first book, "À quoi pense la littérature?". I think he's an extremely powerful thinker. In the book I edited with Audrey Wasser on Macherey and literary theory ["Pierre Macherey and the case of literary production"], there is a very long interview with Macherey, which is very good, and a couple of his essays, including on symptomatic reading written later. And then I have a piece in there called, "What do we mean when we speak of the surface of a text?", which tries to make Macherey relevant to current discussions about literature in the US, which are, in my view, fairly stupid, but you have to deal with it.

[2] *Décalages: an Althusser studies journal.* Issue number 4, volume 1, of the journal has a dossier intitled "Michel Pêcheux", which presents the original manuscript "Oser penser", in French, and, also, the translation of the text into English, Portuguese, and Spanish: https://decalagesjournal.org/volume-1-issue-4/.

L. Vinhas:
Can I ask you more questions concerning Pêcheux? So, the first question is related to the translation process of "Discourse: Structure or Event?". You said that he was writing in one room and you were translating in the other room. Did you have the opportunity to talk to him during this process?

W. Montag:
Yes, I did. And it raised a very interesting question, because his English is quite good. I'm pretty sure we spoke French, but his English was very good, so we got into some arguments, because he had maybe a slightly incorrect idea about some idioms, which is inevitable, and I was saying, "Well, that isn't exactly what it means", or something. He was very friendly. We had some discussions or differences, and I did make some changes that later I undid when it was reprinted, because even at that time, I knew they were wrong, but I didn't want to fight with him. It's great to have the writer with you in one way, but in another way, it's not great, unless they're absolutely fluent in the language. He wasn't bad, I mean, there are many people who would be much worse. However, there were some mistakes in the first version, but when it was reprinted I went over it again and made some changes. I would say he was helpful, because if I didn't understand something, he would explain it to me and give me something like "I'm referring to x" or some philosopher, psychoanalyst, whatever. And from Pêcheux I learned about Jean-Claude Milner, whose work I didn't know before, and he thought very highly of him. And I think very highly of some of his things, and, of course, I don't agree with his attack on Spinoza, and he's very Zionist, if I could put it that way, and I'm not Zionist – I'm Jewish, but not Zionist. But Roudinesco is part of that problem as well. It's a story about racism in France, really, we can talk about that later.

L. Vinhas:
About Pêcheux and the text, you said something earlier about Aleatory Materialism. Do you think that he was influenced by that text from Althusser when he was writing this text he presented here in the US?

W. Montag:
To some extent. You can see it in something like "Oser penser". I don't want to say that he had some sort of revelation after reading the edit. What was published in French was François Matheron's selections from a messy, crazy manuscript. Althusser explains in his autobiography, without mentioning Pêcheux, but it was about him: his own father had been institutionalized. He said to Althusser, the one time he went to visit him in the hospital after the murder of Hélène, "I can't come again, it's too painful, it's too traumatic". I don't think he had a direct relation, but my sense is that he developed that before Althusser wrote that manuscript, and he used the word *aleatory* in certain texts, like on Machiavelli. I mean, as you can see from François Matheron, he replaced words like *contingency* with the *aleatory*, but the concept was there, and it was there, as Pêcheux said, in "Contradiction and overdetermination". It's not something new, really. That element was always there in Machiavelli. I've seen, I've gone to the archive many times. I looked at Althusser's notes on Lucretius and Epicurus, and he has pages and pages of notes that are from maybe the mid-70s, because one of his students, named Francis Worff, did a book which is practically impossible to find now on Lucretius and Epicurus, and a lot of it is probably from Althusser. You can see he was interested in that stuff at that time, because there are letters and things like that.

