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Nancy C. M. Hartsock

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Louis Althusser's Structuralist Marxism: Political Clarity and Theoretical Distortions

Nancy C. M. Hartsock

The petty bourgeois is composed of On The One Hand and On The Other Hand. This is so in his economic interests and therefore in his politics, in his scientific, religious and artistic views. It is so in his morals, in everything. He is a living contradiction. If, like Proudhon, he is in addition a gifted man, he will soon learn to play with his own contradictions and develop them according to circumstances into striking, ostentatious, now scandalous or now brilliant paradoxes. Charlatanism in science and accommodation in politics are inseparable from such a point of view.

Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (202)

Signification as play, the irreducibility of difference, the subversion of the subject, the deconstruction of truth—these themes came to dominate French thought in the 1960's and early seventies . . . [and] even Marxism . . . was not immune to their attractions.

Alex Callinicos, *Is There a Future for Marxism?* (81)

In his book *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, Perry Anderson notes that Western Marxism is the product of “repeated defeats of the labour movement in the strongholds of advanced capitalism in continental Europe” (1984, 15). He cites the defeat of proletarian insurgencies from 1918 to 1922, the collapse of the Popular Fronts of the late thirties, and the failure of the Resistance movements to attain

political power immediately following World War II. The situation for Marxism has not improved in recent years, with the demise of strong Communist parties in Western Europe, the failure of Eurocommunism, and most recently the Eastern European revolutions and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

One response has been to declare Marxism dead and, in many cases, to adopt some variant of poststructuralism. However, as Cornel West has stated, “despite its blindness and inadequacies—especially in regard to racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and ecological abuse—Marxist thought is an indispensable tradition for freedom fighters who focus on the fundamental issues of jobs, food, shelter, literacy, health and child care for all” (1991, xiv). I believe it is important to enter into a dialogue with the tradition, to (as West does) treat Marxism as an intellectual weapon, to analyze how the defeats of Marxism in the West have come to be inscribed in its theories, and to expose the ways in which some theoretical moves foreclose new possibilities both intellectually and politically.

In such a dialogue, the figure of Louis Althusser is particularly important as an instance of the problems Marxists have encountered in retaining both Marx's politics and the science of history that emerged from his work. Althusser has been very influential in English- as well as French-speaking contexts as even a very brief survey of the literature of Marxism will demonstrate.¹ He has been credited with setting the theoretical agenda for a time in Europe and to some degree in North America (Freedman 1990, 309). His work has been the subject of a number of important debates and at least one writer has credited him with attempting to “constitute Marxist philosophy” (Therborn 1976, 55). And in recent years, his work on ideological state apparatuses has been widely influential across disciplines. Thus, one finds feminist authors such as Teresa de Lauretis arguing that Althusser's work on ideology can potentially illuminate how concrete individuals are constituted as gendered subjects (1987, 6).

Althusser's structural Marxism is also interesting in light of the emergence of poststructuralism and its current attractiveness to many radical critics. A number of writers have recognized the “anemic” politics of postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches (Anderson 1984; Callinicos 1982; Elliott 1987; Hartsock 1990), but some believe these approaches can be grafted onto intellectual work with a more explicitly political goal (e.g., Fraser and Nicholson 1989). While many postmodernist theorists do not claim to have radical political commitments, Althusser obviously did. Moreover, his structuralism represents only the first steps along the road later taken by poststructural thinkers in which the subject is subverted and truth deconstructed. Thus, an analysis of the political difficulties generated by his theoretical positions can highlight some of the central problems in attempting a liberatory politics based on the theoretical moves of both structuralism and poststructuralism. That is, if Althusser, given his political commitments, forecloses

1. His influence is very strong in the work of such figures as Nicos Poulantzas (1975a, 1975b, 1974) and Etienne Balibar (1977). In addition, the bibliography at the end of Althusser's *Essays in Self-Criticism* lists 58 works on Althusser.

important political and intellectual directions, can we really expect political guidance from his intellectual successors?

Althusser represents a particularly interesting figure since he insisted that theory itself is an important aspect of class struggle, or more precisely, that philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in theory; that his own work must be understood as an intervention in a particular political conjuncture. In addition, Althusser insisted that Marxism is a science, and was himself concerned with the harmful political results of collapsing the scientific and political aspects of Marxist theory into each other. He argued against those who have reduced Marxist theory to economic determinism on the one hand or to an ethico-religious humanism on the other.

Yet in spite of his important contributions in each of these areas, and the basic correctness of the political (if not theoretical) directions he took, Althusser's formulations distort Marx's theory. In an effort to defend Marx against those who reduced Marxism to only one of the two aspects, or those who ignored one of these two aspects of Marx's work, Althusser split them apart. In stressing the double nature of Marx's work, Althusser, especially in his early writing (*For Marx, Reading Capital*), lost sight of the connection between Marx's theory and his politics. In his later works (*Lenin and Philosophy, Essays in Self-Criticism*), Althusser attempted to reintroduce class struggle in the form of a self-criticism for his "theoreticist deviation," but failed to reestablish the dialectical unity of science and politics. Thus, in his insistence that Marxism cannot be reduced to either one, he took the position that the terms themselves are irreducible and ended up reproducing dualisms fundamental to liberal theory—the opposition of subject to object, and the observer to the external world. The impact of his argument is to separate science from politics and thereby to undermine the liberatory significance of Marxism.

Althusser's incorrect understandings, however, are instructive. They demonstrate the extent to which our lives and thought are dominated by the dualisms of liberal theory, and make clear the difficulty of maintaining the dialectical tension between Marxism as a theory of liberation and Marxism as a systematic analysis of capitalism. But because Marxism is indeed a political science, theoretical errors "inevitably" involve political mistakes. Therefore, Althusser's work, as a contribution to Marxist theory, must be evaluated not only on the basis of its theoretical fidelity to Marx's "problematic" and the possible advances it offers Marxist theory, but also in terms of its consequences for politics.

Althusser's Marxism

For Marx, to describe the social relations of capitalism is at one and the same time to justify revolution. But as should be clear, the unity of theory and practice is not an identity but a set of distinctions within a unity. Its different moments and aspects are structured and complex, and cannot be reduced to a simple statement. I

will examine Althusser's understanding of the fundamental features of Marxism and look as well at the kinds of political consequences that the adoption of his views would encourage in the contemporary world. Althusser himself argued that "public positions must always be judged against the system of positions actually held and against the effects they produce. For example, to look at only one side of the question, you may declare yourself for Marxist theory and yet defend this theory on the basis of positivist, therefore non-Marxist positions—with all the consequences. Because you cannot really defend Marxist theory and science except on the basis of dialectical materialist (therefore non-speculative and non-positivist) positions, trying to appreciate that quite *extraordinary*, because unprecedented, reality: Marxist theory as a *revolutionary* theory, Marxist science as a *revolutionary* science" (1976, 115). Althusser argued as well that "The class struggle has not only an economic form and a political form but also a theoretical form" (1976, 38). Thus,

every interpretation of Marxist theory involves not only theoretical stakes but also political and historical. Theoretical positions in philosophy have led to real defeats and victories in politics" (1976, 186).²

Althusser is correct that the nature of Marxism is such that if we fail to understand theory as an aspect of class struggle we will fail to understand the logic of arguments such as those Althusser puts forward. He described his own work as an effort to advance and "defend the simple idea that a Marxist cannot fight, in what he writes or in what he does, without thinking out the struggle; without thinking out the conditions, the mechanism, and the stakes of the battle in which he is engaged and which engages him" (1976, 168).³ He insisted that his texts, then, must be understood as political interventions, as efforts to defend Marxism against the dangers of bourgeois ideology.

