

# The politics of Louis Althusser:

## Introduction

Despite the fact that Louis Althusser is a prominent representative of a distinct political trend in the French Communist Party, his writings have been debated outside France as though they were *politically* unimportant — the province of academic philosophers alone. We do not propose to follow this practice. If Althusser's work were purely of consequence to the editors of *Telos*, *Radical America*, *Theoretical Review*, and the more difficult contributors to *New Left Review* and *Marxism Today*, they would not interest us.

Eurocommunism is Althusser's habitat — that jumble of massive but unorthodox Communist Parties who defy the Soviet Union, discard proletarian dictatorship as an anachronism, drop Leninism from their vocabularies, join bourgeois governments, and, in Italy, hunt down revolutionaries and jail them. From within the French CP Althusser criticizes much of this, yet he not only has stayed in, but frequently has beaten theoretical retreats through self-criticism which, so far at least, has kept his party membership intact.

In this way Althusser provides what seems in some respects to be a defense of Marxist orthodoxy — a left critique of the Eurocommunist mainstream. Marxist militants who cannot stomach the giant departures of Georges Marchais, or Enrico Berlinguer, or Santiago Carrillo are given a theoretical justification for joining or staying in the Communist Parties. This is not an unimportant task. Were every militant who read and agreed with Marx, and look note of the CPs' departure from his teachings, to leave the CPs as those parties depart from Marxism, their collapse would be imminent.

But some aspects of Marxist orthodoxy are stubbornly incompatible with even the most radical variant of Eurocommunism. Here is where Althusser's genius comes into its own. His Marxism permits one to discard Marx selectively, using an elaborate theoretical construct and an apparent philosophical rigor supposedly methodologically loyal to Marx. If Althusser can withstand attack here, the rest of his system, and its political consequences, may be safe. The *Urgent Tasks* symposium therefore examines both Althusser's politics and the theoretical underpinnings.

Followers of Althusser's writings sooner or later come to an almost inescapable conclusion: Althusser may be the first person who became a Marxist-Leninist philosopher before becoming thoroughly familiar with the teachings of Marx and Lenin.

It is difficult to imagine, otherwise, how he could have gotten himself into so much theoretical diffi-

culty with nearly every stroke of his pen. His latest book [*Essays in Self-Criticism*, New Left Books, London, 1976; translation, Preface, and Introduction by Grahame Lock] is Althusser's attempt to clean up his act, but his attempt to extricate himself from one set of problems is leading him into fresh collisions with Marx and Lenin.

There are some superficial parallels between the careers of Georg Lukacs and Louis Althusser. Lukacs, the Hungarian Marxist philosopher and literary critic, was a creative and innovative thinker who, after daring to test the outer limits of thought in the Communist movement under Stalin, was frequently forced to retreat with a pitiful "self-criticism" which barely preserved his party membership, and perhaps his life, from the wrath of the monolith. Althusser, the eccentric philosopher in the French Communist Party who has invented a whole new theoretical approach to Marxism, has now begun his retreat.

Both Lukacs and Althusser are defenders of Marxist "orthodoxy" during periods when their parties disdain it. Perhaps these similarities explain why the ideas of these two men seem destined to a common fate ~ the growth of a large, vocal, and aggressive following among young intellectuals in the academic world; some measure of recognition by the bourgeois intelligentsia; and a much smaller following among party rank-and-filers.

But there the similarities end. Lukacs was defending the orthodoxy of revolutionary creativity within the confines of a Stalinist straitjacket. Both the creativity and the orthodoxy of Althusser's thought are purely formal — hypermodern Marxism whose complexities and terminological novelty inspire otherwise intelligent people to participate in the dullest enterprise while defending the terms, but not the ideas, that once taught millions how to recognize social revolution when they saw it.

Despite the new book's title, Althusser exhibits no humility in his "self-criticism." This is a truculent book in which Althusser bullies his opponents even as he retreats from most of the theoretical ground on which he made his name.

In the past, for example, Althusser distinguished himself with his claim that theory is a form of practice. "Theoretical practice" was reified into the defiant slogan of the Althusserian camp, and his British followers took that as the title for their political journal. Now that Althusser confesses that his most original assertion was in error (it is "dangerous," he says, and "must be done away with"), his loyal adherents are left holding the bag. But if Grahame Lock's Introduction is any guide, they are shamelessly committed to their man and scarcely disturbed by such trifles.

# a symposium

All this confirms that something more (or maybe less) than "philosophy" is involved here. It is difficult to suppose that pillars of basic doctrine can be abandoned at will, but if the changes wrought are actually conducted at a lower theoretical altitude than the Althusserians pretend, they can readily be understood as attempts to shore up a dubious possessory title to certain political turf.

Althusser has played a cat-and-mouse game with his critics for nearly a decade. An essay would appear, and his critics would respond. He would then write, "They don't understand," and would reveal the secret of what he was supposedly driving at in the first place. (When he bothered to answer at all, that is.) The current book continues Althusser's intellectual unscrupulousness masquerading as scholarship by including a lengthy bibliography of his critics, a dozen or so of whom get passing mention in Lock's Introduction, but only one — British Communist John Lewis — is actually debated by Althusser.

Sometimes the ludicrousness of Althusser's responses to his critics is astonishing. For years his philosophy has been called "structuralism," in keeping with its similarities to that of other writers who have so named their approach. Now Althusser writes, the problems in my theory didn't come from structuralism, but from an affinity for Spinoza! — but answers to the substance of the criticisms still don't appear, despite the fact that he knows the debate isn't about political taxonomy.

Lock writes that the purpose of his lengthy Introduction is to allow readers to "get an idea of what kind of politics lie behind Althusser's 'philosophy'." In itself, that ought to be taken as a confession of bankruptcy. If Althusser's previous four books haven't managed to convey his politics somehow, then the claims he made as to the political character of his theoretical work were clearly bogus even before his "self-criticism." Even so, it is interesting that Lock, with Althusser's approval, can write that his politics lie behind his philosophy, rather than the other way around. (It seems likely that had a critic been the first to pose this relationship between Althusser's politics and theory, she or he would have been roundly denounced by the defenders of the faith.)

Althusser insists on your respect. Even if you don't agree with him, he demands that you admire his political courage. We should try to understand, he says, "whatever the risks of what we say," the errors of the world Communist movement. "I shall take the personal risk of advancing this hypothesis now." "It cannot be denied that such an initiative involved great efforts and risks." The problem can be summed up as the effects of a single problem, the "Stalinian

deviation." (He rejects the term "Stalinism" because it is a bourgeois or Trotskyist label which "explains nothing.")

Of course, he adds, it is wrong not to recognize Stalin's "historical merits": "He understood that it was *necessary* to abandon the miraculous idea of an imminent 'world revolution' and to undertake instead the 'construction of socialism' in one country." Stalin taught millions of Communists "that there existed *Principles of Leninism*." But there were drawbacks to Stalin too, among them, his "humanism."

Lock makes some of this concrete: "The Polish events [the mass strikes of 1970] demonstrate something important, too. The workers' protest itself was not — contrary to a common opinion — directed against 'Stalinism': rather the opposite." (They were *for* Stalinism??!!) "It is therefore impossible to paint the Stalin period in wholly black or white terms, and it is equally impossible to pretend that its faults can be eliminated simply by 'democratizing' or 'liberalizing' the political structures (for the sake of 'liberty') and 'reforming' the economy (for the sake of 'productivity'). The effects of Stalin's *humanism* and *economism* cannot be rectified by a *more consistent humanism* and a *more consistent economism*."

These lines depart sufficiently from the high road of "philosophy" to the low road of politics that one naturally is led to the search for a motive other than that of academic excellence and intellectual devotion. It is not hard to find. Althusser himself admits he wasn't always so courageous:

"Before the Twentieth Congress [of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956] it was actually not possible for a Communist philosopher, certainly in France, to publish texts which would be (at least to some extent) relevant to politics, which would be something other than a pragmatist commentary on consecrated formulae." But the torrent of criticism that followed the Twentieth Congress attacked "Stalin's errors" from the *right* — "there inevitably followed what we must call an unleashing of *bourgeois* ideological and philosophical themes within the Communist Parties themselves."

The ferment that erupted in the Communist Parties did in fact become part of the general right-wing drift as those parties sought to increase their electoral strength and trade union power in Western Europe and to seek commercial independence from the Soviets in Eastern Europe. In resisting these currents, Althusser emerged as a defender of Marxist "orthodoxy" — a left pole within the French CP. In contrast to the leading political currents, Althusser's criticisms and his terminological loyalty to certain Marxist traditions (for example, his defense of the concept of proletarian dictatorship while the Western European

CPs are jettisoning it) has given him a "revolutionary" aura.

