

**ALTHUSSER'S CRITIQUE OF HUMANISM : A DEBATE  
ON THE CHARACTER OF MARXIST THEORY**

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DECLARATION

Certified that the dissertation entitled "ALTHUSSER'S  
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## P R E F A C E

The most important and influential writings of Louis Althusser span the decade of the 1960s. Politically, these writings may be understood as Althusser's contributions to a series of important debates which took place during this period within the French communist party itself, and between it and the various 'non-party' currents of the French left. These debates were about the implications for the future of socialism in the west because of the now inescapable knowledge of the stark realities of 'Stalinism' in the Soviet Union, and of the growing importance of China as an alternative model of socialist construction. In terms of their theoretical orientation, Althusser's essays attempted a wholesale re-evaluation and re-casting of the most basic concepts of Marxist thought.

Althusser set out to rescue Marxism from what were termed the bourgeois deviations of economism and humanism. His project took the form of an attempt to demonstrate the scientificity of Marxist analysis. For him, Marx was responsible for an immense scientific revolution. With 'capital' the continent of history had been opened up for scientific analysis. Althusser's task was to explicate that of which Marx and Engels had been unaware, namely, the epistemological significance of their advance. Establishing the form of the perceived qualitative leap thus constituted for

Althusser a vital theoretical and political task. The scientificity of Marxism rested with its production of a system of logically related concepts, which might reveal the hidden structure of the capitalist mode of production.

This study attempts to provide accessible exposition and criticism of Althusser's critique of Humanism, and sets it in its intellectual and political contexts.

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Prabhat Ranjan

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Ist Chapter

Humanism: Thematic Constitution and  
Theoretical Formulation

Conceptual Structure:

Theoretical humanism is a form of serial theory which embodies the central political and moral values of human freedom and creativity, of mutuality and of the intelligibility of social life to its creators. There is philosophical trade among the notions of man, the economic subject, human need, spirit, liberty, generic human nature and empirically concrete human individuals. It rests on the attribution of distinctive characteristics to human beings and their social relationships. Human beings are conceived as distinctively "free subjects", as the agents of 'meaningful' acts, as the 'creators' of their social world. It seeks to draw moral and political inferences from some purported 'essence' of man or "human nature". If human is to be in any sense a term of distinction, it is only intelligible because man is seen as a being possessed of certain capacities which distinguish him from the rest of the nature by engaging in "conscious, goal-directed activity".<sup>1</sup>

Chief among these capacities is often considered to be choice, that is, the ability to initiate free and responsible actions to which judgements of praise and blame can be affixed. Beings governed by necessity alone cannot be truly human in the fullest

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1. Max Weber, Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, G. Roth and C. Wittich, eds., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978, Part one, Chap.1.



sense of the term, since what is human depends upon the ability to choose one course of action over another. In the social sciences, theoretical humanism is based on an explicit or implicit philosophical anthropology which affirms the distinctive character of the object of social scientific investigation. It is a philosophical anthropology in the sense that the recognition of that distinctive character is thought to be not the product of scientific investigation but its pre-condition.

Theoretical humanism proposes the reduction of the social realm to the will and consciousness of human actors. Social relations are inter-subjective relations and social life is the product of the telological action of individual human subjects: social relationships and social collectivities are always reducible to the actions of individuals "action . . . . . exists only as the behaviour of one or more individual human beings".<sup>2</sup>

#### Western Philosophy and the Philosophy of Subject:

The "philosophy of subject" is central to western philosophy from Descartes through Kant to Husserl. Descartes' "cogito ergo sum"<sup>3</sup> is an assertion of the ultimate cognitive primacy and self-transparency of the contents of consciousness. In this unmediated presence of the self to itself is to be found the certainty by which

2. Weber, 1964a, p. 107.

3. Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method, trans and ed. F.E. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth, 1968), Especially pp. 53.

all other knowledge-claims are to be measured. Descartes' epistemological reconstruction of the world of external objects and other selves on the basis of this certainty, and under the guarantee provided by God the non-deceiver, can also be taken as the source of a philosophical tradition in which the self is the starting point not just for knowledge, but for the constitution of the world itself. The philosophical 'subject' is here the self-subsistent source of knowledge of the 'object' which it simultaneously constitutes.

For Kant, the chief capacity distinguishing man is his reason and human freedom is neither caprice, nor the determination of interest, but autonomy obedience to the inner law of reason. The self-cultivation of the species means the progressive transcendence of man's purely animal existence and the increased perfection of his rational faculty which implies practical or moral reason. From a state of heteronomous subservience to nature, man achieves autonomous self-determination. To be sure, the possibility is not a likely one because man is no angel and "one cannot fashion something absolutely straight from wood which is as crooked as that of which man is made.

Husserl accepts the privileged-access position, he thinks others' conscious states can never be directly presented and

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4. "Idea for a universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent" in the Philosophy of Kant, ed. with intro. Carl J. Friedrich (New York, 1949), p. 123.

hence can never be self-evident. Thus, even as sense-correlates, the constitutional status of others is secondary. One's apprehension of others is always parasitic on one's own self-constitution.<sup>5</sup> The independence of transcendental ego from the natural world gives it a monadic character. The monadic nature of Husserl's ego is omni-productive, as the source of every sense through which it apprehends the world in the natural attitude.<sup>6</sup> On this view, others do not ever condition the processes of the monadic ego. They are only quasi-reproductions of oneself.

#### Alternative Philosophical Approach:

Hegel abandons the traditional epistemology on the ground that the traditional philosophy seeks to ascertain the conditions of knowledge even prior to the acceptance of already acquired cognitions. In summarizing this traditional conception of philosophy, Hegel remarks: "It is natural to assume that before philosophy enters on its subject proper - namely, actual knowledge of reality - it must first come to an understanding of knowledge itself."<sup>7</sup>

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5. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans-Dorian Cairns. The Hague, Netherlands, Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, pp. 108-9.
  6. *Ibid*, p. 91.
  7. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baille, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979, p. 131.

The theory of knowledge which regards itself as an inquiry into the conditions of possible knowledge is itself a type of knowledge. It cannot, therefore, lay claim to some privileged position vis-a-vis existing knowledge without falling into circularity. In a reference to Kant, Hegel points out that "the investigation of the faculty of knowledge is itself knowledge, and cannot therefore arrive at its goal because it is this goal already".<sup>8</sup>

For Hegel, the true is the whole"<sup>9</sup>, and this truth appears in all facts of that system, epistemological, ontological, political and ethical. The subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge are inherently identical because the object of knowledge is produced out of and constituted by the subject of knowledge.

The absolute spirit is an expressive subject, whose ultimate function is to differentiate its primal immediacy into a richly articulated universe of mediated particulars, then recognize itself in that plenitude. Only after differentiation and recognition is the absolute spirit truly itself, for "of the absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that

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8. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simpsom, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1955, 3:428.

9. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, foreword by J.N. Findlay, Oxford, 1979, p. 11.

only at the end is it what it is in very truth".<sup>10</sup> Man is himself a moment in the absolute spirit. Its self-recognition is also his own. Crucial to Hegel's system is the corollary assumption that the ontological process is ultimately knowable by the human subject whose rationality partakes of the general rationality permeating the whole. Thus, the method of science is comparably holistic, circular and dialectical: "Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a circle rounded and complete in itself. In each of these parts, however, the philosophical idea is found in a particular specificality or medium, The single circle, because it is a real totality, bursts through the units imposed by its special medium, and gives rise to a wider circle. The whole of philosophy in this way resembles a circle of circles."<sup>11</sup> The historical totality is thus a self-reflexive one: the subjective totality at the beginning of the process recognizes as itself the objective totality at the end.

Heidegger challenges the traditional priority of the self and its knowledge of itself. The only way to adequately conceptualize human self-ness is to understand the basic structures of human existence. One's existence is always

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10. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, quoted in Lukacs, *The Ontology of Social Being: Hegel's False and His Genuine Ontology*, trans. David Fernbach (London, 1978), p.68.
11. Hegel, *The Logic*, Quoted in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 226.

articulated in a world and one can be in a world only with others.<sup>12</sup> This relatedness to persons is a priority. It precedes all empirical relationships to others and makes them possible.<sup>13</sup>

Concrete relations specify this basic relatedness. Heidegger holds that there are different modes of selfness. The self of everyday life is predominantly an impersonal self (Das Man).<sup>14</sup> This mode of selfness is an existential one, in which one is not oneself but is dominated by a hidden, elusive crowd. It conditions all other modes of selfness.<sup>15</sup> Authentic selfness is not a wholly distinct type, but a modification or variant of the impersonal mode.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that sociality is inescapable. Even authentic individuals define themselves in terms of what is common or typical. Though they achieve a distinctive kind of existence, they never transcend their immersion in social life and their being-with others. Hence the assertion that who one is, is wholly dependent on one's

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12. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York, Harper and Row, 1962, pp. 153-4.
13. *Ibid*, pp. 156-7.
14. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 167.
15. *Ibid*, p. 167.
16. *Ibid*, p. 168.

relatedness to others. There is no selfness apart from this relatedness. And typically the self one lives is impersonal-absorbed in this relatedness.<sup>17</sup>

Methodological Strategy and Implication:

The Cartesian programme originates in a search for certain, indubitable propositions. Only those which cannot be doubted or about which doubt is unintelligible constitute genuine knowledge. The Cartesian discovers one realm where his standard is satisfied: the realm of one's own mental states. When one is doubting (or thinking), one cannot intelligibly doubt that one is doubting (or thinking). One's mental states are transparent. One seems to have so unmediated a relation to them that no margin for error exists. Nothing else has this privileged relationship to one's own states. They constitute a realm of private access which no one else can penetrate. Only this realm is truly, genuinely known.

Heidegger questions the transparency and immediacy of one's access to oneself. This access is befogged by mistaken philosophical pre-suppositions, inadequate attention to lived

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17. Ibid., p. 164. Also, p. 152.

experience and inauthentic ways of life.<sup>18</sup> One's own existence is least evident to one. Only a patient uncovering, recalling, and resurrecting of lived experience can supply the necessary clarity. Heidegger stresses that clarity also requires a transformation of existence that simultaneously alters one's apprehension of others and of oneself. If understanding is achieved at all, it illuminates both others and oneself with equal intensity.<sup>19</sup>

The impersonal mode of selfness provides a universal medium through which persons have as direct an understanding of one another as they have of themselves. For to understand oneself in this mode is to understand others and vice versa. There is no essential difference in the object of understanding. Each is interchangeable. None is differentiated.<sup>20</sup>

When others exist authentically, one is momentarily thrust toward the possibility of authenticity oneself. In this way one comprehends something of their existence. The symmetries in modes of existence yield symmetries of access and these symmetries allow one to transcend the apparent separation between self and others.<sup>21</sup>

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18. William Ralph Schroeder, *Sartre and his Predecessors*, Routledge Kegan Paul Plc. 1984, 123-6.
19. William Ralph Schroeder, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 134-6.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 137.



A person is most fully revealed in his cares and these can be grasped in the way he relates to his surrounding instrumental and interpersonal milieu.<sup>22</sup> The merely mental or the merely physical are abstractions which are rarely experienced. Heidegger elucidates the social structure of the instrumental significations that constitute the map of one's world.<sup>23</sup>

The map orients one's life and actions one's possible projects. Persons inhabit socially. Constituted symbolic and structural systems which function as the rails along which their experience runs.<sup>24</sup>

Hegel suggests that certain shapes of consciousness, self-consciousness and Reason Cohere with distinct types of social organization (spirit).<sup>25</sup> Specific kinds of social relations engender parallel structures in the other spheres of experience.

Husserl realizes that some features of experience - the experience of objectivity reciprocal social acts - involve essential modifications of the primordial stream of experience in the sphere of ownness.<sup>26</sup>

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22. Ibid., pp. 127-30.

23. Ibid., pp. 126-9.

24. This view is supported by Claude Lévi-Strauss. *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966.

25. William Ralph Schroeder, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

26. Ibid., pp. 32-4.

Solipsism is an inevitable result of the Cartesian picture. On the one hand, one becomes pre-occupied with issues of knowledge; on the other, one is severed from the evidence that might resolve one's epistemic dilemmas.

°On the Cartesian view, social wholes are created by antecedent individual atoms who remain their basic units. Only when such units voluntarily combine via contract or consent does a larger social unit emerge. Even though persons are best characterized as modifications of a hidden, amorphous totality which pulses through all its members.<sup>27</sup>

For Hegel, Kantianism is marked by abstract and ahistorical antinomies that only dialectical thought can overcome. To Hegel, the apparent dualisms naturalized by Kant are merely way-stations on the journey of self-recognition and reconciliation that is the progress of the absolute spirit through time. Contradiction, fragmentation, estrangement, alienation are real and necessary aspects of that progress. Appearances are as 'real' as essences. Objectifications are the sole source of the social whole as well as the denial of personal totalization outside the larger supra-individual process. But the central weakness of this expressive totality is that the unity or "organic wholeness" of a period or epoch is precisely something which

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27. Ibid., pp. 134-6.

has been conjured into existence with the very notion of a hidden essence.

For Husserl, transcendental egos are the core of persons. If one is to posit a transcendental ego as the center of the field of consciousness, then essential connections among persons have to be established at that level. But these are not provided by Husserl. Nor does he show how to constitute the other's transcendental ego. His explication is limited to the other's empirical ego.<sup>28</sup> In effect, the existence of the other is never reached as long as Husserl remains inside the transcendental standpoint.<sup>29</sup> Husserl reduces being to an infinite series of verifying acts of one's transcendental ego and thus reduces being to the knowledge one has of it or at least to the constitutional processes that account for it.<sup>30</sup>

Husserl's first step to the abstraction to the sphere of ownness.<sup>31</sup> He performs this abstractive process with some awareness that he cannot intuit the resulting realm. Hence, he will not be able to offer pure descriptions of it.<sup>32</sup> Although one can conceive the resulting sphere of contents, one cannot

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28. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. and with an introduction by Hazel E. Barnes, New York, 1956, p. 234.

29. Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Husserl, *op. cit.*, Sections 44-8, pp. 92-106.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

experience it. One can thus only construct a path from this sphere to every day experiences-as-supposed. The basic contents from which constitution begins and the whole constitutional process too easily become hypothetical, and this betrays the descriptive ideal of phenomenology.

However, Husserl offers no independent criteria for determining what is alien and what is own.<sup>33</sup> No means of verifying the contents of the sphere of ownness are provided. Some criteria can be found to include all that is on Husserl's list and exclude everything else. But the reason for drawing the boundary line there at least requires some justification,<sup>34</sup> The problem here is analogous to that in Descartes where certain truths of reason are imported into the sphere of clear and distinct ideas without asking whether they satisfy the same criterion of indubitability that acts of consciousness do.

Scheler suggests that the primordial level of experience, that from which all distinctions emerge, is an undifferentiated

33. William Ralph Schroeder, op. cit., p.29.

34. David Cart in his article "The 'Fifth Meditation' and Husserl's Castesianism", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 34, 173-4, pp. 14-35, proposes the following criterion: the sphere of ownness contains whatever can be the object solely of one's own mental processes, actual and possible (p. 18).

stream of experiences which are not assigned to either self or other. Only gradually does the capacity to discriminate forms within this stream and to assign them to an owner become possible.<sup>35</sup>

Husserl's criterion for epistemic adequacy is "presence-full self-evident givenness". Every Husserlian investigation revolves around this criterion. Presence seems to be a natural criterion because the transcendental attitude erases all one's practical relations to the world. Heidegger raises an important objection to Husserl's criterion, viz., that presence is a derivative mode of appearance. For Heidegger, the world is *pri mordially* organized as a series of instruments. They manifest themselves in a very different fashion than the metaphor of presence suggests. Only if this instrumental organization breaks down or is suspended does an object appear simply as present.<sup>36</sup> Husserl elevates to a regulatory law a mode of appearance that is secondary in lived experience. Its apparent primacy is artificially created by adopting the transcendental standpoint. Others, for example, are not most manifest when they are

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35. Max Scheler, "Other Minds", in *The Nature of Sympathy*, p. 246.

36. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

most present, but when their practical aims are most evident. Not only does the transcendental standpoint artificially screen off entire sectors of phenomena, it suggests inadequate guidelines for investigating those it leaves intact. Sartre suggests that adopting the transcendental standpoint alters the data one is trying to understand and thus makes adequate description impossible.<sup>37</sup>

Sartre's basic disagreement with Heidegger lies in how the essential relatedness to others (being-with) is to be understood. He notes that being-with is an ontological relationship and is a priori.<sup>38</sup> Sartre portrays Heidegger's existentials as similar to Kantian categories - constituting and shaping the field they govern.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Sartre thinks that others can only be apprehended a posteriori. Others essentially transform one after one experiences them in a certain way. They do not function like conditioning features of any possible way of life, structuring any possible experience. Sartre thinks the other reached by Heidegger's being-with can only be an abstraction which lacks any relationship to concrete other

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37. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, New York, 1957, pp. 35-42 and 54-60.

38. Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-5.

39. Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-5.

people encountered in everyday life.<sup>40</sup> Other's existence can only be a fact, never a necessity.<sup>41</sup> This relation to others cannot be a condition for one's experience. It can only be a result of it.

The basic implication of Heidegger's position is that traditional problem is seen as a false problem because it assumes conditions that do not exist in the typical state.<sup>42</sup> One might question the being of others if one exists authentically, but one's question will not be epistemological. Rather one will be questioning their way of life as impersonal, inauthentic selves. One cannot help questioning others in this way if one exists authentically.

If there is no prior sense of self in terms of which the existence of others can be doubted, then the traditional approach has been superseded.

To conclude, Heidegger denies that there is any centre or focus of consciousness (the ego) to which the universal concept man may refer in each case. He works out instead a series of relationships between the self and its world which

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40. Ibid., p. 248.

41. Ibid., p. 250.

42. Ibid., pp. 245, 246, 248.

should show exhaustively what it means for man to be. The ego is only one such mode, not at all the 'core' of man's being.<sup>43</sup>

Man's selfhood means this: he must transform the being that discloses itself to him into history and bring himself to stand in it. Selfhood does not mean that he is primarily an 'ego' and an individual. This he is no more than he a we, a community.<sup>44</sup>

This philosophical legacy passes through the work of Hegel into the earlier work of Marx, and, by a different route, passes into the phenomenological and existential Marxism of post-war France. They posit a "subject-centred" history, and the lived - experience of the historical actor as the source of cognition. Despite the historicization of subjectivity, and its attribution to the communal action of collectivities, the philosophical ancestry of this conception of self and of cognition remains intact.

In Merleau-Ponty's case, Husserl's phenomenological conception of consciousness as 'intentional' - as necessarily consciousness of something - is given shape in the form of

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43. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 153.

44. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 121.



a concept of historical practice as bestowing meaning on and transforming its object. Through this concept a link is made between the phenomenological tradition and a version of Marxism in which the emphasis is on the making of history by 'man'. There are no "iron laws" and created history is always fragile and contingent.

Sartre's existential philosophy also places human objectivity at the centre of the intellectual stage. Like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre rejects the scientific and determinist self-understanding of Marxism, seeking to develop that side of Marxism which recognises the possibility of the free and creative making of history by social actors, in a way which always holds surprises in store for the theoretician. The oppositions of Sartre's earlier philosophy are both carried through and transformed in the later encounters with Marxism. Here human subjectivity and freedom are no longer abstract universals but are historically located and contextualised. But material nature remains an undifferentiated category, designated inert and passive. Dialectical reason applies to human individual and social practice, or 'praxis', alone.

Marxist Humanism: An Alternative Direction:

This philosophical strategy is accelerated by Khrushchev's critique of Stalinism's inhumanity and the subsequent cultural thaw. The thaw of the ice-cap watered the numerous plants of heterodoxy, schism or mere unofficial growth which had survived on the margin of, or under, the giant glacier.<sup>45</sup> Khrushchev dubs the congress "a congress of the builders of communism" and the party's programme "a document of true communist humanism". The Soviet State is now declared to be a "state of the whole people", the CPSU a "party of the whole people". "Everything in the name of the man, for the benefit of man" becomes the ideological watchword of Khrushchevism at home and abroad.<sup>46</sup> In this "altered historical landscape"<sup>47</sup> space is opened up for independent thinking after decades of stultifying orthodoxy.

The conviction that economic production and relations of production are everything helps Stalin in advocating the "revolutionary productionist ideology" of socialist economy in the light of the dictatorship of proletariat. Negation of

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45. Revolutionaries, London 1982, p. 142.

46. The Road to Communism, Moscow n.d. 1961.

47. Anderson, Arguments within English Marxism, p. 106.

the negation is supposed to be central point of the Hegelian evolutionary dialectical movement of reality; whereas "the materialist philosophy of Lenin forms an identity between revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice."<sup>48</sup> Engels' dialectic of nature, Lenin's materialist dialectic and Stalin's ontological natural dialectic share the common point that there is a primacy of nature/matter/physical and external world over mind/spirit/subjective consciousness. Engels' work "Dialectics of Nature" and Lenin's "Materialism and Empirio criticism" try to establish an anti-positivist and anti-dualist natural materialist epistemology which is identically applicable to the spheres of nature, history and human being. Though it can be maintained that the dialectical movement of natural and material world, based on "the motion of matter", becomes a prior referential point to understand the dialectic of history and human thought. Hence, Stalinism identifiable with "totalitarian character of a regime which believes in the progressive destruction of civil society and absorption of all forms of social life by state."<sup>49</sup>


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48. Stalin Leninism English translation by Eden, Cedar Paul George Allen, Urwin LTD London, 1928, pp. 94-95.

49. Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism, Vol.III OUP, 1978, p.7.

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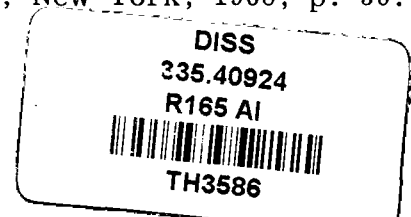
Instead of Marxism as a theory of revolutionary self-emancipation, there is a self-proclaimed science which imposes a direction upon history from above. It tolerates no opposition in the name of "iron laws". The dialectical materialist thesis of a unity between human history and the natural world denies what is specific to human history, i.e. the part played in it by the creative activity of human beings and social groups. The indifferent application of the concepts of the dialectic to nature and to human history, too, divests these concepts of their distinctive value, i.e. the rendering intelligible of human practice. The associated conception of history as the outcome of "iron laws" rooted in the economic contradiction between forces and relations of production and of the ineluctable advance of the forces of production likewise denies a creative, directing, meaning bestowing role for human subjectivity in the historical process.



Hence, protest is registered against the hyper empirical character of natural dialectic and the duality of being and consciousness by the Marxist humanists. There is an attempt to rejuvenate Marxism as "the philosophy of our time"<sup>50</sup> which has frozen in a set of abstract categories that no longer meaningfully articulate social reality but instead cover it with an impenetrable veil of ideas. They think Marxism has to

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50. Sartre, Search for a Method, New York, 1968, p. 30.



be reconstructed in which its "first truth" that "men make history" is restored to it.<sup>51</sup>

First, there is the emphasis upon alienation or reification introduced by Georg Lukacs. Second, there is the idea of an "end of history" taken from Hegel and developed in France by Alexandre Kojève. Third, there is the attempt to 'recover' man within Marxism or to re-establish the ineradicable subjectivity of experience.

#### Theoretical Structure of Alienation:

At the heart of Marxist humanism is the doctrine of alienation which is the most important notion in Marx's 1844 manuscripts. For Marx, it signifies a feature of life in modern bourgeoisie society which rests upon a historical separation of producers from the products. It also consists in the reification of abstractions or relations in such a way as to make them into forces which dominate and limit their human creators. In the passages on "estranged labour", Marx argues that the private property whose laws are described, but not 'comprehended' in political economy is merely a manifestation of human self-alienation.

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51. Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, p. 316.

Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him - i.e., operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity - so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another. It is the loss of his self.<sup>52</sup> This alienated labour, which involves a separation between man and man, and also of man from himself, can only be understood as 'alienated' by contrast to what it is an 'alienation' from, or 'denial' of: the human essence or species-life.

Extrapolating from Marx's discussion of the "fetishism of commodities" in the first volume of capital,<sup>53</sup> Lukacs introduces the notion of reification to characterize the fundamental experience of bourgeois life. This term means the petrification of living processes into dead things which appear as an alien "second nature". This is effected through the exchange of commodities. As a result of which men find themselves ruled by the relations of their products in the market. At the same time, quantity drives out quality and the rich diversity of use-values is reduced to portions of abstract social labour.

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52. Marx and Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 3 London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1975, p. 274.

53. Marx, Capital, Vol. I, pp. 72-80.

The heart of reification lies in the transformation of the worker into a thing, of labour-power into a commodity. Hence, only the proletariat can comprehend society as a historically evolved totality. It is both an absolute object deprived of any human status and at the same time the core of the mediations constructive of the totality. "Historical materialism", in which the proletariat becomes conscious of itself, is also "the self-knowledge of capitalist society"<sup>54</sup> because of "its ability to see society from the centre, as a coherent whole".<sup>55</sup>

The class consciousness, as a potential capacity for insight into the structure of society, plays a constructive role in terms of the simultaneous processes of understanding and transformation of totality which is "an intersecting economic and social totality."<sup>56</sup> Hence, the assertion that the mere existence of the objective expression of historical contradiction between essence and existence of the commodity producing society cannot produce an automatic revolution unless there is an effective intervention by the self-conscious proletariat.

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54. Lukacs, HCC p. 299. Herlin Press London, 1983.

55. Ibid., p. 69.

56. Lukacs, op. cit., p. 15.

This is because 'consciousness' refers to that particular stage of knowledge where the subject and object of knowledge are substantively homogeneous, i.e. where knowledge takes place from within and not from without..... The chief significance of this type of knowledge is that the mere fact of knowledge produces an essential modification in the object known: thanks to the act of consciousness, of knowledge, the tendency inherent in it hitherto now becomes more assured and rigorous than it was or could have been before."<sup>57</sup>

Kojeve rediscovers in Hegel the idea of an end of history. The idea is that history has an identifiable end or telos. All its own which leads us through its own "cunning of reason" to a condition of universal freedom and rationality. Marx identifies this end state with communism. Kojeve describes it as the "universal and homogeneous state". Hence, universal freedom and equality become the condition of man not at the beginning of history but at its end. The freedom realized and manifested as dialectical or negating action is essentially a creation. For to negate the given without ending in nothingness is to produce something that does not yet exist. This is precisely what is called 'creativity'.<sup>58</sup>

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57. Lukacs, Political writings, 1919-1929, p. 15.

58. Kojeve, Introduction to the reading of Hegel, p. 222.



In fact, Kojève's 'existential' reading of the phenomenology, provides a point of access to Marxism for thinkers like Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. The intention of Kojève's reading of Hegel can be seen as providing an anthropological foundation for history based upon a basic human passion or desire. His identification of the essence of man not with useful labour but with 'freedom' or 'ontological negativity' is also an existentialist formulation.