The other thing I should tell you, which is kind of interesting, is that when I went to see Macherey in 1995 he was in Lille. He was teaching at the university in Lille, and we went to lunch. We went back to his house, and he said, "I've got some Althusser manuscripts and things. Would you like to see them?". I said, "Sure". So, he brings out a couple of boxes, and Macherey is very organized, almost obsessional. If you go to his house, everything is absolutely the opposite of the way I am. Everything is in order, alphabetical order, nothing is out of place, and these boxes were like somebody had just thrown all these papers in there. So that was weird. I had gone to the archive [IMEC], and I knew what they had. Among his things, there was Althusser's proposal for a course or a seminar on Spinoza that they absolutely did not have at the archive. I said, "Wow, this is kind of a discovery". And there are other things on the theoretical conjuncture, which was an important thing in the mid-60s for them. And Macherey said, "Look, I don't need all this, why don't you just take it all?". And I said, "I can't do that". And he said, "No, no, I insist", and he was very firm. And so, he took these boxes and just dumped them into a big plastic bag, and there were two big bags full of the stuff, and I had to take the train back to Paris and all that. And so, I said, "Are you sure?". And he said, "I want you to have them". That's it. He walked me to the train station and I went back to Paris. I called my friends, and they came over. We started sorting through everything. It was like a treasure trove

of things. So that was a big deal that caused all kinds of trouble with the archive, because there's a long, complicated story, but there was a big sort of antagonism between François Matheron and Moulier-Boutang and the Althusser people. So, François got very mad at me, because he thought I was plotting. It caused trouble, but we ended up publishing a number of things. They were quite good. There's that piece "On Genesis" that we published, I think, in the first issue of "Décalages", which is part of that. And this shows that he was doing aleatory materialism in 1966. From that I could see that Pêcheux was really referring to a part of Althusser's thought that probably always existed in some way. Because if you look at "Contradiction and overdetermination" and if you look at Lenin's writings from 1917 you can see this aleatory argument: if we didn't have all these factors that converged, the revolution could never have happened. And he even says, I quoted this thing a million times: "It was like a miracle". If I believed in miracles, I would say, this is a miracle, that all these things combined by chance, and, including weather and events that had nothing to do with the Russian situation, and that was very important, extremely important for Marxism. So anyway, that's my amusing story.

L. Vinhas:
It's very important to know all these things, because when we study Pêcheux in Brazil, we are kind of distant from them and sometimes we imagine how things happened, how theory was produced. We can relate this to the pseudonym that Pêcheux used during the first texts that he wrote. One of the things that people say is that he was writing a thesis in the social psychology department, and maybe it would be contradictory to what he was writing about in his first texts.

W. Montag:
I asked Balibar and Macherey about that, and they said that wasn't true. They were just as vulnerable. This is "Cahiers Marxistea-Léninistes": if you look at who published there, these are the stars of the French scene in the 60s. There was no threat. He may have imagined or tried to justify it like that, but there was no reason. Nobody else did that. Althusser wrote that anonymous thing, which is not the same thing as pseudonym, about the Chinese Cultural Revolution. But he didn't write under pseudonyms. And Althusser had his own problems with that sort of thing. He probably would have liked to have written under a pseudonym, but he also wanted the recognition. It's ridiculous for someone who's a communist to be writing under a pseudonym unless there's enormous repression or something, which obviously there was not in 1960's France. So, there's no good reason. I think it's something that's just his own problems with identity and being who he was and all that. It's purely about that. I think also his writing with other people, which I think was not only legitimate, but it accurately reflected that he worked with them, but sometimes I think it was a way of hiding, of concealing his role in writing this stuff. Maybe it was generous to bring other people, but also it may have been a way of diluting his own role and what happened. I think it didn't affect his work. But maybe I mean, as I say, I shouldn't put it that way, because I think the difficulty of his work has a relationship to his ambivalence about the recognition, about being seen as an important figure, which he both wanted and didn't want at the same time, and it caused him anxiety. And either way, if he started to fade from interest or from the scene or something, he felt bad. But, if there was too much attention, he didn't want that either. I think it's mainly his own conflicts which both drove him but also inhibited him in other ways. So, I would see it that way.

L. Vinhas:
There is a researcher in Brazil, a professor who wrote her thesis in the beginning of the 90s. She is a psychoanalyst and she analyzes some of the texts Pêcheux wrote. She talks about the appendix to "Les vérités de La Palice", which was written in 78, and she says that, in that text, Pêcheux says "Oser penser…" as a movement related to Althusser: it was a way of distancing himself from Althusser[3].

