



## From Adversity to Heresy: Towards a Disjunctive Conjunction of Foucault and Marx

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Over the last decades, influential critical thinkers have creatively mobilized Foucault's ideas to renovate the Marxist lens. However, while recognizing key proximities between Marx's and Foucault's works, Étienne Balibar has argued that these attempts necessarily face fundamental obstacles. In his view, the "point of heresy" connecting Marx's and Foucault's thought must be understood as a fundamental "adversity." By critically discussing Balibar's argument, this article shows that a "conjunctive", rather than "adversative," interpretation of the "point of heresy" might be used to develop a cross-reading of Marx and Foucault. The article thus poses methodological reflections for a systematic reassessment of the Marx-Foucault relationship.

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## 1. Introduction

While the association of Foucauldian and Marxist critical concepts may appear paradoxical, given Foucault's well-documented opposition to official communist and hegemonic Marxist positions, it has nonetheless gained increasing traction over the past decades. By making a systematic and creative use of certain Foucauldian concepts—such as "discipline" and "resistance," "governmentality" and "forms of life," "biopolitics" and "subjectivation"—authors with very different perspectives have renewed and restructured traditional Marxist grids. These attempts have sparked a complex debate, polarizing recent discussions in critical theory between those who dismiss Foucault as a pro-neoliberal thinker (Zamora 2015) and those who deploy his concepts as essential tools for analysing neoliberal capitalism (Oksala 2023).

Adopting a philologically grounded and seemingly intermediate perspective, Étienne Balibar has, since the 1980s, emphasized the value of Foucault's permanent confrontation with Marx's critical theory of capital (Balibar 1997, 281–304). More recently, however, Balibar has deepened his argument by focusing to what he calls the "point of adversity" (*point d'adversité*) around which Foucault engages in a conflictual dialogue with Marxism (Balibar 2020a, 167–188). His reading of the Marx-Foucault relation is both convincingly balanced and highly sophisticated. Through the notion of the "point of adversity," he captures the historical continuities and discontinuities, as well as the possible theoretical alliances and ruptures, between Marxian and Foucauldian approaches to common problems—most notably, the historical production of the individual subject as the foundation of capitalist society. However, mobilizing this notion, which he derives from Foucault himself, Balibar ultimately concludes that these points lead to an insurmountable opposition between the two theoretical frameworks. In his view, even though "[Foucault] has worked, from the inside and with his specific conceptual as well as historiographical means, on the questions of Marxism," scholars should "speak against conciliation [with Marx]" and instead "think the disjunction between the two authors" (Balibar, 2020a, 168, my translation). While acknowledging potential intersections between Marxist and Foucauldian insights, this perspective insists that their conceptual frameworks must not only be distinguished but decisively severed.

Nevertheless, Balibar's reading of the "point of adversity" between Marx and Foucault does not exhaust the analytical potential of his own insight. As he shows elsewhere (Balibar 2020b, 126–166), this "point of adversity" is closely tied to what he calls the "point of heresy" (*point d'hérésie*), a notion that assumes different roles and meanings across Foucault's works. Building on Balibar's arguments, this article proposes a conjunctive rather than adversative interpretation of the "point of heresy," suggesting that it functions not only as a site of rupture but also as a conceptual hinge—one

that both separates and connects, disjoins and simultaneously enables a more nuanced reading of the Marx—Foucault relationship, ultimately producing what can be called a "disjunctive conjunction." By doing so, I propose to engage in a reflection that is, in a sense, *a priori*—concerned with the conditions of possibility of a cross-reading of Marx's and Foucault's works. Rather than analysing specific Marxian or Foucauldian concepts, I sketch out methodological reflections on their relationship by developing Balibar's argument beyond his own conclusions. Moving beyond a naïve comparative approach, where analysis risks collapsing into either frontal opposition or linear convergence between Marx and Foucault, I aim at providing reading tools for constructing a "disjunctive synthesis"—an assemblage that accounts for their seemingly divergent, yet deeply interrelated, critiques of society. To achieve this, I first examine Balibar's position, which advocates for a fundamental reversal of "heresy" into "adversity," situating his argument within the broader debate on the Marx–Foucault relationship. Second, I test Balibar's use of the "point of heresy" against the multiple meanings of this notion in Foucault's late 1960s writings. Finally, drawing on Pierre Macherey, among others, I develop a different use of this concept—one that may offer a productive framework for rereading several "conceptual antinomies" which allegedly oppose Foucault to Marx.

## 2. Foucault, an Anti-Marx?

Since Foucault's death—and, as Nicos Poulantzas' theory of the state power demonstrates (Poulantzas 1980), even earlier—various lines of inquiry have sought to integrate Foucault's concepts within the Marxist critical framework, proposing multiple points of convergence between the two thinkers. If these attempts have begun in the Eighties (Smart 1983), they have gained increasing prominence in recent decades, particularly following the publication of Foucault's early 1970s lectures at the Collège de France (Foucault 2008, 2015, 2019). These lectures have often been read as marking a "Marxist turn" in Foucault's thought (Gros 2010, Elden 2015, Toscano 2015), giving rise to two different yet interconnected approaches.

