Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault met at the École Normale Supérieure on the rue d’Ulm in Paris, with the older Althusser acting as something of a mentor to the younger Foucault, becoming a tutor while Foucault was a student there, advising and to some extent assisting the younger man. Under Althusser’s influence, Foucault joined the French Communist Party. Foucault left soon afterwards, but had reportedly enjoyed Althusser’s blessing in leaving, Althusser’s relationship to the Communist Party itself being marked simultaneously by a tenacious commitment and a deep, mutual ambivalence: he would remain a member for most of his life, as long as he felt he could, but always attempting to change the party from within. Foucault soon graduated from the École Normale and departed from that institution too, unlike Althusser, who spent most of the rest of his life ensconced there as a fixture of the teaching staff. Still, the two remained on friendly terms, and were considered contemporarily to belong to the same intellectual tendency, what was popularly called “structuralism,” though neither of them accepted this descriptor readily.

This essay will examine their relationship through the lens provided by this special issue of Angelaki, that is, through the concepts in their respective lexicons deriving from the notion of the problem, namely those of “the problematic” and “problematization.”

1965: problematic

I will begin by focusing on a brief passage from Althusser, which contains a simple definition of what he takes a “problematic” to be, by understanding it correlative with another of his key concepts, that of the “epistemological break,” as well as giving us an account of the provenance of these terms (though what this does not do yet is give us any appreciation of the etymological significance of the notion of a “problematic”):

Without a theory of the history of theoretical formations it would be impossible to grasp and indicate the specific difference that distinguishes two different theoretical formations. I thought it possible to borrow for this purpose the concept of a “problematic” from Jacques Martin to designate the particular unity of a theoretical formation and hence the location to be assigned to this
specific difference, and the concept of an "epistemological break" from Gaston Bachelard to designate the mutation in the theoretical problematic contemporary with the foundation of a scientific discipline. (For Marx 32)

Problematics, then, are peculiar to particular theoretical formations, and as such are divided from one another by "breaks" (coupures, literally "cuts"), which, in something of a mixed metaphor, Althusser defines as "mutation" in the problematic, though specifically only such mutation as occurs when a scientific discipline is "founded."

The attributions which Althusser gives for each of these two concepts here, to Martin and Bachelard respectively, while widely accepted by his readers, are actually rather dubious in both cases. Bachelard’s name would have been familiar to most of Althusser’s readers, as that of perhaps the pre-eminent French philosopher of science of the twentieth century. Martin’s name, on the other hand, would have been known only to Althusser’s immediate circle, since the young philosopher never held an academic post or published any of his own work. He had committed suicide in 1964, the year before the above-quoted passage was published, in Pour Marx, the first anthology of Althusser’s writings. Althusser indeed dedicates the whole collection to Martin, and one might suggest that the extent of his attribution of the notion of the problematic to Martin is due to a peculiar overvaluation at that juncture by Althusser of Martin’s influence. ¹ It is worth noting perhaps also that Martin was, according to Althusser, just as close to Foucault as he was to Althusser, but we have only Althusser’s word for this (The Future Lasts 133), since Foucault by contrast does not mention Martin at all, ever, in any publicly available statement (Macey 26).

While Althusser might have picked up the word “problematic” from his friend Martin, Martin certainly did not invent the term. Patrice Maniglier has argued that the notion was itself rather invented by Bachelard.² Bachelard uses the term deliberately and copiously in his 1949 book Applied Rationalism (Lecourt 79), and was a significant influence on Martin, having supervised his thesis (Althusser, The Future Lasts 327). It is likely that Martin made this notion more prominent in his own thought than Bachelard previously had; Macey indicates that the problematic was the key concept of Martin’s thought (25–26), whereas it was not that for Bachelard, at least not in any obvious way.

If the term “problematic” was not particularly important for Bachelard, he did not actually use the phrase ascribed to him by Althusser, “epistemological break,” at all. He speaks of “ruptures” rather than “breaks” and even then this is not a very common phrase in his writing nor is it usually qualified as “epistemological.” That is, Althusser has expanded on Bachelard by renaming and then thematizing a concept that he ultimately purports to derive from him. With Étienne Balibar (208), I would say that Althusser’s notion is in effect an “original concept” in relation to Bachelard’s thought. We may well wonder, then, what transformation he has effected in relation to the concept of the “problematic” he ascribes to Martin.

When For Marx came to be translated into English in 1969, the translator, Ben Brewster, included a glossary of terms, appended also to the English translation of Reading Capital. This glossary features definitions of both “epistemological break” and “problematic.” In both cases, Brewster provides an inaccurate etymology that underestimates Althusser’s originality and gives misplaced credit instead to Foucault. Brewster follows Althusser in attributing the notion of the “epistemological break” to Bachelard, before claiming it was taken up not only by Althusser but also by Foucault and Canguilhem. This is misleading in so far as the precise term “epistemological break” is invented and used only by Althusser, with Foucault across his works preferring Bachelard’s term rupture to Althusser’s coupure, though we can indeed speak of a similar conceptual move and related vocabulary in each of these thinkers’ work. With “problematic,” Brewster references only Foucault, noting a “related concept […] in Foucault’s Madness and Civilization.” It’s unclear what “related concept” Brewster had in mind, but the most likely term would presumably be
“problematics,” which occurs twice in *Madness and Civilization*, but is used to translate the same French noun, *problématique*, which Brewer (less eccentrically) translates as “problematic” in the case of Althusser. It is worth noting perhaps that *Madness and Civilization* is a massively abridged version of Foucault’s full *Histoire de la folie*, which has more recently appeared in a full translation as the *History of Madness*, in which *problématique* is rendered both as “problematic” and “problematics.”