Paradoxically, this appearance actually became an asset to the CP, because it provided a political lure *within* the party for militant workers and radical intellectuals whose leftward drift might otherwise become a threat to party hegemony. His utility is strengthened when his militancy implicitly runs counter to the party line — for instance when he refers to the French events of May 1968 as "the greatest workers' strike in world history." (But his political courage hasn't yet extended to the point of directly attacking the counter-revolutionary role of the French CP during that strike.)

The appearances are deceptive, however. On the most basic level, Althusser clings to the reformist assumptions of his party. His attack on "humanism" is actually a defense of the party and the unions, not a revolutionary departure. Thus: "The humanist line turns the workers away from the class struggle, prevents them from making use of the only power they possess: that of their *organization as a class* and their *class organizations* (the trade unions, the party), by which they wage *their* class struggle." [Althusser's emphasis] One would never guess from this that these workers' "class organizations" played the crucial role of restoring bourgeois authority during "the greatest workers' strike in world history."

Nearly every reformist working class party has someone playing the role we have described here. What has distinguished Althusser has been his attempt to justify his political position in theory. Whereas previous generations of CP intellectuals have rationalized their lines by re-interpreting Marx and Lenin to conform to party doctrine, Althusser has no qualms about rejecting much of Marx's and Lenin's writings on their face as "un-Marxist." He and his followers are not moved by demonstrations that their positions contradict Marxist-Leninist teachings; they simply reply that Marx and Lenin abandoned previously held positions, sometimes unconsciously.

Even so, Althusser is compelled to say that certain texts provide valid guides to political theory, and these provide at least a small plot of common ground on which to apply mutually acceptable standards to political claims. In this book Althusser opposes working class self-activity in theory by asserting, time and time again, that Marx viewed history as "a process without a subject." Yet he also says that "I based myself as closely as possible on Marx's 1857 *Introduction*, and if I used it to produce some necessary effects of theoretical provocation, I think that I did nevertheless remain faithful to it."

Did he remain faithful to it? Is Marx's history a process without a subject? In the 1857 *Introduction to Critique of Political Economy*, Marx wrote that "all epochs of production have certain common traits, common characteristics." These traits, "the elements which are not general and common, must be

separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that in their unity — which arises already from the identity of the *subject, humanity*, and of the object, nature — their essential difference is not forgotten." [Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Pelican Marx Library edition, page 85, emphasis added]

In a similar way, Althusser's statement that "*Marxism-Leninism has always subordinated the dialectical Theses to the materialist Theses*" [his emphasis] is clearly in opposition to Lenin's view that "what is decisive in Marxism [is] its revolutionary dialectics." [33: 476] In another instance Althusser writes, "Of course it is not true that everything is always connected with everything else — this is not a Marxist thesis," whereas Lenin's view was the opposite: "The relations of each thing (phenomenon, etc.) are not only manifold, but general, universal. Each thing (phenomenon, process, etc.) is connected with *every other*." [38: 222, Lenin's emphasis]

Clearly Althusser's "theoretical" work in the 1970s isn't much different from that of the 1960s reviewed by Martin Glaberman. Althusser's theoretical system has taken on a life independent of its political utility, and this aspect has gotten nearly all the attention and commentary outside France. As we stated in the beginning, this is a subordinate concern for us.

At the same time we would caution against the urge to write an insurance policy underwriting Althusser's political life. The appearance of flexibility in the Eurocommunist parties is deceptive, and Georges Marchais, head of the French CP, is a tinhorn Stalin. He has already ordered Althusser to stop criticizing the party's electoral strategy.

It seems likely that the rallying point for leftwing Eurocommunism will increasingly focus on Fernando Claudin and his debate with Spanish CP leader Santiago Carrillo. If so, Althusser may become entirely expendable. It will be interesting to see whether his "philosophy" can survive in the absence of a viable political base.

Picking up after Martin Glaberman's review of the bulk of Althusser's theoretical works, Don Hamerquist explores the political implications of Althusser's recent articles and examines his place in the tableau of Eurocommunism. Though all conclusions are necessarily tentative, the article explores the tensions between Althusser's growing criticism of the French CP and his own theoretical roots. Hamerquist considers the direction of Althusser's political drift incompatible with his "scientific," "anti-humanist" theory. Indeed, if Hamerquist's optimism about Althusser's political future is justified, it is likely that Althusser will undergo an "epistemological break" of his own. Whether or not this will amount to a "philosophical revolution" remains to be seen.

Jasper Collins  
for the editors

# Althusser: the action of large masses is determinant

Below are excerpts from a four-part series of articles by Louis Althusser which appeared in *Le Monde* last April, sharply critical of the French Communist Party in the wake of its electoral defeat. As the final installment appeared on April 28, party leader Georges Marchais announced that the political debate within the party was closed.

it is interesting to note that Althusser departs from some of his own political and theoretical ground rules here. For example, he uses the term Stalinism, which he had previously rejected as a bourgeois/Trotskyist term. More significantly, his reference to the self-emancipation of the proletariat would appear to undermine his definition of history as "a process without a subject."

These articles constitute Althusser's strongest political commentary on the CP and its leadership to date, and they may be his last words on these subjects for some time to come — especially if he values his party membership.

Translation is by Renee Rosenfeld, Noel Ignatin, and Ken Lawrence.

A little historical awareness is enough to make one see that there exist as many forms of political practice as there are classes in power or struggling for power. Each governs or struggles according to the practice which best corresponds to the constraints of its battle and its interests.

We can, for example, thanks to bourgeois history and theoreticians, affirm that the role of the bourgeois practice of politics consists of *making sure of its own domination through others*.

\* \* \*

Against this bourgeois practice of politics, Marxist tradition has al-

ways defended another thesis — the proletariat must "emancipate itself." It can count on no class or liberator besides itself; it can count only on the strength of its organization. It has no other choice, no exploited to manipulate. And since it must of necessity make lasting alliances, it cannot treat its allies as *other people*, as forces at its mercy that it can dominate at will, but must treat them as *true equals*, whose historic personality it must respect.

\* \* \*

How then is bourgeois political practice reproduced in [the proletariat's] ranks? By treating the militants and the masses *like others*, whom the leadership, in the purest bourgeois style, gets to implement its political line. It is sufficient to allow free rein to the internal mechanism of the party, which spontaneously produces the separation between the leadership and the militants and the separation between the party and the masses.

\* \* \*

Because in the party, on the basis of the Stalinian tradition, theory is the "property" of the leaders (and those who might not agree would learn at their expense what the cost is today), and because this "property" of theory and Truth hide other "properties" — one of the militants and one of the masses themselves, [the bourgeois practice of the party] should not be interpreted in individual terms, but in terms of the system. The style of the individuals changes; the Stalinism of our leadership has become "humanist," even "open." That doesn't matter. What counts is that everything that has just been pointed out as tending toward bourgeois political practice in the party is *the exist-*

*ence of a system which functions on its own*, independently of the individuals who find their place in it, but which compels those individuals to be what they are: *both used by and taking from the system*. When someone says that the party functions on authority from above, one should not look at authority as a personal passion of a leader, but *in the machinery of the apparatus*, which at every level hides responsibility for the conduct of authority and its results: an automatic source of secrecy, suspicion, distrust, and cunning. \* \* \*

If a party and a line are needed, it is to aid the working class in organizing itself as a class or, what is the same thing, organizing its struggle as a class. So the party must no longer be built for its own sake, nor the working class organized for its own sake; this would be to fall into isolation. The working class exists in the midst of large masses of exploited or oppressed people, as the part of the masses most capable of organizing itself and of showing the way to all the other exploited.

Marxist tradition holds that it is the action of large masses that is determinant, and that it is necessary to conceive of the action of the working class in terms of this determining role. It is from large masses that historic initiatives of revolutionary import come: the invention of the Commune, the factory occupations of 1936, the popular triumphs of the Liberation Committees of 1944-1945, the prodigious surprise of May 1968 in France, etc. And *a party judges itself in the first place by its capacity for attention to the needs and the initiatives of the popular masses*.

# Attempts to subordinate history to the CP

*An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Canada, August 27, 1974, and published in the September 1975 issue of The Review of Social Theory.*

**By Martin Glaberman**

When the writings of Louis Althusser began to be translated into English, interest in the French Communist philosopher grew tremendously. Today there are indications that that interest has begun to decline. Althusser, however, remains an important figure because, in the first place, he is associated with a powerful international political movement and because, in the second place, his ideas have a certain attraction to middle class intellectuals who prefer their Marxism in forms that are compatible with the empirical scientism of traditional academic disciplines.

