

ALTHUSSER AND THE ANTI-REDUCTIONIST READING OF MARX

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DECLARATION

Certified that the material in this dissertation being submitted for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy , has not been previously submitted for any other Diploma or Degree at this or any other University .

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This study is about Althusser's anti-reductionist reading of Marx. We begin in the first chapter by explaining what reductionism in general consists of. This is followed by an analysis of the different kinds of reductionism prevalent in the writings of some Marxists. Althusser tries to counter these reductionisms by proposing, first, that a mode of production be conceived of as comprising practices which are different from each other and, second, that the kind of causality that is ascribed to a mode of production be such that it takes note of the 'overdetermination' of an event by the different practices comprising the mode of production. The second chapter of this thesis deals with Althusser's first proposal and describes the different practices discussed by him. The third chapter takes up his second proposition and attempts to explain his concepts of 'overdetermination' and 'structural causality'. The fourth chapter offers another illustration of his anti-reductionist programme by discussing his anti-empiricist conception of science and his grounds for distinguishing science from ideology. The study concludes by demarcating and defining Althusser's position once again.

This study has a limited objective in that the discussion of anti-reductionism in it is strictly limited to the work of Louis Althusser. This is not meant to imply that

Althusser was either the first Marxist theorist to develop arguments for an anti-reductionist Marxism or that it is only in this work that the programme of a non-reductionist Marxism is so important. In fact the problem of reductionism has been central to the debates of most Marxist theorists. Marx and Engels themselves had, towards the end of their lives, cautioned against a reductionist interpretation of their work. Such an interpretation became a major source of dispute in the confrontation between Lenin and the Marxists of the Second International. The problem of reductionism has also been central to the work of Lukacs, Gramsci, the Frankfurt school, and Colletti, to name some important Marxist theoreticians. However we have not, except perhaps in passing, mentioned the work of any of these thinkers in the study. This is not because we do not realize the importance of their individual contributions but because the scope of this dissertation is restricted to the writings of Althusser.

Althusser's essays of the 1960s introduced many new concepts into Marxist theory. The main purpose of this study is to attempt a clarification of the meaning of some of those concepts by representing or unpacking their content in a simpler style. This is exemplified specially in the third chapter, ^{where} we come to realize the exact differences between structural, expressive, and linear causality only after we

have represented these kinds of causalities more simply. This study seeks only to provide an understanding of the Althusserian project and does not endeavour to point to directions beyond him; although as stated in the conclusion, there is ample space for continuing work on a non-reductionist form of Marxist explanations.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank, first of all, my supervisor, Dr Sudipta Kaviraj, to whom I remain deeply indebted for his patient guidance and his encouragement. I am also thankful to Mr Rajeev Bhargava and Ms Gurpreet Mahajan for helping me with some of my difficulties. I thank my friends Nivedita and Anju, discussions with whom were useful. And I owe special thanks to Ajit who has taught me to accept the limitations of my work.

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Shefali Chowdhry

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER I

WHAT IS REDUCTIONISM

This study attempts to elucidate Althusser's anti-reductionist reading of Marx; hence, it is pertinent to see what constitutes a reductionist interpretation of Marx for Althusser. We begin with a discussion of the problem of reductionism in philosophy in general which may cast light on the problem of reductionist Marxism.

I

In philosophy, reductionism is encountered in two forms:

- (i) Ontological reductionism, which is of the form 'X is nothing but Y', denies the separate identity of the term which is being reduced; for example, "a performance of a violin sonata is nothing but the scraping of horsehair on catgut",¹ social entities or properties are "nothing more than material or mental entities or properties",² and a caste division is nothing but an economic class division;

1 R. Nozick, Philosophical Investigations (Oxford, 1984), p. 627.

2 D.H. Ruben, The Metaphysics of the Social World (London, 1985), p. 8.

(ii) Explanatory reductionism is of the form 'X cannot be explained except in terms of Y'. Here X and Y are separately identifiable but an explanation of X or the key to the nature of X lies only in Y. If to explain X is to know the cause of X, then X or the nature of X is caused by Y. Examples of explanatory reductionist statements are: "the key to the superstructure is never found in the superstructure itself, ... [it is found in] deeper socio-economic roots",³ or, an explanation of intentionality in terms of unconscious causal processes. We must keep in mind that the statements of both kinds of reductionism are asymmetrical: 'X is nothing but Y' but not vice versa; similarly 'X can be explained in terms of (is caused by) Y' but not vice versa.

Some instances of reductionism are: (a) methodological individualism, (b) mechanical materialism, and (c) the positivist reduction of meaningful statements to observational statements excluding statements containing theoretical terms.

(a) Reductionism in methodological individualism can be^{of} both varieties; ontological reductionists state that social entities are nothing but aggregates of individuals, while the explanatory reductionists hold that "all attempts to explain

3 E. Mandel, From Stalinism to Eurocommunism (London, 1979), p. 73.

social and individual phenomena are to be rejected unless they refer exclusively to facts about individuals".⁴ Methodological individualism in both its forms is criticized on many counts:

(i) social entities are said to have 'emergent' properties which the persons constituting them do not individually possess;

(ii) "the predicates designating properties special to persons" (i.e. the 'facts about individuals') are said to "presuppose a social context for their employment".⁵ This is clear from the example of a description of a person as a tribeswoman necessarily implying the existence of a tribe; this shows that individuals are not even logically independent of society. Thus 'given' individuals with 'given' aims and preferences or dispositions are said to be false starting point for explanation.

(iii) Besides, social processes are the result of human action but not the result of human intentional design. So even if social entities do not have aims, intentions or goals which are the properties only of individuals, yet, if a structure or pattern is attributed to a social entity, then to explain this pattern or structure in terms of individual intentions become difficult. Society would not exist without human activity; however, "the social cannot be reduced to (and is not the product of) the individual [and] it is equally clear that

4 S. Lukes in I.C. Jarvie, Concepts and Society (London, 1972), p. 178.

5 R. Bhaskar, The Possibility of Naturalism (Sussex, 1979), p. 35.

society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all".⁶

(b) Mechanical materialists maintain that ideas, sensations, and all psychological processes are motions or modifications of matter in the brain.⁷ In other terms, 'mental states' are nothing but 'brain states' or mental states are determined by physical or brain states; for example, a specific thought is identical to or always accompanied by a physical process of a particular kind and no other. However although when mental events take place, physical events also occur, their identity is questionable. 'For instance, if a person were watching a television show, and a scientist were at the same time examining the viewer's brain, they would see different things.'⁸ From her or his perception of the physical reactions in the brain, the scientist is not able to construct the sequence of events that comprised the television show. Determination of mental events by physical or brain states is also criticized on the grounds that the formal physical process that accompanies the act of thinking does not affect the content of thoughts; hence, both an ontological and an

6 Ibid., p. 43.

7 See J. Shaffer, "Mind-Body Problem", in P. Edwards, ed., The Encyclopedia of Philosophy (New York, 1967), vol. 5, pp. 336-46.

8 R.H. Popkin and A. Stroll, Philosophy Made Simple (London, 1979), p. 80.

explanatory reduction of mental states to brain states is held to be invalid.

(c) Some early positivists of the Vienna Circle claimed that observational statements alone are meaningful, thus implying that we can only know what we observe and further only that can be said to exist that we know. Granting an epistemological and ontological privilege to observations, they effected a reduction of the world ultimately to our observations.

II

Keeping in mind that reductionism can be of both forms, ontological as well as explanatory, let us see what kinds of reductionism are present in the analysis of some Marxists.

(i) We come across a reduction of the superstructure to the base, i.e., the political and ideological levels are reduced to the economic level. This reduction may be ontological, as in the example, 'a caste division is nothing but an economic class division', or explanatory when the nature of the superstructure is sought to be explained through the state of the base, as in the example, 'the key to the superstructure is never found in the superstructure itself, it is found in deeper socio-economic roots'. It is held that the superstructure cannot explain the nature of the base because the superstructure does not cause the base to have the character it does. This

reduction of the effectiveness of the superstructure, which is said to have characterized the Marxism of the Second International, was criticized by Lenin. In his "The State and Revolution",⁹ he stated that it is the specific effectiveness of the bourgeois State and bureaucratic apparatus that make it imperative for the proletariat to smash the State apparatus to establish its own dictatorship. Gramsci extended this analysis to ideological superstructures by pointing out that the ruling classes of the advanced capitalist countries maintain their hegemony through numerous cultural institutions--schools, churches, newspapers, parties and associations. "Economic crises of the type which earlier Marxists had seen as the central lever of revolution under capitalism could be contained and withstood by this political order."¹⁰ Althusser's argument concerning the "idealist-economist tendency of the Second International",¹¹ is that whether the effectiveness of the political and ideological levels is neglected for that of the economic, or whether some sort of neo-Kantian idealism, that is, the idea that "man is by nature free"¹² is professed, the

9 V.I. Lenin, The State and Revolution (Moscow, 1977).

10 P. Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism (London, 1979), p. 80.

11 L. Althusser, Essays on Ideology (London: Verso Edition, 1984), p. 129.

12 Ibid., p. 84.

result is the same : a neglect of the organisation of the class struggle by the party, which is a political and ideological question. "If the question of 'man' as 'subject of history' disappears, that does not mean that the question of political action disappears. Quite the contrary! This political action is actually given its strength by the critique of the bourgeoisie fetishism of 'man' : it is forced to follow the conditions of the class struggle. For the class struggle is not an individual struggle, but an organized mass struggle for the conquest and revolutionary transformation of state power and social relations."¹³

(ii) Instead of reducing the superstructure to the base, some Hegelian Marxists instead hold that all the levels of a social totality objectify an essential common principle: for example, Lukacs postulates the commodity structure or commodity fetishism or reification as "the universal category of society as a whole".¹⁴ He writes, "the problem of commodities must not be ... regarded as the central problem in economics but as the central structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects".¹⁵ If the explanation of all the levels is to be found in this common principle, then a reduction of the logic of one level to the logic of all the others is carried out.

13 Ibid., p. 86.

14 G. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness (London, 1983), p. 86.

15 Ibid., p. 83.

(iii) Some Marxists are said to be reductionist because they do not distinguish a social formation from a mode of production. Consequently they reduce all contradictions existing in a social formation to the basic contradiction of the dominant mode of production. In this way the distinction between a mode of production which exists in its purity only as a conceptual object and a social formation, in which several modes of production coexist under a dominant mode of production, is obliterated.

(iv) Although some Marxists emphasize the effectiveness of the superstructures in history, they also maintain that the nature of the superstructures is determined by the position of individuals in the relations of production, i.e. their class positions. This idea is termed as 'class reductionism' by Chantal Mouffe.¹⁶ According to her, the three principles of the reductionist problematic of ideology (as a superstructure) are: "(a) all subjects are class subjects, (b) social classes have their own paradigmatic ideologies, and (c) all ideological elements have a necessary class belonging."¹⁷ Class reductionism is in a way linked to the base-superstructure kind of reduction through the notion of class interests or positions in the economic processes of production. If class positions or interests determine the nature of the superstructures, then

16 C. Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci", in C. Mouffe, ed., Gramsci and Marxist Theory (London, 1979).

17 Ibid., p. 189.

the autonomy of, say, the realm of ideology, i.e., its capability to form other than 'class subjects' is questioned. Instead of believing that ideologies are explainable through class interests, we could alternatively hold that ideologies explain the formation of individuals either as class or non-class subjects.

(v) The last kind of reductionism that will be mentioned is the reduction of structures or practices to a constitutive subject, whether individual or collective/class. This can take the form of "equating practice with the objectification of subjectivity, instead of seeing it as an interaction of a subject with a pregiven effect".¹⁸ An example can be provided by the views of the State as an 'instrument' of the ruling class in the sense that the ruling class can 'make' the state serve its interests. This view reduces the State to the practice of the ruling class. Against this conception it is argued that the results of practice are not the results of untrammelled or unconstrained subjectivity but that of acting on/within circumstances with a structure. Moreover, it is also held that not only the results of practice but 'practice' itself cannot be equated with constitutive subjectivity.

