

ALTHUSSER'S MARX*

Leszek Kolakowski

ALTHUSSER enjoys the reputation of having proposed a new, "structuralist" interpretation of Marx instead of an "historicist" and "humanist" one which had long been dominant and which was mainly based on Marx's early philosophical writings from 1843-45. Althusser himself maintains, without explaining the matter more closely, that he does not hold to the "structuralist" ideology. It would be sterile to discuss this question which seems unimportant and blurred by the ambiguity of the word "structuralism". What matters is whether or not Althusser's interpretation provides another, better understanding of Marx and in what respects it differs from the existing ones.

Althusser's main idea may be briefly summarized as follows: most of the contemporary commentators tried to describe the contents of Marxian doctrine in categories which are specific to the early Marx's philosophy and, especially, interpreted *Capital* as a continuation or development of these early, humanist and historicist tenets. In reality, a radical rupture ("epistemological break") occurring in the year 1845 (*The German Ideology*) separates these early writings from the later ones, especially from *Capital*. This turning point means the passage from "ideology" to "science", a break with Feuerbach's humanist and historicist philosophy and with the Feuerbachian method of criticizing Hegel, in favour of a scientific, structural description of economic reality. The problematic itself is changed: the questions, and not only the answers, typical of Hegelian philosophy are rejected. The content of *Capital* cannot be clarified through the early writings since what is specific in *Capital* is precisely a radical denial of this early "ideological" philosophy. Proper Marxism, the Marxism of *Capital*, does not contain any theory of generic human nature and it does not imply at all that a theory of the historical process may be an empirical theory ultimately reducible to the description of the "concrete human individuals" as proper subjects of history. On the contrary, the object of *Capital* is a theoretically constructed object, a whole that is the

*Louis Althusser. For *Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster, Allen Lane, Penguin Press, p. 272. £2.75.

Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, translated by Ben Brewster, New Left Books, p. 340, £4.00.

product of thinking, where "real subjects" are absent and abstract categories, characteristic of Marx, appear in their place: relations of production, productive forces, exchange value, surplus value. What distinguishes the new scientific theory of history as outlined in *Capital* and other mature works from the Hegelian philosophy of history is not that the former simply introduces, as factors determining historical evolution, productive forces and relations of production in place of the Idea which, through successive self-alienations and self-negations, comes to a fuller and fuller expression of its own hidden truth. For Marxism does not simply imply that different domains of social life differently express the same "basic" reality: it pre-supposes that each of them also has principles of development of its own and that, for this reason, some unevenly developed ingredients of various spheres of social life intervene in any social situation. Every social situation has to be conceived as a global structure where the meaning and the importance of elements are defined by the whole, not as "expressing" the whole but as being submitted to "structural causality". However, there are always in the structure dominant elements and none of them exactly matches the other ones in their level of development.

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; 2. traditional Marxist concepts that are vague and ambiguous in Marx himself (or in Engels) and which remain, after Althusser's explanation, exactly as vague and ambiguous as they were before; 3. some striking historical inaccuracies. I will argue, further, that the rules of interpretation which he proposes are self-contradictory; and, finally, that the whole construction, in spite of the verbal claims to "scientificity" is a gratuitous ideological project intended to preserve a certain traditional model of Marxism typical of Stalinist Communism.

The main design of Althusser reveals an ideological or simply a religious way of thinking. He does not oppose the young Marx to the old one but the young Marx to *the* Marx, thus pre-supposing that in some phases of Marxian thought something may be found that is Marxism *par excellence*, genuine Marxism. The question "whether the Young Marx was already and wholly Marx" (FM, p. 52) or the statement that at a certain moment "the Young Marx did become Marx" (FM, p. 70) are typical of religious thinking and can only be meaningful on the assumption that some texts must, *a priori*, be a revealed source of truth. That Marx during his life changed in some respects and did not change in others we can be certain of in advance, of course, since that is exactly what happens to everybody. And, as in anybody else's case, we may ask what is the proper content of his thinking at a given moment or in a certain period. We may try to

explain how Plato, writing *Protagoras*, differs from Plato writing *Timaeus* and how these differences may be put into an evolutionary schema; but the question *which* lat to-the author of *Protagoras* or the author of *Timaeus* — is the *true* Plato, is devoid of any rational meaning. It has a meaning only in a religious perspective: when theologians (mainly in the epoch of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation) ask about the relation of the Old to the New Testament in these terms (has the New Testament developed or fulfilled or explained the promises of the old—or else has it simply abolished it?) this made sense because it was certain *a priori* that the Revealed Word must be true; the question *which texts* are properly the last Revealed Word was important. In historical thinking this question is not simply irrelevant but it obviously cannot be put in a meaningful way.

