

**ENCYCLOPEDIA
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**CHRISTOPHER JOHN MURRAY,
EDITOR**

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1950s. He taught at the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes/Saint Denis) from 1969 to 1999, when he returned to L'École Normale as head of the philosophy department. He continues to teach a popular seminar at the Collège International de Philosophie, on topics ranging from the great “anti—philosophers” (Saint-Paul, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Lacan . . .) to the major conceptual innovations of the twentieth century. Much of Badiou's life has been shaped by his dedication to the consequences of the May 1968 revolt in Paris. Once a leading member of *Union des jeunes communistes de France (marxistes-léninistes)*, he remains with Sylvain Lazarus and Natacha Michel at the center of *L'Organisation Politique*, a “post-Party” organization concerned with direct popular intervention in a wide range of issues (including immigration, labor, housing). He is the author of several successful novels and plays as well as more than a dozen philosophical works, of which the most important are *L'Être et l'événement* (1988), *Logiques des mondes* (2003), and *Théorie du sujet* (1982).

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BALIBAR, ÉTIENNE

Philosopher

Étienne Balibar's writings oscillate between philosophy and politics, merging investigations into the history of ideas with a resolute commitment to the present. In his early work, Balibar's major concern was historical materialism. As a student and close collaborator of Althusser, he coauthored *Lire le Capital* (1965), one of the most systematic attempts to read Marx philosophically. The book's aim was the elaboration of a “true science” of historical materialism, centered on the pivotal concept of *mode of production*, depicting the political economy as a complex and overdetermined structure. This anti-Hegelian reading broke with a prevailing teleological conception of history in post-war Marxism. Balibar's contribution confronted the theoretical problem posed by the refutation of historical determinism: the succession of different modes of production. All production is foremost a *reproduction* of social relations. The mode of production reproduces the elements' places within a given structure and is thus the fundamental concept of historical continuity. The immanent contradictions of one mode of production do not bring about a transition to another mode; they can only arrive at equilibrium. Far from tending toward demise, capitalism only reproduces itself and perpetuates its cycle. A consistent and nonteleological theory of transition hence requires a consideration of

different temporalities articulated within a mode of production.

Balibar carried on the project of systematically reconstructing Marxism until the late 1970s. Among his main themes were questions regarding the philosophical and scientific status of historical materialism, the relation between the state and class struggle, and the function of ideology. His reflections on the state and historical transformations continued through *Sur la dictature du prolétariat* (1977), written in the context of the rise of Eurocommunism. Against the “revisionism” of the French Communist Party leadership, Balibar maintained that a genuine extension of democracy beyond the dominant classes required the dismantling of the state apparatus. His vocal critique of the Communist party’s policies paralleled a theoretical shift away from historical materialism.

Although Balibar later rejected some of the positions he had upheld in the 1970s, the dialogue with Marx has remained a constant feature in his work. The critical disengagement that Balibar subsequently called a “deconstruction” of Marx set the stage for a new set of concerns clustered around the question of the *subject*: a research agenda that would lead him to focus on the question of *philosophical anthropology*.

This investigation of modern identities and subjectivities is highly influenced by Balibar’s materialist reading of Spinoza (*Spinoza et la politique*, 1985), where he discovers a theory of *transindividual subjectivity*. Neither purely individual nor collective, subjectivity is constituted through communication, that is, through the imaginary. The mechanisms through which subjectivities are established are the focus of *Race, nation, classe* (1988, with Immanuel Wallerstein). Contemporary racism, Balibar suggests, functions as a meta-racism, as racism without races, where notions such as culture or immigration substitute for biological race. Racism, in Balibar’s explanation of nationalism, operates as the production of a “fictitious ethnicity.” The reproduction of the nation requires the individual to be socialized as a *homo nationalis*, by means of normalizing institutions and practices. Radicalizing Benedict Anderson’s account of the nation as an imagined community, Balibar maintains that not only are communities imaginary, but “only imaginary communities are real.” In his later *Masses, Classes, Ideas* (1994), Balibar expands on the crucial relation between the *imaginary* and the *real*, arguing that the imaginary is not an effect, but a cause. The imaginary, understood as the sphere of social relations, is not a reflection of underlying real processes, but retains its own autonomy and efficiency; in other words, the imaginary (and *a fortiori* ideology) should not be understood as a “superstructure,” but as a “base.”