Althusser's attraction, I believe, stems from three elements of his work. The first is the apparent freedom of his writing from the kind of rigid, monolithic doctrinairism associated with Stalinism. Althusser is willing to praise and criticize a wide range of Communists and non-Communists in ways that would not have been tolerated in the Stalinist period. He is even willing to criticize Marx, to invent new terms, and, in general, to behave like a free-thinking philosopher. (I shall attempt to show that this view is superficial, that fundamentally Althusser's philosophy is Stalinist in every significant sense.)

The second is the idealism of his philosophy. Although he constantly refers to himself and his philosophy as materialist, historical materialism, if you please, at every crucial point he attributes to idealistic forms (theory, party programs, ideas) the power to move history. It is an idealism that is concealed by the manipulation of language. For example, he defines practice so

broadly that it includes theory. "By theory, in this respect, I shall mean a *specific form of practice*, itself belonging to the complex unity of the 'social practice' of a determinate human society. Theoretical practice falls within the general definition of practice. It works on a raw material (representations, concepts, facts) which it is given by other practices . . .,"<sup>1</sup> etc. By defining concepts, etc., as material, or using words in such a way that the material nature of ideas is implied, Althusser magically transforms his idealism into a materialist philosophy.<sup>2</sup> The attraction of this to many radical intellectuals who would never think of their own philosophical views as idealist is that it places intellectual activities at the center of historical movement, giving intellectuals a role in the transformation of society of which mundane materialism seems to deprive them.

The third is the seeming scientific character of his methodology. Intellectuals, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, have always had difficulty with the Marxian dialectic because it seems to go against the rules of ordinary scientific method. The flouting of Aristotelian logic, contradiction, negation of the negation, historical necessity, interpenetration of opposites, and so on, have only rarely been accepted by social and natural science. By abandoning the dialectical content yet retaining the name, by reducing historical materialism to an ahistorical empiricism, by eliminating historical necessity and the general laws of development of capitalist society, Althusserian philosophy has an attraction to those intellectuals who are critical of existing society, are committed to social change, but who are not prepared to accept the fundamental changes in their methods of thought and in their scientific work which are implied in Marxist theory.

Althusser seems to be speaking to the post-Stalinist, post-World

War II world. It is in relation to this world that the validity and the relevance of his ideas must be judged. One element of that world, the colonial revolution which has seen independence won by most of the nations of Africa and Asia, must be left aside, since Althusser does not deal with it except in occasional marginal comments. The other element is the waves of revolutionary activity in the industrial world, in the East and in the West. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, in which the Hungarian working class destroyed a totalitarian regime and created a new society based on workers councils; the creation of a "New Left," in the United States and in Europe (the appearance of massive war movements, black movements, women's movements, anti-war movements, etc.); these are the landmarks of the post-World War II world that revolutionary theory and revolutionary philosophy have to grapple with. It is in this context that we view Althusser's work.

Althusser's emphasis on how to "read" the Marxist classics throws an interesting light on his ideas, although that subject is only marginal to the purpose of this paper. He has always insisted on the discontinuity of Marx's works, a strange way to interpret any thinker. He designated Marx's works in the following categories:

1840-44: the Early Works.

1845: the Works of the Break.

1845-57: the Transitional Works.

1857-83: the Mature Works.<sup>3</sup>

Althusser's attempts to root Hegel and the dialectic out of Marxism brought him under considerable attack, an attack that was strongly supported by the publication of the *Grundrisse*, which made available to the general public the integrated character of Marx's economic and philosophic ideas. Althusser, however, was not to be put off. He retreated to his final fortress: "When

*Capital* Volume One appeared (1867), traces of the Hegelian influence still remained. Only later did they disappear *completely*: the *Critique of the Gothe Programme* (1875) as well as the *Marginal Notes on Wagner's 'Lehrbuch der politischen Oekonomie'* (1882) are *totally and definitively exempt* from any trace of Hegelian influence."<sup>4</sup>

In the whole body of tens of volumes of Marx's works, these two pieces are all that remain that are truly Marxist. (I should note that what an earlier Stalinism attempted to do by the distortion and misinterpretation of Marx and other Marxists, while proclaiming absolute fidelity to the letter and spirit of Marx, Althusser accomplishes much more openly by challenging the texts head on.) For the rest, one dare not take Marx's word for what he says or means. One needs Althusser as a guide. Ordinarily one would not have to take this nonsense seriously. What is interesting, however, is that what is presumptuous and arrogant in relation to studying Marx has a certain validity in studying Althusser, because in fact, it is difficult to take Althusser literally. Althusser, for example, occasionally displays an absence of scruples in dealing with facts, quotations, and ideas. To put it plainly, he is unscrupulous.

For example: "Lenin's 'Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary practice.'<sup>5</sup> And "When Lenin said 'without theory, no revolutionary action' . . ."<sup>6</sup> What Althusser is quoting with such gay abandon is the following: "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement."<sup>7</sup> Althusser has taken a statement that a political movement cannot exist without a theory and transformed it into the totally idealist nonsense that practice or activity cannot take place without theory.

For example: "During the Chinese Revolution, the principal force was the workers (even though they were few in number compared to the peasants).<sup>8</sup> This is simply false. From the time of the Long March

when the Chinese Communist Party retreated from the cities to the isolated countryside, until after the seizure of power in 1948-49, the contact of the Party with workers was either non-existent or marginal.<sup>9</sup> Althusser simply creates facts to sustain his politics.



Well-known Humanist

For example: "By *practice* in general I shall mean any process of *transformation* of a determinate given raw material into a determinate *product* . . ."<sup>10</sup> "As we have seen, every transformation of a raw material into products . . ."<sup>11</sup> "What is this but intellectual fakery? Althusser frequently states something and then later refers to it as if proven or generally accepted.<sup>12</sup>

There is one other element in Althusser's writings that needs to be mentioned. There is a distinct tendency toward bombastic writing, toward the invention of new terms to replace perfectly usable old ones, toward phrasing banalities and commonplaces to make them sound like significant principles. The result is an obscurantism which, if not deliberate, nevertheless serves the function of limiting any criticism of his ideas.<sup>13</sup>

Substantively, one of the crucial points of attack on Hegel and the dialectic is Althusser's rejection of the negation of the negation and, in effect, the substitution of criticism

and self-criticism. "The same Hegelian influence comes to light in the imprudent formulation in Chapter 32 of Volume One Part VIII, where Marx, discussing the 'expropriation of the expropriators,' declares '*It is the negation of the negation.*' Imprudent, since its ravages have not yet come to an end, despite the fact that Stalin was right, for once, to suppress 'the negation of the negation' from the laws of the dialectic . . ."<sup>14</sup> Along with, and often lumped with, the rejection of the negation of the negation is the rejection of *Aufhebung*, a key concept in Hegel and in Marx variously translated as transcendence, supersession, etc., and alienation. Criticism and self-criticism Althusser has called "the golden rule of the Marxist-Leninist practice of the class struggle."<sup>15</sup> This last was the simultaneous contribution of Mao and of Stalin (through his commissar of culture, Zhdanov).<sup>16</sup>

As is evident from Marx's use of the term, the negation of the negation relates to the revolution itself.<sup>17</sup> It is the logical statement that all significant social categories are torn apart by contradiction (negation), contradiction that is inherent in and internal to the system, and that the ultimate destruction of the system is the result of these internal forces and leads to its transcendence, to the creation of a new category (or system), that, however, embodies the old. In relation to capitalist society, it locates the forces of revolution within the economic structure of society, in the relations of production, in the working class, and defines the revolution as not simply the "inversion" (a favorite word of Althusser's) of capitalists and workers but their mutual destruction and absorption into the categories of a new society based on totally different relations of production. It is this definition of the revolution that is unacceptable to Althusser because it is thereby removed from the absolute control of the Communist Party.

In its place we have the "law" of criticism and self-criticism which Zhdanov introduced as the law of

motion of socialist society and which Althusser expands to cover the practice of the class struggle. Why this interest in criticism and self-criticism? To begin with, it replaces a materialist conception with an idealist conception. Instead of placing the source of movement, of development, of struggle, of change, in the objective forces existing in society, it places the source of movement in discussion and debate, in party decisions and programs. (Of course, that is viewing it at its best. In point of fact, criticism and self-criticism has a very specific meaning in the Communist movement — the leadership criticizes and lower levels of leadership and the membership engage in self-criticism.) In short, the proletariat is eliminated as the fundamental revolutionary force (although not, of course, in May Day speeches or Party manifestoes) and replaced by the Party, insuring the conservative stability of the movement. The "suppression" of the negation of the negation is necessary to subordinate history, that is, the revolution, to the Communist Party.