The term appears, however, only ten times in the original book of close to 700 pages – it is thus much less prominent there than it is in Althusser’s work, say in the contemporaneous essay “On the Young Marx,” where Althusser uses the word at least twenty-eight times in fewer than forty pages. Althusser was justified, then, in taking umbrage at his English translator’s linking his use of this term to Foucault, even if *Histoire de la folie* did appear in French before any of Althusser’s writings of equivalent significance, and Althusser himself stressed the importance of the work, expressing in 1962 an intention to write a piece about it (Montag).

Althusser took issue with Brewer before publication in a letter that was duly published as an addendum to the glossary. Here, Althusser (*For Marx* 257) downplays the connection between Foucault’s thought and his own:

> He was a pupil of mine, and “something” from my writings has passed into his, including certain of my formulations. But (and it must be said, concerning as it does his own philosophical personality) under his pen and in his thought even the meanings he gives to formulations he has borrowed from me are transformed into another quite different meaning than my own.

Althusser’s response in some ways may be said to give too little credit to Foucault – in English at least, describing him as a “pupil” overstates Althusser’s seniority in the relationship, and I think there is reason to suspect that Foucault, despite his relative lack of seniority, was more of an influence on Althusser than vice versa, evidenced perhaps by the fact

Althusser refers to Foucault a number of times in *For Marx* and in *Reading Capital*, whereas Foucault never refers to Althusser in this way at all. However, Althusser nonetheless manages here, whether intentionally or not, still to give too much credit to the idea that Foucault has a concept of the problematic.

While the word is in Foucault’s vocabulary, there’s no indication that he has a distinctive conceptualization of it. He uses *problématique* as a noun consistently at a low level throughout his career: in his very first publication, his introduction to his 1954 translation of Binswanger, where he speaks of Binswanger’s “double problematic,” combining phenomenology and psychoanalysis (“Introduction” 79–80); twice in 1963’s *Naissance de la clinique* [*Birth of the Clinic*], where he refers first to a “causal problematic” (142) and later to a “problematic of essences” (181); four times in *Les Mots et les choses* [*The Order of Things*] in 1966, where he talks of a “moral problematic of profit” (178), about a problematic which “bypasses representation” (323), and a problematic established by “modern thought” (343–34); four times in 1969’s *L’Archéologie du savoir* [*The Archaeology of Knowledge*], where he speaks of “the problematic of a trace” (159), and “the problematic of the origin” (185, 247, 264); once in *Surveiller et punir* [*Discipline and Punish*] in 1975, where he speaks of panoptic architecture as “a whole problematic” (174); twice in *La Volonté de savoir* [*The Will to Knowledge*] in 1976, wherein he speaks of a shift from a problematic of relations to a problematic of “flesh” (142), and of a “double problematic of life and man” (189); and twice in the *L’Usage des plaisirs* [*The Use of Pleasure*] in 1984, where he posits a shift in problematic with Plato (253). These usages seem to be consistent with one another and with Althusser’s definition of the problematic as the particular unity of a theoretical formation, but without any attempt ever to explore the meaning of the concept. The term occurs with slightly more frequency in his shorter writings and interviews collected in *Dits et écrits*: by my count, across its four volumes, the word occurs as a noun seventeen times in the first volume, thirteen
times in the second, seventeen times again in the third, and twenty in the fourth. It would seem, then, that Foucault was perhaps somewhat more comfortable invoking this concept in less formal settings than in his books, which may betoken a sense that it is not really “his” concept. It is worth noting that his interlocutors use the word frequently, and that sometimes Foucault merely uses the word to answer questions that already use it, for example in his famous 1968 response to the Althusserian Cercle d’Épistémologie published in Cahiers pour l’Analyse (“Sur l’Archéologie des Sciences. Réponse au Cercle d’Épistémologie” 708, 710, 731). It is, then, a background notion that is widely understood in his milieu; as Maniglier indicates, this notion has come to be a stock-standard one in French academe.

1966: episteme

There is nonetheless a distinctive concept of Foucault’s that resembles Althusser’s notion of the problematic, in so far as it is for Foucault the thing between which what might be called epistemological breaks occur, namely the episteme. This cannot be what Brewster meant to refer to, inasmuch as it is a concept peculiar to one work of Foucault’s, The Order of Things. There is no other notion in Foucault’s vocabulary, indeed, that is quite so original, so singular and so limited in its scope and application. It is possible, moreover, that Foucault is influenced by Althusser here, since The Order of Things came out only in 1966 and “On the Young Marx” had appeared in 1961.

The Order of Things charts the history of what became “the human sciences,” that is, European discourses about life, language, and society. Foucault observes what he takes to be strikingly similar principles across these disciplines in different time periods – the epistemes – which go through relatively sudden changes simultaneously multiple times during modernity.