18 M. Jay, Marxism and Totality (Oxford, 1984), p. 114.

III

Althusser's anti-reductionist project, grounded in his interpretation of the logic of Marx's concepts, bears on all the kinds of reductionist Marxist analyses mentioned above, which he claims are based on a misreading of Marx. Althusser criticizes these reductionisms by proposing a conception of a social totality as made up of distinct practices and by stressing the differences between the various practices -- each practice has its own logic of functioning as well as its own specific effectiveness. Althusser asserts this again and again in his writings, as for example, when he states: "But History 'asserts itself' through the multiform world of the superstructures, .. the economic dialectic is never active in the pure state; in history, these instances, the superstructures, etc. are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the last instance' never comes."¹⁹

Since Althusser is convinced that the superstructures are not the phenomena of the base, and therefore that a 'conjuncture' is causally determined by the base as well as

19 L. Althusser, For Marx (London: Verso Edition, 1982), pp. 112-13.

by the superstructures, he has to give a theory of complex causality where a single cause (the base) does not act alone but several factors (the base and the superstructures) are jointly necessary and sufficient for the effect. This question of causation will be dealt with extensively in the third chapter.

We find that when Althusser criticizes other thinkers for reducing everything to a sole cause or for being reductionist on other counts, he presents them as holding to the problematics of either humanism²⁰ / empiricism-idealism²¹ / empiricism²² / historicism²³ / idealism-economism²⁴ / economism ≠ humanism.²⁵ In this thesis we have not adopted the strategy of discussing Althusser's anti-reductionism by taking up in detail his responses to each of these problematics separately. However, we do examine Althusser's analysis of most of these problematics during our description of his position

20 Ibid., see chapter 7.

21 Ibid., see chapter 7.

22 L. Althusser and E. Balibar, Reading Capital (London, Verso edition, 1979), see part 1.

23 Ibid., see part 2, chapter 5.

24 L. Althusser, Essays on Ideology, op. cit.; see 'Reply to John Lewis'.

25 Ibid.

on the question of social totality, causation, and the science-ideology distinction. In the next chapter we take up Althusser's concept of social totality.

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CHAPTER II

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF THE SOCIAL TOTALITY : PRACTICES

I

During the Enlightenment some thinkers held that since human beings are fundamentally alike across space and time, a science of man could be constructed whose generalizations would be as free of reference to particular ages and places as were the laws of nature. David Hume wrote: "Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English...Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature."¹

Against this view are sharply set the Hegelian and Marxian theories of history which are said to be characterized by the principles of holism and historicity. These principles imply that the proper units for understanding historical processes are not individual events or individual subjects; instead there are what are generally called structures, in

¹ D. Hume, quoted in G.A. Cohen, Karl Marx's Theory of History - A Defence (Oxford, 1978), pp. 3-4.

history, which should be seen as a succession of structures or forms.²

This conception of structures in history was present in the idea put forward by Montesquieu and Herder that there was a diversity of national characters, i.e. there existed different ways of being human. These distinct national characters were unities organized around distinct principles. Hegel appropriated this view of national character and added to it his conception of the spirit of a nation being a stage in the development of the self-consciousness of the world spirit or Geist. Moreover, the unity or structure that the 'spirit of a nation' signifies is not intended by the individuals living in that nation or community. In fact, it is the social whole which determines the characteristics of the individuals living in it. As Charles Taylor, commenting on the Hegelian concept of 'ethical substance' puts it, "we are what we are in virtue of participating in the larger life of our society - or at least, being immersed in it, if our relationship to it is unconscious and passive, as is often the case".³

So far there is no disagreement between Hegel and Althusser's Marx. Althusser would agree that in Marx too there is no concept of an eternal human nature because all the

2 S. Kaviraj, Some Observations on Marxism and Political Causality, unpublished.

3 C. Taylor, Hegel (Cambridge, 1975), p. 381.

so-called human properties of individuals are caused by the social wholes to which they belong and in history there have been a succession of different social wholes. An analogy can be provided with Marx's thesis that "there is no production in general".⁴ Marx writes: "When we speak of production, we always have in mind production at a definite stage of social development..."⁵ Although no production is possible without certain elements, for example, without an instrument of production and past accumulated labour, these elements as embodied in "the skill acquired by repeated practice and concentrated in the hand of a savage",⁶ and also in capital, which is an instrument of labour and also past materialized labour, become completely different because they belong to different modes of production. The case of the serf and the worker as labourers and of the feudal lord and capitalist as non-labourers would be similar.

It seems that those who believe that human nature changes would also hold that social wholes cause human nature to change rather than that social wholes are the products of

4 K. Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Moscow, 1970), p. 190.

5 Ibid., p. 189.

6 Ibid., p. 190.

the international acts of individuals. Like Hegel, Althusser's Marx also holds that structures are not the product of the intentions of individuals. The individual capitalist is as much constrained by the structure of the capitalist mode of production to act in a certain way as is the worker. Individuals have been formed in certain ways by the social wholes in which they have lived throughout history. In some epochs men and women have identified themselves with the social whole in which they live; in the modern period, however, human beings perceive themselves in an extremely individualistic and atomistic fashion while not recognizing that this kind of self perception is related to the play of the social forces within which they live. Marx wrote, in the Preface to the first German edition of Capital, volume 1 - "My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them."⁷

Although there are similarities in Hegel's and Marx's theories of history, and Marx is said to have adopted Hegel's dialectical method, with its denial of the 'abstractness' and staticity of metaphysical thought, for Althusser's anti-

7 K. Marx, Capital (Moscow, 1965), vol. 1, p. 10.

reductionist project, it is the differences that are crucial. The main difference that Althusser finds between Marx and Hegel is with regard to the nature of the social wholes or structures which succeed each other in history. Althusser begins his characterization of Hegel's conception of a social whole by rejecting the distinction made by the left Hegelians between the Hegelian system and the Hegelian method. For Althusser, the Hegelian method is contaminated by the object of the Hegelian system. Beginning with the assertion that a conception of "the exteriority of the dialectic to its possible objects"⁸ is pre-dialectical and hence unmarxist, Althusser points out that it is only because for Hegel, history is the coming to absolute self-knowledge of the world spirit, that the Hegelian totality is reduced to a simple internal principle. For Hegel, movement in history takes place only because there are contradictions between the successive embodiments or conditions of existence of Geist (whether in cultural forms or in modes of consciousness) and its ultimate teleology. Since this ultimate teleology is the self-realization of Geist, given the principle of embodiment,⁹ it is necessary for the realization of Geist, that there be "a hierarchy of cultural forms and modes of consciousness which

8 L. Althusser, For Marx (EM) (London: Verso Edition, 1982), p. 93.

9 C. Taylor, Hegel, op. cit., see chapter III.

succeed each other in time and make up human history".¹⁰ Hegel shows the essential contradiction to be between two essential principles, one that unifies the present embodiment of Geist and another that is its teleology. Therefore, the Hegelian dialectic is based on a single simple contradiction. "...the simplicity of Hegelian contradiction is never more than a reflection of the simplicity of this internal principle of a people, that is, not its material reality but its most abstract ideology."¹¹ Hegel's dialectic, "the simple play of a principle of simple contradiction"¹², is perhaps adequate to Hegel's object but ^{it} is not adequate to Marx's object. After having shown the "intimate and close relation that the Hegelian structure of the dialectic has with Hegel's 'world outlook', that is, with his speculative philosophy",¹³ Althusser goes on to describe the consequence, Hegel's reductionism. Hegel, deriving the idea from Montesquieu reduces "all the elements that make up the concrete life of a historical epoch (economic, social, political and legal institutions, customs, ethics, art, religion, philosophy and even historical events: wars, battles,

10 Ibid., p. 91. Also see Norman, R., Hegels Phenomenology - A Philosophical Introduction (New Jersey, 1976).

11 L. Althusser, EM, op. cit., p. 103.

12 Ibid., p. 103.

13 Ibid., p. 104.

defeats and so on) to one principle of internal unity...."¹⁴

Therefore for Hegel, each of the elements of a whole is the phenomenon of the same essence; however, this essence is not one of the spheres of the totality, be it the economic, political or ideological sphere, but an 'internal spiritual principle', which is itself a moment in the development of the Idea. Thus, Marxism is not an inversion of the Hegelian totality because in the latter, none of the specific social spheres, not even that of ideology, is the determining sphere. As Althusser writes, giving the example of Rome, "it is not its ideology that unifies and determines it for Hegel, but a 'spiritual' principle (itself a moment of the development of the Idea) manifest in every Roman determination, in its economy, its politics, its religion, its law, etc. This principle is the abstract legal personality. It is a 'spiritual principle' of which Roman Law is only one determination among others. In the modern world it is subjectivity, just as universal a principle: the economy is subjectivity, as is politics, religion, philosophy, music, etc. The totality of Hegelian society is such that its principle is simultaneously immanent to it and transcendent of it, but it never coincides in itself with any determinate reality of society itself. That is why the Hegelian totality may be said to be endowed with a unity of a 'spiritual' type in which each element is pars totalis, and

14 Ibid., p. 103.

in which the visible spheres are merely the alienated and restored unfolding of the said internal principle. In other words, there is nothing to justify the identification (even as an inversion) of the Hegelian totality's type of unity and the Marxist totality's type of unity".¹⁵

Those who mistakenly consider the Marxian totality an inversion of the Hegelian totality believe that while in the Hegelian totality, the ideological sphere is the essence and the other spheres its epiphenomena, in the Marxian totality, on the other hand the economic level is the essence and the political and ideological levels its epiphenomena. Marxists who are truer to Hegel, like Lukacs do not make the superstructure into a phenomenon of the base but instead conceptualize both the superstructure and the base as the objectification of one principle. As Lukacs states, "...the commodity structure...penetrate(s) society in all its aspects and...remould(s) it in its own image."¹⁶

As we saw, the Hegelian unity is a multiplication of simples. In contrast, the Marxist totality is a complex unity wherein elements which are different from each other form a unity. "...the unity discussed by Marxism is the unity of the complexity itself".¹⁷ When we speak of complexity here, we do

15 Ibid., p. 204.

16 G. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness (London, 1983), p. 85.

17 L. Althusser, FM, op. cit., p. 202.

not mean "...either a simple irreducible unit or an unorganized population of units (such as molecules of a gas) or a dis-organized diversity (such as a cart of rubbish)." ¹⁸ Rather "...the sphere of complexity is that of organized diversity, of the organization of diversity". ¹⁹ Notice that we have to discuss two questions here, (a) that of the diversity of the elements that make up a complex totality, and (b) that of the organization of these diverse elements into a complex unity.

As regards the first issue, Althusser postulates the irreducibility of the distinctness of the economic, political and ideological practices and grounds the multiplicity of contradictions, "...some of which are radically heterogeneous - of different origins, different sense, different levels and points of application" ²⁰ in the irreducible distinctness of these practices.

II

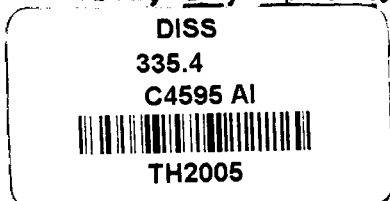
Althusser's Concept of Practice as Production

Althusser puts forward his concept of 'practice as a production' against the reductionist concepts of 'practice

18 E. Morin, "Complexity" in International Social Science Journal, vol. 26, no. 4, 1974, p. 558.

19 Ibid.

20 Althusser, FM, op cit., p. 100.



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as an expression or a reflection'. A practice is not the passive reflection or expression of a reality or real essence external to it. All practices have a structure of a production and in each practice is produced its own reality. Knowledge is not the result of a reflection of the real, and politics and ideology are not the reflections or shadows of the economy. The concept of practice is also not opposed to the concept of structure in the sense that subjectivity / will / voluntarism is opposed to objectivity. "The political and ideological are equated with the class struggle, i.e. practice, which results in the disappearance of the juridico-political structure of the state and the ideological; the economy is equated with the structure, which involves the disappearance of the economic class struggle."²¹ All practices are objective and structured. Althusser is also opposed to the ideological conception of practice which defines it as 'practice in general' as opposed to theory. In this conception all practices are assimilated in a general practice called 'historical practice'.²² For Althusser, however, all practices are distinct from each other and irreducible to each other. What distinguishes the practices from each other is that each practice has its own distinct raw material, employs a distinct means of production and produces a distinct product. The Marxist totality "contains

21 N. Poulantzas, Political Power and Social Classes (PPSC) (London, Verso Edition, 1982), p. 89.

22 L. Althusser, ^{+ E. Balibar,} Reading Capital (RC) (London, Verso Edition, 1979), p. 134.

different levels or instances which do not directly express one another";²³ hence, they cannot be reduced to a general historical practice.'