The reader who is already familiar with the debates about Althusser will find that I share a number of the specific criticisms made by others. For example, like several others, I take a critical view of Althusser's use of the production process as the model for theoretical practice.⁴ My argument against the adoption of Althusser's views, however, is based on my criticism of his destruction of the dialectical unity of theory and practice or, in his terms, science and revolution. In that context, Althusser's use of the production process as a model becomes simply another instance of a more general pattern.

2. See also the introduction to the same essays by Grahame Lock on the question of what is termed the "Stalinian deviation," and Althusser's own statement on the relation of philosophy and politics in *Lenin and Philosophy* (1971 42–45). On this point Althusser finds much support in Marxist theory. The polemics against Eduard Bernstein and other reformists rested on theoretical (rather than simply tactical) differences.

3. On Althusser's attempts to defend Marxism against bourgeois ideology, see Althusser (1976, 105, 115–17, 143, 186).

4. See Callinicos (1976, 75), Benton and Therborn (1977, 184), and Glucksmann (1972, 69–71).

In addition, I have ignored a number of important debates because they do not bear directly on the issue of the relations between theory and social change. I have left aside questions of Althusser's Stalinism, and though I discuss his claim that there was an epistemological break in Marx's thought, I do not address the question of whether or not he was correct. My purpose here is to stress the importance of maintaining the links between intellectual work and political practice in Marxism, to indicate some of the ways one can lose sight of this unity, and to point to the unfortunate philosophical and political consequences of this loss.⁵ Finally, by pointing to some of the difficulties that flow from Althusser's structuralism, I intend to raise questions about poststructuralism.

My account here is focused largely on the positions taken in Althusser's early works. While some have suggested that there may be an epistemological break or fundamental change in his thought between his early and later work, I see little evidence of such a change.⁶ Where relevant, I have noted his later formulation. In general, however, even his own admissions of error did not lead him to make fundamental changes in his ideas. Thus, for example, despite his admission of a "theoreticist deviation," the basic features of his position changed very little even though, in some cases, major changes would seem to have been required by Althusser's own admissions of error. *The Essays in Self-Criticism* should be understood, then, to be clarifications of his earlier positions rather than a formulation of alternative views.

Althusser suggested three themes that tie his essays together and that can help us understand the general structure of his thought (1976, 175ff.). Each of them should be viewed as aspects of his arguments against reductionism; each path represents his attempt to insist on *both* the scientific and revolutionary character of Marxism. Yet along each path we can see the fundamental separation of science from social change in Althusser's work. Althusser suggested the concept of "the last instance," "theoretical anti-humanism," and "the process of production of knowledge" as three paths across his essays. Let us examine each in turn.

The Last Instance

Althusser argued that each social formation is complex—an overdetermined, structured whole. The exact structures of the whole in any particular instance cannot be determined in advance: the role of primary and secondary contradictions may change; and the whole itself can be said to be determined by the economic mode of

5. On Althusser's relation to Stalinism, see Gerratana (1977, 101–2) and the "Introduction" by Grahame Lock (Althusser 1976, 1–32); Callinicos (1976, chap. 4) also addresses this question. On the question of Althusser's structuralism, see Glucksmann (1972). For humanist responses, see Kolakowski (1971) and Korac (1969). For an argument against Althusser's thesis of the epistemological break, see for example Meszaros (1970).

6. Geras (1972, 86) made this suggestion. See also McLennan (1978, 135–43).

production only in the last instance (an instance, Althusser argued, that never occurs in pure form). Along this path, to support his argument, Althusser introduced the concept of overdetermination. In addition, he argued for the differentiation of Marx's dialectic from Hegel's by means of the epistemological break between the simple dialectic of Hegel and the complex one of Marx. This "path" must be understood as an attempt to combat economism—a position that collapses Marx's political side into an account of the development of the productive forces. At the same time, along this path Althusser developed several theses that are also important in his opposition to humanism.

Contradiction and Overdetermination

Althusser used Lenin's accounts of the situation in Russia on the eve of the revolution to argue that the central contradiction between the forces and relations of production cannot in and of itself induce a revolutionary situation. If this contradiction is to become a "ruptural principle," there must be an "accumulation of circumstances" into a single national crisis. "If as in this situation, a vast accumulation of 'contradictions' comes into play *in the same court*, some of which are radically heterogeneous—of different origins, different sense, different *levels* and *points* of application—but which nevertheless 'merge' into a ruptural unity, we can no longer talk of the sole, unique power of the general 'contradiction.' Of course, the basic contradiction dominating the period . . . is active in all these 'contradictions' and even in their 'fusion.' But strictly speaking it cannot be claimed that these contradictions and their fusion are merely the *pure phenomena* of the general contradiction . . . the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal *conditions* of existence, and even from the *instances* it governs; it is radically *affected by them*, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation it animates; it might be called *over-determined in its principle*" (Althusser 1970, 100–101).

Althusser is arguing here against those who would reduce Marxism to the simple contradiction between capital and labor, those who make Marxism into economic determinism by stressing only the development of the productive forces. He is correct that contradictions other than the general antithesis of capital and labor not only exist but are not totally dependent on the capital-labor relation. They have a certain autonomy. Moreover, the social totality within which the different contradictions are active is both determined by the general contradiction and determinant of it. The totality is cause, effect, and context, all at once.

Because of the complexity of real social situations, the "lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" (Althusser 1970, 113). That is, we never confront economic factors in isolation from other social relations. Thus, Althusser suggested that after a revolution, one is not simply dealing with survivals from the old system, anomalies with no relation to a new mode of production. (Here Althusser is arguing against Stalin.) Rather, Althusser argued, we must recognize that a revolution in the

mode of production does not necessarily and automatically modify all the social relations of a society. Often ideologies and other aspects of society remain unchanged. In addition, the revolutionary society itself may reactivate older structures (Althusser 1970, 115–16): The continuation of patriarchal family structures in the Soviet Union is only one example of these processes.

Thus, for Althusser, the social whole is complex. Kolakowski charges that Althusser was simply restating the commonsense argument that there are always many factors at work. But Althusser did more than this. He argued that the complex whole is structured in dominance (Althusser 1970, 202).⁷ There are two aspects of this structure. First, the concept of overdetermination designates “the reflection in contradiction itself of its conditions of existence, that is, of its situation in the structure in dominance of the complex whole” (Althusser 1970, 209). An important feature of the position of any contradiction is what Althusser called the unevenness in the determination of the contradiction itself. To put it more simply, Althusser was arguing that any situation contains both primary and secondary contradictions. Moreover, each contradiction has both primary and secondary aspects. He did not however, mean to say that the relations among primary and secondary contradictions or primary and secondary aspects of a contradiction are simple or mechanical. Althusser insisted that the secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the principal contradiction, that they constitute its conditions of existence just as the principal contradiction constitutes the condition of existence of the secondary ones.

A second aspect of the structure of the whole is that for Althusser, in a real historical situation, two processes occur: one opposite may pass into the position of another (something Althusser called “displacement”), or opposites may form an identity (a process he called “condensation”). In both cases, however, the structure itself remains constant (Althusser 1970, 211).

In the essay on contradiction and overdetermination, Althusser’s categories begin to move and flow in a way readers of Marx will find familiar. However, his formulations present several problems. First, they are marred by his insistence on the certainty of finding a single primary and several secondary contradictions in any and every situation. At least in principle, one cannot expect that a single contradiction will *always* be dominant. One cannot predict in advance a single structure for every social relation. Althusser allowed himself to fall into the same mechanical reasoning he attempted to combat. He argued for a close analysis of the real social situation, by insisting that one cannot name *in advance* the determining factors one will find, and indeed, suggested that one can never find the *single* factor that represents the determination of a crisis by the economy. His argument is supported by his contention that any situation contains both primary and secondary contradictions and that the relations between them are not simple and mechanical but complex and changing. However, when Althusser asserted that in any situation one

7. See also Kolakowski (1971, 120).

can find only *one* principle and several secondary contradictions, he stepped back from the conclusion toward which he himself had pointed. Althusser laid out the answers in advance of real analysis, on the basis of an *a priori* principle.⁸ This mechanical insistence on the necessity of finding one primary and several secondary contradictions is certainly foreign to Marx's own practice of using a single social relation as a starting point for unravelling the totality.

Second, Althusser's understanding of the relation of opposites is devoid of a sense of dialectical (inner) unity. He focused on processes that he treated as distinct entities and that have essentially *external* relations to each other. Althusser's contradictions, unlike the relations Marx brings to view, do not contain their opposites *within* themselves, but must "change places" with their opposites. Oppositions may also, according to Althusser, "condense" to form a (simple) identity. Here too, Marx's understanding that social relations contain their opposites within themselves is abandoned. Thus, Althusser could not see, as Marx did, the accumulation of misery, toil, ignorance, brutality, and mental degradation contained within the process of accumulation of wealth. His understanding of contradictions cannot support such a close, indeed internal, relation of opposites.

In spite of the ways Althusser's formulations undermine his own argument, we should recognize the correctness of his basic direction, if not of his conclusions. By calling attention to the structured complexity of situations and by emphasizing that one cannot see the configuration of a situation in advance, Althusser attempted to make an important and useful point against economic determinism in Marxist theory.

Althusser went on to argue that it is precisely the structured complexity of primary and secondary contradictions that differentiates Marx's dialectic from that of Hegel (Althusser 1970, 107, 209). His differentiation of Marx from Hegel brings us to our next topic, the epistemological break. Althusser used the concept of the epistemological break in Marx's work in two arguments: against economic determinism, on one hand, and against humanism, on the other.

The Epistemological Break

Althusser argued that Marxism is only scientific because of the epistemological break between the idealist, Hegelian, Feuerbachian, "pre-Marxist" notions of Marx prior to 1845 and the period of scientific Marxism or the science of historical materialism after that time. Through his argument for the epistemological break, Althusser joined the debate over the early versus the late Marx which had raged for decades. Many people have been involved in this argument—Leszek Kolakowski, Ernest Mandel, Istvan Meszaros, Galvano Della Volpe, Lucio Colletti, to name only a few. Although I take the position that there are important developments in the thought of Marx, but no fundamental break between the young Marx and Marx proper, I do not intend to enter the debate here. My criticism of Althusser's use of

8. Benton (1984) makes a similar point.

the “epistemological break” does not turn on my disagreement with him about the relation of the young Marx to the old.

Althusser used the term “epistemological break” to call attention to a “mutation in the theoretical problematic contemporary with the foundation of a scientific discipline” (Althusser 1970, 32). The epistemological break, as he quite correctly made clear, is not a question of simply finding Marxist and pre-Marxist elements in Marx’s thought, but rather refers to a change in the basic problematic that structures the work as a whole (Althusser 1970, 68). On the basis of the changed problematic, Althusser argued that one can differentiate the “enslaved thought” of the young Marx from the “free thought” of Marx (Althusser 1970, 83). Thus, while the *1844 Manuscripts* rest on the concepts of “human essence,” “alienated labor,” and “alienation,” the *German Ideology* makes use of other concepts such as “mode of production” and “division of labor.” These changes in basic concepts represented for Althusser a shift to a terrain “on which the new concepts, after much elaboration, can lay down the foundations of a scientific theory, or (another metaphor) ‘open the road’ to the development of what will, irresistibly, become a science, an unusual science, a *revolutionary science*, but a theory which contains what we recognize in the sciences, because it provides *objective knowledge (connaissances objectives)*” (Althusser 1970, 85).

Althusser stressed the differences between Marx’s early work, which he saw as based on concepts such as “human essence” and “alienated labor,” and Marx’s later works in which, although alienation is present as a category, it is not a major concern. In this way, Althusser laid the ground work for an argument against a Marxist humanism based on Marx’s early works, a humanism that he believed downgrades the importance of class struggle by stressing the importance of the links among all human beings and by failing to give enough attention to the divisions and dehumanization that result from class society. At the same time, his insistence that Marx’s dialectic opened a new continent to science, and that it allowed for the posing of the real problems of history, allowed Althusser to argue that Marx’s dialectic differs from that of Hegel. It also links the thesis of the epistemological break to his argument about complexity and overdetermination. In this latter context, the thesis of the epistemological break served Althusser in his struggle against economism.

Althusser argued that Marx’s dialectic did not simply take the form “thesis/antithesis/synthesis” and did not represent the development of a single essence through history, thus marking his critique of essentialism. Humanists, Althusser implied, have substituted the development of the human essence for the Hegelian development of the world spirit; economic determinists have substituted the development of the productive forces. Both groups, then, have failed to recognize the fundamental differences between Marx’s dialectic and that of Hegel. Althusser argued that the epistemological break contained three “elements.” First, it contained the element provided by the development of a theory based on “radically new concepts: the concepts of social formation, productive forces, relations of produc-

tion, superstructure, ideologies, determination in the last instance by the economy, specific determination of the other levels, etc.” rather than a theory based on human nature or alienation. Second, it contained a radical critique of the “*theoretical pretensions of every philosophical humanism.*” Third, it contained the “definition of humanism as an *ideology.*”⁹

Althusser argued that the epistemological break occurs in the *German Ideology*. The “Theses on Feuerbach” mark its earlier limit. The break concerns what Althusser described as “two distinct theoretical disciplines”: the theory of history (historical materialism) and a new philosophy (dialectical materialism) (Althusser 1970, 33). This division between philosophy and the science of history, seemingly an innocuous academic exercise, proves to be the source of some of Althusser’s most radical divergences from Marx’s theory. Perhaps as a consequence of these divergences, it proves to be a division Althusser was constantly forced to rework. A set of contradictory positions grows from Althusser’s insistence on the conceptual distinction between philosophy (dialectical materialism) and science (historical materialism), and his attempt to constitute each as a distinct theoretical practice. The difficulties are exacerbated by Althusser’s self-confessed theoreticism and by his later efforts to reintroduce class struggle into his work and to link philosophy and science with it.

In his later work, Althusser recognized that for Marx, philosophy, science, and revolution were closely linked. He also correctly saw the suppression of distinctions among these domains as indicative of “rightist” or “leftist deviations.” The first reduces philosophy to science; the second reduces science to philosophy (Althusser 1971, 14). But Althusser’s argument for the *distinctness* and autonomy of each practice is one that isolates each practice from the others, and treats each as an entity in itself. Thus, for example, Althusser at first cautioned us that the new philosophy was only implicit in the new science and might even “confuse itself with it” (Althusser 1970, 33; italicized in original). Later, however, he maintained that philosophy lags behind science, and is, in effect, *produced* in the theoretical domain by the conjuncture of the effects of the class struggle and the effects of scientific practice (Althusser 1971, 15, 107). Although Althusser was attempting to argue in this way for the separation of philosophy from science, and for its constitution as a separate and autonomous discipline, he made philosophy into a phenomenon that simply results from a conjuncture of processes outside it, and therefore lacks autonomy.

He created still more difficulties with his suggestion that philosophy is distinguished from science by the fact that it has no history and therefore, strictly speaking, no object. Althusser then differentiated science, which has an object, from politics, which has a stake and an aim. But then he suggested that philosophy is like politics in that it too has a stake—“scientific practice” (Althusser 1971,

9. I am uncertain of Althusser’s definition of the concept of “elements” in Marxist theory, but my own reading of Marx is much more sympathetic to the concept of aspects and elements. The remarks about the three “elements” of the epistemological break come from Althusser (1970, 227).

55–57, 61). To make his confusion even more apparent, Althusser then argued that there are two decisive nodal points: (1) the relation between philosophy and science, and (2) the relation between philosophy and politics. As he put it, “everything revolves around this double relation” (Althusser 1971, 65). Here he has lost track of the relation he posited previously, in which philosophy is an effect produced by science and politics. Perhaps in recognition of these difficulties, Althusser took yet another position with regard to philosophy in his *Essays in Self-Criticism*. While he admitted that there are arguments for the idea that philosophy lags behind science, he indicated that one can also argue that Marx’s scientific breakthrough was based on and presupposed a philosophical revolution. Moreover, he indicated that what lay beneath the philosophical change was Marx’s political development. Here, then, Althusser has argued that philosophy is not (at least in this situation) an *effect* of scientific practice and class struggle, but that both philosophy *and* scientific practice depend on class struggle.

Althusser preserved the separation he made among philosophy, politics, and science at some cost. The accounts he gave are not only contradictory, but also run counter to his own contention that the science of historical materialism is an autonomous realm which defines its own standards. Althusser obviously fell into a morass in attempting to specify the manifold (and as he saw them, external) relations of dialectical materialism (philosophy), historical materialism (science), and politics. The cases against humanism and economic determinism not only do not require such extreme and rigid oppositions among different spheres of activity but, indeed, cannot be made on this basis.

The distinction between dialectical and historical materialism is foreign to Marx’s own ideas and, significantly, never appears in his work. The term “historical materialism” comes from Engels, and “dialectical materialism” from Plekanov (Bottomore 1956, 20). The distinction was then taken up by Lenin, in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, and codified by Stalin, in *Historical and Dialectical Materialism*. Marx, himself, refused such rigid distinctions. At the same time, however, he did not argue for the simple *identity* of philosophy and science (or of science and politics). Marx spoke of “‘distinctions within a unity,’ ‘members of a totality,’ ‘identities’ which were not simple but ‘mediated.’”¹⁰ Marx does not provide a set of consistent, mutually exclusive categories into which one can “sort” action and experience. For Marx, the boundaries among science, philosophy, and politics are elastic and permeable. The three are not, as they are for Althusser, separate, though related activities, each of which can be clearly distinguished from the others.¹¹ Rather, they are aspects of a dialectical unity in which science, philosophy, and revolution are internally related. For example, in Marx’s Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, ironically cited so frequently by Althusser, one finds an intermingling of

10. For illustrations of these terms, see Marx’s Introduction to the *Grundrisse* (1973, 81–115).

11. Althusser’s account of the relations among these activities is especially important in *Lenin and Philosophy* (1971, 11–22); see also Althusser (1971, 107–26).

philosophy, science, and even politics. There Marx is concerned not to specify relations among (fixed and unchanging) spheres but rather to explore the inner relations of a unified, though not necessarily uniform, whole.

Marx's own theory indicated, on one hand, that from the vantage point of human activity as ontology, to possess a scientifically correct account of reality was at the same time to be a revolutionary. On the other hand, by taking up the vantage point of the working class, a revolutionary class position, Marx demonstrated that revolutionary activity both required and helped to generate such an account. That is, the two vantage points allow for different views of the same terrain. Althusser, in contrast, gave a far more instrumental and one-sided account of these relations: the working class needs objective and scientific knowledge in order to win.¹² Marx's work in *Capital* has become a tool to be selected or rejected. It is no longer analysis and critique of capitalist production and justification for social change all at the same time.

Although he recognized the problems created by his formulation of the epistemological break as a "simple theoretical fact," and later argued that class struggle must be brought back into his work, Althusser left the links among the separate spheres of science, philosophy, and politics unspecified. One might almost say he treated them as nonexistent. The commonality among the separate spheres consists simply in the fact that each sphere has a common structure—that of production. Although Althusser appears to endorse the idea that Marxism is a revolutionary science, his insistence on the separate activities of philosophy, politics, and science depart from Marx's own account. Althusser's continual attempts to restate the proper relation among what he understood to be three (distinct) activities, and his contradictory accounts of the roles of each sphere in relation to the others suggests that he recognized the difficulties.

Science and Ideology

We cannot conclude this discussion of Althusser's understanding of the epistemological break without touching on the question of the relation between science and ideology—since the break between the thought of the Marx who was not Marx (pre-Marx) and Marx consists in the passage from ideology into science.¹³

In *For Marx*, Althusser argued that he was about to set out on a reading of Marx that would allow him to distinguish science from ideology in Marx's own work (Althusser 1970, 39). Because every ideology is false, Althusser argued, one must not examine it in terms of its relation to a truth other than itself but must instead look at its relation to the ideological field and to the social structure that sustain it and are reflected in it. Here too one can see the kind of statement that poststructuralists make. An ideology must be recognized to be a result of forces other than itself. It is

12. On this point, see for example the entry for "theory" in the glossary at the end of *For Marx* (1970, 256); see also Althusser (1976, 116).

13. See the very interesting discussions of this question by Benton and Therborn (1972, 186ff.) and Callinicos (1976, 60–66).

not autonomous; its “motor principle” is outside it (Althusser 1970, 63). To make clear the status of a body of thought, to expose the basic problematic that lies beneath the ideology, Althusser proposed that we compare the problems posed by the ideologue with the real problems posed for her/him by her/his time (Althusser 1970, 67–68). By this means, Althusser pointed to one of the important and defining features of ideology—its unconsciousness of itself.

Althusser then put forward a second formulation: the unconsciousness of ideology does not indicate that it is simply false. Ideology is an expression of the way people live their relation to their world, the expression of the not-necessarily-conscious structures that define the lives of all human beings. It is, Althusser argued, both a real relation and an imaginary one. More precisely, it is the “(overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation” (Althusser 1970, 234). The bourgeoisie, for example, “lives in the ideology of *freedom*, the relation between it and its conditions of existence: that is *its* real relation (the law of a liberal capitalist economy) *but invested in an imaginary relation* (all men are free including free laborers)” (Althusser 1970, 234). But ideology for Althusser is not simply a feature of capitalist society: it is a “system of mass representations.” Ideology presents the forms in which people *always* live their lives. Since it represents a real, lived relation to the world, Althusser argues it will be essential even in communist society (Althusser 1970, 235, 252).