The Order of Things was the best-selling book that made Foucault famous. It was not its dense, meticulously scholarly arguments about the history of knowledge that powered its sales so much as its concluding claims about an epochal shift underway in the contemporary human sciences, ending with the final lines in which Foucault threatened the entire concept of “man,” which is to say, more broadly translated into English, of the human itself as such, with obsolescence. The most hyperbolic reaction came from the predominant camp in French philosophy at that time, the humanist Marxists around Jean-Paul Sartre, the most prominent philosopher of the day, and his journal Les Temps modernes. Sartre cast Foucault as “the last rampart of the bourgeoisie.”

Marxists were used to casting their opponents as simply behind the times, but Foucault seemed here to claim exactly that about Marxism, through the device of claiming that Marx belonged to an older epoch with which we have now broken. The specific difficulty with Foucault was that he was young and radical enough to be, in a sense, post-Marxist. As Deleuze once said of him: “it is as if something is emerging in the wake of Marx.”

For Sartre, this amounted to the last tactic that capitalism has to prevent itself being swept away. We have indeed seen liberals adopt precisely this tactic, including with approving reference to Foucault, to accuse Marxist critiques of being outdated in favour of the endorsement of neo-liberalism or other positions which are much less radical than Marxism. This was not Foucault’s position, however, which was rather that something genuinely new was in the offing. Thinking in terms of historical rupture, as Foucault does in this book, is for him precisely a hallmark of a new ruptural emergence.

Foucault seemed so dangerous here because he didn’t occur in isolation. Rather, he declared Marxism obsolete in favour of the new breed, what is usually called “French structuralism.” While Foucault doesn’t use the term “structuralism” to describe this tendency, he is clear enough in The Order of Things in aligning himself with the figures – of which Foucault was already one – commonly designated “structuralist” in Paris in the 1960s, casting this tendency as embodying of an incipient new
contemporary *episteme*. Claude Lévi-Strauss is the only contemporary figure he actually names approvingly in *The Order of Things* (413), though his placing of “psychoanalysis” alongside Lévi-Strauss’s ethnology here is surely a nod to Jacques Lacan. Perhaps the more explicit reference to Lévi-Strauss relates to the fact that his *Raw and the Cooked* appeared in 1964, when Lacan’s *Écrits* weren’t published until 1966, the same year as *The Order of Things*, which is not to say that Foucault only discovered Lacan after that publication—Didier Eribon tells us that Foucault already recommended Lacan’s occasional pieces to his students before this (139) and indeed claims that Lacan was the primary inspiration for Foucault’s archaeological method (272) – but rather that prior to this publication Lacan did not quite have Lévi-Strauss’s intellectual prominence.

Althusser, despite being primarily categorized as a structuralist, is not mentioned either, nor even alluded to in the way Lacan is. One might suggest Althusser fell afoul of the same effect I have suggested befell Lacan, of lacking the literary prominence to merit a mention at the time Foucault was writing. Althusser’s first book, *For Marx*, appeared in 1965, with Foucault receiving a copy from Althusser in September (Defert 32), too late one imagines for this to influence *The Order of Things*, which was finished early in that year (Defert 31). Indeed, François Dosse (341) reports that Balibar claims that Foucault was simply unaware of Althusser’s work on Marx when he wrote *The Order of Things*. With Andrew Ryder (136), I do not find this claim entirely credible given Foucault’s personal closeness to Althusser. While I would agree that Foucault might not have read all of Althusser’s articles prior to their anthologization in *For Marx*, being as they originally appeared in Communist Party journals that Foucault likely did not read, it seems implausible to suggest that Foucault was not aware that Althusser was engaging in an attempt to read Marx in a way that broadly accorded with what was then commonly called “structuralism” in France. This is not to say, of course, that he appreciated all the theoretical complexities of Althusser’s developing position, and perhaps this is all Balibar meant. In any case, given the many influences that Althusser and Foucault had in common, we cannot assert that Foucault’s *episteme* is necessarily influenced particularly strongly by Althusser’s notion of the “problematic.”

However, there may be another reason for not mentioning Althusser in *The Order of Things* than a lack of knowledge of his theory: given that Althusser was not just a Marxist but a Marxologist, claiming to represent a faithful reading of Marx, it would be difficult for Foucault to square a dismissal of Marx and Marxism with the idea that Althusser is part of the post-Marxist *episteme*. This is not to say that there was actually a substantive disagreement by Foucault with Althusser’s Marx. Indeed, Foucault clarifies as much, that the critique of Marx in *The Order of Things* does not apply to Althusser, in a later interview (“Entretien avec Michel Foucault” 170). Foucault was elsewhere laudatory about different aspects of Marx: in the introduction to his next book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault *inter alia* cited Althusser’s *For Marx* and clarified that his invective towards Marx and Marxism in *The Order of Things* pertained specifically to Marx’s economics; when it came to Marx’s view of history, he saw Marx as having a progressive stance, viewing history in terms of discontinuity as Foucault himself did. And this was no change of mind on Foucault’s part, since he also treated Marx positively in a text, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” that was composed prior to *The Order of Things*. In at least one interview in 1966, Foucault does align his position with Althusser’s (“Interview avec Michel Foucault” 653). In an untranslated 1971 interview, Foucault clarifies that the Marxism he was talking about in *The Order of Things* was not Marxism *tout court* but specifically humanist Marxism (“Entretien avec Michel Foucault” 170). This makes sense inasmuch as this was precisely the camp that was offended by it.

