The works of the French communist philosopher, Louis Althusser, have in recent years attained some prominence, exerting a considerable influence on both the form and content of current debates on marxist and revolutionary theory. With his stress on rigour and his plea for a 'scientific' marxism freed from all 'ideological' trappings such as humanism, Althusser represents for many an important new point of departure from marxist theory following the theoretical poverty of the Stalin era and the 'revisionism' which swept the international communist movement following the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956.

Althusser’s new departure is achieved by a reinterpretation of old texts in the course of which he elaborates an abstract theoretical system supposed to represent a statement of correct marxist science and theory. This reinterpretation is not merely passive, but one in which Althusser brings his own knowledge and his training in philosophy to bear so that we have both Althusser’s restatement of classical marxism together with insights and theories of his own.

Althusser has made one major contribution (although it is not a completely original one) to the study of Marx. While, in my opinion, his conception of marxism is dogmatic in the sense that he hopes to find a virtually perfected system from the classics alone, it is also true that he is undogmatic in that he calls for a critical reading of Marx which does not accept at face value every word that Marx wrote. Althusser is quite correct to call for a rigorous approach to Marx which penetrates beyond superficial impressions to get at the heart of what Marx is saying. He is also right to point out that we should process the classic texts and discard what we believe to be wrong and accept what we think is right. In this sense Althusser has something to teach many marxist intellectuals and revolutionary activists who think that just because Marx or Lenin or Mao wrote something it must therefore be right. For too long this sort of thinking has led to ‘proof by quotation’ arguments, which are very often futile because the quotations are treated as holy writ, as well as being usually quoted out of the context of the text and the times in which they were written. However, Althusser is not the first to make these points, and simply to call for a critical reading of Marx is not to ensure that your own reading will in fact be rigorous and critical, nor will it ensure that products from such reading will be scientifically valid.

It is impossible here to examine all aspects of Althusser’s theories. I wish to concentrate on what I believe is central to Althusser’s theory of human society and social change: his ‘theoretical anti-humanism’. Althusser’s goal is to establish a certain image and interpretation of marxism, from the point of view of both form (the epistemological status of marxism) and content (the actual discoveries which marxist science has made). However, save for the elaboration of a structuralist model of society (see below) which is said to be extracted from Marx, and the definition of a number of concepts (some useful e.g. his definition of practice, and some hopelessly useless, e.g. his definition of science) Althusser’s main focus has been an investigation of marxist philosophy, particularly epistemology – the theory of knowledge. In his own terminology, he is concerned with a ‘theory about theory’, and a theory of science.

These are important concerns for human knowledge generally and the theory of knowledge is an area in which many of the crucial debates in revolutionary theory are taking place. It has been noted that: ‘It should by now, in fact, be clear that no marxist epistemology as such yet exists, and that the difficult problems posed by the bond between historical materialism and the proletarian class struggle are still far from being solved.’ (1) While I would not agree entirely with the way the writer of these words has posed the problem, they do point to a crucial lack. One should perhaps say that no clear epistemology was elaborated in the classic marxist texts, and that today the various strands within marxist thought have all, at least implicitly, developed their own epistemologies which have in part led to the bitter theoretical debates between them.

For at stake here is nothing less than the whole marxist image of man’s place in, and relation to, the rest of the

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BRIAN AARONS

1. This article is a continuation of the discussion on the ideas of Louis Althusser commenced in ALR No. 37. A complete analysis would require something much longer. This is not possible at the present time, so here I analyse certain key concepts in Althusser’s writings, and endeavor to assess the implications of his work for the development of a theory of society adequate for today's revolutionary movement.

The main works referred to are ‘For Marx,’ Allen Lane, 1966 (henceforth FM, p. --) and ‘Lenin on Philosophy,’ NLB, 1971 (LP), as well as four major articles of criticism: L. Kolakowski ‘Althusser’s Marx’ (AM) in The Socialist Register 1971; F. George ‘Reading Althusser,’ (RA), Telos No. 7; N. Geras ‘Althusser’s Marxism: An Account and Assessment’ (AA), New Left Review, No. 71; and A. Glucksman ‘A Ventriloquist Structuralism’ (VS), New Left Review No. 72. These references include comments on the series of essays of Althusser and Balibar, published as ‘Reading Capital’ (RC), which otherwise I have not yet had time to fully consider.
world, both the natural and the social worlds. How do we know the world; what can we know about it; what possibilities and limitations are there for ‘scientific’ knowledge about human society; and what is the relation between knowledge, consciousness and human action? Answers to these and many other similar questions about the nature of man and society are necessary preconditions for the formation of a new revolutionary philosophy and science of society which will incorporate all that is best, relevant and correct in the classic works and jettison all found wrong or inadequate.

It is here, in the realm of how we are to approach the theoretical issues at present being contested so fiercely within the left, that Althusser’s work has its main bearing.

1. APPROACH TO THEORY: ATTITUDE TO MARXISM

Despite some originality and creativity in his interpretative work, Althusser’s approach is essentially a dogmatic one. His basic concern is to argue a case for his own interpretation of Marx, to establish Marx in his own image, so to speak. His method for doing this is a close reading of the texts of Marx, Engels and Lenin, with little reference to the external reality (human society) which is the object of analysis in these texts. Thus proof of what is correct and what is incorrect is to be established by a careful, laborious work of textual analysis, rather than by testing the theory against social reality. Althusser’s clear attitude to this project is that once he has established the ‘true’ interpretation of Marx (what Marx ‘really meant’ or ‘should have meant’) everything will be settled. The revolutionary movement need only accept this interpretation and reject all ‘deviations’ for it to have a correct theoretical framework in which to carry on its analytical and political work.

