Brian Aarons' criticisms of Louis Althusser in the last Australian Left Review recognised that there has been great confusion about the status of marxism among communists since the disintegration of stalinism, and that Althusser's work is one important response to that situation. However he gives no consideration to what sort of response it is, except to imply that Althusser is an authoritarian dogmatist, struggling to shore up the collapsing orthodoxy.

In the period since 1956, many communists who had identified marxism with stalinism rejected marxism when they broke with stalinism. Others did not go so far, but claimed that marxism as it stood was inadequate and had to be injected with heavy doses of humanism, existentialism, or some variant of these ideologies. The trajectory of such movements was away from marxism as a science to an increasing concern with ethical problems. But, says Althusser, the strength of marxism lies in its scientific character; anything that leads it away from its ability to scientifically analyse the capitalist social formation weakens marxism and communism, and can only benefit the dominant class -- it is in fact an ideological incursion into marxism.

Althusser's response to the breakdown of stalinism was not to search for an auxiliary theory which could join hands with marxism and save it from its own inadequacies. He assumes that marxist theory is capable of providing the basis for regenerating itself, and so sets about critically examining the classic texts in order to clarify the contemporary fundamental problems of marxism.

We must note that in doing this, Althusser is not, as some of his critics assert, trying to maintain the old stalinist certainties in the face of new developments. To the contrary, there is no nostalgic ambiguity (which one often finds in the writings of many ex-stalinists) in Althusser's remarks about the effects of stalinism on marxist intellectuals: "Our generation sacrificed itself and was sacrificed to political and ideological conflict alone, implying that it was sacrificed in its intellectual and scientific work." (1) But, says Althusser, liberation from dogmatism has not spontaneously restored an integral marxism to us, for one can only liberate something that exists in the first place. "What the end of dogmatism has restored to us is the right to assess exactly what we have, to give both our wealth and our poverty their true names, to think and pose our problems in the open, and to undertake in rigor a true investigation." (2) A reinvigorated marxism will not come to us as a gift from the gods, but is something which we will have to construct (or reconstruct) and fight for, against both dogmatists and incursions from bourgeois ideology.

With this view we agree, and it is for these reasons -- which are, in the last instance, political reasons -- that we feel we must take issue with Brian Aarons' highly misleading critique of Althusser. Unfortunately, we cannot in the space of this article give any comprehensive account of Althusser's work and its importance; fortunately, however, we are able to refer our readers to such accounts. (3) The content of this article is determined by the fact that it is a direct reply to Aarons' article.

Aarons' Reading of Althusser

As we mentioned above, Althusser's primary concern in his published work is one of clarification -- to establish by careful textual analysis what Marx actually meant, and so to disperse the current fog of confusion about what is and what is not marxism. This means that his work is primarily concerned with epistemological and methodological questions -- matters of form rather than content. But Aarons objects: "His method for doing this [renovating marxism] 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 and what is not correct is to be established by a careful, laborious work of textual analysis rather than by testing the theory against social reality." (ALR No. 39, p.8.) Aarons evidently believes that what Marx meant in his works is transparently obvious and involves no problems; one can proceed without further ado to the application of Marx's theory. This approach, with its implicit indifference to theoretical questions, is an effect of Aarons' empiricism -- something we will discuss in due course.
Despite his continual attacks on Althusser for dogmatism, Aarons' own discussion reveals its own particular form of unreflective conformism. Althusser is firmly embedded in what has been the dominant trend in marxist thought since 1956, the marxist-humanist trend. Central to this trend have been the concepts of reification (developed by Lukacs in History and Class Consciousness) and alienation (taken from Marx's 1844 Manuscripts). For Aarons these notions are self-evidently valid. Althusser attacks them, and so it is self-evident that he is wrong. Aarons accuses Althusser of making "bald assertions," but this is a prominent feature of his own text, which is studded with phrases such as "obviously," "everyone agrees that," "of course," etc. It is precisely the self-evident nature of such "obvious" propositions as the one that "it is clear that history is made by people and not any other entity or entities" (p. 12) that Althusser is challenging. Instead of meeting this challenge, Aarons simply restates the "obvious" truths and appeals to the dominant ideology within the socialist movement for his "proof."