While the orthodoxy among French Marxists, including both the most prominent Marxist intellectuals and the primary institutional expression of French Marxism, the French
Communist Party (Parti communiste français – PCF), was that Marxism was a form of humanism, Althusser’s project was to change the party from within via his anti-Hegelian reading of Marx. In March 1966, the “humanist controversy” around Althusser’s anti-humanist thought concluded with the definitive pronouncement by the party’s Central Committee that Marxism was a humanism. Foucault and Althusser – and the other “structuralists” – had common cause in attacking humanism. Put simplistically and schematically, they were diametrically opposed to humanism’s focus on the human individual and his experience, in favour of a focus on the structures and systems that subtext the human. Both Foucault’s *episteme* and Althusser’s “problematic” are structures in this sense.

Althusser, of course, made adherence to Marx the centrepiece of his thought, and in doing so gave Marxism renewed respectability in the university by aligning it with cutting-edge perspectives, according to G.M. Goshgarian (xxvii), such that the party had to pretend to take Althusser seriously. However, the party had no intention of abandoning a notional commitment to humanism: it was the line coming out of Moscow, and the PCF was at that time still in thrall to the Soviet Union, and moreover it allowed the PCF to seek a majoritarian coalition with progressive Catholics and socialists to capture state power in France. It is in this space that *The Order of Things* exploded: a space where the PCF has sided with Sartre in effect against Althusser. Of course, this was an accidental intervention to the extent that Foucault could not have known the book would appear at this conjuncture and did not anticipate the fuss it would cause: the indications are that Foucault did not at all seek the level of political controversy he encountered with the book.

Althusser never writes anything negative about Foucault (even if some of his students did), despite Foucault’s occasional criticisms of Marxism. Rather, Althusser takes Lévi-Strauss as his critical target, on the basis of which Althusser sharply distinguishes his thought from “structuralism,” of which he takes Lévi-Strauss to be the exemplar, while leaving the way clear to an alliance with pretty much any other non-Marxist anti-humanists such as Foucault (Goshgarian xxix). Here, however, lurks another disagreement with Foucault, since he aligns himself in *The Order of Things* most explicitly with Lévi-Strauss, even if Foucault (“Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal” 516) elsewhere in 1966 aligns himself simultaneously with Lévi-Strauss and Althusser.

Though Althusser does not publicly criticize Foucault, he does, however, as we’ve seen, in his letter to Ben Brewster, forcefully distinguish his position from Foucault’s. Clearly, an essential difference between Foucault’s stance and Althusser’s is that Althusser thinks Marx, and more particularly Marx’s *Capital*, constitutes an epistemological break, whereas Foucault does not. Is there a methodological reason for this difference? At first blush, Foucault’s methodological position in *The Order of Things* looks nearly identical to Althusser’s, with his verdict on Marx’s significance being opposite within the same framework, albeit with a different technical vocabulary.

Balibar in 1977, at a time when he was still Althusser’s most orthodox follower and, like Althusser, a member of the PCF, attempts to differentiate and defend Althusser’s formulations vis-à-vis Foucault’s. He avers that “Foucault and Althusser both make use of a quasi-identical formulation,” relating Althusser’s problematic to Foucault’s *episteme* (222). “But,” qualifies Balibar,

for Foucault the relation between discourses and episteme is explained by a *variational mechanism* according to a double play of criteria: variation in different disciplines and in their particular “objects” […] Now, to speak of a variational mechanism is also necessarily to speak of an invariant preexisting or immanent to those variations.

By contrast, Balibar argues that

in Althusser the relation of a theoretical problematic to its particular effects or realizations is not thought in variational terms, nor, therefore, can he have anything invariant as ultimate anchorage point […] So I
believe that it is possible, at the very least, to credit Althusser with the originality – in relation to his contemporaries – of having attempted the elaboration of a theory of discontinuity without invariance. (223; emphasis in original)

It is far from entirely clear from Balibar’s text how it is that Althusser is supposed to escape this trap of positing invariance vis-à-vis Foucault, but light is shone here by a text that Balibar cites in support, namely Georges Canguilhem’s 1967 review of The Order of Things. What Canguilhem says there, speaking of Foucault, is that “The verification of the discourse on the episteme is concerned with the variety of domains where the invariant is revealed” (609; my translation). Canguilhem then reads Foucault’s archaeological operation in The Order of Things as a matter of looking across a variety of domains for an invariant that proves that the episteme is there in each of them – the episteme then amounts to the invariant. By contrast, Althusser’s problematic is held by Balibar neither to be nor to imply an invariant. Balibar is thus arguing that while the episteme for Foucault is a fixed facet of knowledge at any given time, for Althusser there is no invariant implied by the concept of the problematic. This for Balibar (223) is a further reason why Althusser should not be considered “structuralist.”