Because it was based on the unscientific concepts of “human essence” and “alienation,” Marx’s work prior to 1845 must be analyzed as ideology. Althusser argued that although Marx’s work was ideology, Marx was involved in a “retreat” from the massive ideology of German philosophy. This retreat from ideology coincided with Marx’s discovery of the organized working class and of a class struggle “obeying its own laws and ignoring philosophy and philosophers.” Marx then had to “think” what Althusser refers to as a “double reality” (Althusser 1970, 81; italics in original). Moreover, Marx had to think this double reality in concepts left over from his own past as an ideologue, concepts that were not adequate to the task Marx set for them. Only by moving to adopt the standpoint of the proletariat as represented in the political action of the organized working class was Marx able to move from ideology to science. The analysis of the social world from a proletarian class position was essential to the foundation of a science of history, “that is, to an analysis of the mechanisms of class exploitation and domination” (Althusser 1976, 160).¹⁴

Ideology differs from science in its practico-social function (function as knowledge). Ideology refers to the *lived* relation to the world, whereas science, because it refers to the production of knowledge, has, by implication, a much more distant relation to life. Ideology and science are thus fundamentally separated in Althusser’s thought.¹⁵ Each is given its own sphere of activity, or practice. Althusser’s

14. See also Althusser (1970, 157 and 1971, 100).

15. See also Althusser (1970, 243, 231).

understanding of ideology lead to two errors in his treatment of Marx's own evolution. First, Althusser treated the epistemological break as the mark of Marx's passage from error to truth, his passage from ideology to science. As he later admitted, he reduced the break between bourgeois ideology and Marxism to the opposition of truth and error, and thereby made the opposition into a theoretical rather than practical and political one. Science for Althusser is, in this context, the discovery (production) of truth. But Althusser's categories cannot allow for the appropriation of Marx's science in a practical way. To the extent that appropriating Marx's science in a practical way affects real life, it takes, for Althusser, the form of ideological practice and can no longer be scientific. This seems the only possible conclusion to be drawn from his insistence that even inhabitants of a communist society will live their relation to the world through ideology.

Second, in what was perhaps an attempt to reintroduce class struggle into his work, Althusser suggested that since ideology is a feature of all social relations, Marx's break with bourgeois ideology consisted simply in taking up "proletarian ideology" (Althusser 1976, 120–24). Althusser wished to reject what he called the theoreticist deviation embodied in his contrast of truth (in the form of science) with error (in the form of ideology). Yet by opposing bourgeois to proletarian ideologies, he ends up in relativism (Benton 1984, 179). The importance of totality, of the mediate and therefore objectively correct understanding of reality available from the perspective of the proletariat, has disappeared. The practical, political struggle has been transformed into the opposition of two (presumably) equally valid ideologies, two lived relations to the world.

Along the first path across Althusser's essays, the path of the last instance, we have encountered a number of irreducible dualisms: the static and rationalist opposition of truth (science) to error (ideology), the insistence on the "double reality" Marx has to theorize (the capitalist *and* the proletarian realities), the tangled separation of philosophy both from science and from class struggle, and the delineation of a realm of science as opposed to a realm of ideology. Although Althusser later modified his positions on some of these questions, the fundamentally dualistic character of his views remained unchanged. In *Lenin and Philosophy* he said he was too abrupt in stating that the epistemological break occurred in 1845. Rather, he argued, it began in 1845 and Marx's whole intellectual history can be seen as the continuing and difficult rupture with his past (Althusser 1971, 93–101). Second, in his *Essays in Self-Criticism*, he argued that he formulated the concept of the epistemological break in a "theoreticist" way. That is, he reduced the antagonism "between Marxism and bourgeois ideology to the antagonism between science and ideology" (Althusser 1976, 123). Moreover, Althusser noted that he formulated the distinction between science in general and ideology in general as the distinction between truth and error. Thus, Althusser admitted, he ended up in a "rationalist-speculative" formulation which left class struggle out of account (Althusser 1976, 106).

Althusser argued that all the effects of his theoreticism derive from this rationalist-speculative interpretation. All this is a useful corrective to the views he set out in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, but none of his corrections overcome the irreducible dualisms of this thought. Nor do they reestablish the ruptured connection between systematic analysis and political struggle. That is to say, he is still involved in the search for mutually exclusive categories and the use of the principle of analysis—the belief that wholes are made up of fundamentally simple parts which can be separated from each other and examined, the belief that elements may be broken out of the whole without fundamentally altering them. This view differs profoundly from Marx’s understanding of the dialectical unity of opposites, and of the essentially inner relations of capitalist society. It represents, rather, several common features of the bourgeois ideology Althusser was attempting to combat.¹⁶

In his own defense, Althusser explained his purposes along the first path across his essays:

I wanted to defend Marxism against the real dangers of *bourgeois* ideology: it was necessary to stress its revolutionary new character; it was therefore necessary to “prove” that there is an antagonism between Marxism and bourgeois ideology, that Marxism could not have developed in Marx or in the labour movement except given a radical and unremitting *break* with bourgeois ideology, an unceasing struggle against the assaults of this ideology. This thesis was correct. It still is correct (1976, 105).

At the same time, Althusser indicated that he did not see clearly in 1965 what made Marxist science different from other sciences—that it was “a *revolutionary* science. Not simply a science which revolutionaries can use in order to make revolution, but a science which they can use because it rests on *revolutionary class theoretical positions*” (Althusser 1976, 130).

I have argued that along the path of the last instance, Althusser is indeed involved in a “theoreticist deviation.” The importation of class struggle as an afterthought does not lead to the reconstitution of Marxism as a practical political science.

Theoretical Antihumanism

Althusser pointed out a second path across his essays, one that is also a part of his fight against reductionism—the path of what he termed Marx’s theoretical antihumanism. And as Althusser remarks in the *Essays on Self-Criticism*, “just for the pleasure of watching the ideological fireworks with which it was met, I would have had to invent this thesis if I had not already put it forward” (Althusser 1976, 195). He argued that liberation from Stalinism gave rise to a liberal and ethical reaction in Marxist circles in which Marx’s early works were used as support for the reduction

16. See Unger (1975) on this point for a far more comprehensive discussion.

of Marxism to a moral theory with a human subject at its heart.¹⁷ In opposition to this kind of humanism, Althusser argued that the idea that human beings are at the center of the world is linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie. It expresses their aspirations by basing all social understanding on the view that to be a person is to be a free subject—an individual free to possess, to sell, and to buy (Althusser 1976, 201). Marx, Althusser stressed, began his analysis of capital from the perspective of the real dehumanization and lack of humanity of workers, not “from man but from the economically given period of society” (Althusser 1976, 201). In *Capital*, where he focused on the production relations that structure the social formation as a whole, Marx dealt with individuals as “personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests.”¹⁸ Thus, Althusser argued, Marx’s science is fundamentally opposed to theoretical humanism.

Although this brief statement gives the general tenor of the argument, and provides a sense of its base in Marx’s own writing, Althusser’s argument against theoretical humanism in fact has several elements. First, Althusser argued that ground explanation in the concept of a human being as “originating subject,” as the source of her/his own needs, thoughts, and acts, tempts one to believe in the “omnipotence of liberty or of creative labor” (Althusser 1976, 205). It leads one to ignore the class basis of the development and practice of humanism in the West. In a second and related argument, Althusser argued that by ignoring the importance of class relations, humanists commit the same error as the classical bourgeois economists Marx criticized for beginning their analyses with population. They fail to recognize that the concrete (in this case, the concrete human individual) is the result rather than the starting point of analysis (Althusser 1976, 205). Thus, Althusser suggested that humanism fails as an account of the real social relations of bourgeois society. This is one reason why Althusser argued that Marx’s break with humanism was one of the elements of Marx’s epistemological break with bourgeois ideology in general.

This leads Althusser to a third, though closely related criticism. Humanism represents a concept developed by the ruling class as a description of their social reality. Theorists such as Hobbes and Locke began from the free and separate individual who was the embodiment of human nature, the possessor of his/her own needs, desires, and capabilities. The stress on the free subject and on the human essence expressed an aspiration of the bourgeoisie, but also expressed what was both an imaginary and a lived relation to the world (Althusser 1976, 198).¹⁹ Because humanism takes up these fundamentally capitalist ideas, Althusser was correct to criticize humanism for falling into a fundamental antinomy of liberal thought. He argues that humanism is an empiricist/idealist outlook because “if the

17. In this argument Althusser took the position, no doubt related to the 1936 Congress of the CPSU and perhaps later repudiated, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is superseded by a kind of humanism in the USSR (but not China). On this point, see the essay “Marxism and Humanism” (Althusser 1970).