Now the difference between "the Young Marx" and "the Marx" or Marx *par excellence* may be reduced in Althusser to the difference between a humanist and historicist ideology on the one hand and anti-humanist and anti-historicist science on the other. One would expect all these terms to be explained in Althusser. But here precisely we are disappointed. About ideology he says (FM, p. 231) that it is a system of representations (images, ideas, myths, concepts) with a logic and a function of their own. This is an extremely obscure formula that may also be applied to the history of philosophy, the history of science, to paranoid delusions or to poetry. There is no reason why it should not be applied to Marx's economic theories. In the sense used by Marx and Engels, the concept of ideology was intended to mean forms of social consciousness which prevent people from realising that their thinking about the world is determined by some conditions which do not depend on them and which are not themselves ingredients of consciousness. In ideological thinking, people imagine that the logic of thinking itself rules their consciousness and they are organically incapable of being aware of the social situations and of the interests which mould their mental work. This concept of ideology as false consciousness or as thinking that cannot be aware of its own sources may indeed be useful, and was applied by Mannheim and other sociologists of knowledge. The defect of the concept, however, is that we never have criteria for stating that a certain theory or doctrine does *not* fall under the concept, even as far as natural science is concerned; nor may we ever be certain that a criticism of ideology is *not* itself ideological. No conceivable means are available for stating that *Capital* is not an ideology in this sense. Certainly, Marx maintained (not only in his famous letter to Ruge, but in *The Poverty of Philosophy* as well, i.e. after the alleged "break") that his own theoretical work was to express the real historical movement, i.e. that he was aware of the social sources of his own thinking and that he was in this sense himself

free from ideology; however, there is no way of finding out beyond doubt that Marx or that anybody who conceives his own thinking as an "expression" of a certain historical process is not deluding himself about the meaning of his own self-consciousness.

Althusser maintains however that Marx's liberation from ideology did not consist in his self-awareness of the social sources of his thinking but in his passage to science. As is well known, the criteria of "scientificity" as applied to the social sciences are extremely vague and no generally accepted set of such criteria exists; hence, one would expect that on this point Althusser would be especially careful to provide some reasonable criteria that would permit the distinction to be made between "scientific" products and "ideological" ones, the more so since his whole interpretation is based on this distinction. But what he says (RC, p. 67) is that "the validity of a scientific proposition as a knowledge was ensured in a determinate scientific practice by the action of particular forms which ensure the presence of scientificity in the production of knowledge, in other words, by specific forms that confer on a knowledge its character as a (true) knowledge". In other words—science is science when it has the form of scientificity! This grotesque statement contains everything we can find in Althusser about how to distinguish scientific work from other kinds of work. He notices that Marx does not put the traditional question about the "guarantee" of knowledge. This is certainly true, but it is not a priori obvious that this fact should be considered as a mark of his peculiar superiority. To be sure, Marx rejected, and not only neglected, the Cartesian epistemological problem because the question itself, according to the ("ideological", not "scientific") Manuscripts of 1844 arises from a false consciousness that cannot realize the conditions of its imaginary independence, the idea of this independence being involved in the question. The validity of such a solution may be arguable but it is not this solution which Althusser is referring to (probably because it would require him to look for support in an "ideological" text). He simply states that the question of criteria does not arise in the sciences because "theoretical practice is indeed its own criterion" (RC, p. 59). An example is mathematics which, in Althusser's view, produces its own criteria of validity without recourse to "external" guarantees. And so, as in many other cases, the crucial questions are eluded. Certainly, one cannot blame Althusser for being unaware of discussions in the mathematical sciences concerning their criteria or validity and for believing that the questions of the foundations of mathematics simply don't exist because everything is settled "in mathematical practice". But even if this simple-minded idea was not erroneous in mathematics, what consequences would follow for the social sciences? Are we to understand that their validity is simply

assured by their "practice" and on what basis is this validity attributed to *Capital* and denied to *The Holy Family*? On what basis can Althusser deny the scientific validity of the theology that has certainly produced "in theological practice" the criteria for legitimating its proposals? No answer. The whole question, which is crucial not only in validating but in giving a meaning to Althusser's interpretation is settled in this sloppy way.¹

Let us see however in what consists, as Althusser puts it, "Marx's immense theoretical revolution" (RC, p. 182) or "the fantastically innovatory character" (RC, p. 75) of his discovery or the "total theoretical revolution" which his theory brought about. Marx, according to Althusser, changed the object itself of political economy. In the chapter devoted to this question, Althusser criticizes the definition of political economy given in the Dictionary of Lalande and he argues that bourgeois economists reduced economic phenomena to human needs and thus produced an anthropological ideology, which was also characteristic of Marx's early writings. For Althusser, it is not needs which define the economic phenomenon and it is not human beings who are the object of political economy. The relations of production are not reducible to inter-subjective relationships: on the contrary they define the social functions of individuals. Nor are human beings the subject of economic processes but the distribution of roles and functions in production (RC, pp. 160-180. This is perhaps what connects Althusser with structuralism insofar as this theory, according to an often-quoted, not very clear formula, states that meaning is given in the relations, while the terms of the relations from the point of view of meaning are indifferent or "conventional".) This explanation is astonishing for two reasons. It is well known that Marx in *Capital* deals with "anonymous" productive processes and that he announces that he will consider human beings only as carriers or embodiments of some economic tendencies functioning independently of the will and intentions of individuals. This is not a rule preceding the analysis of capitalism, but only a repetition, in another version, of the same idea which occurs repeatedly in Marx's thinking, beginning with the Manuscripts of 1844: in capitalist society, human individuals are *in fact* dissolved in anonymous laws of the market, society itself forces them into a particular place in the productive process and deprives them of individuality. This process, described as a form of "reification" is for Marx simply a real phenomenon of capitalist production and the rule in *Capital* on this point is the exact reproduction of the idea of the Manuscripts of 1844. Similarly, there is present in *Capital* the original idea of socialism as a return to the individuality of which ~~people—workers~~ and capitalists alike—have been deprived in a society dominated by exchange value. This is why Marx in *Capital* opposes