Althusser distinguishes four distinct practices which are irreducible to each other - economic practice, political practice, ideological practice and theoretical practice. However all these practices share a formal unity and the following definition applies to all of them: "By practice in general I shall mean any process of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of 'production'). In any practice thus conceived, the determinant moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the labour of transformation itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilising the means."²⁴

Ideological Practice

There is a basic defining feature of ideology that is common to all particular ideologies: ideology, in general, is a practice that produces or constitutes individuals as

23 Ibid., p. 132.

24 Althusser, FM, op. cit., pp. 166-7.

subjects. In a deeply unconscious manner, women and men become subjects in and subject to ideologies. As this practice, ideology slides into all human activity, it is identical with the lived experience of human existence itself. "This 'lived' experience is not a given, given by a pure 'reality', but the spontaneous 'lived experience' of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real".²⁵ Ideology produces or constitutes subjectivities through the mechanism of interpellation which has a specular or mirror like structure; it is as if an image presented to an individual in a mirror from an external source is taken by the individual to be his or her reflection whereas actually the individual is formed as a subject under the subjection of that image. Since all individuals live in the mode of subjectivity, the ideological relation is the form in which the subject lives its relation to the world and to itself. Ideology is the imaginary relation through which women and men live or are related to their real conditions of existence.²⁶ In 'Marxism and Humanism' at one point, Althusser had defined an ideology as a system of representations - that is, as images, myths, ideas and concepts.²⁷ His alteration of this definition to the position that ideology is a real

25 L. Althusser, Essays on Ideology (London, Verso Edition, 1984), p. 175.

26 See *ibid.*, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", pp. 36-39.

27 Althusser, EM, op. cit., p. 231.

relation instead of a representation grounds Marx's belief that an ideology can never be dissipated by a mere knowledge of it.

To become a 'subject' means to acquire a consciousness of oneself as someone who freely chooses her or his ideas, goals and values. However, Althusser believes that these ideas and goals do not originate from the so-called subject but from 'elsewhere', so that the so called free subject is actually, although unconsciously, subjected to them. Ideologies which form subjectivities are derived from 'Ideological State Apparatuses' in which they are realized. Althusser's thesis of the materiality of ideology stresses the existence of Ideological State Apparatuses. Not only is ideology material in the sense of 'ideas' being materialized in actions; or being a real relation instead of a representation, but also in the sense of existing in Ideological State Apparatuses. "...an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material."²⁸ We can cite Althusser's own example of the political ideological state apparatus of the bourgeoisie presupposing "a complete material and regimented set of devices - from the electoral roll, the ballot paper and the voting booth to the election campaigns and to the resulting parliaments".²⁹

28 L. Althusser, Essays on Ideology, op. cit., p. 40.

29 L. Althusser in the 'Appendix : Extracts from Althusser's 'Note on the ISAs' to Mike Gane, On the ISAs episode, Economy and Society, vol. 12, no. 4, 1983, p. 460.

Althusser tentatively lists many Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs): the educational ISA, the religious ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the media and communication ISA, the political ISA, the sports ISA and the art and culture ISA. Althusser holds that since production cannot exist unless it reproduces its conditions of existence and the ISAs are essential for this reproduction to take place, therefore "no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the ISAs",³⁰ specially as the ruling ideology serves the ruling class not only in its rule over the exploited class but in its own constitution of itself as a ruling class. This anti-reductionist argument asserts what was the presupposition of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, that ideologies do not automatically change as a result of a transformation in the relations of production. Althusser states categorically that "a revolution in the structure does not ipso facto modify the existing superstructures and particularly the ideologies at one below"³¹ and that therefore it is necessary to struggle against or within ISAs as Lenin struggled to revolutionize the educational ISA. Ideological struggle is not a struggle to change ideas, it is a struggle to change certain institutional structures and

30 L Althusser, Essays on Ideology, op. cit., p. 20.

31 L. Althusser, FM, op. cit., p. 115.

social practices. Another illustration of the specific effectivity of the ideological instance is provided by Perry Anderson's critique of Gramsci's distinction between repression and ideology as the domain of the State and civil society respectively. Anderson argues that the State in the sense of the political apparatus of parliamentary democracy functions massively by ideology - the ideology of representing all the citizens who have had the freedom to vote.³²

Ideologies are realized in and exist in ISAs. However, they "are not 'born' in the ISAs but from the social classes at grips in the class struggle: from their conditions of existence, their practices, their experience of the struggle, etc."³³ Here, perhaps, though on the one hand, Althusser asserts the specific effectivity of the ISAs and the ideological instance and indicates the necessity of class struggle within the ideological instance, on the other hand, he still maintains that "particular ideologies...always express class positions".³⁴ Some critics like P.Q. Hirst claim that the avoidance of reductionism would first of all mean the rejection of ideology as a representation (that people have) of an imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence. "Ideology is not a

32 See P. Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci", New Left Review, no. 100, November 1976-January 1977.

33 L. Althusser, Essays on Ideology, op. cit., p. 60.

34 Ibid., p. 33.

distorted representation of real relations but rather a real relation itself, namely the relation through which human beings live the relation to their world."³⁵ Hirst seems to hold that the ideological relation is the only relation that a subject can have to his or her world, so that the distinction between the 'relation' through which human beings live the 'RELATION' to their world which presupposes both a real relation and an imaginary lived relation is invalid. However, it still remains true that men and women hold different positions in the structure of the relations of production. Does this distribution have an effect only in the economic instance or in the other instances as well; if the latter, how (in a non-reductionist manner)?

Another question that arises here is that of the 'falseness' of ideology. To take the example given by Althusser, the political system as an ideological state apparatus functions by ideology not only in the sense that voters accept the rules and practise them without being forced to do so, but also in the sense of "the fiction corresponding to a 'particular' reality, whereby the components of this system, as well as the principle of its mode of functioning, are based on the ideology of the 'freedom' and 'equality' of the voting individual, on the 'free choice' of the people's representatives by the individuals who 'make up' the people, notably by dint of the

35. J. B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge, 1984)

idea which each individual makes for himself of the politics to be pursued by the State".³⁶ The ideological political system functions on the basis of this fiction, since the politics of the State are ultimately determined by the interests of its ruling class in the class struggle. Thus, though the proletarian ideology is an ideology in the sense that just as all ideologies address individuals as subjects, proletarian ideology also addresses individuals as 'combatant - subjects'; however, it is an ideology which is based on 'objective knowledge' and the experiences of the proletariat, it is "imbued with historical experiences which are illuminated by the scientific principles of analysis".³⁷

Political Practice

What is political practice or political action and what distinguishes it from other practices? In answering these questions, Althusser points out that the object of the Marxist political practice of the class struggle is the 'current situation'. Political practice seeks to transform social relations by acting on the structured current situation. The modality of the object of political practice is that of a current existence or of a concrete present; the structured

36 L. Althusser, Appendix : Extracts from Althusser's "Note on the ISAs", op. cit., p. 458.

37 Ibid., p. 463.

currency of the situation defines political practice as such.

However, Poulantzas points out that to define political practice by its object - the present moment or conjuncture or the nodal point at which the contradictions of a social formation are condensed is insufficient to emphasize its specificity; in this formulation, a possibility remains of "identifying everything which transforms a given unity as political".³⁸ This is similar to the historicist conception in which the field of the political includes "not a particular structural level and a specific practice but, in general, the 'dynamic/diachronic' aspect of every element, belonging to any level of the structures or practices of a social formation... [This conception] leads to the ideological variant voluntarism/economism."³⁹ Therefore Poulantzas claims that the specificity of political practice depends on its having State power as its objective. In his essay on 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser also states that "the whole of the political class struggle revolves around the State".⁴⁰ The objective of the political class struggle is State power, because the State has the global function of maintaining the

38 N. Poulantzas, PPSC, op. cit., p. 42.

39 Ibid., p. 38.

40 L. Althusser, Essays on Ideology, op. cit., p. 14.

unity of a social formation, thus ensuring the continuation of the domination of the ruling classes. The State is the cohesive factor of a formations unity -- that is why the basic question of every revolution is that of State power. Thus the specific 'effectivity' of the political is asserted, and consequently also that of the practice (i.e. political practice) which acts on the political level. To bring about a revolution the proletariat will need to seize State power and then smash the bourgeois State apparatus.

Althusser differentiates the State apparatus from State power. "... [The State apparatus] may survive political events which affect the possession of State power".⁴¹ Althusser gives the example of the survival of the bourgeois State apparatus even after the seizure of State power by the revolutionary class in 1917 in Russia. In this way, again, the specific 'effectivity' of the political practice is asserted. Lenin, too, argued that "opportunism is not characterized by a refusal to talk about the conquest of State power, or about the need for the workers to take political power... [Opportunism admits] that this is necessary, but without talking about the class nature of the State apparatus, therefore without talking about the absolute necessity for the proletariat to destroy the bourgeois State apparatus...."⁴²

41 Ibid., p. 14.

42 E. Balibar, On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat (London, 1977), pp. 89-90.

Political practice is an irreplaceable real practice which 'makes' 'inevitable' revolutions. Unlike theoretical practice in which a successful or unsuccessful revolution is encountered as a theoretical object, as necessity's fait accompli, political practice whose object is the present conjuncture and which acts on concrete history has the task of achieving this necessity. Thus, Althusser asserts, theoretical practice never supersedes the reality of political practice.⁴³

Economic Practice

"The site of the true determination of the economic [is] production."⁴⁴ Economic practice, the social production of use values, takes place within a structure made up of the labour process and the relations of production. The labour process includes three elements: "... (1) the personal activity of man, or labour, strictly speaking; (2) the object on which that labour acts; (3) the means with which it acts.... The labour-power of men who, using defined instruments of labour according to adequate (technical) rules, transform the object of labour (either a natural material or an already worked material or raw material) into a useful product."⁴⁵ Althusser

43 Althusser, FM, op. cit., pp. 178-80.

44 Althusser, ^{+ Balibar} RC, op. cit., p. 168.

45 Ibid., p. 170.

follows Marx here in stressing that 'labour is not the source of all wealth' since nature in the form of raw materials is just as necessary for the production of use values. Marx is able to produce a non-idealist concept of the economy and of production by emphasizing the material conditions of the labour process, i.e., the forces or means of production. This emphasis is evident when Marx, as against Adam Smith, pointed out that the reproduction of the material conditions of the labour process is indispensable to the existence of that process. Thus Marx produced the 'operational concept' of Department I where productive consumption or the reproduction of the conditions of production (raw materials and instruments like machines and tools) on a simple or extended basis takes place.

In Marx's materialist conception of the economy, the overwhelming importance of the means of production is also clear from the claim that it is the relationship that economic agents have to the means of production that determines the relationship that they have with each other. In all production systems there exist certain relationships between the means of production and human beings: the relationship of real or material appropriation and that of property ownership. A person can own certain means of production as her or his property or can have the ability, as a direct producer, to set to work the means of social production. This relationship

between the means of production and the producers determines the relationship that the producers have with each other - in a capitalist mode of production, for example, the worker only owns her or his labour power; she or he does not have the ability to set to work the means of social production nor does she or he own or control any means of production. Since the capitalist owns the means of production, the worker enters into a wage relationship with the capitalist. Therefore relations of production are not merely relations between persons but first and foremost relations between persons and things. To be a member of an economic class is to have a certain relationship with the means of production.