This comical appeal to the obviousness of the contested propositions is symptomatic of a total failure to come to grips with what Althusser is saying. In fact, many of Aarons' criticisms of Althusser arise out of a very limited reading of Althusser's texts. (On the evidence of his article, it seems to us that Aarons has read Althusser's critics rather than Althusser himself!) For instance, he scoffs at Althusser's claim of rigor, and says that he never clarifies certain key concepts, such as "humanism" and "historicism" -- when an entire essay in For Marx is devoted to humanism, and a whole chapter of Reading Capital is on the concept of historicism. Even a cursory glance at the table of contents in these books would have short-circuited these criticisms. Furthermore, the English editions of For Marx and Reading Capital have a glossary of terms, in which Althusser's translator (Ben Brewster) provides concise definitions of both humanism and historicism.

We will cite a particularly striking example of this cavalier attitude to what his opponent is actually saying. Aarons states that "Althusser espouses a reductionist view of science when he states (LP, p. 39) that chemistry and biology belong to the continent of physics." (p. 9). But the citation is incorrect. When we locate the relevant passage on page 42 of Lenin and Philosophy (4) we read: "If in fact we consider the great scientific discoveries of human history, it seems that we might relate what we call the sciences, as a number of regional formations, to what I shall call the great theoretical continents... A science like chemistry... is a regional formation within the continent of physics: everyone now knows that it is inscribed within it. A science like biology... by its integration with molecular chemistry, also becomes part of the continent of physics." The very fact that the argument is conducted through a metaphor indicates a lack of precision within Althusser's thought here, but the thrust is clear enough. The sciences are "regional formations" which, to the extent that they are interlocked and integrated, form "theoretical continents." There is no reason to assume, as Aarons does, that this involves the dissolution of these "regional formations."

We believe that the above demonstrates the loose, careless nature of Aarons' reading of Althusser and indicates that he has not grasped the purpose of his work. If this is so, one would hardly expect him to come up with telling criticisms of this work. His criticisms are of two sorts -- some focusing on Althusser's allegedly idealist epistemology (theory of knowledge), others on his alleged structuralism and his "theoretical anti-humanism." Let us take these up one at a time.

**ALTHUSSER'S IDEALISM**

Aarons states that Althusser sees science "purely as a theory, as a mere thought process and thus cuts the link between theory and observation." (p. 8). He thus cuts the dialectical connection of reasoning with reality. Following this line of argument, Aarons protests against Althusser's concept of knowledge as a production rather than a vision -- surely, he says, science is a vision, because it must "tell us something about the real world." (p. 10).

On these points, Althusser is fond of quoting Spinoza's dictum that the concept "dog" cannot bark. Real objects are something distinct from the concepts people form about them and think about them with. The idea of the circle is not the same as a circular object. We have scientific knowledge of the real world only indirectly, via work with concepts. The proof that the circumference of a circle is $2\pi$ times the radius is a series of purely mental operations carried out upon the concept of the circle, and does not involve any practice on circular objects in the real world, even though the knowledge derived from this theoretical practice may be applied very usefully in such practice. This application then tests whether there is a correspondence between the concept and its properties and the real object's properties. It does not establish some mysterious connection which grafts the concept and the object together. The role of experiment and social practice in scientific discourse is to provide the raw materials for theoretical practice, rather than to act as a surrogate for that practice.

Let us note that Marx agrees with Althusser on this point, and so if Aarons rejects Althusser as an idealist, he is necessarily bound to reject Marx on the same grounds. Marx criticized the Hegelian dialectic for conflating the real object and the subject, and insisted that "the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete and reproduces it as a concrete mental category" is "by no means the process of evolution of the real world itself." (5) We believe that not only are Althusser and Marx right on this point, it is something which is fundamental to materialism, for what it does is allow us to think of the external world as an independent reality.