It is perhaps not readily apparent how Althusserian problematics are less “invariant” than Foucauldian epistemes, but we may refer here to Althusser’s critique in Reading Capital of the conception of “time” found in the Hegelian totality and suggest it is applicable to the stages represented by Foucault’s epistemes. Foucault does not posit “totalities” in the sense that Althusser (unlike Balibar, who in his contribution to Reading Capital redefines “totality” as a positive Althusserian term) criticizes as such, which is to say to mean everything in a given social formation at a given time cohering together absolutely without remainder. Foucault’s epistemes are not totalities, are not the ideas that govern totalities, are not even elements of totalities. They are rather elements of the disparate things that Althusser calls instead “wholes.” Still, the “time” implied by epistemes does seem to conform to the conception of time that Althusser attributes to Hegel, since Foucault seems to see everything at any given moment as subservient to a set of rules that belong to that moment. Althusser is opposed to this kind of division of time into periods, indeed to an extent that does not seem compatible with Marx’s view of history as it is conventionally understood, insisting rather on the co-existence of different problematics, as of different modes of production, contemporaneously.

Althusser, I think, has Foucault on this point: Foucault exaggerates how monolithic epistemes are, and Althusser here is more sophisticated, presaging the kind of position towards power and knowledge that Foucault will take in his later work. It’s a high irony that Althusser in propounding his conception of historical time references Foucault’s representation of the complexities of history in the latter’s History of Madness, which I think indicates that Foucault did have a more sophisticated view in this earlier work before his “archaeology” developed into a methodological straitjacket. One might suggest that in The Order of Things, Foucault flew rather too close to the structuralist sun. The Althusserian Dominique Lecourt (189) indeed contends that in abandoning the notion of the episteme in his next work, The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault casts off his structuralism, and does so in the direction of Althusserian Marxism moreover.

Where Foucault says in The Order of Things that there can at one time in one culture (whatever meaning we give to this notion of “culture”) only be one episteme, Althusser says that at any one time there are multiple modes of production, and hence multiple ideologies. To this Foucault in effect responded with a new position that there may be any number of interlinked strategies of power and knowledges, without having to ground this in any account of modes of production. Foucault’s later genealogical perspective differs from Althusser in not having to reckon with Marxist shibboleths, however, in particular, notoriously, the historical materialist formula of “determination in the last instance.”
He also never embraces the kind of thinking in terms of providing a coherent “theory” or “science” that Althusser does. While Foucault’s notion of the episteme may fall afoul of Althusserian objections by having too monolithic a conception of scientific culture at a given time, it nonetheless actually implies less coherence among its adherents than does Althusser’s notion of the problematic. Where Althusser defines the problematic in terms of unity of theory in relation to what may potentially be thought, Foucault defines the episteme rather in terms of scientificity and the acceptability of statements within a field. These distinctions may seem semantic, but they are substantive differences. Althusser posits unity in the formation governed by problematics, but for Foucault there is no unity required in an episteme, only a constitutive exclusion of things as unacceptable within a discourse:

I would define the episteme retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won’t say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme is the “apparatus” which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific. (“Confession of the Flesh” 197)

The episteme then ends up being a filter by which certain claims or kinds of claim are ruled out within scientific discourses at a given time, whereas the problematic is integral to the constitution of any thought itself as such. The episteme is historically contextually limited by this token, limiting its time, whereas Althusser can talk about the same problematic being present in the mature Marx and Spinoza, hundreds of years earlier, allowing that problematics are historically invented, but once invented can circulate indefinitely. For Althusser, there is also a particular problematic of the thought of the individual” (For Marx 70), whereas for Foucault the point is only ever to study here what occurs beneath and across individuals’ contributions:

We must go further than the unmentioned presence of the thoughts of a living author to the presence of his potential thoughts, to his problematic, that is, to the constitutive unity of the effective thoughts that make up the domain of the existing ideological field with which a particular author must settle accounts in his own thought. (For Marx 66)

For Althusser, the immediate point of the notion of the problematic as he develops it in his writings is to discern within or underneath Marx’s thought a Marxist problematic, which is not instantiated necessarily in every thing Marx said, but can be distinguished from other, non-Marxist dimensions of his thought. Althusser thus defines the problematic as “the concrete determinate structure of a thought and of all the thoughts possible within this thought,” which cannot be identified with the totality of things that a writer says (For Marx 69). This contrasts with Foucault’s insistence in his Archaeology of Knowledge on studying only what is said, without concern for who is behind it. While both Foucault and Althusser are concerned to burrow beneath the thought of the individual, Althusser remains strongly focused on a particular individual, “Marx,” even if what Althusser does with Marx to be sure is to disturb the perceived unity around the historic individual named Karl Marx in favour of discerning a properly “Marxist” problematic within his various writings. By contrast, Foucault, in The Order of Things at least, is content to treat individuals as monolithic, in so far as he is not interested in dividing up any individual’s thought into periods or moments, but at the same time less individualistic, in so far as he does not accord real importance to singular individuals in the first place, but rather to the broad historical formations within which individuals think and which they are relatively powerless to escape. In this respect, Foucault could be deemed more radically anti-humanist.