The crux of Sartre's argument is that the structures of alienation can only be understood as based upon free human praxis. By accounting for the structures of unfreedom in terms of free action it permits the possibility of self-liberation. "In effect, praxis is a passing from the objective to the objective by means of an interiorization. The project, as a subjective move from objectivity to objectivity, stretched between the objective conditions of the milieu and the objective structures of the field of possibilities, represents in itself the moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity.... The subjective thus appears as a necessary moment of the objective process."<sup>59</sup>

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59. Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

Human practice imposes meanings through what Sartre calls 'totalisations': interpretations of the conditions of action in the light of the aims and intentions of action. The possibility of human creation of history requires that history be given a single meaning. The totalisations inherent in each individual project do not cancel each other out in some meaningless chaotic resultant, but somehow coalesce into a synthetic unity.

The first totalizing relation between the individual and the environment is need: "Need is the negation of the negation in the measure that it reveals itself as a lack in the interior of the organism; it is positivity in the measure that by means of it the organic totality tends to conserve itself as it is ....."<sup>60</sup>

There is, however, a "contingent and ineluctable" fact about the external world which is crucial for the development of the theory: scarcity.<sup>61</sup> The internal relation to the world in terms of need, structures the world by externalizing itself and acting on it. Due to the dialectical reciprocity, the factual existence of scarcity is internalized. The internalization of scarcity introduces negativity into the notion of the human subject in a dialectically intelligible manner.

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60. Sartre, op. cit., p. 166.

61. Ibid;, p. 168.

From the point of view of human action, history is a double movement of "the internalization of the external and the externalisation of the internal".<sup>62</sup> Marxism must recapture this process if it is to render history intelligible. Historical reason must retrace the projects of the past and only by doing so can it present history as the arena of human choices.

For Sartre, the project has another quality. That quality is totalisation. Each individual makes sense of the world in which he acts. A given project is connected with the larger project of living in the world at a determined time. One can pretend not to take account of the totality, but that would be self-deception. Praxis necessarily totalises. The historical field, therefore, includes as a main determinant not just the objective totality (the given state of the mode of production) but also the multiplicity of totalizations, the countless and intricately interlocked meanings given to the world by praxis. History consists of changing totalisations embodied in praxis, encompassing moments of subjectivity and objectivity. Hence, the priority of the individual as the "individual practices are the sole ground of totalizing temporality."<sup>63</sup> Sartre's

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62. Ibid., p. 97.

63. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p. 64, NLB, London, 1976.

focus is on totalizing whole, not on totality: because "a totalizing praxis cannot totalize itself as a totalized element."<sup>64</sup> Because totalisation being a "developing activity which cannot cease without the multiplicity reverting to its original statute."<sup>65</sup>

In so far as products escape from the project for which they are intended and dominate their makers, each of us can be said to be caught up in a machinery that we do not will but which we cannot escape. Each of us becomes other. Each is determined by the project of the other and each determines the project of others. "Otherness comes to things from men and returns from things to men in the form of atomization....."<sup>66</sup>

This active passivity of matter is interesting because its actions seem to be the result of praxis of every one and of no one. "Matter alienates in itself the action which works it.... because its inertia allows it to absorb the labour-power of others and to turn it back against everyone." Matter becomes a "counter-finality", an "anti-praxis", a "praxis without an author".<sup>67</sup> Thus, "worked matter ... becomes the fundamental force of history by and for men by virtue of counter-finality". It unifies human actions because human beings relate

64. Ibid., p. 373.

65. Ibid., p. 47.

66. Sartre, op. cit., p. 246.

67. Ibid., p. 235.

to one another as "radically other" in circumstances dominated by scarcity. The possibility of class antagonisms arises from the fact that "the relations of production are established and pursued by individuals who are always ready to believe that the other is an anti-human member of an alien species."<sup>68</sup> Having analyzed the structure of human action by means of concepts such as counter-finality, Sartre aims 'to establish' "that there is one human history, with one truth and one intelligibility."<sup>69</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty, subjective consciousness is embedded in two primordial and meaning-laden contexts: the sensual reality of the body and the intersubjective reality of the social world. To make man the key explanatory principle of philosophy is mistaken, because "one explains nothing by man, since he is not a force but a weakness at the heart of being.... His existence extends to too many things, in fact to all, for him to become the object of his own delight, or for the authorization of what we can now reasonably call a "human chauvinism."<sup>70</sup>

Merleau-Ponty calls for a system of analysis which can explain the complex 'mediations' which link the individual

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68. Ibid., pp. 132, 149, 165, 183, 250, 251.

69. Sartre, op. cit., p. 69.

70. Merleau-Ponty, In Praise of Philosophy, p. 44.

to the total situation in which he finds himself and which can capture human experience as a dense web of inter-relationships without recourse to the dubious dialectic between the free and spontaneous will, set against the dense and recalcitrant material world.

The presence of structure outside us in natural and social systems and within us as symbolic function points to a way beyond the subject-object correlation which has dominated philosophy from Descartes to Hegel. By showing us that man is eccentric to himself and that the social finds its centre only in man, structure particularly enables us to understand how we are in a sort of circuit with the socio-historical world.<sup>71</sup> And the full realization of reason is dependent on human praxis, for "it is consciousness which definitively puts reason into history by linking the constellation of facts in a particular way. Every historical undertaking is something of an adventure. Since it is never guaranteed by any absolutely rational structure of things."<sup>72</sup>

The unitary totality that is constituted by history is the result of a totalization through praxis. And the practitioner of such a praxis, i.e. the revolutionary, who realizes the

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71. Merleau-Ponty, signs p. 123.

72. Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-sense, p. 166.

necessary unity of theory and practice has a privileged overview of historical reality. On the one hand, historical process is seen as a unitary totality and on the other, there is stress on the importance of 'praxis', i.e. man's active relationship with history where the history is considered to be the product of radical or revolutionary activity.

For Gramsci, history is the arena of conscious activity, political will, subjective intervention and political initiative. "There is in history a logic superior to contingent facts, to the will of single individuals, to the activity of particular groups, and to the industrious contributions of single nations."<sup>73</sup> This scientific theory of history gives this idea that there is a homogenous identical relationship among philosophy, politics, economics and history. Twin interrelated concepts of the concrete-historicization of philosophy and an identity of philosophy and practical politics which constitute the seed of the philosophy of praxis. Its speciality consists in an organic bond between theoretical practice and practical action.

The concept of philosophy of praxis related to the immanentist conception of reality as well as the historical subjectivity of social class as a real fact which converges with a practical

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73. Gramsci, "Wilson and the Russian Maximalists", II Grido del Popolo (March 2, 1918), reprinted in Cavalcanti and Piccone, p. 129.

act. It forms a concrete social content which has a connection with politico-economic praxis and it unites the theory of dialectical materialism and historical materialism under the unity expressed through the "conception of the world".<sup>74</sup>

Gramsci says "the philosophy of praxis thinks of itself in a historical manner"<sup>75</sup> and continues to say that "the philosophy of praxis is absolute historicism", the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world."<sup>76</sup> Our capacity to think and act depends on the subjects and objects of history. As Gramsci informs us that the critical dimension of philosophy of praxis "teaches that reality does not exist on its own, in and for itself but only in a historical relationships with the men who modify it."<sup>77</sup>

Under the circle of historicism everything depends upon the realization of a new hegemonic ideological terrain

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74. Gramsci defines society in terms of a historical bloc in which there is "reciprocity between structure and superstructure, a reciprocity which is nothing other than the real dialectical process." Antonio Gramsci prison Notebooks, International Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 366.
75. Ibid., p. 404.
76. Ibid., p. 465.
77. Ibid., p. 346.



which regulates and reforms our consciousness and method of knowledge. Hence, history has a primacy over material structure.

An Assessment:

Hegel raised the problem of alienation. For him, the posting of finite, material existence constitutes the self-alienation of absolute spirit. Hence, alienation consists in the very 'otherness' or externality of objects in relationship to spirit. For Feuerbach the postulation of the absolute spirit is an instance of man's self-alienation. Implicit, then, in Feuerbach's 'inversion' of Hegel, is a conception of history in which 'man', rather than the absolute idea, transcends successive self-alienations in the course of his "self-realisation". The content of the Feuerbachian concept of 'man' is not derived from the 'senses' nor from any science, but from the philosophical inversion of Hegel. Therefore, the very concept of 'alienation' is logically inseparable from some form of philosophical humanism and from the historicist conception of history as the process of self-realization of the human essence. The realisation of the human essence then, involves the achievement of a definite state of society and of that society's relationship to nature. Hence, history-now, the history of 'man' still obeys the laws of the Hegelian dialectic.

The economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844 by Marx takes the form of a realisation of Feuerbach's programme.

As Marx himself recognises, both in his preface to the manuscripts and in the final fragment ("critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and philosophy as a whole"), the Manuscripts are an extension and 'fulfilment' of the method implicit in Feuerbach's inversion of Hegel. ".....positive criticism as a whole - and therefore also German positive criticism of political economy - owes its true foundations to the discoveries of Feuerbach...."<sup>78</sup> and: "Feuerbach's great achievement is... the establishment of true materialism and of real science...."<sup>79</sup> For Plekhanov, too, the philosophical identity of Marx and Feuerbach's materialism is the foundation of that of Marx and Engels.<sup>80</sup>

Therefore, the concept of 'alienation' has its theoretical and methodological roots in the Hegelian dialectic. The Manuscripts are an ethical-philosophical denunciation of capitalist production and the society based on it. Without the concept of human essence its correlative concept of self-alienation and the whole Hegelian historical dialectic lose their theoretical place.

Moreover, the roots of the phenomena grouped under the term 'alienation' in capital are located in specific social

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78. Marx, op. cit., p. 232.

79. Ibid., p. 328.

80. Plekhanov, Fundamental Problems of Marxism, pp. 25-6.

relations and not in the fact that there is an ideal essence of man, his 'species-being' which has been negated or denied. And this is the difference that separates capital from certain passages in the economic and philosophical manuscripts.<sup>81</sup> Even though there, too, Marx deals with such features of capitalist society as the domination of the worker by his product and the stultifying character of his work.<sup>82</sup> But in place of a concept of alienation founded on an essentialist anthropology, we have one tied to the historical specificity of forms of domination. Hence, the two concepts are of different theoretical status. And when Lukacs, in his discussion of fetishism, speaks of one-sided specialization "violating the human essence of man"<sup>83</sup> he is guilty of the conflation.

In addition to it, in Lukacs's theory of reification, the different aspects of the totality replicate the structure of the basic contradiction, the transformation of labour-power into a commodity. Rationalization and fetishism are transmitted throughout the social formation from their core in the relation

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81. T.B. Bottomore (ed.), Karl Marx: Early Writings, London, 1963, pp. 126-8.

82. Ibid., pp. 122-25

83. Lukacs, HCC Paris, 1960, p. 128.

between capital and labour. The effect is to reduce the diversity of social life to mere epiphenomena of the economy.

Lukacs also accords to a collective subject, the proletariat, the status of the Hegelian absolute idea: as he puts it, "it appears as if the logico-metaphysical construction of the phenomenology of mind had found its authentic realization in the existence and the consciousness of the proletariat."<sup>84</sup> The proletarian revolution itself seems to be reduced to an act of consciousness: "since consciousness is not the knowledge of an opposed object, but is the self-consciousness of the object the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object."<sup>85</sup> Social relations are reduced to forms of consciousness while ideological struggle is given primacy in the overthrow of capitalism. But consciousness always embodies a measure of 'idealism' because consciousness always entails the overcoming of one's natural, materially and situationally-rooted impulses.

In this tradition of Marxist humanism, base and super-structure are not self-enclosed or regionally separated spheres of activity that can be studied in isolation and examined analytically, but are rather 'dialectically' bound together by bonds of mutual

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84. Lukacs, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

and irreducible interdependence. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to speak of any process of determination going on. The productive forces then lose whatever position of privilege or influence they might have held in the determination of social order.

Despite Sartre's attempt to break the grip of his obdurate Cartesianism and to develop a social theory based upon the reciprocity of individuals engaged in collective enterprises, he is not able to transcend the dualism of subject and object. This is because of preserving man's own particularity as totalizing existent.<sup>86</sup> Sartre retains the primacy of concepts like negativity and conflict which enter into human affairs because of scarcity-as-internalized and the notion of praxis-as-project and the explanation how the future acts as a negativity which affects the present as a facticity, to-be-totalized.

The result is ultimately a form of solipsism in which the exterior objective world remains the dead 'practic -inert' waiting to receive meaning and be transformed through the creative praxis of the subject. Sartre fails to penetrate what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'inter-world' which stands in the

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86. Chiodi, Sartre and Marxism, pp. 112-13.

interstices between mind and nature. This charge is made explicit by Claude Levi-Strauss: "He who begins by steeping himself in the allegedly self-evident truths of introspection never emerges from them.... Sartre, in fact, becomes the prisoner of his cogito: Descartes made it possible to attain universality, but conditionally on remaining psychological and individual; by sociologizing the cogito, Sartre merely exchanges one prison for another."<sup>87</sup>

Perry Anderson suggests that from the extended discussion of the fate of the Russian Revolution, it is clear that "Sartre is unable to demonstrate how the ravaging struggles of the time generates an ultimate structural unity" falling back onto the implicit assumption that "Soviet society was held together by the dictatorial force wielded by Stalin, a monocentric sovereignty imposing a repressive unification of all the praxes within it."<sup>88</sup> Such an analysis evidently contradicts Sartre's view of history as a "totalization without a totalizer", a unified and intelligible process which, however, lacks either an individual or collective subject.<sup>89</sup> Cultures and historical forms are interpreted selectively

87. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 249.

88. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, p. 53. Generally *Ibid.*, 51-3; and R. Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre - Philosophy in the World*, London, 1980, pp. 275-86.

89. Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 817. , p. 817.

from the standpoint of the project of the present by Sartre. This entails imposing a spurious continuity upon discrete historical forms and periods and swallows up the specificity of these periods and other cultural forms in a kind of "intellectual cannibalism". For Gramsci, it is through the critique of the contemporaneity of the historical present that the science of consciousness develops and truth can be seen opening in the concrete reality and hence the genesis of scientific concept must be seen in the light of objects of empirical reality. In order to understand the essential core of truth, we must link different levels of society to one another in such a way that the present of each of them coincides with the presents of all the others.

