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(no date)



# ALTHUSSER:

## REFLECTIONS ON AN UNCRITICAL SELF-CRITIC

(Later version, it seems)

Reading Althusser is rather like trying to untangle a badly cast fishing line. He tends to proceed by assertion rather than by argument. He constructs and then destroys straw people of all kinds. He distorts and misuses quotations outrageously. He uses complicated metaphors and simplistic labels. Thus both the adherent and the opponent have to try to bring together brief assertions and discussions from various points in his essays, either to attempt to show their coherence, or else to attempt to unravel their complicated confusions. There is a certain coherence in his work, which derives from the fact that throughout he is attacking the same theoretical position. There are also vast confusions, but, in order to understand these confusions, we need to begin with a clear understanding of what it is that Althusser is attacking.

Even here, we are faced with the problem that he himself rarely gives a clear and detailed account of his enemy. For example, in several essays in For Marx, he discusses Marx's 'break' with Feuerbach, but nowhere does he bother to give a concise account of the exact nature of Feuerbach's position, as opposed to a series of labellings of Feuerbach. Nevertheless, it is clear that, at every point, the fundamental object of his attack is any theory of automatic progress. It is possible to distinguish three such theories, two of which he names, and the third of which, for political reasons, he tends not to name. They are:

1) The Hegelian idea of history as the unfolding of 'the Notion' in a process in which, at any one time, the existing totality is the expression of a single principle, and in which the end is already essentially contained in the beginning. The end is the 'truth' of the beginning and, in turn, is to be understood in terms of its origin in, and genesis from, this beginning.
2) The 'materialist' version of this theory contained in the so-called 'Diamat', in which history develops inevitably through certain stages, in each stage of which the social whole consists of a 'base' - the mode of production - and a 'superstructure' which is a reflection or an expression of the base. Each stage can be understood through an account of the genesis of the mode of production which characterises it, and by demonstrating how this mode of production is reflected in the other elements of the social whole.



3) What might be termed the Whig or Liberal idea in terms of which history is a process of progressive enlightenment and consequent social improvement. Ignorance is the obstacle to well-being. Ignorance is overcome by the progressive acquisition of new knowledge, and the new knowledge in turn produces more enlightened action which does away with the evils of the past. History is thus the progressive uncovering of the rational essence of man, and the way to speed up the process is through tolerant dialogue and communication. Feuerbach's naturalist anthropology may be seen as a variant of this position, insofar as it assumes a human essence already at the beginning of history, which merely finds different and progressively more adequate forms of expression in history.

Although at first sight it would seem that the first two, and particularly the second, of these three theories are 'revolutionary', whilst the third is evolutionary, Althusser is, in fact, correct in pointing out that they do share a common structure in the idea of the progressive unfolding of an original essence. I certainly agree with Althusser in criticising such theories, and I also appreciate the political significance of the fact that, while he refers mainly to the Hegelian and Liberal variants, the effective object of his attack is the Diamat, which he could not name clearly whilst remaining in the Parti Communiste Francaise. One must thus, to some extent, accept Althusser's claim that his work was written within a particular political conjuncture and with a particular political purpose, and draw the conclusion that some of its obscurities also derive from what could not, for this very reason, be said explicitly. But, while working from within the PCF in order to destroy the Diamat may be desirable, it may also place serious constraints on how that is to be done, in particular by placing the Party and the USSR 'out of (critical) bounds'.

My criticism of Althusser, then, will not be aimed at resurrecting any of the above theories but, rather, will try to show that he has produced an untenable alternative and, in doing so, has incorrectly rejected a number of valid theoretical problems.

## I SCIENCE, PHILOSOPHY AND IDEOLOGY

### a) Science

In SC Althusser attacks the oppositions Truth-Error and Knowledge-Ignorance as 'idealist' theories. Since he does not really specify in what sense they are idealist, and since he himself frequently uses these categories (e.g. 154, 156, 170, 174), it is not immediately clear what he is getting at. However, it seems to me that he is not objecting to the use of these categories themselves, but rather to any theory of science which operates exclusively with these categories, and which sees science as the simple replacement of old errors with new truths, or else, in a more Hegelian sense, which sees the truth as developing out of error, as the truth of that error.

In PM Althusser writes (using the term 'ideology' more loosely than in his later writings): "But Marx's position and his whole critique of ideology implies on the contrary that science (which apprehends reality) constitutes in its very meaning a break with ideology, and that it sets itself up in another terrain, that it constitutes itself on the basis of new questions, that it raises other questions about reality than ideology, or what comes to the same thing, that it defines its object differently from ideology" (PM 75).

What is being suggested here is that it is wrong to see the progress of knowledge in terms of a given set of questions which are successively answered. Rather, it is possible for the questions to change, and when we change our questions we may throw new light on the whole field. The set of fundamental questions which define the parameters or 'knowledge' at any given time are described as the 'problematic', and the 'break' occurs when this problematic is changed. In these broad terms this is a position which would today be accepted by a wide range of philosophers of science. But the problem with Althusser's position lies in the way in which he interprets this.

Firstly, he operates with a normative concept of 'science' as in some sense adequate to 'reality'. Although truth does not 'develop out of' error, it does seem to be contrasted with error in a much more absolute sense than would be permitted by, say, Kuhn's analagous notion of paradigm



change. This raises the problem of the criteria of 'science' in a particularly sharp way, but the formulation of this problem is confused by a further distinction which Althusser makes between real object and object of knowledge.

Althusser rejects the idea that knowledge is achieved by a process of abstraction from a given real object. Instead, he suggests that the process of production of knowledge needs to be understood in terms of the relation between three types of generality (GI, GII, GIII). GI is the 'raw material', but it is not a pure or direct experience of an object. Rather, it is already pre-formed, either as existing assumptions or as perceptual experience already organised in mental categories (LCI 49, PM 187). This raw material is worked on by GII, which is the set of concepts which constitutes the 'theory' of the science in question. The result is GIII, which is described as 'concrete' generality, and is "une connaissance". (PM 187).

Althusser argues that the entire process of moving from GI to GIII via GII takes place entirely 'dans la connaissance' or 'dans la pratique théorique'. ".. of course it concerns the concrete-real, but this concrete-real 'survives in its independence after as before, outside thought' (Marx), without it ever being possible to confuse it with that other 'concrete' which is the knowledge of it." (PM 189-190, PM 186). He calls this thought-concrete "the object of knowledge", in contra-distinction to the 'real object'.

Althusser bases this distinction primarily on a misleading exegesis of a passage in Marx's introduction to the Grundrisse. In this passage Marx criticises Hegel for "(falling) into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself ..." (Grundrisse, p.101) Hegel identifies the real with the process of thought, and this identity is being denied by Marx. Marx is agreeing with Hegel that thought involves moving from the abstract to the concrete (against an empiricist position which would move from 'concrete' to 'abstract') and is suggesting that this fact helped Hegel to fall into the trap of actually conceiving of the real as a product of thought. But he is not concerned with making a point in the opposite direction by suggesting either that there is an 'object of knowledge' distinct from the real object, or that the process of reaching 'the concrete' occurs entirely in thought. Marx's own position is stated clearly as follows: "The concrete is concrete

because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception ... (the Hegelian position) is correct in so far as the concrete totality is a totality of thoughts, concrete in thought, in fact a product of thinking and comprehending; but not in any way a product of the concept which thinks and generates itself outside or above observation and conception; a product, rather, of the working up of observation and conception into concepts". (Grundrisse, p.101) Thus the 'point of departure' is the concrete in reality, from which come observations and conceptions which are then worked up into concepts. These concepts are not abstractions, in the sense that they are complex determinations which carry a greater wealth of meaning than do the original observations and conceptions (they are 'Hegelian' concepts rather than 'Humean' concepts). But they nevertheless remain related to and tested by original observations and conceptions. In fact, in most sciences, the actual process of moving towards GIII is continually enriched by further observation: Althusser's model, suggesting as it does a given GI which, as it were, remains constant throughout the process, is far too rigid to describe actual scientific activity. One may agree that the observations are already themselves structured in certain ways by techniques, ideological presuppositions, etc. (PM 196-7) but this is not the same as saying that "Knowledge working on its object does not then work on the real object, but on its own raw material, which constitutes, in the rigorous sense of the term, its 'object'(of knowledge)" (LCI 49). The point is that it is working on the real object, but always through its own categories. This fact of course produces serious critical problems but they are not nearly so serious as those produced by Althusser's approach.

Before looking at these problems, it is worth considering why Althusser wishes to insist on the 'object of knowledge'. In SC he states that all he wishes to do is to point out that "you must not confuse the real thing and its concept" (192) and suggests that his thesis "'functions' in a very similar manner to Lenin's distinction between absolute truth and relative truth, and to a very similar purpose" (193). But Lenin's distinction is made within the context of a distinctly evolutionist notion of the growth of knowledge, whereas Althusser is operating within quite a different problematic. He wants to be able to conceptualise what happens when a scientific revolution occurs, when there is a shift in problematic.



Here it does seem tempting to say that there has been a change in the very object with which knowledge is concerned; for example, when 'phlogiston chemistry' is replaced with a whole new system of chemistry. But it is still misleading to treat this as a change in the object, unless one is referring to the discovery of whole new classes of phenomena, such as imaginary numbers in mathematics or sub-atomic particles in physics. Althusser seems to conflate this kind of change in the (real) object of knowledge with his own change in the (non-real) object of knowledge (cf.LCII 42). But another reason for his insistence comes, I think, from getting trapped in one of His own metaphors about 'sightings' and 'oversights' in his discussion of Adam Smith's apparent 'myopia' in contrast with Marx's 50/50 vision (LCI 16-25). After developing this metaphor to death, Althusser concludes "it is necessary to completely change the idea that we have of knowledge, to abandon the myth of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as production" (LCI 23 & RC 24). Of course political economy cannot be discussed in terms of literally 'seeing' or 'not seeing' some phenomenon. Marx no more 'sees' the significance of the distinction between labour and labour power than Ricardo fails to 'see' it. Marx thinks it, which means that he is able to conceive of the same real object in a new way. One might call this 'making visible a new structure of the object', but under no circumstances can this be equated with producing 'a new object' (cf LCII 21). But these rhetorical tricks with which Althusser misleads himself and/or his readers are not really very important. What is important, is grasping the role played by his distinction between real object and object of knowledge within his system. After his 'exegesis' of Marx, Althusser continues "When Marx tells us that the process of production of knowledge, hence of its object, distinct from the real object which it precisely wishes to appropriate in the'mode' of knowledge occurs entirely in knowledge, in the 'head', or in thought, he does not for one second fall into an idealism of consciousness, as of mind or of thought, for the 'thought' of which it is a question here is not the faculty of a transcendental subject or of an absolute consciousness, to which the real world would be opposed as matter; neither is this thought the faculty of a psychological subject, although human individuals are its agents. This thought is the historically constituted system of an apparatus of thought, founded and articulated in the natural and social reality" (LCI 47) Leaving aside the fact that Marx says

none of this, that the gratuitous importation of an 'absolute' consciousness comprises the question, that Marx's own expression is "The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head ..." (Grundisse, p.101) - which seems to imply"the faculty of a psychological subject" - the question is, what would be the significance of treating 'thought' in this way? If we say that knowledge is, in some sense 'of the real object' we are immediately thrown onto an individual subject whose knowledge it is, and who is related to the known object in a special way. But if we speak of an 'object of knowledge' distinct from the real object, then we can also speak of a whole system of knowledge objects, in some sense parallel to the system of real objects, and it seems possible to treat the system independent of any reference to individual subjects. This does, however, beg two important questions. The first concerns the ontological status of this system of objects of knowledge; where and how does it exist? But the second is even more fundamental, it concerns the relation between the two systems, and in particular that relation which we call knowledge, in which an object in the 'thought' system is, as Althusser puts it, "adequate to" an object in the real system.

Althusser is certainly aware of this problem He writes that "theoretical practice is indeed its own criterion, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to validate the quality of its product, i.e., the criteria of the scientificity of the products of scientific practice" (LCI 71, RC 59). On this basis he rejects pragmatism: "It is because Marx's theory was 'true' that it could be applied with success, it is not because it was applied with success that it is true" (LCI 72). But neither is Marxism a hypothesis which has to be verified in political practice: "the criterion of the 'truth' of the knowledge produced by the theoretical practice of Marx is furnished in his theoretical practice itself, that is to say by the demonstrative value, by the titles of scientificity of the forms which ensured the production of this knowledge" (LCI 72). This, of course, does not answer the question of adequacy, nor does it mean that we simply have to give an historical account of how this knowledge was produced, since such an account treats the knowledge merely as a fact, but not as having what Althusser calls 'a knowledge effect'. In discussing this, Althusser first criticises the idea that the 'real object' is the originating ground of the 'knowledge effect', rejecting theories in which "a real, concrete, living original is made eternally



and integrally responsible for the knowledge effect; the sciences throughout their history and even today are merely commenting on this heritage, i.e., subject to this heredity" (LCI 76, RC 62). He then goes on to attempt to illuminate the problem through an analogy with Marx's procedure in Capital where, he argues, the central concern is not with giving an account of the origins of capitalism but, rather, with giving an account of the mechanisms by which capitalist society reproduces itself as a society. Leaving aside the fact that the status of this analogy as a mere analogy is obscured by the unanalysed introduction here of the notion of a 'society effect' made functionally equivalent to the 'knowledge effect', the analogy itself is misleading, because it confuses two different senses of 'origin'. In the case of Marx, what is referred to is an historical origin, whereas in the case of the role of 'the real original' in knowledge, this does not refer to an historical origin, as Althusser misleadingly implies in his reference to "the immense space which separates the Chaldean accountant or Egyptian land-surveyor from Bourbaki" (LCI 76, RC 62); it refers rather to a relation to a present 'reality' which is, at least a point of reference in the scientific endeavour. It is only after having got rid of this reference by this illicit path that Althusser is able to insist that "The knowledge effect, produced at the level of the forms of order of the discourse of the proof, and then at the level of some isolated concept, is therefore possible given the systematicity of the system which is the foundation of the concepts and their order of appearance in scientific discourse" (LCI 84, RC 68). Althusser is aware that this is not an answer to the question of the specificity of science; he states that he will "leave the question in this suspense" (LCI 84) (phrase not translated in RC 68), and in fact never returns to it.