socialist individual property to capitalist private property (Capital, Vol. 1, ch. 24, para 7); this is why he repeats many times his old remarks about the *de-humanization* of the worker transformed into a commodity; and why he refers to the inevitable alienation of the producers from their product. Therefore, if the "fantastic innovatory" discovery consists in the idea that in the capitalist economy human individuals don't appear as individuals but as incarnations of abstract categories this discovery was made in 1843. If, however, Althusser is referring to a universal rule which allows us to put aside human beings in any enquiry, then such a rule does not exist in Marx. If it existed, it would only testify to a stronger dependence on Hegel than we usually assume (but Althusser precisely tries to show that this dependence is totally absent in Marx's "mature" works).

The criticism that "anthropological" political economy reduces economic processes to human needs is one of many examples of those vague formulas which Althusser uses to knock down a non-existent adversary. If the theory means that the knowledge of some universal needs is a *sufficient* basis out of which economic laws for all epochs could be deduced, it would be amazingly absurd, to be sure. However, nobody has ever held this view. If it means, on the other hand, that human needs are simply the necessary condition of any economic process, then it is a trivial truth which Marx, incidentally, repeats in Capital by saying that the use value of any product is the necessary (but by no means the sufficient) condition of its exchange value.

Althusser explains the "scientific revolution" in another way. Referring to Engels' Preface to the second volume of Capital and to some remarks of Marx himself, he tries to show that Marx, while constructing the concept of surplus value that was known to Ricardo only in particular forms without being generalized into one notion, made a discovery comparable to those of Lavoisier or Galileo. For, not unlike Priestley who discovered oxygen but was unable to conceptualize his discovery because he was imprisoned in the Phlogiston theory, classical economy discovered surplus value, but lacked the concept required to give to this discovery its theoretical meaning and to grasp its importance. Therefore, Marx is to Smith and Ricardo as Lavoisier is to Priestley, since, owing to the generalized conceptualization of their partial discoveries, he revolutionized the whole science of political economy.

So far Engels and Althusser. The comparison with Galileo and Lavoisier, however, seems very clumsy. By contrast to the Marxian theory of value, the passage from Phlogiston theory to Lavoisier's chemistry, not unlike the passage from Aristotelian physics to the mechanics of Galileo, meant in both cases the passage from speculative and purely qualitative categories to measurable and *empirically*

uerifiable ones. None of these merits are to be found in the concept of exchange value. No doubt, Althusser knows Conrad Schmidt's objection that exchange value is a category which cannot be subjected to measurement (he does not seem to know the more exact forms of this objection repeatedly put by theorists of economics, from Sombart to Joan Robinson). But this is precisely where he sees, oddly enough, the proof of the scientific worth of Marxist theory: exchange value is not measurable because it is not a real thing but the concept of a certain economic relation, and concepts cannot be measured. It might seem that in this explanation any comparison with Galileo and Lavoisier is pointless, but Althusser does not appear to notice it. He is not interested in asking what is the epistemological status of the statement that the exchange value of a commodity is determined by socially necessary labour time: is it an arbitrary definition (which certainly was not Marx's intention), or an empirical statement, and if so how can we control it? It is enough to put these questions to realize that, without answering them, general assertions that the theory of value has created a "new structure" or the "absolute beginning" of a new science are worthless. This does not mean that Marxian theory is worthless, only that those who want to reveal its value must use some other arguments than pointless comparisons with Galileo and the endless repetition of the word "structure."²