The first is historically oriented and focuses on philological and contextual questions regarding the role that Marx actually—rather than allegedly—played in Foucault's intellectual development and research. Several scholars have explored fundamental questions such as: Did Foucault read Marx? If so, how, when, and through what intellectual filters? For what purposes and with what precise results? Challenging a widespread anti-Marxist interpretation of Foucault, this scholarship has demonstrated that Foucault's relationship with Marxism was neither conciliatory nor purely antagonistic, but rather intense and confrontational (Nigro 2001, Legrand 2004, Leonelli 2010, Garo 2011). Alongside these inquiries, a second approach has drawn on

these interpretive tools while pursuing a more explicitly theoretical horizon. In the wake of what has been termed "Neo-" and "Post-" Marxism —following the decline of what Göran Therborn called the "triangulation of science, politics, and philosophy" (Therborn 2008, 180), which had been at least partially sustained by twentieth-century communist parties— several scholars have turned to Foucault as a resource for renewing, reformulating, or surpassing Marxism. In diverse and irreducible ways, they have taken seriously Foucault's invitation to treat his work as a "toolbox" (Foucault 2001, 1588). Rather than adhering strictly to historical-philological concerns, these inquiries have been shaped by what has been termed Foucault's "feedback effect" (Laval, Paltrinieri, Taylan 2015, 7–16)—that is, they begin with questions such as: Is it possible to develop a critique of society that mobilizes both thinkers? If so, with what arguments and to what ends? Addressing these questions, thinkers as diverse as Toni Negri (Negri 2017), Jacques Bidet (Bidet 2016), Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (Dardot and Laval 2012), and Wendy Brown (Brown 2016), to name only a few, have developed original critical frameworks, which one might designate with the provocative term "Foucauldian Marxism" (Polleri 2024).

While recognizing the strategic stakes of merging Marxist and Foucauldian critiques of society, Balibar critically assesses these Marx-Foucauldian engagements by raising a fundamental objection. In his view, however compelling their political insights may be, attempts to synthesize Marxian and Foucauldian notions inevitably confront conceptual pitfalls. Indeed, if Marx and Foucault share a similar "intellectual style" based on the "passion for inquiry" (Balibar 2020a, 169)—a commitment to deriving critical concepts from what others have described as "militant investigation" (Hoffman 2018) —this common orientation does not erase their fundamental theoretical "disjunctions."

In underscoring this, Balibar acknowledges that the "philosophies" of Marx and Foucault could, in principle, be "combined" in various ways. One could, for example, attempt to "articulate" Marx and Foucault by "connecting their statements, analyses, and problematics across varying degrees of distance and proximity, homogeneity and heterogeneity" (Balibar 2020a, 168, my translation). These attempts at "reconciliation" are not merely theoretical constructs; they are historically grounded in what Balibar identifies as the two distinct phases of Foucault's engagement with Marx: his *Abrechnung*, or *règlement de comptes*, with Marxism in the 1960s, when he sharply intensified his critiques of Marxist positions, and the "political cycle" of the early 1970s onward, when he actively engaged with key strategic debates within Marxism (Balibar 2020a, 170). Yet, according to Balibar, such attempts encounter insurmountable difficulties. Rather than confirming that Foucault belongs to the longstanding tradition of

"heretical Marxism," the publication of Foucault's lectures from the early 1970s has made it clear that Foucault was engaged in a competition with it. In Balibar's reading, by confronting Marx directly, Foucault does not seek to reconstruct or renew Marxism but rather to defeat it analytically on its own ground. He writes:

[Foucault] did not confine himself to making general epistemological or political judgments about Marx and Marxism but instead worked from within, using his own conceptual and historiographical tools, to engage with the questions raised by Marxism: the schema of class struggle, reproduction, the genesis of production relations and the capitalist state, the conditions of exploitation, the wage form, etc. Not only he had nothing to envy [...] to contemporary Marxist currents [...] but it is also clear that he sought to outmatch them on their own terrain—partly with their own weapons, partly with others, which would ultimately lead him elsewhere (Balibar 2020a, 175, my translation).

By highlighting such a "competition," Balibar contends that Marx's and Foucault's thought are linked by certain "points of heresy" (*points d'hérésie*), which he defines as theoretical nodes from which multiple, both convergent and divergent, lines of research emerge.

