

A photograph of Louis Althusser, an elderly man with grey hair, wearing a patterned sweater and a light-colored jacket. He is sitting at a desk, looking down at some papers. In the background, there are bookshelves filled with books. The entire image has a green tint.

# LOUIS ALTHUSSER

WHAT  
IS TO BE  
DONE?

What Is To Be Done?

For, ultimately, what did Machiavelli urge upon his readers, long before Chernyshevsky and Lenin, if not the problem and the question: What is to be done?

Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever*

# What Is To Be Done?

Louis Althusser

Edited and Translated by G. M. Goshgarian

polity

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## Note on the Text

The text on which the present translation is based, an unfinished manuscript titled *Que faire?* that Louis Althusser wrote in 1978, was first published in 2018 in an edition that I prepared for the Presses universitaires de France/Humensis. The French edition is based on a photocopy of a ninety-five-page typed manuscript bearing many corrections in Althusser's hand. This photocopy, four pages of which are defective, would appear to be the only copy of the text in Althusser's archives, housed in the Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (Imec) in Caen. An appeal to Althusser's collaborators failed to turn up other copies of *Que faire?*

A list of notes has been preserved at the Imec along with the photocopied manuscript. They bear on passages of Antonio Gramsci's *Quaderni del carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*) quoted or referred to in *Que faire?* However, they contain no note markers pegging them to the text. Some of the notes contain brief comments, all of them in Italian; one includes a handwritten sentence that is not in Althusser's hand. The references to *Prison Notebooks* in the present edition are, without exception, taken from this list, which refers to the edition of the *Quaderni* published in 1975 under Valentino Gerratana's general editorship. Where possible, I have replaced the references to the Italian edition with references to published English translations. I have also inserted note markers at what seemed to be the right places.

All other notes to the text are mine, with the exception of one note by Althusser. I am responsible for the division of the text into chapters as well as the chapter titles. The general title is Althusser's. A few minor errors on Althusser's part have been silently corrected.

# 1

## The ‘What’ in ‘What Is To Be Done?’

What is to be done?

That old question of Lenin’s, which initiated the construction and the practices of the Bolshevik Party, is not, for a communist who knows Marxist theory, a question like any other. It is a political question. What is to be done to help to orient and organize the workers’ and the people’s class struggle so that it carries the day against the bourgeois class struggle?

We should weigh all the words in this simple question.

What is to be done to help to orient *and* organize the workers’ and the people’s class struggle? It can be seen that orientation, or the political line, *comes before* organization. This is to affirm the primacy of the political line over the party, and the construction and organization of the party *as a function* of the political line.

What is to be done to help to orient and organize the workers’ and the people’s class struggle? It can be seen that