In reality there is no doubt that the theory of value is an ideological construction and that it is a new version of the theory of alienation outlined in the 1844 Manuscripts. The whole chronology of Marx's evolution in Althusser's presentation is based on ignorance (1840-44 early "ideological" writings: 1845 "epistemological break"; 1845-57 transitory period; 1857-83 mature works). It has been pointed out by other critics of Althusser and it need only be repeated here, that, unbelievable though it may appear, Althusser cannot have read, while writing his books, Marx's *Grundrisse* (except the Introduction). To be sure, this text, of which the second, easily accessible German edition came out in 1953, was not translated into French until 1968 (except for the Introduction) but this should not be an unsurmountable obstacle for an author who does not fail to remind us (perfectly rightly) that one should read Marx in German and not only in translations, and who is very careful to give us, with Marxist quotations, the German equivalent for the most common words. For anybody who knows the text of the *Grundrisse* to claim that Marx from 1845 onwards stopped thinking about society in the old "ideological" categories of "alienation", "negation", "generic human nature", etc. is so obviously wrong that one wonders how to discuss it seriously. Indeed, the whole theory of man who objectifies but also alienates himself in products that afterwards govern over him as foreign powers,

is repeated in the *Grundrisse* alongside the idea of the future return to man's generic nature and free universality. The *Grundrisse* confirms clearly what may be known from *Capital* itself—that the concept of exchange value is a new elaboration of the concept of the alienated product, or rather the integration of the latter into economic theory. Exchange value is nothing else but the "living labour" of man transformed into an alien force submitted on the market to the anonymous laws of exchange. It is man himself in his objectified and alienated form taking the shape of an autonomous anti-human power. Exchange value is not quantifiable because the meaning of this category is not to explain the movement of prices (prices depend on value but also on several other factors and the relative influence of value—in the Marxian sense—in shaping them is unmeasurable) but to unmask the anti-human character of capitalist production. It is an "ideological" concept in any conceivable meaning of this word.³

"The total theoretical revolution" has however some other aspects. In particular, there are a few concepts which in Althusser give an insight into the content of that revolution—"ideological" concepts of humanism, historicism and empiricism and the "scientific" concept of over-determination.

Althusser does not explain what precise meaning the word "humanism" carries for him but he indicates that he is thinking of the Feuerbachian theory of human nature that is to be restored to man. However, Marx criticized this theory in 1844, at least insofar as it implied a kind of universal inherent in particular human beings. But he never renounced the idea of the "social nature of man" (outlined in the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Law), a nature of which people are deprived as a result of the capitalist organization of labour and of the atomization of society, this being a counterpart of the apparent socialization of life in the form of autonomous economic laws. This last idea is present and repeated many times in *Capital*. In the article "Humanism and Marxism" (FM pp. 221ff, where we do not find any explanation of the concept of "humanism"), Althusser states that now, when the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Soviet Union has come to an end, the new epoch of socialist humanism certainly requires a new organization of life but not the return to the old discredited philosophical anthropology. Needless to say, Althusser does not reflect upon what, in general, "the dictatorship of the proletariat" in the Soviet system means, or on what basis the system could claim such a label, or what the new epoch without dictatorship consists in. He naively accepts the declarations of the Congress of the Soviet Communist Party as valuable theoretical formulations and appears completely satisfied with them. From other passages, one would presume that "humanism" means for Althusser a statement that men,

i.e. concrete individuals, are proper subjects of the historical process. This statement, in such a form, is however, too vague to be discussed. If it means that historical processes are going on in conformity with the individual intentions of their actors, it is obviously absurd and in no phase of Marx's thought, even the most "ideological", can this be attributed to him. If it means, on the other hand, that individual acts of which ultimately social life consists, are submitted to regularities over which people have no power, then it is certainly as true for Marx writing *Capital* as it was for Marx writing the 1844 Manuscripts. Incidentally, the famous remark that men make their own history but not in freely chosen circumstances, dates from 1852, i.e. after the "epistemological break".

As far as the concept of "historicism" is concerned, we are not in a much better position (RC, pp. 119ff). The concept itself is nowhere defined either, but we can approximately guess what it is intended to mean from some arguments of Gramsci which Althusser quotes as negative examples of historicist pseudo-Marxism. The point is that Gramsci considers all forms of culture including science and including Marxist theory itself as ingredients or as articulations of existing social practice, and thus dissolves them into the current historical process and deprives them of autonomy. In reality, Althusser says, different domains of culture do not simply express a given epoch—in contrast to Hegelian philosophy—since each of them has a "logic" of development of its own. *Science* in particular is not conceived in Marxism as an element of the super-structure, nor may Marxism itself, as a scientific theory, be so conceived. Marxism is not the ideology of the proletariat, but a science, which is why, in opposition to doctrines of "spontaneity" and in conformity with the well-known ideas of Kautsky and Lenin, it could not arise as a spontaneous product of the class consciousness of the proletariat but had to be imported from outside by intellectuals into the workers' movement.