There are two possible ways of rejecting this materialist thesis. One is to subsume the objective reality into ideas and concepts -- this is how Hegel produced his idealist philosophy. The other way is to regard our knowledge as being direct knowledge of the real object in itself rather than knowledge of the concept, the "ideal object" constructed by scientific discourse. In this case, knowledge ceases to be a production and becomes a direct vision of reality. This is empiricism, an inverted variant on idealism, and is precisely the position adopted by Aarons. We can now see why Aarons had no time for Marx's theoretical efforts as such, and wanted to deal only with the question of how it reflected reality -- he has collapsed theoretical practice into a "vision" of reality.

It is ironic that there is a real basis for the charge that Althusser is an idealist. It is not that he sees scientific discourse as a process occurring entirely in the realm of thought, but that in his eagerness to drive this
point home, he forgets (at least in his earlier writings) that the *preconditions* for this process are not just theoretical, but also ideological, political and historical as well. Science *is* a specific social practice, *relatively* independent of other social practices, but it is nonetheless articulated with them in relations of compatibility and incompatibility, correspondence and non-correspondence. Omitting any discussion of these relations, Althusser's earlier writings present, by default, a view of science as outside history -- and this is an idealist view. (7)

But Althusser's more recent writings reveal an awareness of this problem. In the Foreword to *Lévi-Strauss and Philosophy*, for instance, he stresses not simply that Marxism is a science, but that it is a science which cannot be acceptable to everyone -- not for scientific reasons, but for political ones: "Precisely because it reveals the mechanisms of class exploitation, repression and domination, in the economy, in politics and in ideology, it cannot be recognised by *everyone*. This science, which brings the social classes face to face with their truth, is unbearable for the bourgeoisie and its allies, who reject it and take refuge in their so-called 'social sciences': it is only acceptable to the proletariat, whom it 'represents'... *class conditions in theory* had to be achieved for Marx to carry out his *scientific* work." (8) Such statements signal a *recognition* of the problem, but it could not be claimed for Althusser that they *resolve* it.

**STRUCTURE VS. PRACTICE**

Aarons' critique of what he calls "structuralist marxism" is, in our view, based on a complete misunderstanding of structuralism and its relation to marxism. It rests on the mistaken identification of "structure" with the external restraints on human freedom and activity, whether these restraints be social or natural. Structure thus appears juxtaposed against practice.

Let us first briefly summarise Aarons' theses. Structuralism, he says, is the study of social reality "in itself," in isolation from the subject which has created this reality. This leads it to treat man as a prisoner of what he has created, while forgetting he has created it and can therefore change it. Structuralist analysis is a perfect example of reification, and leads to a denial of the possibility of human freedom or action. It is therefore an intrinsically counter-revolutionary doctrine, unless it is "balanced" by a theoretical humanism which continually stresses the notion of the human subject, and so reminds us of the possibilities of human activity and freedom.

It is quite true that structuralism rejects the concept of the subject held by Aarons, and it therefore denies the marxist-humanist thesis that Man is the subject-creator of history. But this does not deny the possibility of human activity and freedom.

As for Louis Althusser, the concept of practice is central to his philosophy. But unlike Aarons -- and this is a *crucial* point -- he does counterpose the creativity of practice and the inertia of structures. We quote Althusser: "We can assert the *primary* of *practice* theoretically by showing that all the levels of social existence are the sites of distinct practices: economic practice, ideological practice, technical practice and scientific (or theoretical) practice. We think the content of these different practices by thinking their peculiar structure, which, in all these cases, is the structure of a production; by thinking what distinguishes between these different structures, i.e., the different natures of the objects to which they apply, of their means of production and of the relations within which they produce (these different elements and their combination... obviously vary as we pass from economic practice to political practice and theorectico-philosophical practice). We think the relations establishing and articulating these different practices with one another by thinking their *degree of independence* and their type of 'relative' autonomy, which are themselves fixed by their type of *dependence* with respect to the practice which is 'determinant in the last instance': economic practice." (9)

If these distinct practices, with specific sites and modalities, are collapsed into an undifferentiated practice of a unitary "subject," we have an expressive totality, rather than a complex, structured whole, and it is then impossible to avoid reductionism of some sort (and it must be stressed that economic reductionism is by no means the only form of reductionism possible!) It is only by thinking of practice as *structured* activity that we are able to grasp its tangible forms.