Through this notion, Balibar not only highlights the distance between Marx's relatively unified and dichotomic vision of class antagonism and Foucault's emphasis on multiplicity and difference but also argues that their divergence ultimately stems from their respective interpretations of Hegel's "abstract right." Both thinkers, he claims, accept Hegel's idea that "abstract individuality" (universal and formally equal) is not naturally given but rather the outcome of a social process of "individuation"—the "institution" or "production of the subject" (Balibar 2020a, 183). However, Balibar insists that Marx and Foucault theorize this process in fundamentally incompatible ways. Whereas Marx understands the "production of the subject" through the economic and juridical schema of commodity production, Foucault instead focuses on the productivity of powers—particularly those associated with penal law, body discipline and moral normativity. This fundamental divergence leads to a second rupture: the opposition between Marx's "holistic" vision of human emancipation and Foucault's "individualistic" one. While the former elaborates a philosophical anthropology of alienation and dis-alienation, the latter outlines an ethics of escape and deviation. In Balibar's view, this conceptual split mirrors a deeper political disagreement: the opposition between Marx's "communism" and Foucault's "liberalism," which leads to a profound strategic divergence. Whereas Marx envisions the "totalization" of individuals through proletarian revolution,

Foucault, by contrast, proposes a strategy of "infinite differentiation" of singular subjectivities (Balibar 2020a, 187).

A similar perspective has recently been advanced by Christian Laval, who argue that Foucault engages with Marxist debates to play "Marx against Marx" (Laval 2015, 29–44)—that is, to pit Marx's problems against his own solutions. However, the conceptual device of the "point of heresy" allows Balibar to adopt a slightly different, and more nuanced, position—one that emphasizes Foucault's internal deviation from Marx and Marxism. In his view, Marx is not simply a key-reference, or a polemic object, for Foucault; rather, he plays the role of what Lacan calls the "Big Other." In other words, Foucault appears haunted by Marx in a dual sense: as both the simulacrum to be challenged and the symbolic order within which he is compelled to define his own theoretical identity. Yet, this does not seem to eliminate the need for a fundamental theoretical decision between the two frameworks. While grasping "Foucault within Marx and Marx within Foucault," and even though "[Foucault] has worked, from the inside and with his specific conceptual as well as historiographical means, on the questions of Marxism," scholars should "speak against conciliation [with Marx]" and "think the disjunction between the two authors" (Balibar 2020a, 168, my translation).

When applied to the relationship between Marx and Foucault, the "point of heresy" assumes a specific meaning in Balibar's discourse. While it identifies both explicit and subterranean dialogues, it does not offer a basis for stable intersection. At first glance, this hypothesis appears to clarify the meaning of the "permanent confrontation" (*combat permanent*) that, according to Balibar, Foucault waged with Marx's thought (Balibar 1997, 281–304). But the "point of heresy" does not merely indicate "Foucauldian moments" in Marx—such as his analysis of the technologies of power embedded in workers' exploitation—or "Marxian moments" in Foucault—such as his reformulation of the critique of ideology through the concept of "normativity." Rather, it exposes the irreducible "adversity" (*adversité*) opposing the two thinkers. Ultimately, reading Balibar, the "confrontation" with Marx that underpins Foucault's intellectual trajectory leads the latter to position himself as an "Anti-Marx," developing his thought as a mirror-image reversal of historical materialism. Even though he values fundamental alliances between Marxian and Foucauldian concepts, by using the "point of heresy" as counterpart for "adversity" Balibar ends up supporting the idea of a definitive choice (*choix*) between Marx's critique of capital and Foucault's analyses of powers.

### 3. Point of Heresy: Form and Figures

Balibar does not invent the concept of the "point of heresy;" rather, he finds it in Foucault's own work. In a contribution dedicated to his "archaeological method," he interprets this notion as a "complex device" which designates an "alternative" or a

"bifurcation between the *doxai* (opinions, judgments, positions) throughout the development of a given knowledge *dispositif*" (Balibar, 2020a, 133, my translation). Such a detournement of a Foucauldian notion to interpret Foucault's relationship to Marx is both remarkably consistent and ingenious, yet paradoxical. It allows to underscore the network of analogies and antagonisms that inevitably arise when engaging with Foucault's relationship to Marx and the Marxist thinkers of his time. However, by transforming the "point of heresy" into a "point of adversity," Balibar risks undermining the heuristic potential of the very concept he mobilizes, ultimately contrasting it with Foucault's definition of the term. This risk becomes particularly evident when we examine the role of the "point of heresy" in Foucault's works, which Balibar himself has brilliantly analysed (Balibar 2020b, 126–166).

The first occurrence of the term *point d'hérésie* can be traced back to *The Order of Things* (1966), where Foucault develops his "archaeology of the human sciences." At this stage, the term appears multiple times, playing a strategic, albeit subtle, role in Foucault inquiry. First and foremost, the "point of heresy" enables him to conceptualize the ruptures within what he terms *épistème*. At the time, Foucault situates his "archaeology" within the broader structuralist refusal of "humanism," while simultaneously advancing a sharp critique of historical accounts of modern science based on the notion of progress. As Luca Paltrinieri has clarified (Paltrinieri 2015), Foucault's archaeology diverges from other contemporary "philosophical archaeologies," particularly those of phenomenological origin. Whereas Husserl's archaeology entails a vertical excavation of subjective experience, granting access to the "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*), Foucault's archaeology operates horizontally. It does not function as a speleology in search of authenticity, foundational truths, or the origins of knowledge. Instead of seeking an ontological ground, it explores the historical layers of discourse, analysing both the synchronic circulation of its codes and the diachronic conditions of its emergence.