This question is directly tied to the concept of "overdetermination" to which Althusser attaches particular importance (FM, pp. 89ff). He seems to believe that this concept is a discovery of a fundamental truth of Marxism, entirely overlooked until now by its followers as well as its critics. He applies this concept above all to the question of the "revolutionary situation", but it has universal applicability. The point is that the general contradiction of capitalism (productive forces—relations of production) does not itself lead to revolution: there must be an accumulation of circumstances of various kinds which converge at a certain moment in an explosive unity. This may be explained by the fact that various domains of social life do not develop in parallel to each other. Each of them has a rhythm of development of its own, the principle being always valid that "in the last instance"

the social whole is determined by the economic conditions. This Marxist theory runs counter to **Hegel's** concept, since in **Hegel** any historical "totality" expresses itself through all the spheres of life; the "spirit of the time" or the spiritual principle (essence) organizing the historical moment is articulated in all domains of culture as its "phenomena". However, from the Marxist point of view, the relation of various parts of the superstructure to the conditions of production is not a relation between "phenomena" and "essence", precisely because the superstructure enjoys a relative autonomy and produces many "contradictions" within itself. Now Mao-Tse-Tung wrote that nothing in the world develops absolutely evenly. This phrase, which Althusser calls "the law of uneven development" and a few pages later "the great law of uneven development" explains that contradictions which accumulate in the historical process and explode in revolutions are not simply manifestations of one basic contradiction but come from "relatively autonomous" parts of the superstructure.

This theory, expressed in Althusser's works in extremely pretentious language, is nothing else but the repetition of Engels' principle of the "relative autonomy" of the superstructure in respect to economic conditions and is just as unclear as that principle. "The great law of uneven development", if it means anything, means that comparable units (e.g. individuals or industrial societies or tribal societies or trees or galaxies) do not change exactly in the same way since their environment is never exactly the same. It is of course a common sense platitude that may perhaps have a certain philosophical meaning, e.g. in Herbert Spencer. To present it as a dazzling achievement of Marxist thought and to call it "the great law" proves nothing. The same is true of "overdetermination". That important historical events, such as revolutions, result from the coincidence of many circumstances is a commonplace and one could hardly find anybody foolish enough to maintain that any detail of the historical process may be deduced from the general principle of "contradiction" between productive forces and relations of production. Neither is this commonplace specifically Marxist in any sense. What is specifically Marxist is Engels' famous phrase about the determinant forces of economic conditions "in the last instance". This is vague and is not made less vague by Althusser's repetition of it without any further explanation. It is certainly true that **Marx** never tried to replace historical inquiry by general statements about "contradictions" nor did he hope that the course of history might be described by deductions from this statement. But this is precisely what makes the whole meaning of historical materialism unclear unless it is reduced again to the commonplace idea that many factors are at work in any historical event and that economic conditions are one

of them. This is why some Marxists of the Second International were reluctant to admit Engels' well-known explanations in his letters to Schmidt, Bloch or Mehring. They believed, perhaps not without reason, that the idea of "many factors" enjoying "relative autonomy" deprives Marxism of its specificity, and makes of historical materialism a banal commonplace, since the additional vague statement about the "determination in the last resort" has no meaning whatsoever in historical explanation as long as we are not able to define what are the limits of this "ultimate determination" and, similarly, the limits of the "relative autonomy" granted to other domains of social life, especially to various spheres of the so-called superstructure.

Again, the whole theory of "over-determination" is nothing but a repetition of traditional banalities which remain exactly on the same level of vagueness as before. If we say, e.g. that the state of science, or of philosophy, or of legal institutions, does not depend only, in a given moment, on the actual economic conditions, but also on the past history of science, of philosophy or of legal institutions, we will certainly have difficulty in finding anybody to contradict us and Althusser's expenditure of indignation in attacking his non-existent enemies on this point seems rather exaggerated. Moreover, he contradicts himself directly, as far as ideology is concerned. After quoting with approval Marx's statement from *The German Ideology*, that philosophy and religion, in a number of ideological forms, have no history of their own but that their apparent history is only the "real" history of the relations of production (FM, p. 83) he goes on to explain in the second book (RC, pp. 99ff) that, on the contrary, every domain of the "superstructure", including philosophy and art, *has* its own specific history, which does not mean, as Althusser explains, that they are independent of the social "totality", but that their degree of independence is determined by their degree of dependence. This last remark is either a tautology or a vague statement that the state of philosophy, or of art, is partially dependent on the actual economic "totality"—a statement which belongs to common sense but is useless so long as we are unable to define the limits of this partial dependence.

Neither is Althusser able to explain what is the meaning of the idea that different domains of culture don't develop at the same rhythm when compared with each other. On what basis can we state that a certain change in science or in religion corresponds to a change in political or economic history (and we must know this in order to give a meaning to the statement that the "corresponding" changes do not occur simultaneously)? And why should we expect that "revolutions" in all domains of culture should arrive at the same time? What conceptual tools do we have for comparing changes in painting and in **the** movement of prices or "revolutions" in physics and in political

institutions in order to point out their parallelism or lack of parallelism? No answer.

