THE ALTHUSSER CASE

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Part 1. Marxist Humanism

The post-war years in France saw a great swing towards Marxism. After the defeat of Germany the reactionary governments of country after country collapsed and were swept aside. Everywhere socialism was on the ascendancy. In Western Europe too the tide of socialist thought flowed strongly and there was a great upsurge of Marxist writings. This was greatly influenced by the philosophical theories of those central-European Marxists who had rediscovered the Hegelian basis of Marx's thought, notably Lukacs and Korsch. The hitherto unknown texts of the Marx of 1844 which had first appeared in the thirties but were lost sight of during the War were being translated and eagerly read and studied.

Such works as Sartre's *Existential Marxism* became popular with its emphasis on commitment as the realisation of the "authentic" person. Mounier's "personalism" represented a parallel movement of a humanist kind which found support in the notion of alienation, which Lukacs emphasised as part of the essential Hegelianism of Marx.

Two diverging trends became evident. While one strongly held to the whole corpus of Marx's writing, but found in them a humanism which had been missed, at the same time emphasising the importance of Hegel for a real understanding of Marx, the other counterposed the recently studied works of the younger Marx to the established and familiar texts of the older, interpreting the earlier writings in terms of a moralistic humanism and of an existentialism which laid stress on the importance of the human will (of voluntarism) and personal decision as the effective force in revolutionary change. They regarded the later and now generally accepted works of Marx, such as *Capital*, as reflecting a decline of Marx's ideas into determinism and a preoccupation with economics. For them the real Marx was finished somewhere around 1845.

Althusser's *For Marx*

The growing influence of the early Marx, both in the existentialist Marxism of Sartre and in Marxist humanism, was countered by the appearance in 1965 of Louis Althusser's *Pour Marx* (For Marx), which comprised a series of articles which had begun to appear in 1960. This was followed by his *Preface to Capital* in 1969, an essay on the *Reading of Capital*, and an interview in *Pensée*. These essays stirred up a considerable controversy: and both in France and in Britain he now has devoted disciples.

Althusser, a former Catholic, has been a member of the French Communist Party for some 20 years. He is a lecturer in philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure.

His strategy is a bold one. He advances an interpretation of Marxism which is directed both at the existentialist humanists on the one hand, and, on the other, at all those Marxists who, while remaining in the central tradition of Marxist thought, are nevertheless profoundly influenced by the Hegelian and humanist philosophy of the young Marx.
Althusser's position is that Marx in 1845 totally abandoned all his early views as Hegelian and idealist, and thereafter they play no part at all in his writings. These Hegelian conceptions include "alienation", "the negation of the negation" and "supersession" (Aufhebung).  

Among the idealist notions which he now once and for all abandoned were two others: the Marxist theory of historical development, which Althusser calls "Hegelian-evolutionism"; and Marxist humanism: the concepts of "man" and "humanism", says Althusser, are terms whereby Marx never again thought reality, after 1845. They must give place to what he calls "Marxist anti-humanism". 

This certainly demolishes both existentialist Marxism and moralist theories of socialism: but do we not pay a rather high price for it? It is not the best cure for a toothache to cut off the patient's head. Not only has revisionism been overthrown, but the whole Hegelian heritage that Marx himself, as late as 1873, still regarded as fundamental. In fact everything we have hitherto known as Marxism has gone, and in its place all that is left is a static and scholastic parody of the Marxist method.

The "Break" 

Althusser's arguments rest on the basic assumption that after the Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 which in Althusser's opinion represent the high-water mark of Marx's Hegelianism, there was a sudden and dramatic "break" with all his previous thinking. The German Ideology, which Marx and Engels wrote in 1845, marks, according to him, the abandonment of these earlier views and the establishment of his final "scientific" position. This is the "break". Discussing the 1844 Manuscripts, Althusser says: 

"Marx is furthest from Marx in this book. It is Marx on the brink of change, on the eve, on the threshold—giving the philosophy he was on the point of giving up a last chance".  

He speaks of Marx's "sudden and total return" to Hegel in the 1844 Manuscripts, followed by its complete rejection in the German Ideology, where we see:

"Thoughts in a state of rupture with the past, playing a pitiless game of deadly criticism with all its erstwhile theoretical suppositions".

1 This important Hegelian concept represents the "overcoming" or "supersession" of one historical and economic phase by the next which nevertheless carries over onto the new level in a modified form what was achieved in the earlier. The essential notion is that of "going beyond" or "transcending" capitalism, its basic structure, its economic laws, and its ideology. The German word for this is Aufhebung. 

2 For Marx, p. 244. 


4 For Marx, p. 159. 

5 Ibid, p. 36. 

This story is a complete myth. What evidence is there for this "break"? Althusser claims that Marx himself announced the rejection of his former views when he says in the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy that in the German Ideology "we settled accounts with our former philosophical conceptions". Marx goes on to say that after their publisher refused to print it, having taken fright at the author's reputation, he and Engels "abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of mice". It was indeed shelved, forgotten, and never published until 1932.  

