



CONSIDERATIONS ON WESTERN MARXISM

his most intense fire on the dialectics of matter in Hegel, as the religious touchstone of his idealism, and most baneful legacy to later socialist thought: yet Althusser actually singled out the same aspect of Hegel's work as the one viable kernel of scientific insight inherited from it by Marxism.

Moreover, the criss-crossing of lines extends well beyond these two protagonists. Much of Althusser's system was constructed against that of Sartre, locally dominant in France at the turn of the sixties; while most of Colletti's polemic was directed against the Frankfurt School, temporarily dominant in Italy in the late sixties. Neither appears to have had any close acquaintance with the main adversary of the other, with the result that each was unaware of certain diagonal similarities with them. Colletti's growing preoccupation with the duality of Marxism as 'science or revolution', theory both of the objective laws of capitalism and of the subjective capacity of the proletariat to overthrow the mode of production of which it is itself a structural part,⁵⁰ was in fact very close to the basic methodological starting-point of Sartre's enquiry. The involuntary correspondences between Althusser and Adorno – apparently the remotest possible pair of theorists – was more striking still. The Frankfurt School was from the outset of its formation more saturated with Hegelian influence than any other in Europe. Adorno's Marxism represented, by the sixties, an extreme version of its renunciation of any discourse on classes or politics – precisely the objects given formal primacy by Althusser's Marxism. Yet Adorno's *Negative Dialectic*, first developed in lectures in Paris in 1961 and completed in 1966, reproduces a whole series of motifs to be found in Althusser's *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, published in 1965 – not to speak of others in Colletti's *Hegel and Marxism* published in 1969. Thus, among other themes, Adorno explicitly affirmed the absolute epistemological primacy of the object; the absence of any general subject in history; the vacuity of the concept of the 'negation of the negation'. He attacked philosophical concentration on alienation and reification as a fashionable ideology, susceptible to religious usage; the cult of the works of the Young Marx at the expense of *Capital*; anthropocentric conceptions of history,

⁵⁰ See, for example, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, pp. 229–36.

and the emollient rhetoric of humanism accompanying them; myths of labour as the sole source of social wealth, in abstraction from the material nature that is an irreducible component of it.⁵¹ Adorno was even to echo exactly Althusser's precepts that theory is a specific type of practice ('theoretical practice'), and that the notion of practice must itself be defined by theory. 'Theory is a form of practice' wrote Adorno, and 'practice itself is an eminently theoretical concept'.⁵² The defiant theoreticism of these pronouncements, effectively suppressing the whole material problem of the unity of theory and practice as a dynamic bond between Marxism and mass revolutionary struggle, by proclaiming their lexical identity at the outset, can be taken as a general motto of Western Marxism in the epoch after the Second World War. They indicate the underlying ground shared by the most disparate intellectual positions within it.

For, of course, the theoretical systems of Althusser and Adorno were otherwise notoriously dissimilar in problematic and orientation. The curious intersection of certain significant themes in their oeuvres is merely evidence that a vague binary contrast between Hegelian and anti-Hegelian schools is wholly inadequate to define the exact locations of the different schools within Western Marxism, or the inter-relations between them. The very multiplicity of the philosophical filiations discussed above – including not only Hegel, but Kant, Schelling, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Pascal, Schiller, Rousseau, Montesquieu and others – precludes any such polar alignment. The collateral links of each theorist with variant sectors of contemporary bourgeois culture further complicate the problem of the affinities and antagonisms between them. These in turn were conditioned and regulated by diverse national political situations. In other words, it is perfectly evident that each individual system in this tradition has received the impress of a *plurality* of determinations, deriving from different horizons and levels of the social and ideological structures of its own time and the past, producing a wide heterogeneity of theories – inside the parameters

of the basic historical conjuncture delimiting the tradition as such. There is no space here to explore the real distribution of relationships within this field, in all its complexity. For present purposes, it is more important to consider the salient originality of each system vis-à-vis the classical legacy of historical materialism of the preceding epoch. For in any balance-sheet of the record of Western Marxism, the development of new concepts or emergence of new themes provides the most critical gauge of its nature and power as a tradition.

⁵¹ See *Negative Dialectic*, pp. 183–4, 304, 158–60; 190–2, 67, 89, 177–8. It should be noted that Adorno's insistence on the primacy of the object is at least as strenuous as Colletti's, rendering the latter's generic attacks on the Frankfurt School in this respect largely otiose.

⁵² *Stichworte*, Frankfurt 1968, p. 171; *Negative Dialectic*, p. 144.