In SC he discusses briefly the fact that, in the above passages, he based himself on Spinoza's idea that "Truth is the criterion (sign) of itself and of the false" (cf. Ethics Part II Prop XLIII) and he contrasts this with the problematic which demands any further criterion, since "If you claim to judge the truth of something by some 'criterion', you face the problem of the criterion of this criterion - since it also must be true - and so on to infinity" (SC 137). There is something in this but, to understand the implications of Spinoza's position, it is necessary to understand it within the context of the Cartesian system

which it is attacking. Descartes dichotomised reality into 'res cogitans' and 'res extensa', two substances with equal ontological status, united only by God. Spinoza attempts to take this last point seriously, by showing that the idea of two distinct substances cannot be thought coherently, and that there is only one substance, God, of whom 'res cogitans' and 'res extensa' are modes. Insofar as they are modes of the same substance there must exist a fundamental correlation between them. Starting from the presupposition of this correlation, Spinoza's account of knowledge is designed to discover, within the sphere of thought, what distinctions can be made between more or less 'adequate' knowledge. Very broadly, his answer is that my mind reflects the order of causes of my body, and as such remains partial and inadequate, because my body is embedded in a causal network which goes beyond it. In this sense all ideas correspond with an external reality, but it is nevertheless possible to distinguish between ideas which are immediate reflections, and ideas which are coherently related to other ideas, and thus reflect the causal network in a less partial way. Here coherence is the unique criterion of truth; absolute truth would be a completely coherent system of ideas, and as such would constitute God's thinking. The individual's mind is part of the total system which constitutes God's mind in exactly the same way as the body is part of the total material system. Because the body has certain characteristics in common with other bodies, such as extension, the mind can have adequate ideas of these features, and these adequate ideas form the basis for further development of a coherent system. This raised two problems for Spinoza - how do we recognise these basic adequate or 'common' ideas, and how do we construct a system on them? His answer to the first question is that the criterion of recognition is precisely their self-evidence. That is, because as bodies we share certain characteristics with the rest of the material world, our minds necessarily reflect these features adequately, and by realising this necessity we become aware that we already possess a standard of truth in the self-evidence of these ideas. It is in this sense that "Truth is the criterion of itself and of the false". There are certain propositions which are self-evident and logically necessary, and this means that it is intrinsically self-evident, and is not to be identified by "the agreement between the idea and its object" as an extrinsic mark (cf. Ethics Part II Defn.IV). It is for this reason that the whole process of knowledge then takes place in knowledge itself. Systematic knowledge itself is achieved by use of the criterion of self-evident logical coherence. Since there



can be only one self-causing and self-monitoring substance, there can only be one possible coherent way of organising ideas, and thus if I can find some simple ideas among my basic adequate ideas from which the others can be logically deduced, I can be satisfied that this system is true. Here, then, the idea of self-evident adequacy is founded upon the presupposition of the identity of the system of matter with the system of ideas, and the criterion of systematicity and logical coherence is further based upon the presupposition of one single substance. The process can take place purely within thought because of the presumed identity, and, in any event, within the system it is impossible to conceive of any form of 'access' from one sphere to the other, each being a distinct mode of the unique substance. Within the system, further, it is not necessary to inquire into the ontological status of 'ideas', since they are lodged firmly in God's mind, as a total system of which each individual mind is only an aspect.

Inverting this into a 'Marxist' context is as difficult as inverting Hegel. But the crucial point, in relation to Althusser, is that Spinoza in fact remains within Descartes' problematic. He asks, like Descartes, for a general criterion for distinguishing truth from error. His answer, self-evidence, is different from Descartes' 'clarity and distinctness', but both answers offer a criterion which is supposed to be applicable in such a way as to tell us whether a proposition is true by considering its form, rather than its content. As Hampshire puts it, within such a theory "To discover whether a particular proposition can safely be accepted as true must always be to discover something about the logical properties and relations of the proposition, as opposed to discovering something about the world; it is to do logic, as opposed to observing beings and events" (Hampshire, Spinoza, p.119). This is precisely the foundation of idealism, criticised as such by Kant (Critique of Pure Reason, p.67) and defended against him by Hegel, as the basis for entirely rejecting the sphere of sense-experience as mere "truthless opinion" (Hegel, Science of Logic, II, p.228)

In his critical discussion of positivism from an Althusserian perspective, Hindess makes a statement which seems to me to illustrate clearly the weakness of Althusser's approach. He writes "In the last resort observation for positivism represents the place where demonstration

ceases. What remains is the confrontation between the observer and the brute fact, the real object in all its nakedness. The observer can only recognise the fact for what it is or else fail to recognise it. For Carnap as for Andreski, knowledge rests in the last analysis on nothing more than an irrational - or non-rational act of judgement" (Hindess Models and Masks, p.245)

But, to the extent that an observation may be equated with a judgement ("This desk is brown") there is nothing irrational about it - the very fact of confusing irrational with non-rational is indicative of the 'idealism' of Hindess's position. There are facts. This desk is brown. Byzantium did fall to the Turks in 1453. The fact that these facts cannot be logically demonstrated, but require, in the last resort, certain observations (or judgements) doesn't make any set of propositions within which they occur irrational. Nor does the acceptance that such facts are facts entail the acceptance of a positivist or purely empiricist account of the nature of scientific theory. Althusser and his followers are certainly right to stress that one cannot produce scientific theories merely by analysing facts "according to more or less systematic sorting procedures based essentially on John Stuart Mill's methods of agreement and difference in order to determine empirically valid relationships or causal laws (Hindess and Hirst, Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production, p.2).

Theory guides the selection and interpretation of facts. One cannot 'let history speak for itself'. But this does not mean that theories arise and are validated quite without reference to facts. Hindess and Hirst impose a false dichotomy when they write "Concrete conditions are not 'given' to theory in order to validate or to refute its general concepts. On the contrary, it is the general concepts that make possible the analysis of the concrete" (Hindess and Hirst, p.4). But this is not an either/or relationship. It is, to use an old-fashioned term, a dialectical relationship. Of course the exact nature of this dialectic is very complex and needs to be made explicit, which I have not done here. (Althusser himself, in a later discussion, admits the significance of a "raw material provided in the last resort by the practices of real concrete history" (LCI 137) for the development of theory, but never attempts to put this together with his discussion of 'object of thought').



In his brief defence of this position, Althusser manages to get rid of 'experience' by turning his logical distinction between GI, GII and GIII into a temporal succession. He is probably correct in suggesting that each science establishes its own canons of scientificity, but it does not do so by appeal to self-evidence. Rather, it does so by critical reflection on boths its tools and its real object, and it proceeds in its scientific practice by continual reference to 'experience' in the form of experiments, which do not 'remain within the sphere of thought' in any meaningful sense. Lavoisier could only 'discover' oxygen, in the sense of 'thinking' chemistry in a new way, because oxygen had first been produced in an actual (real, non-thought) experiment. Such a description obviously raises many problems, both at the level of generality - how can/do scientists reflect critically on their object and on their tools - and also on the level of each science. But Althusser merely conjures these problems away. He neither deals with the general problem, nor discusses the specific problems of a science of history. The one criterion which he does offer, systematicity, is quite useless by itself. Feyerabend has pointed out that Ptolemy's system was considerably more systematic than Galileo's. And astrology and many different theologies may be systematic and internally coherent.

Nevertheless, there are two ways in which Althusser's rejection of the problem of crieria makes some sense. Firstly, there is the problem of 'knowledge of the outside world' as formulated within the Cartesian problematic: the question as to how I can be 'sure' that I really know what is going on in the 'real world'. This epistemological problem is a trap from which one can never escape, and which leads to some form of subjective idealism. Secondly, Althusser is right insofar as he is suggesting that we cannot lay down a priori universal criteria for science (although he fails to see that this is what Spinoza is in fact doing); but that 'science' is an ongoing endeavour in which criteria are established, then rejected or changed (cf. SC 137). But this makes it all the more crucial to attempt to specify the present 'criteria' of the 'science of history'. In general, Althusser's GII just seem to be there. It would be by examining the nature and functions of GII in greater detail that he would be able to raise the real problems.

b) Philosophy:

The problem of the relation between science and 'practice' as a possible criterion of verification seems to me to remain obscure in the passages to which I have referred above. Although Althusser formally rejects a 'pragmatist' reliance on verification through practice, there nevertheless do seem to me to be at least implicit references to such a position. The problems associated with this come out much more clearly in the discussion of the role and nature of philosophy in Lenin and Philosophy, and in Self-criticism, although unfortunately the relation between science and philosophy still remains ambiguous. In Lenin and Philosophy Althusser asserts that the function of philosophical practice is to draw a dividing line between the scientific and the ideological: "All philosophy consists of drawing a major dividing line by means of which it repels the ideological notions of the philosophies that represent the opposing tendency; the stake in this act of drawing, i.e. in philosophical practice, is scientific practice, scientificity" (LP 61-62). But earlier, and also later, in SC, he has argued that 'science' itself does this: "In fact, every science, as soon as it arises in the history of theories and is shown to be a science, causes its own theoretical pre-history, with which it breaks, to appear as quite erroneous, false and untrue" (SC 155). Insofar as a true idea is the criterion of itself and of the false, it is the science, not philosophy, which is the true idea. Nevertheless, in SC he certainly does believe that philosophy has effects in the field of science, either negative or positive (cf. SC 59-60).

The "privileged relation of philosophy to the sciences" is justified first in terms of a biazarre development of Hegel's metaphor of the Owl of Minerva. In terms of the metaphor Althusser suggests that philosophy always follows science, as a reflection on the "shock of a scientific break" (LP 45). Without any theoretical investigation of this assertion and after a one paragraph on "empirical" history of the relation between science and philosophy from Plato to Husserl, he concludes, as an 'empirical' inference, that "Philosophy only exists by virtue of the distance it lags behind its scientific inducement. Marxist philosophy should therefore lag behind the Marxist science of history" (LP 45).

This whole section may well be an elaborate joke - it is certainly difficult to take seriously - since it becomes a 'philosophical dream'



which vanishes when we turn to Lenin and discover that he, in fact, formulated the essential Marxist philosophical theses. Yet, in SC, Althusser refers back to the Owl as a philosophical thesis. But apart from its inherent improbability, in SC Althusser describes propositions such as "The masses make history" and "The class struggle is the motor of history" as "philosophical theses" (cf. SC 40), and is at pains to show that these theses are explicitly present in Marx's own texts. So the Owl of Minerva is present from the beginning. Finally, if philosophy always lags behind science in this way, it is difficult to see how it can be useful in drawing the necessary dividing line between the scientific and the ideological.

The argument in LP is that there are, fundamentally, only two philosophies, idealism and materialism; that each 'in the last instance' represents a class position; and that the task of Marxist philosophical practice is to draw the line between these two. Hence "Philosophy represents politics in the domain of theory, or to be more precise; with the sciences - and, vice versa, philosophy represents scientificity in politics, with the classes engaged in the class struggle" (LP 64-65). Or, as the thesis is reformulated in SC, "philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory" (SC 39).

Science can be thought of in terms of truth and error, but "In philosophy we are dealing with tendencies which confront each other on the existing theoretical 'battlefield'. These tendencies group themselves in the last instance around the antagonism between idealism and materialism, and they 'exist' in the form of 'philosophies' which realise the tendencies, their variations and their combinations, as a function of class theoretical positions, in which it is the social practices (political, ideological, scientific, etc.) which are at stake. Thus, in order to mark this distinction, you have to introduce a category which plays an all-important role in Marxist political practice and theoretical reflection on philosophical theses and tendencies: the category of correctness" (SC 142).

There are two problems here. The first, which I shall not pursue any further, is that 'ideology' spreads into the domain of science as well as that of philosophy (e.g. bourgeois economics). The second is the question of what is meant here by 'correctness'? Althusser is very vague about this. Perhaps the closest he gets to being specific is in the

following: "A Marxist philosopher able to intervene in the theoretical class struggle must start out from positions already recognised and established in the theoretical battles of the history of the Labour Movement - but he can only understand the existing state of the theoretical and ideological 'terrain' if he comes to know it both theoretically and practically: in and through struggle. It may be that in the course of his endeavours, even when he starts out from already established positions in order to attack open or disguised enemies, he will take up positions which in the course of struggle are shown to be deviant positions, out of step with the correct line which he is aiming for. There is nothing astonishing in that. The essential thing is that he should then recognise his deviation and rectify his positions in order to make them more correct" (SC 144).

Now one can well agree that philosophy is not free from class struggle, and that philosophic positions are linked to other class positions. This is not in dispute. What is at issue is, how one goes about trying to establish 'correct' positions, or how to 'rectify' deviant tendencies. Althusser offers one criterion by referring to "position already recognised and established in the theoretical battles of the history of the Labour Movement". But this in itself begs several questions. To start with, what is the 'Labour Movement'? Unless one arbitrarily identifies it with one or other 'tendency' in the communist segment of the labour movement it "poses very exacting problems of identity and identification" (whereas Althusser treats it as being "as simple and neat as you can imagine") - and some of these problems of identification may well involve the problems which one is trying to resolve. Further, how do we tell what positions 'have already been recognised' - and how do we know that they have been 'correctly' recognised? Althusser himself accuses Stalin of (incorrect) 'humanism' and 'economism' - which means that, at the time when Stalin was dominant in communist parties, the 'recognised' positions were nevertheless incorrect. Leaving this aside, how is the theoretical struggle conducted, or how does one recognise 'deviance' within it? How does one 'attack' an opposing philosophy? One of the methods is trying to show its implications. But this is finally circular, because you still have to attack the implication. The normal first method is to try to show that it is not 'correct' or 'true' by criticising its presuppositions or its arguments - and by criticising them in terms of certain criteria (e.g. logic, experience, relevance, etc.).



Althusser tries to salvage his position to some extent by arguing that "the fate of philosophical theses does not depend only on the position on which they stand - because the class struggle in theory is always secondary in relation to the class struggle in general, because there is something outside of philosophy which constitutes it as philosophy, even though philosophy itself certainly does not want to recognise the fact" (SC 145). This, however, is very obscure. Is it an appeal to 'history' - truth is what the winner says it is? In any event, it is of no help during the class struggle, and if one accepts, as does Althusser, the specificity of philosophy, then such an 'external' appeal does not solve the problem of with what weapons (other than truth criteria) the philosophical class struggle is to be conducted.