But is this remark about "settling accounts" evidence for a "break"? Why if it was here that he reversed his whole position did he never publish it? But further, Althusser rests his case on the content of the book itself, in which we are to find all Marx's previous writings contradicted and the doctrines of the mature Marx enunciated. Is this the case? Not in the least. So far from refuting his earlier views in the Manuscripts of the previous year, Marx continues and develops their argument, announces no divergence, no repudiation of these views. 

Take first Marx's Hegelianism. What exactly was this? It was firstly what Marx believed to be a permanent and vital element in the understanding of man and his world—the notion that in creating his own world by labour, man creates himself; secondly, comes Hegel's theory of alienation—that man's labour somehow resulted in loss as well as gain, a deprivation, a loss of humanity; thirdly, that in due course man overcomes or transcends alienation, recovers and fulfils himself. These are all Hegelian concepts, and they are all Marxian concepts. But what Marx did with them was to show that they must be understood in relation to man's material life in the real world. Thus we escape the mystification which Hegel himself is responsible for when he treats the whole process as the manifestation of the Idea. But Marx never abandons these three principles. Enunciated in the Manuscripts of 1844, they are expanded and developed in the German Ideology, and embodied and made concrete in Capital. 

Nor when we turn back to the Manuscripts do we find "the high-water mark of Hegelianism", the "idealism" from which Marx is supposed to have refuted himself, the "total return to Hegel", which Althusser sees there, in which "the whole of nature is derived from logical abstraction". On the contrary, we find the theory of man creating his world himself through his labour, which Marx accepts from Hegel and maintains throughout all his later work, but treats materialistically as meaning that all history is man's self-creation. 

We find here in the Manuscripts, rather than in the German Ideology, in the essay entitled "Critique of
the Hegelian Dialectic as a Whole”, which Althusser appears never to have read, Marx’s fundamental criticism of Hegel. It is in this essay, rather than in the later work, that Marx “settles his accounts” with Hegel as, indeed, he tells us in the Preface to the second edition of Capital. But, as he explains, “settling accounts” with Hegel is not rejecting him. (any more than the phrase itself would mean in business). Marx tells us what he accepted and what he rejected. He accepted the unity of the subjective and the objective in knowledge, but he rejected the derivation of the material world and history from The Idea. All this is in the Manuscripts itself, not in the German Ideology.

Marx and Alienation

It is here also that Marx raises the question of alienation, which Althusser describes as a purely Hegelian conception. It is true that Hegel sees it as a feeling of deprivation or loss resulting from man’s creation of the object over against himself—a purely subjective affair. Marx while he accepts the fact of alienation, explicitly rejects this explanation and gives it an economic interpretation. But does he, as Althusser says, now reject it so completely that “no trace of this Hegelian category appears in the Marx of 1857”? On the contrary, it immediately reappears in the German Ideology—the work in which Marx is supposed to have submitted it to “pitiless and deadly criticism”. On the contrary here it plays the central role which it continues to play in all Marx’s subsequent work.

Althusser declares that Marx’s treatment of alienation in the Manuscripts is purely Hegelian, that it remains on the purely subjective level, alienation being the very form and existence of pure Mind in the course of its development. Is this really Marx’s view of alienation in the Manuscripts? Let us turn to the very first page of this work, where Marx explains what to him, alienation, really is.

“Wages are determined through the antagonistic struggle between capitalist and worker. Victory goes necessarily to the capitalist. The capitalist can live longer without the worker than can the worker without the capitalist”, and so on.7

This first essay is on Wages; the second on the Profit of Capital; the third on the Rent of Land. Then we come to Alienated Labour, and what does Marx say about that?

“On the basis of political economy, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities”.

Where is the subjective idealism? Where are the “pure abstractions”? Clearly this is not the Hegelian view of alienation but Marx’s economic explanation, and he brings it forward in opposition not only to Hegel but to the ideas of Feuerbach as well.

Of course Marx owed a great deal to Feuerbach who showed that so far from the material world owing its being to the idea, our ideas arise from our comprehension of the material world. As he says:

“I do not generate the object from the thought, but the thought from the object: and I hold that alone to be an object which has an existence beyond one’s brain”.8

But Marx rejected Feuerbach’s religious explanation of alienation, which was that man felt deprived, unworthy and sinful, because he had projected his real humanity upon the deity. Marx had already replied, in an earlier essay,9 that on the contrary it was not because men were religious that they were alienated, but because of the grievous conditions under which they laboured that they turned to religion for consolation.

Thus Althusser is wrong again. Marx is not under the influence of Feuerbach’s Hegelian errors, he is refuting him.

Feuerbach’s Theory of Man

But what about Feuerbach’s very abstract theory of Man and human nature? Althusser declares that in the Manuscripts Marx is guilty of accepting this fundamental Hegelian error of Feuerbach’s and that he only escapes from this after his conversion to materialism in 1845.