Furthermore, Althusser defines the problematic correlative with a concept that Foucault refuses pointedly, that of ideology. This term of Althusser’s vocabulary comes from Marxism, although he changes its meaning substantially,
albeit in a direction he claims is more authentically Marxist than that it previously had. His use of the term is, then, idiosyncratic, if influential. He defines ideology in his famous essay on “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” most succinctly as “an imaginary relation to real relations” (166). Foucault’s thought lacks any equivalent concept to this; Foucault neither rejects nor accepts the kind of notion this represents, so much as utterly brackets the very consideration of such a question. He opts not to use the notion of ideology inter alia because it necessarily refers “to something of the order of a subject” (“Truth and Power” 60). More specifically, in Althusser’s case it refers to a quasi-Lacanian theory of the subject, given Althusser’s formulation in terms of the Lacanian categories of “real” and “imaginary,” hence his insistence in For Marx that ideology is not “conscious” (233), defining ideology instead as “the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence” (233–34). By contrast, for much of his career Foucault refuses to investigate subjectivity as such, and when he does, in his late work, he does so in a very different style to the Lacanian theory of the subject, indeed avoiding any theorization of subjectivity per se (see Kelly, “Foucault, Subj ectivity, and Technologies of the Self”). This is not to say that he is opposed to the Lacanian approach to subjectivity as such, only that he does not pursue it himself (Foucault, Hermeneutics of the Subject 189).

Althusser invokes the concept of ideology in defining the problematic as “the constitutive unity of the effective thoughts that make up the domain of the existing ideological field.” In invoking the notion of the problematic to understand the unity of underlying ideology (For Marx 67), he seeks to escape from what he sees as the idealist approach to ideology, which only describes the superficial features of ideology and fails to attend to its deep structure. This does not define the problematic in terms of ideology so much as vice versa: an ideology requires a problematic to unify it (62); this does not mean logically that we need to invoke ideology to understand this problematic, although the problematic is at least in part defined as the underlying unifying principle of ideology. Even though Foucault does not talk about ideology, it is clear enough that his episteme is neither meant nor able to explain how ideology works, but rather is specific to the coherence – but not unity – of formations in the history of science that do not have the status of ideology. Here, indeed, we may speak of a difference in the problematics of the two thinkers, in so far as Althusser is fundamentally concerned with producing a philosophy selectively using Marx’s writings to provide its basic coordinates, an approach entirely foreign to Foucault, who sanctifies no individual. By the same token, we may speak of the two thinkers as belonging to different epistemes, with Althusser perhaps representing a liminal position on the cusp of Foucault’s episteme: Foucault has rejected the form of thought that Althusser represents in so far as he ties himself ineluctably, albeit differentially, to the historical figure of Marx.

In the end, the episteme and the Althusserian problematic are related and not mutually exclusive concepts. Still, it is worth noting that episteme is a notion that is proper only to one of Foucault’s works, unlike Althusser’s notion of the problematic, inasmuch as Althusser uses this word till the end, albeit with lower frequency and emphasis in later work. It is also worth noting that Foucault’s episteme, already less oriented towards thought and the subject than Althusser’s problematic, is replaced in effect by Foucault with a notion of dispositif which is considerably more material again, a “heterogeneous” assemblage of discursive and non-discursive, as opposed to the primarily discursive dispositif that he now retrospectively understands the episteme to have been (“Confession of the Flesh” 197–98).

post-1968: problematization

After the publication of the Order of Things, Foucault spent time with Althusser and Derrida (Defert 33) – the latter on the verge of making his own big splash – and the criticism
started rolling in. Both Althusser and Foucault were in a phase of defensive retreat. Both of them were forced to reconsider the relation of theory to practice. Foucault brackets the question of practice entirely in *The Order of Things*, to an extent he never would again, and which he clearly retrospectively thought a mistake. This meant that the book was oddly naive: there is no concern in it for what it means as a practical intervention to say the things he says in the book. Althusser, by contrast, as a Marxist had never tried to isolate theory from practice, but nonetheless saw himself later as having been naively theoreticist in his earlier work.

For Foucault, the intense reaction to *The Order of Things* effectively raised *inter alia* the question for him of how such abstract reflections can stir up such a hornet’s nest. This spurred him to investigate the relationship of institutions and ultimately of power to knowledge. For Althusser, the rejection of his philosophy by his party raised a similar question, because it became clear that having a correct line and winning arguments were not enough for a theory to gain acceptance. In effect, both reached similar conclusions, even though they encountered rather different obstacles: Foucault faced a critical firestorm that he didn’t anticipate, and Althusser a cold rejection where he hoped for revolution. Althusser came to reconsider the relationship of theory to practice, though within the same basic framework of concepts. Foucault, by contrast, moved on to new concepts – “genealogy” and “power” most notably – but there he did not repudiate his earlier positions but rather can be said to have built on them.

His initial move was modest, to examine not great structures of power but the molecular operation of statements in language. Foucault replied to his critics, then left France for Tunis for two years.