Althusser himself offers two criteria. The first is the effect of a particular political thesis within the political arena; more specifically, its capacity to assist or impede political mobilisation. He asserts, for example, that "the whole Marxist tradition has refused to say that it is 'man' who makes history. Why? Because practically, i.e. in the facts, this expression is exploited by bourgeois ideology which uses it to fight, i.e. to kill another, true, expression, one vital for the proletariat: it is the masses who make history" (LP 24). Leaving aside the causal excision from the 'Marxist tradition' of all those who have said that 'man makes history', and leaving aside the empirical question as to how many workers have in fact been demobilised by being told that 'man makes history' this pragmatic argument still begs the theoretical question. It assumes a knowledge of the 'true' proletarian position, since mobilisation itself isn't enough: workers have been mobilised on such diverse grounds as anti-semitism, royalism (cf. Macciochi, p.126-8), universal suffrage, nationalism and even the defence of petit-bourgeois bureaucratic dictatorship in the USSR. You can only tell what 'works' in politics when you know what you are working for, which means that you need some independent way of deciding on that.

There is an easy assumption that the masses want 'socialism': but 'socialism' is initially a slogan, not a concept. We know, and the workers know, that they want an end to all forms of exploitation. But neither the identification of all forms of exploitation nor the organising or an exploitation-free society follow automatically from that; as Marx

pointed out, capitalism is scarcely transparent. In identifying forms of exploitation and the principles of a non-exploitative society we cannot, without circularity, refer directly to the state of the class struggle as our criterion.

The other criterion which Althusser offers for identifying 'correct' tendencies in philosophy is that of scientific practice. Referring to Sartre's work he asks rhetorically: "What did it contribute to the science of history? Did the ingenious development of the Sartrian position finally permit the production of a few pieces of scientific knowledge about the economy, the class struggle, the state, the proletariat, ideologies, etc. - knowledge which might help us to understand history, to act in history? We have, unfortunately, reason to doubt it" (SC 59-60). Leaving aside the rather causal nature of his investigation of the question, the principle contained in it does have interesting, if limited, implications. But it is a purely pragmatic criterion and it is worth pointing out that interesting scientific results can also flow from incorrect philosophical positions.

There are two disturbing features about Althusser's philosophical method (as opposed to the many disturbing features of his polemical method - abuse, misrepresentation, selective quotation, double standards, etc.) The first concerns the concept of 'thesis'. Althusser refers to a previous publication in which he has argued that "Philosophy states propositions which are Theses", in contrast to science, which "states propositions which are Demonstrations" (SC p.40, note 6, see also p.143). Unfortunately the ramifications of and justifications for this are not made clear here, but the consequence seems to be an attempt to summarise philosophical positions into short snappy single sentences, and then to discuss these sentences. But this is inevitably obscuring and misleading, and also leaves wide space for dishonest argument, for the writer is in a position to spell out in detail what he means by his own thesis, while criticising the hermetic obscurity of the thesis into which he has sealed his opponent's argument. (cf. the Reply to John Lewis). The distinction between Thesis & Demonstration is linked to the idea that philosophy is concerned with correctness, not truth, and is therefore as obscure as that distinction. Both are connected with "the primacy of the practical function and the theoretical function in philosophy itself." (SC 143) -



with the taking up of positions in the class struggle, all of which is expressed in metaphors about drawing lines and occupying positions - without saying how these are done - i.e. without saying what distinguishes the correctness of a thesis from the truth of a demonstration.

The second feature I wish to discuss is the pervasive use of metaphor. In a sense Althusser justifies this by stating categorically that "in philosophy you can only think - i.e. adjust existing, borrowed categories and produce new ones within the terms required by the theoretical position taken up - by the use of metaphors" (SC 107, note 1, see also 140). Now this is a strong and striking claim. Unfortunately, while he certainly does continually use metaphor, he neither attempts to justify his claim that one can only think through metaphors in philosophy, nor does he attempt to show how one can think through metaphors, how metaphors function in arguments. His actual use of metaphor is often extremely vague and unclear (e.g. the discussion of background to Marx's scientific revolution in terms of aimless lineages, etc.), and sometimes misleading. It is worth looking at one example which illustrates this and at the same time introduces a further point which I wish to make about Althusser's method.

In his thesis defence, Althusser admits that he has taken up "radical positions", but defends the political-pedagogical propriety of this by the use of the metaphor borrowed from Lenin of having to bend a bent stick in the other direction in order to straighten it. "Behind the relations between simple ideas there thus stand relations of force, which place certain ideas in power ... and hold other ideas in submission ... until the relation of force is changed. It follows that if you want to change historically existing ideas, even in the apparently abstract domain called philosophy, you cannot content yourself with simply preaching the naked truth, and waiting for anatomical obviousness to 'enlighten' minds ...: you are forced, since you want to force a change in ideas, to recognise the force which is keeping them bent, by applying a counter-force capable of destroying this power and bending this stick in the opposite direction so as to put the ideas right" (SC 171).

This sounds quite sensible at first - there certainly are relations of force involved, and so on. This implies the necessity of political struggle as part of the process of overcoming the opposition etc. But when one looks more closely, one sees that Althusser is not using this

analogy to justify political struggle as well as "simply preaching the naked truth". He is using it to justify a particular procedure within the domain of philosophy: the use of extreme and radical formulae. But what does the metaphor mean here? What, within the domain of philosophy, is the 'counter-force' to be applied to the 'bent stick' constituted by the 'false idea'? Althusser seems to be saying that you compensate an exaggeration in one direction by exaggerating in the opposite direction (if Nazi nostalgics say 'only' one million Jews were killed in the camps, you 'correct' this by saying that eleven million were killed). But how does this method work? One of its consequences is to make one's position that much easier to refute. Of course, another consequence may well be to draw attention to a 'thesis' which might otherwise have been ignored, and thereby to open up a discussion which, although it refutes the original thesis, does lead to a more satisfactory situation than existed before. On the other hand, it could be argued that the truth itself is sufficiently striking to be relied on from the beginning (and, in terms of Althusser's Spinozism, this is in fact an unavoidable conclusion).

In any event, while one should certainly take into account the polemical and confirmational use of striking formulae by Althusser, it seems to me that, at least in the question of philosophy at present under discussion, his position is so confused that it cannot possibly be bent straight. This confusion carries over, at least to some extent, into the discussion of 'ideology'.

c) Ideology:

In SC, Althusser points out that, in The German Ideology, the term 'ideology' plays two different roles, designating a philosophical category on the one hand (illusion, error), and a scientific concept on the other (formation of the superstructure) and he goes on to say that, within his own earlier writings, "this equivocal notion of ideology was brought into play, within the rationalist context of the antithesis between truth and error. And so ideology was reduced to error, and error called ideology" (SC 119). This passage seems to imply that there are in fact two different roles to be played - the philosophical category and the scientific concept, but that it is misleading when the same term is used for both. But it is not initially clear how this is related to



the idea that the antithesis between truth and error is an (erroneous) rationalist position. Further on, Althusser writes "Behind this disguise of error as ideology, there stood a fact: the declaration of opposition between truth and error which is objectively one of the symptoms of the birth, of the appearance of a science (when this really is what has taken place)" (SC 121). This means, I think, that the couple truth-error is legitimate within science, but that it is not a philosophical set of categories; Althusser in fact goes on to refer to the Spinozist notion that truth is its own criterion, and so that the 'philosophical' search for criteria should not arise (SC 122, 124, n.19). Thus we need to distinguish between the notion of truth and error as they arise within science, and the category of ideology as a scientific concept referring to a particular reality.

Althusser begins his investigation of this reality in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (which he describes as "no more than the introduction to a discussion" (LP 123, n.1). He asserts that ideology is 'eternal', in the sense of being a necessary feature of any social formation which contains classes. It is "omnipresent in its inimitable form throughout history (= history of social formations containing social classes)" (LP 152). The reason for this is that "the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'" (LP 128). Here the ruling ideology is equated with "the rules of the established order". In addition to the ruling ideology, there may be other, opposing ideologies, as is implied by Marx's reference to "ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out" (quoted LP 140 n.11).

There is already an ambiguity introduced here. On the one hand, 'ideology' refers to both (or all) sides in the struggle over the 'rules' of social order. On the other hand, ideology refers to specific kinds of rules which have a specific function - rules in a class society functioning in the interest of the ruling class. 'Ideologies' - that is systems of legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic ideas

(cf. LP 140 n.11) - used against the 'ideology' of the dominant class, cannot necessarily be assumed to have the same characteristics as that ideology. The 'dominant ideology' inculcates certain rules and legitimises those rules by showing their naturalness and/or desirability (cf. LP 146-7). The opposition to this ideology tries to change the rules, initially at least, by criticising the justifications for them in the light of alternative rules and alternative justifications. This opposition may itself represent another partial class interest (e.g. bourgeoisie v. feudal aristocrats), in which case the new rules will also function in the interest of exploiters, and their justification will function to mask this fact.

Crudely, one may say that if bourgeois ideology is functioning perfectly, the worker imagines that the capitalist exploiting him is a benefactor who has saved him from starvation by kindly providing him with a job. That is, one may say that he lives his real relation to the capitalist and his factory in an imaginary mode; as Althusser puts it, one may say that here "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (LP 153). But Althusser is now no longer talking about ruling class ideologies. He is talking about every ideology. In his note at the end of the text he explicitly refers to the ideologies of both the ruling and the ruled classes (LP 172-173). This raises the question as to whether "proletarian ideology" is also a representation of an imaginary relation to real conditions? If the worker discovers that his employer is not a benefactor, but an exploiter, and therefore lives his relationship to the employer in revolt, would it not be correct to say that he no longer has an imaginary relationship to his real conditions? But then his 'proletarian ideology' is not an ideology in the above sense.

In SC, Althusser writes "For (Marx) was only able to break with bourgeois ideology in its totality because he took inspiration from the basic ideas of proletarian ideology, and from the first class struggles of the proletariat, in which this ideology became flesh and blood" (SC 121). And later he writes: "When (Marxist) science appears, it necessarily shows up its own prehistory as erroneous, but at the same time it also shows it up as ideological in the Marxist sense of the term. Better, it shows up its own prehistory as erroneous because ideological, and in practice treats it as such. Not only does it indicate error - it explains the historical reason for error. Thus it rules out the exploitation of the



'break' between the science and its prehistory as an idealist antithesis of Truth and Error, of Knowledge and Ignorance" (SC 155).

Considering these two passages, two facts emerge. Firstly, proletarian ideology, as inspiring Marxist science cannot be "erroneous because ideological". Bourgeois ideology is erroneous because of the kind of ideology which it is: because it does embody an imaginary relation to the real conditions, and this is what Marx shows in his dissection of it. Secondly, although the antithesis 'truth-error' may not be adapted in an 'idealist' manner which implies that all that is at stake is an argument about truth, and that once it is agreed what the truth is, all will be well, nevertheless it is clear that the antithesis can and must be used: ruling class ideologies are not 'pure illusions', but they are also illusions, and the struggle against them involves, inter alia, attacking them as error and illusion. And this is what is implied by the notion of Marxism as science, and its relation to proletarian ideology as a real relation to real conditions. (cf SC 160-61) But this in turn means that Althusser's assertion that "the 'break' between Marxist science and its ideological prehistory refers us to something quite different from a theory of the difference between science and ideology, to something quite different from an epistemology" (SC 156) is slightly inadequate. He is perfectly correct to point out that it refers to a theory of the superstructure and to a theory of the processes of production of knowledge. But it does also refer us to a theory of the difference between science and ideology. On the most obvious level, one of the ways of legitimating bourgeois ideology is through the appeal to certain criteria of scientificity and the rejection of the 'marxist' claim to scientificity. Just because what is at stake is not purely an academic discussion over 'the truth' it is not adequate merely to appeal to the self-evidence of Marxism! (compare his comments on "obviousness" of ideology (LP 161).)

This is why the confusions over the nature of science and philosophy are important: such questions do, as Althusser never tires of pointing out, actually have effects.

In further discussion of the actual nature of ideology, Althusser states that "the subject acts insofar as he is acted upon by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing

in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief" (LP 159). The crucial point here is that the end product is a subject acting according to his belief, that is, acting as though he were a subject, and as though the beliefs were his beliefs. In this sense ideology may be said to have "the function ... of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects" (LP 160), where a subject is understood as a free subject (see LP 157). Taking the example of Christianity, Althusser says that the function of the religion is to establish each individual in his or her own eyes, as seen and loved by God, and thereby to obtain from that individual a recognition that he or she really is as seen by God, really does occupy this or that role, and does so as an infinitely important subject in the eyes of God. On this basis Althusser then extrapolates to a general statement that ideology always has this double structure of the single absolute Subject who recognises subjects.

Althusser's speculative daring is breath-taking here: on the basis of one single example of religious ideology he has gone on to make a generalisation not only about all other religious ideologies, but about all ideology. It is, of course, an interesting and suggestive speculation; it would be worth examining Stalinism from this point of view, for example. But, leaving aside the question of the universal role of the Subject, the function of ruling class ideology is clearly brought out: "the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'" (LP 169).

If we relate this back to the idea of an imaginary relation to real conditions, this would seem to mean that the real conditions of exploitation are such that the individual is being used for another's ends, and is not really controlling his own destiny - or acting freely. The imaginary relation to these real conditions is that he is in fact acting as a free subject, as "a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions" (LP 169). Here the gap between the reality of exploitation and the imaginary freedom is a function of the class



nature of the society. The implication of this is that, outside a class society there need no longer be a gap between real and imaginary conditions: the imagined status as subject could become a real status.

But this is in fact not Althusser's point at all. Rather, he is here trying to show that the notion of Subject itself is imaginary (or ideological) by nature. He does this by suddenly, and without argument, switching from the treatment of ideology as a phenomenon of class society, to the assertion that "man is an ideological animal by nature" (LP 160). Thus he is able to describe all rituals of recognition as ideological (LP 162) and to conflate "ideological" attempts to convince unfree individuals that they are "really" free subjects with any philosophical discussion that uses concepts such as 'subject'.