"The reduction and identification of the peculiar history of science to the history of organic ideology and politico-economic history ultimately reduces science to history as its 'essence'. The collapse of science into history here is no more than the index of theoretical collapse: a collapse that precipitates the theory of history into real reality; reduces one (theoretical) object of the science of history to real history; and therefore confuses the object of knowledge with the real object. This collapse is nothing but a collapse into empiricist ideology, with

the roles in this presentation played by philosophy and real history."<sup>90</sup> The concept of philosophy of praxis assumes a homogeneous circular relationship between philosophy, real historical politics and economics which manifest themselves in an identical way since they are the different expressions of the same historical content of a given society at a given point of time.

Althusser has rightly said that "if Marxism is an absolute historicism, it is because it historicizes even what was peculiarly the theoretical and practical negation of history for Hegelian historicism: the end of history, the unsurpassable present of absolute knowledge."<sup>91</sup> In absolute historicism there is no longer any absolute knowledge, and hence no end for history.

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90. L. Althusser and E. Balibar, Reading Capital, pp.133-34, London, NLB/verso editions, 1986.

91. L. Althusser and E. Balibar, 1986, op. cit., p. 132.



IIInd Chapter

Louis Althusser and Marxist Theory

Althusser: Conjecture and Character of Intervention:

The context of Althusser's intervention is simultaneously theoretical and political. Politically it is dominated by two 'great events': the Twentieth Congress and its aftermath and the Sino-Soviet split in the international communist movement.<sup>1</sup> Althusser says that he "would never have written anything were it not for the 20th Congress and Khrushchev's critique of Stalinism."<sup>2</sup> For Anderson, "The Sino-Soviet dispute.... is the real political background to the writing of for Marx and Reading Capital."<sup>3</sup>

On the intellectual side, the configuration of Marxist theory in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the "Stubborn, profound absence of any real theoretical culture in the history of the French Worker's Movement."<sup>4</sup>

The wake of the Twentieth Congress revelations and subsequent de-Stalinisation has constituted something of a watershed for Marxism in so far as the explanation of Stalin's crimes through the deployment of a conception of the "cult

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1. For Marx, pp. 9-12; and also ES-C, pp. 78-9.
  2. Quoted in Radical Philosophy 12, Winter 1975, p. 44.
  3. Anderson, Arguments Within English Marxism, London 1980, p. 106.
  4. For Marx, p. 23.

of personality". In order to "settle accounts" with Stalin, Khrushchev evaluates Stalin's personality with psychological indexes such as persecution mania and brutal instincts followed by mass repression and terror. Simultaneously doubt is cast on the validity of historical materialism and on the functioning of the Soviet system. For as Feuer has commented, "if the 'cult of personality' was founded on a single individual, then historical materialism was false; but if the 'cult' arose from the Soviet system, then Socialist Society itself must bear the responsibility for the inherent potential of Stalinism."<sup>5</sup>

The programme adopted by the 20th Congress of the CPSU declaring "Everything for Man", "peaceful coexistence and competition" and the Soviet State to be a "state of the whole people" is condemned as 'revisionist' by the CPC. In their assault on the CPSU's "out and out revisionist programme", the Chinese charge it by saying that "the programme crudely revises the essence of Marxism-Leninism, namely the teachings on proletarian revolution, on the dictatorship of the proletariat on the party of the proletariat, declaring that the dictatorship of the proletariat is no longer needed in the Soviet Union and that the nature of the CPSU as the vanguard of the proletariat

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5. Feuer, L.S., Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, London, Fontana, 1971, p. 40.

has changed, and advancing fallacies of a "state of the whole people" and a "party of the whole people".

It substitutes humanism for the Marxist-Leninist theory of class struggle and substitutes the bourgeois slogan of liberty, equality, fraternity for the ideals of Communism. It is a revisionist programme for the preservation and restoration of capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

Politically, Marxism was slow in coming to France because there was already an indigenous radical tradition ultimately stemming back to the Jacobinism of the Revolution which found its greatest practitioner in the conspiratorial insurrectionist Blanqui. This coupled with the anarcho-syndicalism of Proudhon and his followers dominated the labour movement in France well into the twentieth century.

Founded at a time when the influence of pre-Marxist ideologies on the French labour movement was still strong, the PCF had further suffered from "the burden of a long century of official philosophical stupidity" in the national, 'provincialist' culture. Born into a "theoretical vacuum", the party had produced no philosophical 'masters'.

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6. The polemic on the general line of the International Movement, pp. 91-2, Peking 1965. The Road to Communism, Moscow, n.a. 1961, pp. 190-1, 261, 450.

The relative slowness of Marxism in making any theoretical impact in France can be further explained by the conditions under which the theoretical non-revolutionary philosophy emerged in France. Those conditions are consolidation of bourgeois power through three revolutionary moments of 1789, 1830 and 1848 which assimilated intellectual force and agency in favour of the liberal ideological order which soon became associated with the production of philosophies of idealism, reformism, spiritualism, cultural provincialism, the politics of activism and neo-Hegelian movement. And in modern times the "French misery" has appeared due to the proclamation of the idealist writings of the young Marx.<sup>7</sup>

Now the ideologies of the communist party of France are deeply rooted <sup>in</sup> progressive democratic socialism in terms of a maximalist interpretation of social progress implicit in measures such as nationalization of property, redistribution of income, democratic and rational planning and curbs on authoritarian political practices.

In the years immediately following World War II throughout the European continent a tremendous enterprise of criticism

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7. L. Althusser, for Marx, London NLB/verso Edition 1986, pp. 25-8.

and conversion began in which Marxism was interpreted as an ethical system. It is in such contexts that particular non-Marxist forms of theory and analysis have been identified as the source of a potential advance. As Anderson has remarked, "The original relationship between Marxist theory and proletarian practice was subtly but steadily substituted by a new relationship between Marxist theory and bourgeois theory."<sup>8</sup> Subject-centred, 'humanist' and 'historicist' philosophical forms of Marxism emerge and party intellectuals follow the example of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty into a re-examination of Marx's earlier works as a source for the humanitarian values and ethical principles which Stalinist Marxism so clearly lacked.

The origins of this new wave can be traced back to Marx's 1844 Manuscripts where the most important notion is the concept of 'alienation'. The emphasis upon alienation provided a neglected insight into the possible moral and psychological dimension of man in modern society. In fact, Marx criticizes thinkers like Proudhon, who, he says, "overcomes economic alienation only within the bounds of economic alienation" without looking beyond the economic domain to the deeper longings of the human soul.

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8. Anderson, P., *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London, New Left Books, p. 55, 1976.

Hence the EPM with its emphasis on the critique of human alienation in capitalist society and the potential liberating realisation of the human 'essences' under socialism becomes a means for the excavation of the ethical of capital. Capital is not only the culmination of the Paris Manuscripts, but "a concrete phenomenology of Mind.... inseparably concerned with the working of the economy and the realization of man."<sup>9</sup> In addition to it, EPM also happens to be a vehicle for various forms of critique of Stalinism and the orthodox Marxism that this had institutionalised in western and eastern Europe.

Under Stalinism, theory and practice had been sundered, the practice degenerating into pragmatism, the theory into dogmatism.<sup>10</sup> Theoretical Stalinism was condemned on two main scores: for its economic-determinist account of the historical process, which negated the specificity of human history, suppressing its complexity and the role of creative human agency therein; for its conception of the Marxism as a natural science, which betrayed its dialectical particularity severing theory from lived experience.

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9. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 101.

10. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, pp. 21-2.

Althusser himself requests that his philosophical writings of 1960-65 are to be read and judged as complementary theoretical and political interventions in a particular conjuncture. "These texts ... are explicit interventions in a definite conjuncture: political interventions in the existing world of Marxist philosophy, directed at one and the same time against dogmatism and the rightist critique of dogmatism; also philosophical interventions in politics, against economism and its humanist 'appendix'.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding the latest shifts and reversals of theoretical positions there is a discernible and consistent direction in Althusser's interventions. "The object of the first intervention is to 'draw a line of demarcation' between Marxist theory and the forms of philosophical (and political) subjectivism which have compromised or threaten it: above all, empiricism and its variants, classical and modern-pragmatism, voluntarism, historicism, etc. ...

The object of the second intervention is to 'draw a line of demarcation' between the true theoretical bases of the Marxist science of history and Marxist philosophy on the one hand, and, on the other, the pre-Marxist idealist notions on which depend contemporary interpretations of Marxism as a

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11. ES-C, pp. 168-9.



"philosophy of man" or a 'humanism'.... Behind the details of the arguments, textual analyses and theoretical discussions, these two interventions reveal a major opposition; the opposition that separates science from ideology....<sup>12</sup>

Althusser proceeds to demonstrate that humanism is an ideological concept. He emphasizes, however, that his is "not to dispute the reality that the concept of socialist humanism is supposed to designate, but to define the theoretical value of the concept."<sup>13</sup> The ethical content of humanism is endorsed. What is rejected is the abandonment of the theoretical tools necessary to explain and effectively oppose Stalinism as a historical reality. Althusser says that one of the "indissociable elements" of Marx's 'break' of 1845 is "the definition of humanism as an ideology". And moreover that "this rupture with every philosophical anthropology or humanism is no secondary detail; it is Marx's scientific discovery. The logical conclusion is that the theoretical value of the concept is nil."<sup>14</sup>

Socialist humanism is no more than the "practical ideology" of the USSR. It furnishes a compelling ethical critique of

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12. FM, pp. 12.

13. FM, p. 223.

14. Ibid., pp. 229-30.

the inhuman form taken by the dictatorship of the proletariat under Stalin, but is otherwise "an imaginary treatment of real problems"<sup>15</sup> characteristic of ideology. Any critique cast in its terms remains ideological. The "cult of personality" is said to be an "unclassifiable concept in Marxist theory."<sup>16</sup>

Marxism is established in Marx's rejection of the philosophical humanism of his early years and is now threatened by the current 'retreat' into philosophical humanism by intellectuals faced with the ethical, political and intellectual realities of Stalinism. Socialist humanism, it is suggested, expresses a proper denunciation of the inhumanity of Stalinism, but the construction of a non-Stalinist socialism requires a political strategy, and this, in turn, requires a scientific analysis of what Stalinism was and what were its conditions of possibility. This scientific analysis is precisely what the humanist philosophy does not have to offer.

For Althusser, the evaluation of Stalin's authoritarian voluntarism and political crimes can be seen as a bourgeois ideological reaction or right wing critique because it denounces "certain facts about legal superstructure without reference

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15. Ibid., p. 247.

16. Ibid., p. 240.

to the rest of the Soviet superstructure such as the state and party on the one hand and the infrastructure such as the relations of production, class relations and the forms of class structure."<sup>17</sup> The 20th CPSU Congress should have criticized Stalin's violation of socialist legality in terms of (1) the state and the party, and (2) the class struggle, not in terms of cult of personality which is alien to Marxist theory because this is a subject-centred explanation .

The absence of a left-wing critique is said to provide "the most violent bourgeois anti-communism and Trotskyist anti-Stalinism... with a historical argument: it gives them a justification, a second wind, a second life."<sup>18</sup>

Althusser's reconceptualization of the structure of social formations enables him to characterize the USSR under Stalin in terms of a dislocation between a "socialist infrastructure" and a deformed superstructure.<sup>19</sup> He ventures the following hypothesis:

(i) The international communist movement has been affected since the 1930s, to different degrees and in very different

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17. L. Althusser, ESC, p. 75.

18. Ibid., pp. 82-3.

19. FM, p. 240.

ways in different countries and organizations, by the effects of a single deviation, which can provisionally be called the "stalinian deviation".

(ii) Keeping things well in proportion, that is to say, respecting essential distinctions, but nevertheless going beyond the most obvious phenomena - which are, in spite of their extremely serious character, historically secondary: I mean those which are generally grouped together in communist parties under the heading of "personality cult" and 'dogmatism' - the Stalinian deviation can be considered as a form (a special form, converted by the state of the world class struggle, the existence of a single socialist state, and the state power held by the Bolshevik Party) of the posthumous revenge of the second international: as a revival of its main tendency.

(iii) This main tendency was ... basically an economic one.<sup>20</sup>

Hedged round with qualifications, this hypothesis contains three clear propositions: the relation of the history of the international communist movement to a 'deviation' dating from the 1930s; the identification of that 'deviation' as an inheritance from the second international; the specification of it as 'economism'.

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20. ES-C, p. 89.

These are proffered as laying the foundations of a left-wing critique of Stalinism. It is suggested that the key defect of stalinism as a theoretical formation is its economism and technical determinism. There are two main lines of argument in Althessur against this.

First, the Marxist thesis of the "determination in the last instance" by economic relations is reinterpreted not as an historical law, but rather as a thesis about the causal relations between the elements in a society, considered in abstraction from their historical movement - i.e. synchronically. Understood in this way, the correlate of "determination in the last instance" by the economic, is the "relative autonomy" of the superstructures. This idea of "relative economy" is of great importance in allowing for due weight to be given to a whole range of cultural and political struggles, practices and objectives. With particular relevance to Stalinism and the Soviet state it carries the implication that transformation of capitalist economic relations is insufficient for thorough going social revolution. Social and political struggles for the revolutionising of cultural life and against state bureaucracy remain necessary; as the Chinese case shows, even where there is a socialist infrastructure.