According to Daniel Defert (34), Foucault’s partner whose presence in Tunis was the initial spur for his move, the polemical pressure against *The Order of Things* in Marxist journals kept up until May 1968, at which point, of course, things changed. The Events of 1968 might seem to falsify Foucault’s hypothesis that Marxism was moribund, and to show that Althusser was in effect right that Marxism was still the main game, still the horizon of rebellion, inasmuch as it was the dominant discourse of the barricades. Althusser was, of course, wrong that the Communist Party was the main vehicle for revolution, and his decision to remain there looked ever more ridiculous after 1968 – but he maintained that while his line seemed to imply he should leave the PCF, and while it was the PCF’s failure to rally the workers that meant 1968 didn’t see a revolution, that this meant he was right that it was the only vehicle that could have led to a real revolution (*The Future Lasts* 230). All the while, he associated with Maoists and other extra-party young intellectuals more sympathetic to his ideas; Althusser’s intervention has been ineffective as an attempt to reform the PCF, but fecund in stimulating Marxism outside of it, presaging and perhaps even catalysing 1968. Foucault’s anti-Marxism more or less disappeared from view after 1968 – his next book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, though largely written before the Events of May, has an introduction which I suspect was written afterwards (the book did not actually appear in print until 1969), in which Foucault praises and aligns himself with Marx, and mentions Althusser approvingly. Strictly speaking, this does not contradict his earlier perspective, however, because his positive comments on Marx now relate to Marx’s view of history as ruptural, whereas his assessment of Marx in *The Order of Things* pertained explicitly to Marxist economics. The main body of the book hardly relates to Marxism or Althusser at all, however. If the introduction of the book displays a deliberate reorientation towards Marxism, a less pointed movement in the same direction can be seen in the main body of the book, though it may have been written before 1968, perhaps reacting to some of the Marxist criticisms of his previous work, in particular by explicitly trying to locate discourse at a *material* level (see Lecourt; Kelly, *Political Philosophy*).

Still, this is as nothing compared to the full-blown reorientation post-1968, for which we
have to look to Foucault’s next book, his inaugu-
ral 1970 lecture at the Collège de France, L’Ordre du discours. The shift here is substan-
tial, towards an engagement with politics and
institutions, and hence towards Marxism, if
not particularly towards Althusser: Foucault
uses no Althusserian vocabulary and does not
refer to Althusser here, only to Marx. Foucault
moves closer to Marxism in this period but
does not become a Marxist, rather forging his
own novel political thought outside of
Marxism, albeit under its influence.

The influence of Marxism, both on Foucault
and on the French scene more generally,
waned steadily as the 1970s wore on. Prominent
soixante-huitard revolutionaries became
avoided anti-Marxist New Philosophers. Fou-
cault’s stance shifted more subtly than theirs,
but nonetheless definitely tacked away from
Marxism. In his later thought, Foucault begins
to use a new concept that shares a clear etymo-
logical kinship with the notion of the prob-
lematic, the concept of “problematization.”
Foucault does once use the adjective “problema-
tized” in The Order of Things, but his nominal-
ization of this concept comes later, and his
thematization of it later still. He first uses the
noun “problematization” in his 1975 Collège
de France lectures, Abnormal. Here, the word
is used descriptively, to talk about the historical
“problematization” of phenomena by emergent
medical psychiatry, that is, the process by
which experts took things to be “problems”
that needed to be addressed. He continues to
use the word in this sense in the first volume
of the History of Sexuality published the fol-
lowing year. Foucault continues to use the
word thereafter in his lectures.

In the nine months of his life leading up to his
death in 1984, however, he turns an intense
focus onto the concept, now directly problemat-
izing the very concept of problematization
itself, in particular, in a series of lectures in Cali-
ifornia in late 1983, later collected and published
as Fearless Speech. Here, he initially simply
uses the term descriptively, to describe an his-
torical problematization of a particular concept
in Ancient Greece, but in the final minutes of
his last lecture he turns his attention to the

notion of problematization itself. He takes pro-
blematization simply to mean making some-
thing into a problem, and his work as a matter
of analysing how and why problematizations
happen. Thereafter, “problematization”
remains his key concept across his final works,
one in terms of which he now retrospectively
couches his life’s project (“The Concern for
Truth” 456). The most interesting mutation in
Foucault’s discussion of problematization
comes in an interview conducted in May 1984,
just a couple of months before his death
(“Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations”).
Here, he identifies “thought” itself as such
essentially with problematization:

It seemed to me there was one element that
was capable of describing the history of
thought – this was what one could call the
element of problems or, more exactly, pro-
blematizations. What distinguishes thought
is that it is something quite different from
the set of representations that underlies a
certain behavior; it is also something quite
different from the domain of attitudes that
can determine this behavior. Thought is not
what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it
its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to
step back from this way of acting or reacting,
to present it to oneself as an object of thought
and to question it as to its meaning, its con-
ditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom
in relation to what one does, the motion by
which one detaches oneself from it, estab-
lishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a
problem. (117)

While what Foucault says here implies that his
own main business qua thinker is problematiza-
tion, the concept of problematization is not pri-
marily invoked for describing his own method,
pace many standard treatments of the topic
(e.g., Koopman, “Problematization”), but
rather defines his method only in so far as it is
one instance of the transhistorical operation of
thought that he defines as problematization.
His own thought is thus a particular form of
modern critical problematization, as can be
seen in his discussion of Kant’s What is
Enlightenment? as the first text in which “one
sees philosophy problematize its own discursive
problematizing the problematic

actuality.” But the broader point here is to privilege ruptural moments in the history of thought by defining thought as such not in terms of the formations that Althusser calls ideological but rather essentially as what breaks with ideology.

“Problematization” is obviously not the same thing as Althusser’s concept of the “problematic.” In so far as Foucault might allow that such a thing as the problematic exists, problematization is both governed by and can stage a break with it. That is to say, when Foucault analyses problematizations that have occurred in the past, these might be said to relate to the problematic – in an Althusserian sense – that existed at the time, while problematization may nonetheless sometimes disturb the problematic, and indeed set up what we might call an epistemological break. Similarly, though Foucault stopped using the concept of the episteme well before he ever spoke of problematization, as with the Althusserian problematic, this concept may be used in conjunction with that of “problematization” inasmuch as an episteme might be said to allow and disallow forms of problematization, yet those allowed within an episteme may nonetheless bring about a rupture with the episteme.