18. See, for example, Marx (1967a, 10).

19. See also MacPherson (1962).

essence of man is to be a universal attribute, it is essential that *concrete subjects* exist as absolute givens; this implies an *empiricism of the subject*." Yet to argue that each individual must carry within him/herself the "whole human essence," even if only in principle, implies "an idealism of the essence" (Althusser 1970, 228). Althusser's critique of humanism here comes close to restating Marx's point in the "Theses on Feuerbach" that the human essence must not be understood as an abstraction inherent in each single individual.

These several critiques of humanism are part of Althusser's correct argument, first, that humanism downgrades the importance of classes in any systematic analysis; and second, that to begin at this point is to mistake the proper method of political economy and to fall into inconsistency. One cannot begin from the essence of humanity, but can only arrive at concrete humanity as an end point. The proper starting point for analysis is quite different: it is the social relations of production.

A second critique of humanism emerges in the essays in *Reading Capital*, where humanism is criticized under the heading of historicism. In this context, too, Althusser is involved in an argument against reductionism—here, an argument against the reduction of historical materialism to dialectical materialism (or what he termed in other contexts the reduction of science to philosophy) and the "flattening" of scientific knowledge down to "politico-economic practice" (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 136, 133). Humanism and historicism indicate that the actors of history are also its subjects, that is, they are "actors of roles of which they are the authors, too" (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 139). Althusser argued that both humanism and historicism assume that most people have far more power than they do in reality. At worst, then, humanism can become a Marxist variant of blaming the victim for her/his own plight. Althusser is attempting to call attention to the situation of an individual confronted with and indeed constructed by inexorable and impersonal social forces.

As in the case of the "epistemological break," Althusser chose provocative terms which indicate a more extreme opposition than he was in fact suggesting. Stress should be put on the term "theoretical." Althusser's Marx is working against 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" (Althusser 1976, 201). He was arguing against humanism as a basis for scientific knowledge. As Althusser explained, theoretical antihumanism does not indicate a contempt for human beings. *Capital* must be understood as a work that was written in order to end the suffering of an exploited class. Althusser was also careful to explain that he recognizes that humanist ideologies, even if they support the ideological hegemony of the capitalist class, may also express a revolt against that class (Althusser 1976, 200). His purpose was simply to point to the scientific achievements of Marxism, and to argue that Marx arrived at a scientific analysis of the social relations of capitalism through a critique of the philosophy of the human essence (Althusser 1970, 223).

The theses of the epistemological break and the distinction between science and ideology clearly have important roles to play in Althusser's account of Marx's theoretical antihumanism. Both serve to emphasize his argument for the fundamental disjunction between Marxism and the bourgeois science that preceded it. The epistemological break for Althusser established a complex, rather than a simple dialectic, and together with Althusser's distinction between science and ideology, allowed him to define Marx's earlier work as ideology. Althusser's work on contradiction and overdetermination becomes relevant as well, in the form of his argument that only by "displacing" the concept of humanity and having its place taken by the analysis of social relations can one arrive at the knowledge of the concrete (Althusser 1970, 243).

Althusser's account of Marx's theoretical antihumanism represents an important and fundamentally correct direction. It could serve as an entry point for a discussion of the importance of mediation in constructing an objective account of the social world by calling attention to Marx's insistence on the necessity for beginning an analysis with social relations and arriving at a reproduction of concrete reality only as a terminal point. Althusser was correct as well to argue against those who downgrade the importance of class divisions or who overemphasize the power individuals have over their own circumstances. The problems in Althusser's formulation of Marx's theoretical antihumanism lie in other directions.

The single most important difficulty grows out of Althusser's argument that social relations include not only the social relations among groups of people but also include relations between human beings and things. Althusser included within the latter the relation to the means of production, and thus divided social relations into two distinct categories. This represents an important departure from Marx's own views. Marx argued that human labor occurs as an interaction with (nonhuman) nature but transforms nature in such a way that it comes to be the embodiment of human activity in other forms. Nature itself comes to appear as a form of human work, and human beings must, conversely, be recognized as natural beings as well as social animals.²⁰

Neither humankind nor the natural world can be understood without the other; each has become what it is, been shaped and even created by the other. While both humankind and the natural, material world are indissolubly interdependent, neither can successfully be reduced to the other.²¹ The process of human creative activity, or work, involves both the incorporation of human powers into natural objects and their reconstitution as social use-values. At the same time, the process of realizing human powers changes humankind itself.²² The commonplace opposition of the

20. See Schmidt (1971) and Marx (1964, 112, 114, 13).

21. The attempt to reduce the social to the natural world or, more precisely, to study it in the same categories as the natural world is, of course, one of the major efforts of Western social science. Behaviorists and other positivist social scientists are still continuing their efforts to reduce the social world to the kinds of terms found in the natural sciences.

22. See, for example, Marx (1967a, 177).

social and natural worlds, and the sense that natural forces must be brought under human control, was an important feature of the ideology developed by the emerging bourgeoisie as they worked to develop technological control of nature. In separating relations to human beings from relations with (natural) objects, Althusser, however, did more than simply take over one element of this world view. By splitting the social from the “natural” world, Althusser failed to recognize the ontological importance of human activity, and thus, its character as constitutive of the human world in *both* its social and natural aspects. The result is that in breaking the dialectical unity of humankind with nature, Althusser also severed the links between Marx’s science of history and political struggle. *Capital* is a justification for revolution only if Marx’s analysis of the laws governing capitalist production is at the same time an analysis of the laws governing the theft and destruction of the worker’s humanity. *Capital* can provide this double analysis only if one accepts the world-constitutive (ontological) character of human activity. Althusser failed to grasp the fact that the ontological character of human activity, as developed in Marx’s account of alienation, is fundamental to Marx’s project.

Althusser’s argument for Marx’s theoretical antihumanism, insofar as it depends on his thesis of the disjunction between science and ideology, suffers as well from the effects of his self-confessed theoretician deviation. Here, these effects consist in his stress on the scientific character of Marxism to the exclusion of its political aspect. This one-sided view takes the form of an emphasis on the importance of classes but not of class struggle. In addition I have argued that Althusser’s insistence on the epistemological break and on the lack of theoretical importance of the concept of alienation in Marx’s later work is the basis for a disjunction between science and revolution. By refusing alienation an important *theoretical* role in *Capital*, Althusser once again separates Marxism as a science from Marxism as a theory of revolution. Finally, Althusser’s failure to grasp the meaning of dialectical unity appears once again in his use of the concept “displacement” to refer to Marx’s substitution of social relations for the concept of human essence as a starting point for his analysis (Althusser 1970, 167). Althusser used the concept of displacement to refer to the shift of one opposite into the place of the other, but dialectical unity does not refer to objects that can shift positions but rather refers to relations that include within themselves both aspects of a polarity.

Thus, Marx described his own move in the *German Ideology* not as a result of shifting two (by implication separate) parts of an opposition, but rather, as a move based on the recognition of the real relations behind (and contained within) the apparent ones. This is why Marx could state that “This sum of productive forces, capital funds, and social forms of intercourse . . . is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as the ‘substance’ and ‘essence of man’ ” (Marx and Engels 1970, 59).