Althusser is, in fact, wrong in two different ways. His hasty 'empirical' jump from Christianity to the essence of all ideology, leads him to overlook the fact that there are two different ways of dealing with the unfreedom of exploitation. He implicitly recognises that there is a necessary tension between the real condition of class society and the desire for what can loosely be defined here as 'subjectivity' (although, it is worth noting, there seems to be no means within his conceptual framework for either making this tension explicit or thinking it: but if it is not there the entire Ideological State Apparatus is superfluous). One way of dealing with the tension is to convince the individuals that they really are acting as free subjects. But the other way is to convince individuals that they are not subjects at all, or at least that they should not want to be subjects. Hinduism and Buddhism, insofar as their ideal is loss of self rather than affirmation of self, may have this function. And Sartre has argued cogently, in his essay on Materialism and Revolution (in J-P Sartre, Situations III, pp. 135-225) that some versions of materialism, insofar as they insert the individual irrevocably into an absolute causal network, also effectively de-subjectivise (and de-revolutionise) him or her. (This might be an alternative way of approaching the relation between the Diamat and Stalinism - and Althusser).

Althusser's other direction of error lies in the way in which he treats of the universality of ideology. It is not argued at all in the essay on ideology itself - and in fact it is in contradiction with the

introduction of 'ideology' to resolve the problem of reproduction in a class society. But he does refer back to his previous discussion of ideology. In one way these have to be treated with caution, as being the object of one of his self-criticisms, precisely for having failed to include an adequate account of the relation between class struggle and ideology. The main problem with the discussion of ideology in PM (238-242) is that the notion of the imaginary seems to be subject to at least two different interpretations. Althusser begins by using the term 'ideology' to refer to a 'lived' system of relations through which individuals relate to their conditions of existence. In this sense "the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a will (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (PM 240, FM 234). Here the 'imaginary' carries no implication of illusion or distortion; it is 'imaginary' simply because it refers to what is not, to values, and is bound up with ethics "which is, in its essence, ideology" (PM 239). In this sense both ideology and its 'imaginary' component are indeed inevitable. But this is not the sense of 'imaginary' which is implied in discussing the specific role of ideology in a class society. Discussing bourgeois ideology, Althusser states that "In the ideology of freedom the bourgeoisie thus very exactly lives its relation to its conditions of existence: that is to say its real relationship (the law of the liberal capitalist economy) but invested in an imaginary relationship (all men are free, including the free workers)" (PM 241). Here the term 'imaginary' is used in a different sense, to refer to illusion or distortion.

Considering the idea of the 'subject', it is useful to distinguish here between 'being a subject' as a value and 'being a subject' as an illusion. Althusser's whole account of the function of ideology in LP assumes 'being a subject' as a value which threatens class society and therefore has to be satisfied with an imaginary (illusory) state of being a subject, created by the mechanisms of the Ideological Apparatus.

Although Althusser is quite right to insist that a ruling class ideology is not a lie, since it is lived by the ruling class itself, and functions also to enable it "to constitute itself as a ruling class, by making it accept its lived relation to the world as real and justified" (PM 242), it does not necessarily follow that all ideology necessarily serves all the functions of bourgeois ideology including the (self)-deluding



functions. Neither does this follow from the fact that, even in a society without class, there is a continual transformation of the conditions of existence to which individuals have to adapt. Of course, one may well agree that a completely classless society completely transparent to its members is a non-realisable ideal, which it may be possible to approach, but can never actually be achieved. But the recognition of this fact can itself be achieved: it is not necessarily a question of having to 'imagine' a perfect achievement of subjectivity in order for a broadly 'classless' society to reproduce itself.

In SC Althusser refers to his reliance on Spinoza for his theory of ideology having three characteristics: "(1) its imaginary 'reality'; (2) its internal inversion; (3) its 'centre': the illusion of the subject." (SC 135) But, once again, Spinoza's position needs to be understood within the context of his system. It is based in all respects on the theory of extension and thought as modes of God as the unique substance. It is only on this basis that Spinoza can treat the notion of the mind as an independent substance as an illusion; the reality of which is its presence as an element in the totality of thought. And it is because thought is ultimately identical with extension in God that ideas, and ideas of ideas, are necessarily always to some degree true, and cannot be wholly false, so that Althusser can say that Spinoza's theory "refused to treat ideology as a simple error, or as naked ignorance, because it based the system of this imaginary phenomenon on the relation of men to the world "expressed" by the state of their bodies" (SC 136). However, while it is easy to see that this latter idea has the potential for a 'materialist' interpretation, at least insofar as it insists on the embeddedness of 'mind' in 'matter', the same does not apply to the treatment of the subject as an illusion. For Spinoza, God offers an alternative ontological support for the function normally attributed to the subject. Althusser obviously cannot use God, so he will have to find another such ontological support.

## II. STRUCTURE AND SUBJECT

Althusser argues that Marx's major discoveries in the study of history and of political economy constitute a radical break with the 'problematic' of previous writers on these topics; it is that break

which constitutes a new science, a scientific, as opposed to an ideological study of history. Further, he argues that this break occurs within Marx's own writings, in the sense that the basic problematic of this new science is only formulated in the German Ideology of 1845, while the previous writings share a different problematic with Feuerbach.

Now it is possible almost ad nauseum, to align quotations from these earlier writings that are profoundly un-Feuerbachian and apparently similar to the mature Marx (Pullberg has done this in detail, giving, incidentally, a clear account of the Feuerbachian problematic, which is something that Althusser fails to do; Ronciere, one of the original co-authors of RC, has argued the same point). It is, similarly, possible to align quotations, as Althusser has admitted, from virtually all of Marx's later writings using key terms from pre-1845 rejected by Althusser as un-Marxist. But this is, finally, a relatively uninteresting exercise, since, at the level of comparative quotations, Althusser can always argue inconsistency by Marx. The basic terms/concepts rejected by Althusser are alienation and fetishisation, and associated terms such as subject, man and humanism. Rather than comparing quotations using these terms, we need to ask what theoretical function they perform in Marx's work, and what theoretical function Althusser thinks they perform. Then we can answer the interesting question, which is not whether and when Marx ever changed his mind, but rather what would be the theoretical consequences of abandoning the notions of alienation and fetishism or, more broadly, what would be involved in a 'theoretical anti-humanism'.

Althusser never, it seems to me, gives a clear and unambiguous account of exactly what he understands by the term 'humanism'. But from his scattered references to the topic, I think that at least three key features emerge. The first is the notion of 'essence'. In PM he writes: "The previous idealist (bourgeois) philosophy rested in all its domains and developments ('theory of knowledge'), conception of history, political economy, ethics, aesthetics, etc. on a problematic of human nature (or of the essence of man). This implied, when Marx confronted it, the two complementary postulates defined by him in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach:

1) that there exists a universal essence of man;
2) that this essence is the attribute of 'individuals taken in isolation' who are the real subjects thereof." (PM 234)



This is, incidentally, an odd exegesis of the sixth thesis, in which Marx himself seems to be accepting a notion of 'essence' - but the crucial point here seems to be the idea of an individual essence as genius present in each separate individual. This is linked by Althusser with a notion of alienation as a loss of this essence: "History is the alienation and the production of reason in unreason, of the true man in the alienated man. In the alienated products of his labour (commodities, State, religion) man, without knowing it, realises the essence of man. This loss of man, which produces history and man, certainly presupposes a definite pre-existing essence" (PM 232). The notion of 'subject' is also linked here with the notion of essence: "In order for the essence of man to be a universal attribute, it is necessary in fact that concrete subjects exist, as absolute givens" (PM 234). Although this proposition does not in fact define 'subject' as having an essence, the implication of his usage here, is that what is being rejected under the concept 'subject' is the notion of essence. In particular this is the case with his discussion of the theoretical function of the notion of subject in classical political economy, which operates on the basis of "a 'naïve' anthropology which founds all the acts by which economic objects are produced, distributed, received and consumed on the economic subjects and their needs" (LCII 28). Each of these subjects is 'homo oeconomicus' as an 'essence' of needs: "All the subjects being identically subjects of needs, one can treat their effects while bracketing the ensemble of these subjects: their universality is then reflected in the law of the effects of their needs" (LCII 30) (see also PM 235, LCII 36).

As Althusser sees it, then, the first aspect of 'humanism' is that it operates with the notions of an 'essential' subject, and of alienation as the 'loss' by this subject of its essence. The second element, I think, is that, although this humanism may act politically, its basis for action is a purely ethical appeal, and a moral condemnation of alienation. Althusser seems to take this relation between the idea of alienation and moralism so much for granted that he does not spell it out in detail, but he does refer to it occasionally in passing. For example, "It is enough to live in ethics or in religion, or in that politico-ethical ideology which is called social democracy, in order to found a humanist but not historicist interpretation of Marx: it is only necessary to read Marx in the 'light' of a theory of 'human nature', whether it

is religious, ethical or anthropological ... Reducing Capital to an ethical inspiration is child's play if one supports oneself or the radical anthropology of the 44 Manuscripts" (LCI 178). And the general function which Althusser believes 'alienation' to have in Marx's work emerges clearly from a footnote discussion of its possible utility, in SC: "It seems to me that the category of alienation can render provisional services, given a double and absolute condition: (1) that it be 'cut' from every philosophy of 'reification' (or of fetishism, or of self-objectification) which is only an anthropological variant of idealism; and (2) that alienation is understood as secondary to the concept of exploitation. On this double condition, the category of alienation can in the first instance (since it disappears in the final result) help to avoid a purely economic, that is, economist conception of surplus-value: it can help to introduce the idea that, in exploitation, surplus value is inseparable from the concrete and material forms in which it is extorted" (SC 70 n.32). There are two points to notice in this passage: (1) "Fetishism" is equated with "reification" understood as "self-objectification", in the sense of loss of self in and through labour. (2) "Alienation" is used to describe what happens to the worker in the process of exploitation in addition to the mere extraction of surplus value: that is, presumably, to the fact that while he is producing surplus value he is doing so in a particular concrete situation which, by its very nature, does other nasty things to him - 'deskilling', subjecting him to rhythms of the machine, and so on. Here again, then, the term 'alienation' may be said to have moral or even aesthetic function, and it is clear that Althusser understands it as having only this function in Marx's writings, early and late.

Connected with the 'moralism' of humanism is an inevitable down-playing of the class struggle: "The humanist line turns the workers away from the class struggle, prevents them from making use of the only power that they possess: that of their organisation as a class and their class organisations.' (SC 64) This, in turn, is also connected to the third key feature of humanism: the fact that the human essence is attributed to 'individuals taken in isolation', and that social relations are treated purely as relations between these individuals in the form of "simple relations between men ... relations which would only put in question men, and thus ... variations of a universal matrix, inter-subjectivity (recognition, prestige, struggle, domination and servitude,



etc.)" (LCII 45, see also LCI 178, where such a reduction is said to be "current in all the humanist interpretations of Marxism" (n.27) ). By making social relations, and specifically relations of production, into relations solely between individuals 'humanism' is then able to reduce these relations to an interplay of the essences which define the humanism-essences which vary from theory to theory, of course, but which share the same function in each theory: "You start to think that a social relation is the natural quality, the natural attribute of a substance or a subject" (SC 52).

Althusser argues that Marx's mature work is a 'theoretical anti-humanism', in the sense of "completely doing without the theoretical services of the concept man" (PM 255) and of rejecting "the theoretical pretensions of the humanist conception to explain society and history, starting out from the human essence, from the free human subject, the subject of needs, of labour, of desire, the subject of moral and political action" (SC 201).

Thus Althusser gives a specific meaning to the key terms 'man', 'alienation' and 'subject', by relating them to the notion of essence, and states that these terms, thus understood, play no theoretical role within Marx's mature writings. But this does raise a further possibility: could these terms, defined in a different way, have a different theoretical function to the one Althusser ascribes to them? To put it another way, may not Althusser have been blinded by the problematic of 'essence'? To answer this question, we need to look specifically at the role of the theory of fetishisation in Capital. In SC Althusser has the breath-taking footnote comment: "One day it will be necessary to clear up the problem of the theory which serves as a philosophical alibi for all this "reification" literature: the theory of commodity fetishism in Book 1 Part 1 of Capital" (SC 118 n.13). This seems to be an understatement, referring as it does to the beginning of Capital. The fact is that it has a specific theoretical function there: that of giving an account not of the content of the 'laws' governing capitalist society, but of the nature or ontological status of those laws. Marx is getting at this problem even in the 1844 Manuscripts, when he writes "Political economy begins with the fact of private property; it does not explain it. It conceives the material process of

private property, as this occurs in reality, in general and abstract formulae which then serve it as laws. It does not comprehend those laws; that is, it doesn't show how they arise out of the nature of private property." (Fromm, Marx's Concept of Man, p.93)

Thus, in the 1844 Manuscripts the notion of alienation performs two functions; it is a moral-critical concept and, at the same time, it is used to attempt to understand the nature of social structure: that is, not the nature of this or that social structure, but rather, how it is possible for there to be such a thing as 'social structure' or, as Marx puts it in Capital "We are concerned only with a definite social relation between human beings which, in their eyes, has here assumed the semblance of a relation between beings" (Marx, Capital, vol.I, p.45). The first chapter of Capital is designed, inter alia, to give an account of how social relations between human beings came to appear as quite external facticities and laws imposing themselves on human beings: that is, take on a non-human appearance. It is possible to distinguish between the descriptions of how a particular social system or structure functions, and the question of the ontological status of a social system or structure. For Marx it was crucial to show that capitalism as a system was an 'alienated' or 'fetishised' reality, rather than as bourgeois economists argued, a 'natural' reality governed by 'natural laws' of the same status as those governing 'nature'. What is at stake here is brought out very clearly in the following passage from Engels' Socialism, Utopian and Scientific in which he writes that, after the abolition of commodity production "The laws of his own social action, hitherto standing face to face with man as laws of nature foreign to and dominating him, will now be used with full understanding, and so mastered by him ... Only from that time will man himself, more and more consciously, make his own history" (ed. Feuer,p.109). That is, these apparent natural laws, 'extraneous objective forces' can be overcome, and 'man' can then consciously make history; but this can only occur because these are not really 'natural laws'; they are fetishised or alienated social relations, resulting from the separation of human beings from the instruments of production through the existence of private property (and hence also of class divisions). Now, of course, some of Marx's description of how capitalism works can be accepted without accepting this account, but the analysis as a whole, set within the



'historical materialist' account of changing 'human nature' and changing 'natural laws' of society only makes sense in the context of such an account. Which may be why Marx placed it carefully at the beginning of Capital.