But criticism and self-criticism had a more immediate purpose when it was introduced — to remove the Soviet Union from the functioning of dialectical-historical laws. If dialectics indicates that all change and development stems from contradiction, and that in society contradiction is fundamentally the struggle between classes, what does one do in a "classless" society? The application of dialectics and the relevance of the class struggle is too obvious in a society governed by totalitarian violence. So a new law is invented that brings everything under control and subordinates conflict to the dictates of the Party leadership. Mao found that law useful in China, but also added some trimming: principal contradiction, principal aspect of a contradiction, antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions. All are designed to do the same thing as the law of criticism and self-

criticism — turn attention away from the self-development of society, from struggles objectively rooted in class contradiction, and place reliance in the judgment of the Party. It is not surprising that Althusser is warmly receptive to Mao's philosophical innovations and assures us that there is not a trace of Hegel in them.

The same dual concern is involved in Althusser's considerable interest in *Capital*. In the first place, Althusser attempts to "read" Marx and Lenin in such a way that they mean the opposite of what they say. Marx gives him difficulty by acknowledging his debt to Hegel in both form and content in *Capital*. Althusser (whose arrogance is spectacular) takes the bull by the horns and simply defines the "Hegelian" sections of *Capital* as non-Marxist. Lenin also gives him difficulty by insisting that "It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!"<sup>19</sup> Althusser reinterprets Lenin so that he was more of a Marxist and dialectician before he studied Hegel than after.<sup>20</sup> But the concern with *Capital* is not simply based on the need to attack the dialectical method which informs it. It is also based on the need to defend the existing structure of the Soviet Union.

In a preface to a French edition of volume one of *Capital*, Althusser proposes that *Capital* not be read as it was written.

I therefore urge on the reader the following method of reading:

1. Leave Part I (Commodities and Money) deliberately on one side in a first reading.
2. Begin reading Volume One with its Part II (The Transformation of Money into Capital).

3. Read carefully Parts II, III (The Production of Absolute Surplus-Value) and IV (The Production of Relative Surplus-Value).

4. Leave Part V (The Production of Relative and Absolute Surplus-Value) on one side.

5. Read carefully Parts VI (Wages), VII (The Accumulation of Capital) and VIII (The So-Called Primitive Accumulation).

6. Finally, begin to read Part I (Commodities and Money) with infinite caution, knowing that it will always be extremely difficult to understand, even after several readings of the other Parts, without the help of a certain number of deeper explanations.<sup>21</sup>

These distortions of *Capital* have an interesting predecessor. In 1943 there appeared in the Soviet Union an authoritative article entitled, "Teaching of Economics in the Soviet Union."<sup>22</sup> The unsigned article, appearing in *Under the Banner of Marxism*, indicated that the teaching of economics had been halted and was now being resumed on the basis of a new approach to *Capital*, one which abandoned Marx's own structure and substituted a new arrangement of the material. The problem was that a straightforward reading of *Capital*, with its emphasis on the social relationships of production and the law of value, was embarrassingly relevant to the nature of Russian society, with its class divisions.<sup>23</sup> Since *Capital* could not be destroyed altogether, the next best step was to distort it into an ahistorical, structural analysis. How important this was is indicated by the fact that the teaching of economics was literally brought to a halt in the Soviet Union until the task of revising *Capital* could be accomplished.

Althusser's concern for the proper reading of *Capital* conforms to his dual interest: to root dialectical materialism out of Marxism and to defend Russian state capitalism as a socialist society.

Very much the same is involved in Althusser's famous (and much overrated) concept of "overdetermination." In his essay, "Contradiction and overdetermination," Althusser lays the basis for his new concept by flagrantly distorting Hegel by a play on the word "simple." Pretending that Hegel's conception of contradiction was simple, Althusser counterposes the Marxist view of a complex social totality, consisting of contradictions on various levels, generally, economic base and superstructure. He then presents Engels' statement in a famous letter to J. Bloch of September 21, 1890. Says Althusser:

Listen to the old Engels in 1890, taking the young "economists" to task for not having understood that this was a *new relationship*. [The emphasis on "new relationship" is a typical Althusserian distortion — there is no justification for the term in Engels.] Production is the determinant factor, but only "*in the last instance*": "*More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted.*" Anyone who "*twists this*" so that it says that the economic factor is *the only* determinant factor, "*transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, empty phrase.*" And as explanation: "*The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — the political forms of the class struggle and its results: to wit constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their fur-*

*ther development into systems of dogmas — also exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles, and in many cases preponderate in determining their form . . .*" The word "*form*" should be understood in its strongest sense, designating something quite different from the formal.<sup>24</sup>

This last sentence is another example of Althusserian fakery — no one would assume that by form, Engels meant formal — but the issue is confused enough so that there is a chance that one might think what Althusser wants one to think, that form means content. Because what Althusser is doing is taking a widely known correction or modification which simply says that the economic basis is not all, and reinterpreting it to mean that the economic basis is not anything, that the superstructure is all.

Here, then are the two ends of the chain: the economy is determinant, but *in the last instance*, Engels is prepared to say, in the long run, the run of History. But History "asserts itself" through the multiform world of the superstructure, from local tradition to international circumstances. Leaving aside the *theoretical solution* Engels proposes for the problem of the relation between determination *in the last instance* — the economic — and those determinations imposed by the superstructures — national traditions and international events — it is sufficient to retain from him what should be called the *accumulation of effective determinations* (deriving from the superstructures and from the special national and international circumstances) *on the determination in the last instance by the economic*. It seems to me that this clarifies the expression *overdetermined contradiction*, which I have put forward. . . . We

must carry this through to its conclusion and say that this overdetermination does not just refer to apparently unique and aberrant historical situations (Germany, for example), but is *universal*: 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.<sup>25</sup>

One stands in awe of such arrogance that in two pages can transform the meaning of Engels into its opposite. Overdetermination, then, is the replacement of the general laws of development of capitalism by the universal law of national exceptionalism. Overdetermination takes the revolution out of the economic system, that is, out of the sphere of the social relations of production, and places it purely in the superstructure, that is, in politics. In doing this, of course, it transforms the revolution from a social revolution to a political revolution and it replaces the proletariat with the Party as the prime mover. (This helps to explain Althusser's astonishing statement of "Marx's principal *positive* debt to Hegel: the concept of a *process without a subject*."<sup>26</sup> How helpful — a proletarian revolution without the proletariat!)

The cause of the revolution has now become the special, unique, overdeterminations of the superstructure, not the class struggle at the economic base. The revolution takes place in a particular place, not because the working class is exploited and alienated in the process of production, but because of exceptional political and ideological circumstances. These exceptional circumstances no longer simply

modify the form that the revolution takes, they determine the fact of revolution itself. The revolution is no longer rooted in objective necessity (material conditions) but in ideal contingencies. Philosophical idealism is restored and, with it, the ruling position of the Communist Parties.

One does not have to search far for the practical political significance of these theoretical distortions. Concluding his essay on "Contradiction and Overdetermination," Althusser says:

How, then, are we to *think these survivals*? Surely, with a number of *realities*, which are precisely *realities* for Marx, whether superstructures, ideologies, "national traditions" or the customs and "spirit" of a people, etc.? Surely with *the overdetermination of any contradiction and of any constitutive element of a society, which means*: (1) that a revolution in the *structure* does not *ipso facto* modify the existing superstructures and particularly the ideologies at one blow (as it would if the economic was the *sole determinant factor*), for they have sufficient of their own consistency to *survive beyond their immediate life context*, even to recreate, to "secrete" substitute conditions of existence temporarily; [Please note: "temporarily" means 57 years and still going strong and a revolution can take place which does not modify the state (superstructure) at one blow.] (2) that the new society produced by the Revolution may itself *ensure the survival, that is, the reactivation*, of older elements through both the forms of its new superstructures and specific (national and international) "circumstances." Such a reactivation would be totally inconceivable for a dialectic deprived of overdetermination. [How

true!] I shall not evade the most burning issue: it seems to me that either the whole logic of "supersession" must be rejected, or we must give up any attempt to explain how the proud and generous Russian people bore Stalin's crimes and repression with such resignation; how the Bolshevik Party could tolerate them; not to speak of the final question — how a Communist leader could have ordered them.<sup>27</sup>

There you have it. If the revolution takes place in the process of production and involves, above all else, a transformation (transcendence, supersession) of social relations in the process of production, and the superstructure (state form) is subordinate to that, it becomes possible to say that Stalin's crimes reflect a counter-revolution, of tremendous violence, which eliminated the Russian working class from any remnants of control over their society. But if the revolution is defined as taking place in the superstructure and is characterized not by transcendence but by a structural break (a favorite expression of Althusser's is "epistemological break"), then one can ignore the historical reality of Russian developments and pretend that socialism consists of nationalization (no matter who controls the nationalized industry) and Soviets (no matter who controls the Soviets). Stalinism is then seen as an aberration on a fundamentally sound structure instead of the *process* of the *counter-revolution* in which economic base (social relations of production) and superstructure (totalitarian state) are reasonably in tune with each other. And, incidentally, a criticism of Stalin is simply the form of a defense of Stalinism.