The second line of argument is to maintain that it misappropriates Marxism in a way which exactly mirrors the humanist misappropriation. Whereas the humanist represents the historical process as a journey of the human subject through self-alienation to final self-consciousness and self-emancipation, Stalinism repeats this telological structure, only with the ever advancing forces of production in place of the human subject. History is still an evolutionary succession of phases, in which original inner potentials are successively realised through historical time. Against this is set a properly Marxist conception of "history without a subject". No social form has its necessary transcendence inscribed in its origins. Hence, Arthusser's opposition to Stalinism<sup>21</sup> takes seriously the question of what kind of opposition, in theory, and in practice, is most adequate to its historical tasks. Arthusser offers a "third way" - neither Stalinism nor humanist Marxism and 'opportunism'. Thus it is a socialist strategy which is both revolutionary and is genuinely popular and democratic.

In order to refute the humanist and historicist themes and to recapture Marxism for itself, Arthusser fosters a thorough re-working of the most basic categories of Marxist thought.

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21. V. Gerratana, "Arthusser and Stalinism", *New Left Review*, No. 101-2, Feb./April 1977, pp. 110-21.

"For the first time, a major theoretical system was articulated... whose power and originality were conceded even by its most determined opponents."<sup>22</sup>

At issue, the critical themes are: "what is Marxist philosophy? Is it necessarily 'humanist' or 'historicist' in its philosophical basis? Has it any theoretical right to existence? And if it does exist in principle, how can its specificity be defined?"<sup>23</sup> What is the relationship between Hegel and Marx? What is the relationship between the earlier and the later works of Marx?

In order to seek the answer to the question of what errors in interpretation caused Marxist theory to become perverted either into Stalinist economism or into the humanism/historicism of western Marxism, he conceives of the development of Marxist theory from the standpoint of centrally important problematics that structure the thematic horizons of the individual writings. The idea of a 'problematic' emphasises that the distinctiveness of a theory or set of theories, or a text or series of texts, lies not necessarily in the intentions of the author or the surface content, but in the kind of questions that it is possible to

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22. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p.38.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

pose and those that it is not possible to pose within the given structure of concepts in the theories or texts.<sup>24</sup> Also, that the meaning and significance of a concept is determined by and cannot be grasped outside its relation to other concepts in the discourse. Sighting of a problem is no longer an act of the individual subject and his psychological vision; it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and its objects and its problems.<sup>25</sup>

The Freudian science of unconscious discourse discovers the truth by a symptomatic reading of an object of knowledge. Althusser writes that "only since Freud we began to suspect what listening and hence speaking (and keeping silent) means; that this meaning of speaking and listening reveals beneath the innocence of speech and hearing the culpable depth of a second, a quite different discourse, the discourse of unconscious."<sup>26</sup> Phenomena and texts do not represent the single expression of an underlying essences but exhibit a complex structure, existing at various levels. This can be exposed by means of a 'symptomatic reading'. It can identify silences and slippages

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24. Ibid., pp. 32, 46-7, 66-9, 227-9, 244-5; RC, pp.24-8.

25. L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC, p. 25.

26. Ibid., p. 16.



whose existence reveals the real peculiarity of the complex totality.<sup>27</sup> Althusser employs precisely this strategy of identifying distinctive problematics in Marx's texts.

Gaston Bachelard rejects the schema of incremental advancement in ever advancing scientific knowledge and proposes the thesis that the growth of scientific knowledge can be explained through epistemological breaks through which the scientific ideas are disconnected from previous ideological ideas. In fact he speaks of reorganization and mutation of scientific knowledge by highlighting the importance of "epistemological value" established by the philosophy of scientific culture.<sup>28</sup> The idea of pre-scientific knowledge gives rise to a theory of lapsed history whereas the status of scientific knowledge is associated with the history of rupture. The transformation must be one which involves the whole theoretical system of the science. It is not a change which rejects, displaces and replaces concepts one by one, i.e. piecemeal. This is because the concepts and problems which make up a theoretical structure are not identifiable independently of their location within the whole. By a rationally organized critique of previous illusionary

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27. Ibid., 1970, pp. 13-17.

28. D. LeCourt, *Marxism and Epistemology*, NLB, London 1975, p. 10.

ideas embedded in the closed space of philosophical immobilism, science opens up a new horizon of open space of scientific knowledge which "has no object outside its own activity; that is in itself, in its province, its own productive norms and the criteria of its existence."<sup>29</sup>

Like Popper, Bachelard (though he rejects analytical philosophy) believes that scientific error plays a vital role in constituting an essential moment in the production of scientific knowledge. Kuhn's discontinuist model of the history of science belongs to the same rationalist epistemology of Bachelard. Bachelard tries to give a "materialist cast of his philosophy through the concept of scientificity which constitutes its own norms in material form reflected through institutions, meetings, colloquia, not in the pure space of disembodied minds."<sup>30</sup>

Applied to the history of Marxist thought, this concept serves to locate the historical moment of the emergence of 'historical materialism' in the texts of Marx. It also indicates the shift in cognitive status to a scientific theory which occurs with this break. Furthermore, the persistent after the 'break' of concepts and problems of the pre-history continue to threaten

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29. Ibid., p. 26.

30. D. LeCourt, op. cit., p. 82.

the achievements of later theoretical transformations in the form of "epistemological obstacles". The work of a philosophy which is partisan in support of the new science is to identify and wage war on these obstacles.

However, the concept of an epistemological break has itself undergone some changes in its incorporation into Althusser's 'problematic'. There are two specific changes. The first is that the relationship between a science and its pre-history is, in Althusser, mapped onto the Marxist contrast between science and ideology. The second is that the obstacles which continue to threaten the advance of a science after the moment of its foundation are also rooted in ideology. For Bacherard, they are psychological in origin.

The conception of knowledge as a form of 'production' is central to the analysis of theoretical work. It has a double advantage. It provides means for thinking about the specificity of theoretical work within a discipline, with its own inner dynamic. At the same time, it refers to its necessary articulation and interchange with other social practices through the reference to extrinsically produced raw materials. The main point of Althusser's characterisation and critique of empiricism is to be to show that it entails a denial of the productive, transformative character of the "knowledge process". Knowledge is an

intellectual construct not a receptacle of the imprints of what lies outside it.

Althusser asserts that "the object of knowledge is distinct from the real object such as the idea of the circle which is the object of knowledge must not be confused with the circle, which is the real object."<sup>31</sup> For Spinoza the criteria of truth is determined by self-referential system and internal coherence between concepts because "the idea of truth and the idea of the jurisdiction of a criterion always go together because the function of the criterion is to identify the truth of what is true..... What is true identifies itself not as a presence but as a product as it emerges in its production."<sup>32</sup>

In opposition to pragmatism and empiricism, Althusser maintains that "it has been possible to apply Marx's theory with success because it is 'true'; it is not true because it has been applied with success. The whole matter is non-problematic because theoretical practice is its own criteria, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to validate of its product... "The established sciences themselves provide the criteria of validity of their knowledge."<sup>33</sup>

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31. L. Althessur and E. Balibar, RC, p. 40.

32. L. Althusser, LP, p. 137.

33. L. Althessur and E. Balibar, RC, pp. 56-9.

The concepts of 'problematic', 'the epistemological break' and 'the conception of knowledge as production' are closely integrated with one another: the idea that theoretical discourse is governed by an underlying problematic which determines what can and cannot be said/seen within it carries with it a conception of knowledge as a social construct, as produced, rather than 'impressed' upon the mind. Whilst the notion that knowledge must advance discontinuously, by qualitative leaps or revolutions is implicit in the idea of a problematic as a structure of concepts and problems which binds together and gives unity to its constituent elements. Change must be a more or less immediate overthrow and replacement, rather than a cumulative process of piecemeal addition or correction.

Epistemological Break:

Epistemological break is defined in terms of "changing terrain and terms of problems."<sup>34</sup> Althessur identifies the existence of two mutually opposed problematics. He comes up with the observation that there is an irreversible break in 1845 in which Marx displaces his early theoretical terrain of humanism by a new theoretical terrain of science. He becomes opposed to Smith, Ricardo, Hegel and Feuerbäch. In fact, he makes a double rupture. first with the Hegelian concepts

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34. Ibid., p. 155.

of teleological simple idealist dialectic and simple expressive ideational totality; and then with Feuerbachian concept of theoretical humanism, i.e. a concrete sensuous 'Man'. marx refers to the German ideology as the text in which he and Engels achieved self-clarification in the attempt to settle "accounts with our former philosophical conscience."<sup>35</sup>

Hegel, Feuerbach, the young Marx of 1844: The  
Fundamental Theoretical Unity:

Hegel presents a historicist model of society in which all manifestly complex phenomenal elements are reduced to the single universal essence of spirit or idea. Consequently, all parts necessarily express similar essence in different forms and thereby mutually reducible to one-another. Since all elements are identical in the domain of self-sustaining and self-expressing essence, they follow a continuous evolutionary homogeneous pattern of development.

Thus, Hegel's philosophy of idea formulates the concepts "of simple dialectic, simple homogeneous expressive-ideational-circular-totally, simple homogeneous history and simple homogeneous linear time-continuum"<sup>36</sup> which together provide the condition to one-another in the evolutionary transformation

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35. K. Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (London, 1971), p. 22 (from the preface).
36. FM, pp. 101-104, 202-204 and Althusser and Balibar, RC, pp. 93-97, 103.

of reality that is nothing but a progressive realization of the universal spirit of humanity. Althusser points out that the "Hegelian philosophy of history is teleological because from its origins it is in pursuit of a goal of the realization of absolute knowledge and the Hegelian dialectic, too, is teleological in its structure. Since the very structure of the Hegelian dialectic is the negation of negation, which is the teleology itself, within the dialectic."<sup>37</sup>

Feuerbach's 'inversion' of the Hegelian dialectic and speculative philosophy takes the form of a transposition of subject and predicate, of 'being' and 'consciousness'. He situates the human mode of perception and capacity for action in the total organic structure of the human being. He, therefore, understands human sensuousness as being, by its essential nature, "open to the world"<sup>38</sup> and sees in it the foundation for the human being's potential universality. He complements the idea of a sensuousness rooted in the human organism with the notion of <sup>an</sup> a priori intersubjectivity of the human being.

The cognising subject is to be conceived only as a community of subjects, because becoming a subject is possible

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37. L. Althusser, PH, p. 181.

38. Feuerbach, Principles of the Philosophy of the Future, 53, 1843.

solely by means of processes of interactive communication. Inter-subjectivity is thus not just the precondition for sensuous certainty about the existence of objects, but is also the criterion for the validity of all cognitive judgements whatsoever.<sup>39</sup>

Religion is a form of dream or fantasy in which human desires for the satisfaction of real needs take on a fantastic form. In this fantastic form 'men' attribute to a superhuman or supernatural being, prior to and independent of themselves, their own essential qualities and powers. Religion (and, hence, speculative philosophy) is thus a form of human self-alienation. So long as 'men' lack the power to realise their human essence in practice, they overcome the contradiction between their present conditions of existence and their essential human qualities in imagination, by creating Gods in their own image. Religious conceptions of the world and of life become the object on which Feuerbach's critique of ideology focuses. He not only unmasks them as cognitive errors, but also grasps and demonstrates their great emotional and communicative importance.<sup>40</sup> Thus, he criticises religion less as a false or deficient form of human cognition, than as an illusory form of the satisfaction of human needs.

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39. Philosophy of the Future, p. 41.

40. Lowith, Karl, 1984, From Hegel to Nietzsche (New York, Garland Publishers, esp. Part I, chapters 2 and 3.



The essential characteristics such as will, reason and love are ends in themselves and constitute the aim of human development; and as essential characteristics they are what unites all human beings into a single species.

The theoretical humanism of Feuerbach becomes the mastercode of Marx's economic and philosophical manuscript (1844) in which history is conceptualised as a process of alienation of man. Althusser argues that during 1842-45 the young Marx's famous expressions such as "philosophy's world-to-be", "the inversion of subject and predicate", "the suppression and realization of philosophy", "philosophy is the heart of human emancipation and the proletariat is its heart", etc. etc., are expressions directly borrowed from Feuerbach, or directly inspired by him."<sup>41</sup> The young Marx also theorizes that man's freedom - reason is grounded into a communal being or species being which has been decomposed by the ever-extending composition of capital. Alienation of man from his essence can be overcome by the politics of practical reappropriation of the lost essence - ultimately Althusser's young Marx comes to the conclusion that "the practical revolution must be the common work of philosophy and of the proletariat, for, in philosophy, man

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41. FM, p. 45.

is theoretically affirmed; in the proletariat - he is practically negated... the revolution is the very practice of the logical immanent in alienation: it is the moment in which criticism, hitherto unarmed, recognizes its arms in the proletariat."<sup>42</sup>

History moves as a result of the simple opposition of contradictions and their supersession. "...the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation - and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all relations of servitude are but modifications and consequences of this relation."<sup>43</sup>

For Althusser, there is no distinction among the notions of the Cogito (Descartes), the transcendence subject (Kant), the Idea (Hegel), the concrete-sensuous Man (Feuerbach) and Human species (the young Marx) due to the fact that all these notions are merely variant forms of the invariant ideological problematics of idealism of essence and empiricism of subject which assume "that there is a universal essence of man; and that this essence is the attribute of 'each single individual' who is its real subject."<sup>44</sup>

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42. Ibid., pp. 226-227.

43. Marx and Engels, Collected works, Vol. 3, p. 280.

In his sixth thesis on Feuerbach, Marx says: "Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."<sup>45</sup> To locate the 'reality' of the human essence in the "essence of the social relations", is, in effect, to do away with the concept of human essence as such.

The human essence provides the underlying dynamic (contradiction between alienated existence and essence or potentiality) and the ultimate goal (realisation of essence, transcendence of alienation) of the human historical process in both Feuerbach and the Marx of 1844. An 'essence' which is the underlying dynamic and ultimate goal of the historical process cannot be the same thing as the 'essence' which is merely the historically transitory "ensemble of social relations" in any phase of history.