The whole point of Marx's theory of fetishisation is to show that the apparently external, objective and natural laws which govern economic behaviour under conditions of commodity production are, in fact, produced by the members of the society themselves. If one wishes to put it in the not very useful (grammatical) terminology of 'subject' and 'object', it appears that the laws are the 'subject' and the people are the 'object', acted upon and determined by the laws. But, argues Marx, in fact the people are the 'subject' and the laws are the 'object', the product of their activity.

However, firstly, this is neither a 'conscious' nor a 'free' production: the people do not intend to produce this system of constraints ruling their behaviour. Secondly, what is involved here is not exclusively a relation between people: it is a relation between people in the context of their relations to things (specifically, to the means of production). Thirdly, although the 'subjects' in this process are people, there is no suggestion that these people can be described in terms of an essence of the type 'homo oeconomicus'. Fetishisation is not 'loss' of a pre-existing essence. The idea is compatible with a 'non-essence' notion of man and of subject.

Does this mean that Althusser's description of Marx as a 'theoretical anti-humanist' is substantially correct, although verbally misleading: that what is at issue is merely whether one should wish to describe the above theory as 'humanist' or not?

To try to answer this question it is necessary to look at the rather tiresome 'debate' conducted by Althusser between himself and John Lewis in SC, concerning the question whether it is 'man' or 'the masses' who make history. It is tiresome partly because Althusser's argumentative procedures are so arbitrary, partly because in one respect at least Althusser's claim that 'the masses make history' is, if it is intended in any other than an inspirational sense, obviously wrong: the ruling classes also play a role in deciding the outcome of real (non-Hegelian) class struggles; and it is tiresome because, finally, what seems to

concern Althusser is the possible demobilising effect on the working class of the belief that 'man makes history'; and this seems to me to be just plain silly (not even Mephan's far better-argued restatement of Althusser's case can convince me that the belief that man makes history has created many scabs or kept many workers off the barricades).

Althusser begins by playing cat and mouse with imaginary opponents who believe that 'history' is freely created by free individuals, and who at the same time believe that "history is the result of the action (what is done by) a subject ... identifiable by the unity of its 'personality'" (SC 47-48). This is an easily-destroyed strawperson. But, nevertheless, Althusser is correct in implying that the terms of the debate can usefully be changed. And when he writes "In my opinion: men (plural), in the concrete sense, are necessarily subjects (plural) in history, because they act in history as subjects (plural). But there is no Subject (singular) of history" (SC 94), he is stating a position which seems to be perfectly compatible with the theory of fetishisation outlined above. But the next sentence indicates that this is an illusion "And I will go even further: "men" are not "the subjects" of history." (SC 94) Instead, he asserts, "'human', i.e. social individuals are active in history - as agents of the different social practices of the historical process of production" (SC 95). Referring to the discussion of the role of 'the subject' in ideology, he believes that this is sufficient ground for dismissing the belief that individuals are real (alienated) subjects as well as imaginary (real) subjects. Instead, they are 'subject agents' who are "only active in history through the determination of the relations of production and reproduction" (SC 95).

I have already shown the confusion in Althusser's argument about the relation between ideology and the notion of the 'subject'. In SC Althusser carries through this confusion by stating that "When you begin with man, you cannot avoid the idealist temptation of believing in the omnipotence of liberty or of creative labour - that is, you simply submit, in all 'freedom', to the omnipotence of the ruling bourgeois ideology" (SC 205). But such a statement is absurd, both empirically and conceptually: it is obviously possible to believe both that men are potentially autonomous subjects and that capitalist society enslaves them by depriving them of their autonomy; in fact it is impossible to say that capitalism enslaves



without making some reference to an idea of freedom (try 'liberating' an army ant).

The only other 'conceptual' argument here is the construction of a new strawperson: "One cannot seize (begreifen: conceive), that is to say, think real history (the process of the reproduction of social formations and their revolutionary transformation) as if it could be reduced to an Origin, an Essence, or a Cause (even Man), which would be its Subject - a Subject, a 'being' or 'essence', held to be identifiable, that is to say existing in the form of the unity of an internality, and (theoretically and practically responsible, identity, internality and responsibility are constitutive, among other things, of every subject) thus accountable, thus capable of accounting for the whole of the 'phenomena' of history" (SC 97). But the categories offered here are simply too crude and caricaturist to come to grips with the real issues.

Finally, Althusser offers one exegetical argument against men making history; a quotation from Marx's Preface to the Eighteenth Brumaire: "I show something quite different (different from the ideology of Hugo and of Proudhon, who both held the individual Napoleon III to be the (detestable or glorious) cause 'responsible' for the coup d'etat), namely how the class struggle (Marx's emphasis) in France created the circumstances (Umstände) and the relations (Verhältnisse) which allowed (ermöglicht) a person (a subject) so mediocre and grotesque to play the role of a hero" (SC 99; All brackets from Althusser). But in this passage Marx is concerned to show that 'heroes' do not make history; this in no way contradicts his Eighteenth Brumaire assertion that 'Men make history'. As Althusser says, "One must read one's authors closely" (SC 99).

But in spite of all this, it is still necessary to take Althusser's position seriously insofar as he offers an alternative theory, embodied in the idea of the primacy of the relation of production and reproduction over the individuals involved in the relationship: "the structure of the relations of production determines places and functions which are occupied and assumed by the agents of production, who are never anything but the occupants of these places, to the extent that they are 'bearers' (Träger) of these functions. The true 'subjects'(in the sense of constituting subjects of the process) are thus neither these occupants nor these

functionaries, are thus not, contrary to all appearances, the "evidences" of the "given" of naïve enthropology, "concrete individuals", "real men", - but the definition and the distribution of these places and of these functions. The real "subjects" are thus these definers and these distributors; the relations of production (and the social, political and ideological relations). But, as they are "relations", one cannot think them under the category of subject" (LCII 53).

This theme is developed most fully by Balibar in his contribution to LC. Beginning from Marx's brief Preface to the Contributions to the critique of political economy, in which Marx speaks of "Men entering into determinate relations", of the consciousness of "men", and so on, he makes the legitimate point that, before deciding on the significance of this, we have to elucidate the conceptual functions of the term "man" within the theoretical structure which contains it. He states that a first, 'naïve' reading of Marx's text creates the impression that the concept "man" plays an important role in assuring the structural cohesion of the whole system. Men both produce things and produce the social relations within which production can occur. Furthermore, they are "the real (concrete) supports of the different practices articulated within the social structure: this articulation is in fact only given by men who both participate in the process of production, and are juridical subjects, and are consciousnesses" (LCII 88). Against this, however, he asserts here that the term 'men' is ambiguous in this context because of its "simultaneous membership in several incompatible systems of concepts: theoretical and non-theoretical, scientific and ideological" (LCII 89). Unfortunately he develops this point no further here, but he does construct an alternative account, which we now need to consider.

He is concerned with the nature and object of a 'history'. What is, for example, a history dealing with differing forms of work a history of? What is the changing subject which provides the unity of this history? One can certainly, say, deal historically with work, but such a history does not describe an autonomous evolutionary process in which, say, technical developments at one 'stage' lead necessarily to the next. The changes which occur are related to 'history in general', which means that in order to delimit and comprehend a "regional history" it is necessary to grasp its relation to history in general.



According to Balibar this problem has traditionally been solved either by a vague reference to some 'spirit of the times' which contains no actual specification of the nature of the relationship, or else by the simple reduction of some structures to others, or to one claimed fundamental structure. He suggests that the reason for this is that history has traditionally 'received' its object, in the sense of accepting, of taking for granted a particular domain, pre-defined by the current more or less ideological assumption of the historian. The alternative method, adopted by Marx, is to recognise that what a particular approach to a 'history' reveals is a function of the initial theoretical concepts used, and that it is thus necessary to constitute the 'object' of the history. That is, if you wish to study 'work' it is not adequate merely to attempt an empirical description of the way in which people have worked at different moments in time, and to hope that the various descriptions will fall into place as a 'history'. Rather, one must begin with a general theoretical concept of the nature of 'work' as an element within a structure, and this necessarily means also a theory of its relations with other elements in the structure (cf.LCII 144-6).

This seems to me to be a valid and important point. A 'history', as a selection and an ordering, is inevitably guided by a theoretical framework, and this framework should therefore be made explicit and thought out - although of course the question as to how one goes about actually doing this remains to be settled. But the result, at least from Marx's perspective, will be to define a system of relatively autonomous instances, of which it is meaningful to attempt a 'history', articulated around a central instance (the mode of production). But the history of each of these instances will, because of their articulation, not describe an evolutionary process, but rather a series of shifts or displacements, comprehensible not from within the instance, but only through its relation to the whole. Each particular form in this succession Balibar describes as "an historical individuality" (LCII 148).

From this argument Balibar reaches the following conclusion: "We can say that each relatively autonomous practice thus engenders forms of historical individuality which are peculiar to it. Thus realisation has as a result the complete transformation of the meaning of the term 'men' which, as we have seen, the Preface to the Contribution made the supports

of its entire construction. We can now say that these 'men' in their theoretical status, are not concrete men, those of whom celebrated formulae tells us, without anything more, that they 'make history'. They are, for each practice, and for each transformation of that practice, the different forms of individuality, which can be defined on the basis of its structure of combination ... there are, in the social structure, different forms of political, economic, ideological individuality, which are not supported by the same individuals, and which have their own relatively autonomous history" (LCII 149).

Balibar gives us examples of such 'historical individualities' in philosophy, suggesting that a history of philosophy might well be a history of the succession of problematics, rather than a history of philosophical systems. Thus the term 'individuality' here does not refer to a single person, but to what one might call a basic unit. For example, while in pre-capitalist modes of production individual workers can put the means of production to work, this is no longer the case in capitalism, where the means of production can only be put to work socially, by a 'collective worker' and it is this 'collective worker' whom Balibar describes as the 'historical individuality' in this case.

I think, then, that what Balibar is suggesting here is that, one can give a history of each autonomous instance, and in each instance the basic 'unit' which one is describing will be determined by the articulation with the whole. This means that the basic unit will vary from instance to instance: there will not be a basic unit characteristic of the society as a whole, and which one can identify at work in each instance. Furthermore, in dealing with any particular instance one is not dealing with 'concrete men' but with men "in so far as they fulfill certain determinate functions in the structure" (LCII 150). It is here that the notion of Träger is introduced: "Men only appear in the theory in the form of bearers (support-Träger) of the relations implied in the structure, and the forms of their individuality only as determinate effects of the structure". (LCII 150)

As an example, we may perhaps take a political system. In any such system, there will be not only a variety of specific roles, but also



mechanisms for selecting individuals for those roles. In describing the system one may refer to the individuals who play particular roles, but one refers to them only insofar as they play these roles (and perhaps other relevant roles), but not necessarily to all their roles, to the sum total of their being as concrete individuals. Thus on the one hand one treats the individual purely as a 'role', and on the other hand one analyses the role as a function of the system or structure as a whole.

What, then, is the place of 'concrete individuals' in this? In SC Althusser writes: "Marx constantly uses the concepts of position and function, and the concept of Träger ('supports'), meaning a support of relations: but this is not in order to make concrete realities disappear, to reduce real men to pure functions of supports - it is in order to make mechanisms intelligible by grasping them through their concept, and beginning with these (since this is the only possible way) to make intelligible the concrete realities which can only be grasped by making a detour through abstraction" (SC 129-30). Thus the process Balibar is describing would seem to be identified as an abstraction. But what happens when one tries to put these various abstract mechanisms together again? What role does the idea of a 'concrete individual' play in this? Balibar himself rather sidesteps the problem by constructing another straw-person, a Leibnitzian notion in terms of which each individual (monad) reflects the (social) totality in its entirety, and he writes "Men, if they were the common supports of determinate functions in the structure of each social practice 'would in some way express and concentrate' the entire social structure in themselves, that is to say, they would be the centres from which it would be possible to know the articulation of those practices in the structure of the whole. By the same stroke each of these practices would be effectively centred on the men-subjects of ideology, that is to say, on consciousness. Thus the "social relations", instead of expressing the structure of these practices, of which the individuals are only the effect, would be engendered from the multiplicity of these centres, that is to say they would possess the structure of a practical intersubjectivity" (LCII 151).

I suggest that this is a straw person, not in the sense that it is a position which has never been held by anyone, but in the sense that Balibar is suggesting only two possible positions: either we accept that structures

are the primary features and determine individual or the social structure is a practical intersubjectivity centred on consciousnesses. But this is far too simple (and undialectical) a view (and, insofar as the second point of view is linked by Balibar with the 'problematic of mediation' developed by Sartre, it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Sartre's position).

But before elaborating on this, I would like to look at the second area in which Balibar identifies the autonomy of a structure. This is in the analysis of the 'simultaneity' of the process of reproduction, in which it is shown that the various 'spheres' of the economic process cannot be taken in isolation, but that they mutually suppose one another. This means, according to Balibar, the necessity of moving from "a concept of production as an act, the objectivation of one or several subjects, to a concept of production without a subject which in return determines certain classes as its own functions" (LCII 171). Balibar suggests that this is in fact valid for all modes of production, as well as applying to the relation between the actual production process and the other instances. For example, the production process assumes as its condition certain legal forms but, at the same time, as a process of reproduction it also reproduces these forms. Balibar suggests that there are two possible ways of treating this phenomenon. The first way is to see it simply as a unidirectional temporal process in which "the necessity of the social relation is simply the work of the activity of previous production, which necessarily leaves to the succeeding one determinate conditions of production" (LCII 175).

But this means the unity of the process. The alternative is to consider the production of social relationships as "a production of things and individuals by the social relationships, a production in which the individuals are determined to produce and the things to be produced in a specific form by the social relations. That is to say that it is a determination of the function of the social process of production, a process without a subject" (LCII 175).

This circularity of the production and reproduction of social relations is important. But once again it seems to me that Balibar's two possible modes of explanation constitute an over-simplification.