III

Since the distinctness and specific 'effectivity' of the economic, political and ideological instances from each other is asserted in any mode of production, all historical conjunctures are defined with reference to an ensemble of economic, political and ideological determinations none of which is the reflection of an / other but has an origin in its own domain. Similarly a social class is not defined with reference only to the relations of production, nor is a social class an effect of one particular structural level on another structural level, i.e., an effect of the economic structure on the political or ideological structure. Social

classes manifest themselves "as the global effect of the structures in the field of social relations".⁴⁶ It is important to keep the different instances distinct, otherwise one mistakes a change in one instance to be automatically a change in another instance - as Barry Hindess accuses Bettelheim of doing when the latter argues that certain political relations in the Soviet state apparatus were an indication of capitalist relations of production in the economy. Instead of conflating the political and the economic, the correct position would have been to investigate whether "a displacement of relations at the political level effects the specific conditions of the class struggle in which the transformation of economic relations may be a possible outcome".⁴⁷

The practices are relatively autonomous from each other: "the socialist infrastructure has been able to develop without essential damage during this period of errors affecting the superstructure";⁴⁸ on the other hand the practices also constitute each other's conditions of existence. The political and ideological structures are autonomous but

46 N. Poulantzas, PPSC, op. cit., p. 64.

47 B. Hindess, "Introduction", in C. Bettelheim, Economic Calculation and Forms of Property (London, 1976), p. 19.

48 L. Althusser, EM, op. cit., p. 240.

not external to the economy, rather they are the latter's conditions of existence and are necessarily present in the constitution and reproduction of the relations of production: for example, "The buying and selling of labour power in which capitalist relations of production exist, directly presupposes ...a consideration of the formal legal relations...as well as a whole political and ideological superstructure".⁴⁹

So we come to the conclusion that although the distinctness or irreducibility or relative autonomy of each practice is stressed, this does not mean that each practice is an "essentially autonomous instance composed of elements that remain constant, whatever the mode of production..."⁵⁰ It is erroneous to think of the different practices as if each of them was an 'already constituted essence' or "an instance that was by nature or essence autonomous and possessing immutable boundaries and as if that instance carried within itself the laws of its own historical reproduction".⁵¹

We have reached a basic methodological principle followed by Althusser - that the essence of any object lies

⁴⁹ L. Althusser, ^{→ E. Balibar} RC, op. cit., pp. 177-8.'

⁵⁰ N. Poulantzas, State, Power, Socialism (London: Verso Edition, 1980), p. 18.'

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 19.'

not within it but in a sense outside it in the relationships which constitute it. We have also come to our second question - 'that of the organization of diverse elements into a complex unity'.⁵² The above ideas are encapsulated by Althusser in his concept of 'structural causality'. What is structural causality? which kind of relational model does it suggest? what kind of relations exist between instances in any mode of production -- these are questions which will be taken up in the next chapter.

52 See p. 23.

CHAPTER III

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THE NOTION OF CAUSALITY IN ALTHUSSER

The last chapter dealt with the first of the two questions raised there - that of the complexity of a mode of production; in this chapter will be taken up the second question, i. e. that of the kind of causality that can be ascribed to a mode of production. This chapter will thus deal with Althusser's analysis of such causation in terms of the concepts of 'overdetermination' and 'structural causality'. Althusser opposes these concepts to ^{the} two alternative models of mechanical causality and expressive causality. First, we shall deal with the model of mechanical (linear or transitive) causation which studies causal relations between elements. We will then show how the theory of mechanical causality has no conception of a whole as a cause of its parts, this type of causality is instead exemplified in Hegel's theory of the 'expressive whole'. We will elucidate the model of expressive causality and its criticism by Althusser, and discuss Althusser's own position on causation: against both the models of an element or an expressive whole as a cause, he proposes the model of a 'structure' as a cause -- structural causality studies "the determination of either an element or a structure

by a structure".¹

I

Linear Causality

In philosophy, the model of linear causality has an important representative in David Hume. We shall discuss his position, its development by J.S. Mill as well as J.L. Mackie's attempt in the 1970s² to refine and defend this position. We will concentrate on two problems with this position --

- (a) The reduction of 'laws of nature' to constant conjunction by both Humean as well as Mackie's counterfactual analyses of causation.
- (b) The inability of the regularity theory of causation to think causation by a whole of its parts.

(a) Causal Necessity

(i) Hume

Hume's theory of causation is often referred to as 'the regularity theory of causation'. Hume argued that an analysis of our ideas -- which are copies of our sense impressions -- revealed that our idea of causation was derived

1 Louis Althusser and E. Balibar, Reading Capital (RC) (London: Verso Edition, 1979), p. 188.

2 J.L. Mackie, The Cement of the Universe - A Study of Causation (Oxford, 1980).

from our sense impression of the constant conjunction of events. We, for example, always experienced the sensation of burning when we put our hand in fire. Given that ideas are only copies of impressions, our idea of causation could only be that of constant conjunction because that is all we experience or have a sense impression of.³ According to the dominant interpretation of Hume, he held invalid the identification of causation with 'necessity in nature' because he held that we cannot have any experience of the latter. Hume defined 'necessity' as "rational a priori inference"⁴ from the cause to the effect. Such inferences were grounded on a claim to the knowledge of the intrinsic nature or power of things. Hume thought that ordinarily when we say that C caused E we mean that due to our knowledge of the intrinsic character of C and E we can make deductively valid a priori causal inferences, i.e. Es following C is knowable a priori. Therefore the sequence is not merely observable but intelligible. However, Hume, as a radical empiricist, questioned our knowledge of the intrinsic character of things on the grounds that the latter were unobservable, hence not knowable. If this is the case, it follows that we can never observe causality in an individual case: however, we still

3 J.P. Wright, The Sceptical Realism of David Hume (Manchester, 1983), chapter 4.

4 J.L. Mackie, op. cit., p. 11.

make causal ascriptions in individual cases. Our singular causal propositions are in fact supported by universal generalizations. The "instanting of a universal generalization ... was supposed to supply what could not be observed in the individual case".⁵ It was assumed that true singular causal statements are derived from such inductively believed universalities. As an example, suppose that a single case of a billiard ball A hitting another billiard ball B and causing the latter to move is observed. According to Hume, a judgement of causality in this case cannot be based on the intrinsic character of A and B since that is not observable. Therefore, if this sequence is still called a causal sequence, the ascription of causality can only be based on a universal generalization of the form that whenever A hits B, B moves. Althusser's definition of linear causality as such "that the necessity of its [the cause effect relation's] immanence could be grasped completely in the sequence of a given",⁶ not only fits this example but is also surely similar to Hume's conclusion that all that we should mean when we ascribe causation is regular succession, i.e. when we say that C caused E, all that we mean is that event E followed event C; or in other words, "we may define a cause to be an object, followed by another, and where all objects similar

5 G.E.M. Anscombe, "Causality and Determination", in E. Sosa, ed., Causation and Conditionals (London, 1975), p. 69.

6 Althusser and Balibar, RC, p. 182.

to the first are followed by objects similar to the second".⁷

However, in some cases even where an event is followed by another, we do not call that sequence causal, as for example, when one song is followed by another in a record, or when day is followed by night. Thus there are some constant conjunctions which we do not wish to describe as causal; they could either be accidental regularities (as in the first example) or the common effects of a common cause (as in the second example). As a response to this problem J.L. Mackie argues that our distinction between causal and non-causal sequences is neither based on regular succession or constant conjunction, nor on deductively valid a priori causal inferences; rather it is based on contrary to fact conditionals.⁸

(ii) Counterfactual Analyses of Causation

A counterfactual analysis of causation (which is also implied by Hume's other words: "if the first object

7 David Hume, quoted in J.P. Wright, op. cit., p. 130.

8 J.L. Mackie, The Cement of the Universe, op. cit., ch. 2. A contrary to fact conditional or a counterfactual is a conditional proposition whose antecedent is known to be false. Counterfactual analysis is a part of modal logic.

had not been, the second never had existed",⁹ suggests that when we say that C caused E we mean that C occurred and E occurred and in the circumstances E would not have occurred if C had not. For instance, in the following example, of the two sequences A and B,¹⁰—A: A chestnut is stationary on a flat stone. I swing a hammer down so that it strikes the chestnut directly from above. The chestnut becomes distinctly flatter than before.

B: A chestnut is stationary on a hot sheet of iron. I swing a hammer down so that it strikes the chestnut directly from above. At the very instant that the hammer touches it, the chestnut explodes with a loud pop and its fragments are scattered around.

Only in the case of A do we think of the hammer blow as the cause because in this case we can say that, in the circumstances, the chestnut would not have become flatter if the hammer had not struck it. As regards B, we cannot say that in the circumstances, the chestnut would not have exploded if the hammer had not struck it. Thus a causal

9 David Hume quoted in J.L. Mackie, "The Cement of the Universe", op. cit. Hume's full definition is as follows: "...we may define a cause to be an object, followed by another, and where all objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second, or in other words where if the first object had not been the second never had existed."

10 J.L. Mackie, The Cement of the Universe, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

ascription is a counterfactual claim of necessity ("X is necessary in the circumstances for and causally prior to Y provided that if X were kept out of the world in the circumstances referred to and the world ran on from there, Y would not occur"),¹¹ which requires "assertions about how the world would have run on if something different had been done : [it] involves thought about the independent running of a merely possible world".¹² A causal sequence can be distinguished from a non-causal sequence not only by a necessary conditional but also by a sufficient conditional; the latter must however use a strong sense of sufficiency as a weak sense of sufficiency is not adequate for the purpose. A weak sense of sufficiency has the form: Given the circumstances, if X occurs, then Y will. Taking our earlier example of the two sequences A and B, in both, A: Given the circumstances, if the hammer struck it, the chestnut would become flatter.

B: Given the circumstances, if the hammer struck it, the chestnut would explode.

the consequent follows from the antecedent even though in B the hammer blow is not the cause of the chestnut exploding. Thus a weak sense of sufficiency cannot discriminate between

11 J.L. Mackie, The Cement of the Universe, op. cit., p. 51.

12 Ibid., p. 52.

causal and non-causal sequences. A strong sense of sufficiency has the form: Given the circumstances, if Y had not been going to occur, X would not have occurred: Taking the same example Mackie writes: "In the appropriate possible world in which the circumstances are the same as in sequence A; but the chestnut does not become flatter, the hammer blow has not occurred....And we cannot say the corresponding thing about the non-causal sequence B. The statement: 'If in the circumstances of sequence B the explosion had not been going to occur, the hammer blow would not have occurred', is not true or even acceptable. The supposition implicit in its antecedent cannot be coherently considered in the light of the actual world's laws of working for, given these laws, in the circumstances of sequence B the explosion was going to occur".¹³

Thus counterfactuals are used to define causality. In fact, according to Mackie, we attribute causality to objects not because we have observed many instances of E following C (as Hume said) but because we have observed a contrast case - on which we base our counterfactuals -- where the absence or non-occurrence of C has been followed by an absence or non-occurrence of E.

¹³ Ibid., p. 40.

However, counterfactual conditions are still grounded in the corresponding regularities as is evident when it is stated that it is reasonable to assert some counterfactuals rather than others, because only some counterfactuals are sustained by laws of nature. Mackie gives an example of two counterfactuals:¹⁴

- (a) 'If this bit of potassium had been exposed to air, it would have burst into flame', and
- (b) "If this bit of potassium had been exposed to air, it would have turned into gold",

and states that it is reasonable to assert counterfactual (a) and not (b) because only the former has a basis in a law of nature: 'Potassium when in contact with oxygen, ignites'. As Nelson Goodman points out, in the case of an empirical counterfactual, the consequent of the counterfactual "seldom follows from the antecedent by logic alone".¹⁵ In the case of another example of a counterfactual of the form, 'If that match had been struck, it would have lighted', Goodman writes that "even after the particular relevant conditions are specified, the connection obtaining will not ordinarily be a logical one. The principle that permits inference of

14 Ibid., p. 199.

15 In W.S. Sellars, "Counterfactuals" in E. Sosa, ed., Causation and Conditionals, op. cit., p. 126.

That match lights

from

That match is scratched. That match is dry enough.