The Production of Knowledge: Theoretical Practice and Political Practice

The third path Althusser suggested, that of the process of production of knowledge, is the locus of the most pernicious effects of his one-sided stress on Marxism as a scientific account of capitalist production. Along this path, he extended his thesis of the epistemological break in Marx's work, along with his distinction between ideology and science, to develop the concept of theoretical practice. He argued that knowledge is the result of a process of production in the realm of thought, and undertook a literal transposition of Marx's account of the process of material production into what Althusser saw as the separate and distinct world of thought and knowledge. The raw materials of knowledge are transformed into knowledge(s), the product, through a process of theoretical labor or theoretical practice. Knowledge, then, is the product of a theoretical labor, and since this labor takes place entirely in thought, the product as well can exist only in thought.

There are several aspects of Althusser's argument which must be taken up in turn. First, there is his argument that the practice of the production of knowledge is distinct from other social practices and is linked with them by the fact that every social practice takes the common form of production. This represents Althusser's interpretation and distortion of Marx's argument that production is the single most important and determinant practice among the social practices in any society (Althusser 1970, 167). Second, we should look more closely at Althusser's distinction between the real object and the object of knowledge produced by theoretical practice, and his idea that theoretical practice generates its own standards. Finally, we can link the theses of the epistemological break and Althusser's distinction between science and ideology with his efforts to develop the concept of theoretical practice.

Althusser began to present the concept of theoretical practice in the context of setting out Marx's differences from Hegel. He argued that the solutions to theoretical problems already exist in Marxist practice. In every case, however, they must be posed and resolved in *theoretical* form. This "ultimately means to express theoretically the 'solution' existing in the practical state, that Marxist practice had found for a real difficulty it has encountered in its development" (Althusser 1970, 165).

Theoretical practice for Althusser is one of a number of distinct social practices—that is, it is a "process of *transformation* of a determinate given raw material into a determinate *product*, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of 'production')" (Althusser 1970, 166). Political practice represents another practice that proceeds on the same model and produces not knowledge but revolutions. Althusser suggests here a division of labor among Marxists between "a man of science who applies himself to the constitution and development of a science, or a political man who applies himself to the development of the class struggle."²³ Clearly, Althusser understood the social world to be

23. See Althusser (1970, 174, 199, 210 and 1971, 75).

made up of a variety of autonomous spheres, each of which takes its form from the process of material, economic (in the narrow sense) production. Indeed, he indicated four major autonomous spheres of practice, each of which is fundamentally constituted by a separate process of production—economic, political, ideological, and theoretical.²⁴

Althusser used the concept of theoretical practice to argue that the production of knowledge involves a transformation, and to indicate that theorizing is a legitimate activity (or work). Although Althusser argued that Marxist theorists are merely expressing something in theory that has already been worked out in practice, this theoretical expression requires real theoretical labor—theoretical practice. It takes the dual form of the production of a knowledge and the critique of illusion (Althusser 1970, 166, 189).

Althusser described the process of theoretical practice or production as one that includes three “generalities.” Generality I is the precondition for scientific labor, the raw material to be transformed into knowledge. Generality II refers to the work done—although Althusser was unclear about whether this is simply the means of production or the labor process itself. Generality III is the knowledge produced through this process of transformation. Althusser insists on two main propositions: (1) that there is “never an identity of essence between Generality I and Generality III, but always a real transformation”; and (2) “the work whereby Generality I becomes Generality III . . . whereby the ‘abstract’ becomes the ‘concrete’ only involves the process of theoretical practice, that is, it takes place ‘within knowledge’ ” (Althusser 1970, 185).

Although this form of argument may strike the reader as unnecessarily complex, Althusser indicated that he presented the argument in this form for two purposes: (1) to support his argument that theoretical practice involves real labor, evidenced by the transformation of the materials worked on in a process of production; and (2) to emphasize that Marxism is a science rather than a technique, that scientific Marxism is not simply the application of formulae to situations but involves a real analysis of the complexities of those situations (Althusser 1970, 170).

The work takes place entirely in thought, and the objects produced exist only in thought. Thus, Althusser argues that one must not confuse “*two different concretes*: the *concrete-in-thought* which is a knowledge, and the *concrete-reality* which is its object. The process that produces the concrete-knowledge takes place wholly in the theoretical practice” (Althusser 1970, 186). This mode of appropriating the concrete-in-thought, then, differs from the mode of appropriating real objects: thought objects can only be appropriated in thought. Althusser is supporting a division of the world into two opposing realms: a world of thought on the one hand—with its own objects, practices, mode of appropriation, and so on, and a world of real objects (by implication physical ones), attached to their own practices. The opposition of these two worlds represents an important distortion of Marx’s own views—one we can

24. See Althusser and Balibar (1970, 58) and “Glossary” in Althusser (1970).

perhaps clarify by looking at the sources in Marx's work from which Althusser seems to have drawn support.

In constructing his model of theoretical practice, Althusser took his inspiration not only from Marx's argument that production is the determinant moment of social relations but also from Marx's statement that the proper scientific method consists not of the evaporation of the concrete to produce abstractions (such as the "division of labor" or "money") but rather requires one to begin from these abstractions to arrive at the "reproduction of the concrete by way of thought" (Marx 1973, 100–101).²⁵ One arrives at the concrete through a process of (re)constructing and concentrating the many determinations at work. It is a result rather than a beginning. Marx goes on to argue against those to whom the "movement of the categories appears as the real act of production." Althusser's distinction between the concrete-in-thought and the concrete-reality is an effort to restate Marx's argument that "the totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practical, and mental appropriation of this world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely, as long as the head's conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical" (Marx 1973, 101–2). The distortion represented by Althusser's account stems from the fact that he seems to have missed Marx's last phrases. Science for Marx is not speculative but must be practical as well. Indeed, Marx argued that science only begins where speculation ends and argued as well that one can only appropriate the world by changing it in reality, not simply by interpreting it differently, or changing it in thought.²⁶

Whereas for liberal theory the objects of which we have knowledge are simply external to us, Marx recognized a more complex relationship. We must appropriate objects of knowledge in a practical as well as speculative way; we must in addition recognize both the social and natural worlds as aspects of ourselves, as our own creations, and even as extensions of ourselves. While Althusser was correct to stress the production of knowledge as real activity, as production in thought, he failed to grasp the fact that we come to know the world as whole human beings with all our senses. Indeed, we come to know the world by appropriating it and in that *appropriation* we cannot help but recognize our involvement and participation.

Althusser's separation of the concrete-in-thought from concrete reality and his argument for theoretical practice as a process analogous to the process of production form a part of his argument for the autonomy of different spheres of social life. The argument for autonomy, in turn, must be seen at least in part as an effort to support his argument against the simplistic analyses of economic determinism. In terms of theoretical practice, Althusser argued that "demonstration and proof are the product of definite and specific material and theoretical apparatuses and procedures, internal to each science" (Althusser 1976, 170).

25. This passage is cited by Althusser (1970, notes to 185).

26. See, for example, Marx and Engels (1970, 41, 18).

As in the case of the distinction between the object of knowledge and the real object, Althusser based his argument for the autonomy of theoretical practice, or of science, on one of Marx's arguments. Althusser took off from Marx's statement that the "order of succession" of economic categories, "is determined . . . by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to historical development" (Marx 1973, 107).²⁷ This statement is one of the bases for Althusser's emphasis on the autonomy of science. It forms the basis of his argument that the order of categories in a science differs from their order of historical genesis, and by implication, that activity in any sphere other than science cannot provide a guide to the practice of science (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 46).