The two positions formulated here constitute a development of the earlier two. The idea of production as a unidirectional causal sequence is connected with the idea that there is a practical intersubjectivity which acts as the 'subject' of production, and the fact that this cannot account for the circularity of the process helps to refute the whole position. On the other hand, the fact that the social relations here are 'eternal' as both the precondition and the result of production, helps to establish their priority over the individuals involved.

Nevertheless, the major weakness in Balibar's position lies in the fact that he fails to elucidate what a structure is. Although we can certainly treat, say, the political system in itself as an abstraction, we also need to be able to say what it is, in the sense of how it exists. In his essay on ideology, Althusser argues that ideology has a 'material existence', both as an 'apparatus' and as the actual practices and rituals of individuals, and it would seem that this account could be generalised to all structures. But if so, then the crucial point is that the material existence which the structure enjoys is fundamentally, although not exclusively, the material existence of individual human beings. Not exclusively because it exists also in buildings, tools, books, communication networks, uniforms and a thousand other objects; but fundamentally, since even these function as part of a structure only through the actual practice of individuals. Prison rules and prison hours have their own material existence, but they only function as a prison through individuals enforcing the rules and locking the doors. This, of course, does not resolve the problem. We cannot reduce structures to individual action in the sense of attempting to explain the existence of structures as the product of self-conscious goal-directed behaviour of individuals linked in intersubjectivity. But it does mean that we need to theorise the role of individuals in the whole process. I do not intend to do this here, but I will make four points which seem to me to be vital in this respect.

1) Such an account obviously cannot begin from a 'human essence' as a system of values and behaviour patterns which is assumed to pre-exist insertion into any given structure. Althusser is perfectly correct to reject this kind of anthropology and to insist that different 'human natures' occur in different social formations. But it is still necessary to ask what is peculiar to human beings which permits this to occur; if

you prefer, what specific characteristics of human beings permit them to act indifferently as 'bearers' of a number of different functions. Althusser certainly assumes that they do have this capacity, but it may not simply be assumed. It has to be accounted for, and its implication assessed.

2) We cannot treat social structure simply as the product of an inter-subjectivity. Individuals relate to one another, firstly, within a material context and, secondly, within the context of the existence of other people not involved in immediate face-to-face relations. The existence and characteristics of the material world will condition the relations. The inevitable plurality of individuals will also do so: the ontological separation of individuals has structural implications which need to be investigated.

3) To suggest that concrete individuals play a crucial role in the unity of the whole is not to suggest either that the whole is 'centred' on individuals in some simple sense, or to suggest that each individual is a Leibnitzian monad reflecting the totality. But Balibar commits a meaning shift when he moves from the attempt to identify different units in different instances (different historical individualities) to the implication that the various instances do not exist in and through the same actual individual people A given individual is a member of the economic system as a worker, of the political system as a subject or a voter or a party activist, of the legal system as a possessor of rights and obligations of various kinds, and of the ideological system as a receiver and practitioner/contradictor of the dominant ideology. He or she may play functionally different roles in each system, and there may be tensions between the various roles. But the articulation of the roles with one another is only possible through this relation to concrete individuals, and the possibility of change in the system relies on these tensions and their role in transmitting effects from one instance to another, as, for example, when the tensions between factory resistance and political compliance transmits revolt from the 'economic' to the 'political' systems. But none of this means that the structure exists in its entirety in each individual as the "local reproduction, in miniature, of the whole social articulation" (LCII 150). It does not exist through each individual, but in the sum of all individuals, and the 'summation' will be a function of the ontological characteristics of individuals (the form and nature of their separation) and of the material context in which they are operating. This is the basis for Marx's account of fetishisation.



4) All human practice has the peculiar circularity which Balibar identifies as the process of reproduction, although not necessarily in the same form. In its simplest form a practice is directed towards a goal, and the goal is both the precondition and the result of the action. In other terms, human practice is embedded in a system of meanings, which, as meanings, are eternal. The words which I am writing now have their specific meaning only in relation to the completed sentence, and the end of the sentence has its specific meaning only in relation to the beginning. But, more, each word can have meaning within the sentence only by virtue of the references which it carries to a whole conceptual system outside the sentence. A system of production is such a meaning system in which the meaning of the individual act in physical terms (the actual end product) is previously embodied in a system of concepts comprehending the elements in the process. Crudely, X is amortising his machinery because he knows that Y is producing machines, and Y is producing machines because he knows that X is amortising his machinery. Again, this is not a process of unconstrained intersubjectivity. The meaning system operates within the material and ontological context already described, but the point is that it is because it is a system of shared meanings (which is not the same thing as a value consensus) that the system has the characteristic of 'eternity'. This, too, is a crucial element in the theory of fetishisation. Human relations can exist as fetishised object relations only because they exist as a meaning system (which is, of course, in turn a 'material' system in Althusser's sense).

Althusser refers back to Spinoza as the father of the notion of a process without a subject. But Hegel's criticism of Spinoza is equally valid as a criticism of Althusser. Hegel argued that Spinoza's God, who was substance without being Subject, failed to guarantee the unity of res cogitans. The system of ideas described by Spinoza is, finally, a mere coexistence of different elements, which destroys their status as ideas, because ideas or concepts are defined in relation to one another. This interrelation can only be provided by an active subject which unifies the system and holds together the various ideas in such a way that they have meanings. Similarly, Althusser's structures, material systems and even theoretical systems can give no account of their own unity insofar as they are abstracted from any unifying activity by a subject or subjects. Once more, this activity cannot be thought

in terms of an Hegelian Absolute Spirit, or in terms of a subject which creates the whole process out of itself. But it has to be thought of in terms of subjects who are active in history, and who can only act as 'supports' of structural functions because they are subjects, even if they are in a particular conjuncture, alienated or ensalved subjects. In the dialectical relation between subjects and structures subjects are determinant 'in the last instance' because they are the ontological foundation of structures. It is this which is the only basis for the abolition, not of structures per se, but of alienating and enslaving structures.

As an example of the problems raised here I will briefly discuss Althusser's comments on the role of the individual in the production of knowledge and, in particular, on the role of Marx. In LC he drops occasional hints on this theme, in particular in his discussion of the idea of 'an object of knowledge', distinct from the real object, insisting that to make this distinction is not to fall into idealism, since the 'thought' in which the process of production of knowledge occurs is "the historically constituted system of an apparatus of thought, founded and articulated in natural and social reality" (LCI 47); it is not "the faculty of a psychological subject, although individual subjects are its agents" (LCI 47). It is worth noting here that, at this stage, the notion of a thought 'apparatus' is purely a metaphor, and that 'psychological subjects' constitute a fundamental part of 'natural and social reality', so that the contrast between the two may be misleading. But for Althusser the consequence of this idea is that the individual thinking subject is assigned a place within the process of production of knowledge, and that even the 'change of terrain' involved in a break between problematics must not be thought of as the result of the activity of a constituting subject which decides to change its point of view on the world (cf. LCI 48). It is rather the case, he suggests, in a poetic moment, that concepts, far from being constructed when needed 'sometimes' "keep one waiting a long time, or march past in borrowed clothing before dressing in their adjusted suits - as long as history has not furnished the tailor and the cloth" (LCI 61). This historically provided tailor may be the Owl of Minerva in borrowed clothes; he certainly retains the absolute (theoretical) arbitrariness of that kind. In SC Althusser rejects the idea that the flight of the Owl follows on an exclusively scientific event, asserting that it is also related to the events of political/ ideological revolution. He attempts to give an account of Marx's 'break'



as follows: "(It) in fact seems to have been produced like a 'fatherless child' by the meeting of what Lenin called the Three Main Sources, or, to use a more accurate term, by the intersection or conjunction, against the background of the class struggle of 1840-48 ... of lines of demarcation and ... ideological lineages which, aimlessly and each for itself, criss-cross in the resultant field of their intersection. Now it is possible and necessary to distinguish as dominant in this contradictory process what we might call the change in the class theoretical position of the historical 'individual' Marx-Engels. This change of class theoretical position took place, under the influence of the political class struggles and of their lessons, in philosophy" (SC 149).

Now, the minimum meaning of this text is that we must avoid the trap of imagining that ideas are produced 'out of the blue' as the result of an entirely autonomous process occurring in the head of a Great Thinker. This is of course correct. Any philosopher finds ready a certain conceptual apparatus and certain definitions of what constitutes philosophical problems, and attempts to work with and through these concepts and definitions in the context both of his personal experience and situation and also of the events of the time insofar as they impinge upon him. Neither would I disagree with the importance of the change in class perspective by Marx and Engels for their theoretical development. But I do question the theoretical utility of the extended spatial metaphor of lines of demarcation and of aimlessly criss-crossing lineages. The construction of the 'historical individual Marx/Engels' also seems to involve an arbitrary confusion of the roles played by the real individuals Marx and Engels. It is simply not adequate to imply that, say, Marx, plays a role which is "assigned to him by the mechanism of the process" (LCI 28). His own ideas, once formulated, enter into a practical field in which their final form and fate are determined by the field, certainly. But the role of Marx, as originator of those ideas, should draw our attention to the fact that the practical field itself rests on other individuals who use and transform his thoughts. This is not an aimless criss-crossing of lineages, but a process in which people are using ideas in the context of problems. Althusser's metaphor observes the role of individuals within a process which does transcend each of them as individuals but which nevertheless cannot be understood without reference back to the individuals.

A number of critics have made the point, which follows also from my earlier criticism of Althusser's account of the notion of 'subject' as ideological, that Althusser and Balibar have described the characteristics of the alienated and fractured individuals in capitalist society as though these were the necessary characteristics of individuals per se (see e.g. J.M. Vincent in (eds.) J.F. Godchau et A. Brossart, Contre Althusser, pp. 240-242). Because they have not understood the problematic of fetishisation-alienation, they have not been able to grasp Marx's account of the way in which, in capitalist society, structures do in effect determine individuals who become bearers of different functions in different systems.

## III. STRUCTURE AND CONTRADICTION

In the previous section I questioned the adequacy of Althusser's account of the relation between individual subjects and social structures. But if he is wrong on that issue, it doesn't mean that what he has to say about structures themselves is uninteresting. He begins with a reflection on Marx's so-called 'inversion' of Hegel, pointing out that one cannot interpret this as the idea that the same 'dialectic' is now to be used 'materialistically' rather than 'idealistically'. Hegel's dialectic is an 'expressive totality' in the sense that its 'principle' is present in all elements of the whole: "this totality is reflected in a unique internal principle, which is the truth of all its concrete determinations" (PM 101). Further, insofar as the principle is self-contradictory, there is a single contradiction present throughout, and the historical process of the particular form can be understood entirely as the working out of this simple contradiction. There is a way of inverting Hegel which maintains this notion of an expressive totality defined by a single contradiction. In terms of this inversion, "while for Hegel it is the politico-ideological which is the essence of the economic, for Marx it would be the economic which would make up the whole essence of the politico-ideological. The political, the ideological would then be nothing but the pure phenomenon of the economic, which would be their 'truth'. Thus for the pure principle of the consciousness (of itself of a time) the simple internal principle which, in Hegel, is the principle of the intelligibility of all the determinations of an historical people, would have been substituted by another simple principle, its contrary: material life, the economy, a simple principle which becomes in its turn



the unique principle of universal intelligibility of an historical people ... This attempt ends with the radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the generating dialectic of successive modes of production, that is to say, at the limit of different techniques of production" (PM 107-08). As Althusser points out, this description is not a caricature. It is, rather, a constant theme in much pro and most anti-Marxist writings.

Althusser's alternative account places its stress on the ideas of the 'relative autonomy' of the structure, and of the economic being determinant only "in the last instance". However, he admits that "the theory of the specific effect of the superstructures and other 'circumstances' remains in large part to be elaborated, and before the theory of their efficacy, or at the same time (for it is by the observation of their effect that one can obtain their essence) the theory of the particular essence of the specific element, of the superstructure" (PM 113). His own work then, is an attempt to begin to work out this theory. The advantage of such an approach is that it permits us to understand the complexity of any given conjuncture much more clearly, because, instead of insisting that everything happening at that time must be the essential expression of the mode of production, it recognises that different instances have different historical peculiarities, and 'move' at different speeds. In particular, it has clear political implications, both through the fact that it stresses the importance of basing action on the actual analysis of a complex conjuncture, rather than on abstract principles, and through the fact that it raises clearly the question of the autonomy of the political instance, which does not simply follow or express the contradiction of the economy, but has its own status and rules. So doing makes it possible to give a theoretical treatment of the political practice which attempts to change the structure. It also offers a more complex understanding of revolution, which can be seen, not as the working out of the fundamental contradiction in the economy, but rather, in terms of different contradictions in different instances. In these terms, revolution only occurs when there is a peculiar coincidence of contradictions in a number of separate instances in a 'unité de rupture' (PM 98): "That is to say that the 'differences' which constitute each of these instances in play ..., if they 'merge' in a real unity, do not 'dissipate' themselves as a pure phenomenon in the internal unity of a simple contradiction. The unity that they constitute in this 'fusion' of the revolutionary break

is constituted by them by their own essence and effectivity, on the basis of what they are, and according to the specific modalities of their action. In constituting this unity, they certainly reconstitute and accomplish the fundamental unity which animates them, but in doing this they also indicate its nature: that the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the structure of the whole social body in which it is acting, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence and from the very instances which it governs, that it is thus itself, in its heart, affected by them determining but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various levels and the various instances of the social formation which it animates: we can call it overdetermined in its principle" (PM 99-100). Althusser's quotation marks indicate the extent to which he is aware of the metaphorical and unspecified nature of much of this important passage. Leaving aside the question of identifying the instances, it raises the question of how the instances affect one another, and, in particular, of what it means to describe one instance as determinant 'in the last instance'. Althusser is not simply saying that there is a plurality of instances, each with its own 'contradiction'. Rather, within the whole there is a contradiction which 'dominates the others' (PM 206), and this domination is not purely contingent but is, rather, an essential element in the nature of the structure. It is what he calls a structure à dominante. Within this structure, however, each element has its own independent role to play, in the sense that each is presupposed by the other. In particular, within a society, the 'superstructure' is not merely a secondary expression of the base, it is, rather, a condition of its existence.