W. Montag:
In some way, yes, because he was very critical and correctly, in my view, of the functionalism of the "Ideology and State Apparatuses" essay. He felt that, as he said very explicitly, Althusser had basically made revolt unthinkable. What's complicated about that is that it's true about the published version, but the original version, which is published under the name "Sur la reproduction", has sections on revolt and revolution, not only the sections, but even within the sentences of the section of ideology that refer to resistance, revolt, disturbing the reproduction instead of making it possible, they were all removed, so you have every single reference to resistance

[3] This reference is to Nina Leite's Doctoral thesis, entitled "O acontecimento na estrutura. O real da língua na teorização sobre o discurso: a hipótese do inconsciente", which was defended at UNICAMP in 1993. Her thesis was published by Campo Matêmico under the title "Psicanálise e Análise do Discurso: o acontecimento na estrutura".

and revolt and revolution removed by Althusser. And why? I talked to Étienne Balibar extensively about this, and I don't know why. I have some vague thoughts about May 68 or something, but it's very strange. The first version had all these references, and then he took them out. Maybe he didn't want to say that publicly, but Pêcheux writes as if he didn't even know – and I know this is not true – as if he didn't know what the original was. I know that he did know, and he was the one who pressed Althusser to add the appendix to the ideology essay, which says, "Oh, but there's always class struggle, by the way", but it doesn't have a place in the system. And Pêcheux was very concerned, as he says in the appendix to "Les vérités de la Palice", about this functionalist temptation in Althusser, which is there certainly in that essay, and I think in that sense, he was continuing to criticize him, because Althusser never rectified that. He never changed it. He never said that it was a mistake and Althusser was perfectly capable of self-criticism, and he was quite accepting of it. But he didn't do that with that essay, and I think that is both pointing out that there's a functionalist danger in that text, but also why he borrows these words from the Chinese Cultural Revolution – "dare to struggle, dare to win. It's always right to rebel against reactionaries". These I believe are the things from Lin Biao's initial proposal for the cultural revolution in 66 before it really started. This too is like he's going back to the days of the UJCML [Union des Jeunesses Communistes Marxistes-Léninistes], that sort of thing, this kind of Maoism, or maybe even La gauche proletariénne, in some way. Now that I'm talking to you about this, the very idea of becoming a manual laborer, which he said to me, he does not say this publicly, goes back to the kinds of debates and the conflicts they had within the UJCML, which I don't think he was a member of, but he knew about these. They were all pressured to get a job in industry. Some people like Robert Linhardt did – a student of Althusser, who wrote the book that Pêcheux always refers to, "L'établi". So Pêcheux keeps going back to those days: it was a time when they really thought revolution was very possible, and people went into the factories, and it wasn't a disaster really. I mean, it's never perfect. But he was kind of fixated on that moment and I think that's what's going on. It's a critique of Althusser openly, not unfriendly or unfair. What is the relationship between that and aleatory materialism? The ISA ["Ideology and State Apparatuses"] essay is the opposite of aleatory materialism. It doesn't even factor in the possibility of something like the eruption of the aleatory, which is constant, like capitalism, as we know, is some stable system. That's like some fantasy that you read in The Wall Street Journal. And so, I think those critiques are absolutely right, especially that essay, which is so important for Pêcheux, because it was sort of the framework, but it had serious problems with it. And I think that's right. The dominant reading, as I've said before, was like the reading of "Discipline and punishment", by Foucault: there's no resistance, there are powers everywhere, and didn't even take those powers seriously. But you can't rebel and it's an all-powerful system. And, neither one was really saying that in some way, but Althusser especially came very close to creating a system without even the possibility of revolt, or making it very unlikely. He couldn't explain what happens with a disorder of capitalism, which is not some perfect machine. So, I think he was concerned about that, and he's using this somewhat dated language to say "Oser penser", "Dare to rebel". Nobody was saying that in 1970: it was the opposite. That was the time of the new philosophers and that was a very big pressure on him. I remember all of them because Althusser murdered his wife, at a time when everybody's attacking Marxism. You have all kinds of people saying, "You see, this is what Marxism, whatever it leads to", or something. And there they felt under attack. And it wasn't just criticism, but people ridiculed them, and it was like, "Oh, this is this old bullshit that nobody believes". And it was very demoralizing. And for Pêcheux especially, I think. Balibar and Macherey were better able. I mean, they were depressed, definitely, but they were better able to deal with that, I think. And they went to Spinoza as a kind of tactical maneuver, and it was very important, worked out well. For him, it was very difficult, I would say. And he told me that personally.