The tension Foucault establishes between epistemic invariants and historical change is essential for understanding the conceptual form of the "point of heresy." At first glance, the notion of *épistème* in Foucault's work serves a unifying function, guaranteeing the synchronization of a multiple knowledges and discourses. However, while giving a sense of "order," it simultaneously acts as a vector of *inquiétude* (unease) that affects the archaeologist. This sense of unease arises from the fact that each unifying epistemic structure is internally fractured. As Judith Revel has extensively shown (Revel 2010), from the 1960s onward, Foucault conceptualized historical transformation—and particularly the shift from one *épistème* to another—through the vocabulary of "rupture," "break," "mutation" and "transformation," as opposed to the vocabulary of "coherence," "linearity," and "unity" (Foucault 1972, 5).

Only by attending to this historical "discontinuity," archaeology might analyse the mechanisms governing the formation of the human sciences and explain the historical constitution of the "humanist" philosophical presupposition whose disappearance Foucault announces.

Nevertheless, Foucault's discourse leaves undetermined not only why but also how and where such epistemic discontinuities occur. While reading his archaeological works, one might ask: what are the figures of historical discontinuity within a given epistemic order? Foucault introduces the notion of the "point of heresy" precisely to address these questions. Drawing on geometric inspiration, this notion is synonymous with the "point of choice" (*point de choix*) and designates moments of synchronic and diachronic deviation that rupture an epistemic order from within. Simply put, the "point of heresy," or "point of choice," designates uneven historical transformation within the epistemic order: it marks the anticipation of novelty or the delayed effect of a past change. The "point of heresy" is not merely the name for the separation between different *épistèmes*; rather, it refers to the internal thresholds of mutation—the point at which an order of discourse opens itself to divergent developments or where a difference emerges within a consolidated discursive structure.

Through a very schematic, yet hopefully useful, model, based on the occurrences of the term in the *Order of Things*, we might argue that the "point of heresy" assumes three distinct figures—never explicitly differentiated by Foucault, yet crucial to his investigations:

- (a) First, the "point of heresy" designates the *divergence* within a given epistemic structure. In this sense, it refers to a conflict that, by destabilizing an order of discourse, simultaneously provides negative proof of its unity. This first formulation aligns with one of the key premises of Foucault's archaeological method: the idea that epistemic orders are transdisciplinary; they are not confined to a single domain of knowledge but instead traverse the entire discursive field of a given epoch. In this first sense, the divergences described by the "point of heresy" do not merely concern different interpretations of the same problem within a specific field of knowledge; rather, they expose the finite set of possible—and potentially contradictory—solutions that the discursive space of a given period authorizes in response to a shared problem. From this perspective, the "point of heresy" names a phenomenon that Foucault also captures with the term *partage*, a French noun that can be translated as both "sharing" and "partition." Introduced as early as the 1961 Preface of *History of Madness* (Foucault 2006, xxviii–xxxvi), *partage* conveys the idea of "co-division:" a separation from a common ground, or a form of commonality that emerges through rupture.

A striking example of this first meaning of the "point of heresy" appears in Foucault's analysis of the "general grammar" of the Seventeenth century, where the *partage* marks the division between the analysis of words at the level of their phonetic components (letters, sounds) and the study of their elementary signifying core (roots) (Foucault 1970, 110–111). This rupture does not merely signal a theoretical split, but reveals an underlying partitioning of competing perspectives that, despite their differences, remain grounded in a shared epistemic foundation. Foucault emphasizes that this divergence is intelligible only within the discursive order of the Classical age, whose "historical a priori" is the separation between "words" and "things." Only within this epistemic framework—where language functions as representation and thus necessitates the formal ordering of representational rules—grammarians can be divided between those who analyze verbal units in their phonetic components and those who investigate their signifying roots. Similarly, in the field of political economy, Foucault shows that modern economists can only diverge between explaining the genesis of money through exchange relations or through the social utility of exchanged objects because they remain situated within a discursive order that conceives of money as a "representation of value" and of value as a representation of needs (Foucault 1970, 208). In both cases, the "point of heresy" marks a rupture within the order of discourse. However, rather than simply undermining epistemic coherence, this rupture paradoxically confirms the underlying structure of the epistemic order itself. By revealing the limited set of authorized divergences, the "point of heresy" not only destabilizes but also delineates the boundaries of an epistemic formation.

- (b) This first meaning—the "point of heresy" as divergence within a given epistemic order which paradoxically certifies its unity—is accompanied by a second one. Beyond designating a conflict that diagonally cuts across different fields of knowledge within the same historical period, the "point of heresy" also refers to the *anachronism* that anticipates or echoes past or future discursive orders. In its first sense, the "point of heresy" highlights an alternative between divergent solutions to a problem. In this case, its dimension is necessarily synchronic, as the alternative—or "heresy"—takes place within the epistemic structure of a determined period. In its second sense, that of anachronism, the "point of heresy" designates the echoes and prefiguration that resonate within the fractures of a discursive order, thus assuming a diachronic, if not asynchronous, dimension. It can account for the re-emergence of themes, categories, and problems from a past epistemic order or delineate those of a future one.

This second formulation of the "point of heresy" helps clarify the meaning of Foucault's famous yet contested statement regarding the role of Marx within the epistemic order of modern political economy. On the synchronic level, Foucault argues that Marx fits comfortably within the epistemic structure of classical political economy, particularly within David Ricardo's labor theory of value. From the perspective of the archaeology of knowledge, Marx's thought would not entail a critique or a rupture with the discursive order of his time. According to Foucault, it neither "disturbs" nor "alters" Ricardian political economy but instead reinforces and confirms its fundamental features (Foucault 1970, 284). Having introduced no "real break" (*coupure réelle*) in the epistemic structure of his era, Marx's thought would thus be reduced to a discourse that is "both empirical and critical," one that is "at once positivist and eschatological," since "man appears within it as a truth that is both reduced and promised" (Foucault 1970, 349). However, Foucault's position on Marx appears significantly different when considered through the lens of the "point of heresy" in its second dimension. Even though he insists on Marx's belonging to the epistemic order of Ricardian political economy, Foucault does not reduce the "choice" Marx embodies to a mere divergence between solutions to the economic problem of the value-labor relationship. Rather, he describes it as an alternative or bifurcation between different conceptions of historicity. For Foucault, certainly, both Marx and Ricardo are situated within an *épistème* that holds together the empirical "finitude" of man and the ultimate, metaphysical meaning of history. Nevertheless, whereas Ricardo's "pessimism" and "cumulative history"—where the link between demographic pressure and resource scarcity leads to social stagnation—Marx responds by moving in the "opposite direction," in which historical process can lead to a radical "reversal" (*retournement*) (Foucault 1970, 283). While situating both thinkers within the same historical discourse, Foucault underscores that Marx, unlike Ricardo, develops a conception of history as a field of contingencies and opportunities for liberation. This interpretation is reiterated and expanded at the beginning of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where Foucault emphasizes that Marx "decenters" the universal subject of history, making circular relationship between "structure" and "process", objective historical determinations and subjects engaged in struggle (Foucault 1972, 11–13).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this reading resurfaces in an unpublished manuscript dated 1967, containing Foucault's notes for an intervention at a seminar led by Raymond Aron at the Sorbonne. Here, once again commenting on the Marx-Ricardo relationship, Foucault argues that, from the standpoint of the theory of history, Marx represents an "absolutely major break" (*coupure absolument majeure*). (Foucault, Autographed manuscript of 48 sheets, Boîte 55, chemise 10, Archives Foucault, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), Paris, cited in Paltrinieri 2015).

- (c) Finally, beyond signaling constitutive divergences within an *épistème* and indicating its anachronism, the "point of heresy" designates the peculiar site of enunciation—or the *liminal standpoint*—of the very "archaeology of knowledge." While this aspect of the notion may seem paradoxical, it aligns with the objectives of Foucault's method. At this stage of his work, Foucault conceives of his archaeological approach as a means of producing an "estrangement" (Paltrinieri 2012, 20) from the reader's cultural references, thereby destabilizing the epistemic order of the present and fostering the emergence of "difference" within it. But—one may ask—how can one uncover the differences that surface within the present and displace the reader from their historical time, if not by adopting a perspective situated at the threshold—at the very edge of the dominant epistemic structure? In Foucault's framework, divergences and anachronisms, variations and ruptures, are not merely objects of analysis; they function as privileged investigative tools, generating the very displacement that Foucault seeks to produce. In other words, the archaeologist not only examines "points of heresy" as synchronic and diachronic alternatives emerging within a given *épistème* but also adopts the perspective of the heresies in their own epistemic order, positioning themselves simultaneously within and at the margins of it.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault embodies this perspective in the general reconstruction of the emergence of the "human sciences" in the nineteenth century he exposes in the last sections of the book. Since these sciences posit the empirical existence of man as the transcendental condition of possibility for knowledge, he famously argues that they fall into a vicious circle, ultimately erecting metaphysics of Life, Labor, or Language. Yet one might ask: how can Foucault unmask what he also calls the "empirical-transcendental doublet" (Foucault 1972, 347–351)? Does the archaeology of knowledge not also emerge within the boundaries defined by the order of discourse of the human sciences, whose genesis it seeks to critique? The notion of the "point of heresy" provides an answer to these questions. As we have seen, archaeology does not claim to critique the epistemic structure of the human sciences from an external hypothetical standpoint. Instead, it takes as its starting point the divergences and anachronisms that traverse them—that is, their internal differences. From this perspective, Foucault argues that fields such as psychoanalysis, ethnology, and linguistics, which belong to the order of the human sciences, contain a set of "possible choices" (*choix possibles*) and "excluded possibilities" (*possibilités exclues*) (Foucault 1972, 415).