Enough oxygen is present. Etc.

is not a law of logic but what we call a natural or physical or causal law".¹⁶

If, however, laws of nature are taken to be no more than descriptions of contingent and actual states of affairs, then the argument becomes circular: A causal sequence differs from a non causal sequence because it can support counterfactuals. Counterfactual conditionals themselves can only be grounded in laws of nature and not in contingent actual universals. If laws of nature are nothing but descriptions of contingent actual universalities, then we have to begin anew our search for a basis of the distinction between causal and non causal sequences. It is thus important to clear about our conception of laws of nature because these "necessary relation(s) of the actual world"¹⁷ bear not only on the problem of the

16 Ibid., p. 127.

17 T.A. Climo, and P.G.A. Howells, "Possible Worlds in Historical Explanation", History and Theory, vol. 15, no. 1, 1976, p. 11.

connection of the consequent to the antecedent in a counterfactual but also on a further question - raised by Jon Elster¹⁸ -- of the 'legitimacy' of the antecedent. Elster argues that all counterfactuals in general and historical counterfactuals in particular must be about a possible world or state which is not seen as "possible tout court but as possible relatively to a given (actual) state."¹⁹ About the following counterfactual, 'If it had not been for slavery, the G.N.P. of the US South in 1860 would have been twice as high as it actually was',²⁰ Elster writes that: "This statement would not be assertable if a non-slave South could stem from a branching point no later than, say, 1750, whereas a GNP of the required size would require counterfactual changes going back to 1700".²¹ Thus the possible world in which there is no slavery in the US South must be constructed keeping the actual world in mind. Given the circumstances of the actual world, one can construct a possible world of a non slave South from 1750 but not before that. So any antecedent which supposes the latter is illegitimate. Mackie gives us a hint of this problem in his exposition of sufficiency in the strong sense when he

18 J. Elster, Logic and Society - Contradictions and Possible World (Chichester, 1978), ch. 6.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., p. 191.

21 Ibid. p. 191

writes: "The supposition implicit in its antecedent cannot be coherently considered in the light of the actual world's laws of working...."²² The same issue is taken up by Climo and Howells in their attempt to solve the impasse of traditional counterfactual analysis by proposing that, of any two counterfactuals -- for example, (i) 'if not c then not e' and (ii) 'if not e then not c' -- only that counterfactual will be considered valid which supposes a possible world that is least distant from the actual world. "Since what we relinquish in positing a possible world is the actual world, deprivation value measures our evaluation of the extent of the departure. The extent of the departure is a combination of the relationships forgone between events and laws. [The world with the lowest deprivation value] is closer, because in any understanding of closeness, a possible world which preserves a necessary relation of the actual world is closer to actuality than a possible world which does not."²³ We notice that both in the case of general statements of laws of nature and in the case of particular events in history, counterfactual analysis takes recourse to 'the working of the actual world'.

(iii) Causal Necessity

How do we understand 'laws of nature', the 'necessary relations of the actual world', 'the working of the actual

22 See supra p. 45.

23 Climo and Howells, op. cit., p. 11.

world', etc. Hume tried to do away with the concept of natural necessity by arguing that causality was nothing but a constant conjunction of events. Since constant conjunction could not distinguish causal regularities from accidental regularities, philosophers like Mackie turned to a counterfactual theory of causality. However, we found that the counterfactual theory is also grounded in laws of nature - since it assumes the presence of laws of nature, it cannot be used to distinguish laws of nature from accidental regularities. Realist philosophers of science like Roy Bhaskar²⁴ think that laws of nature are distinguished by just that characteristic - 'natural necessity' -- which Hume rejected. Natural necessity is the attribute of "real structures, mechanisms and systems of relations at work in nature (and society) providing the ontological basis of causal laws".²⁵ Roy Bhaskar argues that given any invariant sequence, a scientist constructs explanatory models of causal mechanisms that may be responsible for the invariance. After the successful testing of one such model we may then be said to have knowledge of natural necessity a posteriori, since "it is in the working of [causal] mechanisms that the objective basis of our ascriptions of natural necessity lies".²⁶ This analysis of necessity

24 See R. Bhaskar, A Realist Theory of Science (Sussex, 1978), edn. 2; and The Possibility of Naturalism (Sussex, 1979).

25 R. Bhaskar, A Realist Theory of Science, op. cit.,

26 Ibid., p. 12.

as an attribute of causal mechanisms/properties/powers of things would be able to fit in Althusser's conceptions about such matters²⁷ except that Althusser lays much more emphasis on the acquisition of a property/essence/causal power of anything due to its relations with other elements.

(b) 'Relation' in Mechanical Causality

(i) Complex Regularities

Coming back to the regularity theory of causality we see that if a law of nature is still taken to be nothing but a universal proposition about some regularity, then perhaps one line of defence could be to improve the conception of this kind of a universal proposition.

So far we have been studying causation in terms of a single cause; now we will consider causation in terms of a plurality of causal factors. The latter can either take the form of compound causation or of multiple causation. These kinds of causation were discussed by J.S. Mill²⁸ who, after stating "It is seldom, if ever, between a consequent and a single antecedent that this invariable sequence subsists",²⁹

27 See L. Althusser, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx : Politics and History (London: Verso Edition, 1982), p. 20.

28 J.S. Mill, A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation, J.M. Robson, ed. (Toronto, 1978). Book III of Vol VII

29 Ibid. p.327

took note of assemblages of conditions (conjunctive antecedents or minimal sufficient conditions, which we are calling compound causation) and of plurality of causes (disjunctive antecedents, which we are calling multiple causation).

Mackie illustrated these concepts by giving an example of a short circuit being cited as the cause of a fire in a house.³⁰ By itself the short circuit is not sufficient for the fire. However the presence of inflammable material, the absence of a fire extinguisher (this is a counteracting cause which would oppose or negate the effect of the short circuit) and the short circuit together form a conjunctive antecedent or a compound cause which is sufficient for the fire. This antecedent is a minimal sufficient condition because none of its factors are redundant for the effect.

The short circuit is also not necessary for the fire as there can be many other such minimal sufficient conditions which could have caused the fire. These disjunctive antecedents provide for multiple causation where C and D are each sufficient and hence neither necessary for the effect. Multiple causation or what Michael Scriven calls overdetermination can be of various kinds: independent overdetermination if C brings about the effect before D can, although D would have in time; simultaneous overdetermination if both C and D bring about

³⁰ J.L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions", in E. Sosa, ed., Causation and Conditionals, op. cit.

the effect simultaneously; and linked overdetermination where the multiple causes C and D are not independent; "the circumstances are such that the very act of preventing C from occurring will bring about D which will itself cause E.... Suppose a radical group attempts a coup d'etat; the effort is watched attentively by the army which will take action if the coup is unsuccessful but not otherwise".³¹

Coming back to our example of the short circuit the latter is an indispensable part of the conjunctive antecedent - without it the other factors of the complex condition could not have caused the fire. So "the short circuit which is said to have caused the fire is thus an indispensable part of a complex sufficient (but not necessary) condition of the fire... the cause is...an Insufficient but Necessary part of a condition which is itself Unnecessary but Sufficient for the result".³² Mackie further introduces the concept of a causal field which we use to demarcate causes from standing conditions. Causal statements are made in a context and this context presupposes the normal running on of the circumstances in which the event occurred. For example, since it is normal for people to light cigarettes in a residential flat, but a gas leak is abnormal, we would rather ascribe the causation

31 M. Scriven, "Defects of the Necessary Condition Analysis of Causation", in E. Sosa, Causation and Conditionals, op. cit., p. 46.

32 ^{In short, an INUS condition} J.L. Mackie, Causes and Conditions, op. cit., p. 16.

of an explosion in the flat to the gas leak than to the lighting of a cigarette. Moreover the concept of a causal field enables us to find a cause sufficient in relation to the intended field, otherwise it might be impossible to find a genuinely sufficient condition "without including in the cause the whole environment, the whole prior state of the universe",³³ for any event. For instance, in the case of the short circuit causing the fire, "it may be hard to find even a complex condition which was absolutely sufficient for this fire because we should have to include, as one of the negative conjuncts, such as item as the earth's not being destroyed by a nuclear explosion just after the occurrence of the suggested INUS condition; but it is easy and reasonable to say simply that such an explosion would...take us outside the field in which we are considering this effect".³⁴

Hence, some disjunction of conjunction of factors some of which may be negative, is both necessary and sufficient for the effect in the field in question. This is the full cause. However, when we speak of something as a cause we usually mean an INUS condition or an individual instance of an INUS condition. If $ABC\bar{C}$ and $DEF\bar{F}$ and $GHK\bar{K}$ are assemblages of conditions and $(ABC\bar{C} \text{ or } DEF\bar{F} \text{ or } GHK\bar{K})$ is the full cause then an example of what we typically call a cause o& the INUS

33 Ibid., p. 23.

34 Ibid., p. 24.

condition, will be any member of a conjunctive antecedent, depending on the causal field.

Thus causal regularities are shown to be complex; moreover, since we do not know all the co-causal factors or all the disjuncts, these kinds of complex regularities as known are typically incomplete - they have the form, "All F (A ... B ... or D ... \bar{H} ... or ...) are P and all FP are (A ... B ... or D ... \bar{H} ... or)"³⁵ - what we know are certain elliptical or gappy universal propositions.

(ii) 'Relation' in Mechanical Causality

To point out the weaknesses - mainly the inability to show the causation of parts by a whole - of the model of linear causality, we will follow the strategy of seeing how the above analysis of complex regularities bears on Marxist social explanation. Let us suppose that an event in the political sphere, for example, a revolution or a particular kind of State is to be explained. To the question, 'why did the revolution take place?' some Marxists would answer that the revolution occurred because it was preceded by certain events of an economic nature.³⁶ This could either mean that

35 J.L. Mackie, The Cement of the Universe, op. cit., p. 66.

36 This precedence need not be of a temporal nature. It could be a logical precedence as in the example of a hand moving a pen to write on a page. Both the movement of the hand (cause) and the writing on the page (effect) are simultaneous. This cause is not temporally but logically prior to the effect. See R. Taylor, "The Metaphysics of Causation", in E. Sosa, ed., Causation and Conditionals, op. cit.

their description of the intrinsic nature of the economic events and the political event led them to make an a priori assertion of the revolution as an effect of the economic events or that the explanatory character of the precedence statement and the corresponding counterfactual (if the events in the economic sphere had not taken place, the revolution would not have occurred) are grounded in a generalization of the form 'whenever A, then B'. However, simple generalizations of this form are usually false, or if true, then not explanatory. A solution could be to consider an elliptical universal proposition stating a complex regularity of the form $(PE\bar{I})^{37}$ or $P_1E_1\bar{I}_1$ or $P_2E_2 \dots$ or $P_3 \dots$ or \dots) cause event e in the field F. Here we have already assumed that along with the economy, a political event as well as an ideological event can act as a cause. Together $PE\bar{I}$ constitute a minimal sufficient condition for the effect, i.e. P by itself or E by itself or \bar{I} by itself would not have been sufficient for the effect. Thus $PE\bar{I}$ is an example of a compound cause. Here it should be noted that there can be varying conceptions of what $(PE\bar{I})$ as a cause signifies. On one interpretation, the presence of P, the presence of E and the absence of I are independent of each other. P happens to be present, so does

37 P stands for a political event, E for an economic event and \bar{I} for the absence of a state of affairs in the ideological instance.

E, I happens to be absent and together they cause the result, as for example, "Classical economics reasons from independent 'factors' whose interaction 'may' induce such and such a result".³⁸ This kind of compound causation which employs the category of 'relation' externally after the causal factors are present is what is suggested by Mill's conjunctive antecedents.