If structure is a feature of practice, and not something to be juxtaposed to it, we see that Brian Aarons has posed the question of structuralism and its relation to marxism in entirely incorrect terms. Since the confusions exhibited in his article are unfortunately widespread, it seems worthwhile providing the readers of *Australian Left Review* with a very brief sketch of structuralist ideas.

**DIGRESSION: WHAT IS STRUCTURALISM?**

Structuralism originated with linguists in the early years of this century (most importantly, with Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Course in General Linguistics*, published in 1916), but it was not until after World War II that structuralist approaches were widely used in a conscious manner within the field of social science. The results have on occasions been spectacular. Claude Levi-Strauss, for instance, has revolutionised anthropology with his pathbreaking studies of kinship systems, totemism and mythology. Noam Chomsky has completely transformed the study of language with his theory of generative grammar, while the work of Jacques Lacan is creating a similar upheaval in psychoanalysis. (10)

Structuralism is the study of the way in which wholes are constructed -- not in the sense of finding some act of genesis or creation, but in the sense of analysing the internal articulation of the whole. It is not a matter of the individual components out of which the whole is composed, not even the more "essential" components, but of the specific way in which they are assembled and combined. Levi-Strauss states that "a structure consists of a model with several requirements." These requirements are: "First, the structure exhibits the characteristic of a system. It is made up of several elements, none of which can undergo a change without affecting changes in all the other elements. Second, for any given model there should be a possibility of ordering a series of transformations resulting in a group of models of the same type. Third, the above properties make it possible to predict how the model will react if one or more of its elements are submitted to certain modifications. Finally, the model should be constituted so as to make immediately intelligible all the observed facts." (11)

Let us make two observations on this. The first is that this notion of structure is anti-empiricist -- Levi-
Levinas and insists that "structural thought now defends the reality, it is nonetheless a reality, and no more a meta-
structure, as well as their content. Perhaps an example of structural analysis will help make this clearer. Chomsky's generative grammar is a set of rules governing the combination of words to form sentences. The problem in constructing a generative grammar is to find the set of rules which will allow us to generate all the sentences of a certain language, and only the sentences of this language. Any actual spoken sentence is then but the realisation of one of possible combinations of these elements consistent with this relation (or relations). The empirical phenomena considered at the beginning will now reappear, as one possible combination among others. The value of the approach is that it defines the limits of possible changes within this structure, as well as their content.

Perhaps an example of structural analysis will help make this clearer. Chomsky's generative grammar is a set of rules governing the combination of words to form sentences. The problem in constructing a generative grammar is to find the set of rules which will allow us to generate all the sentences of a certain language, and only the sentences of this language. Any actual spoken sentence is then but the realisation of one of the multiplicities of possibilities defined by the grammar. Again, we have our distinction between the concept of the structure and the real structure. We all "know" the latter even if we are completely unaware of it -- it is inscribed in our unconscious, and comes into operation every time we speak -- and the problem of scientific practice is to construct a concept of structure which corresponds to this real structure.

Just as most people who construct sentences are unaware of the rules of generative grammar according to which they do this, so too is it possible for scientists to carry out a structuralist analysis without being aware that what they are doing is "structuralism." Thus, in certain ways, we find that Marx was a "structuralist" half a century before structuralism was invented. capitalism is not a descriptive account of the observable phenomena of capitalist society in the mid-19th century, and if it had been it would no longer be of any relevance to us today. But instead, Marx provided us with an analysis of its underlying structure (and then, of course, of the observed phenomena of his time as effects of this structure. It was on precisely this basis that he differentiated himself from the "vulgar economists": the "philistine's and vulgar economist's way of looking at things stems from the fact that it is only the direct form of manifestation of relations that is reflected in their brains, and not their inner connections. Incidentally, if the latter were the case, what need would there be for science?" (14) Here Marx is making concern with structure rather than phenomena a central criterion of scientificity! In contradistinction to the vulgar (empiricist) theoreticians who manufacture vast ideological systems (e.g., neo-classical economics or sociology) by systematising visible relations, Marx discovered the "generative grammar" of social relations in the mode of production, a structured combination of forces of production and relations of production. (15)