But whatever the scientific merits or demerits of ‘Capital’ and Althusser’s version of Marx might be, it is clear that an approach which seeks to find the truth simply by analysing the classic texts of marxism is far from scientific. These texts do have much to teach us, especially about how revolutionaries should approach the study of the society they hope to change. But it is precisely the method and approach to studying social reality used in most of these texts which Althusser has failed to grasp in his own study of Marx and Lenin. For not only does he have a peculiar notion of what science is and what its criteria of truth are, he also fails completely to understand that the worth of any text or any scientific model is a function of how well it explains and predicts the phenomena and events it purports to be analysing.

What we most get from Althusser are bald assertions (usually highly questionable ones) about the scientificity of marxism, or about what marxist science really is. Althusser has devoted a lot of space to an analysis of Lenin’s contribution to marxist philosophy, but in his own work there is scarcely a sign that he has understood or applied Lenin’s dictum that ‘concrete analysis of concrete situations’ is the key to revolutionary marxist analysis. And indeed this is no surprise, for not only does Althusser— in his own writing avoid any contact with social reality and events, but he actually espouses a theory of knowledge which justifies this omission.

As a number of critics have convincingly shown, Althusser’s epistemology is essentially idealist; this despite Althusser’s own pronouncements against idealism, and his proclamations about marxism being materialist. This idealism finds its expression in a number of different ways and leads Althusser to make a number of important errors:

† He states in various places (e.g. LP, p.39) that logic and mathematics are sciences. This is at variance with both the accepted definitions of science in the philosophy of science and the (admittedly vague) discussions of science by most marxist writers. The distinction between mathematics and logic on the one hand, and the sciences on the other, is that in the former, criteria of proof and advances in knowledge are decided by rules set up within the disciplines, whereas in the latter the criteria include reference to experimental data. This error is both characteristic and revealing, for it illustrates Althusser’s strong inclination to see science purely as theory, as a mere thought process.

† On a different tack, Althusser’s ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ leads him to make statements like this: ‘... it is not enough just to register the event, nor to record the concepts ... in which the event itself thinks itself.’ (FM, p.223). I shall discuss below the validity of the ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ of Althusser — here we note the amazing similarity between this statement of the ‘anti-Hegelian’, ‘materialist’ Althusser and Hegel’s notion about history being the unfolding of the Absolute Idea. Clearly, events do not ‘think themselves’. Events are the products of human actions, which are themselves the result of a complex interplay between reality, perceived reality and the ideas of the people taking part in them. Events are not some mystical entities existing above and beyond the people who act them out; to believe that they are, and are therefore capable of ‘thought’ etc. is philosophical idealism.

† Insofar as the much misused word ‘dialectical’ has any determinate meaning it is to denote two-way interactions between entities in a totality. In the sphere of human knowledge about the external world, including scientific knowledge, it implies a continual interaction between ‘reality’, observations of that reality (data), and human reasoning as to the ‘meaning’ of the data, producing hypotheses which are tested in practice via new observations. If the new observations verify the hypotheses, then the hypotheses may attain the status of a theory. This is a simple statement of the procedures of science, or what marxists have often referred to as the ‘dialectical method’.

But Althusser does not see this dialectic. In effect, he cuts the link between theory and observation and establishes a definition and theory of science which sees it purely in terms of the thought processes of scientists. Thus he states that Marx’s theory is practical because it is true, not that it is true because it is practical i.e. has succeeded in practice. (RC, p.59). The obvious question
which Althusser's formulation cannot answer is how do we know Marx's theory is true, i.e. what are its criteria of proof? Clearly these must be made up of 'internal' criteria (the logic, consistency, coherence of the theoretical models) plus external ones (does the theory describe and explain fully and accurately the entity it is talking about, and can it predict, or at least be compatible with, future events?). No scientific theory can establish its own truth without reference to observations of the object it attempts to describe. In fact, as is typical of the circular process (i.e. dialectical interaction) which takes place between theory and observation in all science, we must say that Marx's theory, insofar as it is true, is both true because it is practical and practical because it is true. And even that statement leaves aside many considerations concerning the nature of truth and proof of which Althusser does not seem to have the slightest inkling.

† Althusser defines science purely in terms of its form, and even here he is wrong. Thus he claims 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.' (RC,p.67). While it is true that science can be distinguished from other types of knowledge by certain formal characteristics, these characteristics are not of themselves a sufficient condition to make something a science. It is this mistake that allows Althusser to believe that mathematics is a science.

Kolakowski correctly asks how, if this is our sole condition for science, 'can Althusser deny the scientific validity of the theology that has certainly produced in theological practice the criteria for legitimating its proposals?' (AM,p.115). Althusser has one let-out here. Elsewhere he defines science as having an object. He could claim that theology has no (real) object, just as he claims that philosophy has no object in the sense that science has an object. However, while we might agree that theology does not have an object in the sense that science has one, this definition, like many of Althusser's, is both narrow and unilluminating. The point is, most theologians believe that theology does have an object. How can this belief of theirs be disproved? In fact, within the terms of reference they set themselves, they can't be disproved; they can only be disproved within the framework of the assumptions and methodology of science. Thus, and this is the crucial point, science not only looks at objects, it plays an active role in defining what objects are and which objects are to be regarded as proper objects of scientific enquiry.

And here we come to the crunch. For in speaking of science in a vacuum as if it could be isolated from the objects which it studies and the human subjects who practise it, Althusser ignores the real problems of obtaining so-called 'objective' knowledge in the sciences. These problems exist with particular force in the social sciences (AM,p.114), not least because human beings (whom Althusser wants to define out of existence as objects of study) are very complicated entities indeed. However, these problems exist, and pose great difficulties in the physical sciences also. The uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics has been enough to make physicists realise that observation and knowledge are processes — interactions between external reality and internal thought. At our present level of knowledge at least, it is clear that there is both an 'objective' and a 'subjective' component to knowledge, and that 'scientific' knowledge is not merely a 'mirror reflection' of some 'objective' reality but a result of human striving to overcome complete subjectivity, ignorance and mysticism.