This is not the case. It is precisely in the Manuscripts that Marx refutes this notion of Feuerbach too, and we find “the concept of the human species brought down from the sky, the abstraction to the real ground of earth”. Marx sees man as developing and realising his personality as he wrests his living from the earth, and thus makes himself.

What then does Marx mean when he uses the term “species man”? Marx’s conception of man is that he is essentially a social being—“species man”. The human essence, says Marx, “is no abstraction inherent in each individual”, (which is Althusser’s idea of Marx’s understanding of “Man”). “In reality, it is the ensemble of social relations.” But this, says Althusser, “means nothing at all”.10 Any comparative psychologist, however, would explain that man, unlike some solitary predators, is essentially a social animal who becomes himself in society by accepting its obligations and receiving its social benefits, following the acceptance by others of those obligations to create, serve and maintain the human fellowship. In a capitalist society man is still “the ensemble of social relations”, but the co-operative relations are contradicted and in part nullified by competitive relations. Man becomes himself only in

7 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, p.1.
8 Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity.
9 Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right.
10 For Marx, p.243.

AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW—OCTOBER, 1972
the pattern of social relations found in common ownership and social control of production for the common good. This is what Marx means by “the concept of the human species brought down from the sky of abstraction to the real ground of earth; what else is it if not the concept of society?”

It is remarkable that Althusser should turn a blind eye on the concept of alienation in the *German Ideology* work, for it is an essential part of the whole of Marx’s argument here. Marx uses two words for this notion: *Entfremdung* is used when his intention is to emphasise the fact that man is being opposed by a hostile power of his own making: *Entaußerung* when the emphasis is on “externalisation” or “objectification” of this power, as in the capitalist “market.”

Turning to the *German Ideology* from which, says Althusser, the idea has been completely banished, we read that in class society “Man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him.” Marx goes on to speak of the “consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations . . .” “This *alienation*, he continues, has become “an intolerable power, a power against which men make a revolution” because it rests upon the fact that the great mass of humanity have been rendered propertyless. We recall that the first four essays of the *Manuscripts* were devoted to precisely this explanation of alienation, and here it is again in the *German Ideology*.

In *Capital* in which the term again appears, the economic form which Marx had given it from the first is further developed in the theory of man’s labour power as a “commodity”, which, inseparable as it is from man himself, is bought and sold in the market. But this is not to abandon the notion of alienation, for it is how Marx explained it from the first, in the *Manuscripts*. This is clearly shown if we turn to the passages in which he first discusses it.

“In the purchase of men’s labour we purchase the man with his labour and he becomes a mere tool or instrument for our ends—a commodity, a thing. The man who becomes a wage labourer finds that his real personality no longer exists even for himself.”

In the important *Grundrisse*, or *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*, written in 1857 (the date which Althusser regards as heralding the “mature” Marx, now completely free from Hegelianism), Marx is still using the hateful term.

There are over 300 occasions on which he explicitly refers to it by the original term, *alienation*, in this work, and frequently does so in long and important paragraphs. All through *Capital* the emancipation of man from alienation and the fulfilment of his personality is the constant theme. Alienation, indeed, might well be described as the basic theme of the whole of Marx’s life-work from its early beginnings in the Essays of 1842 to the day of his death.

Lenin also wholly accepts Marx’s theory of alienation as expressed in the *Manuscripts* of 1844. Of course he had not seen them (they were unpublished), but Marx had transcribed the essential pages on alienation into the *Holy Family*, and Lenin wholly endorses the theory as he found it there.

**Althusser’s “Theoretical Anti-humanism”**

On no other topic does Althusser’s intellectualism appear more barren than on the question of humanism in Marxism. It cannot be denied that Marx himself affirms his humanist faith frequently and explicitly in his earlier works, and that there is no more warmly humanist analysis of the cruelties and inhumanities of capitalism than *Capital* itself. This Lenin recognised. He had no sympathy with the view that the humanism in *Capital* is alien to Marxism and should be extruded.

“In few scientific treatises will you find so much heart, so many burning and passionate polemical outbursts. It depicts capitalist society as a living thing with the actual social manifestation of the antagonistic classes in the relations of production.”

Of course, we are well aware of the possibility of a rapid, emotional kind of uplift which can call itself humanism, but its existence seems a poor reason for eliminating the basic concern for humanity from socialism. To strip Marxism of its concern for man, for human interests, for the fulfilment of human aspirations and the human personality would be to deny everything that Marx, and after him Lenin, stood for. Humanism, and faith in man, was never for Marx the theory of “abstract” man, though that is Althusser’s whole point. But it was Marx himself in his earlier writings, these very writings which Althusser characterises as idealist, as treating man as an abstraction, who criticises Feuerbach for this error—not however, to reject humanism, but to make it concrete, historical and linked with the technological advance of developing man.