Marx's analysis thus contains structuralist analysis, but it contains a good deal more than that. Structuralism deals with single structures, studied in splendid isolation from each other. But Marx's work contains a theory of society as a structure combining elements which are themselves structures -- forces of production and relations of production are structures which are combined in specific ways within modes of production, while the economy and the superstructure are also structures which are in turn combined in a structured way, and so on. Marxism passes beyond structuralism, for it ceases to deal with single structures in isolation, and introduces concepts which allow us to think the relations between structures -- the irreducibility and relative autonomy of each structure, the asymmetrical relations between them, resulting in uneven development, contradictions within and between structures. This is no trivial matter, for by doing this, marxism has resolved in advance one of the central problems faced by structuralism. With no concept of contradiction, structuralism was robbed of any dynamic principle, and its adherents found themselves in the dilemma of juxtaposing synchronic and diachronic analysis, structure and history.

Thus to collapse marxism back into structuralism would be to destroy many of its scientific achievements. This is so particularly in the case of Louis Althusser, who has devoted his theoretical labors to exactly those concepts and problems (contradiction, dialectic, etc.) which arise at the point that marxism passes beyond structuralism. For this reason we believe that Althusser is correct in stating that "the profound tendency of our texts was not attached to the 'structuralist' ideology." (16) Needless to say, this appears as a gratuitous remark to those who, like Brian Aarons, have misunderstood the notion of structure in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Let us now survey the results of our critique of Brian Aarons' article. He claims that Althusser is an idealist, but his arguments on this point show only that he himself is an empiricist. The possibility of a genuine criticism of Althusser on precisely these grounds is thus let slip. He attempts to demolish Althusser's "structuralist marxism," but fails because his empiricist problematic will not allow him to grasp the notion of structure.

Has all this been an elaborate word-game, which may be of interest to intellectuals, but is of no practical importance to communists? Certainly it has no direct and
immediate political consequences. The consequences lie in another field which, however, does have repercussions in the political arena. Brian Aarons' empiricism excludes the possibility of a marxist science. Our little excursion into abstract epistemological and methodological concerns is intended to defend the possibility of such a science. The fruits of this will be seen, we hope, not so much in this defence in itself, not in just demonstrating such a possibility, as in practising it. Scientific analysis of society is the life-blood of the revolutionary movement; without it, it flounders helplessly and dies. The practical experiences of the communist movement through the entire Stalin and post-Stalin period are in our opinion eloquent testimony to the truth of this proposition.

NOTES
(1) For Marx, Allen Lane, London, 1969, p. 27.
(2) Ibid, p. 30.
(6) Ibid, p. 207.
(12) Ibid.
(14) Marx, letter to Engels, June 27, 1867, in Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence, 2nd ed., Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965, pp. 190-91; cf. also Capital, Vol. III, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1966, p. 817: "Vulgar economy actually does no more than interpret, systematise and defend in doctrinaire fashion the conception of the agents of bourgeois production who are entrapped in bourgeois production relations... These relations seem all the more self-evident, the more their internal relationships are concealed from it, although they are understandable to the popular mind. But all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things coincided."
(16) Althusser and Balibar, op. cit., p. 7.