However, all these confused generalities (the superstructure is "on the one hand" a tool of the "base", but "on the other hand" it has a relative autonomy etc.) have had and still have in the history of Marxism a well defined ideological role—especially in Stalinist Marxism which exploited them and benefited from their ambiguity and vagueness. Kautsky's statement, taken over by Lenin, that Marxism, being a scientific theory, could not be a spontaneous product of the working class, but had to be imported from outside, by intellectuals equipped with scientific knowledge, became the peculiar ideological instrument to justify a new idea of the party—the party of manipulators. Since the working class is in principle incapable of articulating theoretically its consciousness, it is possible and even necessary that the "genuine" theoretical consciousness of the working class should be incarnated in a political organism that could consider itself the carrier of this consciousness regardless of what the "empirical" working class thought about it, given that the "empirical" consciousness of this class is irrelevant in defining who in a given moment represents its interest. This is why the theory of class consciousness instilled from outside and the whole idea of scientific socialism so conceived served to justify the fact that in all kinds of political activity and later in the exercise of political power, the working class may be and must be replaced by the political apparatus which is the vehicle of its consciousness at the highest level. The whole Leninist and then Stalinist principle of dictatorship which the proletariat exercises through the intermediary of its self-appointed representatives, is only a development of the idea of "scientific socialism" so conceived. Besides, the "great law of uneven development" offers another service to the dictatorial power. Althusser says that "overdetermination" may explain, for instance, such phenomena as the survival of past ideologies in new social conditions since the ideology, having a logic of its own, may live beyond its proper historical context. This concept of "ideological survival" was a convenient political device in the Stalinist dictatorship: "We have new, socialist relations of production"—the ideologists and the political rulers used to explain—"but the consciousness of the people does not keep up with the social development or 'lags behind' the economic structure", and this makes people hold on to their religious beliefs or steal state property or fail to love their leaders as they should. In other words, political rulers *know* what the consciousness of the society *should* be to match the relations of production: they are able to *deduce* from these relations the *proper* content of social consciousness, a level that empirical consciousness does not reach because of the "great law of

uneven development". This fantastic pre-supposition that we can deduce from economic conditions, the content of consciousness as it should *be* must be admitted if the concept of "ideological survivals" it to be applicable. Needless to say, this concept is extremely convenient in political rule. Whatever repression is used against carriers of an "improper" consciousness, it is "historically" justified since its aim is only to bring a backward consciousness remaining from past society into line with the new conditions. The persecution of churches and every kind of repression against people who do not think exactly according to the actual wishes of rulers are always justified in the theory of "uneven development". Except for this political service, the concept of "ideological survivals" cannot possibly have any rational meaning since to imagine that one may deduce from a gratuitous historical schema the "correct" content of social consciousness appropriate to given economic conditions is empty fantasy.

It is true nevertheless that the Marxian concept of determination does not consist simply in replacing the Hegelian all-embracing spiritual principle by another "material factor". Althusser points out, perfectly rightly, that Hegel's dialectical method could not simply be extracted from his system as an independent methodology, and that in Hegel himself "the method" is not indifferent to its object—although he should perhaps have mentioned that this point was stressed and developed with much better justification by Lukács fifty years ago. (Actually the idea that there is "a contradiction" between Hegel's method and his system and that the former may be extracted and used in another, opposite philosophical construction, was invented by young Hegelians, taken over verbatim by Engels and then repeated by Lenin and Stalin; otherwise it is hardly to be found among Hegelian scholars). Althusser insists that for this reason one may not speak of the "inversion" of Hegelianism in Marxian thinking and that Marx himself, while using this or similar expressions, was not fully aware of how his method differed from the Hegelian one. He insists that Marx, at a certain moment ("the epistemological break") stopped answering Hegelian questions and that we always ought to analyse the "problematic", i.e. the set of questions in order to understand the real changes in philosophical development. This last remark is certainly justified although it seems again that Althusser considers as an important discovery something that is a commonplace to any historian of ideas. That important changes in intellectual history occur when people do not simply give other answers to old questions but abandon the old questions as implying false or meaningless pre-suppositions is a rather well known and commonly applied principle among historians. They know perfectly well, e.g. that the importance of early Renaissance philosophy did not consist in giving new answers to

scholastic problems but in rejecting the problems themselves. The same may be said about the passage from the Renaissance philosophy of nature to Galilean mechanics, etc. These are, however, well known generalities that manifest their meaning only in real historical investigations and to repeat them again, as Althusser does, without saying concretely which Hegelian questions were rejected by Marx and which new ones were posed, does not help us much in understanding either philosopher. Althusser stresses that instead of "expressing" the basic spiritual principle of time (as in Hegelian doctrine), particular elements of the social whole are conceived in Marxism as being determined by ("overdetermined") the structure of the whole and this "structure", which determines its elements, seems to him an especially innovatory methodological device. In reality, the concept of the "whole" which is not determined by the qualities of its elements and which, on the contrary, has qualities and "laws" of its own, determining qualities of the elements, this concept goes back at least to Aristotle. It was especially developed in Gestalt psychology and Gestalt theory which was able to endow it with empirical meaning. Thanks to many experiments intended to give the concept of "Gestalt" an empirical content, we may have a clear idea of its meaning. (To give a simple example: hens are conditioned to look for food in the darker of two surfaces placed before them; when the lighter surface is removed and a new, still darker surface is placed next to the second one, hens instinctively run to the new surface and **not** to the other one, to which they have been conditioned to look for food. In other words, they react to the "structure" and not to its elements. Such kinds of experiments can tell us what empirical meaning the concept of "structure" as opposed to "agglomerates" may have.) To repeat now—as Althusser does—generalities about "structural determination" and the "irreducibility" of the whole of its elements (RC, pp. 183ff) does not lead us beyond common sense platitudes.