So, I think that's important, but I think it is a critique of Althusser for sure. I don't know if I would say it's distancing, because he was very committed to Althusser's thought and the project, this collective project. Balibar and Macherey don't speak in the same way exactly, but there's a common project that they're still working on. A lot of this is about Spinoza. They're very close in that way. And I think Pêcheux felt the same way. There's a project that he wants to keep going. Balibar had his own criticisms about Althusser, not so much publicly, but privately. I think I talk about this in my book "Althusser and his contemporaries", where I have a chapter on "the end", the idea of the apocalypse, and it was Balibar who wrote a letter, which I read at IMEC, about the existence of an original chaos, and it's going to end up in chaos. So, it's like a beginning and an end. If you look at the Bible, for example, there is chaos in the beginning, that God created. So, there's something somewhat theological. That's what he was arguing, which I agreed with, actually, but I got there from Balibar, who wrote that to Althusser. So, they weren't slavish followers. It wasn't like that at all. They always felt free to criticize Althusser, and he did to them, and I think that they were, in some cases, very ahead of him. He says this himself. But he liked where they were going, and he was glad that he had students like that. People around him would be critical, but they didn't just become something completely different, which happened with some of them, but even the people that broke with him (maybe the exception was Rancière), but even he in some way. I wrote a short thing on Rancière, and I wrote that there was something that

was like recognizing Althusser in his book, and he read that, and was very angry. He was insulted that I would say that, but I think it's true.

L. Vinhas:
And you were talking about a difference between the essay ISA and the rest of Althusser's work. In Brazil, especially in discourse analysis, most of the researchers cite and rely on ISA…

W. Montag:
Yes, it's the same here, no matter what field. It's by far the most widely cited and read of all his works. And, in certain ways, it's very althusserian, but I think that the critique that Pêcheux made is absolutely right, and you have to be very careful when you use that to understand it. But I think "Oser Penser", for example, is the beginning of a kind of not just a critique, but a way of rethinking at least some of the problems there, because the idea of discourse, which is hard for people, because to understand the materiality of discourse, which Althusser insists on in the essay, is very difficult, because they keep going back to some representational kind of thing. But what Pêcheux was saying in "Oser Penser", if I'm remembering correctly, is that by the performance of discourse, if you could use that Austin vocabulary, and the performance or the enactment of discourse exposes it to the risk of mistakes, reversals, deviations, etc. And I think that's absolutely critical. He says in that appendix to the English edition of "Les vérités de La Palice": "I don't mean to make the slip the basis for revolution", but still, when discourse is produced, let's put it that way, it is exposed, not by virtue of its own conflicts only, but when it comes into contact with other practices of discourse and just the history of language, which never remains the same, it's constantly changing. There are all kinds of openings for intervention. There are changes that occur, and that's the way it is. The Chomskyan fantasy of an underlying order, which Pêcheux always rejected, prevents you from thinking about that. And Pêcheux is the one who basically is saying, like Milner in the old days would say, the disorder of language, or Lacan's lalangue, is really absolutely constitutive of discourse and language in general, in another way. The historicity of language and of discourse is something that linguistics – I don't want to make some grand statement – but, to a great extent, is designed to deny. The disorder of language becomes only apparent, because underneath it, as its condition of intelligibility, is this order, the language of all languages that contains all the possible variations. And now people want to make it part of your brain. I think that in that way Pêcheux is on the right track. There's something very productive there. The idea of "La langue introuvable", which, unfortunately, has not been translated into English, but that's exactly what I'm talking about, the very notion of *langue* as the order of *langage*. That's the kind of thing that Pêcheux was very perceptive and criticized in a very interesting way. So, I think it's very important.