Further, the new conception of alienation and its transcendence as involving 'contradictions', antagonisms internal to material, social life itself, which require revolutionary practice for their resolution. But if what 'moves' history is now revolutionary

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45. K. Marx and F. Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 5, p. 4.  
Also in Marx and Engels, The German Ideology,  
pt. 1, ed., Chris Arthur, London, 1970, p. 122.

practice, transforming an internally contradictory reality, this practice must be the practice of particular individuals, groups and classes, under definite organisational forms, and with specific strategy and tactics. And if this is what moves history, then it cannot be the contradiction between men as they exist and the essence or nature of 'man' as some abstract goal of history which is the motor force of historical change. The recurring theme of the theses on Feuerbach is Feuerbach's failure to "grasp the significance of 'revolutionary', of 'practical-critical', activity."<sup>46</sup>

The "ensemble of social relations" is precisely what is transformed in history. If the human essence is identical with the ensemble of social relations then it must be transformed in history. How then can it be the universal aim and motive force of history? It can't: the 'human essence' disappears into a new conception of history as 'ensembles of social relations' and their transformations.

Thus, Marx rejects as a basis for historical analysis both philosophical conceptions of the human individual ('subject') abstracted from the necessarily socially and historically located character of human individuals and conceptions of the 'human

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46. K. Marx, "First Thesis on Feuerbach", in the German Ideology, Part I, trans. Chris Arthur London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1970, p. 121.

essence'. Even conceived in Feuerbach's terms as a form of collective life, which are formed in abstraction from the concretely observable and historically transitory forms of actual social life. He also opposes views of history as a development process of 'man', or as a process whose outcome is pre-given, independently of concrete specific historical contexts and circumstances (humanism and historicism).

The critique of "post-Hegelian philosophy" includes an extended critique of the post-Hegelian Feuerbach, and therefore, by implication, their own Feuerbachian texts. If Feuerbach inverted Hegel, and Marx and Engels established their later positions from a critique of Feuerbach, then the relationship of Marx and Engels to Hegel cannot be adequately summed up as the 'inversion' of Hegel.

#### The Specificity of the Marxist Dialectic:

Althusser believes that an epistemological revolution does not consist in a change from idealism to materialism for this would have taken place with Democritus or in modern times with Hobbes. Nor does it consist in a change from metaphysics to dialectic as this would have taken place with Heraclitus or Hegel. Marxian materialist dialectic is not an inversion of the Hegelian teleological simple idealist dialectic; rather it is completely antithetical to it. The materialist

dialectic annihilates the terms and conditions of the Hegelian idealist dialectic as well as the system (i.e. the structure of idea) with whose association the dialectic maintains its survival condition. According to Althusser, Engels rejects the idea of a pure and single non-overdetermined contradiction by calling it meaningless, abstract and senseless.<sup>47</sup>

Althusser regards multiplicity, difference, as primordial. "...There is no longer any original simple unity..., but instead, the ever-pre-giveness of a structured complex unity."<sup>48</sup> As Etienne Balibar, puts it, "a plurality of instances must be an essential property of every social structure."<sup>49</sup> Changes in social structure are said to be over-determined by numerous contradictions.<sup>50</sup> The unity they constitute in this 'fusion' into a revolutionary rupture, is constituted by their own essence and effectivity, by what they are, and according to the specific modalities of their action."<sup>51</sup>

Althusser believes that the specificity of the materialist dialectic lies in the fact that it formulates the design of a

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47. L. Althusser, FM, p. 113.

48. Ibid., pp. 198-9.

49. L. Althusser, RC, p. 207.

50. L. Althusser, FM, p. 101.

51. Ibid., p. 100.

complex heterogeneous structure of contradictions originating from various practices of invariant complex whole. The complex whole cannot exist without maintaining the uneven relations among various contradictory contradictions. He points out that "unevenness is internal to social formation because the structuration in dominance of the complex whole, this structural invariant, is itself the pre-condition for the concrete variation of the contradictions that constitute it, and therefore for their displacement, condensations and mutations."<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, not only the terms of the relationship have changed, so has the relationship itself. There is no single inversion of the essence-appearance relationship, but rather, the idea of a pre-given unevenly-structured complex whole consisting of distinct practices having their own respective laws of development, history, condition of existence, mode of articulation and law of combination. The unity of a complex structure is ensured by two complementary principles of specific activities of the parts of superstructure and the determination of parts by the whole does not rule out the possibility of relative autonomy of the parts.

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52. L. Althesser, FM, p. 213.

Structural Causality:

On the pre-supposition of three interrelated ideas of the multiple practices, the multiple historical times and the multiple unevenly-developed contradictions, Althusser generates the thesis of structural causality in terms of the concept of mode of production whose presence within the society can be seen only in its 'effects'. Through it Althusser proposes to conceptualise "the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations between those elements, and all the effects of those relations by the effectivity of that structure."<sup>53</sup> In contrast to 'Cartesian' theory of "transitive causality" and Leibnizian or Hegelian theory of "expressive causality", in Althusser's account of "structural causality" the economic structure is not a cause separate from its effects, but rather devotes the existence of a cause working in and through its effects.

Borrowing Spinoza's conception of a "causa immanens", or immanent cause, Althusser writes: This implies....that the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark; on the contrary, it implies that the structure

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53. L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC, p. 186.



is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.<sup>54</sup>

It attempts to point us in the direction of a more complex "differential historicity" based upon the overdetermination between the parts and the whole.<sup>55</sup> There is always a multiplicity and coalescence of causes among the various levels of society such that one can never observe the economic functioning in its "pure state" but only as mediated by other aspects of the whole. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the "last instance" never comes.<sup>56</sup>

The social structure being considered is a structure, and structures have a logic all their own. So it is not in an essence hidden behind or beneath the surface of things that Althusser seeks the explanation of social reality, but in the relations among elements of the structure. Moreover,

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54. Ibid., pp. 188-89.

55. L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC, pp. 108-9.

56. L. Althusser, FM, p. 113.

Althusser's notion of structural causality derives from a fact about structure itself: that a structure is always more than the sum of its parts. That is, once we add up the elements of a structure and the relations among them we find ourselves confronting a totality that can be seen as such only as it includes something else, and this "something else" is nothing other than structure itself. So Althusser's move is to conceive the social totality as a structural totality in the in the strictest sense.

Hence, Althusserian over-determination arises from the notion of a structural totality within which the function of every element is simultaneously a condition for the function of every other.

Three important ideas are entailed by Althusser's notion of a structural totality. The first is the idea of history as an "absent cause". This concept follows directly from notion of the totality as a structure: since the idea of structure is purely relational, it can make no sense to talk of any structure as having an existence separate from its elements. To speak of history as an "absent cause" is similarly to speak of the structure of the totality as something immanent in its elements or effects, not as something that is additional to and apart from them.

The second concept is the relative autonomy of the levels of the superstructure. The third one is mediation. Althusser's real objection to what he calls mediation, is actually an objection to homologies of the sort asserted by Lucien Goldman in The Hidden God. Sudipta Kaviraj says, "Althusser's suggestion that causality is 'structural', or that it can be attributed only to the "structure-in-dominance", obviously marks a sharp departure from the notion of explanation as reduction. It asserts, on the contrary, that in historical analysis, a reduction, even in terms of the acknowledged central contradictions of a social form, is misleading.... Reduction attenuates complexity."<sup>57</sup>

#### The Decentring of the Subject:

Althusser's advocacy for no-unified center - whether spiritual or material - provides him with a weapon to fight against theoretical humanism which keeps 'man' at the center of history and assigns autonomous action to human subject. Althusser's theory of history as a process without subject and goal derives its strength from Lacan's concept of a decentered subject. For Lacan subject is not an entity with an identity but a being created in the fissure of radical shift. The main thrust of science of unconscious, based on reorientation to psycho analysis of Freud, is to show how subject is constructed

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57. Krishna Bharadwaj and Sudipta Kaviraj, ed. *Perspectives on Capitalism*, Sage Publications, 1989, p. 149.

and deconstructed as Lacan has pointed out that "if the unconscious has taught us anything, it is firstly this, that somewhere, in the other, it knows and it knows precisely because it is upheld by the signifiers through which subject is constituted."<sup>58</sup> It is through material signifier through which the discourse of unconscious knows more than what a being does and believes to be true in the ideological world of conscious knowledge.

Althusser tells us that the subject is an agent or bearer of a fixed relation of production and his role is already - always determined by the structural totality of mode of production. Derrida also supports the thesis of a decentered subject when he says that "centre has no fixed locus, natural site; it is a function, a sort of nonlocus in which infinite number of sign substitutions repetitions and transformation come into play."<sup>59</sup>

Derrida's discourse on deconstruction thesis assumes the fact that everything begins with structure, configuration or relationship; at the same time it abandons its reference

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58. Jacques Lacan *Feminine Sexuality*, ed. by, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1985, p. 158.
59. J. Derrida, *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences, Writing and Difference*, Chicago, 1978, pp. 279-80.

to a centre, to a subject, to an origin etc. Thus, there emerges the notion of decentered subject within structure.

The determinate theoretical labour of Marx announces the birth of a scientific problematic or "a historico-dialectical materialism of praxis"<sup>60</sup> which consists of the theses of theoretical anti-humanistic epistemology (theory), revolutionary materialist proletarian philosophy (philosophy) and revolutionary politics of class struggle (politics). Marx says, "My analytical method does not start from man but from the economically given social period."<sup>61</sup> For Althusser, "Marx's theoretical anti-humanism means a refusal to root the explanation of social formations and their history in a concept of man with theoretical pretensions, that is, a concept of man as an originating subject, one in whom originate his needs (homo-economicus), his own thoughts (homo rationalis), and his acts and struggles (homo moralis, juridicus and politicus)."<sup>62</sup> Marx contrasts ideology with science and says that humanism is an ideology which produces mystified world-view by injecting false consciousness in the cognitive map of masses.

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60. L. Althusser, FM, p. 229.

61. Cited in FM, p. 219.

62. L. Althusser, ESC, p. 205.

Science vs. Ideology: A Sharp Disjuncture:

According to Althusser, ideology articulates to social and economic practices without being susceptible to tests of truth or falsity. Ideology expresses "not the relation between the workers and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence."<sup>63</sup> In ideology, the real relation is "inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a will, a hope, or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality."<sup>64</sup> It constrains the political reflection of those who see themselves entering into reflective relations and expressing reflexive attitudes in daily life.

The contrast between science and ideology is a matter of the different relationships the two types of discourse (or problematic) have to social practices external to knowledge, and the related structural differences in their problematics. Althusser's alternative strategy involves reverting to a classical epistemological distinction in terms of the 'falsehood' or 'deformation' of ideology vis-a-vis its scientific counterpart. The former

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63. FM, p. 233.

64. Ibid., p. 234.

strategy involves Althusser in the claim that ideological discourses do not possess an internal principle of intelligibility. In order to understand an ideological discourse it is necessary to relate it to its broader "ideological field", but beyond this it is necessary to understand the peculiar pattern of presences and absences - questions posed, questions excluded - in terms of a relationship between the ideology and the real social problems and structures which sustain it.

Althusser says that ideology differs from science in that in the ideology the "practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function...."<sup>65</sup> This practico - social function is that through and in ideology 'men' are formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence.<sup>66</sup> The domination of theoretical ideologies by the need to 'service' the demands of extra-theoretical interests and practices has implications for the structure of their problematics: the problematics of theoretical ideologies are 'closed' by contrast with the openness of scientific problematics.<sup>67</sup>

It is through 'transformations', 'mutations' and 'fusions' of theoretical ideologies in a given 'ideological field' that a

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65. Louis Althusser, FM, p. 231.

66. Ibid., p. 235.

67. L. Althusser, RC, p. 53.

science is founded. These 'mutations', 'transformations' and soon are themselves not thought of as entirely self-generating, but as in part the effects of transformations in other practices, under the determination in the last instance of the economic. The 'rupture' should be understood as opening up a new 'terrain' of problems and concepts within which a new scientific theoretical system may be produced. The 'problematic' of a theory at any moment in its history constitutes the main element of the 'means of production' by which new knowledge is produced in that theoretical practice. But in each case the "objects of knowledge" must be thought of as internal to knowledge, and not confused with the real object which remains throughout independent and 'outside' knowledge. The 'openness' of the problematic of a science consists in its 'solutions' not being pre-determined by the structure of its theoretical problems and in its problems not being set by extra-theoretical requirements and interests.

Thus, there are three basic theses relating to ideology: Ideology is representation of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence. Ideological conceptions are representations of the way in which people experience (live) their relation to real conditions.



Ideology has a 'material' existence in the concrete practices of the lived. It exists in the social practices of the lived. It exists in the social practices and rituals generated by the different state apparatuses.

Ideology, says Althusser, "interpellates individuals as subjects". In ideological practices the individual recognizes himself/herself as a centred, willing subject. This psychological recognition is, at the same time, a conceptual mis-recognition. It inculcates in the individual certain necessary attitudes and beliefs which he/she recognises as his/her own.

Therefore, Althusser treats subjectivity as a necessary illusion generated by ideology which, by giving individuals a false belief in their uniqueness and autonomy helps to bind them to the status quo. Ideology is not the site and effect of class struggle, but a factor of social cohesion.

Mode of Production: Determinate and Determinant Structure:

It is a structure of functioning development. This implies the (economic) principle of the (social) contradiction which bears within it the necessity of its destruction as a structure, of its own deconstruction. The relations of production constitute a regional structure, itself inscribed in the structure of the social totality. "the relations of production (and political and ideological social relations) irreducible to any anthropological

inter-subjectivity since they only combine agents and objects in a specific structure of the distribution of relations, places and functions, occupied and 'supported' by objects and agents of production."<sup>68</sup>

The mode of production is the various modes of articulation among five elements which co-exist and define each other reciprocally. The whole cannot be reconstituted by a temporal composition that introduces these elements in succession. It is to be regarded synchronically as an articulated combination. Hence is the rejection of any genetic explanation of the structure, both from the point of view of knowledge and from the point of view of reality.