One cannot turn to any work of Marx without entering immediately into the human problem. In 1843 we find him proclaiming “the doctrine that man is the supreme being for man . . . therefore with the categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being.” Althusser regards this as “abstract, illusory, utopian and idealist.” He condemns it as:

11 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.
13 There are references to “alienation” and “estrangement” on pages 21, 23, 24, 27, and 28 of the Pascal translation of 1938. It is the theme running through the whole of Part 1.
14 *German Ideology*.
15 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.
18 Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. 
"the recourse to ethics so deeply inscribed in every human ideology (which) plays a part only in the imaginary treatment of real problems." 19

We must learn in these matters, he says, to use our scientific concepts, value free, excluding moral considerations and humanistic ideas.

Marx regards the whole process from the standpoint of values. He roots the inhumanity he condemns in the wage system of capitalism and the sale and purchase of labour power as a commodity.

Althusser has never noticed that one of the longest essays in the Manuscripts, is Engels' Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy, which occupies 34 pages. This was Marx's first introduction to capitalist political economy and to the crises its market system involves. Engels show that:

"... in the last instance private property has turned man into a commodity whose production and destruction also depend solely on demand. The system of competition has thus slaughtered, and daily continues to slaughter, millions of men. All this we have seen, and all this drives us to the abolition of this degradation of mankind through the abolition of private property, competition and the opposing interests." 20

Of course, both Marx and Engels had still a long way to go in their analysis of capitalism; but this is a masterly beginning. Is all this "abstract", "philosophical", "illusory"?

"Truly Human" Man

Marx immediately follows this with the important argument in The Holy Family, which demonstrates that "the empirical world must be arranged so that in it man may at last be able to experience himself as truly human". 21 The whole of the German Ideology is concerned with this very problem, for the alienation of man's condition under capitalism arises because:

"... we have the majority of individuals from whom these forces have been wrested away, who robbed them of all life content, have become abstract individuals." 22

It is not Marx who treats man as an abstraction, it is capitalism! And it is Althusser's empiricism! To free the account of man's economic and social condition from "values", "ethical considerations" and "humanism", is not being scientific. It is the worst form of abstractionism.

Alienation is overcome by the social ownership of these forces.

It is in Capital that Marx's humanism reaches its full realisation, that this understanding of the economic nature of alienation is now expanded into those moving chapters on the factory system, burning with indignation, which make this work so much more than an analytical exposition of economic and social structure. The ultimate appropriation of the means of production by the community achieves "the realisation of the person". Now "begins that development of human power which is its own true end . . . the full development of the human race", of "species man", the realisation of "man's necessity to develop himself." 23

And this is anathema to Althusser. He emphatically declares that after Marx's conversion in 1845, i.e., the rejection of the Hegelianism of the Manuscripts, Marx never again introduces the concepts of man or humanism. 24

"The absolute precondition for the positive knowledge of the world itself and its transformation, and of knowing anything about man is "that the philosophical myth of man is reduced to ashes!" 25

This rejection of humanism carries with it for Althusser the elimination of man as the agent of historical development, and of the necessity of the rise of historical consciousness in the proletariat, which was for Marx the indispensable pre-requisite of socialism.

Althusser asserts that "the whole classical Marxist tradition has refused to say that it is man who makes history." 26

To which Marx replies:

"It is man, real living man, that makes history; history is not a person apart, using man as a means for its own particular aims: history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims." 27

Marx refutes Althusser's "theoretical anti-humanism" in the same argument, for he declares that "the entire history of the world is nothing but the begetting of men through human labour". "By activity in the world, and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature and develops the potentialities that slumber within him". 28 Thus, man's making of his world is at the same time his making and re-making of himself and his achievement of his own full development as man. 29

24 For Marx, p. 244.
25 For Marx, p. 299.
26 Althusser, Interview in La Pensee, April, 1968.
27 Marx, The Holy Family.
29 For Althusser social transformation is the effect of pre-determined economic development of an automatic nature. If men play any part it is only because their actions are in the last resort determined by the economic factor.
Part 2.

We have ceased to read Hegel, and that is why for the past half century none of the Marxists has understood Marx.  

Lenin

Two philosophical trends unite in Marx, and are both transformed by him. The first is the materialist tradition, British (Bacon, Hobbes and Locke) and French (Descartes, Gassendi). The second is the German classical philosophy of Kant, Fichte and Hegel.

The importance of materialism was its rejection of everything beyond the natural world, whether supernatural agencies, tendencies moving to some goal, or entities like the "vital force" of Bergson, Shaw and the vitalists. Materialism also laid proper stress on the importance of the environment in the making of man, but could never explain, how in that case, the environment could be transformed by those who were themselves made and constituted by it in mind and character!