II

Althusserian Overdetermination and Conjunctive Antecedents

Complex or compound causation has been analysed by Althusser through the concept of overdetermination. We saw earlier that the concept of overdetermination was used to denote multiple causation where both causes A and B are each sufficient for the effect. Althusser however uses the concept of overdetermination to define not multiple causation but compound or complex causal conditions where neither causes A and B are sufficient by themselves for the effect. Althusser's use of 'overdetermination' and other related concepts like 'condensation' and 'displacement' owes much to their presence in Freud's explanation of dreams. I think, therefore, it is important to take a detour via Freud's 'The Interpretation of Dreams'³⁹ before discussing Althusserian overdetermination

38 Althusser and Balibar, RC, op. cit., p. 289.

39 S. Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (Pelican Book, 1976).

because that will help us to better understand the latter⁴⁰ and prevent us from confusing the latter with Mill's conjunctive antecedents.

(i) Freud

For Freud, a dream is constructed through the processes of the dream work: the dream thoughts which are the material of which a dream is made are transformed through the processes of condensation and displacement of the dream work into the dream content.

A dream is a highly compressed or condensed form of the dream thoughts. An analysis of the elements of a dream leads by many associative chains to numerous dream thoughts all of which are active during the formation of the dream. Each element of a dream does not lead to only one dream thought, neither is each dream thought represented by a separate element in the dream. On the contrary, each element in the dream is associated with many dream thoughts and a particular dream thought is represented by many elements in a dream. "Thus a dream is not constructed by each individual dream-thought, or

40 Althusser also uses the term 'metonymic causality' to characterize what he otherwise terms as 'overdetermination' or 'structural causality'. According to Lacan (*Écrits* London, 1977, pp. 156 - 157), the operation of metaphor (substituting one word for another, for example Leviathan for State) and metonymy (as part standing for a whole by association, e.g. thirty sails for a fleet of ships) is similar to that of 'condensation' and 'displacement' respectively.

group of dream-thoughts, finding separate representation in the content of the dream."⁴¹ Since a dream is a highly compressed form, not all the elements of the dream thoughts are represented in the dream. Only those particular elements of the dream thoughts are selected into the dream content which bring to mind associations with all the dream thoughts which were active during the formation of a dream. These elements are "nodal points upon which a great number of dream-thoughts converged... each of the elements of the dream's content turns out to have been 'overdetermined' - to have been represented in the dream-thoughts many times over."⁴²

Along with the considerations of condensation, the dream work has also to take note of the presence of censorship or resistance. These factors are overcome by another process of the dream work called displacement. This process replaces in the dream, elements of the dream thoughts which are highly stressed in themselves with other elements of the dream thoughts which are of low psychological value. The psychological value of the elements of a dream is in fact usually almost opposite that psychological value which these elements have in the dream thoughts. "A dream is 'differently centred' from the dream thoughts."⁴³

41 S. Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, op. cit., p. 389.

42 Ibid., pp. 388-9.

43 Ibid., p. 414.

When during the dream work, a transference of psychical values takes place, high psychical values are transferred to only those elements of the dream thoughts which have the capability, through being overdetermined, of representing the most numerous dream thoughts. Displacement takes place onto that element of the dream thoughts which serve as an allusion to the real instigator of the dream through intermediate links with the latter. While giving the example of 'The Dream of a Botanical Monograph',⁴⁴ Freud writes that if there had been no possibility of forging enough intermediate links between the dreaming of the monograph (the dream content) and the conversation with the friend (the real instigator of the dream) "the dream would simply have been different. Another indifferent impression of the same day ... would have taken the place of the 'monograph' ... since it was in fact the monograph and not any other idea that was chosen to serve this function, we must suppose that it was the best adapted for the connection."⁴⁵ The "displacement of psychical emphasis by means of intermediate links (is the way by which) ideas which originally had only a weak charge of intensity take over the charge from ideas which were originally more intensely cathected and at last attain enough strength to enable them to force entry into consciousness".⁴⁶ The dream work "strips

44 Ibid., pp. 254-62.

45 Ibid., p. 262.

46 Ibid., p. 263.

the elements which have a psychical value of their intensity, and by means of overdetermination, creates from elements of low psychical value new values".⁴⁷ Thus the process of displacement is not arbitrary but linked to the process of overdetermination, values are displaced only to those elements which are overdetermined.

(ii) Overdetermination in Althusser

On the above description, then, a dream is the effect not of a single dream thought but of the relations of condensation (overdetermination) and displacement among numerous dream thoughts. The Althusserian event or conjuncture too is not the effect of a single contradiction, but that of multiple determinations. Althusser is trying to make just this point when he describes Lenin's analysis of the Russian Revolution,⁴⁸ stressing how Lenin explained the occurrence of the Russian Revolution not in terms of the general contradiction alone, but precisely in terms of the multiplicity of "all the historical contradictions then possible"⁴⁹ in Russia.

That which is a cause in Althusser's social totality seems to be an accumulation of contradictions. "They (Marx and Engels) draw from them the basic notion that the capital-labour contradiction is never simple, but always specified by

47 Ibid., p. 417.

48 Louis Althusser, For Marx, op. cit., pp. 94-100.

49 Ibid., pp. 95-96.

the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised. It is specified by the forms of the superstructure (the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organized movements, and so on); specified by the internal and external historical situation which determines it on the one hand as a function of the national past (completed or 'relapsed' bourgeois revolution, feudal exploitation eliminated wholly, partially or not at all, local 'customs', specific national traditions, even the etiquette' of political struggles and behaviour etc), and on the other as functions of the existing world context (what dominates it-competition of capitalist nations, or 'imperialist internationalism', or competition within imperialism etc.) many of these phenomena deriving from the law of uneven development in the Leninist sense."⁵⁰

The numerous determinations on the general contradiction constitute a whole. A whole is distinct from an aggregate in that the relations that exist between the parts of a whole are internal while those that exist among the

50 Ibid., p. 106.

From the above passage, it seems as if strictly speaking, the cause is not so much an accumulation of contradictions as an accumulation of determinations on the basic or general contradiction. The determinations flow from the different social practices, the subordinate modes of production, and the world context.

parts of an aggregate are external. A relation is internal when it is impossible to conceive of one of the related terms without conceiving of the other, for example, it is impossible to conceive of a sister without a brother.⁵¹

The relationship that exists between the various determinations in Althusser's social totality is that of a structure in dominance: that means that there is always a principal contradiction⁵² and many secondary contradictions. The structure in dominance remains constant, though the principal contradiction may become a secondary one and vice versa. "...If the structure in dominance remains constant, the disposition of roles within it changes; the principal contradiction becomes a secondary one, a secondary contradiction takes its place....There is always one principal contradiction and secondary ones, but they exchange their roles in the structure articulated in dominance while this latter remains stable...."⁵³

The secondary contradictions are not the phenomenon of the principal contradiction in the sense that the principal contradiction ~~in the sense that the principal contradiction can~~ "exist without the secondary contradictions, or without some

51 D.H. Ruben, The Metaphysics of the Social World (London, 1985), p. 27.

52 The term 'contradiction' is being used in the sense of a 'determination'.

53 Louis Althusser, EM, op. cit., p. 211.

of them, or might exist before or after them".⁵⁴ The principal and secondary contradictions are each other's conditions of existence. "The secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the principal contradiction...they really constitute its conditions of existence, just as the principal contradiction constitutes their condition of existence...."⁵⁵ This observation applies to the determinations which flow from the different levels of a social totality which are also each other's conditions of existence. We must keep in mind that within a structure in dominance, the principal contradiction or determination will be derived from the dominant instance or level. An exchange of roles between contradictions will be based on a displacement of positions between the different levels - for example, the political level may displace the economic level as the dominant level.

"...it is economism that identifies roles...eternally, not realizing that the necessity of the process lies in an exchange of roles 'according to circumstances'."⁵⁶ The question is, what are these circumstances which determine which will be the principal contradiction or which will be the dominant instance? For Freud, displacement takes place only to that element of the dream thoughts which through the process of

54 Ibid., p. 205.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 213.

condensation can serve as an allusion to the 'real instigator' of the dream. Since Althusser, unlike Freud, does not identify overdetermination only with the process of condensation, he can write that "an overdetermined contradiction may either be overdetermined in the direction of a historical inhibition, a real block for the contradiction...or in the direction of revolutionary rupture."⁵⁷ However, Althusser also suggests that it is necessary for there to be a rupture that the displacement be in the direction of a contradiction in which a condensation of the other contradictions takes place: "But this principal contradiction produced by displacement only becomes 'decisive', explosive, by condensation (by 'fusion')"⁵⁸ ... "the condensation of the struggle in a strategic locus is inseparable from the displacement of the dominant among these contradictions."⁵⁹

A single contradiction is not sufficient for the effect. The co-causal factors i.e. (contradictions) which are sufficient for the effect are the primary contradiction and the secondary contradictions. These contradictions are each other's conditions of existence. If "the secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the primary contradiction"⁶⁰

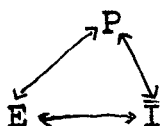
57 Ibid., p. 106.

58 Ibid., p. 211.

59 Ibid., p. 216.

60 Ibid., p. 205.

and vice-versa, then the relation between the co-causal factors cannot be external. If Mill's conjunctive antecedent, wherein no co-causal factor is essential for the existence of another co-causal factor, could be symbolized as $(PE\bar{I}) \rightarrow e'$ then perhaps the above interdependent conception of a compound cause can be symbolized as



where P, E and \bar{I} are all necessary for each other's existence. Although all contradictions are each other's conditions of existence, there is still a distinction among them between a primary contradiction and several secondary contradictions. A primary contradiction is that which like a dream element is overburdened with links to the secondary contradictions so that an explosion of a primary contradiction will have further reaching effects on the secondary contradiction than vice versa. "It is not simply a question of choosing the 'weak link' from a number of pre-existing and already identified links: the chain is so made that the process must be reversed. In order to recognise and identify the other links of the chain, in their turn, one must first seize the chain by the 'weak link'."⁶¹ Passages like the ^{above} following clearly imply that the

61 L. Althusser, Essays on Ideology, op. cit., p. 68n.

'links' or contradictions are connected, and further that the relations between these links constitute one of them as the weak link. If the structure in dominance consisting of a primary contradiction and secondary contradictions is the cause and if it is the relationships between the contradictions that constitute them as a primary and secondary contradictions, then it is these relationships that are the cause. If a structure is merely "a specific combination of its peculiar elements",⁶² then we have an example of causation by a structure or structural causality. ✓

III

Expressive Causality and Althusserian Overdetermination

A compound cause, in the sense of a structural cause, ✓ is a form of causation of the whole on its parts. We have already discussed how the model of transitive causality "could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements",⁶³ according to Althusser, precisely this purpose was served by the model of the Leibnizian concept of expression which dominates all of Hegel's thought. But this model presupposes "in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an inner essence, of which the elements of the whole are

^{+ Balibar}
62 Althusser, RC, op. cit., p. 189.