Contrary to the fears of many, to assert this does not mean a return to prescientific modes of thought and proof. In fact, discoveries such as the uncertainty principle represent scientific advances because they demonstrate that previous theories about the complete objectivity of science were but metaphysical assumptions and ideologies. The traditional concern of marxism to uncover the hidden workings of society, to demystify it so that people could understand it 'as it really is' is still valid. But the rather simplistic and dogmatic notions of marxism about the possibilities of objective scientific knowledge must be discarded and replaced by a more sophisticated, more correct epistemology and philosophy of science.

† Althusser espouses a reductionist view of science when he states (LP, p.39) that chemistry and biology belong to the 'continent of physics'. This ignores (at least) the very real practical difficulties in reducing one level of analysis to another. In fact, chemistry and biology are domains of science in their own right, and neither their theories nor their methods can be 'reduced' to those of physics.

† Althusser's 'unscientific' conception of science is fully exposed in his peculiar attitude to Freud. While he has correctly argued against the rejection of Freud by dogmatic marxists, he quite wrongly contends that Freud is 'scientific'. As is well known, Freud made a great step forward in psychology by establishing certain analytical techniques and advancing a number of important theories about individual psychology. However, it is also well known that Freud's theories, particularly his theory of the unconscious, suffer from a number of defects which make them far from scientific. This is not to say that Freud is wrong in all his theories, but simply that these theories cannot properly be tested as yet.

Typically, having adopted another 'scientific' figurehead, Althusser becomes obsessively dogmatic about him. Thus, in replying to Lewis (ALR No. 38, p.31) he refers sneeringly to 'anti-Freudian' psychologists, comparing them to anti-Galilean physicists. But there are very good 'scientific' grounds on which many psychologists are anti-Freudian. Althusser ignores these; as with his attitude to Marx he wants a theory with all the answers, rather than an open, scientific investigation of the issues posed by that theory.

† Althusser's idealist theory of knowledge is demonstrated in his polemic against the supposed empiricist view of 'knowledge as a vision'. To this 'error' Althusser
counterposes his own theory: ‘knowledge as production’
Althusser is wrong here because of his one-sidedness.
Knowledge can be regarded as a production process, but
it is clearly more than that. In the sense that knowledge
does, or should, tell us something about the world, it is
also ‘vision’. Obviously, Althusser’s opposition to ‘know-
ledge as vision’ flows directly from his lack of interest in
reality, i.e. from his idealism.

The above brief examination of issues in the philosophy
of science has been necessary to establish that Althusser’s
method in processing Marx and Marxism is an essentially
idealist one. His idealist conception of science has allowed
him to embark on an idealist project: to establish a revolu-
tionary science of society purely by analysing and inter-
preting the classic Marxist texts. There are overtones of an
almost mystical, semi-religious attitude to Marx, Engels,
Lenin, Mao, etc. because the clear assumption is that a
modern revolutionary theory and methodology can be
extracted from them alone.

2. SOME SPECIFIC THEORIES

Society as Structure: It has been said that Althusser is
neither a structuralist nor a functionalist, and Althusser
himself refers at least once in slighting terms to structural-
alism as a positivist theory. However, any systematic rea-
ding (!) of Althusser leaves no doubt that not only is he
very much within the structuralist tradition, but in cer-
tain respects he belongs to the extreme wing of the struc-
turalist school.

Broadly speaking, within the history of the social sci-
cences (in fact, within the history of science and knowl-
edge generally) three streams, or traditions of philosop-
ical thought can be distinguished. There are two extremes
what might be called the materialist/determinist tradition
(M/D) and the idealist/voluntarist tradition (I/V) -
and a middle, the dialectical tradition. The M/D tradition
has tended to seek for ‘objective’ knowledge of human
society, to look for ‘objective’ laws of social development and
history and to look for forces controlling this develop-
ment which exist beyond human consciousness and act on
it in a more or less determinate way. The I/V tradition fo-
cusses on the individual person, exploring the world as
seen by this individual, his situation in the world and his
action upon the world. The dialectical tradition, which
has both based itself upon elements of M/D and I/V and
also found it difficult to resist strong pulls (‘deviat-
ions’) towards one or the other, has attempted to com-
bine the best (i.e. most correct, relevant) elements of both
traditions. This process of combination should not be
seen as an ‘eclectic mish-mash’ but as something of a syn-
thesis of both, together with an operation of ‘tacking’
between two perspectives which each have validity within
certain limits. The dialectical tradition has yet to develop
fully and coherently an explicit theory and method which
embody the above processes, and I see this as one of the
key tasks before it. (3).

The structuralist school in social science has attempted
to develop formalised models corresponding to structures
exhibited in human society. The key concepts of structu-
ralism are:

- structures: closed, self-contained systems
- elements: individual entities which make up the structure
- laws of transformation: rules which govern the
  behaviour of the elements belonging to the structure.

Some of the key assumptions of structuralism are:

† The whole is more important than the parts: the
  structure (say a group of people) assumes an identity ab-
  ove and beyond the elements (individuals) who comprise
  it.

† Laws operate at the level of the structure making
  the structure an ongoing, self-regulating entity. For in-
  stance, in human groups, norms and rules act as constraints
  on the individuals belonging to them.

† The structure (group or society) exists over and ab-
  ove its constitution by the people belonging to it; it is a
  super-entity of its own, exerting virtually uncontrollable
  laws and forces over the actions of those within it.