These are doctrines which support the bureaucratic status quo. Structure replaces historical development ("historicism" is one of Althusser's expletives). Social categories no longer have any life or development. They are ahistorical, eternal. Since the existing social

structure is a given (much in the manner of bourgeois sociology), it becomes possible for Althusser to accept or defend the Russian suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Theoretically, revolution in Hungary cannot exist in Althusser's system of ideas. Practically, of course, Althusser simply transforms it into its opposite, calling revolution counter-revolution and counter-revolution, revolution. (It is intriguing that Althusser rejects the dialectical conception of the transformation of categories into their opposites, which might help to explain the transformation of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party, or the modern trade union from organs of working class struggle into instruments of oppression or domination over the working class. Yet he manages to perform the magical transformation in his own undialectical way.)

What directly serves to support the status quo in societies dominated by the Communist Party, indirectly supports the status quo in the rest of the world, if not the specific social structure of capitalist society. An integral part of Althusser's views is his conception of party and organization. In a discussion of the French events of 1968 he wants the rebellious youth "to confront, in precise terms, the problem which at present torments them: the problem of the *necessity of organization* (because they sense, and some of them even know, that no political action is possible without *organization*).<sup>28</sup>

To begin with, two orders of deception are involved here. The first is the distortion of Lenin on organization indicated above.<sup>29</sup> The second is the distortion of historical events. "What happened," in May 1968, says Althusser, "was an historical *encounter*, and not a fusion. An encounter may occur or not occur. It can be a 'brief encounter,' *relatively* accidental, in which case it will not lead to any *fusion* of forces. This was the case in May, where the meeting between workers/employees on the one hand and students and young intellectual

workers on the other was a brief encounter which did not lead, for a whole series of reasons I will mention very briefly and very generally, to any kind of *fusion*.”<sup>30</sup> Nowhere does Althusser mention that a significant reason for the limitation of this encounter was the positive intervention of the French Communist Party to seal off the workers over whom they had some influence and organizational control from contact with the students.

But apart from deception there is the matter of methodology. Althusser views historic encounter in purely structural and party terms. How else can he call several weeks of street battles between students and police, followed by the occupation of the factories by virtually the entire French working class — a relatively accidental brief encounter? He cannot see the objective character of massive historical events. He can only see them (positively or negatively) when formally structured, which is to say, controlled by parties and unions. He sees spontaneity as the enemy contained in the dialectic, even the spontaneous formation of organs of struggle or new state forms (Soviets, workers councils). Althusser is all for revolution, (1) provided it does not take place in the "socialist" countries and, (2) provided, in the capitalist countries, that it is not revolutionary. The role of the French Communist Party in limiting and suppressing the revolution of 1968 corresponds perfectly in practice to Althusserian philosophy in theory.

What Althusserian philosophy makes it impossible to see is the dialectical development of working class organization and revolutionary struggle. If the difference between the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Soviets of 1905 and 1917, and the Hungarian workers councils of 1956 are simply overdeterminations, that is, historical accidents, then they provide little guide to revolutionary theory. If, however, these differences correspond to stages of development of capitalism and the working class (both of

which were essentially international to Marx and Lenin), then they indicate the need to continue the development of Marxist theory and practice. If Lenin's view in *What Is To Be Done?* (even when not distorted) is taken as an eternally fixed absolute, the past, the present, and the future become unintelligible. What does one understand about the nature of Marx's Communist League? Was it simply a mistake? Or was it simply pre-history? And what of the First International, a very different type of organization than the Third International? If Lenin's vanguard party is not an eternal verity, does it become necessary to discuss new forms of organization in terms of the historical necessities (not accidents) that appeared in Hungary in 1956 and in France in 1968?

It is interesting to contrast Althusser's method with the method of Marx and Lenin. The Marxian classics on the state and revolution are Marx on the Commune and Lenin on the Soviets. That is to say, Marx and Lenin started with the spontaneous, creative outburst of the working class and based their theory and the expansion of their theory on that. There is no room in Althusser's philosophy for the historical fact that Paris workers invented the commune before Marx wrote its history, and Russian workers invented Soviets before Lenin wrote *State and Revolution*.

In letters to an Italian Communist, Althusser raises an interesting question in relation to the French events of 1968. He asks, "Why have the Communist Parties, who after all are represented among the students by their own organizations, lost practically all contact with the student youth, to the extent that they were left behind by the latter's spontaneous actions and ideology in May?"<sup>31</sup>

(Let me note parenthetically: the openness and honesty of this question, which is so attractive to non-Party radicals, is deceptive. Nowhere does he attempt an answer, other than to lecture students on their backwardness, petty bour-

geois ideology, etc. Nowhere does he ask the crucial companion question: why was the Communist Party of France, which, after all, is represented among the workers by its own organizations and by control of the CGT, one of the major union federations, left behind by the spontaneous actions and ideology of the workers in May?)

It is possible to give a simple answer to the question Althusser asks and the question he does not ask. The Communist Party has become a bulwark of the status quo. In the context of a discussion of Althusser's system of ideas, however, a related and more general question needs to be raised. Is a structuralist version of Marxism a useful tool in analyzing the role of the party in the industrial world? Does a dialectical materialism which acknowledges its debt to Hegel provide a significantly better methodology?

In the confines of a short paper it is easy to give the impression of dialectical materialism as some alternate, monolithic system. Clearly, with any methodology, individuals can reach varying and contradictory conclusions, the validity of which must be tested in practice. I say this by way of introduction to *one* dialectical analysis of the developing role of organization in relation to the working class in capitalist society. I do not intend this example to exclude other possibilities, possibilities which I can not treat within these limits.

In 1948 the West Indian Marxist, C. L. R. James, did an informal study of Hegel and Marxism which was later called *Notes on Dialectics*.<sup>32</sup> Its purpose was to emphasize the continuing relevance of dialectical materialism and its usefulness in studying the problems of revolution and organization. Some extracts will indicate something of what is involved, although these are disconnected fragments. James quotes Hegel from *The Phenomenology of Mind*:

'In my view — a view which the developed exposition of the system can alone

justify — everything depends on grasping and expressing the ultimate truth not as Substance but as Subject as well.'

That is to say, scientific method cannot examine the object alone but must at the same time and equally examine the categories with which it examines the object. . . .

The truth is what you examine it with; both are in process of constant change. What Marxists considered a Workers State, a revolutionary international, a reformist international, in 1871, cannot be the same in 1905, in 1923, and in 1948. . . .

The subject is a constant negativity. It assumes a constant change. When it looks at something it sees it and sees the negative in it which will be positive tomorrow, thus constantly developing new categories, which correspond to the changing object.

. . . 33

Now the Hegelian logic would begin by saying: when you looked at the categories in 1889, at the time that the 2nd International propounded them did you *know in advance* that its categories had within them the inherent power of moving forward in the direction of something new, a new organization of consciousness, a new party, and had at the same time in them the tendency to become their opposite? If you didn't know that, he would say, you don't know the beginning of dialectic. The object was proletarian and, further, revolutionary and socialistic. . . .