#### 4. Heresy as Method

This digression through Foucault's *Order of Things* demonstrates that the notion of the "point of heresy" only partially overlaps with the concept of "adversity"—understood as the logical exclusivity between concepts and arguments concerning a shared object of reflection. Foucault employs this notion in three primary senses, none of which are fully encapsulated by reducing "heresy" to "adversity." The "point of heresy" not only illuminates the bifurcation between alternative solutions emerging from a shared intellectual terrain but also functions as both a site of separation and connection—disjoining while simultaneously creating the conditions for conjunction. As shown by Balibar himself (Balibar 2020b, 134–135), this dynamic can also be traced etymologically. In the history of religions, "heresy" (from the Greek *αἵρεσις*, meaning "choice") refers to a faction constituting itself autonomously within a dominant doctrine, opposing one or more of its dogmas, corrupting its purity, and developing hypotheses that were previously marginal, if not inconceivable. Conversely, in geometry, the "point" is a primitive concept—"without parts," according to Euclid, meaning without volume, area, or length—that serves as the origin of a line and locus where infinite lines may intersect. In this sense, we can assert that the "point of heresy" is the theoretical site—the premise or the problem, the argument or the concept—from which one or more parallel lines may branch out, based on a choice that arises within and against a given system of enunciation. This definition echoes Hegel's description of the "limit" in *Science of Logic*, where the line dividing two surfaces (or, more generally, two material or ideal entities) does not merely constitute the boundary marking their separation but also serves as the threshold for their "reciprocal action" (*Wechselwirkung*). As Hegel writes, "the point is the limit of line, not because the latter just ceases at the point and has existence outside it [...]. Rather, at the point the line also *begins*; the point is its absolute beginning, and if the line is represented as unlimited on both its two sides, or, as is said, as extended to infinity, the point still constitutes its element". This is because "[t]hese *limits* are the *principle* of that which they delimit; just as one, for instance, is as hundredth the limit, but also the element, of the whole hundred" (Hegel 2010, 100).

Beyond its function as a specific conceptual operator in Foucault's works, the multifaceted notion of the "point of heresy" resonates with certain interpretive methods developed within the "structuralist" momentum of French philosophy. According to Louis Althusser, for instance, Marx's critique of classical political economists does not aim at attending its explicit arguments but the "blanks" (*espaces blancs*) structuring its specific discourse. "Marx—Althusser writes—makes us see blanks in the text of classical economics' answer; but that is merely to make us see what the classical text itself says while not saying it, does not say while saying it" (Althusser 1970, 22). Similarly, in

his "symptomatic reading" of *Capital*, rather than merely commenting on Marx's well-known theses, Althusser foregrounds open problems, aphasias, and unresolved tensions, identifying internal fractures (*coupures*) in Marx intellectual trajectory—most notably, the supposed rupture between the "humanist" early writings and the "scientific" approach adopted from 1845 onward. In this respect, he concludes that "if, even despite the letter of Marx's work, we have succeeded in reconstituting the sequence and the peculiar logic of this silent discourse in certain delicate points; if we have managed to identify and fill these blanks [...] then that is all we have done" (Althusser 1970, 50).

In the late Seventies, Pierre Macherey extended and transformed Althusser's reading method by shifting the focus from internal breaks within a single thinker to the productive tensions that emerge between distinct and seemingly opposed theoretical frameworks. His analysis of the ambivalent relationship between Hegel's and Spinoza's philosophies exemplifies this shift. Rather than treating their opposition as a settled contradiction, he excavates the emergence of Spinozian questions within Hegel's thought, thus uncovering continuities and discontinuities between their ontologies. Macherey's reading strategy invites us to reconsider the conjunction "or" (*ou*) in its constitutive semantic ambiguity. As a "disjunctive conjunction," it does not merely establish differences but actively articulates them: while it can signify exclusive opposition ("either/or"), it can also suggest a relational transformation ("otherwise"). He writes:

In the French language the use of the conjunction *or* merges two forms of evaluation that other languages distinguish from each other; it is thus that this *or* of the French offers an indistinct translation of *vel* and *aut* of Latin [...]. If "Hegel or Spinoza" were expressed in this way, "*aut* Hegel *aut* Spinoza," that is, either Hegel on one hand or Spinoza on the other, this would lead us to present them as two irreducible forms of thought, constituting the terms of a choice that it would not be possible to leave suspended indefinitely [...]. But we must not forget that "Hegel or Spinoza" can also be translated as "Hegel *vel* (*sive*) Spinoza," which apparently signifies the opposite. The *or* here is an expression of identity and equivalence. (Macherey 2011, 4–5)

Returning to Macherey's idea of a "disjunctive conjunction" allows us to see that the "point of heresy" does not simply indicate an exclusive division between alternative terms but also their potential interrelation. In an earlier contribution, where he sketches out a theory of "literary production," Macherey goes even further and argues that the logic of "disjunctive conjunction" poses the basis for a broader reading method. "What is important in a work—he writes—is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation 'what it refuses to say', although that would in

itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of measuring silences, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged." (Macherey 1986, 87).