To conclude, voluntarism in each case is subject to deeper structural determinants. The lived relations between particular men are only one part of a specific combination of agents and objects in a specific structure of relations, places and functions. The self, the human subject, does not so much constitute but is constituted by the structural relationships in which it finds itself.

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68. L. Althusser, RC, p. 180.

Epistemological Troubles:

E.P. Thompson re-asserts the centrality of the concept of 'experience' both to historiography and to the constitution of the historical process itself. He attempts to demonstrate that the abandonment of empirical means of validation in the writing of history itself leads to a rationalism in Althusser in which theoretical concepts are self-validating and become a means of imposing a pre-conceived pattern on the flow of real events.

To treat social formations as endowed with the capacity to generate their own ideological and political conditions of existence and, therefore, to reproduce themselves in perpetuity. Contradictions are conceived as the effects of self-sufficient structures. This is an approach whose implication is to rule out the very possibility of social change.<sup>69</sup>

A concept of human nature, encompassing at once the common needs and the general and distinctive capacities of human kind, plays an important, a quite fundamental role within historical materialism in accounting for those specifically human relationships that are production relations and for that specifically human type of process of change that is history.

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69. B. Hindess and P. Hirst, *Precapitalist Modes of Production* London, 1975, 272-8; and Callinicos, *Future for Marxism*, 129-34.

The reason is that "there are features of the relations in question that are due precisely to the nature of the entities may relate, that is to say, to the general make-up of human beings, to human nature."<sup>70</sup>

Without an anthropological dimension in theory, it is inexplicable why the role-bearers require ideology to bear the roles imposed by capitalism. With such an anthropology, the view that theory is not and cannot be made available to participants in ways that influence their future conduct must be revised profoundly. Structural theory does not eliminate, rather it suppresses the anthropological dimension. And once the suppressed premise is exposed, structural theorists must re-engage the very issues they have sought to expunge from theory - issues such as the nature of human subjects; the relation between individual subjects and inter-subjectivity; the structural limits to the emergence of self-consciousness; the connection between consciousness and political practice; and the moral inhibitions to both social control and revolutionary action.<sup>71</sup>

The postulated disjuncture between theory and ideology closes off the potential dialectic of self-consciousness. Althusser

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70. Geras N., *Marx and Human Nature*, pp. 106, 107. London, 1983.

71. W.E. Connolly, *Appearance and Reality in Politics*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 50.

has to hold, for instance, that even in a communist society the role-bearers cannot become free subjects; "Let us admit, historical materialism cannot conceive that even a communist society could ever do without ideology."<sup>72</sup> With the introduction of the disjuncture he gives up even a modest version of Marx's aspiration to see an order in which "the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations," and in which production is "consciously regulated" by "freely associated men... in accordance with a settled plan."<sup>73</sup>

Mepham says, Althusser provides several different 'anti-humanist' formulae which do not coincide with one another. A first formula reads: "It is the masses which make history, the class struggle is the motor of history."<sup>75</sup> A second formula has in turn two versions: (i) "the subjects of history are given human societies;<sup>76</sup> and (ii) The true subjects of the practices of social production are the relations of production. Men are never anything more than the bearers/supports/effects of these relations."<sup>77</sup>

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72. FM, p. 232.

73. Capital, Vol. 1, pp. 79-80.

74. J. Mepham, "Who Makes History", Radical Philosophy No. 6, Winter, 1973, p. 24.

75. FM, p. 215.

76. Ibid., p. 231.

77. RC, p. 180.

Despite Althessur's declarations of hostility to Hegelianism, his argument shows an interesting similarity to Hegel's on one point: his belief that in explaining historical situations one should not ascribe analytical values a priori, but only after the event. Unilinear causality of the economy is normally a priori ascription. Althusser's approach to historical occurrences is more circumspect. Even among his jostling contradictions, one cannot decide any<sup>a</sup>/priori hierarchy.- Althusser's theory, therefore, avoids not only any a priori primacy but the idea of primacy itself.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, not only is material history sacrificed to theoretically constructed history but also an ontological regression sets in because of dispensing with the fundamental insight of the historicity of natural and human social existence.<sup>79</sup>

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78. Sudipta Kaviraj, op. cit., p. 150.

79. Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure*, p. 66, London, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1983.

IIIrd Chapter

Social Theory: The Problematic of Action  
and Structure

This chapter seeks to establish the extent to which the two perspectives of structural explanation and intentional understanding are compatible with one another. The aim is not to blur real differences, setting in their place a shallow syncretism, but it seems that no worthwhile social theory can do without variants of both perspectives. This is so especially for Marxism which stakes its claim on human beings' capacity to sweep away millenia of exploitation and oppression. The "common project" has been "a sustained, diverse attempt to deal with the problematic of structuring", by which is meant "the real relationship of structure and action, the structural conditioning of action and the effects of action on structure."<sup>1</sup>

The debate over Althusser is the question of the relation between structure and subject. Anderson argues that this "has always constituted one of the central problems of historical materialism". He points to the permanent oscillation, the potential disjuncture in Marx's own writings between his ascription of the primary motor of historical change to the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production, on the one hand... and to the class struggle, on the other hand. The first refers essentially to a structural, or more properly interstructural, reality: the order of what contemporary

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1. P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, West Compton House, 1982, pp. 6-7, x.



sociology would call system integration (or for Marx latent disintegration). The second refers to the subjective forces contending and colliding for mastery over social forms and historical processes: the realm of what contemporary sociology would call social integration (which is equally disintegration or reintegration). How are these two distinct types of causality, or principles of explanation, to be articulated in the theory of historical materialism?<sup>2</sup>

Conceiving history as "a process without a subject", Althusser treats human agents as the 'bearers' or 'supports' of objective structures and subjectivity itself as a construct of ideology. While Althusserian Marxism helps to stimulate concrete historical studies by providing certain tools of analysis, its reduction of agency to structure denies it the means to conceptualize struggle and change. One of the main attractions of the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, is its openness to the contingencies, the uncertainties, the instabilities of history.<sup>3</sup>

The question of structure and subject has been placed firmly at the top of the agenda for social theory by the recent

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2. Anderson, *In the Tracks*, p. 34.

3. T. Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, London, 1984.

emergence in a version of Marxism which treats individual action as primary, reducing social structures to the consequences of such action. "Structures are created by activity which has no structure, but suffers its results as a structure."<sup>4</sup>

Some of Marx's statements on politics are evidently voluntaristic in their emphasis and stress that it is men who make history. Some others are deterministic and emphasize the limits under which they are obliged to make it. A simple solution to such elementary mysteries is to stick to Gramsci's judgement, that Marx was not trying to set up a theory which was voluntaristic or determinist in the usual sense, but to break the plane of that kind of discourse. His endeavour was to discover a level of coherent discourse which would be free from these persistent and in his view, sterile, dichotomies.<sup>5</sup>

Sudipta Kaviraj suggests that Marx's model of political explanation, properly understood, tries to render this dichotomous discourse of political theory redundant. He thinks it is crucial for a reconstruction of Marx's theoretical project to see the three dichotomies he tried to transcend. These were the dichotomies

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4. Sartre, "The Itinerary of a Thought", Between existentialism and Marxism, trans. John Matthews, London, New Left Books, 1974, p. 55.
  5. Sudipta Kaviraj, "On Political Explanation in Marxism", in Perspectives on Capitalism, ed. by Krishna Bhardwaj and Sudipta Kaviraj, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1989, p. 136.

between materialist and idealist philosophies; between positivist and hermeneutic notions of science; and between determinism and indeterminism (voluntarism) in explaining politics. These dichotomies are mutually connected.<sup>6</sup>

Giddens postulates a "duality of structure" where structure provides the rules and resources involved in agency, which also reproduces the structural properties of social institutions.

Structure is both the medium and the outcome of the day-to-day conduct in which actors engage. Thus, the study of social reproduction cannot be conceived as the aggregation of numerous "productive acts".<sup>7</sup> The conceptions of structure, and structural causation, involved cross-cut the traditional lines of the debate over the status of methodological individualism. Social systems only exist as transactions between actors; but their structural features cannot be explicated except as properties of communities or collectivities.<sup>8</sup> For structuration theory, then, agents, action and interaction are constrained by, yet generative of, the structural dimension of social reality. "The concept of the unconscious is essential to social theory... But the unconscious... can only be explored in relation to the conscious: the reflexive monitoring and rationalization of conduct, ground in practical consciousness."<sup>9</sup>

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6. Ibid., p. 173.

7. Giddens, A., *Studies in Social and Political Theory*, London, Hutchinson: New York: Basic Books, p. 130.

8. Ibid., p. 134.

9. Giddens, A., *Central Problems in Social Theory*: University of California Press, p. 58, 1979b.

The question actually at issue is not whether concrete human beings exist or not, but the relation between the level of analysis of the 'individual' and that of 'society'. There is no subject of history, but there are subjects in history. That is to say: society is not the subject, people are subjects. But their agency as subjects is defined for them by the historical process in which they find themselves, rather than that process being the expression of their choices. Thus the true 'subjects' are these definers and distributors: the relations of production (and political and ideological social relations). But since these are 'relations', they cannot be thought within the category subject.<sup>10</sup> That human, i.e. social individuals are active in history - as agents of the different social practices of the historical process of production and reproduction - that is a fact. But, considered as agents, human individuals are not 'free' and 'constitutive' subjects in the philosophical senses of these terms.<sup>11</sup>

For Anderson, the Marxist conception of human agents as entering into relations "independently of their will" is generally

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10. Althusser, RC, p. 180.

11. Althusser, ESC, p. 95.

true of historical periods prior to the emergence of the modern proletariat, when individuals were usually the victims of circumstance, and classes were not self-conscious and active forces in history. It is to this historical past that Althusser's structural determinism is more appropriate. But it is not simply a matter of adjusting the proportions of agency and structure in account adequately for the conditions of different historical periods, but, as Anderson partly recognises, the duality of 'agency' and 'structure' itself has to be questioned.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely the unsatisfactory character of the philosophical conception of human subjectivity and agency that motivates structuralist approaches to explanation in the human sciences.

But in general, where structuralism leaves intact the philosophical conception of subjectivity and intentional action, simply 'decentring' it, theoretical difficulties re-emerge. In Althusser's case, the difficulties take the form of a retention of subjectivity as an 'imaginary' relation which nevertheless has effects, and of agency as mere fulfilment of functional requirements of the social system. So long as the opposition between structure and agency governs theorising about historical

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12. Sociological Review, Vol. 26, No. 2, May 1978, pp. 217-36.

causality, the extremes of structural fatalism and vacuous voluntarism can be avoided only by arbitrary combinations of the two.

Objectivist models of political explanation, in trying to account for crucial decisions - their forms and timing - have to admit that intentionality is often of critical significance in historical occurrence.... Agency makes possible the translation of objective possibility into an actual occurrence. Conversely, attempted accounts of history, in purely rational terms, must get involved in problems of the reverse type. For history is, in large part, an unintended story, or intentions gone out of control. Every unintended consequence must, however, have as its logical counterpart an intended occurrence which failed to come off. Historical accounts may justifiably transcend these intents in the larger process of explaining, but they must begin from them.<sup>13</sup>

The beginnings of a way out of this impasse can be established through a recognition of three methodological principles in the use of structural explanation. First, the widely held assumption that structural determinants of action are external to the actor has to be questioned. Psychoanalysis

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13. Sudipta Kaviraj, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

is one intellectual tradition in which psychic life is itself understood to be structured in such a way that the conscious life associated with intentional action and subjectivity is subject to unconscious determinations which are nevertheless internal to the individual psyche. The notion of unconscious determination of conscious life provides theoretical space for a conception of human actors as more than mere 'bearers' of external structures, without resort to the essentially theological notion of action as an "uncaused cause". Second, the widespread assumption that structural conditions of action are constraints on action should be questioned. Certain structural features of social and psychic life should be seen not as 'constraints', but as facilitating conditions or conditions of possibility of action. When this is recognised, the identification of structural explanation with fatalism is hard to sustain. Thirdly, explanation in terms of structures is not the same thing as explanation in terms of immutable structures. Any more or less enduring pattern of relationships between agents or between agents and objects may be thought of as constituting a 'structure'. Relationships may confer causal powers on the agents which they relate and they may effect constraints on their behaviour in various ways. The susceptibility of relationships to deliberate

dissolution or transformation by agents is similarly immensely variable - from the delicacy of the bonds constituting a friendship to the immense resilience of the relations constituting a mode of economic production.

Gramsci restates Marx's claim in the "Theses on Feuerbach" that "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice."<sup>14</sup>

For since a socialist conception of the world is implicit in the daily practice of the working class, it can only be elicited and rendered dominant over that of the ruling class which is also present in that practice, if revolutionaries actively involve themselves in the struggles of the working class. It is thus that he conceives the revolutionary party, as "the result of a dialectical process, in which the spontaneous movement of the revolutionary masses and the organizing and directing will of the centre converge."<sup>15</sup> Outside of such an interaction between theory and practice, party and class, the most brilliant Marxist philosopher is likely to degenerate into the paid jester of the ruling class. The point, after all, is to change the

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14. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 4.

15. A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Political Writings 1921-1926*, London, 1978, p. 198.



world.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the social actors must be understood at least in part as intentional subjects acting in response to an understood situation and whose actions must also be seen in terms of its symbolic or meaningful character for them.