L. Vinhas:
And for us, it's a struggle inside our research area: we are criticized mostly because of this essay and its "functionalism". I think we would be more materialistic if we relied more on the rest of his work.

W. Montag:
That's right. But I think you have to also understand the things that Althusser was trying to do, that he had to do and should have done, and that is the materiality of discourse, and that discourse is always imminent in practices, apparatuses, rituals, which is a very important idea. And I think those things are invaluable. And people could say, "Oh, that's just formalism or something, or functionalism", but that's not what we're talking about. Rituals are not permanent ideal structures of logic or something, and they're open to failure, change, etc. And I think that that's the materiality of discourse. It's very easy to slip away from that, because in many ways it's contrary to linguistics, because linguistics is almost made to foreclose that possibility. What Althusser did that was good was that: to look at the material existence, to look at what discourse exists as a material entity or something. And I think it's right, it's a very interesting part that doesn't, in any way, foreclose change. And I think Pêcheux, the later texts, is a good example of that, including "La langue introuvable". He was not in favor of any kind of functionalism and formalism. But, in some way, you have to draw a line of demarcation within formalism, because not everything about formalism is bad. And also, the context: like the emergence of phonology, for example, with Trubetzkoy, was necessary to have a kind of formalism. That was the necessary beginning. You had to move beyond it. But it was better than what existed. So, you have to look at it historically, and my own feeling about the ISA is that it was, to use the Leninist metaphor, *bending the stick*: it's bending the stick away from the idea that spontaneous revolt will succeed, that revolution is possible at any minute, that we're only being held back by our fear. Actually, revolution isn't

possible at any moment, and you have to be able to read the opening, the opportunity, in the rare moments that come by - that's Lenin's lesson. There's a volunteerism about the gauche prolétarienne and other groups that just thought that May 68 was the beginning of a revolution and all we had to do is push it a little bit. The essay was written in 69, so I think it's against volunteerism and trying to show how difficult it is to make a revolution. That it doesn't just happen because people want it or whatever. I think that's part of it, and that's also the source of its errors. Althusser thought it would be an important intervention, but I think it was a disaster in that sense, but still, there's a lot of absolutely important things in there. So, I won't disavow it or something. But I think what you say is right if you just focus on the functionalism, and you have to have an argument against it, based on the essay, which I think you can be made. I think Pêcheux saw that at the end.

L. Vinhas:
And about the text you translated, "Discourse: Structure or Event?": Pêcheux came to the US and he was at the conference?

W. Montag:
Yes. I talked to the organizer, Cary Nelson, who edited the volume, about Pêcheux's suicide, and he was shocked. Pêcheux was having a great time: he's very funny, and likes to be with people and all that, everyone loved him and thought he was great. And then, a few months later, he kills himself. So, everyone was very shocked. But I think he had a very good time. He wrote me a letter after that and he said that he enjoyed it. There were all kinds of very interesting people there. It was a big conference.

L. Vinhas:
And what are your projects right now?

W. Montag:
I've actually written a lot of political stuff since Trump. So, you can't not write about the stuff, because it's constantly in front of you, and you have to deal with it. And in the case of Palestine, I became a target for the right-wing Zionist people, and, because I'm Jewish, it's even worse. They think I'm a trader, idiotic communist or whatever. I have two different books on Spinoza that I'm working on, one which is on language, and his use of notions of language and discourse, and also questions of translation, which is something I'm very interested in. It's a big issue now, I think. Balibar has written quite a bit about that kind of thing, and he was part of that book about the untranslatables, about philosophical terms that can't really be translated. Well, they get translated, but it's a very difficult process, and I'm very interested in that sort of thing. And then Spinoza has his own theory on the Hebrew Scriptures, not labeled as translation theory, obviously, but it's about that. Pêcheux wrote a little bit about that: the "Archaeology of Knowledge", by Foucault, versus the "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus", by Spinoza, which is a very funny kind of thing. He had a good sense of Spinoza. It's very interesting. Actually, he must have written more. I want to go to the IMEC and see his materials that his wife put in there.

L. Vinhas:
What about the relation between literature and law. How did you go that way?

W. Montag:
Well, the law is somewhat different for me, because the law question came up when I was comparing the original manuscript of the ISA essay, "Sur la reproduction", to the published version. And I noticed something very weird, because the published version says, "I've already discussed law", and there's nothing on law. Why did he leave that? But I have to see it as a symptom. And there's a kind of difficulty in dealing with law for him. I think that it's something that wasn't clear exactly. Carl Schmidt became this very important figure, Carl Schmitt and the state of exception and the question of sovereignty. And this is quite foreign to Althusser's thinking, because it means a kind of exception, a state of exception that is a suspension of the rules, and anything is permitted, this kind of thing. From an Althusserian point of view, there is no such possibility. There's no suspension, I mean, it's an illegal suspension, but what that means in practice, in material existence, is another thing.

So, I was talking to Étienne about that quite a long time ago. I hadn't even read Kelsen at the time – it was like 15 years ago. And he said, "Althusser is very interested in Kelsen". And I was thinking: "Kelsen?". Because for me, like many people, Kelsen was a legal

formalist, and that's because that's what Schmidt said. But, should I believe what Schmidt says? No. And so when I actually read Kelsen, and "Pure Theory of Law" is one of the most important, but also, he has an essay about natural right, and these were absolutely extraordinary, and from an Althusserian perspective, I could completely understand the importance of these things, because it wasn't a legal formalism at all. Most of what he's talking about, because Kelsen's formation was Austria, and he was close to the Social Democratic Party of Austria after World War One, which was a very left party, and the questions there had to do with property and the expropriation of property for public use. So much of what Kelsen is talking about even later – the Social Democrats ruled for a decade –, but he was always talking about property. And the fact that it's declared to be outside the law, because it's a natural law, and it's a natural right which goes back to Locke or something, that whatever is your property is part of your person, the state can't touch it unless you agree or whatever. And what he argues is that it's a fictional construct whose purpose is to preserve a property for the people who have property. He didn't have illusions about the efficacy of law without force, but that law could be a part of a process of undermining, of asserting that there is no natural right to property, and that we as societies evolve or change. And this question has to be considered in terms of the needs of the people and what the society requires, and even the relations of production require. And law is a way of undermining this claim to property, not preserving it.

The critique of natural right and natural right to property I think is something that Althusser is always in many cases referring to, and this is something that Kelsen was very interested in. So, people misread him, or they don't see that. Later he became like a theoretician of international law or something. In the 20s, that's the time of his great works, and these were fundamentally works that question this idea of natural right to property, and that was his project in many ways, and it was very interesting and important. I could see that immediately. There were debates that had been published in Spanish, but not in English, his debates with Schmidt about sovereignty and things like that, and again, his position is there's nothing outside of the purview of law, meaning there's nothing that isn't changeable. There's nothing that isn't something that can be legitimately changed from the point of view of a given society through its procedures. If you look at the Schmidtian idea of the state of exception, it's nothing but a juridical fiction. There's nothing that says, because someone decrees a state of exception, that that will actually mean that the sovereign could do whatever the sovereign wants. That's not determined by law, that's determined by relationship of forces. And it seems like a very obvious concept, but that was debated as a question of right. There are many sinister aspects about that debate, because Schmidt would start referring to Kelsen as the Jew Kelsen, because Kelsen was a Jew. So, this was the legalism of the Jew, this fantasy that they obey the law no matter what, or something like that. And he and Schmidt played with that idea. But he was, in many ways, without the anti-semitic stuff, he shaped the way that people perceived Kelsen, and especially when there was the Schmidt revival. And someone like Agamben didn't get that because he usually was very thorough in his reading and research, but with Kelsen, he took Schmidt as his guide or something, which is weird, but now that Agamben seems to be close to the far right, it's probably not that weird. I like "Homo sacer". It's interesting, there are some very valuable things there, but he's too focused on the juridical to the exclusion of other things, then that's very problematic in this world.