When Jean-Luc Nancy asked the question “Who comes after the subject?” Balibar’s response was unambiguous: the *citizen*. Both in political and philosophical terms, the revolutionary epoch of the late eighteenth century points to the displacement of the subject in favor of the citizen. Citizenship is indeed one of the leading themes in Balibar’s recent work, often seized through the pivotal question of immigration. Political philosophy, as a reflection on the constitution of the public space, can no longer axiomatically suppose the categories of “belonging” and “reciprocity.” What is at stake, then, is a rethinking of democracy, in terms of its *borders* (*frontières*). The polysemy of the border stands both for the concrete political institution, where issues of identity, community, and citizenship are regulated, and for the conceptual question about the limit of politics. The national border is a privileged site, condensing processes of subjectivation and normalization while separating the exclusion of the foreigner from other schemes of anthropological differentiation. Counter to the prevailing politics of structural exclusion, Balibar proposes three models of politics: *emancipation, transformation, civility*. In their constitutive dissonance, they overdetermined a universal concept of the political (*La crainte des masses*, 1997). Emancipation is the name of an autonomous, unconditional politics, that of the self-determination of a people (understood as *demos*, not *ethnos*), articulated in the proposition of *égalité*, that is, in the inseparability of equality and liberty. Transformation stands for a heteronomous politics, a practice under given socio-economic conditions aimed at the alteration of these very conditions. Yet both politics as emancipation and as transformation is heteronomous in the sense that it is only possible within the absence of *ultra-violence*. A third concept, that of *civility*, is therefore necessary. As opposed to traditional conceptions of politics that externalize violence, civility takes the global proliferation of violence as its very object to create the necessary space for politics.

Influenced to some extent by Derrida, Balibar’s later work is marked by an attention to textual problems, contradictions, and aporias. These are not semantic obstacles a hermeneutic approach to the text can overcome. Rather they define the specificity of philosophical writing, insofar as the philosophical text radicalizes the contradictions that go beyond it. In a sense, then, this “symptomatic reading” reveals a continuity of Balibar’s method from the early days of *Lire le capital*. An example of this is his analysis of Marx and Engels’s “vacillation” with regard to the necessary, yet impossible, notion of a proletarian ideology. Linking the very notion of politics to this vacillation, Balibar demonstrates that a mass revolutionary politics is always tied to a *conjuncture*.

Conjuncture is a key concept for Balibar: it is the condition of possibility for both emancipatory politics and truth. Arguing against the “metaphysics of truth and totality” that haunt historical materialism, Balibar contends that truth can only be the effect of a conjuncture. If ideology (as a subset of the imaginary) is part of the materiality of history, then truth can only appear as a moment from within ideology. Neither historically determined nor historically relative, truth is the very break that disrupts and suspends the governing configuration of the imaginary. In other words, truth is the effect of a critique that confronts and contradicts the dominant ideology and its criteria of universality. Although truth effects relate to their historical contexts, they are not predetermined by history, but imply a “non-contemporaneity” of critique and its conditions.

This conception of truth as a moment sheds light on two of the characteristic traits of Balibar’s work. The first is the absence of a unified corpus. Balibar’s writings present themselves almost exclusively under the form of dispersed yet related essays: singular texts that differentiate, dissociate, and displace their objects. Finally, it elucidates the twin aspect of his work, at once philosophical and political. A work that in its double articulation is fundamentally that of a public intellectual, committed to “philosophy as a practice.”

YVES WINTER

See also **Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida**

Biography

Born in Avallon, France in 1942, Étienne Balibar was a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the early 1960s. He taught at the University of Algiers, Algeria from 1965–1967, before returning to France and taking up a position at the Lycée de Savigny-sur-Orge. From 1969 until the mid 1990s he taught at the University of Paris I (Sorbonne), interrupted by a stay in Leiden, Netherlands in the late 70s. From 1994 to 2002 Balibar held a chair in political and moral philosophy at the University of Paris X (Nanterre). In 2000 he was appointed Distinguished Professor in Critical Theory at the University of California, Irvine. He was a member of the French Communist Party from 1961 until 1981, when he was excluded for his public condemnation of the party’s stance toward immigration. Balibar continues to be an outspoken critic of French and European immigration policies and a prominent advocate against exclusion. Étienne Balibar is the author and editor of over twenty books, the co-director of the series *Pratiques Théoriques* at Presses Universitaires de France, and the translator of works by Marx, Locke, and Antonio Negri.

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