† Individuals are merely the mediators of the struct-
  ure and its laws. According to Piaget (in his book Struc-
  turalism) these laws cannot exist in human consciousness,
  and even exist independently of their recognition by the
  social scientist.

This is merely an outline which ignores differences with-
in the structuralist tradition. However, it allows us to see
just how neatly Althusser fits into this school of thought.
(4)

Althusser’s ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ is based firmly
on a structuralist vision of society, or to use his own termi-
ology, on the concept of ‘structural causality’, together
with notions about the ‘objective’ nature of certain struc-
tures within the social formation. Geras (AA, p.76) succ-
cinctly summarises Althusser’s structuralist, ‘theoretical
anti-humanism’:

‘... It is not men that make history. They are not the
subjects of the process. And a scientific knowledge of
social reality cannot be founded on an anthropology em-
bodying a concept of human nature or of the essence of
man. Rather the “absolute precondition” of such
knowledge is “that the philosophical (theoretical) myth
of man is reduced to ashes”, and that “we do completely
without (its) theoretical services”. So, though humanism
may still have a role to play as an ideology, its rejection
for scientific purposes is complete and unambiguous. Nor
is this affected by the centrality of the notion of practice.
For, as we know, each practice is a structure, and, as such,
exercises its determination over the elements it combines
or relates — men, objects of labor and instruments of lab-

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or. Men cannot therefore be regarded as the active subjects of the process. They are simply its 'supports': 'The structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the 'supports' (Trager) of these functions. The true 'subjects' (in the sense of constitutive subjects of the process) are therefore not these occupants or functionaries, are not, despite all appearances, the 'obviousness' of the 'given' of naive anthropology, 'concrete individuals', 'real men' -- but the definition and distribution of these places and functions. The true 'subjects' are these definers and distributors: the relations of production (and political and ideological social relations). But since these are 'relations', they cannot be thought within the category subject. Balibar has expressed this by saying that 'individuals are merely the effects' of the different practices, and that 'each relatively autonomous practice .... engenders forms of historical individuality which are peculiar to it.'

This central theoretical stance of Althusser finds its elaboration, support and echoes in virtually all components of this theory, whether in economics, epistemology, science or philosophy. Thus, in writing of practice, Althusser says: 'In any practice thus conceived, the determinant moment (or element) is neither the raw material nor the product, but the practice in the narrow sense: the moment of the labor of transformation itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilising the means'. (FM, p.166).

He asserts that economic reproduction appears as 'a process without a subject'. Marx described the capitalist system as a 'mechanism', a 'machinery', a 'machine'; therefore, Althusser concludes, one can compare the economy, whose appearances are set in motion by a deeper machinery, to an 'authorless theatre' which is simultaneously its own stage, its own script and its own actors. There is nothing behind the stage direction of this theatre save for the rules of the stage direction. (see VS, p.84).

And finally, the same theory finds its expression in Althusser's epistemology, where it can be seen as part and parcel of his philosophical idealism. A key concept in his epistemology is that of problematic. Geras explains this term as designating '.... the theoretical (or ideological) framework which puts into relation with one another the basic concepts, determines the nature of each concept by its place and function in this system of relationships, and thus confers on each concept its particular significance'. (AA, p.66).

In other words, a problematic is a particular theoretical framework with its own set of concepts, rules of operation, etc. As we might expect, Althusser sees the problematic as living a life of its own. To see the force with which Althusser states this, and to bring out all the implications, it is worth quoting again from Geras:

'As regards the activity of the implicit, unconscious, problematic, it is intended in the strongest possible sense. In words which we are enjoined by Althusser to take 'literally', the problematic is assigned those functions which other epistemologies, such as empiricism, attribute to a human subject: 'The sighting is thus no longer the act of an individual subject, endowed with the faculty of "vision" which he exercises either attentively or distractedly; the sighting is the act of its structural conditions, it is the relation of immanent reflection between the field of the problematic and its objects and its problems .... It is literally no longer the eye (the mind's eye) of a subject which sees what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which sees itself in the objects or problems it defines .... the invisible is no more a function of a subject's sighting than is the visible: the invisible is the theoretical problematic's non-vision of its non-objects, the invisible is the darkness, the blinded eye of the theoretical problematic's self-reflection when its scans its non-objects, its non-problems without seeing them, in order not to look at them'. (RC, pp.25-6).

'This passage, in which a theoretical structure, the problematic, is represented as the determinate element in the process of production of knowledge, so that the human subject ceases to be the subject of the process in the strict sense, is no mere polemical excess on Althusser's part. It is typical. The Althusserian universe is governed by structures and the only subjects that populate it are those subject to this government, their places and functions marked out for them by its ubiquitous hegemony.' (AA,p.67).

3. THEORETICAL HUMANISM AND THEORETICAL ANTI-HUMANISM

Far from representing materialist 'science' in all its rigorous glory, Althusser's theoretical anti-humanism is in fact a metaphysical (in that it speaks of entities which have no independent existence of their own in the physical world) and idealist pseudo-science.

Althusser's chief mistake lies not so much in that he tries to see entities and structures other than human beings as the subjects of history, but rather in that he takes one aspect of, or one perspective on human society and history and tries to make it the only aspect/perspective. That is, one part of the social process is seen by him as the whole of the process.

For it is true that one way of looking at society is to look at its 'objective' features: at the workings of various structures (the economy, the law, the power structure, the institutions of civil society, the functioning of human groups, especially the 'social unit' - the family - and so on) which all exert an influence on the individuals who inhabit them. This influence is exerted in a number of different ways: by coercion, authority, persuasion, reward and punishment, satisfaction of needs, etc.
Further, we can agree that at the macro-level of analysis, these structures operate according to rules of their own: we can build models of, say, the economy which describe, explain and predict the workings of the economy according to certain rules which need not necessarily be related back to the individuals who work within the production process. Or we can see that within a particular area of knowledge, or science, certain rules and forms operate which must be conformed with by those engaged in that field in order that new knowledge be produced. In that sense, each theoretical framework or set of ideological beliefs is worthy of study as an object in its own right, in which certain rules and procedures govern the practice of the discipline and the production of knowledge within that discipline.

But, while this is one way of looking at the various processes which make up the social totality, it is not the only way. Moreover, and more importantly, our analysis cannot and should not stop there, as Althusser's analysis does. For it remains as perhaps the only absolute invariant of history, that all these structures and all these processes are the result of human activity, both individual and collective activity. What might be called the thesis of 'theoretical humanism', as opposed to theoretical anti-humanism, can be stated very generally as follows: concrete individuals (real people) are the proper subjects of history. This, however, tells us little; it is merely a statement of principle in opposition to Althusser. It does not mean that historical processes are going on in conformity with the individual wishes and intentions of their actors. Clearly, to the extent that people do not understand the workings of society, or the motivations of themselves and others, and to the extent that they must contend with certain given realities (economic, biological, emotional and other needs) and the wishes, intentions and actions of other people who have an effect on their lives, this cannot be so. But it does mean that the individual acts of which social life ultimately consists, are not submitted to regularities over which people have no power. Rather, these acts are the results of all the realities and social influences brought to bear on them. That is, social events are the resultant in these conditions of the strivings, aspirations, ideas and actions of ensembles of individuals.

No one individual has complete power over, or fully determines, a social event; but there is always a set of real people who are the main (direct or indirect) influence on the outcome of any particular event. Hence, while the basic assumption of Althusser is that structures, problems and other such entities are the proper subjects of history and therefore the proper objects of study for social science, the basic assumption of 'theoretical humanism' is that people are the subjects of history and the 'objects' of social science.

This assumption, which is far more 'scientific' than Althusser's because it more correctly states the reality of the matter, is nevertheless only a crude beginning. It does not get us very far in terms of useful knowledge. But it does help us to refute Althusser and to incorporate his useful achievements within a broader, more correct perspective.

Let us go back over some of the above tenets of Althusser's theoretical anti-humanism and examine them from the point of view of 'theoretical humanism'. Firstly, it is clear that human history is made by people and not by any other entity or entities. However, the ways in which people, individually, in groups, in classes and masses, make history are many and varied. Society and history are not just the products of individual efforts, but of collective efforts (which naturally are composed of many individual efforts in given natural-economic-social situations). Looking at society overall, regularities emerge (i.e., we can perceive social structures operating according to certain 'rules'). But these regularities only occur because the individuals in any group or society act in accordance with particular norms and values. Thus, if in a given society no more than 0.1% of people are murdered each year, this is only because most citizens act in accordance with the laws or mores against murder. A similar analysis applies even at the level of the most 'objective' social structure: the economy. Obviously, leaving aside for the moment the reasons why people work, it is only because they work, and work in certain ways according to certain accepted rules, that any economy can function in the way it does. (It is when we realise this human foundation for economic laws that we can begin to see some merit in certain concepts of Marx which Althusser would like to abandon as waffly idealism: alienation, reification, fetishism of commodities, etc., and begin to reject some of the technocratic notions of 'efficiency').

Theoretical humanism is thus not some emotional belief, but a more scientific starting point than Althusser's. Nor does theoretical humanism have to espouse a concept of an 'essence of man' although a concept of a human nature, or 'model of man' which is historically variable and subject to change according to social conditions, is a useful one for it. Thus, we should not reduce the 'myth of man' to ashes; we should devote our efforts to study of people and societies as they really are. In this view, it is not people who are the 'supports' of the process of practice; any process of practice is the creation of the people who take part in it, i.e. act to bring it about. Similarly, while it may be useful from certain perspectives to look at people in terms of the roles and functions they serve in any process (e.g. economic production) it is not true that people are 'never anything more than the occupants of these places .......'. (emphasis added). In fact, the roles, places and functions of any process of practice are socially determined; they are ultimately the outcome of decisions made, however indirectly and unconsciously, by human collectives.

Hence 'the relations of production' (and political and ideological social relations) are not the 'subjects' of the social process at all, they are rather the products (objects) of collective human activity. Nor is it true that 'individuals are merely the effects of the different practices' (emphasis added). Individuals are both the effects of different practices (insofar as the social order tends to cast individuals in a certain mould) and the producers of those practices. In other words, individuals are the 'effects' of practice only to the extent that practices are effects.
of the sum of individual human actions. Again, we may note here the ongoing dialectic between individual and society: social reality affects individuals who act back on that reality affecting it, etc.

So in any practice it is not 'the moment of the labor of transformation itself, which sets to work, in a specific structure, men, means and a technical method of utilising the means'; it is the people active in the given practice who, during 'the moment of the labor of transformation' set to work the means and the techniques within a specific structure. This is so in all practices (scientific, economic, political, ideological or whatever) but the forms and extent of active human intervention vary between the different practices, and with time within a given practice. So, for example, in any area of human knowledge, the problematic of the particular discipline is not the active subject which 'sees' or 'does not see' the various events and objects which it studies. Human subjects create the problematics (theoretical frameworks) which they then use as instruments with which to understand the objects of study. Certainly the theoretical framework determines how an individual approaches the object of study and what he perceives, but it is the person who does the perceiving and adopts the framework in the first place, not the framework which, alone active, adopts the individual.

I said above that in a sense Althusser's theory is one possible way of looking at society (i.e. one perspective on society). Given that this perspective may be of use in some theoretical endeavours, we need to see also what is wrong with Althusser's totalisation (making it the only one) of his perspective. In demonstrating the weakness of his one-sided approach we shall see more easily the strengths of 'theoretical humanism'.

Essentially, Althusser's thesis is that history has no subject, because the real motive forces in society are structures, relations and practices (productions). It is not clear whether he suggests that these entities have an existence other than the existence which people give them by virtue of their own activity. In fact, he never tackles this question, which is symptomatic of his approach. But the theoretical implications of his writings point clearly in this direction, and take us straight into the realms of metaphysics and out of the realm of science. If Althusser does not want to acknowledge that people create the structures, relations and practices, then he should make it clear where he thinks these entities come from.

However, we need not describe Althusser as being metaphysical in order to see the theoretical and political inadequacies of his vision of society. For in placing his main (indeed, only) emphasis on the structures and relations as being the determining influences over people, he makes both a factual error and a serious political mistake. The theory that structures determine people in a one-way interaction cannot explain social change, except by recourse to more metaphysics. Because if the structures determine the people, then nothing will ever change except by a change in the structures themselves. What might bring about this change? Unless one likes to postulate metaphysical forces, metaphysical 'laws of motion' which make the (metaphysical) structures and relations change, then one can only answer that collective human thought and action is the only possible agency of change. This is the answer, on the theoretical level, to structuralist and functionalist theories of all kinds within social science.

But since Althusser claims to be a marxist revolutionary, there is also a political dimension to his work. And while he is clearly not a supporter of the capitalist status quo as other structuralists so often are, and indeed may not even be a 'revolutionary conservative' for all I know, it is nevertheless true that if his theories were taken as guides for political activity, they would act as conservative influences on revolutionary politics. Because Althusser's vision of society fits very much within the determinist strand of marxist thought. This strand actually originated to some extent in Marx and Engels, although one can always find quotations to show otherwise. These origins were taken up, expanded and dogmatised in the theory and practice of the second international, and it was only with Lenin that both a theoretical and a political opposition to determinism were formulated, although in a very sketchy form.

That Althusser belongs in this determinist strand is clear from his theoretical formulations and from what he chooses to emphasise in the classic texts of marxism. And it is here that we can understand the full meaning of his anti-Hegelianism, his opposition to terms like alienation and reification, and his polemics against Gramsci and Lukacs. Marx noted in his theses on Feuerbach (which were, amongst other things, a polemic against vulgar and materialist determinism that had, as with Althusser, become metaphysical) that the active side of human practice and understanding had been developed by idealism. While Marx did not espouse idealist philosophy, his point in this thesis has in practice been forgotten by the determinists. Gramsci and Lukacs, whatever their weaknesses, are chiefly responsible for reinserting into marxism the notion that it is people who create society, make history and change the world.

Moreover, we can now understand yet another feature of Althusser's theory: his attempt to exclude the ethical dimension from marxism. Many of his supporters admire him for this, apparently seeing it as part and parcel of his 'rigorous scientific' approach. Again, the determinist overtones here are obvious. It is one thing to call for a scientific study of society free from the intrusion of the biases and values of the enquirer; but it is quite another to exclude from your analysis the very elements which have such a large bearing on why people behave as they do: values, attitudes, etc. And for a revolutionary it is a grievous error to imagine that social change will take place other than by a change in the attitudes, ideas and values which guide the lives and behaviour of the majority of people in capitalist society. The implications of Althusser's structural determinism are that 'objective' laws in the
structures will bring about social change. This has always been the recourse of vulgar determinists of all kinds in the history of marxism, for if you exclude people from your analysis of society, and see them as merely the products of a social ‘super force’ then this can be your only explanation for change.

If, on the contrary, you see society as being the product of all those who make it up, within a given complex of circumstances, then you will see that change is brought about by collective action which will only take place when the majority starts to think and act in ways different to those conditioned in them by capitalist society. This is not to go to the idealist/voluntarist extreme and suggest that people can do anything, or that people will change simply by moral persuasion. Clearly, certain conditions of crisis have to mature in a ‘semi-objective’ way in a society before people start to question their ideas and values. But just as clearly, an ‘objective’ economic crisis does not inevitably produce socialists or socialism, as the revolutionary movement has learnt from bitter experience.

‘Objective’ analysis of society can tell us what is, and the possible direction in which history is headed; but only a revolutionary movement based on opposition to existing conditions, and with a clear idea of what ought to be can overthrow those existing conditions and institute a new social order. The determinist theory can neither explain how change comes about nor serve as a guide for bringing about that change.

Thus we see that Althusser has remained at a level of analysis which doesn’t even begin to ask the right questions. The analysis of social totalities and structures can provide us with much useful knowledge. But it cannot tell us all we want to know. Naturally, the size and complexity of human societies force us to make macro-analyses as one part of social understanding. But just as physicists who use statistical mechanics to understand gases composed of many atoms would not therefore call themselves ‘theoretical anti-atomists’, so social scientists who prefer to look at overall structures would be wrong to call themselves theoretical anti-humanists.

Althusser does in fact recognise that people behave according to ideologies which they believe in. However, his analysis of the social function of ideology only demonstrates further the consequences of his attempt to totally separate ethics and science. He concedes that various ‘ideologies’ such as humanism play a practical role in society, and that sometimes this role can be progressive. Further, he states that ideology will always play a role in society. He never makes it clear whether he thinks humanism does, will, or should, continue to play a positive role. However, there is the strong implication that humanism and other ideologies are ‘what is good for the masses’. Surely, if he believes in the necessity of a ‘scientific’ approach, he should hope for the day that everyone sees through false ideologies, in which case everyone should become a ‘theoretical anti-humanist’. Such an attitude is typical also of a certain paternalistic strand in the marxist movement which somehow believes that there are truths which are the property of the enlightened and not for general distribution.

4. ALTHUSSER’S STYLE AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENT

The critics of Althusser have, in my view, effectively destroyed the validity of his claims to rigour and science. While most have preferred to give him the benefit of the doubt and concentrate on analysing his ideas (which I also think is the most important, for even dogmatism and illogicality may produce fruitful ideas) it is important to demolish the myth of Althusser’s rigour, because his demonstrable lack of it must call into question his conclusions and theses, and because so many appear to believe in the myth. Here one can only briefly refer to some of the numerous examples of this sort of theory.

Kolakowski makes some important observations on this point.

‘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.’ (Socialist Register, 1971).

This is an excellent summary of the faults which crop up time and time again in Althusser’s work.

† Althusser places great emphasis on rigorous and ‘scientific’ definitions of terms. Sometimes he lives up to his promise, although very often in an unnecessarily abstract and difficult manner, but so often he does not even bother to inform the reader of what he means by a particular concept. This is particularly so when he is polemicising against the alleged faults of his opponents. Thus, Althusser never really tells us what precise meaning the words ‘humanism’ and ‘historicism’ have for him, yet he thunder against their harmful effect on current marxism.

† Althusser stresses the importance of ‘closely read (ing) one’s authors’ yet he makes surprising references to authors in his own discussions. Kolakowski notes Althusser’s ‘historical sloppiness’ when discussing the empiricist tradition in philosophy (Althusser confuses Aristotelian theory with the empiricism of Locke) and gives as a further example Althusser’s misunderstanding of Spinoza. George cites an example where Althusser attributes a statement to Hegel which Hegel never really made at all. Some connection could be made between what Hegel really said and what Althusser says he said, but it
would require some careful analysis, and that is just what Althusser never gives us. Since he makes Hegel’s alleged statement the theme of a rather long argument about the relation between science and philosophy, this omission is far from minor.

Althusser is much given to vague phrases like ‘in the last resort’ and ‘in the last instance’ which, because they are never fully defined or explained are really covers for a lack of analysis. Althusser’s discussion of the statement, which originated with Engels, that social processes and events are determined ‘in the last instance’ by the economy (or economic forces) while interesting in the context of the overall system which he tries to construct, is never proved or in any way critically analysed. Unfortunately, this phrase, which in many ways contradicts the more complex and open thought to be found in the sophisticated works of Marx and Lenin, and even Engels himself, has entered Leftwing literature by a process of intellectual osmosis rather than on its own merits.

* Althusser is frequently inconsistent and contradictory, both at the level of his overall theory and within particular essays, passages and arguments. Glucksman, for instance, shows that amongst other faults, Althusser’s own theories have internal inconsistencies. This shows serious inadequacies in Althusser’s work, even relying on his own texts alone, without reference to Marx or to differing interpretations of Marx. In ‘Lenin and Philosophy’ inconsistency and contradiction are also present in Althusser’s very style of argument:

One of Althusser’s main points in this essay is to establish that Marxist philosophy does not yet properly exist. Yet he speaks of theoretical deviations in the Marxist movement as being essentially philosophical deviations (p.45). How can there be deviations from a philosophy which does not yet exist? To be fair, Althusser seems to realise, to some extent, that there is a difficulty here, so he adds that the ‘deviations’ overwhelmed even those who denounced them (Engels, Lenin and ‘other great workers’ leaders’) because, of course, they didn’t have the correct Marxist philosophy because it didn’t yet exist! It still remains for us to see how Lenin could have denounced deviations from philosophical principles which even Althusser, 60 years later, still cannot enunciate. Lenin could only denounce deviations from what he saw as correct theory (philosophical or otherwise) not from something of which he was unaware.

* Althusser shows a strong authoritarian streak in his method of argument. He often appeals to Marx, Engels or Lenin for proof where clearly they provide none, although at other times he will allege deviant influences on them when it happens to suit him (i.e., when they make statements with which he disagrees). One does not object to a reasonable use of any text or authority, so long as they are clearly relevant to the argument at hand and not a substitute for the writer’s own independent thought. But Althusser, despite his criticisms of treating Marx, Lenin, etc., as holy, and his denunciations of Stalinism, falls very much within the ‘proof by quote’ tradition so typical of the Stalin era, and unfortunately still strong at present.

Althusser says of the terms ‘bourgeois or petty-bourgeois economist or ideologist’: “These are not polemical phrases, but scientific concepts from the pen of Marx himself in “Capital” . (L.P., p. 79).

Now these terms may be scientific (although Althusser in fact uses them as labels with which to beat his opponents), and they may be from the pen of ‘Marx himself’ (although Althusser, in a fashion reminiscent of Stalinism, uses them in ways quite different, in both meaning and spirit, from Marx), but this is no argument. Althusser would have done better to explain to us, in at least a little detail, the scientific meaning of these concepts, instead of invoking ‘Marx himself.’

Further, Althusser’s authoritarianism is displayed in a negative way when he labels his opponents within Marxism as being influenced by some evil figurehead outside Marxism. Thus he polemicates against Hegelian influences on Marx and Marxism, without ever explaining in detail just what these influences are, and, more importantly, why they are bad. For instance, in his reply to Lewis, he accuses Lewis of being either a follower of, or greatly influenced by, Jean-Paul Sartre. At one point he even refers to Sartre as being Lewis’ ‘Master’ (the quotes are Althusser’s). Despite the mitigating quotation marks, this attack is sheer use of the ‘bogey-man’ method of argument. At no point does Althusser prove that Sartre has influenced Lewis -- indeed, everything Lewis wrote in his article could be gleaned from the early works of Marx or from Hegel. Althusser merely infers a connection, assuming that his readers will be anti-Sartre, and therefore they will now be anti-Lewis. This is typical of the sort of authoritarianism which refutes political ideas simply by labelling them Trotskyist, Stalinist, petty-bourgeois, etc.

But let us suppose that Lewis is in fact strongly influenced by Sartre. Surely the refutation of his ideas must proceed by analysis of the ideas themselves, not by conjuring up a black demon.

* Consistent with his authoritarianism, Althusser is fond of labelling his opponents as a method of proof. His favorite trick is to refer to their class origins or ‘class positions’ as explanations for why they disagree with Marx, or with Lenin. This sociological determinism of ideas, while it contains an element of truth, is grossly exaggerated. Althusser misuses the notion of ‘petty-bourgeois intellectual’ in the worst traditions of dogmatic Marxism. For him it is a form of argument which closes all discussion. Having established that his opponents are petty-bourgeois, he feels that the discussion therefore ends. As usual, we do not get concrete analysis of what these opponents are saying, merely the usual slogans.

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Louis Althusser's contribution to revolutionary theory has been to attempt to construct a theoretical system which will serve as a philosophy, a method and a social analysis for revolutionaries. Unfortunately, he has failed. He has failed because his attempt was incorrectly based right from the start. Seeking after knowledge, he proceeds from an idealist view of what knowledge is and how it is gained. Claiming to be scientific he does not know what science is nor what its methods are. Stressing rigor, he employs sloppy, illogical reasoning and analysis. Preaching anti-dogmatism, he displays strong dogmatic tendencies.

But in the course of his failure, Althusser has contributed some valuable ideas, although personally I do not think these are as original as many make out. (7) In particular, however, his call for a more explicit elaboration of what are mostly only sketchy, implicit theories in Marxism is entirely correct. I would only add that this elaboration should be undertaken, not only by critically reading Marx and Lenin, but also by reading anyone who might have something useful to say, and examining experience.

1. Introduction to Glucksman's essay, by an unnamed author, NLR No. 72, p.66.

2. Marx, Engels and Lenin all held to this 'mirror image' view of science, which is not surprising, given the periods they lived in. However, modern scientific advance has demonstrated that their view of science, widely held by many others, even today, is wrong, or rather, inadequate.

3. A recent work of substantial and far-reaching importance, which should be read by all those interested in the advance of revolutionary theory, is 'Contemporary Schools of Metascience' by the Swedish philosopher of science, Gerard Radnitzky.

4. It should be stressed from the outset that the conservative and reactionary political consequences of much structuralist theory do not necessarily apply in Althusser's case. Rightwing social scientists have argued that structures are unchanging entities which maintain themselves and that men do and should act to aid this maintenance. Thus, radical dissent is seen by some (e.g. Talcott Parsons) as being dangerous because it tends to upset the self-regulation and maintenance of the given social structure. While Althusser is clearly opposed to this sort of thing, I believe his version of structuralism could have conservative influences within the revolutionary movement insofar as it suggests that revolution will come about through the workings of 'social laws' of development rather than through human action.

5. For a fuller discussion on this point, see my article 'Marxist Theories of Revolution' in ALR No. 34.

6. Geras forcefully shows the inadequacies of this attempt, both as a reading of Marx and as a viable theory:

   'No doubt, one could, by a fairly intricate analytical operation, purge Marx's concept of exploitation of its ethical and critical content (one would have, in the first place, to change its name), leaving it only its cognitive function. But then it would no longer be Marx's concept of exploitation. The use Marx himself makes of it is a critical as well as a cognitive one, because he expresses in his work the interests of the exploited. Althusser is right to insist that "Capital" should not be reduced to "an ethical inspiration." (RC, p.139). He is wrong to pretend that it contains no values of any kind whatever. Doing so, he merely echoes Hilferding who, with a logic that was flawless and an historical understanding that was limited, believed that one could accept the whole of Marxist science without the least commitment to socialism.' (RC, pp. 85-6).

7. Geras, for instance, believes that Althusser's notion of the problematic 'represents a substantial contribution to the Marxist theory of ideology and of science.' However, this concept has been elaborated elsewhere. Kuhn's notion of the 'paradigm' is very close to Althusser's 'problematic,' and frankly, I believe you can learn more from Kuhn, and more easily, than from Althusser.

   It is also said by some that Althusser is 'improving' and doing away with some of his errors. While Althusser has criticised himself for 'theoreticism,' I think that his reply to Lewis shows him as firmly committed as ever to the theories and methods outlined here. In particular, he gets up to his usual debating tricks. Thus, communist philosophers, such as Lewis, who think differently from Althusser, are labelled as taking 'the road of bourgeois philosophy.' Even were Althusser right and Lewis wrong, there is little in Lewis' article which justifies the label 'bourgeois.'

   Further, Althusser displays either intellectual dishonesty or complete lack of comprehension when he answers Lewis' thesis that 'man makes history' by the 'Marxist-Leninist' thesis that 'the masses make history.' Apart from that, this must be one of the silliest replies to an argument I have ever seen.

   Lewis was counterposing the thesis that man makes history to Althusser's thesis that it is not people, but structures and relations which make history. Althusser prefers to ignore his previous 'theoretical anti-humanism' and dodges the real issue altogether. He tries to shift the argument by implying that it is a question of petty-bourgeois individualism versus Marxist-Leninist class and mass positions. But as with any such debating trick, the user should be careful. Are we to infer from the 'Marxist-Leninist' thesis (the masses make history) that Althusser has abandoned his structuralist 'theoretical anti-humanism'? Not at all, because we still find that 'history is a process without a subject.' Thus, typically, we have more contradictions within one Althusser article: the masses make history, but history has no subject. The masses, it seems, are not subjects, but objects to be manipulated in Althusser's fantasies, as a concept which can help him get out of yet another corner in which his theories have landed him.