But, Althusser insists, this does not mean that these instances are accidentally combined, but functionally independent. Rather, in each contradiction we find "the reflexion ... of its condition of existence, that is to say, of its situation in the structure à dominante of the complex whole" (PM 215). Insofar as each instance has its own history, and tension and conflicts within it come to a head in their own time, as it were, in any given conjuncture, we may expect to find different states of contradiction in different instances. Here Althusser refers to Marx's distinction between principal and secondary contradiction, and to his idea of the uneven development of contradictions (see PM 198). But if we are to reject the idea that there is a contradiction in one



instance which is always the principal contradiction, and yet maintain the idea of a structured whole, rather than a relatively accidental conjunction of separate instances, then we want to be able to give some theoretical account of how and why the principle contradiction moves from instance to instance. Thus Althusser wishes to show that the specificity of the Marxist dialectic is that "It alone permits us to understand the concrete variations and mutations of a structural complexity such as a social formation ... not as accidental variations and mutations produced by external 'conditions' on a fixed structured whole, its categories and their fixed order ... but as many concrete restructurations inscribed in the essence, the 'play' of each category, in the essence, the 'play' of each contradiction, in the essence, the 'play' of the articulations of the complex structure à dominante which reflects itself in them" (PM 215-6). Such a theory would permit, on the one hand, a meaningful periodisation of historical stages and, on the other hand, it would enable us to understand the 'fusion' or 'condensation' of various contradictions in the revolutionary 'mutation'. It is distinguished from 'economism', which identifies one invariable dominant contradiction determinant in the last instance, through its insistence on the unequal development of contradictions. But it remains 'Marxist' because it nevertheless insists on the idea that the economic instance is determinant in the last instance, by distinguishing between 'dominant contradiction' and 'contradiction determinate in the last instance'. Thus it is possible to identify the role of being 'determinant in the last instance' as the function of determining which instance will contain the dominant contradiction, and it is this function which is ascribed to the economic instance.

Althusser's objective in this discussion is basically "to enunciate theoretically the specific difference of the Marxist dialectic at work in the theoretical and political practice of Marxism" (PM 223) and in particular to distinguish it from the Hegelian dialectic, and it seems to me that what he has to say is very useful, at least insofar as he is dealing with the attempt to analyse 'society' and 'history' dialectically. But, in bringing out the difference between an idealist dialectic as the expressive unity of a single principle, and a materialist dialectic as a structure à dominante, he at the same time indicates a serious problem, which he solves, in PM at least, only by the use of metaphor: this is the problem of the 'unity' of a structure which is no longer the expression

of a single principle. In PM he uses the term 'reflection' to describe the way in which one instance penetrates or exists in another. But for the moment this remains purely a metaphor. Similarly, the expression 'in the last instance' remains unclear, partly because it cannot be further specified while 'reflection' remains vague, and partly because Althusser gives no justification here for his insistence that the economy always and inevitably has the role of being determined in the last instance. Thus we know neither how this function is performed nor why it is performed by the economy.

In LC Althusser elaborates on the idea of the relative autonomy of each instance through a description of the different systems of development and change of these instances, which he calls their different 'times'. Once more his concern here is to reject an Hegelian notion of historical development in terms of which it would be possible to make a cross-sectional cut at any point in time, which would reveal the coinciding features of all the instances at once, in perfect harmony. Further, neither within each instance nor across the whole can we treat history as though it is a single unilinear development, in which there is a more or less continuous process of change which can be broken up into 'periods' at certain points. Rather, the nature of the system in each case will be a function of the nature of the structure concerned. This means that a 'history' can never be a mere empirical chronology. Instead, it has to understand the type of structure with which it is involved, and has to begin with some idea as to what would constitute an 'historical' fact, in the sense of a fact which would affect or count as a mutation in the existing structural relations (see LCI 127). For example, in a history of philosophy it is not adequate to give a mere chronology of philosophers. We need to have a concept of what constitutes a philosophical system (or problematic) and of what would count as a change of system. On this basis we can give an account of the relation of different philosophers to a given system within which they operate, trace out the tensions within the system, and finally identify the 'break' in which a new system is produced.

Looking at the relation between structures, Althusser wishes to stress the necessity of not moving from a Hegelian 'coupe d'essence' to a view which takes the 'time' of one of the structures as the norm, and attempts to



identify advances and survivals or uneven development. Rather than using one of the 'times' as our measure, we have to operate with the idea of a 'conjunctural present' in which we must "consider these differences of temporal structures as, and solely as, as many objective indices of the mode of articulation of the different elements or of the different structure in the overall structure of the whole" (LCI 133). But this is, finally, although quite unexceptionable, merely a repetition of the brief account of the structure à dominante in PM, and Althusser admits that this "theory of the conjuncture indispensable to the theory of history" remains "almost entirely to be elaborated" (LCI 133).

The object of Althusser's criticism is any 'historicist' version of Marxism which attempts to make all instances into the expression of an historical totality tends inevitably to be flattened down to the 'infrastructure'. In particular, he wishes to defend the notion of 'science' against the attempt to treat it in historicist fashion as relative to its epoch. He argues that Marx himself, outside the early writings, doesn't include science in the (historically relative) superstructure. Science, rather, in breaking from ideology, inaugurates its own historical temporality in which, assuming that its actual continuity is assured, it escapes from the common fate of a unique history. While it would be 'idealist' to treat science as atemporal, it must nevertheless be thought, in its own categories, as having its own 'relatively autonomous' history. Thus we may not a priori reduce different types of practice to the same model, but should first seek out their specificity. Once more, however, although one may agree with this as a programme, it remains for the moment in purely programmatic form.

In his further discussions of this problem in LC, Althusser still does not get beyond merely formulating the problem more clearly. The idea of the causal efficacy of elements of a structure on one another cannot be thought either in terms of a (Cartesian) causality, or in terms of a (Leibnitz-Hegelian) expressive causality. Thus if we are to engage in structural analysis of this type, we must develop a notion of "structural causality" which can "think the determination of the elements of a structure, and the structural relations existing between these elements, and all the effects of these relations through the efficacy of this structure ... (and) the determination of a subordinated structure by a

dominant structure" (LCII 61). The type of causality operating can be described as a "metonymic causality" (borrowing a Lacanian term), in which the structure is immanent in its effects, and is in fact nothing other than the system of its effects. According to Althusser, Marx uses a good dozen different expressions in an attempt to pin this relation down, the least 'metaphoric' of which is the term Darstellung or representation. But all Althusser can offer us in clarification of this is an even more obscure metaphor: "the mode of existence of the stage direction of the theatre which is simultaneously its own stage, its own script, its own actors, the theatre whose spectators can, on occasion, be spectators only because they are first of all forced to be its actors, caught by the constraint of a script and parts whose authors they cannot be, since it is in essence an authorless theatre" (LCII 71, RC 193). As Althusser stresses in SC his object in PM and LC was "to differentiate between Marx and Hegel" (SC 178). It seems to me that he is successful in this task insofar as he shows that the Marxian 'whole' is structured differently from Hegel's 'totality'. But he has failed to demonstrate the possibility of such a 'whole'.

However, Balibar, in his contribution to LC, does at least offer some more clues. Beginning from an analysis of Marx's brief programmatic note in the Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, he points out that the concepts used to describe the relation between the elements of the social structure are remarkable for their vagueness; they are what he describes as 'practical' concepts, and need still to be turned into 'theoretical' concepts. This method is basically to search in Capital for hints at the structure of the argument, and then to attempt to formulate these links into a coherent theory. For this reason he is concerned largely with the 'mode of production' as a structure, rather than with the structure of the social whole as such, but his object is both to illuminate the nature of any structure and also, finally, to make some suggestion about the mode of articulation between the mode of production and the other instances.

This discussion of structure takes place within a polemic against purely empiricist history, based on Althusser's earlier argument that the notion of the autonomy of instances implies that each instance has its own 'time'. Historians, therefore, cannot simply begin 'collecting facts'. They must first 'construct their object', in the sense of



giving some account of what kind of object it is, and what would actually constitute a change in it. Thus what Althusser is opposing in his discussion of various 'times' and in his insistence that history has to 'construct its object', is the attempt to distinguish between history as a purely 'concrete' science which merely has to describe what happens, and political economy, as an essentially 'abstract' science which then has to be rendered 'historical' (and concrete in some way) (cf. LCII 197). Rather, he is insisting that both, insofar as they are sciences, lead a double existence as both theoretical and empirical sciences, which "are elaborated and developed in the investigation of a new material provided in the last resort by the practices of real, concrete history" (LCI 137). But both have to approach their real history armed with theoretically constructed concepts. I think that in his criticism of the 'role of the individual in history' debate as a paralogism involving the confrontation of "the empirical existence of another" (LCI 140), he is making the related point that a general theory (e.g. historical materialism) is not designed to explain individual events, but rather to define the nature of the object which the historian has to investigate.

Balibar takes up this idea of different 'times' and elaborates on it in a way which is not entirely unambiguous. He seems to distinguish between 'the kind of history in general' and the 'time' of particular structures. As a concept 'history in general doesn't function within the theory of history': rather it "is simply the designation of a problem constitutive of the 'theory of history' (of historical materialism): it designates this theory in its ensemble as the place of the problem of the articulation of different historical times and of the variations of this articulation" (LCII 217). To say that the concept 'history in general' doesn't function within the theory is to say, and think, that the historian cannot appeal to 'history' as an explanation for anything, any more than the biologist can appeal to 'life'. It doesn't mean that the historian is not finally studying 'historical' phenomena, any more than that the biologist is not finally studying living beings. Unfortunately, however, neither Althusser nor Balibar ever discuss the relation between the theoretical and the empirical within the activity of the historian. Partly this is because they are not here concerned with methodology. But it is also justified through the insistence that theory takes place entirely 'within thought', and it therefore

seems to me to mask certain problems concerning how one actually arrives at the elements which go into one's theoretically constructed structure. Balibar sidesteps the problem by discovering his elements in Capital. But this leaves their status undetermined unless we can give an account of how and why Marx arrived at them.

But Balibar is more directly concerned here with explicating the notion of structure. He begins by attempting to isolate the elements out of which any mode of production must be constructed, and then goes on to discuss in greater detail the question of determination in the last instance. Here he suggests that for Marx one important characteristic of the dominant instance in any society is that it is fetishised. In Capitalism this is the economic instance itself, whereas in the 'primitive' community, the collectivity is fetishised, and in the so-called 'Asiatic' mode the ruler is fetishised, in the sense that it appears that the surplus product naturally belongs to the ruler. But this method of identification doesn't help us to explain the relation between this dominant instance and the mode of production as determinant in the last instance. Marx himself gives the outline of an account in distinguishing between the role of the political instance in feudalism and in capitalism. In the latter the appropriation of surplus value by the capitalist occurs directly in and through the process of production. The political instance does not intervene directly at all. Thus the class conflict is also initially directly economic, concerning wages and hours etc. Under feudalism, however, the extraction of surplus does not occur directly in production, but indirectly through corvée labour and taxation, based on more or less visible political coercion. That is, the different production processes imply a different role for the political instance. Under feudalism, class conflict then takes a form which is both political and economic at once. Whereas economic crises play the fundamental role in capitalist society, political crises would be fundamental in societies which involve the direct extraction of surplus. If the only function the mode of production has as 'determinant in the last instance' is to determine the instance which will be dominant, this would seem to imply that its influence on how the dominant instance goes about its business after that would be minimal.



Nevertheless, Balibar does wish to retain both the autonomy of the instances and their interdependence. "Although any given mode of production is a combination of the fundamental elements, each element derives its specific nature from that mode of production. Each mode is not merely a 'descriptive juxtaposition' but is, rather, a 'functioning unity'" (LCII 14) in which each element has a specific form. Thus, for example, although any mode of production includes a property relation, what is meant by property varies from mode to mode. As Marx puts it, "To define bourgeois property is nothing other than to give an exposition of all the social relations of bourgeois production" (LCII 117).

The fundamental characteristc of a structure as a whole is that it persists, or rather, that it reproduces itself, and so we can get a clearer idea of 'structural causality' by looking at this process of reproduction. In the capitalist mode of production, at least, (and Balibar doesn't investigate any other here), this process of reproduction has the form, not of a temporal succession, but of a system of synchronic dependencies, in which all the different movements necessary for the reproduction are apparently going on at the same time. It is a process without beginning in which all the relationships imply one another reciprocally. In particular, the relation between capitalist and worker is both presupposed and reproduced in production. Our analysis of the process necessarily takes a sequential form, but the point is that this is a logical sequence, not a temporal one, and in this sense we are making a syndrome analysis without reference to time: "Syndrome is not a real present, contemporaneous with itself, but the present of theoretical analysis where all the determinations are given" (LCII 212).

But the process of reproduction is, insofar as it is a contradictory process, also a process of movement. This movement Balibar calls a dynamic, which is "a movement of development internal to the structure and sufficiently determined by it ..., proceeding according to a peculiar rhythm and speed determined by the structure, possessing a necessarily irreversible orientation, and indefinitely conserving (reproducing) on another scale the properties of the structure" (LCII 213).

The important point about this dynamic is that it remains within the boundaries of the structure. Although, for example, it is possible to estimate the systemic 'age' of a particular capitalist social

formation by looking at the extent to which the fundamental tendency of a rising organic composition of capital has developed, there is no point at which this turns into a different structure. In the form of economic crises the structure has its own way of reestablishing its dynamic. There is no internal reason why it should not go on for ever, staggering from crisis to crisis.

Within the structure, it is possible to define the notion of a correspondence between the various instances in terms of "the mode of intervention of one practice in the limits determined by another practice" (LCII 222), where the function of this mode of intervention is to reproduce the system, precisely because the limits of the intervention are predefined by the system as a whole.

On the other hand, a change in the mode of production occurs if the intervention of political practice in the economic instance is such as to transform the limits of the mode of production.

Roughly, Balibar seems to envisage the following combination. The dynamic of the mode of production produces certain elements which are available for a new mode of production. But these are not, as it were, the fulfillment of the old mode of production. There is no genesis of a new mode of production from within the old. Rather, once we have the new we can trace its genealogy by discovering the various elements which were to constitute it within the old. But each of these elements has its own dependent origin. There is no one necessary way in which the transition should occur. The discovery of the genealogy constitutes what Balibar calls a diachronic analysis, which, as distinct from the dynamic, deals with transition. These elements of a (possible) new mode of production are only actually combined, however, through an intervention of the political instance. That is, in a period of transition there is a state of 'non-correspondence' between the various levels (cf. LCII 224). But this non-correspondence is only possible because of the simultaneous existence of elements of two modes of production, of which one is dominant. This means that the transition, finally, has to be understood as the mode of articulation of two (or more) modes of production, hence as a 'synchronic' which describes the process of reproduction of the combined whole, and which contains its own dynamic as the working out of the tendencies implied by the articulation of the various modes in the whole. And in



fact any history dealing with "real-concrete social formations is always studying economic structures dominated by several modes of production" (LCII 214 note 1).