So that the proletarian categories would be fundamentally proletarian. But they could swing to their opposite, i.e., become permeated through and through with a capitalist content, as far as that was possible without smashing the initial con-

cept of the proletariat as proletariat. Or the consciousness would move further along the road of finding truer, more rich, more clear, i.e., more concrete, categories of its own truly proletarian nature, its unending fight against capital. It would develop its notion of itself, and therefore see the initial stage it had reached more clearly. The 2nd International was one strong knot. After conflict, a new strong knot would be the 3rd International. *But* — a Hegelian would say as soon as the 3rd International was formed, I would *know* that the same conflict of tendencies existed inside of it, and would go on until the proletariat found its true self, i.e., got rid of capitalism, whereupon it would not be proletariat at all, but a new organism. Every new stage marked a wider, deeper, more concrete notion and therefore a clearer grasp of the actual stage of existence of the proletariat. He would know all this in 1889, though he would not be certain when the new organism, *i.e.*, socialism, would come. But until it came this process would go on. 34

It is obvious that the conflict of the proletariat is between itself as object and itself as consciousness, its party. The party has a dialectical development of its own. The solution of the conflict is the fundamental abolition of this division. The million in the Communist Party in France, the 2V4 millions in Italy, their domination of the Union movement, all this shows that the proletariat wants to abolish this distinction which is another form of the capitalist division between intellectual and manual labor. The revolutionary party of this epoch will be organized labor itself

and the revolutionary petty-bourgeoisie. The abolition of capital and the abolition of the distinction between the proletariat as object and the proletariat as consciousness will be one and the same process. That is our *new notion* and it is with those eyes that we examine what the proletariat is in actuality. . . . 35

The party as we have known it must disappear. It will disappear. It is disappearing. It will disappear as the state will disappear. The whole laboring population becomes the state. *That is the disappearance of the state.* It can have no other meaning. It withers away by *expanding* to such a degree that it is transformed into its opposite. And the party does the same. The state withers away and the party withers away. But for the proletariat the most important, the primary, is the withering away of the party. For if the party does not wither away, the state never will. 36

Eight years before the Hungarian Revolution, in which the Hungarian working class as a whole created workers councils, 20 years before the French Revolution, in which the French working class as a whole occupied the factories of France, the Marxist dialectic, informed by a study of Hegel, indicated, in the necessarily abstract forms of theoretical analysis, the general shape of things to come, a shape made concrete by the European working class.

All theory must be tested in practice. It is not too difficult to compare. The theory of overdeterminations leaves Althusser wondering about the crimes of Stalin and why the students of France left the Communist Party behind. A dialectical materialism that accepts its Hegelian heritage finds itself in correspondence with the major social upheavals of the post-World War II world and provides an instrument for the study of the reality of revo-

lution in the modern world.

Early in the paper I indicated that I viewed Althusserian theory as essentially Stalinist. It is, however, a Stalinism that conforms to the needs of the post-Stalin era, the era of "many roads to socialism," of irreparable cracks in the monolithic structure of the Communist movement under Stalin. Althusser provides a theory useful to differing Communist parties. But it remains Stalinist in that it provides theoretical justification for party programs; it seeks to subordinate the historical process to the requirements of party and state organizations; and it resorts to the distortion and manipulation of facts and ideas to maintain its influence. It is deeply conservative. And it puts obstacles in the way of seeing the truly revolutionary currents that exist in the modern world.

#### Footnotes

1. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London (Alien Lane, The Penguin Press), 1969, p. 167.
2. "It should be added that Althusser uses the word 'practice' indiscriminately for all kinds of human activity ('theoretical practice,' 'ideological practice,' 'productive practice,' etc.), without explaining what 'practice' in general means: all he suggests is that it means simply anything that people are doing in whatever domain. One can understand his attempt to explain to the leaders of the French Communist Party that they are wrong to compel its ideologists to participate in 'political practice,' i.e., to distribute leaflets rather than writing, since, he says, to write theoretical works is a kind of 'practice' too. But it seems that it could be explained in another way, without depriving the word 'practice' of specific meaning. The traditional Marxist distinction and the opposition of 'practice' and 'theory' be-

comes obviously pointless if 'practice' means simply any activity. I don't maintain that this distinction cannot be criticized; perhaps it is wrongly conceived. But Althusser does not even try to show that there is something wrong with it. He simply does not seem to realize that this distinction has ever existed in the Marxist tradition." Leszek Kolakowski, "Althusser's Marx," in, Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register 1971*, London (The Merlin Press), 1971, p. 127, footnote 1.

3. *For Marx*, p. 35.
4. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London (New Left Books), 1971, p. 90. Emphasis in original.
5. *For Marx*, p. 166.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
7. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, Moscow (Foreign Languages Publishing House), 1961, p. 369.
8. Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *Letters From Inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser*, London (New Left Books), 1973, p. 52. (Letter from Althusser to M. A. Macciocchi.)
9. See Ygael Gluckstein, *Mao's China*, London (George Alien & Unwin Ltd.), 1957, chap. XI, and Martin Glaberman, "Mao as a Dialectician," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, March 1968.
10. *For Marx*, p. 166. Emphasis in original.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
12. "Althusser often formulates a general statement and then quotes it later and then refers to it by saying 'we showed' or 'it was proved' . . ." Leszek Kolakowski, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
13. "I will argue that the whole of Althusser's theory is made up of the following elements: 1. common sense banalities

expressed with the help of unnecessarily complicated neologisms . . ." L. Kolakowski, *op. cit.*, p. 112. There is a rather interesting resemblance between Althusser's stylistic method and that of the American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, who has also been charged with obscurantism in the pursuit of theoretical justification for the status quo.

14. *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 91.  
". . . for the Hegelian dialectic, too, is teleological in its structures, since the key structures of the Hegelian dialectic is the *negation of the negation*, which is the teleology itself, within the dialectic. That is why the question of the structures of the dialectic is the key question dominating the whole problem of a materialist dialectic. That is why Stalin can be taken for a perceptive Marxist philosopher, at least on this point, since he struck the negation of the negation from the 'laws' of the dialectic." Althusser, *Politics and History*, London (New Left Books), 1972, p. 181.
15. *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 164.
16. See Martin Glaberman, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-111.
17. *Capital*, pp. 836-837.
18. See C. L. R. James, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, Detroit (Facing Reality), 1969, pp. 98-101.
19. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 38, Moscow (Foreign Languages Publishing House), 1961, p. 180.
20. "Lenin Before Hegel," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, pp. 107, 109.
21. *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 85.
22. An English translation by Raya Dunayevskaya appeared in *American Economic Review*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3, Sept. 1944.
24. *For Marx*, pp. 111-112. Emphasis in original.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113. Emphasis in original.
26. *Politics and History*, p. 185.

- Emphasis in original.
27. *For Marx*, pp. 115-116. Emphasis in original.
  28. *Letters From Inside the Italian Communist Party*, p. 319.
  29. For a somewhat fuller statement of the distortion of Lenin on the role of the party, see Martin Glaberman, "Toward an American Revolutionary Perspective," *Insurgent Sociologist*, Vol. IV, No. II, Winter 1974.
  30. *Letters From Inside the Italian Communist Party*, p. 307.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
  32. Detroit (Friends of Facing Reality), 1971.
  33. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48. Emphasis in original.
  34. *Ibid.*, p. 57. Emphasis in original.
  35. *Ibid.*, p. 60. Emphasis in original.
  36. *Ibid.*, p. 190. Emphasis in original.

## A tension between the theory

By Don Hamerquist

Louis Althusser, the French Communist Party philosopher, has been an important influence on Marxist theory for the past fifteen years. Though his reputation rests on a series of theoretical essays, Althusser is also a political figure of importance. He represents a left tendency within the phenomenon called Eurocommunism.

Althusser's politics, and certainly his theory, are complex and difficult. This article, an attempt to explore the relationship between the two, is made additionally difficult because at some points Althusser's political stance and his theoretical position are in tension, perhaps even in contradiction. Thus my intentions are limited to opening up some areas of investigation and posing some questions.

My point of departure is Althusser's running commentary on French Eurocommunism. This commentary is contained in a speech on the significance of the 22nd Congress of the French Communist Party (PCF) (*New Left Review*, No. 104); and in a series of critical articles which appeared in *Le Monde* this spring. The *Le Monde* articles were part of the debate over the poor showing of the so-called "Union of the Left" in the recent French general elections. (The selection from Althusser in this issue of *Urgent Tasks* is an excerpt from the *Le Monde* series.) Though these articles deal with issues of general relevance, some knowledge of the crisis of the international Communist movement, an important part of the political environment of the French intellectual left, is helpful in understanding them.

of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956. Within a matter of months this was followed by the Polish and Hungarian uprisings and then the first rumblings of the differences which eventually led to the Sino-Soviet split.

From the beginning the crisis has had two aspects. Both involve critiques of the Soviet Union: as a model of socialist construction; as the leader of an international revolutionary movement; and as the interpreter of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. One center of the crisis has developed around the pole provided by the "Chinese road" and "Mao Tse Tung Thought." Another center, emerging somewhat later, can be roughly characterized as Eurocommunism.

Though there are some parallels between these two centers of opposition to Soviet hegemony in the world communist movement — more in the later period — they are commonly defined by their differences. In fact, until relatively recently they have been more opposed to each other than to the USSR. The initial Chinese polemics were formally directed against "Comrade Togliatti," the Italian communist leader, who was the first prominent advocate of "poly-centrism," the initial manifestation of Eurocommunism.