Marx was a materialist, but in two respects he disagreed with the materialism of his day. He did not accept the prevalent view that the mind is a blank sheet on which the material world makes its impressions. On the contrary, Man knows what he makes, and changes his environment by the knowing and activity which is his life. Therefore Man's objective and subjective life are united—Man does not stand over against his world trying to make out what it is. He makes it—though its physical priority is unquestionable. Thus Marx asserts that in these respects he rejects "all previous materialism".  

But the fact that he is a materialist by no means implies that Marx rejects the tradition of German classical philosophy and its culmination in Hegel. On the contrary, of this philosophical tradition the working class movement, said Engels, is the true inheritor. But, as was the case with materialism, Marx's critique is an evaluation which both preserves and rejects. Marx accepts from Hegel his belief that reality is not as it appears to empirical reflection, and rejects every form of empiricism. There is inseparable interaction of Man and his material world in every fact of knowledge. Mind and action are creative. Marx further joins Hegel in treating as "merely empirical" and to be "overcome" every mode of reality which presents an obstacle to the unfoldling of Man's potentialities. The world is to be transformed; not by an appeal to eternal principles, or by the unfolding of the Idea—the sole reality—but by the progressive unfolding of its own material and human possibilities. But that the ultimate reality is Mind or Reason, and the material world a
derivate from it, Marx wholly rejects: speaking of his acceptance of the idea of Man making his world, he says that "Of course in all this the priority of external nature remains unassailed".  

History was both for Marx and Hegel the story of Man's self-creation, not a record of events passively reflected in the mind.

Hegel's Contribution

As the triumph of rationality over brute existence, Hegelian idealism and the earlier materialist tradition happily combine, and the transition to Marxism represents in every respect a radical break in the continuity of nineteenth century thought.

Marx regards the emphasis on the "active side of knowledge" as Hegel's important contribution to the theory of knowledge, which they both saw as acquired not by reflection, but in manipulating, using and changing the world—associated with the pervasive idea of the self-creation of Man as a process in which the principal factor is Man's own labour. This is the basic theme of the first section of the German Ideology, which far from eliminating the basic Hegelian concepts, integrates them in materialistic form into the very substance of Marxism.

This in fact is the "kernel" which Marx says, in the Preface to Capital, he extracts from Hegel; or to use another figure of speech, "sets Hegel on his feet."

What precisely does this mean? It has sometimes been interpreted rather simplistically as asserting merely that matter comes before mind, or that thought arises as the consciousness of material objects. It has even been supposed Hegel was "put on his feet" when the self-unfolding of the concept was embodied in nature and history. But that would indeed have been a return to the pure metaphysics of Hegelian idealism. Marx means by it—seeing the development of Man and Society in the interaction of creative thought with the environment, showing the theory as essentially the realistic process of getting one's subsistence in the material world by labour, invention and organisation. This is developed in the German Ideology, which is by no means the work in which Marx's thought "is in a state of rupture with the past", and "all its erstwhile theoretical presuppositions" are discarded, as Althusser says. On the contrary, it is where Marx's inversion of Hegel is established and fully expounded.

Althusser has a very defective understanding of Hegel, seeing in his philosophy no more than "the

1 Collected Works, Vol. 38, Philosophical Notebooks.
2 Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, No. 1.
3 Engels, Feuerbach.
4 Marx-Engels, German Ideology.
identification of thought and being", and the postulation of "a simple organic unity which develops within itself by the virtue of its negativity".

Whereas for Marx the unification of the subjective and the objective is the modification and saturation of what we know with our way of knowing it, with the conditions and the activity involved in knowing in order to act; and "the simple original unity" is reached in the realisation that there is only one world and it contains thinking Man and his material environment in continuous interaction.

Marx saw in the approximation of society to a rational goal the gradual disappearance of the ideologies of religion, of utopia, and of reassuring philosophies, which are all compensations for the materialism of the times. But you cannot abolish the illusions of religion, said Marx, (or any of the other illusions), until you abolish the evils which make the illusion necessary. Utopian hopes play the same role as religion, and so do philosophies which only assure us that "reality" is so much better than it appears to be! All these ideologies are useful and necessary illusions; but they will disappear when we know how to change the world, instead of explaining it and kidding ourselves with fantasies.

Man and His World: "The Grundrisse"?

The acceptance of the dialectical process of social development means for Marx the alteration of the environment by men's activities and the adaptation of our economy and our ideas to the environment we have thus created; the impact of that new economy in further changing the environment, leading to further changes in the economy, the superstructure and the very nature of Man. All this is the Hegelian theme of all Marx's mature work; and most completely in the only comprehensive treatise on his theories as a whole (of which Capital was only the first unfinished fragments), the 1,000 page Grundrisse of 1857, the most fundamental work that Marx ever wrote, "the result of 15 years of research, thus the best period of my life", as he said.

The Grundrisse, the work of Marx's complete maturity, is Hegelian in the above sense, through and through.

Althusser never mentions the Grundrisse. Indeed he cannot. For appearing as Marx's mature work, it is a complete exposition of the whole series of concepts which Althusser has removed from Marxism as worthless.