Colin Koopman (Genealogy as Critique 47) associates Foucault’s usage of the notion of problematization with Deleuze, although Koopman does note the much longer standing influence of the notion of the problematic from Althusser, Canguilhem, and even Heidegger here. I am un convinced by the link to Deleuze. Deleuze’s notion of problematization is marginal in his work. He speaks much of the “problem,” and multiple times uses the adjectival “problematizing” in Difference and Repetition, a book Foucault certainly knew. Pace Koopman’s (133ff.) assertion to the contrary, however, Deleuze does not have a concept of “problematization” per se at all: this word simply does not appear in Deleuze’s vocabulary. This does not mean that Deleuze’s conceptualization of the “problem” does not crucially inform Foucault’s adoption of the concept of problematization, but the extent to which Deleuze can be taken to be the crucial influence on Foucault here is seriously mitigated when one considers his much longer standing relationship with Althusser.

But, of course, the notion of the “problem” has a longer and deeper philosophical history – which indeed it is the aim of this present journal issue to elucidate. There remains a common root of both the concepts of problematic and of problematization in their etymological reference to “problems” as such. Indeed, Althusser in effect traces this problematic of the problematization of the notion of the problem back to Marx himself, and to Engels, whom Marxists typically treat as more or less interchangeable with Marx from a theoretical point of view:

I am justified in putting forward this term “theoretical problematic” because in doing so I am giving a name (which is a concept) to what Engels says to us: Engels in fact sums up the critical interrogation of the old theory and the constitution of the new one, in the act of posing as a problem what had hitherto been given as a solution. (Reading Capital 154)

Here, Althusser is very close to Foucault’s notion of “problematization,” though he has no equivalent term in his lexicon. For Althusser, in effect, a problematic is organized around a particular problematization. Althusser distinguishes between the unconscious problematic of ideology and the self-conscious one of Marxism (For Marx 69), Althusser’s Marxism distinguishing itself therefore in being a unique ideology that understands its own nature as an ideology (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”). Foucault’s critical re-problematization, problematizing problematization, is a similar move. In both concepts, Althusser’s “problematic” and Foucault’s “problematization,” there is a common idea that what matters is what the problem is taken to be. In both cases, we find a positing of a relationship of thought to thought by which thought can obtain a critical distance from itself as it does from reality, taking itself as a real object, historical and material. This indicates that both Foucault and Althusser belong at some level to
a common problematic and engage in a common problematization, even if within this Foucault problematizes some of Althusser’s unproblematized suppositions.

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notes

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1 That said, there is some indication that this (over)valuation is much more general for Althusser. His autobiography, The Future Lasts a Long Time, begins with his recollection of the occasion in 1980 when Althusser killed his wife, Hélène. This episode is an obvious choice to begin the book with: it was the single moment of Althusser’s life which would ever after be most remembered, and his murder of his wife surely dominated every day of his life from that point on, not only because it had separated him from a woman with whom his daily life had been entwined for decades, but because it had also caused his separation from two institutions, the École Normale and the French Communist Party, with which his association had been scarcely less close. But in this moment of realizing he had killed his wife, he is reminded of Martin, apparently so forcefully that he was driven to rearrange his wife’s corpse so as to resemble the scene of Martin’s suicide. Though Martin was younger than Althusser, the older man was taken prisoner during the Second World War and spent most of the war in a prison camp, hence Martin started at the École Normale before Althusser, during the war, and despite a sojourn of his own in Germany as a labourer, remained ahead in his studies. According to Althusser, Martin had introduced him to Cavaillé’s and Canguilhem’s thought (The Future Lasts 183), and also explained Jacques Lacan to him (332). Knox Peden (101) indicates that Althusser saw Martin as the decisive influence leading him to Marxism, the explicitly defining intellectual commitment of Althusser’s life.

2 The Grand Larousse de la langue française locates the origin of problématique with Albert Camus in 1951. One indeed does find the term – once – in his 1951 book L’Homme revolté. But Bachelard had used the term as early as 1949. I can find no trace of the term in Bachelard’s works before that date, nor indeed in Camus’s (though in neither case can I claim to have conducted an entirely exhaustive search of their writings). Peden (297) reports that Balibar suggests that Heidegger is the origin of Martin’s concept – though Peden and/or Balibar do not specify any connection to any specific concept in Heidegger. Maniglier is at pains, however, to distinguish the concept from Heidegger. Yet there is at least one user of the word in French philosophy approximately as early as Bachelard, namely Paul Ricoeur – I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me Ricoeur’s early usage of the term.

3 This discussion occurs in the context of Foucault’s first Collège de France lecture of 1983, but the precise formulation in terms of “problematization” does not occur in the published version of the lectures (Government of the Self and Others 12). Rather, it is to be found in a re-edited version which was published during Foucault’s lifetime, in May 1984, as “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” [“What is Enlightenment?” – one of multiple texts of Foucault’s on the common theme to bear this name], and translated into English multiple times; the quotation here is from a text translated as “What is Revolution?” 85.

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