EDITORIAL COMMENT
The above article is part of a debate about marxist theory today which ALR has been promoting over a period, and one which we think is very important for the revolutionary movement. We believe this to be so despite the fact that some readers have, with justification, been critical of the tone, obscurity and abstractness of some of the articles. Already some very important issues have begun to crystallise, and, we remind readers, theoretical polemics have historically been essential to the development of the revolutionary forces. It should also be stressed that these debates in our journal are conducted among comrades in the revolutionary movement, and our aim is the clarification of principles. Any sharpness in the debates has this purpose and is in no way intended personally. It should also be realised that political differences do not inevitably, or directly, follow from theoretical differences. Those who disagree theoretically may agree on many political questions, while there may be political differences among those who agree theoretically.

* * *

As we see it, the key issues in the present debate are now to distinguish science from pseudo-science, what is meant by theoretical humanism and theoretical anti-humanism, and what follows from them. Regrettably, the reply of Grant Evans and Kelvin Rowley to Brian Aarons largely avoids, instead of clarifying, the principles involved. It is agreed that the central point of Althusser's work is its claim to give the correct, scientific approach to, and interpretation of, Marx; but the following criticisms of these claims were raised and have not been answered:

* It is not a scientific procedure to look for the truth only by analysing the classic texts of marxism. This would be so even were Althusser's particular analysis correct, but this is also disputed. It was nowhere stated that it is transparently obvious what Marx meant, as Evans and Rowley assert, or that it is not important to read Marx. On the contrary (p.7 of last issue), it is claimed that in this reading Althusser "avoids any contact with social reality and events... and espouses a (wrong) theory of knowledge which justifies this omission." (p.8).

Evans and Rowley comment obliquely on this, saying that one does not know reality directly, but only through concepts, and they quote Spinoza to the effect that the concept of a dog cannot be derived. This is not disputed, but where two concepts compete one which refers to the barking characteristic of dogs would be preferred to one which does not. It is true, as Engels says, that one can include a shoe-brush within the concept "mammal" but this does not make it sprout mammary glands; and to include Althusser's theory in the concept "scientific", does not make it so.

* Taking Althusser's definition of science - mathematics and logic (and even theology!) could be taken as sciences. In the first two instances the point was made (p.8) that their difference from science is that the criteria of proof are decided by rules set up with-
in these disciplines themselves, while in science the criteria of proof necessarily also include reference to experimental data and observation. Evans and Rowley make no reply to this but add a revealing statement that the proof that the circumference of a circle is 2 pi times the radius is arrived at by "a series of purely mental operations carried out upon the concept of the circle and does not involve any practice on circular objects in the real world ......

Here, Evans and Rowley make a revealing blunder typical of Althusserian idealist epistemology. Pi is an empirical number, the value of which was originally determined by a series of operations on circles drawn on paper with compasses. But even had they picked a more informed example from mathematics, the crucial point is whether scientific theories of atoms, rocks, living organisms, societies, etc., could be arrived at purely from operations with concepts involving no practice on the objects concerned in the real world.

Evans and Rowley claim that it is justified, in the circumstances of theoretical confusion, to be primarily concerned with matters of form rather than content. Concern with form may be acceptable as one aspect of a more general effort, but it is another thing to defend it, as they do, as sufficient, making no attempt to reply to the original statement that "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." This is especially important, in our view, in relation to marxism today, for as well as assessment of the completeness of its theories in relation to past periods, there are many new phenomena such as the Chinese and other revolutions, the changes in the productive forces and social conditions under capitalism, the experiences of socialism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, the problem of revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat in the West, women's liberation, etc., which, in our view, must enter into any re-statement of marxist theory today.

To Evans and Rowley, it is apparently the essence of "science" to stress those approaches which "allow us to think of the external world as an independent reality." This is said to be materialism, but it is, at best, only a one-sided or crude materialism, as is their "correspondence" theory of truth. Developments in physics and other sciences make clearer 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."

We think Lenin was correct when he said that the view that conscious people "cannot divert the movement from the path determined by the interaction of environment and elements is to ignore the simple truth that the conscious element participates in this interaction and in the determination of the truth." (Collected Works, Vol. 5, p.316).