63 Ibid., p. 186.

then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole, such that at each moment it is possible to write the immediately adequate equation, such and such an element (economic, political, legal, literary, religious etc., in Hegel) = the inner essence of the whole. Here was a model which made it possible to think the effectivity of the whole on each of its elements, but if this category-inner essence/outer phenomenon - was to be applicable everywhere and at every moment to each of the phenomena arising in the totality in question, it presupposed that the whole had a certain nature, precisely the nature of a 'spiritual' whole in which each element was expressive of the entire totality as a 'pars totalis'. In other words, Leibniz and Hegel did have a category for the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts; but on the absolute condition that the whole was not a structure".⁶⁴

A passage in Hegel's 'Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy'⁶⁵ exemplifies the above comment of Althusser. In the section on 'Relation of the History of Philosophy to the rest of the Manifestations of the Spirit', Hegel, while discussing the view that the philosophy and

64 Ibid., pp. 186-7.

65 G.W.F. Hegel, Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy, tr. by T.M. Knox and A.V. Miller (Oxford, 1985).

politics of a time have a great influence on each other, writes that: "...categories like great influence, effect on one another, etc... point to an external connection, i.e. you start by regarding both ^{as} on their own, independent of one another. But here we must consider this relation from a different aspect altogether: the essential category is unity, the inner connection of all these different manifestations. Here we must keep hold of the fact that it is only one spirit, one principle, which is stamped on the political situation and manifested in religion, art, moral and social life, trade and industry, so that all these different forms are but branches of one main trunk. This is the chief point of view. The spirit is one and one only, there is one spirit as the substance of an era, a people, an age, but it is shaped and manifested in various ways; and these different manifestations are the factors which have been adduced. Thus we must not have the idea that politics, constitutions, religions, etc. are the root or cause of philosophy, or that conversely, philosophy is the basis of them. All these factors have one single character which has at their root and runs through them all. However manifold all these different things are, there is no contradiction between them. Not one of them contains anything different in kind from their basis, no matter how much they seem to contradict one another. They are only shoots from the same root, and philosophy is one of them."⁶⁶

66 Ibid. pp 109-110

The above lines suggest that the elements of a whole are actually independent of one another,⁶⁷ what they are not independent of is the stage of the spirit's development. Philosophy, politics, industry, etc. bear no relation to each other except as homologous elements of the 'Idea'. There is no contradiction between these elements which are homologous either as manifestations of the same spirit or - in the Marxist borrowing of Hegel - as the phenomenon of the essence, where the essence is the economy or class. This conception fits ill with the Althusserian picture of the 'specific' autonomy of the different social practices. These practices all have a logic of their own. For instance, take Claus Offe's discussion of the relation between the Welfare State and the commodity market economy, in which he shows that the principles on which both these two institutions work are opposed. Although the welfare state may have originated to facilitate the working of the commodity market, in time, the logic of the working of the welfare state curtails the operations of the commodity market.⁶⁸

Not only is the structure constituted by contradictory relations between elements, but the structure which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements "is

67 With Mill too, the elements of a compound ^{cause} ~~course~~ were independent of one another.

68 C. Offe, The Contradictions of the Welfare State, ed. J. Keane (London, 1984), chapter I.

nothing outside its effects".⁶⁹ The whole or the structure has no cause outside it or beneath it - no inner essence of which it is the appearance. It is only a complex of certain relations. ✓

IV

Conclusion

We again consider the contrasts between the theories of causality we have been discussing - this time in the words of E. Gellner:

"In a sense, the covering-law view of causation, which amounts to saying that there is no link, no 'power' connecting elements in a causal chain, that the only connection is in an extraneous law which is not intrinsically part of either of the connected events, is itself the consequence of an extreme emanationism: the perception that the links following each other are not really connected with each other but both emanate from a hidden core, when followed by the excision of that core (because we realize that, being inherently hidden, it is never accessible to us and hence irrelevant), leads to a Humean view of causation."⁷⁰

↓ E. Balibar
69 L. Althusser, RC, op. cit.

70 E. Gellner, Relativism and the Social Sciences (Cambridge, 1975), p. 133.

By contrast, the Althusserian theory of causality which does not reduce causality to a covering law, nor ascribe it to an inner hidden core, postulates that there are constitutive links between elements and that causality inheres precisely in these links.

....

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER IV

SCIENCE AND IDEOLOGY

So far this study has dealt with Althusser's anti-reductionist project in terms of his concepts of - a mode of production ~~was~~ made up of different practices; overdetermination; and, structural causality. In this chapter we will discuss the distinction that Althusser makes between science and ideology as another part of his anti-reductionist programme. We will see that just as Althusser attacks the empiricist notion of linear causality and tries to provide a different conception of causation. Similarly he also rejects as reductionist the empiricist notion of science and puts forward an alternative view of science. Consequently, his basis for differentiating science from ideology shifts from that used by those who equate science with empiricism.

I

The Empiricist Conception of Science and Althusser's Critique

The classical empiricist tradition propounded a theory of knowledge in which all knowledge was ultimately based on sense-impressions or phenomenal objects. This empiricist theory of knowledge viewed knowledge as mind

dependent but not thought dependent.¹ "For an empiricist, all objects of consciousness are impressions, and hence have a phenomenal or mentalistic existence. In that sense, they are essentially dependent on the mind."² On the other hand, the independence of impressions from mental activity, i.e. from thought, is asserted by the claim that all thoughts, concepts and ideas can be traced back to experience which is, unlike in Kant, equated solely with impressions. As Hume says: "...Let him ask from what impression that idea is derived? And if no impression can be produced he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant."³

The empiricist tradition postulates that we can only know what we experience, thus restricting our knowledge to the phenomenal world. We can only know the object of our experience which may well be different from the real object. However, the empiricists make this epistemological category of experience perform an ontological function by reducing statements about being to statements about our knowledge of being. Since what appears to the sensations is atomised sense, the world is made up of atomised objects. Similarly the fact that we cannot

1 D.H. Ruben, Marxism and Materialism - A Study in Marxist Theory of Knowledge (Sussex, 1979), second ed., p. 20.

2 Ibid. p.20

3 D. Hume, in D.H. Ruben, Marxism and Materialism, op. cit., p. 13.

experience any necessary connection between these atomised objects means that there is no necessary connection in nature. Roy Bhaskar calls this anthropomorphism of the empiricists an 'epistemic fallacy' - a part of the problematic of empirical realism.⁴

Just as scepticism (based on the mind-dependence of knowledge) is one of the off-shoots of the empiricist theory of knowledge, so is a positivism which (based on the thought-independence of knowledge) postulates the givenness of facts which an observer has merely to see in order to gain knowledge of them. According to Althusser, this theory of knowledge or science, which views knowledge as a mere epiphenomenon of reality, i.e., as a reflection of given objects and facts, is nothing but "the mirror myth of knowledge".⁵ As against this picture of knowledge as vision, Althusser presents a conception of knowledge not as mind dependent but as theory or thought dependent. Althusser explains knowledge not as a reflection but as a kind of production or work wherein thought objects are constructed through 'problematics' to gain cognition of the real world.⁶

The production of knowledge or 'theoretical practice' has a structure common to all kinds of productions/practices.

4 R. Bhaskar, A Realist Theory of Science, op. cit., pp. 36-38.

5 L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC, p. 19.

6 See L. Althusser, FM, and L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC.

Like all production, the production of knowledge requires a raw material. This raw material (which Althusser calls Generality I) consists of existing ideological, pre-scientific, scientific (depending on the development of the science) concepts. It does not consist of a purely objective 'given' or of 'pure and absolute facts'. The real object is never given to perception or comprehension in its purity but exists for the observer always under some concept, whether the concept is ideological or scientific. Knowledge is not the result of a pure given object being perceived by a pure consciousness. Consciousness is always content ridden and constructs the object of knowledge according to this content. The object of knowledge is always a construct. Bachelard calls it a secondary object as opposed to the real object.⁷ In Althusser's own words "...however far back we ascend into the past of a branch of knowledge, we are never dealing with a 'pure' sensuous intention or representation, but with an ever-already 'complex raw material...i.e. matter already elaborated and transformed, precisely by the imposition of the complex (sensuous-technical-ideological) structure which constitutes it as an object of knowledge."⁸

In this respect we can place Althusser with those philosophers of science who criticize the empiricist belief

7 See D. Lecourt, Marxism and Epistemology

8 L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC, p. 43.

in the theory neutrality of observation statements and instead uphold the theory impregnatedness of such statements and the immanence of concepts in all experience.⁹

The raw material of theoretical practice is worked upon by the 'means of production' of this practice. These means of production (termed by Althusser as Generality II), of the theoretical practice of science, consist of the 'theory' or 'problematic' of a science. We have already seen that Althusser does not believe in pre-theoretical facts. For him a problematic is a set of theoretical presuppositions which determine the way the scientist outlines a problem for herself or himself. A problematic consists of the presuppositions of one's questions because the questions that one is asking of the object already determine the nature of that object in some ways.¹⁰ Generality II according to Althusser is "constituted by the corpus of concepts whose more or less contradictory unity constitutes the 'theory' of the science...".¹¹ A scientific problematic or theory does not produce knowledge by collecting given facts; instead, "...its particular labour consists of elaborating its own scientific facts through a critique of the ideological 'facts' elaborated by an earlier theoretical practice".¹² Therefore Althusser believes that it

9 See T.S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago, 1970).

10 L. Althusser, EM, op. cit., p. 72.

11 Ibid., p. 184.

12 Ibid.

was the problematic of classical political economy which constructed its object, which was not a pure reflection of a 'given real object'. While political economy regards the domain of economic facts which it gives itself as an object "as having the obviousness of facts : absolute givens which it takes as they 'give' themselves",¹³ actually in fact it is political economy itself which 'gives itself' this given "arbitrarily as an object, pretending that this object was given it".¹⁴

Finally in theoretical practice is produced knowledge (or Generality III) as a result of the means of production of theoretical practice working on its raw material. The three generalities are completely distinct from each other. The raw material of theoretical practice is transformed by the labour of the problematic into a new knowledge.

We find that in Althusser's conception of science, a necessary characteristic of science is abstraction. Therefore for him, the practice of all science is anti-empiricist. Theory plays a decisive role in this practice. "A science in the strict sense (is) a theoretical, i.e., ideal and demonstrative discipline, not an aggregate of empirical

13 L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC, op. cit., p. 159.

14 Ibid.

results."¹⁵ It is only through theoretical abstraction that we can grasp concrete realities -- concrete not in the sense that we can see them or touch them but in the sense that they are infinitely more effective than the objects we can see or touch.¹⁶

II

The Science-Ideology Distinction

We have seen that as against empiricism, Althusser holds a general theory of all theoretical practice as a production wherein knowledge is produced by the labour of theories or problematics. However, this does not make Althusser a trans-theoretical relativist¹⁷ because we find that he emphasizes the distinction between scientific and ideological problematics. Upholding Marx's materialist thesis of the distinctness of the real process from the thought process, Althusser, on the one hand maintains, unlike the empiricists, that the real object is not the thought

15 L. Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays (London, 1971), p. 44.

16 Ibid., p. 75. For example, of the two entities, a firm and the market, the latter which is an 'abstract' structure turns out to be more effective than the 'explicit' structure of the firm. cf. S. Kavirdj, Marxism and Political Causality

17 See S. Keat and J. Urry, Social Theory ^{as Science} and ~~Social Practice~~

object, and on the other hand, he also holds, unlike the idealists, that the thought object is not the real object. Althusser supports the principle of objectivity which distinguishes between those problematics that represent reality and those that distort it.