It contains a synthesis of the various strands of Marx's thought, beginning with the outlines of the substance of all four volumes of Capital. And it could well be described as the exposition of authentic Marxism, and as marking the crucial stage in the development of his thought. Any discussion of Marxism that does not take account of the Grundrisse is doomed from the start.

Althusser by his own critical attitude includes it in the writings of Marx's maturity, coming as it does in 1857, but since it includes the whole series of Hegelian concepts (alienation, transcendence, negation etc.) which Althusser says Marx abandoned for ever in 1845, and play no part in the work of the mature Marx, he simply ignores it and proceeds with his exposition of Marxism as though it did not exist!

Capital and Marx's Theory of History

If so much of Marx's work has been rejected by Althusser as worthless, what is left? His choice of Capital, Vol. I would certainly please the more traditional type of Marxist who has always thought of Marxism in terms of Marx's analysis of capitalist contradictions.

Althusser does indeed select Capital as the source of the essential Marxism, but only after stripping it of its Hegelian accretions and distortions. His treatment of the book is a strange one: He is not at all satisfied that what we have in Capital is free from Hegelian defects. Almost the whole of the first section on "Commodities" is unsatisfactory because, in Hegelian fashion, it is based on the historical origins of "the commodity"; and moreover Marx's theory of value is completely false.

Althusser appears to be unaware that Lenin, whom he always treats as a repository of pure and unsullied Marxist truth, gives his full support to Marx here. Has Lenin also confused Hegelianism with Marxism? Must we reject him along with the great first chapter on "Commodities"?

It is a pity that poor Marx is "trapped in a Hegelian conception of science", and has made such a mess of these conceptions of "value" and "commodities". But, far worse, in his theory of the "fetishism" of money and commodities, he has gone head-over-heels into it again. This "reification", or turning into a powerful and controlling entity or force, of "money", and the laws of capitalism, seems to Althusser a purely Hegelian error. He says:

"The whole fashionable theory of 'reification' depends on the projection of the theory of alienation found in the early texts (particularly the Manuscripts of 1844) on to the theory of 'fetishism' in Capital."9

Marx on the other hand, sees it as the very essence of the capitalist system which traps men in the irresistible working of its laws, until they realise that men can be brought to see that the whole law system of capitalism and the fetishism of money and the commodities is an illusion. It belongs only to a passing epoch, it is not eternal or absolute. At the

For Marx, p. 189.

 Ibid, p. 197.

 Grundrisse der Kritik des Politischen Oekonomie (Rohentwurf) Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough draft).

8 See Lenin's biographical article on Marx, Collected Works, 1930, (Vol. XVIII).

9 For Marx, p. 290.
right time, if we come to understand, we can and must pass beyond, supersede, transcend the capitalist economy and establish a socialist one, in which the production and distribution of goods is carried out in terms of reason and human needs, and no longer under the alienation and obstructive laws of the commodity market. But all this appears to Althusser pure Hegelianism, and he will have none of it.

Marx and Historical Materialism

Readers of Althusser’s Preface to the French paper-back edition of Capital must have been somewhat surprised at his rejection of Marx’s theory of historical development as “Hegelian evolutionism”. The formulation he selects for criticism is not explicitly set forth in historical development to show that the enlarged materialism in the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy (1859). The essential paragraph, well known to everyone, opens with these words:

“In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will”.

Marx then develops this dialectical conception of historical development to show that the enlarged forces of production (technology) come into conflict with the potentialities.

The upshot of Althusser’s positivism is the creation of a new system of theoretical abstraction, a system stripped of its humanism, its consciousness, the laws of motion, as described in the Preface, its evolutionary historicism, a conceptual system which is to be the guide to practice. This system was never created by Marx, Althusser argues; it is, however, implicit in the structure of Capital, and it is our task to extract it and build it up into a system.

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10 The words which Althusser will have nothing to do with regarding them as wholly idealistic.
12 Preface to the paperback Capital.
13 Althusser, Preface to Capital.
16 For Marx, p. 187.
Is there a Marxist System?

It is important that we should at once compare this with Marx's own method. He does not present us with any system. Had he thought one necessary he would certainly have constructed one. What he has in mind is the development of consciousness, of understanding, of the possibilities, the problems, the opportunities and necessities in the actual social situation. This Marx calls praxis, because it is always concrete, always we are involved and acting, and therefore thinking as we act, and acting as we think. There is no fixed theoretical structure existing outside the concrete situation, but a situation that changes as we act, because we act; and so instantly demands a re-examination, a new understanding, and a new reaction. This is the philosophy of the working hypothesis.

Marx also put his whole emphasis on the working class, (or a leading section of it able to inform and carry with them the rank-and-file,) coming to this higher level of consciousness at which men become able for the first time deliberately and consciously to make their own history. This is a constant repetition of "going beyond" the present pattern and its laws. It demands at each step the human option, the anticipation of unaccomplished ends; of ends not deduced from existing structure and laws. This Althusser totally rejects as "subjective" and "spontaneous", as ideological.