The Eurocommunists have always been concerned with extending and deepening the critique of Stalin and the Stalin period of Soviet and communist history, while Stalin has come off fairly well in the Chinese attack on the "Khrushchev restoration of capitalism." His dubious policies towards the Chinese Revolution are scarcely mentioned in order to emphasize the errors of the Soviet leadership in the post-Stalin period. Finally, Eurocommunism questions two principles of Marxism-Leninism: the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the related conception of socialism as a transitional period of sharp class struggle. It



Louis Althusser

### Crisis of the International Communist Movement

The crisis came into the open with Khrushchev's famous critique

## and the politics

is well known that the Chinese view any move away from these positions as the essence of modern revisionism.

Most non-communist revolutionaries, particularly outside of Europe, identified with the Chinese position throughout the sixties and early seventies. Chinese opposition to Soviet policy and theory was seen as left and revolutionary; that of the large European parties (notably the Italian) was seen as liberal and reformist. Even within the large communist parties of western Europe there were elements which identified with China. Althusser had such a position. He makes laudatory references to Mao as a philosopher in some of his best-known essays (*For Marx*, pp. 94, 101, 182, 194-195). In his reply to criticisms from John Lewis, the British communist, he asserts that the only genuine "left" critique of Stalinism — as opposed to liberal, "humanist," bourgeois critiques — is that "implied by the course of the Chi-

nese Revolution."

On a more substantial level, Althusser is an important figure in a theoretical tendency on the French left which includes non-PCF and anti-PCF intellectuals such as Charles Bettelheim and Nicos Poulantzas. This tendency is known for its opposition to "economism" and to the so-called "theory of the productive forces."\* This, of course, is the line of the Chinese criticism of Soviet society and Soviet Marxism.

Needless to say, the situation has changed with regard to China. It is becoming increasingly difficult to see it as a revolutionary alternative to the Soviet Union and Soviet Marxism. The serious French intellectuals who were attracted by aspects of Maoism, by the Cultural Revolution, and by the critique of modern revisionism, are moving towards different political ground. Bettelheim has resigned from the Franco-Chinese Friendship chair. Debray and Poulantzas are joining with elements of the PCF (Jean El-

leinstein) and the left section of the Socialist Party to revitalize the political weekly, *Politique Hebdo*. For his part, Althusser is taking up a clear position as a left-wing opposition (possibly not a fully "loyal" opposition) within the Eurocommunism of the PCF. It must be stressed that while Althusser has taken a left stance within Eurocommunism, this is not akin to the pro-Soviet stance of the Portuguese or the U.S. Communist Parties. It took Althusser a long time and much agonizing to break with the old C.P. verities concerning Stalin and the U.S.S.R., but he appears to have made the break. In my view his leftism is more clearly opposed to the Soviet model than is the Eurocommunism of the French and Italian Parties. (See *NLR*, No. 104, pp. 9-10.)

### Estimate of Eurocommunism\*\*

In this country it is easy to interpret Eurocommunism as the final

---

\*Bettelheim's work on the history of the Soviet Union is cast into this framework. The same is true of Poulantzas' book on fascism. While Althusser is not quite so explicit because the object of his writing is philosophy, the parallel is evident in his critical remarks about the Soviet use of the "very ambiguous and (alas) famous *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). . . . I also note that, unfortunately for the same International Communist Movement, Stalin made the 1859 *Preface* his reference text . . ." (*Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 96).

Althusser's criticism of these few paragraphs is that they are very susceptible to an evolutionist interpretation, not to mention their flavor of technological determinism. Stalin, of course, brought all this out in the crudest way and declared it the official historical materialism. (See *Dialectical and Historical Ma-*

*terialism*, pamphlet version, pp. 16-40.)

---

\*\*Even though it is not relevant to this article, one feature of Eurocommunism which is apparently shared by all of the trends in it must be mentioned. By its very title, Eurocommunism raises the specter of Eurocentrism. One of its themes is the potential for socialism in "advanced" metropolitan societies where there is allegedly no need for Preobrazhensky's famous (or notorious) phase of "primitive socialist accumulation." The assumption is that the huge economic advantage of the imperialist metropolis over the rest of the world will continue well into the period of socialist construction.

In the first place, there are real questions about whether any political tendency which lays claim to being revolutionary and internationalist *should* have such a per-

spective. In the second place, it is questionable whether it rests on an accurate assessment of economic trends. In any case, the notion that the wealth of the imperialist centers "belongs" to the workers who accidentally happen to live within the favored nation's borders has been properly handled by Arghiri Emmanuel (*Unequal Exchange*, pp. 424-426).

In order to maximize the appeal of the "socialist goal," the Eurocommunist parties deny the importance of the struggle for economic equality on a world scale. Any talk of the internationalist responsibilities of the metropolitan working classes, in this view, limits the appeal of the affluent socialism which is the main propellant of mass revolutionary consciousness. Clearly the left Eurocommunists would be less likely to descend to complete opportunism on this question as on all others. However, they show little concern about the danger.

descent into social democratic parliamentarism for the major Western European C.P.s. Documents like the Joint Statement of the French and Italian Communist Parties, and, certainly, the commentaries on these documents by such U.S. supporters as Max Gordon, support such a view. (This statement and Gordon's introduction are available as a reprint from *Socialist Revolution*). Eurocommunism is presented as the fetishism of bourgeois parliamentarism; the strategic rejection of armed struggle as a means to power; and, underlying these points, the rejection of the content of the Marxist theory of the state.

How is it, then, that a position such as Althusser's (or Fernando Claudin's for that matter), which is arguably left and revolutionary, can function within such a right-wing framework? The answer is that this official stance is only part of the picture of Eurocommunism. There are distinctions and differences between the French, Spanish, Italian and Japanese variations which allow some latitude for struggle within and between Eurocommunist organizations. Althusser, for example, continually uses the fact of public airing of differences in the Italian party as leverage for his struggle within the French Party. (See *NLR*, No. 104, p. 20.) In addition, certain valuable concepts and approaches have been incorporated into Eurocommunism. For example, the Spanish and the Italian Parties have obviously learned from Gramsci's conception of the struggle for hegemony through a "war of position" (see *Prison Notebooks*, particularly "State and Civil Society"), however onesided they might be in their understanding of Gramsci.

However, the basic reason why Eurocommunism might well have a positive historical impact is that it completely undercuts Soviet domination of the interpretation of revolutionary theory and working class anti-imperialist history. The liberation of Marx and Lenin (Trotsky, Gramsci, Lukacs, and Luxemburg as well) from Soviet Marxism, along with the liberation of the real his-

tory of the working class and anti-imperialist movement from Soviet historiography, is a fact of tremendous importance. It holds the opportunity for the working class to begin to regain its own history and intellectual heritage. Maoism and the Chinese Revolution never really had this potential because along with its challenge to Soviet hegemony was a claim for hegemony for its own position and views. These, in turn, were determined by the requirements of the exercise of power in China, which, unfortunately, do not align exactly with the interests of the world revolution.

Official Eurocommunism, like reformism and revisionism of any type, faces definite problems and limitations. Banishing the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat does not end the reality of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Even if Eurocommunist parties get their coveted place in capitalist governments, and even if some of their policies are enacted, it will not fundamentally alter the condition of the masses of working people spelled out in the famous passage in *Capital*:

... all methods for raising: the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange him from the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion 'as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour-process to a despotism the more hateful for

its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital. But all methods for the production of surplus-value are at the same time methods of accumulation; and every extension of accumulation becomes again a means for the development of those methods. It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the lot of the labourer, be his payment high or low, must grow worse. (*Capital*, Vol. I, p. 604 [Moscow ed.]) Taking into account the objective limits on reformism of any type, it is my opinion that the positive value of Eurocommunism's loosening of the dead hand of Soviet domination of revolutionary politics will be more important than the reformist and revisionist form and content which currently dominate it.

#### **Althusser on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the PCF**

Althusser seems to have a similar conception of the potentials of Eurocommunism, but his conception of its limits is studiously vague. One of the most diplomatic passages from the very diplomatic presentation in the *New Left Review* article illustrates this point:

That is why there is little doubt that in the "abandonment," or rather *symbolic sacrifice* of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the 22nd Congress was killing two birds with one stone. While adopting a new strategy of democratic socialism (a *different* socialism), it in fact adopted a new position with respect to a decisive aspect of the crisis of the international Communist movement (relations with the USSR). The advantage of this new position is that the 22nd Congress gave reasons for think-

ing that it is now at least in part possible to get out of this crisis and its dead ends. Despite its immediate limitations, this initiative may bear fruit. In this perspective, the "abandonment" of the dictatorship of the proletariat has played its part as a symbolic act, making it possible to present in spectacular fashion the break with a certain past, left vague verbally, while opening the road to a *different* socialism from that reigning in the USSR.