The contrast between ideology that distorts reality and science that unmask this distortion is especially marked in Althusser's earlier work: "...the rediscovery of real history, of real objects, beyond the enormous layer of ideology which had hemmed them in and deformed them, not being content with reducing them to their shades";¹⁸ "...a dissipation of illusion and a retreat from the dissipated illusion back towards reality".¹⁹ Althusser, later in his self critical essays qualifies his conception of ideology as illusion by pointing out that ideology is sustained by the practices of certain institutions and apparatuses, hence in order to get rid of ideology it is not enough to gain knowledge of reality but also to change certain structures of that reality. However, Althusser never gives up his conception of ideology (whether as a set of ideas or as a practice) as falsifying reality. We have already seen that in our discussion of his analysis of bourgeois parliamentary democracy as a 'fiction'.²⁰

18 L. Althusser, FM, op. cit., p. 76.

19 Ibid., p. 77.

20 See p.28 of this dissertation.

It is because the 'untruthfulness' of ideology is part of the basis on which Althusser makes a distinction between science and ideology that he stresses the importance of Marxist science for the revolutionary practice of the proletariat. Again and again he stresses the 'necessity' of the science of historical materialism for the proletarian revolution. He invokes Lenin's injunction, "without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary practice",²¹ to emphasize that the workers' class struggle needs to be guided by the Marxist science of history. Marx and Engels themselves, defending their 'scientific socialism' against 'ethical socialism' had said that their socialist convictions were not based on an essentially ethical view but had an objective and scientific foundation.²² As Perry Anderson puts it, "The sovereign practice of the associated producers envisaged by Marx as the attainment of communism was not only a product of will, but equally and indivisibly of knowledge".²³ Thus with reference to the proletariat, emphasis is placed on the cognitive dimensions of agency. In contrast to other forms of agency in history which have been based solely on political voluntarism, the action of the proletariat is based on its knowledge of the

21 L. Althusser, EM, p. 166.

22 See A. Callinicos, Althusser's Marxism

23 P. Anderson, Arguments with English Marxism.

true nature of the socio-historical totality. "The revolutionary perspective derives its strength from the fact that it arises as a consequence of scientific analysis."²⁴ The proletariat is in such a historical situation that it must understand or know society if it is to 'assert' itself.²⁵

Marxists have held different views about the nature of this indispensable science. One view which prevailed in the 1940s and the 1950s was the Stalinist theory of 'bourgeois science, proletarian science'.²⁶ This position was also propagated by the Communist Party of France (PCF) in the 1950s. When the Cold War began in the late 1940s and the communists were dismissed from the government in May 1947 in France, they closed their ranks in the face of increasing repression. The PCF attempted to enforce an ideological uniformity among its intellectuals based on "the political and ideological positions of the working class, as expressed by the party".²⁷ One of the consequences of this polarization and sedimentation on class lines was the view that all science, being a superstructure was a class determined ideology.²⁸ The PCF passed a *resolution*

24 Ibid.

25 G. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, op. cit.,

26 See D. Lecourt, On Proletarian Science (London, 1979).

27 See M. Kelly, Modern French Marxism (Oxford, 1982), p. 72.

28 Ibid.

formally adopting the 'two sciences theory' in the beginning of 1950.²⁹

Althusser is critical of the Stalinist 'two sciences theory'. For him, just as science is not a reflection of 'given facts', similarly it is not the result of the experience of living in certain class positions. If the distinction between science and ideology is not grounded by Althusser on class position, neither is it based on the empiricist categories of clear and cloudy vision. In fact, Althusser's distinction between science and ideology is grounded on his strongly anti-empiricist view of science. An empiricist would consider as ideological that which could not see the obviousness of the truth. Therefore, if Adam Smith's theory were to be characterized by an empiricist as ideological and Marx's as scientific such characterization would mean that Adam Smith could not 'see' what Marx could 'see'. Since Althusser holds that objects of knowledge are constructed in certain ways so that individuals working within a problematic cannot but give importance to certain aspects of the object of knowledge while completely missing out other aspects, so according to him, the difference between Adam Smith and Marx was a difference in problematics, which is why Marx could 'see' what the former could not. "The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual

29 Ibid., ch. 4.

subject, endowed with the faculty of 'vision', which he exercises either attentively or distractedly; the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and its objects and its problems."³⁰ Similarly the invisible is the theoretical problematic's non-vision of its non objects. The object of knowledge is always a construct.

Because Althusser believes the above, he, in 'Marxism is not a Historicism',³¹ also criticises historicism for believing that any present (time) could produce "the science of its^{elt} precisely in the form of a self consciousness".³² The historicists support their position by citing certain 'historicist' passages in Marx's writings on the basis of which they claim that "in some sense, history has reached the point and produced the exceptional, specific present in which scientific abstractions exist in the state of empirical realities, in which science and scientific concepts exist in the form of the visible part of experience as so many directly accessible truths."³³ Hence the self consciousness of that age will be scientific.

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

31 Ibid., ch. 6.

32 Ibid., p. 123.

33 Ibid., p. 124.

However, as Althusser holds that there is a distinction between the 'real object' and the 'thought object', he argues that the thought object can never, not even in any 'exceptional, specific present' be the real object. This means that scientific abstractions can never exist in the state of empirical realities. What actually happens is that the knowledge of reality gained in thought is added to reality, so that it appears as if the empirical phenomena contain the scientific abstractions.³⁴ Similarly the distinction that we make between the appearance and essence of real objects is a function of the knowledge of those objects.

As there are no 'directly accessible truths' we can conclude then that for Althusser, science or theory cannot be reduced either to clear vision or to the experience of class positions. The difference between science and ideology is not based by him on the grounds of clear or cloudy vision, or on class position, but on the grounds of theoretical problematics. That theoretical problematic is scientific which constructs its object of knowledge in such a way that it includes enough relationships that go into constituting that object. It goes wide enough in thinking out the conditions of possibility of its object of knowledge.

34 Ibid., pp. 189-90.

We also notice that whereas with respect to the sciences, emphasis is placed more on theoretical problematics, as regards ideology, it is said to be sustained not so much by theoretical problematics as by certain institutions and social practices. When Althusser writes: "The Mercantilists merely reflected their own present, making their monetary theory out of the monetary policy of their time. The physiocrats merely reflected their own present, outlining a general theory of surplus-value, but of natural surplus-value, the surplus-value of agricultural labour where the corn could be seen growing...."³⁵ does it not imply that although Althusser states that political economy pretends that it is reflecting a given object, whereas it itself gives itself this given arbitrarily as an object, we can still say that in some sense at least, like the object of the Mercantilists and the Physiocrats, the object of political economy was also given it by certain practices. Hence Althusser can claim that ideologies "are not pure illusions (Error) but bodies of representations existing in institutions and practices : they figure in the superstructure and are rooted in the class struggle...(we have to) not simply denounce them as false, (but) also to point out that they claim to be true, and were accepted and continue to be accepted as true, and to show why this is so".³⁶ So, ideologies figure

35 Ibid., p. 123.

36 L. Althusser, Essays in Self Criticism (London, 1976), p. 155.

in certain institutions and practices and ideological problematics are ideological because they construct their object of knowledge in such a manner that they confine it to these institutions and practices.

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CHAPTER V

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CONCLUSION

Taking the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy as a model of Marxist explanation, Cohen argues that the explanatory primacy of the productive forces over the relations of production and that of the foundations over the superstructure can be reconciled with the effectivity of the relations of production and the superstructure on the productive forces and the foundations respectively only if Marxist explanation is taken to be a form of functional explanation.¹ "...production relations profoundly affect productive forces, and superstructures strongly condition foundations....Constructing his (Marx's) explanations as functional makes for compatibility between the causal power of the explained phenomena and their secondary status in the order of explanation."² Functional explanation explains the nature of the explanandum by the consequences the latter has for that which explains it. The nature of

1 See G.A. Cohen, Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence (Oxford, 1978), ch. 10.

2 Ibid., p. 278.

the relations of production is explained (or caused) by the consequences it has for the productive forces.

Let us compare Cohen's example of functional explanation in Marxism with the two aspects of 'necessity' mentioned by Claus Offe. In *The Contradictions of the Welfare State*,³ Offe writes that the relationship between the economic system and the normative and political systems can be necessary in two senses: (a) when the natures of the normative and political systems are genetically determined by the economic system (genetic aspect of necessity), and (b) when the political and normative systems are functional for the reproduction of the economic system (functional aspect of necessity). Offe points out that functional necessity may come into contradiction with genetic necessity, i.e. the political system generated as a result of the economic system may cease to be functional for the latter.⁴ A contradiction is defined by Offe as "a condition in which certain indispensable elements of a social structure cannot be integrated because they are at odds with each other, i.e. the social structure paralyses itself because the elements necessary for its survival at the same time render it impossible."⁵ Unlike Cohen's contradiction between

3 Claus Offe, *The Contradictions of the Welfare State*, ed. by J. Keane (London, 1984).

4 Ibid., p. 40.

5 Ibid., p. 262.

the relations of production and the productive forces where the production relations are left behind when they begin to obstruct the productive forces, in Offe's description of a contradictory relationship between the "decommodification principle" and the "commodification principle", the contradiction is that while the commodification principle (as exemplified in the market economy) cannot exist with the decommodification principle (as exemplified in the welfare state), neither can the former exist without the latter.⁶ Offe argues that the neo-conservatives, in spite of their vociferous charges against the welfare state, cannot visualize a viable future for the market economy without the welfare state.

A contradiction is a necessary feature of a structure: it is what defines the identity of the structure. "Contradictions are not contingent but rooted in the mode of production, which is itself seen to be contradictory, i.e. self-paralysing and self destructive."⁷ Marx tells us "about the historical tendency of the capitalist mode of production, the peculiar movement of its contradiction, the development of the antagonisms implied by the necessity of its structure...."⁸ The question is, as necessary features

6 Ibid., see ch. 1.

7 Ibid., p. 132.

8 L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC, p. 283.

of a mode of production, contradictions hold between which aspects of a mode of production? Althusser, in his discussion of the numerous contradictions present in the Russian social formation, describes the following contradictions:

- (1) "Contradictions of a regime of feudal exploitation... over an enormous mass of 'ignorant' peasants...."
- (2) Contradictions of large scale capitalist and imperialist exploitation
- (3) Contradictions of colonial exploitation and wars imposed on whole peoples.
- (4) A gigantic contradiction between the stage of development of capitalist methods of production (particularly in respect to proletarian concentration...) and the medieval state of the country-side.
- (5) The exacerbation of class struggles throughout the country, not only between exploiter and exploited, but even within the ruling classes themselves.
- (6)Other 'exceptional' circumstances...for examples the 'advanced' character of the Russian revolutionary elite...."⁹

Althusser also describes the Russian social formation as (7) "at the same time the most backward and the

9 L. Althusser, EM, p. 96.

most advanced nation, a gigantic contradiction which its divided ruling classes could neither avoid nor solve".¹⁰ Some of the above contradictions can be characterized as holding between the exploiting classes and the exploited class of a mode of production - (1,5); between different modes of production in a social formation - (4,7), and between different factions of a ruling class of a social formation - (5) Does Althusser also speak of contradictions as deriving from the levels of a mode of production (the law of the falling rate of profit is a contradiction within the economy) or as deriving from the relationships between these levels. Or does Althusser strictly use the concept of contradiction for only the general contradiction, that between the productive forces and the relations of production, "essentially embodied in the contradiction between the two antagonistic classes",¹¹ while the other contradictions are actually specifications or determinations flowing from 'the superstructure', 'the internal and external historical situations', etc.¹² "...the capital-labour contradiction is never simple, but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised",¹³ These distinctions are important if we

10 Ibid., p. 97.

11 Ibid., p. 99.

12 Ibid., p. 106.

13 Ibid.

are to ask the question of the necessity of a contradiction. If the contradiction is "not something different from the structure itself",¹⁴ if the contradiction is that which identifies a structure, and if the general contradiction is only "discernible, identifiable and manipulable",¹⁵ through all the other contradictions, then the structure is also identifiable through all these contradictions, i.e. all these contradictions are necessary to the structure. If we can say that the structure is nothing but the general contradiction, can we not say that the structure is nothing but the total accumulation of contradictions.

If everything begins with "structure, configuration and relationship",¹⁶ and contradictions are a type of relationship, what is the necessity involved in the accumulation of numerous contradictions in a particular social formation. Should we only describe all the contradictions or determinations present in a social formation, and bracket the question of whether their co-presence is accidental or not.

14 L. Althusser and E. Balibar, RC, p. 285.

15 L. Althusser and E. Balibar, EM, p. 98.

16 P. Anderson, In the Tracks of Historical Materialism (London, 1983).

Whether these contradictions or determinations are necessary or not, we must note that in the Althusserian notion of causality they are at least necessary in the sense that none of them is a phenomenon of a 'real' cause. All these contradictions are necessary to enable either the general contradiction, or the primary contradiction, or the economy in the last instance as an absent cause, to be causally effective. Just as in Freudian explanation, the real causes of the dream, i.e. certain dream thoughts can only be causally effective if certain other dream thoughts replace them in the dream, similarly in Althusserian explanation, the causal power of either the general contradiction, or the primary contradiction, or the contradiction determinant in the last instance, can only be activated if the other determinations are also present. This does not mean that an explanation of an event, say event 'A', will be in the form of equally citing numerous contradictions. Since for Althusser, there is always a primary contradiction, the explanation of event A will be in terms of this primary contradiction; and it is only at the next explanatory stage that we will show how it is the relations that the primary contradiction has with the other contradictions that make it a primary contradiction.

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