

Presentation of Althusser

In the first half of the 20th century Marxist theory was dominated by two orthodoxies: before 1914 by the Kautskyism of the Second International, and from 1920 to 1950 by Bolshevism, the theory of the Third International. The collapse of Kautskyism was due to the SPD's collapse into chauvinism on the outbreak of War, and the rise of Bolshevism to the October Revolution and the establishment and consolidation of the USSR. But the revolutionary upheaval of 1917 did not affect Russia alone; as a crisis of Imperialism, its effects were felt more or less in every European country. The Western revolutionary movements also sought for a replacement for the discredited Second International theory—a theory discredited not only by its association with the SPD but also by its failure to comprehend the events of the years immediately following the War. The theory of the inevitable development of the contradictions of capitalism to its collapse was replaced by a theory of the proletariat as the subject of the revolutionary transformation of society. The most notable theorists of this group were Lukács and Gramsci, and their position took the form of an attack on positivism and determinism and hence of renewed stress on Marx's close relationship to Hegel. The trend was enormously reinforced by the publication of Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts* in 1932, since when it has concentrated largely on an exposition of Marx's early works. Marcuse and Henri Lefebvre are representative of this emphasis. Within this 'Western Marxism' there are, naturally, considerable variations, so that Gramsci, for example, can be seen as prefiguring later developments (see below, nn. 23 & 29). Bolshevism was always distinct from this tendency (although the latter's proponents usually proclaimed their Leninism), and in the '30's, when Bolshevism sclerosed into Stalinist dogmatism, the two were in clear opposition. But, curiously, the crude practicality of Stalinism and the philosophical sophistication of Western Marxism formed a viable opposition, until the death of Stalin and the thaw weakened the Bolshevik orthodoxy and this stable opposition crumbled. Western Marxism assumed a revolutionary proletariat as an epistemological basis; the absence of this basis was never theoretically resolved, and its practical consequence was political ambiguity. The SPD published Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts* as a weapon *against* the Communists; Lukács and Korsch took directly opposite stands with relation to Comintern policy; in this country since the Second World War it has been Trotskyists who have

shown most interest in the Western tradition. In the '50's, and increasingly since 1956, a diluted form of the Western theory—so-called 'Marxist humanism'—has become something close to an orthodoxy for the revisionist wings of Western Communist Parties. Some new response to the growing eclecticism of the once persecuted Western Marxism was inevitable.

It emerged first in Italy with the work of Della Volpe and Colletti, particularly the former's *Rousseau e Marx* (1956), and then in France, firstly as a restatement of Bolshevism in Auguste Cornu's biographical studies of Marx and Engels, and recently as a radically new approach in the work of Louis Althusser and his disciples.

Of course, theoretical trends cannot be understood merely in terms of their relation to political history. The Hegelian emphasis of Lukács and Gramsci was a consequence of the re-emergence of Hegelianism in the early 20th century as a development of neo-Kantianism and in the work of Croce respectively. Althusser's work also has a clear pedigree outside the realms of Marxist theory. His primary concern is a close reading of Marx's works, particularly the later works (from *The Poverty of Philosophy* to *Capital*). But he also makes use of insights from more recent developments in non-Marxist thought; as he himself says of the collection he is editing for François Maspéro: 'The THEORY Collection wishes to take into account the *actual* meeting taking place before our eyes of the conceptual elaboration of the philosophical principles contained in the discovery of Marx on the one hand, and on the other of certain works in epistemology, in the history of ideology, knowledge and scientific research.' (*'Théorie'* Collection, end-papers). Among the former are the works of related Marxists, e.g. Maurice Godelier, and among the latter it is worth naming the formalist aesthetics of the Russian school of the '20's (including Eichenbaum, Jakobson and Tynyanov), structuralist linguistics, Michel Foucault's histories of ideas, and Jacques Lacan's linguistic psychoanalysis. Beyond these direct sources lie the phenomenology of the younger Husserl, Freud's psychoanalytic theory and echoes of Spinoza.

Presenting these 'influences' as a list of names does less than justice to the rigour of Althusser's position; he is in reaction against the eclecticism of the various forms of neo-Marxism current since the mid-50's. The major focus of his research has been on the development of the 'theoretical problematic'; a discussion of 'the fact characterizing the very existence of science: that it can only pose questions on the terrain and within the horizons of a definite theoretical structure—its problematic—which constitutes the absolutely defined condition of possibility, and thus the absolute determination of the form in which any problem can be posed at a given moment in science' (*Lire le Capital*, vol I, p.27). Nicos Poulantzas has analyzed Althusser's own work in terms of the contemporary problematic illustrated by the debate between Sartre and Lévi-Strauss on history (*Les Temps Modernes* 240, May 1966).

The essay we present here is one of the earliest written of Althusser's works, and this aspect of his research is no more than implicit in it. He has himself defined the place of this essay in his general conception:

'I finally . . . identified a pertinent absence in the term "Marx's 'inversion' of the Hegelian dialectic": the absence of its concept and therefore of its problem. I laboriously reconstituted this problem by showing that the real content of the "inversion" which Marx discussed was a revolution in the problematic' (*Lire le Capital*, vol. I, p.32 n.10). Althusser has defined his overall project as a theory of the production of knowledge, and its necessary parts as 'a theory of the structure of theoretical practice as opposed to other practices; a theory of the history of the production of knowledge as opposed to other forms of history; and a theory of the structure and of the history of the non-theoretical practices on which theoretical practice is articulated' (*'Théorie'* Collection, end-papers). This essay represents the third of these alternatives: it is a discussion of the theory of history within a discussion of different interpretations of Marx's relation to Hegel.