Althusser's substitution of the system for praxis, leads to the disappearance of the creative man of history, and the arrival of "a knowledge" reserved for the elite, completely separated from the masses by the "break" between involvement and conscious search for a way forward on the one hand, and the level of a detached system of organised abstraction on the other. This is a structuralism and its scientific laws, and is independent of human options.

The upshot is a complex and endlessly argued scholasticism, in which there must necessarily be a variety of rival and equally plausible conceptual constructions; and no possibility of deciding except by exhaustive and inconclusive arguments which is correct. Althusser's disciples seem to disappear into this remote distance of remote and never concluded abstract discussions. Their intellectual labours may remain intellectually satisfying, but they are totally irrelevant to the stream of events and the understanding of the masses who are involved in them.

What is Scientific Socialism?

Althusser opposes to the evolutionary historicism of Marx, and equally to Engels' dialectical progress based on his laws of motion in society, his own version of "scientific" social theory. This system, Althusser explains, was never formulated or mentioned by Marx. We have to elicit it from Capital, where it exists "in a form which has never been extracted". In fact it has to be built up, not from any actual statements or formulations of Marx, but from what Marx did not say (but implied). Our attention has to be "focused on absences", for as far as Marx is concerned there is "silence in respect to the abstractions within the theoretical practice" of Capital. We must therefore search for "answers corresponding to no questions asked".17

Therefore Althusser, rejecting Marx's philosophical approach, and accepting scientific objectivity as his method, analyses and describes the pre-existing structure of capitalism and its economic transformation.18 Man as active subject goes, and we return to a pre-Marxist form of materialism and the corresponding theoretical model or conceptual reproduction of the world. We establish ourselves in the concept, possess its first principles, immutable and complete, from which all further truth and action can be deduced.

This becomes the kind of predictive determinism so severely criticised by Popper, and represents a history which unfolds in accordance with immutable laws based on the contradictions in the economy. This comes very close to metaphysical materialism, which is itself simply the inverted form of metaphysical idealism; the interacting forces conceived conceptually operating with the inevitability of an immanent and unfolding logic. But the notion that the whole of history, with its extraordinary transformations, is predictable by inference from existing data is really quite indefensible19.

All that can be deduced from any such formulation of the structure of society is that the structure conditions Man, and that means that the ruling ideas which condition Men as part of the super-structure of a class society, represent and maintain that class structure and the interests of the dominant class. Marx himself rejected this view as the inevitable consequence of materialistic positivism.

"The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances . . . forgets that circumstances are changed precisely by men. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can only be conceived and rationally understood as revolutionising practice.20"

The point is not to describe the world and accept its law system, but to change it.

The Marxist approach to history does not represent it as the automatic consequence of the operation of inexorable laws, but lays down the guiding theory which shows that when people in a capitalist society become involved in certain contradictions, the way to overcome them is to adapt

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17 Theoretical Practice (No. 1) (The British Journal of Althusser Studies).
18 Althusser adopts as the Law of Transformation the theory of contradictions formulated by Mao Tse-tung.
19 If there is any Marxist who thinks so, Popper has a most convincing answer, but the determinism he refutes is not Marxism.
20 Third Thesis on Feuerbach.

AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW—OCTOBER, 1972
the pattern of the economy, that is its productive relations, their constitutions and ideas, to the already developed form of production. This is the Marxist working hypothesis, the successful operation of which depends on us, on our fully taking the variable conditions into account, on our understanding of the situation, on a very wide understanding and not merely the knowledge of an elite. As Cornforth says:

“It is not, and could not be, a ‘law governed process’ in the strict determinist sense that there are pre-ordained laws which allow nothing to happen except what does happen.”

This would be history without men, who are reduced to being no more than the medium which carries the pattern of social relations, not its makers. It treats structure without reference to human option, or to the imaginative insight necessary to transcend any historically reached and established structural pattern and conceive a totally new one. This is the break which depends upon anticipation of a course that is quite different from the one predetermined by existing conceptual structures, a venture in the making of history which contains risk, responsible choice, and real historical initiative. The essence of Marxism is to show how man transcends existing structure and the logic of that structure. He goes beyond current laws, which he sees as not absolute or eternal, but as historically conditioned. We remember that the one Hegelian concept (after alienation) that Althusser ruthlessly cuts out of Marxism is that of transcendence, going beyond, supersession (Aufhebung); but is it not precisely by this that human history is made?

Althusser only finds one Marxist (Marx himself he sees as full of hopeless inconsistencies!) who can be depended upon to hold firmly to structural rigidity and strictly scientific objectivity, and that is Lenin. Lenin is presented as wholly free from Hegelian slipperyness, idealist moralisings and sentimental humanism. This he had hoped Marx would be too, but was sadly disappointed. However, Lenin, he believes, never regards any Hegelian concept as essential, neither negativity, alienation, “supersession”, nor of course the Hegelian fusion of subjectivity and objectivity. We must disappoint him yet again.