With Macherey, we might argue that the "point of heresy" is not the referent the fixed boundaries that expand or contract depending on the primacy attributed to one thinker over the other; nor does it delineate territories to be defended or theoretical conquests to be safeguarded. As porous threshold, the "point of heresy" simultaneously defines an object of inquiry and a methodological lens. It functions as sites of passage between different authors and concepts, transforming the very concepts they mediate. Thanks to its fundamental ambivalence, the "point of heresy" seeks to highlight the "unthoughts," or "blank spaces," that traverse both Marx's and Foucault's writings—problems that, while emerging within their work, cannot be fully developed within their respective theoretical frameworks. Using a different conceptual framework, we might also describe the "point of heresy" as a counterpart to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their collaborative work, refer to as "disjunctive synthesis" or "assemblage" (*agencement*): "the system of possible permutations between differences that always amount to the same as they shift and slide about" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 12). Indeed, in their view, "in contrast to the alternative of the 'either/or' exclusion, there is the 'either ... or ... or' of the combinations and permutations where the differences amount to the same without ceasing to be differences" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 69–70).

Understood this way, the "point of heresy" does not serve as the basis for a merely "comparative" reading but rather suggests a "cross-reading," developing what Roberto Nigro describes as the "possible dialogue" between Marx and Foucault (Nigro 2001, 433). Drawing on Macherey, the binary opposition 'Marx or Foucault' can be interpreted in two ways: as a strict *aut aut* (either/or), in which Foucault appears as an "anti-Marx" in Balibar's terms, or as a *sive*, a formulation that suggests not only a choice but also an intersection of distinct yet not necessarily opposed concepts. This interpretation offers a distinct yet complementary perspective, providing tools that foster a conjunctive rather than adversative reading of the Marx–Foucault relationship. By adopting this approach, the three figures of the "point of heresy" we distinguished in Foucault's work become operative, rather than being reduced to the idea of "adversity" alone. Firstly, while the "point of heresy" as *divergence* marks the different—and at times opposed—solutions that these thinkers propose to similar problems (e.g., the alternative models for conceptualizing the "production of the subject" identified by Balibar), it simultaneously affirms their belonging to a common discursive field. This shared terrain gives rise to specific questions as well as diverse theoretical responses, thereby establishing a common ground for reading Marx and Foucault together. Secondly, the

"point of heresy" as *anachronism* offers a way to trace both the echoes and prefigurations of their respective hypotheses in Marx's and Foucault's writings. Rather than focusing solely on their divergent responses to shared questions, this approach invites us to identify the deviations within their works—such as Marx's anticipation of Foucauldian insights (e.g., the "productivity of powers," that Marx prefigures in *Capital* volume 1) and Foucault's implicit reliance on Marxian concepts and periodization (e.g., the notion of "workforce" or "original accumulation," explicitly presupposed in Foucault's lectures of the early Seventies). Thirdly, the "point of heresy" as a *liminal standpoint* reflects the stance of the cross-reader, who positions themselves both within and at the margins of the two theoretical frameworks.

Taken as a whole, the three figures of the "point of heresy" allows one to confront Foucault and Marx not merely by examining their explicit divergences but also by reading them together in a way that accounts for both the external and internal boundaries of their thought. Externally, these points of contact delineate the limits where their concepts converge and diverge; internally, they reveal that such boundaries are not peripheral to their work but embedded within the very process of strategic conceptual productions. In doing so, this perspective does not seek to privilege Foucault's analysis of powers over Marx's critique of capital, nor does it reaffirm the real or presumed foundational principles of historical materialism. Unlike comparative reading models, the heretical cross-reading neither assumes a latent fidelity of Foucault to Marxist doctrine nor attributes to Marx a prescient anticipation of Foucauldian themes. Instead, it aims to open pathways for the intersection of their concepts, unsettling the assumed internal coherence of their respective epistemic orders. By adopting the standpoint of their internal thresholds, one could not simply measure proximity and distance, affinity and divergence; rather, it aspires at foregrounding the moments in which Marx and Foucault hesitate in making definitive theoretical choices (for instance, whether to grant absolute primacy to the "relations of production" in Marx's case or to "relations of power" in Foucault's). Rather than connecting Marx and Foucault through their explicit statements, focusing on the "point of heresy" encourages reading their relationship through their silences—through what their frameworks either preclude or fail to articulate.