But this would seem once more to obscure the distinction between diachronic and dynamic which Balibar has taken such pains to make. If all social formations are, in effect, always 'in transition', and if the 'transitional mode' has its own synchronic and dynamic, then the only role for diachronic is the marginal one of dealing with events which are accidental to the social formation itself, such as, for example, the arrival of a colonial power which forcibly alters the mode of production, although, in some instances, at least, it might be possible to treat even this as part of the dynamic of a broader system. Were the 'barbarian' invasions of Western Europe a part of the diachronic of Western Europe, or a part of the diachronic of the whole European politico-economic system?

Balibar himself is able to insist on the distinction to the extent that he does at least partly because he is dealing only with the mode of production as one instance in the whole, and so can treat the eruption of the political instance as a part of its diachronic, not of its dynamic. But to the extent that his account of the mode of production is intended to provide a model also for the elucidation of the structure as a whole, he would have to integrate the movement of the political instance within the dynamic of the whole. In this case, insofar as the mode of production is determinant in the last instance, there must be some sense in which the intervention of the political to change the rules of the mode of production is determined, if not by the mode of production, then at least by the dynamic of the whole. Here we risk falling back into a Hegelian expressive totality. But the alternative is really to admit that Balibar's schema finally accounts for very little. As he himself says, when describing the correspondence between instances as the system of intervention of the practice of one instance within another, on the basis of their relative autonomy, "All I am doing here, obviously, is to designate the place of a theoretical problem, and not to produce a knowledge" (LCII 222).

Trying to walk the razor's edge between an atheoretical 'fact'-collecting empiricism and an Hegelian expressive totality is a difficult task, and it is made more difficult by the notion of 'structural causality'. Balibar's distinction between the dynamic internal to an instance and the diachronic involved through its relation to other instances is helpful, but if the diachronic is to be saved from absorption within a wider dynamic, then the meaning of the autonomy of each element against the structure as a whole needs to be made much more explicit. (And, it is worth mentioning, this involves also the relative autonomy of various elements within the structure of each instance). To a certain extent Althusser's concept of "overdetermination" is designed to do this, by showing that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between events in various instances. In particular, a revolution is produced not by a particular contradiction in a particular instance, but by a combination of contradictions in various instances. But to what extent does it help to bring in the idea of overdetermination? Does it say e.g. that the Bolshevik revolution had to happen - because of the overdetermined conjuncture of 1917? Or does it merely say that it could happen because of that overdetermination? The latter would seem to be more sensible, but it would also seem to weaken the idea of structural causality, particularly in regard to the political instance. Althusser connects the idea of overdetermination with the importance of the political instance and of the reality of individual action, of "the prodigious 'labour' of a theoretician, whether it be Galileo, Spinoza or Marx, and of a revolutionary, Lenin and all his brothers, devoting their suffering, when not their lives, to resolving these little 'problems' ...: elaborating on 'obvious' theory, making the 'inevitable' revolution, realising in their own personal 'contingence' (!) the Necessity of History, whether it be theoretical or political, where, soon, the future will quite naturally live its 'present'." (PM 216, Althusser's punctuation.) Thus the individual's political behaviour as a revolutionary can't be reduced to 'realising the Necessity of History in one's own contingence. But how then can it be reduced to 'bearing' the determinations designated by the structure?

To the extent that Althusser and Balibar are trying to construct the 'object' of history, rather than to actually write a particular history of a particular (concrete-real) social formation or instance, it may be felt that such problems don't arise, in the sense that 'individuals' occur only



in real history, while structures can be described theoretically and then used to guide the empirical practices of historians. But here two problems coincide, and we are left in obscurity. On the one hand the relation between structures and the actual practice of real-concrete 'history' by individuals living out their lives is unexplicated. On the other hand we are not told how historians are actually to use the theoretical 'structures' in the practice of writing particular histories. But, interesting though the purely structural analysis is, these are surely the crucial problems in both polical and theoretical 'practice'.

## IV SARTRE AND ALTHUSSER

Several writers (e.g. Poulantzas, Pouillon) have discussed Althusser's work as a specific break with Sartre. However, Althusser's own references to Sartre are brief, polemical, and distorted almost beyond recognition. To use one of Althusser's favourite phrases, "it is no accident" that he can provide as his sole argument that it is "practically impossible to conceive and defend" Sartre's position, the assertion that: "You just have to read the Critique of Dialectical Reason, which announces an Ethics that never appeared, to be convinced of this point" (SC 98). This 'Ethics' is in fact announced in Being and Nothingness; it is evident that Althusser's analysis and criticism of Sartre in SC are not based on anything like actually looking at texts, but merely on vaguely remembered impressions. Althusser's standards of exposition and analysis and criticism in these passages (SC 43-4, 59-61, 97-9) fall so far below any conceivable level of rational discourse that it is scarcely worth discussing them for their own sake. But they are important insofar as they reveal Althusser's own confusions about key theoretical problems.

In the course of his argument against the thesis attributed to Lewis and Sartre, that 'man makes history' Althusser gives the following parody of Sartre's position:

"And it is just because John Lewis's little human god-man is inside history ('en situation' as Jean Paul Sartre used to say) that Lewis does not endow him with a power of absolute creation ... but with something even more stupefying - the power of 'transcendence', of being able to progress by indefinitely negating-superceding the constraints of the history in which he lives, the power to transcend history by human liberty ... 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 an essentially revolutionary animal because he is a free animal" (SC 43-4).

This is characterised without explanation, as a 'petit bourgeois' concept of liberty, and it is implicit that his concept is designed as an ideological escape from the reality that freedon is "crushed and denied by the development of imperialist capitalism" (SC 45). This is connected with the attempt to hide the role of the natural material conditions of labour, and to delude the workers into thinking that, as men, they are already free, so that they will fail to recognise the need for class struggle (SC 63-4).

In scattered references in LC, Althusser labels Sartre's philosophy as an historical humanism, having the following characteristics:

1) "It assigns to all (theoretical) rationality, as to all (revolutionary) dialectic the unique transcendental origin of the human 'project', as an 'exaltation of human freedom'[5](LCI 182).
2) It reduces history to an expressive totality, by means of the notion of 'mediation', which "has the function of assuming unity in the negation of differences" (LCI 173-174; see also p.77), and by reducing all the various practices to the single undifferentiated notion of 'praxis'.
3) In particular, this undifferentiated notion of praxis, even when developed into the 'pratico-inerte' "lacks the concept of the modality of the material conditions of the process of labour" (LCII 42). It is related to an anthropology of the subject, an idealism of labour as the essence of man, in which "the present material conditions whose structural combination commands all effective work and all present transformation of raw material into a useful product" is dissolved in "the philosophical memory of a previous praxis, itself second in relation to an other or other previous praxes, and so on until the praxis of the originating subject" (LCII 42).

I do not intend to offer a detailed exposition of Sartre's position to show in detail how Althusser has misunderstood it. What interests me, rather, is the extent to which the misunderstandings are an index of the inadequacy of Althusser's own problematic, governed as it is by the unexplicated and untheorised notion of structure.



I have earlier argued that Althusser's idea that we can treat individuals theoretically as mere 'bearers' of structurally determined positions misses a fundamental question: what are human beings that they are able to 'bear' different positions within a structure? This is not a question about a 'human essence' in the sense in which Althusser uses that term. That is, it does not refer to a quest for a given set of motives which define human reality (e.g. homo oeconomicus). To use a rough analogy, it would be silly to inquire into the real shape of putty, but it makes good sense to inquire into the characteristics of putty which enable it to change its shape. And, if we are intending to use it, we must ask this question in order to establish the limits within which we can use it. Sartre's aim in both Being and Nothingness and the Critique of Dialectical Reason is to deal with such questions. In relation to Althusser, we may formulate his fundamental question thus: "What is the significance for the reproduction and/or change of social structures for the fact that they are 'borne' by individual human beings?" Sartre does not attempt to show either 'history' or 'social structures' being created by the free, conscious originating praxis of transcendental subjects. Rather, he attempts to show how 'history' occurs as 'a human work without an author' (Critique de la Raison Dialectique p.68) in relation to the ontological separation of individual human beings in a material context. This means attempting to give an account of how structures which are 'borne' by individuals exist as an external facticity for those individuals. The notions of 'freedom' and of 'praxis' which are used in the course of the argument certainly are 'abstract', but they are intended to be abstract: they are theoretical concepts dealing with the structure of human behaviour, not 'empirical' concepts referring to actual real-concrete human beings. In this sense they are functionally equivalent to Althusser's attempt in PM to give a general theory of production.

I pointed out earlier that one of the key problems for the Althusser-Balibar account of the nature of the social structure is that of the relation between the political instance and the mode of production. One of the ways in which they manage to give credence to the idea of structural causality is in fact by dealing with that instance which is most close to being purely a system of structural relationships - the mode of production - while giving nothing but very general treatment to those instances which are not so easily treated in this way: in particular, the political and the ideological.

Althusser's weakness at the level of dealing theoretically with politics is illustrated empirically by his treatment of Stalinism in SC. He begins by pointing out, quite correctly, that the label 'personality cult' is quite inadequate as an explanation (and it is worth mentioning that the stating of this fact within the PCF is one of Althusser's important services). It is not adequate to look merely at legal superstructure (violation of socialist legality) but one must also consider the State Apparatuses - including the Party (cf. SC 81) as well as the class relations and class struggle involved in the period of constructing socialism. This is a promising start. But this 'left-wing critique' is opposed to a 'right wing critique' which attacks only certain aspects of the legal superstructure, and of course can then invoke Man and his Rights, and oppose Man to the violation of his Rights (or simple 'workers' councils' to the 'bureaucracy') (cf. SC 82). This is then used as a basis once more for attacking 'humanism', and for asserting that the idea of 'liberty of the Person' is fundamentally and necessarily bourgeois (cf. SC 86).

Althusser now poses the following alternative: Humanism "takes on a Social Democratic accent, one which raises not the question of the class struggle and its abolition, through the emancipation of the working class, but that of the defence of Human Rights, of liberty and justice, even of the liberation and free development of the 'personality' or the integral personality" (SC 88). Thus liberty and justice are not integral to the emancipation of the working class; they are an undesirable alternative. On the basis of this analysis, which simply throws aside the problems of the single party and of the state apparatus, Althusser then feels able, as an hypothesis, to identify the Stalinist deviation as a "special form ... of the posthumous revenge of the Second International" (SC 89) although Stalin cannot be reduced to this deviation (SC 91). There is, in this, an important point in the idea that there existed no theory of class struggle under socialism, and that 'economism' and 'humanism' denying class struggle and interpreting problems of socialism purely as problems of production, come into play. But this is surely application of nationalist categories with a vengeance. The Stalinist deviation is a theoretical error - but error is not merely error, it must be treated also as ideology. In his introduction to SC Lock has elaborated on what he believes to be Althusser's position, and he writes: "As we saw, Stalin all but ignored the problem of the generation of a new bourgoisie. He considered the



class struggle under socialism to be primarily a struggle against the old exploiting classes. When that difficulty was resolved, he therefore tended (only tended, however, because he was never quite sure) to consider that class struggle had ceased to exist in the USSR. Thus the dictatorship of the proletariat could be relaxed. That was a 'right deviation'" (SC 31). This gives us a 'rationalist' picture of Stalin trying and failing to reach the truth. But, in fact, Stalin was part of an historical process, part of the 'new bourgeoisie'. His 'errors' need to be interpreted also as the ideology of a specific group lodged within specific institutions: the party and the state apparatus. But this would involve analysing critically the role of the party in relation to the question of how the workers are to control 'their' state; and this Althusser cannot do. And he cannot do it, not only for political reasons (his own membership of the PCF and its concomitant commitment to a certain view of the USSR), but also for theoretical reasons. In his concluding remarks on 'humanism' in PM he writes "To put it simply, the recourse to morality, deeply inscribed in any humanist ideology, can play the role of an imaginary treatment of real problems. These problems, once they are known, are posed in precise terms: they are the problems of the organisation of economic life, political life and individual life. In order to really pose and to really resolve these problems, they must be called by their name, their scientific name" (PM 258). But from the sphere of theoretical concepts the concept 'man' has already been excluded (cf.PM 255). It is because he lacks the concept 'man' and a theoretical analysis of the relation between individual people and social structure, that he cannot pose the real political problem in precise terms. Both problems of political organisation (party structure) and of political institutions essentially concern the relation between individuals and the collectives of which they are a part. Notions such as liberty, justice and rights are not merely 'moral' terms (whatever 'merely moral' might mean); they also designate specific organisational problems. How are workers to control their state? The answer to this question obviously involves an analysis of the problems of socialist planning. But it also involves an analysis of the problem of decision-making among ontologically separated individuals - an analysis such as Sartre makes through his distinction between group and series in Critique de la Raison Dialectique. On the basis of such an analysis it is then possible to specify rights and responsibilities within a necessarily complex organisational structure. Unless we have the concept 'individual

person' as part of our theoretical structure we cannot raise or resolve these problems. Instead we are left with a mystification of the Party as the embodiment and real expression of a class. This is, in Althusser's terminology, an idealism which becomes an empiricism as the de facto justification of the unchecked behaviour of the Leader.

Pierre Victor reports the following conversation with Althusser "One day I told him that, if one man was a communist, it was for the sake of happiness." He replied, in substance: "You mustn't say that; it is in order to provoke a change in the mode of production" (On a raison de se révolter p.197). This story may well be apocryphal. But it does indicate the dangers of abandoning concepts such as 'man' and 'subject'. Althusser attacks the 'mobilisational' consequences of theses such as 'Man makes history'. If we are to use this criterion, Althusser's slogan 'Join the Revolution and Change the Mode of Production' may well be more demobilising than even the most bourgeois evocation of human freedon.

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LCII Lire le Capital II, Maspero, Paris, 1968

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