In recent years, Humanities disciplines have borne witness to a revival of interest in the work of the 20th Century French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. In radical political philosophy, scholars have found a fecund resource in Althusser for the rethinking of ideology. In literary studies, new formalist currents have located in Althusser’s account of the ‘relative autonomy’ of art a striking way of reconceiving the relationship between literature and history.

But what makes Althusser’s work crucial to Continental philosophy today? In this class we will pose the question of his philosophy’s contemporary relevance via a close reading of Althusser’s most important texts, both originally published in 1965: the hugely influential essay collection ‘For Marx’, and the collaborative work ‘Reading Capital’. In both texts, Althusser and his student collaborators sought to provide Marxism with a scientific, which it is to say rigorously theoretical, grounding. We will consider how a combination of esoteric Spinozism, French historical epistemology, and quasi-deconstructive readings of Marx himself powerfully combined in Althusser’s work at a time of great political and philosophical tumult in France. We will also take the time to consider Althusser’s influence on literary and art theory, and we will conclude with a consideration of late, posthumously published texts by Althusser, testifying to an underground ‘philosophy of the encounter’.

Required texts: