I. NEVER FORGET THE CLASS STRUGGLE!

I want to thank *Marxism Today* for having published John Lewis' article about the books I have written on Marxist philosophy: *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, which appeared in France in 1965. He took care to treat me in a special way, in the way a medical specialist treats a patient. The rest of the family, as it were, stood silent and still at the bedside, while Dr. Lewis leaned over to examine "the Althusser case".1 He made his diagnosis. A very grave one: the patient is suffering from an attack of severe "dogmatism". The prognosis is equally grave: the patient has not long to last.

It is an honour for this attention to be paid to me. But it is also an opportunity for me to clear up certain matters, twelve years after the event. For my first article (reprinted in *For Marx*), which was concerned with the question of the "young Marx", actually appeared in 1960, and I write in 1972.

**Philosophy and Politics**

A good deal of water has flowed under the bridge of history since 1960. The Workers' Movement has been touched by many important events. It has seen the Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China (1966-69). It has seen the greatest workers' strike in world history—ten million French workers on strike for a month (May 1968), as well as the important ideological revolt among French students and petty-bourgeois intellectuals which "preceded" and "accompanied" it. It has seen the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the Warsaw Pact nations. It has seen the war in Ireland, & c. The Cultural Revolution and May 1968 have had ideological and political repercussions in the whole capitalist world.

With hindsight one can judge things better. With the passing of the period between the writing of the pieces collected in my books and the present time—twelve, ten, seven years—one can look back and see more clearly whether one was right or wrong.

It is really an excellent opportunity.

Just one small point in this connection. John Lewis, in his article, never for one moment talks about this political history of the Workers' Movement. In *For Marx*—that is, in 1965—I was already writing about Stalin, about the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, and about the split in the International Communist Movement. John Lewis, on the other hand, writes as if Stalin had never existed, as if the Twentieth Congress and the split in the International Communist Movement had never occurred, as if the Proletarian Cultural Revolution had never taken place, nor the occupation of Czechoslovakia, nor the war in Ireland, & c. John Lewis is a pure spirit, he prefers not to talk about such concrete things as politics.

When he talks about philosophy, he talks about philosophy. Just that. Full stop.

1 The title of John Lewis' article was *The Althusser Case*. And in his conclusion, the author compares Marxism to ... medicine.
philosophy is politics in a concentrated form. This is a "schematic" formula. No matter! It expresses its meaning quite well.

Everything that happens in philosophy has, in the last instance, not only political consequences in philosophy, but also political consequences in politics: in the political class struggle.

We will show in a moment why that is so.

Of course, since I cite Engels and Lenin in support of my point, John Lewis will surely say, once again, that I am talking like "the last champion of an orthodoxy in grave difficulties". O.K.! I am the defender of orthodoxy, of that "orthodoxy" which is called the theory of Marx and Lenin. Is this orthodoxy in "grave difficulties"? Yes, it is and has been since it came to birth. And these grave difficulties are the difficulties posed by the threat of bourgeois ideology. John Lewis says that I am "crying in the wilderness". Is that so? No, it is not!

For Communists, when they are Marxists, and Marxists when they are Communists, never cry in the wilderness. Even when they are alone.

Why is that? We shall see.

I therefore take my stand on this theoretical basis of Marxism—a basis which is "orthodox" precisely in so far as it is in conformity with the theory of Marx and Lenin. And it is on this basis that I want to take issue both with John Lewis and 4 See note 3. Althusser's formulae may be compared  

Now some people will say that all this is nothing but words. But that is not true. These words are weapons in the class struggle in the field of theory, and since this is part of the class struggle as a whole, and since the highest level of the class struggle is the political class struggle, it follows that these words which are used in philosophy are weapons in the political struggle.

Lenin wrote that "politics is economics in a concentrated form". We can now add that philo-


3 One must always add: in the last instance, so as not to be misunderstood. I will explain in another place why it is necessary to be precise in this way, not simply to say that philosophy is class struggle in the field of theory, but to add that it is in the last instance that this is the case.
with my own past errors, on the basis of the need to carry on the class struggle in the field of theory, as Engels and Lenin argued, and on the basis of the definition of philosophy which I have proposed in this article: \textit{philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory.} I will therefore leave aside all the rather imprudent remarks, some of them “psychological”, which John Lewis thought it useful to make at the end of his article, about Althusser’s “whole style of life and writing”. John Lewis is for example very worried, very put out, quite upset—good “humanist” that he is—by the fact that Althusser “argues exhaustively and with an extreme dogmatism”, in a way which makes him think not so much of the Scholastics, who were great philosophers of the Middle Ages, but of the schoolmen, commentators of commentators, erudite splitters of philosophical hairs, who could not rise above the level of quotation. Thank you! But really, this kind of argument has no place in a debate between Communists in the journal of a Communist Party. I will not follow John Lewis onto this ground.

I approach John Lewis as a comrade, as a militant of a fraternal party: the Communist Party of Great Britain. In the face of the history of the Workers’ Movement, in the face of the theoretical and practical work of Marx and of Lenin, all Communist Parties are equal, in virtue of proletarian internationalism. And all their militants are equal. I will try to speak plainly and clearly, in a way that can be understood by all such militants.

So as not to make my reply too long, I will only take up those theoretical questions which are most important, politically speaking, for us today, in 1972.

II. WHAT WORRIES JOHN LEWIS?

To understand my reply, the reader must obviously know what John Lewis, in his “radical” critique of my “philosophical writings”, essentially holds against me.

In a few words, we can sum this up as follows. John Lewis holds:
1. that I do not understand Marx’s philosophy;
2. that I do not understand the history of the \textit{formation} of Marx’s thought.

In short, his reproach is that I do not understand Marxist theory.

That is his right.

I will consider these two points in succession.

III.

First point: \textit{Althusser does not understand Marx’s philosophy}.

To demonstrate this point, John Lewis employs a very simple method. First he sets out Marx’s \textit{real} philosophy, which is Marx as he understands him. Then, beside this, he puts Althusser’s interpretation. You just have to compare them, it seems, to see the difference!

Well, let us follow our guide to Marxist philosophy and see how John Lewis sums up his own view of Marx. He does it in three formulae, which I will call \textit{Theses}.\footnote{In a \textit{Philosophy Course for Scientists} (given in 1967 and to be published) I proposed the following definition: “Philosophy states propositions which are \textit{Theses}”. It therefore differs from the sciences: “a science states propositions which are \textit{Demonstrations}”.}

\section*{How John Lewis sees Marx}

1. \textit{Thesis no. 1. It is man who makes history.}

John Lewis’ \textit{proof}: no need of proof, since it is obvious, it is quite evident, everyone knows it.

John Lewis’ \textit{example}: revolution. Man makes revolution.

2. \textit{Thesis no. 2. Man makes history by remaking existing history, by “transcendence”, by the “negation of the negation” of existing history.}

John Lewis’ \textit{proof}: since it is man who makes history, it follows that in order to make history man must transform the history which he has already made (since it is man who has made history). To transform what one has already made is to “transcend” it, to negate what exists. And since what exists is the history which man has already made, it is already negated history. To make history is therefore “to negate the negation”, and so on without end.

John Lewis’ \textit{example}: revolution. To make revolution, man “transcends” (“negates”) existing history, itself the “negation” of the history which preceded it.

3. \textit{Thesis no. 3. Man only knows what he himself does.}\footnote{See Part I of John Lewis’ article, p. 46. Lewis writes that Marx “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 \textit{praxis}, because it is always concrete, always we are involved and acting, and therefore thinking as we act, and acting as we think.” (Translator’s note).}

John Lewis’ \textit{proof}: no proof, probably because of lack of space. So let us work one out for him. He could have taken the case of science and said that the scientist “only knows what he himself does” because he is the one who has to work out his proof, either by experiment or by demonstration (mathematics).

John Lewis’ \textit{example}: no example. So let us provide one. John Lewis could have taken \textit{history} as an example: man’s knowledge of history comes from the fact that he is the one who makes it. This is like the Thesis of Giambattista Vico: \textit{verum factum}.\footnote{\textit{Verum factum:} “that which is true is that which has been done”. Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) was an Italian philosopher who is known for his work on the historical method.}
A little Difficulty for John Lewis

These then are the three Theses which sum up John Lewis' idea of Marx's philosophy:

Thesis no. 1: It is man who makes history.

Thesis no. 2: Man makes history by transcending history.

Thesis no. 3: Man only knows what he himself does. This is all very simple. Everyone "understands" the words involved: man, make, history, know. There is only one word which is a bit complicated, a "philosopher's" word: "transcendence", or "negation of the negation". But if he wanted to, John Lewis could say the same thing more simply. Instead of saying: man makes history, in transcending it, by the "negation of the negation", he could say that man makes history by "transforming" it, &c. Wouldn't that be more simple?

But a little difficulty still remains. When John Lewis says that it is man who makes history, everyone understands. Or rather, everyone thinks he understands. But when it is a question of going further, when John Lewis honestly asks himself the question: "what is it that man does when he makes history?", then you realize that a nasty problem appears just when everything seemed simple, that there is a nasty obscurity just in the place where everything seemed clear.

What was obscure? The little word make, in the Thesis "it is man who makes history". What can this little word make possibly mean, when we are talking about history? Because when you say: "I made a mistake" or "I made a trip around the world", or when a carpenter says: "I made a table", &c., everyone knows what the term "make" means. The sense of the word changes according to the expression, but in each case we can easily explain what it means.

For example, when a carpenter "makes" a table, that means he constructs it. But to make history? What can that mean? And the man who makes history, do you know that individual, that "species of individual", as Hegel used to say?

So John Lewis sets to work. He does not try to avoid the problem: he confronts it. And he explains the thing. He tells us: to "make", in the case of history, that means to "transcend" (negation of the negation), that means to transform the raw material of existing history by going beyond it. So far, so good.

But the carpenter who "makes" a table, he has a "raw material" in front of him too: the wood. And he transforms the wood into a table. But John Lewis would never say that the carpenter "transcends" the wood in order to "make" a table out of it. And he is right. For if he said that, the first carpenter who came along, and all the other carpenters and all the other working people in the world would send him packing.

Italian philosopher of history, famous for his "new science of humanity". He claimed that we can know the social world precisely because it is we who have made it. He wrote the Scienza nuova. (Translator's note) with his "transcendence." John Lewis uses the term "transcendence" (negation of the negation) only for history. Why? We have to work out the answer, for John Lewis himself does not provide any explanation.

In my opinion, John Lewis holds on to his "transcendence" for the following reason: because the raw material of history is already history. The carpenter's raw material is wood. But the carpenter who "makes" the table would never say that he was the one who "made" the wood, because he knows very well that it is nature which produces the wood. Before a tree can be cut up and sold off as planks, it first has to have grown somewhere in the forest, either in the same country or thousands of miles away on the other side of the equator.

Now, for John Lewis it is man who has made the history with which he makes history. In history man produces everything: it is not only the result, the product of his "labour", which is history: so is the raw material that he transforms. Aristotle said that man is a two-legged, reasoning, speaking, political animal. Franklin, quoted by Marx in Capital, said that man is a "toolmaking animal". John Lewis is a philosopher of quite another class from Aristotle or Marx. John Lewis says that man is not only a tool-making animal, but an animal who makes history, in the strong sense, because he makes everything. He "makes" the raw material. He makes the instruments of production (John Lewis says nothing about these—and for good reason! Because otherwise he would have to talk about the class struggle, and his "man who makes history" would disappear in one flash, together with the whole system). And he makes the final product: history.

A Little Human God

Do you know of any being under the sun endowed with such a power? Yes—there does exist such a being in the tradition of human culture: God. Only God "makes" the raw material with which he "makes" the world. But there is a very important difference. John Lewis' God is not outside of history: he is inside. And it is just because John Lewis' little human god—man—is inside history ("en situation", as our good Jean-Paul Sartre used to say) that Lewis does not endow him with a power of absolute creation (when one creates everything, it is relatively easy: there are no constraints!) but something even more stupefying—the power of "transcendence", of being able indefinitely to supersede the history in which he lives, the power to transcend history by his human liberty.

---

* I do not know John Lewis' personal philosophical history. But I am not sticking my neck out much in betting that he has a weakness for Jean-Paul Sartre. His Marxism in fact bears a remarkable resemblance to a (pale) copy of Sartrian existentialism, in a slightly Hegelianised version, which no doubt makes it more easily acceptable to Communist readers.
John Lewis' man is a little lay god. Like every living being he is "up to his neck" in reality, but endowed with the prodigious power of being able at any moment to step outside of that reality, of being able to change its character. A little Sartrian god, always "en situation" in history, endowed with the amazing power of "transcending" every situation, of resolving all the difficulties which history presents, and of going forward towards the golden future of the human, socialist revolution: man is a free animal.

Please excuse all this if you are not a philosopher. We philosophers are well acquainted with this kind of argument. And we Communist philosophers know that this old line in philosophy has always had its political consequences.

The first people who talked about "transcendence" in philosophy were the idealist-religious philosophers of Plato's school: the Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophers. They had an urgent need of the category of "transcendence" in order to be able to construct their philosophical or religious theology, and this theology was then the official philosophy of the slave state. No need to say more. Later, in the Middle Ages, the Augustinian and Thomist theologians took up the same category again and used it in systems whose function was to serve the interests of the Church and feudal state (the ideological state apparatus of the Church is the number one ideological state apparatus of the feudal state). No need to say more.

Much later, with the rise of the bourgeoisie, the notion of "transcendence" received, in Hegelian philosophy, a new function: the same category, but "wrapped" in the veil of the "negation of the negation". This time it served the bourgeoisie state. It was quite simply the philosophical name for bourgeoist liberty. It was then revolutionary in relation to the philosophical systems of feudal "transcendence". But it was one hundred per cent bourgeois, and that is the way it stays.

Since that time, Jean-Paul Sartre has taken up the same idea once more, in his theory of man "en situation": the petty-bourgeois version of bourgeoist liberty. And Sartre is not alone, for transcendence has flourished even since his early days, among for example large numbers of theologians, both reactionary and avant-garde, and even among the "red" theologians of Germany and Holland, of Spain and Latin America. The bourgeoisie no longer needs to believe—and anyway has for thirty years no longer been able to believe—that his liberty is all-embracing. But the petty-bourgeois intellectual, yes! The more his liberty is crushed and denied by the development of imperialism, the more he exalts its power ("transcendence", "negation of the negation"). The "conscious" petty-bourgeois exists in his perfect form only when he protests. The petty-bourgeois ideologist is an animal of protest!

John Lewis now, in 1972, takes up the old arguments in his turn, in the theoretical journal of the British Communist Party. He can, if I may say so, rest assured: he is certainly not crying in the wilderness! He is not the only person to take up this theme. He is in the company of many Communists. Everyone knows that. But why should it be that since the nineteen-sixties it has been so easy to find Communists eager to resurrect this worn-out philosophy of petty-bourgeois liberty and yet still claiming to be Marxists?

We shall see.

IV. WHAT DOES MARXISM SAY ABOUT HISTORY?

But first, I shall do like John Lewis. I shall compare John Lewis' "Marxist" Theses with the Theses of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. And everyone will be able to see the difference and judge.

I will go over the points in John Lewis' order. That way things will be clearer. I am making an enormous concession to John Lewis by taking his order, because his order is idealist. But we will do him the favour.

To understand what follows, note that in the case of each Thesis (1,2,3) I begin by repeating Lewis' Thesis and then state the Marxist-Leninist Thesis.


John Lewis: It is man who makes history.

Marxism-Leninism: It is the masses which make history.

What are these masses which "make history"? In a class society they are the exploited masses, that is, the exploited social classes, social strata and social categories, grouped around the exploited class capable of uniting them in a movement against the dominant class which holds state power.

The exploited class capable of doing this is not always the most exploited class, or the most wretched social "stratum".

In Antiquity, for example, it was not the slaves (except in a few periods—Spartacus) who "made" history in the strong, political sense of the term, but the most exploited classes among the "free" men (at Rome, the urban or rural "plebs").

In the same way, under capitalism the "lumpen-proletariat", as Marx called it, groups together the most wretched of men. But it is not a class, and certainly not the class which is exploited in capitalist production: that is, the proletariat. It is around the proletariat that you will find grouped the masses who

9 Althusser is of course not only or even specially referring to the British Communist Party. His argument is that the struggle between the positions he outlines is taking place or must take place wherever what he calls bourgeois and petty-bourgeois Theses have penetrated Marxism. (Translator's note)

10 It is not certain—here I shall have to bow to the judgement of Marxist historians—that the slave class did not, in spite of everything, quietly but genuinely "make history". The transition from the small-property slave system to the-large-scale system at Rome had its historical effects.
"make history", who are going to "make history"—that is, who are going to make the revolution which will break out in the "weakest link" of the world imperialist chain.

Against John Lewis' Thesis—it is man who makes history—Marxism-Leninism has always opposed the Thesis: it is the masses which make history. Under capitalism, the masses can be defined as the set of exploited classes, strata and categories grouped around the exploited class in large-scale production, around the only class capable of directing their action against the bourgeois state. Compare the two Theses.

2. Thesis no. 2.

John Lewis: Man makes history by "transcending" history.

Marxism-Leninism: The class struggle is the motor of history (Thesis of the Communist Manifesto, 1847).

Here things become extremely interesting. Because Marxism-Leninism blows up John Lewis' whole philosophical system. How?

John Lewis has said: it is man who makes history. To which Marxism-Leninism replied: it is the masses.

But if we went no further, we would give the impression that Marxism-Leninism gives a different reply to the same question. That question being: who makes history? This question therefore supposes that history is the result of the action of a subject, of what that subject does. For John Lewis, the subject is man. For Marxism-Leninism, the subject would be the masses.

Yes and no. When we started to sketch out a definition of the masses, when we argued about this idea of the masses, we saw that the whole thing was rather complicated. The masses are actually several social classes, social strata and social categories grouped together in a way which is both complex and changing (the positions of the different classes and strata, and of course the fractions of classes within the classes, change in the course of the revolutionary process itself). And we are dealing with huge numbers: in France and Britain, for example, with millions of people, in China with hundreds of millions! Can anyone still claim that we are talking about a "subject"? Compared with John Lewis' "subject", as simple and neat as you can imagine, the masses, considered as a "subject", pose nasty problems of identity and identification.

A subject is a being about which we can say: "that's it!" How do we do that when the masses are supposed to be the "subject"?

It is precisely the Thesis of the Communist Manifesto—"the class struggle is the motor of history"—that brings this problem into the open, which shows us how to pose it properly and therefore how to solve it.

It is the masses which "make" history, but "it is the class struggle which is the motor of history". To John Lewis' question: "how does man make history?", Marxism-Leninism replies by replacing his idealist philosophical categories with categories of a quite different kind.

The question is no longer posed in terms of "man". That much we know. But in the proposition that "the class struggle is the motor of history", the question of "making" history is also eliminated. It is no longer, that is, a question of looking for a "subject" of history. It is no longer a question of who makes history.

Marxism-Leninism, then tells us something quite different: that it is the class struggle (new concept) which is the motor (new concept) of history, it is the class struggle which moves history, which advances it. This Thesis is of very great importance, because it puts the class struggle in the front rank.

Absolute Primacy of the Class Struggle

In the preceding Thesis: "it is the masses which make history", the accent was put (1) on the exploited classes grouped around the class capable of uniting them, and (2) on their power to carry through a revolutionary transformation of history. It was therefore the masses which were put in the front rank.

In the Thesis taken from the Communist Manifesto, what is put in the front rank is no longer the exploited classes, &c., but the class struggle. This Thesis is decisive for Marxism-Leninism. It draws a radical demarcation line between revolutionaries and reformists.

For the reformists (even if they call themselves Marxists) it is not the class struggle which is in the front rank: it is the classes. Let us take a simple example, and suppose that we are dealing with just two classes. For the reformists these classes exist before the class struggle, a bit like two football teams exist, separately, before the match. Each class exists in its own camp, lives according to its particular conditions of existence. One class may be exploiting another, but for reformism that is not the same thing as class struggle. One day the two classes come up against one another and come into conflict. They begin a hand-to-hand battle, the battle becomes acute, and finally the exploited class defeats its enemy. That is revolution. However you turn the thing around, you will always find the same idea here: the classes exist before the class struggle, independently of the class struggle. The class struggle exists only afterwards.

Revisionaries, on the other hand, consider that it is impossible to separate the classes from class struggle. The class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing. In order for there to be classes in a "society", the society has to be divided into classes: this division is the exploitation of one class by another. It is therefore the class struggle, for exploitation is already class struggle. You must therefore begin with the class struggle if you want to understand class division and the classes. The class struggle must be put in the front rank.

But that means that our Thesis 1 (it is the masses
which make history) must be explained in terms of Thesis 2 (the class struggle is the motor of history). That means that the revolutionary power of the masses comes from the class struggle. And that means that it is not enough, if you want to understand what is happening in the world, just to look at the exploited classes. You also have to look at the exploiting classes. Better, you have to go beyond the football match idea, the idea of two antagonistic groups of classes, to examine the basis of the existence not only of classes but also of the antagonism between classes: that is, the class struggle. Absolute primacy of the class struggle (Marx, Lenin). Never forget the class struggle (Mao).

Now the class struggle does not go on in the air, or on something like a football pitch. It is rooted in the mode of production and exploitation in a given class society. You therefore have to consider the material basis of the class struggle, that is, the material existence of the class struggle. It is the unity of the relations of production and the productive forces of a given mode of production, in a concrete historical social formation, which is at the same time the "basis" (Marx) of the class struggle and its material existence. It is this profound truth which Marxism-Leninism expresses in the well-known Thesis of class struggle in the infrastructure, in the economy, in class exploitation, and in the Thesis that all the forms of the class struggle are rooted in economic class struggle.

When that is clear, the question of the "subject" of history disappears. History is an immense natural-human system in movement, and the motor of history is class struggle. History is a process, and a process without a subject.11

The question about how "man makes history" disappears altogether. Marxist theory leaves it to bourgeois ideology.

And with it disappears the "necessity" of the concept of "transcendence" and its subject, man.

That does not mean that "men", the individuals, disappear. For social classes are made up of human individuals. But these classes are certainly not just all those individuals "added together". They have material conditions of existence. Nor does it mean that the question of political action disappears: for the class struggle, in the last instance, is practical, which means that it is a struggle of the organised masses for the conquest and retention of state power. Nor does it mean that the question of the revolutionary party disappears, because without such a party the conquest of state power by the exploited masses under the leadership of the proletariat is impossible.

But it does mean that the "role of the individual in history", the existence, nature, objectives and practice of the revolutionary party are not determined by "transcendence", that is, by the free will of "man". They are determined by the class struggle, by the state of the Workers' Movement, by the ideology of this movement (petty-bourgeois or proletarian), by its forms of organisation and its relation to the scientific theory of the class struggle, Marxist theory. All Communists know that.

3. Thesis No. 3

John Lewis: Man only knows what he himself does. Marxism-Leninism: One can only know what exists.

A big difference! For John Lewis man only knows what he himself "does". For dialectical materialism, the philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, one can only know what exists. That is the basic materialist Thesis: the primacy of being over thought. That is where we have to begin in philosophy.

Materialism and Science

This Thesis is at one and the same time a Thesis about existence, about materiality and about objectivity. It means not only that one can only know what exists, but also that what exists is both "material"—that is, distinct from the "mental" character of the thought by which it is known—and objective—that is, exists independently of the subjectivity which knows it.

That of course does not mean that Marxist philosophy denies the activity of thought, that it denies practical scientific work, the work of experiment in the natural sciences or the work of historical experiment represented by political work (for Marxists, the proletarian class struggle). On the contrary! Marx and Lenin even said that certain idealist philosophers (Hegel, for example) had understood the principle of this activity better than certain materialist philosophers. That is how we "get into" the dialectical Theses of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. But—and here it differs fundamentally from John Lewis—Marxism-Leninism has always subordinated the dialectical Theses to the materialist Theses. It is thanks to scientific work that we can know what exists. But we only ever have knowledge of what exists. Knowing something is not the same as "making" or "doing" it.

As far as nature is concerned, there is no problem. Who would argue that it was man who "made" the nature which he comes to know! Only idealists, or rather only that crazy species of idealists who attribute God's omnipotence to man. Even idealists are not normally so stupid.

But what about history? We know that the Thesis: "it is man who makes history" has, literally, no meaning. But a trace of it remains in the idea that history is easier to understand than nature. History is easier to understand than nature because it is "human". That is the idea of Giambattista Vico.

Well, Marxism-Leninism is categorical on this point. History is as difficult to understand as nature. Or, rather, it is even more difficult to understand. Why? Because "men" always think they understand it, because each ruling and exploiting class offers them "its" explanation of history—in the form of

11 This idea I put forward in a brief study called "On the Relation of Marx to Hegel" (February 1968).
its own dominant ideology, which serves its class interests and keeps "men" under its heel.

Look at the Middle Ages. The Church offered all its flock—that is to say, primarily the exploited masses—a very simple and clear explanation of history. History is made by God, and obeys the laws or follows the ends of Providence.

Look at the eighteenth century in France. The situation is different: the bourgeoisie is not yet in power, it is critical and revolutionary. And it offers to everyone (without distinction of class, not only to the bourgeoisie itself and its allies but also to the people it exploits) an "enlightened" explanation of history: history is moved by Reason, and it obeys the laws or follows the ends of Truth, Reason and Liberty.

If history is difficult to understand scientifically, it is because between real history and men there always come a class-ideological explanation of history, a class philosophy of history in which the masses spontaneously believe. Why? Because this ideology is pumped into them by the ruling or ascending class, and serves class exploitation. In the eighteenth century the bourgeoisie is already an exploiting class.

To succeed in piercing this ideological and idealist "smokescreen" of the ruling classes, the special circumstances of the first half of the nineteenth century were required: the class struggles following the French Revolution, the first proletarian class struggles, plus English political economy, plus French socialism. The result of these circumstances was Marx's discovery. He was the first to open up the "continent" of history to scientific knowledge.

But in history, as in nature, man only knows what exists. There is no automatic relation between what he knows and what he "does". The fact that, in order to get to know what really does exist, an enormous amount of scientific work and gigantic practical struggles were necessary, does not disprove the point. One can only know what exists.

But we must go further. You will notice that I said that the Marxist-Leninist Thesis is not Man can only know "what exists", but: "one can only know what exists". Here too the term "man" has disappeared. We should say in this respect that scientific history, like all history, is a "process without a subject", and that scientific knowledge, even when it is the work of a particular individual scientist, is actually the result of a complex process which has no real subject or goal. That is how it is with Marxist science. It was Marx who "discovered" it, but as the result of a complex process, combining German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism, the whole thing based on the struggles between the bourgeoisie and working class. All Communists know that.

Scientists, in general, do not know it. But if they are prepared to, Communists can help to persuade scientists (including natural scientists, including mathematicians) of its truth. Because all scientific knowledge really is the result of a process without any subject or goal. This is undoubtedly a Thesis which is difficult to understand. But it gives a very important insight, not only into scientific work but also into the political struggle.

Yes, it has both scientific and political consequences.

You will remember the definition of philosophy which I proposed: philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory.

If philosophy is class struggle in the field of theory, it is political. And it has political effects. But if it is class struggle in the field of theory, it has theoretical effects, both in the sciences and in certain ideologies. It also of course has effects in all the other fields of human activity, from the "struggle for production" (Mao) to art, etc.

But I cannot deal with everything here. I will just say that, as class struggle in the field of theory, philosophy has two main effects: in politics and in the sciences, in political practice and in scientific practice. All Communists know that, or ought to know it, because Marxism-Leninism has never ceased to repeat it and to argue for it.

Part II

PHILOSOPHY AND REVISIONISM

I

Let us prove the point about the scientific and political effects of philosophical Theses by comparing John Lewis' Theses with the Theses of Marxism-Leninism. That way we shall be able to see how philosophy "functions".

John Lewis' Thesis: It is man who makes history.
Theses of Marxism-Leninism: It is the masses which make history. The class struggle is the motor of history.

Let us look at the effects of these Theses.

Effects in the Field of Science

When someone now, in 1972, defends the Thesis that it is man who makes history, what effect does that have as far as the science of history is concerned? Can one make use of it to produce some scientific knowledge?

In fact, it is of no use at all from this point of view. John Lewis does not show how one could get anything out of it which might be of use in teaching us about the way the class struggle works. You might say that he lacked the space to do so in a single article. So let us turn to his "Master", Jean-Paul Sartre, to the philosopher of "human liberty", of man-projecting-himself-into-the-future (transcendence), of man "en situation", "transcending his

1 See John Lewis, The Althusser Case, in Marxism Today, January and February 1972. (Translator's note)
place in the world” by his liberty. This famous philosopher has written two enormous books—Being and Nothingness (1939), and later a book which deals with history and Marxism, Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960). More than two thousand pages. Did Jean-Paul Sartre manage to use the Thesis that “it is man who makes history” to produce some scientific historical knowledge? Did this Thesis enable him to produce scientific knowledge which would help us act in history? No. Not a single bit of scientific knowledge came out of it.

But someone will say: here’s an example that proves the opposite of your Thesis about philosophy! For this “humanist” philosophy has no effect at all on scientific knowledge. Sorry! I claim that the Thesis defended by John Lewis and Jean-Paul Sartre really do have an effect: they prevent the development of existing scientific knowledge. They are an obstacle to knowledge. Instead of helping it to progress, they hold it back. More precisely, they take knowledge back to the state it was in before the scientific discoveries and developments made by Marx and Lenin. They take things back to the pre-scientific state.

It is not the first time that this has happened in the history of humanity. For example, half a century after Galileo—that is, half a century after physics had been founded as a science—there were still philosophers who defended Aristotelian “physics”! They attacked Galileo’s discoveries and wanted to take knowledge of the natural world back to its pre-scientific Aristotelian state. There are no longer any Aristotelian “physicists”, but the same thing is happening in other fields. For example: there are anti-Freudian “psychologists”. And there are anti-Marxist philosophers of history, who carry on as if Marx had never existed, or had never founded a science. They may be personally honest. They may even, like Sartre, want to “help” Marxism and psychoanalysis! But it is not their intentions that count. What count are the real effects in science of their philosophy. The fact is that although he has Marx and Freud before him, Sartre is a pre-Marxist and pre-Freudian ideologist. Instead of helping to build on the scientific discoveries of Marx and Freud, he mixes things up and paralyses research.

That is how philosophy “works” in the sciences. Either it helps them to produce new scientific knowledge, or it tries to wipe out these advances and drag humanity back to a time when the science did not yet exist. Philosophy therefore works in the sciences in a progressive or retrogressive way.

You can see what is at stake. It is not enough to say that what John Lewis or Sartre says does not help us to produce any scientific knowledge of history. It is not even enough to say that what they say represents an “epistemological obstacle” (to use Gaston Bachelard’s term). We are forced to say that their Thesis produces effects which are extremely harmful to scientific knowledge, retrogressive effects, because instead of helping us, in 1972, to understand the great scientific treasure that we possess in the knowledge given us by Marx, they go back to zero. They take us back to the good old days of Hegel and Feuerbach, to the time before Marx’s discovery, before his “epistemological break”. They mix everything up, and thus they disarm revolutionary philosophers, theoreticians and militants. They disarm them because in effect they deprive them of an irreplaceable weapon: the objective knowledge of the conditions, mechanisms and forms of the class struggle.

The Function of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy

If you now look at the Marxist-Leninist Theses—“it is the masses which make history”, “the class struggle is the motor of history”—the contrast is striking. These Theses are on the side of a scientific understanding of history. They do not ignore Marx’s scientific discovery. On the contrary. These philosophical Theses are also proven propositions of the science of history, of historical materialism.

These Theses, then, take account of the existence of the science of history. But at the same time they help the working out of new explanations, of new scientific discoveries. For example, they force us to define the masses which are “making” history: in class terms. Then again, they force us to define the form of union between the classes which make up the masses. As far as we are concerned, they put the working class in the forefront. They force us to define the proletariat as the class whose conditions of exploitation render it capable of directing the struggle of all the oppressed and exploited classes, the struggle to take the state power held by the imperialist bourgeoisie. These Theses allow us to understand that the “class struggle” is the “motor of history”, they force us “never to forget the class struggle”.

3 Gaston Bachelard: French philosopher, now dead, who introduced the idea of the epistemological obstacle—an obstacle to the development of science. [Translator’s note]

4 Epistemological break: a point of no return in theoretical history. When we examine the history of a science, we find that it does not grow in a gradual way out of pre-scientific ideas, but breaks with these ideas and replaces them with a new system. Althusser holds that the ideas expressed by Marx in his early works were still of a pre-scientific character. He therefore had to break with these ideas, and replace them—though not of course all at once, for such a break involves a struggle—with scientific ideas. Thus he founded the science of history (historical materialism), in very much the same way, to take an example, as Galileo founded the science of physics. [Translator’s note]

5 Scientific propositions can therefore “function” as philosophical Theses. This is a point which deserves to be considered more closely.
The theoretical consequences of these propositions are known to every Communist. They require us, for example, to break with the bourgeois conception of political economy (Capital is subtitled: A Critique of Political Economy), of the state, of ideologies, of “culture”, etc., etc. These Theses help to stimulate scientific research in the field of the science of history.

On the one hand, then, we have philosophical Theses which have regressive effects, in relation to theoretical work, on the science of history. On the other hand we have philosophical Theses which have progressive effects, in relation to theoretical work, in the existing fields of the Marxist science of history, and revolutionary effects in the fields which this science has not yet really touched (for example, in anthropology, in the history of the sciences, in art, in philosophy, etc., etc.).

That is what is at stake, for science, in the class struggle in the field of theory.

Political effects

I think that, as far as political effects are concerned, things are rather clear.

How could one carry on the class struggle on the basis of the philosophical Thesis: “it is man who makes history”? It might be said that this Thesis serves everyone, without distinction, whether he be a capitalist, a petty-bourgeois or a worker, because these are all “men”. But that is not true. It serves those whose interest it is to talk about “men” and not about the masses, about “man” and not about classes and the class struggle. Above all, it serves the bourgeois class. It also serves the petty-bourgeoisie. In his Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx wrote: “The bourgeois have very good grounds for falsely ascribing supernatural creative power to human labour”. Why? Because by making “men” think that “labour is the source of all wealth and all culture”, the bourgeoisie can keep quiet about the power of nature, about the decisive importance of the natural, material conditions of human labour. And why does the bourgeoisie want to keep quiet about the natural-material conditions of labour? Because it controls them. The bourgeoisie knows what it is doing.

If the workers are told that “it is men who make history”, that helps to disarm them. It tends to make them think that they are all-powerful as men, whereas in fact they are disarmed as workers in the face of the power which is really in command: that of the bourgeoisie, which controls the material and political conditions determining history. The humanist line turns them away from the class struggle, prevents them from making use of the only power they possess: that of their organisation as a class, by means of their class organisations (the trade unions, the party).

On the one hand, then, we have Theses which directly help the working class to understand its role, its conditions of existence, of exploitation and of struggle, which help them to create organisations which will lead the struggle of all exploited people to seize state power from the bourgeoisie.

No need to say more.

None of this is affected by the fact that these bourgeois or petty-bourgeois Theses are defended, in 1972, by a militant of a Communist Party. Read chapter 3 of the Communist Manifesto. You will see that in 1847 Marx distinguished three kinds of socialism: reactionary (feudal, petty-bourgeois, humanist) socialism, conservative or bourgeois socialism, and critical-utopian socialism and communism. You have the choice! Read the great polemical writings of Engels and of Lenin about the influence of bourgeois ideology in the workers’ parties (reformism, revisionism). You have the choice!

What we want to know now is how, after so many solemn warnings and so many testing experiences, it is possible for a Communist—John Lewis—to present his “Theses” as Marxist.

We shall see.

II

But first, I will deal with John Lewis’ second reproach: that Althusser does not understand the history of the formation of Marx’s thought. I will deal with it briefly, so as not to hold up the reader.

Does Something Really Happen in 1845?

Here I must make my “self criticism”, and give way to John Lewis on one precise point.

In my first essays, I suggested that after the “epistemological break of 1845 (after the discovery by which Marx founded the science of history) the philosophical categories of alienation and of the negation of the negation disappear. John Lewis replies that this is not true. And he is right. You certainly do find these concepts (directly or indirectly) in the German Ideology, in the Grundrisse (two texts which Marx never published) and also, though much more rarely, in Capital (the negation of the negation, for example, appears only once).

On the other hand John Lewis would have a hard job finding these concepts in the Communist Manifesto, in the Poverty of Philosophy, in Wage Labour and Capital, in his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, in the Critique of the Gotha Programme or in the Notes on Wagner’s Textbook. And this is to cite only theoretical texts. As far as the

Marx called it German or “True” Socialism. He writes that these German literati “wrote their philosophical nonsense beneath the French original. For instance, beneath the French criticism of the economic functions of money, they wrote ‘Alienation of Humanity’ . . .” [Translator’s note]
political texts are concerned—and this of course is equally true of the political texts of Lenin, Gramsci or Mao—well, he can always try!

But in any case, formally speaking John Lewis is right. And so, even if his argument in fact depends on leaving aside all the texts which could bother him, I must nevertheless reply.

Here, briefly, is my reply.

I. If you look at the whole of Marx’s work, there is no doubt that there does exist a “break” in 1845. Marx says so himself. But no-one should be believed simply on his word, not even Marx. You have to judge on the evidence. Nevertheless, the whole of Marx’s work shows him to be right on this point. In 1845 Marx began to “lay down” the foundations of a science which did not exist before he came along: the science of history. And in order to do that he set out a number of new concepts which cannot be found anywhere in his humanist works of youth: mode of production, productive forces, relations of production, infrastructure-superstructure, ideologies, etc. No-one in the world can deny that.

If John Lewis still doubts the reality of this “break”, or rather of this irruption of a new science in a still “ideological” or pre-scientific universe, he should compare two judgements made by Marx on Feuerbach and Proudhon. Feuerbach is described in the 1844 Manuscripts as a philosopher who has made extraordinary discoveries, who has discovered both the basis and the principle of the critique of political economy. But a year later, in the Theses on Feuerbach, and in the German Ideology, he is the object of an all-out attack. After that he simply disappears.

Proudhon is described in the Holy Family (end of 1844) as the “scientific theoretician of the French proletariat”. But in 1847, in the Poverty of Philosophy, he gets a hiding from which he will never recover. After that he simply disappears.

If, as John Lewis says, nothing really happened in 1845, and if everything that I have said about the “epistemological break” is “a complete myth”, then I’ll be hung for it.

II. So something irreversible really does start in 1845: the “epistemological break” is a point of no return. Something begins which will have no end. A “continuous break”, I wrote, the beginning of a long period of work, as in every other science, And although the way ahead is open, it is difficult and sometimes even dramatic, marked by events— theoretical events—which concern the scientific knowledge of a particular object: the conditions, the workings and the forms of the class struggle. In simpler terms, the science of history.

We can say, then, that this science does not emerge, ready-made, from Marx’s head. It merely has its beginning in 1845, and has not yet got rid of all its past—of all the ideological and philosophical prehistory out of which it emerges.

We can add: look at Marx’s texts, look at the birth and development of his scientific concepts, and—since John Lewis insists on talking about them—you will at the same time see the gradual disappearance of these two philosophical categories inherited from the past and still subsisting as remnants, known as alienation and the negation of the negation. Now in fact, the more we advance in time, the more these categories disappear. Capital speaks only once of the negation of the negation (in 2,500 pages!). It is true that Marx several times uses the term “alienation”. But all that disappears in Marx’s later texts and in Lenin.8 Completely. We can therefore say: what is important is the tendency. And Marx’s scientific work does tend to get rid of these philosophical categories.

A Self Criticism

III. But this is not enough. And here is my self criticism.

I was not attentive enough to the fact which John Lewis points out, that is, to the fact of the continuing presence of the said philosophical categories after the “epistemological break”. And that was because I identified the “epistemological break” with Marx’s philosophical revolution. More precisely, I never separated Marx’s philosophical revolution and the “epistemological break”. I talked about philosophy as if it were science, and wrote that in 1845 Marx made a double break, scientific and philosophical.

That was a mistake. It is an example of the deviation of theoreticism which I denounced in the brief self criticism contained in the Preface to the Italian edition of Reading Capital (1966). This Preface was reproduced in the English edition. The mistake consists in thinking that philosophy is a science and that, like every science, it has 1. an object, 2. a beginning (the “epistemological break” takes place at the moment when it looms up in the pre-scientific, ideological cultural universe), and 3. a history (comparable to the history of a science).

This theoreticist error found its clearest and purest expression in my formula: philosophy is “Theory of theoretical practice”.

Since that time I have begun to “put things right”. In a philosophy course for scientists, dating from 1967, and again in Lenin and Philosophy (February 1968), I put forward other propositions:

1. Philosophy is not a science.
2. Philosophy has no object, in the sense in which a science has an object.
3. Philosophy has no history, in the sense in which a science has a history.
4. Philosophy is politics in the field of theory. What are the consequences?

1. It is impossible to reduce philosophy to science, and it is impossible to reduce Marx’s

8 One really must be short of arguments to have to use, as a proof of Lenin’s “humanist philosophy”, a few lines from The German Ideology (1844) which Lenin copied into his notebooks! John Lewis is obviously not worried about gaining the reputation of “schoolman” himself.
philosophical revolution to the "epistemological break".

2. Marx's philosophical revolution preceded Marx's "epistemological break". It made the break possible.

You can of course argue quite seriously that there is a sense in which philosophy, as Hegel said, and as I repeated in Lenin and Philosophy, always "lags behind" science or the sciences. But from another point of view, which is essential here, you have to say the opposite, and argue that in the history of Marx's thought the philosophical revolution necessarily "preceded" the scientific breakthrough.

In the case of other sciences, we lack evidence and proof. But in the case of Marx, what happens is that although the philosophical revolution and the epistemological break take place at the same point in time, it is the philosophical revolution which "determines" the scientific "break".

Concretely, that means the following. The young Marx, born of a good bourgeois family in the Rhineland, entered public life as editor of a liberal newspaper of the same land. That was in 1841. A young and brilliant intellectual, he was, within three or four years, to undergo an astonishing evolution in politics. He was to pass from radical bourgeois liberalism (1841-42) to petty bourgeois communism (1843-44), then to proletarian communism (1844-45). These are incontestable facts. But parallel to this political evolution you can observe an evolution in philosophy. In philosophy, over the same period, the young Marx was to pass from a position of subjective neo-Hegelianism (of a Kant-Fichte type) to theoretical humanism (Feuerbach), before rejecting this to pass over to a philosophy which would no longer merely "interpret" the world, but "change it".

If you now compare Marx's political evolution with his philosophical evolution, you will see:

1. that his philosophical evolution is based on his political evolution; and
2. that his scientific discovery (the "break") is based on his political evolution.

That means, in practice, that it is because the young Marx went over to a revolutionary proletarian class position in his theoretical work that he was able to lay down the foundations of the scientific theory of history as history of the class struggle.

IV. On the basis of these points it should be possible to account for the intermittent survival of categories like those of alienation and of the negation of the negation. Note that I talk about intermittent survival. For alongside their tendency to disappear in Marx's work, considered as a whole, there is a strange phenomenon which must be accounted for: their total disappearance in certain works, then their subsequent reappearance. For example, the two categories in question are totally absent from the Communist Manifesto as well as from the Poverty of Philosophy (published by Marx in 1847). They are absent from his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (which he published in 1859). But there are many references to alienation in the Grundrisse (preparatory notes made by Marx in the years 1857-58, and which he did not publish). We know, because of a letter sent to Engels that Marx had, "by chance", re-read Hegel's Logic in 1858 and had been fascinated by it. In Capital (1867) alienation comes up again, but much more rarely, and the negation of the negation appears just once. And so on.

However that might be, and in spite of all the work which still remains to be done, one fact is clear. The Marxist science of history did not progress in a simple straight line, under its own power, from the moment of the "epistemological break" onwards. If it is true that Marx had to go over to proletarian class positions in his theoretical work in order to be able to found the science of history, he did not make that transition all at once, once and for all, with no going back. The philosophical battle continued within Marx himself, in his work, around the principles of the new science. The science only gained its ground little by little, in theoretical struggle, in theoretical class struggle, and in close relation to the class struggle going on in the world outside theory. This struggle lasted all of Marx's life. It has continued after him, in the labour movement. And it continues in our own time.

It is therefore possible to understand the partial disappearance and reappearance of certain categories in Marx's work as indicative of attempts, advances and failures in the long dual struggle to take up class positions in theoretical work and to found the science of history.

Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Philosophy

When I said that it was the "epistemological break" which was primary, and when I failed to distinguish it from the "philosophical break", I therefore made two mistakes. In the case of Marx it is the philosophical revolution which is primary. And if we are allowed to keep the term "break" to designate the beginning of the science of history, the point of no return, we cannot use the same term for philosophy, because in philosophy, as for long periods in the class struggle, there is no point of no return. We must therefore talk about "revolution in philosophy". This expression is more correct, because we all know that a revolution is always exposed to attacks, to reverses and to counter-revolution.

Nothing then is ever definitively settled in philosophy: there are always "come-backs", and the oldest philosophies are always ready to mount an offensive disguised in modern trappings. Why?

Because philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory. Because the revolutionary classes are always opposed by the old conservative and reactionary ruling classes, who will never give up their ambition for revenge, even when they no longer hold state power. According
to the state of affairs, they will defend their power or
mount an assault against the new power, under the
guise of such and such a philosophy: the one that
serves them best, even if its is the oldest in the world.
It just has to be done up a bit and given a modern
cloth of paint. Philosophical Theses have no age.
That is the sense in which I took up Marx's comment
in the German Ideology that "philosophy has no
history".

In practice bourgeois ideology, when it is able to
put on enough pressure, can penetrate Marxism
itself. The class struggle in the field of theory is not
just a phrase: it is a reality, a terrible reality. Without
understanding that, it is impossible to understand
either the dramatic history of the formation of
Marx's thought or the "grave difficulties" which
even today, in 1972, weigh on the "orthodoxy"
defended by a certain number of Communists.