All this obviously took place "over the head" of the concept; i.e., of the theoretical meaning of the dictatorship of the proletariat. For the "abandonment" of a theoretical concept (which, need it be said, cannot be thought by itself, all alone, but is bound up with a set of other concepts) cannot be the object of a political decision. Since Galileo every materialist has known that the fate of a scientific concept, which is the objective reflection of a real problem with many implications, cannot be the object of a political decision. The dictatorship of the proletariat can be "abandoned": it will be rediscovered as soon as we come to speak of the state and socialism. (*NLR*, No. 104, p. 10) Of course Althusser realizes that the abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat is not so innocently symbolic — that it holds consequences for Eurocommunist politics which go beyond the PCF's attitude towards the USSR. Indeed, he quickly "discovers" these consequences when he moves to a consideration of the PCF's conception of socialism as "... a society governed by generalized democracy and the generalized satisfaction of needs." (*Ibid.*, p. 15) Althusser criticizes this conception as a mixture of economism and utopianism. As an alternative he argues that socialism is "... a contradictory per-

iod of transition between capitalism and communism." (*Ibid.*) His point is that without a conception of the transitional nature of socialism (and thus the continuation of class struggle within it), the hostility of Marxism to all states — the state as such is repressive and oppressive — is lost. From here it is not so far to the Soviet position. "With us, the withering away of the state is achieved via its reinforcement." (*Ibid.*, p. 18) Thus the PCF abandonment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, offered as a break with Soviet Marxism on the level of theory, conceals premises about the nature of socialism and the role of the state that are not so far removed from Soviet practice.

The treatment of the PCF's position on this question follows the general pattern of Althusser's article. Beginning from an asserted agreement with the official PCF stand, he moves more or less quickly to questions and arguments which cast doubt on the significance of the "agreement." After welcoming six "historical initiatives," he manages to point out some element of basic error with each of them. In no instance does he say that the error compromises the "initiative," although in most of the cases, e.g., the one treated above, this would seem to be the case.

The political (in the bad sense) approach of the article is demonstrated most clearly in the section dealing with the PCF itself, the 6th, and final, "initiative." Presumably this "initiative" is advanced ironically, since Althusser's argument is that it is notable mainly through its absence. "The 22nd Congress spoke the language of freedom for the outside, but remained silent about the inside." (*Ibid.*) "... [T]he same Communist party that speaks so generously and amply of liberty for the people, remains silent about the current practices of democratic centralism, i.e., the concrete forms of the liberty of Communists in their own Party." (*Ibid.*, p. 9) As mentioned earlier, Althusser makes the same

point by noting with obvious approval that, "... in certain neighboring Communist Parties, the leaders themselves at Central Committee meetings publicly confront their different and sometimes divergent opinions on the policy to be pursued." (*Ibid.*, p. 20)

These observations sound like a promising beginning for an analysis of the structure and function of a revolutionary party. Unfortunately, with the exception of one isolated passage which we will consider later, Althusser does not even move in that direction. Instead, as soon as the questions of open debate and "liberty" raise the issue of factionalism, Althusser collapses.

A frequent criticism of Althusser's theoretical work is that there is all sorts of tedious substantiation of relatively minor points, while some major points rest on nothing but bald assertion. Here we have an example. With no substantiation or elaboration whatsoever he asserts that "Lenin was against factions." (*Ibid.*) This is the key to his entire argument. There is nothing else advanced to support the conclusion; i.e., factions are out, as are "organized tendencies," because, "Today, the party expects something else, and it is right." (*Ibid.*, p. 21) What is Althusser's remedy for the lack of discussion and debate? It is nothing but "real discussions." However, we are moving ahead of ourselves. How valid is Althusser's attempt to call on the prestige of Bolshevik tradition to support his view? In fact, it is not valid at all. Of course, Lenin opposed factions whose political positions were, in his opinion, wrong. But the thrust of the opposition was directed at the position. He also was in opposition to narrow factional methods of work, because these methods inhibited the broadest possible participation of the party in debate. Finally Lenin did support the ban on factions that the Soviet Communist party enacted in 1921, almost four years after the revolution, but Althusser does not view

this ban correctly.\*\*\*

Of course, Lenin's positions are not decisive. Althusser has lots of company in his opposition to factions, and his argument must be dealt with on its merits. Althusser asks, "Shall we say: factions, no; tendencies, yes?" After a bit of soul-searching he answers, "Not

\*\*\*For substantial periods of time in pre-revolutionary Russia, the Bolsheviks were the Bolshevik *faction* in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. Perhaps this might be viewed as an accidental and transitional situation, but there were also factions within the Bolsheviks. Lenin participated in a faction during the split with the "Ostvosists," who were also Bolsheviks. Lenin's position was a small minority within the Bolsheviks at the time of the famous April Theses in early 1917. Both then and a few months later when he was also in a minority on the question of seizing power, Lenin operated in a manner that can only be regarded as factional — developing a group around his position, taking his minority positions directly to the party rank and file, and even outside of the party to the working class, threatening resignation, etc.

The framework for such activity was laid out ten years earlier in Lenin's brief article, "Unity of Action and Freedom to Criticize" (*Collected Works*, Vol. 10, pp. 442-443):

The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organizations implies universal and full *freedom to criticize* (including outside of the party — d.h.), so long as this does not disturb the unity of a *definite action*, (p. 443) This guideline is ambiguous. It can be debated whether or not — or to what degree — open criticism will undermine the implementation of decisions. Lenin's tendency, however, was to lean towards the "freedom to criticize" side.

It can be argued that Lenin's views changed when the Bolsheviks

organized tendencies, but real discussions which are not confined to Congress periods\*\*\*\* but go on, as a function of Congresses and the problems they pose." (*Ibid.*)

Althusser's position is Utopia. The PCF is a substantial organization. There is something real and important at stake in its contests

had to deal with the problems of civil war, socialist construction, and imperialist encirclement. After all, Lenin did support the ban on factions imposed by the 10th Party Congress in 1921. It is a mistake, however, to draw general conclusions from this without examining the actual debate. After all, during the same period we can find Lenin saying, "Industry is indispensable, democracy is not." (*Ibid.*, Vol. 32, p. 27) History demonstrated that this was Stalin's position, but it was not Lenin's.

A reading of the resolutions and the debate at the 10th Congress indicates the outline of Lenin's position. First, his conception of what constitutes a faction is much narrower than the conception of current Marxist-Leninist parties. Second, he explicitly argues that the measures for dealing with factions (point 7 of the draft resolution on party unity) were extraordinary and temporary. (*See Ibid.*, p. 258.) They have since become routine even for parties that are insignificant pressure groups operating in complete legality. Third, his opposition to factionalism always stressed that the danger posed was the elimination of open discussion and debate, not just the undermining of "iron unity."

Analyses of the Party's general line, estimates of its practical experience, check-ups on the fulfillment of its decisions, studies of methods of rectifying errors, etc., must under no circumstances be submitted for preliminary discussion to groups formed on the basis of "platforms," etc. (factions — d.h.) but must in all cases be submitted for discussion directly

over policy and personnel questions. It is absurd to expect that the entrenched leadership of the PCF would allow it to become an organizational embodiment of pure reasoned debate when a possible outcome is the undermining or even the overthrowing of their political (continued on page 44)

to *all the members* of the party. (*Ibid.*, p. 243) (d.h. emphasis)

Fourth, Lenin's overriding concern with bureaucracy in the Soviet state apparatus and in the party made him aware of the danger of factionalism, not just from minorities and oppositions, but on the part of the official leadership. A leadership faction is the routine mode of functioning for present-day Marxist-Leninist organizations. Althusser makes this very criticism of the PCF leadership in the recent articles in *Le Monde*.

However, the clearest demonstration that Lenin did not view the ban on factions as an absolute principle is to be found in his response to Ryazanov's attempt to amend the resolution on party unity to prohibit members of the Central Committee from appealing a Central Committee decision to the party membership; and to prohibit elections to future Central Committees based on factional platforms. Lenin specifically opposed both aspects of Ryazanov's amendment and it was defeated. Of course, the substance of the Ryazanov amendment was actually instituted despite its formal defeat.

\*\*\*\*Most, if not all, Communist Parties only allow debate and discussion on policies for a specified period (perhaps a couple of months) immediately prior to a Congress. Congresses usually are supposed to occur every two years, but are often held less frequently. During this period special procedures for internal discussion are established, directed through the central apparatus.