In general, what is at issue is not Althusser's stress on the importance of theory, with which we agree, but his undialectical statement of its primacy against the more correct, actually scientific, procedure: "In the sphere of human knowledge about the external world, including scientific knowledge (the dialectical view) 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." (p.8). In dealing with these questions, Evans and Rowley say that in Aarons' view "knowledge ceases to be a production and becomes a direct vision of reality."

In fact, what was said was in criticism of Althusser's (and Evans' and Rowley's) one-sidedness and lack of dialectics: "Knowledge can be regarded as a production process, but it is also vision." (p.10).

Evans and Rowley have not only failed to establish the scientific character of Althusser's marxism, but also, by their failure to deal with the real arguments raised, have displayed how indefensible the Althusserian position is.

This is so, too, concerning the significance of human activity and consciousness in social development which is the key issue in the discussion of theoretical humanism versus theoretical anti-humanism.

Evans and Rowley say that structuralism, in their view, does not deny the possibility of human activity and freedom. Perhaps for some structuralists this is so, but the real problem is how human activity and freedom fit into the theoretical framework they espouse. On this they are silent, except to quote Althusser on practice. These observations were conceded to be valuable (p.7), and it is not denied that practice takes place within a structure or structures -- everything that is not complete chaos has some structure. But the question is -- what is the relation between existing conditions and structures on the one hand and human activity on the other? The assertion that this problem is covered by the notion of contradiction may point in the right direction, but the concept is not defined nor does it solve the problem of how, and why, within that theoretical framework, social change comes about.

In defence, apparently, of Althusser's claim to rigor, Evans and Rowley reject Aarons' statement that Althusser does not define key terms such as humanism and historicism. They say "an entire essay in For Marx is devoted to humanism ..." and that there is a glossary in the English edition in which Brewster conceivably defines them. The complaint is, in fact, that although Althusser has written a whole essay on humanism, at no stage does he give a concise definition of humanism. In fact, it is not even clear what the essay is driving at.

If it is against the sort of "marxist humanism" which exalts man as in the CPSU slogan "everything for the sake of man" (yet sends tanks into Prague and then endorses every policy of the CPSU at every stage), then we agree with him.

If his polemic is against a waffly humanism which asserts a set of ethics without any concrete analysis of society to indicate how these can be instituted by struggle, we also support him.

But if he is making the theoretical point that people really do not make history at all, then -- we think he is both theoretically wrong and politically mistaken. As to Brewster's definition * (reprinted below), it is descriptive and not a definition at all. A similar criticism applies to Althusser's essay on historicism, although we would concede that Brewster's definition is, in fact, a definition. However, Althusser, not Brewster, was the subject of the original critique. And we are still awaiting a definition of that much-favored, anything but rigorous,
phrase “in the last instance,” which is used to cover a multitude of sins.

* The question is whether all weight is to be given to that which can be identified as “determining” human activity, or whether it is also to be recognised that human will, thought, conscience and struggle which cannot be conflated with the existing social structures, have an important part to play and, on occasions, a key part.

It is possible to find plenty of reasons in the conditions and structures of the times why the Long March of the Chinese revolution could take place and succeed; but it is also possible to find plenty of reasons in the same areas why they could have failed. Only the efforts of real people, both in conception (what strategy, tactics, form of organisation, were to be adopted), and in actual deeds of heroism to bring it about, could make the difference between success and failure.

It is possible to point to conditions and structures having a substantial bearing on the neglect of workers’ control in Australia in the past, but in our view it could hardly be claimed that this degree of neglect was absolutely determined, and that various individuals and groups could not possibly have made any other decision. And it seems to us that the future of this encouraging movement depends less on structures than on conscious activity of human beings.

* It is true enough that thinking and action take place within certain frameworks, structures, conditions. But this does not completely prescribe the content of that thought and action, or prevent people undertaking the task of creating new structures, as other people were involved in creating the old ones. The contrary Althusserian view which eliminates this vital human factor in “events which think themselves” is idealistic (even mystical) and deterministic.