The dramatic history of Marx and of his thought
can be reduced, if we follow John Lewis, to a
peaceful and problem-free university career! A
certain Marx appears on the literary and philo-
sophical scene. Quite naturally, he begins to talk
about economics in Capital. He founds and directs
the First International, opposes the insurrection in
Paris, then in the space of two months, takes a firm
stand on the side of the Paris Commune. He wages
a battle to the death against the anarchists and
followers of Proudhon, etc., etc. All that without
the hint of a problem, of a drama, apart from all the
assaults of the struggle, with no regard to the
difficulties, the questions, all the torments of the
search for "truth" in that struggle itself. Like a good
bourgeois intellectual, as well installed in his thought
as he is in the comfort of his existence, Marx (in
this view) always thought the same thing, without a
revolution or "break" in his thinking. Here I will
merely say that only someone who has no experience
or is blind to all experience of the class struggle in
the field of theory—or even simply of the way
scientific research is done—could argue such
nonsense, and thus insult the life and sufferings not
only of Marx himself but of all Communists (and
also of those scientists who succeed in finding
something out). Now, not only did Marx "find
something out" (and at what risk, and of what
importance?), but he was also a leader of
the labour movement for thirty-five years. He always
"did his thinking" in the struggle, that is the only
way in which he did it.

The whole history of the labour movement is
marked by endless crises, dramas and struggles.
There is no need for me to go over them here. But
as far as philosophy is concerned, we ought at least
to mention the great struggles of Engels and Lenin
against the intervention of bourgeois philosophy
in Marxism and in the workers' parties: the struggle
against the intervention of the idealism of Dühning
and of Bernstein, both of them declared neo-
Kantians and humanists, whose theoretical revision-

ism covered their political reformism and political
revisionism.

John Lewis would do well to re-read the first
pages of What is to be Done? In this text a petty-
bourgeois intellectual named Lenin is defending
Marx's "orthodoxy", itself "in grave difficulties", with
"extreme dogmatism". Yes, Lenin declared himself
proud to be attacked as a "dogmatist" by the
international coalition of "critical" revisionists,
with the "English Fabians" and "French Minis-
terialists" at their head! Yes, Lenin declared himself
proud to defend this old problem-ridden "ortho-
dox", the orthodoxy of Marx's teaching. Yes, he
thought it was "in grave difficulties". The cause:
reformism and revisionism!

Some Communists, today, are thinking and doing
the same. There certainly are not too many of them,
and they are rather alone. That is how things are.
Why? We shall see.

III

Let us see why.

We have to answer two questions.
1. Why are there Communists like John Lewis
(and there are quite a lot of them) who, in 1972, can
openly argue in Communist journals for a philosophy
which they call Marxist, but which is in fact simply
a variant of bourgeois idealism?

2. Why are the Communist philosophers who
defend Marx's philosophy so few in number, and
why are they so isolated in their own parties?

To answer these two questions, which are really
one and the same, we must—all apologies to John
Lewis—briefly enter the field of political history.

I have made the basic points in For Marx. But
John Lewis does not seem to have read the political
pages of For Marx. John Lewis is a pure spirit.

Stalin and the Twentieth Congress

I said in For Marx that my period of philosophical
silence ended with the Twentieth Congress of the

That is true. Before the Twentieth Congress it was
not possible for a Communist philosopher, at least
in France, to publish serious philosophical texts—
that is to say, texts which would be both deep and
capable of being put to use ideologically and
politically. That is the good side of the Twentieth
Congress. From that time on it was possible to
publish such texts. The French Party, to take only
one case, explicitly recognised (at the Argenteuil
Central Committee meeting in 1966) the right of
party members to carry out and publish their
philosophical research.

But the "criticism of Stalin's errors" was for-
mulated at the Twentieth Congress in terms such
that there inevitably followed what we must call an
unleashing of bourgeois ideological and philosophical
themes within the Communist Parties themselves.
This was the case above all among Communist
intellectuals, but it also touched certain leaders and
even certain leaderships.
Why?

Because the “criticism of Stalin’s errors” (some of which—and rather a lot!—turned out to be crimes) was made in a non-Marxist way.

The Twentieth Congress criticised and denounced the “cult of personality” (the cult in general, personality in general. . . .) and summed up Stalin’s “errors” in the concept of “violation of Socialist legality”. The Twentieth Congress therefore limited itself to denouncing certain facts about what went on in the legal superstructure, without relating them—as every Marxist analysis must do—firstly, to the rest of the Soviet superstructure (above all the state and party), and secondly, to the infrastructure, namely the relations of production, class relations and the class struggle in the USSR.

Instead of relating the “violations of socialist legality” to 1. the state, plus the party, and 2. the class struggle, the Twentieth Congress instead related them to . . . the “cult of personality”. That is, it related them to a concept which, as I pointed out in For Marx, cannot be “found” in Marxist theory. I now venture to say that it can perfectly well be “found” elsewhere: in bourgeois philosophy and psycho-sociological ideology.

If you take Communist philosophers and other Communist “intellectuals” and set them officially on a bourgeois ideological and philosophical line, in order to “criticise” a regime under which they (and others) have suffered deeply, you must not be surprised when the same Communist philosophers and intellectuals go straight forward on the road of bourgeois philosophy. It has been opened up right in front of them! You must not be surprised when the same Communist philosophers and intellectuals go straight forward on the road of bourgeois philosophy. It has been opened up right in front of them! You must not be surprised when the same Communist philosophers and intellectuals go straight forward on the road of bourgeois philosophy.

Two Things Which are not the Same
Having said that, we must add that it is important not to mix things up which, politically speaking, ought not to be confused, things which are quite different from one another. The humanist reactions of western Communist theoreticians, and even of some from eastern Europe, are one thing. It would however be an extremely serious political mistake, for example, to claim to judge and condemn—on account of an adjective (“human”—something like “socialism with a human face”, a slogan under which the Czech masses let everyone know (even if the form was sometimes confused) about their class and national grievances and aspirations. It would be an extremely serious political mistake to confuse this national mass movement, this important historical fact, with the humanist pedantry of our western, sometimes Communist philosophers (or of such and such a philosopher of eastern Europe). There were intellectuals in the Czech national mass movement, but it was not a “movement of intellectuals”. What the Czech people wanted was socialism, and not humanism. They wanted a socialism whose face (not the body: the body does not occur in the formula) would not be disfigured by practices unworthy both of themselves (the Czech people: a people of a high political culture) and of socialism. A socialism with a human face. The adjective is in the right place. The national mass movement of the Czech people, even if it is no longer to be heard of (and the struggle is nevertheless still going on) merits the respect and support of all Communists. Exactly as the “humanist” philosophies of western intellectuals (at ease in their academic chairs or elsewhere), the philosophies of “Marxist humanism”, whether they are called “true” or “scientific”, merit the criticism of all Communists.

It is for all the reasons outlined above, then, that there are cases like John Lewis in the western Communist Parties—and that there are rather a lot of them.

And it is for the same reasons—directly political reasons—that I want to repeat my thanks to Marxism Today, journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain, for accepting to publish my reply.