This last topic is on well-worn territory, but Althusser is unusual in approaching it from a study of Feuerbach rather than of Hegel. He points out that the distinction Marxist humanists usually draw between Marx and Hegel is no more than the difference between Feuerbach and Hegel. The Marxist humanist thesis is that Marx's later work is a direct development and application of the writings of the period 1843–45 (especially the *Manuscripts* of 1844), but if these writings are essentially Feuerbachian, and, as we know, Marx later rejected Feuerbach, his writings after 1845 cannot be consistent with the earlier works. Althusser proposes a radical break with the earlier humanism in 1846–47, a '*coupure épistémologique*' and a '*changement d'élément*' (Marx himself writes of a 'change of terrain'). That this change is expressed in the same language before and after is the price paid by the theoretical pioneer; new concepts are inevitably expressed with the old language. The confusion of the humanists is due to a superficial reading of the later works. This is the position reached in the article referred to in the first sentence of *Contradiction and Overdetermination*.

Marx points out that Feuerbach's attempt to invert Hegel by placing the essence of man in materiality rather than consciousness merely recreated the idealist problematic with changed terms. Althusser therefore concentrates on Marx's claim that he had merely 'inverted' Hegel, and sets out to discover the difference in conception implied. The 'mirror-image' relation of Feuerbach and Hegel means that both used the same essential concepts of totality and contradiction. Marx used the same words, but the concepts themselves changed. The essay that follows is an attempt to redefine the words as Marx used them in his later work.

Although he claims that the theory Marx utilized in *Capital* has never been isolated, Althusser does not deny that the same theory has been used by the Marxist movement in theory and practice. So in this case he takes Lenin's analysis of the reasons for the success of the 1917 Revolution in Russia as an example of Marxist analysis in which to discover (to 'produce') the Marxist theory employed. For Hegelian theory the Russian Revolution has always been a cruel paradox, only explicable as an enormous 'exception' to the Laws of History. If the

central contradiction of capitalism is that between labour and capital, how could the Revolution take place where capital had barely established itself while fully capitalist states were merely slightly shaken? This is explicable in terms of the accumulation of secondary contradictions in Russia, but such an explanation demands a radical revision of the conception of these secondary contradictions. They can no longer be phenomenal alienations of the ongoing central contradiction, but must have their own autonomous influence on the system as a whole. But Marxism is no mere empiricism of contradictions, analyzing each specific phenomenon in terms of whatever contradictions seem most relevant; there is in Marxism a conception of the totality, of an ensemble that is also asymmetrical, dominated by one of its elements. This autonomy *and* interdependence of the various contradictions is expressed by Althusser in the concept of 'overdetermination'. Freud used this term to denote how a single element of behaviour expresses a complex motivation—e.g. a single dream image expresses several unconscious desires. Althusser uses it similarly to denote the complexity of any contradiction, a complexity due to 'the influence of a structure on its effects'. The particular relation of the over-determined contradictions in any situation determines the possibility of a revolutionary change in the structure. It follows that the totality itself is quite distinct from the Hegelian totality. This difference Althusser expresses in later writings in the definition of the totality as a structure in the domination of the economy in the last instance (*structure à dominante en dernière instance de l'économie*).

Many socialists in England are still defending Marxist humanism against Stalinist dogmatism, without realizing that this battle is largely won; it has been reduced to a conflict with bourgeois distortion of Marx, and even this is fast disappearing to give place to a bourgeois critique of Communism based on the work of the younger Marx. To bring Marxist theory into line with contemporary conditions a completely new conception is needed. Althusser's work represents one approach to such a scientific Marxism.

A note on the translation. Frequent use has been made of the word 'sublation' as a translation for the French 'dépassement', which is itself a translation of the German 'Aufhebung'. The latter is usually translated into English as 'transcendence' (e.g. in recent translations of Hegel), or by a variety of terms (Bottomore and Milligan use 'annul', 'abolish' and 'supersede', as well as 'transcend'). On the other hand, translations of French phenomenology and existentialism use 'surpass' (Hazel Barnes in her translations of Sartre) or even the transliteration 'depass' (Laing and Cooper). As is well known, this confusion is a consequence of the untranslatable ambiguity of the German 'Aufhebung', which means both 'suppression' and 'raising up'. Older translations of Hegel used the term 'sublation' as it is etymologically a (Latinized) equivalent of the German. And in the English translation of a text to which Althusser refers frequently in this essay, Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach*, the word 'sublation' is used, in a context essentially similar to that in which it appears in the essay: '. . . so powerful a work as Hegelian philosophy . . . could not be disposed of by simply being ignored. It had to be "sublated" in its own sense, that is, in the sense that while its form had to be annihilated through criticism, the new content which had been won through it had to be saved.' (*op. cit.*, II 368) As there is no way of avoiding the confusion already produced, it seemed worthwhile to preserve this reference by translating 'dépasser' throughout as 'sublate'.