L. Vinhas:
In the literary studies in Brazil, some people rely on his work to talk about testimony.

W. Montag:
Oh, yeah, witness, the book "Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive". That is one of the better books. It has problems, but there's something interesting about the idea of testimony and witness there, and it could have something to do with literature, but it's not automatically the case.

L. Vinhas:
Maybe we can link this to autobiography, which is one of the questions, because of Althusser's autobiography, and the way that he talks about what he did, but it was not in the juridical apparatus, because he was forbidden to do so, and on the other hand, he told testimony through the autobiography. I think this contradiction is interesting to observe: how the judicial system didn't allow him to speak, but he did that through literature.

W. Montag:

I think that you're right that he didn't testify in court. See, this is what's interesting about what you just said. In one sense, he was deprived of his legal personhood, his status as a legal person who can act on his own behalf, but in another sense, and that was in this juridical framework, but in another sense, if you think about Foucault's "What is an author?", he could speak as a legal person who's the author of a book, because he functioned as a legal person in relation to that book. It was published under his name as the author. He was responsible for it. It was published posthumously, but his heirs would receive the profit that was made from the book, and he functioned in that way as a perfectly legal person. And so, yes, he was deprived of the possibility of testifying against himself or in defense in court, but that's not the only way that one functions as a legal person. It's also in relation to a book which is defined as his property: property rights, about writing and creative property, that sort of thing. So, he still was a juridical subject in some way, just not in that particular context. But, he's still subject to all the ways that people are both subject and subjected. The content is something else: there's a lot of very self-destructive things. Balibar came here to L.A. right after it was published, and he was very upset, especially about the Althusser statements that "I never read Marx, I never read Freud", and that people would take that seriously, and, also, what would that make him and Macherey look like: if Althusser was a fraud, then what were they? And how stupid would they be if they didn't know that? And maybe they are frauds.

I don't know that it ever went that far, but I heard many times people saying that Althusser never read Freud. I'm sorry, but without even quoting Freud, you could see he repeats almost verbatim. He gives a "plagiarizing Freud" – I'm not serious about that. He cited the essay by Freud "Analysis terminable and interminable", without attribution many times. He knew the case histories, like "The Wolf Man", very well, by heart, practically. He didn't even need to look at the book. The idea that he didn't know: what does that even mean? It's absurd. And people seize that because there are a lot of people, for different reasons, who want to discredit Althusser, who knows why, but that was one thing. But what does that mean for him? Did he believe that at some moment? Or was he trying to destroy himself and make people turn away from his work or something? I don't know exactly. So, why did he write that? It's not just about the murder of Hélène, I mean, a little bit is, and that part is the most elliptical and sort of unsatisfactory part of the book, because he doesn't know, he doesn't remember. So, he's saying, "I don't remember". But that's not very helpful. But it's sort of like that's one thing, but then most of the book is his crazy upbringing, and it's a very strange exercise to begin with. And, as I said, he didn't like this, but there are very beautiful moments, but a lot of it is kind of not incredibly interesting or insightful. I don't understand it exactly. It's not like Rousseau, or one of the other famous autobiographies. Especially for somebody who'd done so much psychoanalysis, because I see his relation to Lacan and Freud and everything. It's incredibly crude in certain ways which I do find very weird.