Moreover, Althusser seems to believe that this concept of "structure" is especially important in the struggle against what he calls "empiricist ideology". Empiricism means, according to him (RC, pp. 35ff) a certain theory of knowledge which claims that knowing consists in extracting from the real object a pre-existing "essence" included into and blurred by external appearances. The sole example of this "empiricism" which Althusser quotes is the famous comment of Michaelangelo on a statue which is hidden but ready inside the stone. But he believes that such empiricism constitutes the proper content of the epistemology of Locke and Condillac. The reader with an elementary knowledge of the history of philosophy will notice at once that what Althusser means by "empiricism", could well be considered as the Aristotelian or **Thomist theory** of abstraction but that modern

empiricism—beginning not with Locke but at least with fourteenth century nominalists—means exactly the opposite of this idea. Empiricism in the only sense in which it has been used in the history of philosophy precisely denies the concept that abstraction consists in extracting a "universale in re" or a "formal essence lodged within the object itself," and to attribute this Aristotelian theory to Locke and to contemporary "empiricists" (without saying who falls under this category) proves only yet again the author's historical sloppiness.⁵ No wonder that after creating once again a non-existent enemy, Althusser has no difficulty in attacking him. He insists, moreover, that knowledge—in defiance of "empiricist" ideology—has nothing to do with pure, immediate, singular objects, but always with abstractions which are already elaborated and conceptualized (FM, pp. 183ff). He fails to remember that this discovery was made long ago and that the criticism of the seventeenth century theory of abstraction (concepts as the generalization of an immediate given, raw and unprejudged perception) was made so many times that it became a commonplace in contemporary philosophy of science. Not to speak of contemporary philosophers such as Popper, who have devoted a good deal of their analysis to this problem, this denial of a "raw perception" as a starting point for scientific theories was not simply stated generally, but seriously justified in analyses of scientific procedures—by many "positivist" philosophers and scientists from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, among them well-known French authors such as Poincaré and Duhem. To propose, in general terms, this discovery as an "immense revolution" sounds naïve. In Marx himself, the idea of the object, which is not given in its original immediacy to perception but is always constituted within the "socialized" cognitive assimilation of the world, is expressed precisely in the Manuscripts of 1844 without waiting for the "epistemological break". To invent a new pretentious name for this traditional tenet ("the ever pre-giveness of a structured unity"—FM, p. 199) does not help much in understanding it better.

The universally applicable and nowhere explained concept of structure has in Althusser another advantage in dealing with the question of how to investigate the relation between the young Marx and *the* Marx of *Capital*. The issue is: are we allowed to look into the early writings for some tenets which can help us to understand mature Marxian theory? In *For Marx*, Althusser's answer is unequivocally negative (FM, pp. 51ff). Against those who claim that everything, "the whole Marx", is already contained in the writings of 1843-45 (in reality nobody maintains such an idea) we *must* not look for "germs" of the true Marx in his early work. The reason is simply that "the system" cannot be reduced to its elements and that we should con-

sider the ideology (or science) as a global unity, i.e. to explain it by its structure and not by its genesis. Otherwise, we fall into "empiricism", "ideological illusions" and theology. Again, while discussing Marx's introduction of 1857 (RC, p. 64), Althusser quotes the famous remark that "the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of the ape" in order to state that while we need to know the contemporary structure of society if we want to understand its past, the inverse is not true, i.e. it is not true that we may be helped to understand contemporary society by analysing its past. This principle is apparently applied to studies of Marx: we may benefit from the analysis of the Manuscripts of 1844 in the light of *Capital* (viz, as the result of the radical break with the "ideological" concepts of the early writings) but we are not permitted to read *Capital* as a development of some ideas included in the Manuscripts of 1844. Why not? Not simply because a "radical rupture" occurred in between, but because this is forbidden in principle, because the "structure" cannot be understood through its origins.

An astonishing interdiction! Marx's statement about the anatomy of the ape (apparently not accurate from the strictly anatomical point of view) is precisely the principle of the teleological understanding of history. If we can understand past forms through their future results, we look at them as they would be in the future, i.e. from the standpoint of what they promise. The genetic explanation does not require this finalist concept, it being satisfied with stating how a certain structure arose from an earlier one and without assuming that this earlier structure somehow tended towards its contemporary form. Moreover, while the genetic explanation does not involve the teleological one, the teleological one, in its turn, involves the genetic. If we are allowed to understand past forms in the light of later ones we are also allowed to seek in the past the "germs" of the present. In reality, the question of whether or not the knowledge of genesis is indispensable in understanding the "structure" is wrongly put. It simply depends on what we are asking. There are many questions which we can try to answer without genetic enquiry and many others which require a genetic explanation. In trying to understand how the contemporary combustion engine works, the knowledge of its historical development is irrelevant. Similarly we can understand the functioning of banks without necessarily knowing the history of credit since the Middle Ages. But we cannot really understand contemporary painting without knowing anything about the history of painting and we cannot explain why England is a monarchy while France is not simply by comparing their contemporary "structure" while being utterly ignorant about their respective histories. This seems so trivial that the whole discussion, in general

terms, about **the** value of "structural explanation" as opposed to the "genetic" one is void of meaning.