For Giddens, the production of social life is a skilled performance. Social practices can be understood as skilful procedures, methods or techniques appropriately performed by social agents.<sup>17</sup> It is in addressing the constitution of praxiological skills that human consciousness first arises as a major theme. However, the specific mode of consciousness, i.e. practical consciousness of social skills, must be distinguished from discursive consciousness, i.e. the level of awareness determined by the ability to put things into words.<sup>18</sup> The distinctive quality of practical consciousness is that agents need be only tacitly aware of the skills they have mastered, although it is generally possible to concentrate discursive attention on these skills when the occasion arises. By stressing actors' tacit awareness of skills and procedures, Giddens proposes that practices can be performed without being directly motivated. In fact, much day-to-day conduct occurs in this manner.<sup>19</sup>

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16. Marx and Engels, C.W., Vol. 5, London, 1975, p.5.

17. Giddens, A., *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, pp. 20-2, Polity Press, Cambridge, England.

18. Giddens, op. cit., 1984, pp.41-5. Also, op.cit., 1979, pp.57,73.

19. Ibid., 1979, pp. 59, 218; 1984, p.6.

Giddens has a deep respect for the protean capacities of social agents to reproduce and transform their own historical circumstances.<sup>20</sup> Social agents, not social theorists, produce, sustain and alter whatever degree of 'systemness' exists in society.<sup>21</sup> It is Giddens's contention that while social theory must conserve an interest in the subject as a reasoning, acting being, the subject must also be 'decentred' in favour of a more central concern with social conduct.<sup>22</sup> Giddens argues that in every social relation there is a dialectic of control involving the asymmetrical access to and manipulation of the media (resources) through which agents influence one another's behaviour. It is central to this concept that no agent engaged in interaction is ever completely autonomous.<sup>23</sup> To make a point that anticipates subsequent discussion on the production and reproduction of social activity, the latitude of freedom of agency crucially depends upon the range of practices that an agent is competent to perform. However great this range may be, unqualified freedom is denied because no agent is sufficiently skilled to perform every type of practice that his

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20. Ibid., 1981a.

21. Ibid., 1981a, pp. 41-8; 1984, pp. 164-5.

22. Ibid., 1979, p. 47; 1984: p. xxii.

23. Ibid., 1981a, pp. 61-3; 1984, p. 16.

or her fellow actors have mastered. The polymorphic diversity of human practices is one important reason why Giddens holds that the concept of agency cannot be fully elucidated apart from historically specific modes of activity.<sup>24</sup> Giddens account of the reproduction of institutional practices in the duality of structure provides a basis for his reconciliation of action and structure. For him the patterning of relations in collectivities is constituted by inter-related (but politically asymmetrical) practices reproduced across time and space in various locales. The structuration refers to the reproduction of social relations across time and space as transacted in the duality of structure. And the duality of structure is "the essential recursiveness of social life as constituted in social practices. Structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution."<sup>25</sup>

Since social agency involves interventions that alter or transform social events, i.e. that contribute to their production, there must be an aspect of social practices that refers to how

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24. Giddens, op. cit., 1979, p. 56.

25. Ibid., p. 4.

this influence is exercised. Giddens introduces the notion of resources to serve this end. Resources are the facilities or bases of power to which the agent has access, and which she or he manipulates to influence the course of intervention with others. Resources conceived as properties of collectivities do not exert an independent influence upon the reproduction of practices in the duality of structure. Instead, the meshing of rules and resources in institutionalized conduct results in what Giddens terms strategies of control: the ways in which agents apply knowledge about the manipulation of the resources to which they have access in order to reproduce their strategic autonomy over the actions of others.<sup>26</sup>

Social practices do not reproduce themselves, social agents do and social agents are always seen to retain the capability to act otherwise than they do. "All action exists in continuity with the past, which supplies the means of its initiation."<sup>27</sup> Mutual knowledge and resources establish the continuity with the past but they serve only as the media for the reproduction of institutionalized practices and contexts. There is no guarantee that agents will reproduce regularities

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26. Giddens: 1981a, pp. 61-4; 1985, Ch. 1.

27. Ibid., 1979, p. 70.

of conduct as they previously have done. For this reason Giddens makes it a matter of principle that "the concept of social reproduction.... is not explanatory: all reproduction is contingent and historical."<sup>28</sup>

To say that structure is reproduced in the duality of structure means that structure is reconstituted in each instance where a pervasive and enduring practice is reproduced. This reconstitution of structure reinforces agents' familiarity with established cognitive outlooks.<sup>29</sup> That is, it reinforces the mutual knowledge of rules and of the strategies of control of resources associated with these practices, both for those who actually participate in them and for those who recognize that these practices are being performed. This point applies equally to the reproduction of context. In every instance where agents reflexively monitor physical, social and temporal elements of their circumstances in a routine manner, they reflexively regenerate the contextual relevance of these elements.<sup>30</sup>

No single act of social reproduction is sufficient in itself to reconstitute structural properties. But the continual

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28. Giddens, *op. cit.*, 1981a, p. 27.

29. *Ibid.*, 1979, p. 128; 1984, p. 104.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-4.

repetition and recognition of familiar modes of conduct by numerous members of a social collectivity or group embed an awareness of these practices deep within their tacit memory of the familiar features of social praxis in the circumstances of their daily lives. Conversely, when certain forms of conduct cease or are transformed, the mutual knowledge of the specific configuration of rules and resources associated with these practices begins to lapse and fade.

Although Giddens proposes that many practices are undertaken by social agents on a tacit basis, without any direct motivation, he also acknowledges that specific interests and long-term projects may impel agents to act as they do. It should also be acknowledged that the material milieu of action, the exercise of sanctions as strategies of control, and the constitution and configuration of the practices that prevail within any given social system may constrain possibilities for alternative modes of conduct.<sup>31</sup> But Giddens also suggests that, underlying all routine practices, agents develop an unconscious sense of trust in the fabric of social activities and the object world that comprise the course and circumstances of their daily lives. This sense of ontological security serves to connect

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31. Giddens, *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 174-9.

the agents' unconscious "basic security system" to the routine procedures of social reproduction.<sup>32</sup>

The point concerning whether agents must intend (i.e. be aware) that their mundane social practices serve to reconstitute social structure.<sup>33</sup> Giddens contends that such need not be, and often is not, the case. The basis for this contention is established in the ascription of priority to agency over consciousness in the performance of social activity. Agents may "make a difference" by contributing to the reproduction of structure without even a tacit awareness that they do so. But this unintentional reproduction of structure is not a logical necessity. It remains possible for agents to thematize the contributions they make to ongoing circumstances, and to alter their practices on the basis of these insights.

To conclude, Giddens suggests that we think of structures as "the unacknowledged conditions and unanticipated consequences of human action". Such a perspective will resolve the long-standing 'dualism' of structure and action. More specifically, structures are to be thought of not simply as constraining action, but also as enabling: "structure is thus not to be conceptualized as a barrier to action, but as essentially involved

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32. Ibid., Ch. 2 (extended discussion of the relation of the unconscious to social routine).

33. Ibid., pp.8, 13.

in its production."<sup>34</sup> The duality of structure can only be understood once the conceptual connection between power and action is grasped. Action involves the exercise of "transformative capacity", the ability to bring about some alteration in the course of events. Structures consist in the rules and resources which make possible, inter alia, the exercise of the more specific form of power which Giddens calls domination and which involves actors compelling others to comply with their wants.

But to say that structure is the 'medium' of action is different from describing it as the 'condition' of action. In practice, Giddens tends towards the first and weaker version. This is brought out by his conceiving of structure as consisting of rules and resources. Rules cannot constitute practice.<sup>35</sup> While resources, as Giddens says, can only be thought of as media of action. They only condition action in the weak sense of being necessary conditions of action, but Giddens's general formula is surely meant in a stronger, causal sense of structures conditioning action. His account of power is confused by the claim that the concepts of transformative capacity and domination are logically connected. The overall effect

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34. Giddens, *Central Problems*, pp. 69-70. Also, in the *New Rules of Sociological Method*, London, 1976.

35. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.



is a position much closer to methodological individualism than Giddens's general account of structure would suggest.

Giddens's failure to discriminate between kinds of agency leads him to ignore the fact that there are two very different ways in which the resistance of subordinate groups may "actively alter" their "conditions of life". Change may arise as an unintended consequence of molecular acts of resistance. But the change may not be consciously initiated by or benefit the resisters: thus the modern factory may have been introduced by capital to eliminate the "dishonesty and laziness" (i.e. resistance) of workers employed under the putting-out system.<sup>36</sup> Resistance, however, may also generate collective agents capable of pursuing the conscious goal of social change. Action in pursuit of such collective projects of transformation will no doubt have unanticipated consequences, but it is possible to appraise the outcome in the light of its distance from the goal originally and consciously espoused. Discussions of the Russian Revolution and its fate are an obvious example of this kind of appraisal.

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36. S.A. Marglin, "What Do the Bosses Do?", in A. Gorz, Ed., *The Division of Labour* (Hassocks, 1976).

The distinctions drawn by Anderson - between routine conduct, public initiatives and self-determination - are helpful. They provide a corrective to other invocations of undifferentiated 'agency' against structures. The point of these distinctions is to overcome the abstract polarity between structure and agency. But Anderson's discussion of agency has a major lacuna. He does not consider in any depth what the different forms of agency have in common beyond defining agency as "conscious, goal-directed activity".<sup>37</sup> But it is the nature and implications of agency thus conceived that are at the centre of most of the debates about the status and character of social science. Anderson believes that the resolution of the debate lies in the recognition that the scope for human action, especially in his sense of 'self-determination', depends on historically specific conditions. Structuralism and humanism may each, in particular circumstances, be true. Grasping this depends, however, on making the appropriate conceptual discriminations between different kinds of action.

The two antagonistic formulae of a "natural-human process without a subject" and "ever-baffled, ever-resurgent agents

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37. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, London, 1980, p. 19.

of an unmastered practice" are both claims of an essentially apodictic and speculative character - eternal axioms that in no way help us to trace the actual, variable roles of different types of deliberate venture, personal or collective, in history. A historical, as opposed to an axiomatic approach to the problem would seek to trace the curve of such enterprises, which has risen sharply - in terms of mass participation and scale of the objective - in the last two centuries, from previously low levels.<sup>38</sup>

To conclude, a good social theory must recognize the knowledgeability and competence of actors. Temporality must be treated as an intrinsic dimension of social processes. Human action must be understood as involving conscious intentionality as well as "practical consciousness", practical knowledge of the workings of society that are discursively inaccessible to actors. All action must be situated within the unacknowledged conditions of action and the unintended consequences of action. Finally, a social theory must be built around a concept of the "duality of structure". Action is inconceivable

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38. P. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

independently of its structural conditions but it does not  
imply that action is no more than its structural conditions.

## CONCLUSION

Althusser's reconstruction of Marx's doctrine is one of the most ambitious enterprises in the post-war history of Marxism. It was heralded as a new start in some quarters, dismissed as a refurbished Stalinism in others.

His enterprise is of great scope and originality, executed with enormous determination. This recasting of Marxism is seriously vitiated - by a 'theoreticism' that topples over into idealism and conventionalism. An astringent theoretical anti-humanism which occludes human agency in its prioritization of structural necessity. An ultimately anti-historical anti-historicism productive of its own fair share of difficulties in understanding historical change as a consequence of its emphasis on social reproduction, and yielding an a-historical structurality or, alternatively, an unstructured history.

Whether Marxism can be defended as a science is a question that no longer seems to be resolvable one way or the other. It is appropriate for workers in the human sciences to work with a model of their enterprise which commits them to the highest standards of rigour that are obtainable. That commits them to specifically cognitive objectives, and which allows for the development of conceptual and methodological links with other

sciences. On the other hand, if the modes of 'science' to which the appeal is made includes commitment to the levels of quantification, precision of theoretical language, predictive adequacy and standards of verification which have been achieved in the contemporary physical sciences, then the exercise can only be stultifying, empty and scholastic.

As a means of sustaining historical enquiry and socio-political analysis and explanation, the categories of the early Marx are hopelessly flawed. Marx comes to this view too. But intellectual work on the Left cannot be, and should not be, confined to what goes under the name 'scientific' analysis, necessary though that work is. There is also a fundamentally important place for avowedly committed speculative and creative philosophical work, which engages directly with the popular culture and oppositional 'discourses' of its time and place. The mistake has been to suppose that these quite different parts could be played by a single, self-consistent theoretical discourse.

An adequate theory of agency must be a theory of the causal powers persons have. International explanations of human action, invoking beliefs and desires as reasons for acting, are necessary because of the peculiar kind of living organisms human beings are - in particular, because of the especial capacities they possess for consciously reflecting on and altering not merely

their actions, but also their thoughts. Action-explanations contain a hidden premiss referring to the agent's power to perform the action in question. In normal circumstances this premiss may be ignored, since the capacities assumed are those possessed by any healthy adult person, but this is by no means always the case when the explanation of social events is in question.

Structures play an ineliminable role in social theory because they determine an important subset of human powers. These are called structural capacities, the powers an agent has in virtue of his or her position within the relations of production. Viewing structures from this perspective involves breaking with the idea of them as limits on individual or collective action, providing a framework within which human agency can then have free play. In so far as their position in structures delimits the possibilities open to agents, they are also presented with the opportunity to pursue their goals in particular directions. Anthony Giddens among contemporary social theorists has most forcefully expressed this basic insight - structures enable as well as constrain. But he then undermines his argument by identifying structure with the resources available to agents. The effect is to keep structure within the framework of the utilization theory of action, for resources are the media of power, means used by agents to further their ends, not in any sense

determinants of action. Resources of different kinds are, however, available to agents because of their position within production relations. It is as the determinant of the access people have to resources, and not as the resources themselves, that structure figures in social theory. Thus, the structure and agency are so closely interwoven that to separate either and give it primacy over the other is a fundamental error.



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