

A photograph of Louis Althusser, an elderly man with thinning hair, wearing a patterned sweater and a light-colored jacket. He is sitting at a desk, looking down at a book or paper in his hands. The background is a bookshelf filled with books. The entire image has a green color overlay.

**LOUIS
ALTHUSSER**

WHAT
IS TO BE
DONE?

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Epigraph

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

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Copyright Page

Originally published in French as *Que Faire?* © Presses Universitaires de France/ Humensis, *Que Faire?*, 2018

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Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press

101 Station Landing

Suite 300

Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3860-7

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3861-4 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Althusser, Louis, 1918-1990, author. | Goshgarian, G. M., editor.

Title: What is to be done? / Louis Althusser ; edited and translated by G.M. Goshgarian.

Other titles: Que faire? English

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA : Polity Press, [2020] | Originally published in French as *Que Faire?* in 2018 by PUF. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "A leading Marxist philosopher lays out his practical vision for political struggle"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020012866 (print) | LCCN 2020012867 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509538607 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509538614 (paperback) | ISBN 9781509538621 (epub) | ISBN 9781509544196 (adobe pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Gramsci, Antonio, 1891-1937. | Revolutions. | Communism.

Classification: LCC HX289.7.G73 A7313 2020 (print) | LCC HX289.7.G73 (ebook) | DDC 335.43--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020012866>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020012867>

by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NL

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For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Acknowledgements

G. M. Goshgarian thanks Nathalie Léger, director of the Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine, together with the rest of the Imec staff, the Arles Centre international de traducteurs littéraires, and François Boddaert, Fabio Bruschi, Jackie Épain, Luke Épain, Julie Le Men, Vittorio Morfino, Vanessa Roghi, Stefan Schomann, Laurie Tuller, and Fang Yan.

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 orientation (the line) and organization (the party) *depend* on the workers' and the people's class struggle. Thus the party is the instrument of the political line, and the political line itself is the expression of the current workers' and people's class struggle, that is, of its tendency, antagonistic to the tendency of the bourgeois class struggle.

Everything depends, therefore, on the 'concrete analysis of the concrete situation'¹ of the current tendency of the workers' and people's class struggle in its antagonism to the bourgeois class struggle. Hence everything depends on

the concrete analysis of this *antagonism*, which constitutes the bourgeois class as a dominant, exploiting class and, simultaneously, the working class as a dominated, exploited class.

If it is true that Marx upheld, at least with respect to the capitalist mode of production, the thesis of the primacy of contradiction over the contraries, that is, of the class struggle over the classes, *then it is this antagonism itself* which must comprise the object of 'the concrete analysis of the concrete situation'. Otherwise, we lapse into 'vulgar sociology'. Otherwise, we will analyse the bourgeois class on the one hand and the working class on the other, in the belief that we can come to know them separately. It is as if we believed that we could understand a game of football by 'analysing' the line-ups of the teams, not their *match-ups*, without which there would not be a single football team on earth.²

When we say 'primacy of contradiction over the contraries', 'primacy of the class struggle over the classes', we are merely stating an abstract principle. For we have to go to the field, in the 'concrete', to see, *in detail*, what forms this antagonism historically takes, and what historical forms it confers on the classes that it constitutes. In order to understand the significance and fecundity of these principles, then, we cannot dispense with going 'to the field' and analysing things down to the smallest detail.

How can we carry out this 'concrete analysis of a concrete situation'? How can we learn in detail what goes on, for example, in the conditions of life, work, and exploitation of a metalworker or petrochemical worker, a worker on a 'family' farm or an industrial farm, a rail worker, bank clerk, social security employee, and so on?

Some people believe that it is enough to address an appeal to those involved, to ask them to talk about their lives, their

jobs, how they are exploited, and the like. That is what *L'Humanité Dimanche*, for example, has done by appealing to all its readers to whom the word applies to tell it about 'poverty'.³ And the newspaper has received a considerable number of letters, which are, incidentally, slumbering in its managing editor's office.⁴ Well and good. The workers are writing, they are saying a great many interesting, incredible, overwhelming things. This can provide *some* material for a concrete analysis. It is not a concrete analysis.

Some people believe that it is enough to head for the field, without preparation, and interview the workers. Either they ask them questions (but everyone knows that spontaneous questions aren't spontaneous, that they are biased by the 'ideas' that the person asking them has in mind) and the workers say what they *feel like* saying; or else they arrange matters so as to let the workers talk, interfering as little as possible themselves. In that case too, however, the workers say what they feel like saying. Assuming they say *everything* they know, one thing is certain: they always know much more (or much less) about things than they think they do. They do not say this 'much more', because they do not know that they know it. As for this 'much less', it is masked by what they think they do know.⁵ These 'interviews' too can provide *some* material for a concrete analysis. They are not a concrete analysis.

One cannot dispense with going to the field and listening carefully to the workers – but neither can one dispense with *preparing* for this encounter. It is not a question of psychological preparation for the purpose of establishing 'good personal contact' (of the kind that 'the human relations approach' manufactures). It is a question of *theoretical* and *political* preparation. That is why it is possible to say that *a concrete analysis and the Marxist*

theory or political consciousness of the conditions for knowledge are one and the same thing. All that differs is the *scale* of the object.

Lenin was in the habit of saying that the working class must take the greatest possible account of what goes on outside it, in the bourgeois class, not just to know itself, but to constitute itself as a conscious class (that is, as a class endowed with a party that orients, unifies and organizes its struggle). It cannot be satisfied with knowing what is going on in its own domain, that is, with knowing itself; it must also see and understand what is going on on the other side. This is not a question of simple curiosity; it is a question of grasping the two poles of the antagonism at the same time *in order to be able to grasp the antagonism as that which constitutes the two poles*, in order to grasp the class struggle as that which constitutes the classes by dividing them into classes. Otherwise, the working class will be penned within its own horizon, that of its exploitation, of its revolts with no morrow, doubled by its utopian dreams; and it will, in this captivity, be subject to all the pressures and manoeuvres of the bourgeois class struggle.

To succeed in grasping the antagonism, to succeed in understanding the mechanism of this class struggle that divides the classes into classes, mere 'self-consciousness' is not enough. Italian television recently interviewed Alfa Romeo workers at their workplace.⁶ These were vanguard workers with extraordinarily high consciousness. The audience saw everything they did at work; the workers said everything they knew. They were workers in a separate workshop who held a simple place in Alfa Romeo's immense labour process. Isolated though they were, in their shop, in their work, they had nevertheless managed to arrive at an idea of the structure and mechanisms of the process of production in their plant, and not just the labour process in their own plant, but also the subcontracting