I am far from being a follower of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy. However, while reading some dialectical philosophers (Althusser is an example) I do find myself regretting their lack of any training in this philosophy and consequently of any logical discipline. Such a training would help them to understand the simple difference between "saying" something and "proving" it (Althusser often formulates a general statement and then quotes it later and then refers to it by saying "we showed" or "it was proved"), between a necessary and a sufficient condition, between a law and a statement of fact, etc. It would permit them, too, to know what the analysis of concepts means. These two books of Althusser provide a disagreeable example of empty verbosity which, as noted earlier, can be reduced either to common sense trivialities in new verbal disguise, or to traditional Marxist tenets repeated with no additional explanation, or to wrong historical judgements. In understanding **Marx**, or **Hegel**, or political economy, or the methods of social science, they give us nothing except pretentious language. They teach us only about Althusser and may be useful to someone interested in this subject.

NOTES

1. It should be added that Althusser uses the word "practice" indiscriminately for all kinds of human activity ("theoretical practice", "ideological practice", "productive practice", "political 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" becomes 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.
2. **Marx's** method may indeed be compared with **Galileo's** in another respect. **Galileo** (it is especially striking in the *Mathematical Discourses*) realized that physics cannot simply be a description of experiments actually made but that it requires some idealized situation (geometrical models) impossible to be experimentally reproduced (when he, e.g. analyses the ballistic curves while neglecting the resistance of air or when he describes the movement of the pendulum while neglecting the friction at the point of suspension). Certainly, it is only thanks to these idealized models, involving some limit-conditions which cannot occur in reality—that modern

mechanics could arise. Marx is partially reproducing this way of thinking when he analyses certain imaginary situations and only later introduces successively other "disturbing" factors. He pre-supposes first a non-existent society consisting of capitalists and workers only; then he analyses the production process taking no account of circulation; then circulation is considered without taking account of the influence of supply and demand relations etc. Again, the comparison with Galileo is limited since the idealized geometrical models served as a starting point for the description of real movements in the sense that one could compare (quantitatively) the latter to the model and measure their deviation from the idealized situation. The same cannot be done with **Marxian** models.

3. One of the qualities which often used to be enumerated in distinguishing the sciences (nomothetic, of course) from "ideological" constructs is the predictive force of the former. We must note, alas, that in this respect the history of Marxism does not confirm well its scientific claims. To be sure, Althusser tells us that Marxist theory allows us "to understand that the Revolution as the 'task of the day' could only break out here, in Russia, in China, in Cuba, in 1917, in 1949, in 1958 and not elsewhere and not in another 'situation'." (FM, p. 207). Indeed, in "predicting" the past, i.e. in stating that what exactly happened had to happen here and then, with irresistible necessity, some Marxists are as strong as followers of any other determinist philosophy of history. Unfortunately they are as weak as others in predicting what has not yet happened. I do not claim that there exist other reliable theories enabling us really to predict the results of the "historical rhythm" on a global scale. What matters is not the inevitable predictive incapacity of the Marxist philosophy of history, but the pious naivety of its followers.
4. Althusser apparently wishes to be to Marx what Marx was to Ricardo: he tries to articulate the discoveries which Marx made but did not articulate, and of whose meaning he was not aware. We should, he says, "hear his silence" and he assures us that he has heard it (RC, p. 60). Needless to say, every commentator of an author tries to understand him better than he understood himself and the attempt is not to be condemned if it can be successful.
5. There are other examples of historical ignorance in the work. Althusser says, e.g. (RC, p. 40) that "Spinoza warned us that the *object* of knowledge or essence was in itself absolutely distinct from the real object . . . the *idea* of the circle, which is the *object* of knowledge **must** not be confused with the circle which is the real *object*". In fact, one of the fundamental assumptions of Spinoza's philosophy is that "the idea" is not simply an object of knowledge but is exactly as "real" as the body and that both have the same ontological **validity**. Elsewhere (FM, p. 78), Althusser explains that there is in Spinoza a radical discontinuity between the first and the second kind of knowledge, whereby "although the second kind makes possible the understanding of the first, it is not its truth". Now the first (unreliable) kind of knowledge in Spinoza (according to the Ethics: there is another classification in the Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect) is enumerative induction, the second the deductive reasoning of which Euclid left the model. To say that deductive reasoning "makes possible the understanding" of the **empiria** is void of meaning in Spinoza's philosophy.