And his whole thing with Lacan is another issue, because he saw tremendous promise in Lacan in the early 60s when they really became not close, but they had some contact. And then, later, when he went to the dissolution of the Freudian school in Paris and walked in, and they tried to push him out or something, but he came in, and then he called Lacan "You magnificent, pathetic Harlequin" to his face. It's like a clown. That was some high drama Parisian life. It was a very complicated relationship, and there are things he said in that essay called "Dr. Freud's discovery", but it's bad. Roudinesco wrote like a 20-page letter to him, saying, "Don't even think of publishing this". And he didn't. Pêcheux also said, "Don't publish this". He wrote a lot of it on vacation when he didn't even have his books there. It was like a typical late Althusser kind of crazy thing, and a lot of it was just weird and not right, it's not even accurate about Freud. But when he talked about Lacan was much more interesting, because it wasn't just a denunciation, but it was like he tried to advance into a science that was not yet possible. So, it wasn't a denunciation, but something like volunteerism, again, a kind of theoretical volunteerism. And I've written some stuff about that, because I keep coming back to that. It's influenced by Bachelard and Canguilhem about trying to leap forward with mathematical things when that's not legitimate in some way. It doesn't work. It's like a substitute. And I found that to be very perceptive. But his students didn't like it at the time, because Lacan was under all kinds of attacks anyway, including by Althusser. It's not nice to be called a harlequin or something like a clown, which is a reference to Lacan's very exhibitionistic style.

L. Vinhas:

What I thought was interesting in your comment is that the juridical ideology is everywhere. It doesn't concern a specific institution.

W. Montag:
Another part of the section on law in the original version of the essay was about the Soviet Union, and he says that simply changing the law of property doesn't change the reality of the property. The state becomes an owner, like the individual or the corporation was an owner, and that doesn't mean that the fundamental relations in society have changed. And it's his critique of the Soviet Union, and you can't call that really socialism or anything like that. And I think that's a very important critique, and it touches on why he would like Kelsen, because why do you have to have a property owner in the first place? It seems like it's unavoidable. But why would it be unavoidable? Why accept that as like the horizon of any society? Althusser is quite critical. And I think that's quite interesting. He's close to Charles Bettelheim.

By the way, this is not at all what you were going to ask me about, but people don't understand the extent to which Althusser was deeply interested in Latin America and followed the revolutionary movements. He sent Balibar to Cuba many times, because he didn't want to travel. Balibar spent quite a bit of time in Cuba at the beginning of the revolution. So that, in the first few years, maybe up to 67, his students were going to Cuba, and also, he had contacts in Chile and Argentina. Debray, his student, was arrested with Che when Che was killed, and they wrote and talked a lot about the revolutionary movements in Latin America. And he was very close to this guy in Argentine called Malamud. They had an exchange of letters. I assumed Malamud was in the Communist Party. He wasn't. He was in the PRT, which is an armed struggle organization, and with his entire family, his daughters, his wife, they were all militants in the group. Some of them were killed, I think. And I think Malamud was already in exile in Mexico City. He had an independent relationship to a lot of people, as did Etienne and others, and they followed the events in Cuba, very closely, like during the debates after the revolution, from 60 to 65 or something, they discussed what was it going to be: self-management of workers, the state, like a Soviet type thing, and they followed those debates very closely.

I think it's something that people don't realize about that group. It wasn't some armchair intellectual thing or something. I wrote something about Althusser's response to Michel Verret[4]. Michel Verret was very critical of 1968 saying it was like a petty bourgeois student thing, it was a revolt of the princes, is what they said these privileged kids who didn't know what the life of a worker was like. It was totally false. And Althusser said, "You don't know what you're talking about", basically, that young workers were as excited about May 68 as the students, but also the thing he said – I know this is true from talking to both Balibar and Macherey – they were all radicalized about Algeria. That was the beginning of their radicalization, and they participated. They were obviously very active, and people don't know that either. But Althusser talks about that in that response to Verret where he says, "My students were active in that movement, the anti-imperialist movement". They say Althusser wasn't political, and this is ridiculous, and Macherey the same thing. They didn't go out in the Communist Party, but he had all the experiences. They were political, and they were very interested in the actual revolutionary transformations that were taking place in Latin America. He knew about Argentina and the disaster after the dictatorship in 76 and all that. He wasn't as removed from all this as people think at all, but he didn't go around advertising. It's important to know that.

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[4] Available at: https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/4187-louis-althusser-michel-verret-s-article-on-the-student-may?srsltid=AfmBOopXzM6BqsXyl0Vn4XSh1q7yMrryQCuB_CzlB8vSBKKvd5AnvrVP