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From a historical perspective, the opposition between Foucault and Marx appears deeply inscribed in Foucault's own intellectual trajectory. At first sight, his anti-Marxist statements—frequently cited by those who dismiss any association between his thought and Marxism—seem to confirm that his intellectual path was resolutely opposed to Marx's. According to interpretations that remain influential—initiated by

Foucault's collaborator François Ewald (Ewald 1975) and, perhaps unintentionally, reinforced by Deleuze (Deleuze 1986, 33)—Marx's critique of capital and Foucault's analysis of power relations are mutually exclusive in several respects. First, they diverge in their objects: Marx centres on wage labor and its centrality to economic production, whereas Foucault turns to a multiplicity of anomalous, excluded subjectivities proliferating at the margins of the social field. Second, they differ in scale: Marxist theory foregrounds macro-historical tendencies, while Foucault focuses on the fine grain of singular power relations. Third, their objectives do not coincide: Marx seeks to lay bare the fundamental laws of the economic system, whereas Foucault analyses how relations of force emerge, shift, and dissolve. Finally, their political orientations diverge: Marx invokes the historical necessity of abolishing exploitation, while Foucault insists on the aleatory and contingent nature of power relations and the conflicts they generate. Once assumed without question, these contrasts force a stark choice between two alternatives: either a critique of workers' exploitation as the foundation of all dominations, or an analysis of power relations in which exploitation appears as only one instance among many. Today, this mutual exclusion—framed by the logic of "either ... or"—constrains both perspectives: a certain Marxist vulgate treats struggles against oppression as diluting class struggle, while Foucauldian approaches, often aligned with intersectional analyses, reproach Marxism for reducing power to class and thereby obscuring its multiplicity and autonomy.

Despite the considerable scholarship devoted to contesting and nuancing this view (MacDonald 1993, Nigro 2001, Leonelli 2010, Renault 2015, Mezzadra 2018, 2020, Polleri 2025), such an exclusive interpretation of the Marx–Foucault relation still underlies much orthodox Marxist as well as Foucauldian work. The "point of heresy" reconstructed here offers a way to move beyond this stance. It allows us to see Marx as Foucault's "Big Other:" at once his theoretical rival and a contested source of inspiration. Rather than foregrounding Foucault's often-quoted anti-Marxist remarks, this approach encourages a shift from an adversative to a heretical reading of Foucault's encounter with Marx. It reminds us that one of the most striking features of Foucault's writing is his deliberate misdirection of sources. Whether dealing with archives, documents, or authors, his references are frequently partial, fragmentary, even distorted. The "Author," for Foucault, is not a proper name but a "toolbox" (*boîte à outils*), a set of usable fragments rather than a coherent system to be interpreted. The name "Marx" is no exception. More than the author of a doctrine or the founder of a movement, Marx figures as an "explosion" (*éclatement*) within the epistemic order of his time. "As far as I'm concerned," Foucault famously maintains, "Marx doesn't exist. I mean, the sort of entity constructed around a proper name,

signifying at once a certain individual, the totality of his writings, and an immense historical process deriving from him" (Foucault 1980, 76). "It's always possible," he continues, "to make Marx into an author, localisable in terms of a unique discursive physiognomy, subject to analysis in terms of originality or internal coherence. After all, people are perfectly entitled to 'academise' Marx. But that means misconceiving the kind of break he effected." (Foucault 1980, 76). For Foucault, Marx constitutes less a unified system of thought to be adopted or rejected than a disruptive "discursive function" to be reactivated, displaced, plundered, and thereby recombined in new contexts.

Reframed as I proposed—both with and beyond Balibar's position—the "point of heresy" highlights Marx's displace function within Foucault's work. Seen this way, Foucault's major categories emerge not as dismissals of Marx's critical concepts but as alternative responses to common problems. Their apparent oppositions trace what might be called "antinomic axes" between their frameworks: while Marx structures his critique of capital around exploitation, ideology, and alienation, Foucault develops his genealogy of power-knowledge around power, normativity, and subjectivation. These antinomies point to both methodological and conceptual divergences, but also to possible internal heresies within each framework. The tension between "power relations" and "exploitation" (or, in more technical terms, the "relations of power" and the "relations of production") speaks to the question of how domination is structured. The contrast between "normativity" and "ideology" offers rival accounts of the role of discourse. Finally, the divergence between "subjectivation" and "alienation" reflects alternative theories of how power operates at the level of subjectivity. Engaging with these antinomies does not resolve them, but it illuminates shared problems and enables conceptual intersections that appear foreclosed when Marx and Foucault are treated as mutually exclusive. For example, the tensions in Foucault's theory of "disciplinary society" cannot be addressed merely by turning to his later reflections on "governmentality:" they require recognition of how his analysis both presupposes and transforms Marx's theory of capitalist exploitation.

From what is at first a specific and almost marginal Foucauldian notion, we have sketched an interpretive tool in which "heresy" functions as a cross-reading method, designed to recast alleged antinomies as internal tensions and possible deviations within each body of work. Drawing on Macherey's interpretation of Hegel and Spinoza, this method can also be extended to the reading of other authors, uncovering heretical threads and latent contradictions across diverse theoretical and political frameworks. The antinomies just mentioned, in fact, are not confined to Marx and Foucault's writings; they reflect broader theoretical alternatives that continue to shape critical

thought today. Strongly associated with their names yet endowed with a relative autonomy, they structure debates that scholars—often unconsciously—take for granted. To nuance or overcome these supposedly exclusive conceptual alternatives is not simply to dissolve inherited dichotomies in the Marx–Foucault relation; it is also to intervene in strategic debates of contemporary critical thought by reassessing foundational categories and opening new paths for their intersection.

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## Competing Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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