* The view that events “think themselves,” and other versions of “ineluctable laws of social development” also lead in the direction of stilling human conscience and abolishing human responsibility. We do not accept the view advanced by some that the crimes of stalinism were completely determined by structures, were inevitable, and that different decisions and actions by various groups of human beings at various times could not, and should not, have been taken, realising another path of development.

Similarly, the model of socialism to be striven for (and there are several such models) which will be constructed from the available or possible alternatives, is a matter of choice. No amount of talk about structures (and there are several such models) will be constructed from the available or possible alternatives, is a matter of choice. No amount of talk about structures (and there are several such models) which will be constructed from the available or possible alternatives, is a matter of choice. No amount of talk about structures (and there are several such models) which will be constructed from the available or possible alternatives, is a matter of choice. No amount of talk about structures (and there are several such models) which will be constructed from the available or possible alternatives, is a matter of choice. No amount of talk about structures (and there are several such models) which will be constructed from the available or possible alternatives, is a matter of choice. No amount of talk about structures (and there are several such models) which will be constructed from the available or possible alternatives, is a matter of choice.

It is because of our conviction that human consciousness and activity should be stressed in opposition to various forms of determinism which underdetermine or neglect them, that our general orientation is towards “counter-hegemony.” (See editorial statements, ALR 5/69 and No. 34). To this end, we seek to analyse the existing elements of mass consciousness – what might be called the components of popular culture. The fact that this culture is dominated by capitalist ideas and values is a key problem for revolutionaries. Therefore, we also aim to develop and help foster, in close connection with theoretical analysis of various aspects of Australian society, those attitudes and values, that philosophy which, in all spheres, challenges the prevailing consensus which is the main, though not only, prop of the capitalist system in this country.

* The space given by Evans and Rowley to structuralism (while calling it a “digression”), in preference to stating their views on the points raised above, indicates that it is the core of their outlook. The original article did not oppose structuralism in itself, but only the totalisation of this way of looking at the various processes making up society into the only way of looking at them, and stopping there, as if they were structures and processes over which people have no power.

Furthermore, the very definition of structuralism is currently a matter of heated debate, not least within the structuralist school itself (and it is arguable whether Chomsky is a structuralist at all), so there is no compelling reason to adopt the Evans-Rowley definition as the correct one. Still less is it an argument that because Althusser proposes a structuralist model of capitalism, his model must represent the real structure of capitalism.

There are various conditions which have given some strength to recent trends towards deterministic versions of Marxism and an accompanying rejection of concern with the role of human consciousness in the revolutionary movement, and the problems involved in advancing it. Some of these are mentioned in the article of Franz Marek in our last issue – the failure, despite tremendous achievements, of the student movement of the late sixties, which tended to reject science, theory and organisation, proceeding largely by feelings and what was thought to be right.

But we believe the current trend, of which the Althusser fashion is a part, is an over-reaction leading to the opposite extreme; one which, uncorrected, could lead to a repetition in new forms of older errors of the revolutionary movement. A more dialectical viewpoint, of the kind indicated above, is required.

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This comment by no means exhausts our criticism of Evans and Rowley, nor, for that matter, our discussion of the whole trend in Marxism which Althusser represents. There are a number of issues raised by Evans and Rowley which need further discussion and clarification. Moreover, the general theoretical viewpoints which lie behind the present discussion need further elaboration. Therefore, ALR intends to publish, later in the year, a special pamphlet in which a number of articles and comments will appear. We hope, and intend, that these will not merely repeat old arguments about Althusser but that they will take up key questions in an effort to clarify fundamental issues within Marxism. Contributions to this pamphlet will be welcomed.

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* "Humanism is the characteristic feature of the ideological problematic from which Marx emerged, and more generally, of most modern ideology; a particularly conscious form of humanism is Feuerbach's anthropology, which dominates Marx's Early Works. As a science, however, historical materialism, as expressed in Marx's late works, implies a theoretical anti-humanism. 'Real-humanism' characterises the works of the break: the humanist form is retained, but usages such as 'the ensemble of social relations' point forward to the concepts of historical materialism. However the ideology of a socialist society may be a humanism, a proletarian 'class humanism.'"