Lenin, after his study of Hegel, accepts his essential contribution to philosophy, the unification of the subjective and the objective in the process of knowing, just as Marx did.22 Lenin, as we pointed out earlier, enthusiastically accepts the summary of Marx’s historicist theory in the Preface to The Critique which Althusser rejects and imagines that Lenin rejects too. This bases social development on the changes in the productive relations when they become fetters on the productive forces. Althusser had said “not for a moment did Lenin succumb to the influence of these Hegelian-evolutionist pages”. Lenin actually quoted them in full in two of his most important works, where he describes them as “a complete formulation of the fundamental theory of historical materialism”.23 And, “most unkindest cut of all”, instead of rejecting the Hegelian theory, in its materialist form, but still essentially what Marx always took it for, the dialectic of Man simultaneously creating himself, society and history, through his growing awareness of the historical process, “the realisation of philosophy” by and in the proletariat, Lenin regards the full understanding and acceptance of the Hegelian truth in Marxism as indispensable”.

“We have ceased to read Hegel, and that is why none of the Marxists for the past half-century has understood Marx.”24

We know one French Marxist to whom this most signally applies.

The Althusser Style

One cannot leave Althusser without some comments upon his whole style of life and writing, which is unusual, though more impressive than persuasive. He speaks as a dedicated man and a voice crying in the wilderness. He gives the appearance of wide and competent scholarship applied to a totally novel, and in his view, desperately necessary restatement of the whole Marxist position. Highly polemical, he at once arouses our interest by arraigning in the dock the enemies and heretics which it is his responsibility to expose and denounce; they are the philosophers, the evolutionists, the Hegelians and the humanists.

He argues exhaustively and with extreme dogmatism as the last champion of an orthodoxy in grave difficulties. Interest is held because he has thought for himself, and his presentation has a certain independence that is more convincing than repetitions of well known arguments and expositions, which have a tired and exhaustive feeling.

There is no mistaking the basis of his re-presentation: it claims to be scientific as opposed to the ideological theories of the evolutionists and humanists. This is the reason for his arguments and theses taking on the aspect of vigorously stated empirical facts and strictly logical inferences from them.25 There is no ambiguity or subjectivism about his case. One would think that he is an exponent of the older kind of physics before Einstein took the

21 Cornforth, The Open Philosophy and the Open Society. Cornforth adds that we may read right through the works of Marx and never meet with any formulation of any such laws.


23 Lenin, What the Friends of the People Are, and The Biographical Article on Marx.

24 Lenin, Philosophical Notebooks.

25 A fatal return to empiricism, as he himself admits.
finality and absolutism out of it. Althusser would clearly like Marxism to be clear, absolute and final, incontrovertible and unalterable.

With this necessarily goes the aggressive militancy of the man who knows he has the final truth. This strongly partisan spirit is refreshing and imparts to those who adopt it a reassuring feeling of superiority and confidence.

What, then, is the theoretical system that has emerged and what is he doing about it? Unfortunately, nothing intelligible has emerged and nothing is being done about it. A complete theoretical system is promised, but not presented. Instead we are told to read *Capital* under Althusser's direction. But the secret of Marx, when we put down his books, has been well kept.

Nor is there the kind of healthy immersion in everyday affairs and current issues from which clear insight as to what is really happening and what is to be done emerges, as was the case in all Lenin's vigorous, concrete and practical speaking and writing. What does seem to happen is a scholastic retreat into greater and greater confusion and obscurity. With every fresh batch of essays the topic grows more recondite and the readers and disciples more select and fewer.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{26}\) I refer particularly to the two volumes of essays entitled *Theoretical Practice*.

The parallel with the schoolmen of the Middle Ages cannot be avoided. Every purely conceptual system, though once it is accepted it is going to rule the facts and dictate our actions, can never reach the certainty of unquestionable unanimity. All theoretical dogmatism is very far from science because it is not *praxis*, not a working hypothesis, tested and revised continuously in action, as for instance medicine is; and as Marxism is. Consequently its profound theorisings must take the form of an insistent dogmatism, or tremble on the balancing point of conviction, like all speculative metaphysics. And it must always be open to an alternative and equally rigorous system. That is precisely why medieval scholasticism disappeared within the classrooms of the Catholic philosophers and was for ever lost to sight. Nor is certainty ever to be assured,—the only way in which dogmatism can triumph over doubts,—by the increasing urgency of the assertions as to the rigour and authenticity of the system.

Althusser is prepared to defend his case on the field of a battle for the right word. There are two words in particular on which he is prepared to fight to the last: firstly, he refuses to admit that Marxism is a *humanism*; secondly, he refuses to say that it is *Man* who makes history. If these are his dogmas, he may keep them.