Thus, theoretical practice must be understood to contain within itself the criteria with which to "validate the quality of its product, i.e., the criteria of the scientificity of the products of scientific practice." Once a science is truly constituted it has no need for verification from what Althusser terms "external practices."²⁸ The theoretical practice, for example, of the experimental sciences is formed by experiments that are both the forms of the theoretical practice and the criteria of its validity. The same is true of historical materialism: Althusser paraphrases Lenin's famous statement when he says, "It has been possible to apply Marx's theory with success because it is 'true'; it is not true because it has been applied with success" (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 59).²⁹

Althusser's argument for understanding the creation of knowledge as a process of production both forms a part of his general argument against reductionism and also depends on his other theses. In his *Essays in Self-Criticism*, he stated that along the path of the process of production of knowledge he wished to make several arguments. First, he wanted to argue against empiricism—against the notion that the path to knowledge is the path of rising from the simple to the combined. Second, he wanted to argue against those who felt that Marxist science was complete and needed simply to be applied. Third, Althusser attempted to take up the double opposition to empiricism and to Hegel contained in Marx's argument that the progression from the abstract to the concrete took place in thought, and that this movement did not produce the material world but was a process of coming to know it (Althusser 1976, 189ff.). Thus Althusser saw his distinction between the object of knowledge and the real object as an attempt to stress Marx's break with bourgeois ideology, and thus to support his own argument of the epistemological break (Althusser 1976, 194).

In every case, along this path, Althusser's purposes support the main lines of Marxist theory. Many of his concerns are similar to the questions I have raised. His formulations, however, cannot serve these ends, and indeed, because they represent

27. See also Marx (1967b, 209).

28. See also Althusser (1970, 253) and Althusser and Balibar (1970, 59).

29. See also Althusser (1976, 170) where he remarks that Marx's theory does not depend for its truth on verification.

distortions of Marx's theory, have very different theoretical consequences from those Althusser might wish.

The concept of creating knowledge through a transposition of the process of production lies at the heart of Althusser's understanding of theoretical practice. His error is located in his efforts to simply take over the *form* of production and argue that this form is replicated in every social practice. Marx made clear that the process of production structures all aspects of social life. This does not mean, however, that all areas of social practice simply mirror the production process. The problems inherent in Althusser's argument for autonomous but identically constructed spheres of production can be clarified by examining Marx's own argument that production was the determinant moment in social relations.

Marx argued that production and consumption are related to each other through three identities which form a totality. First, there is an immediate identity in which production is consumption and consumption is production. Second, each mediates the other—production creates the material of consumption. It “not only supplies a material for the need but supplies a need for the material.” Consumption mediates production in that “it creates for the products a subject for whom they are products.” Third, each “creates the other in completing itself, and creates itself as the other.” “Consumption accomplishes the act of production only in completing the product as product by dissolving it, by consuming its independently material form, by raising the inclination developed in the first act of production, through the need for repetition, to its finished form; it is thus not only the concluding act in which the product becomes product, but also that in which the producer becomes producer. On the other side, production produces consumption by creating the specific manner of consumption; and, further, by creating the stimulus of consumption, the ability to consume, as a need” (Marx 1973, 91–93). “The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well” (Marx 1973, 99).

The relations of different realms, even within what Althusser would no doubt term the economic sphere, are thus not simple replications of the form of the production process. The different moments form a complex whole; relations among the parts include immediate identity, the creation by each process of its opposite, and the mediation of each process by the others. We should search for this complex inter-relation rather than for Althusser's simple replication of the process of production (Generalities I to III) in all our social relations. Althusser's formulation of theoretical practice as an act of production does not include the other moments described by Marx and ignores the complex and mediated relations of processes. Moreover, it once again breaks the links between theory and practice in Marx's work. Theoretical practice, according to Althusser, contains its own theory and its own practice, along with its own criteria for validation. As Althusser describes it, the sphere of theoretical practice is in effect not simply autonomous but independent

of other spheres of activity. Althusser has subdivided the social world and built identical houses on undifferentiated plots of land.

Althusser later admits he used the analogy to the process of production “mechanically” (Althusser 1976, 189). And perhaps, he says, even “forced” Marx’s texts. In justification he suggested that it was a way of pointing out that knowledge does not transform the real object and that knowledge is the outcome of a process that takes place only in thought. Althusser recognized that this argument might lead to nominalism and even to idealism, but felt it to be an important aspect of his struggle against humanism (Althusser 1976, 189–92, 195).

Althusser, however, has done far more than simply “force a little” Marx’s texts. His mechanical transposition of the process of production into other (separate) spheres of social life, along with his lack of attention to the inter-relations among these spheres, reproduces two important features of liberal capitalist ideology. First, he reproduces an understanding of social life as a series of (disconnected) arenas. While Althusser does not reproduce the division between public and private, subjective and objective, he does stress both the separation and the autonomy (almost independence) of different social spheres.³⁰ Their only link, as he sees it, is the fact that they share a common structure—the structure of production. Second, in using the labour process in production as the fundamental form of all human activity, Althusser has made the same move as liberal theorists who argue that the market is the fundamental basis for human interaction, and that all forms of social relations can be understood on this model; that the market is the prototypical pattern of interaction.³¹

The fundamental separation of theory and practice is made even more apparent in Althusser’s distinction between the real object and the object of knowledge. Here, understanding of the world is once again fundamentally separated from participation in it.³² Human relations to the social world become fundamentally external. By implication, the only practice that can have an effect on knowledge is the practice of theoretical production—production in thought. Once again, what was for Marx a dialectical unity, a set of distinctions within a totality, has been split apart into separate spheres. Althusser’s argument indicates, contrary to his own statement, that practice does not contain answers to questions, answers that must be appropriated by theory; the answers to our questions can be “produced,” manufactured through a process that takes place in thought alone. The role of practice has been reduced to that of raw material which must be transformed before it can teach us anything. This is hardly what Marx had in mind when he stated that all the “mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice” (Marx 1970, 122).

To the extent that Althusser’s understanding of theoretical practice depends on

30. On this point see Unger (1975, 29–62, 104–44).

31. See, for example, Parsons (1969), Boulding (1969), Mayhew (1974), and Buchanon and Tullock (1965).

32. See, for an extreme extension of this position, Hindess (1977).

some of his other theses, it suffers from the defects of those theses as well. Althusser's understanding of theoretical practice was both supported by and depended on the thesis of the epistemological break, and also functioned as a support for his attempt to differentiate Marx's science of history from ideology. The argument for theoretical practice was also an argument against reductionism (against those who considered Marxism to be a science which had only to be applied), and an attempt to stress the importance of continuing to develop theory. Thus the argument cannot be isolated from other features of Althusser's Marxism.

Overall, Althusser's formulations express a dualistic vision of the world—a kind of division of labor within Marxism, a specialization in either science or politics. As such, they support a distinction between science and politics alien to Marx's work and profoundly hostile to Marx's project.

In later formulations, Althusser attempted to give more weight to political practice, and argued that one must directly experience two realities: "the reality of theoretical practice (science, philosophy) in its concrete life; the reality of the *practice of revolutionary class struggle* in its concrete life, in close contact with the masses" (Althusser 1970, 20; italics in original). He also attempted once again to work out the links between philosophy and politics, and to argue in more specific terms that philosophy represents politics in the domain of theory. "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" (Althusser 1971, 65).

By the time Althusser came to write the *Essays in Self-Criticism* he had moved to the point where he argued that the category of theoretical practice was a poor one, and represented his theoreticist tendency (Althusser 1976, 123). The reason he gave for rejecting the category, however, is that he confused scientific and philosophic practice. It is important, he argued, to avoid making philosophy into science or politics. Philosophy, however, he now says, is not simply an outcome of other forces but is itself, in the last instance, a self-contained class struggle in theory (Althusser 1976, 150).

Althusserian Politics

I have been concerned to show how Althusser distorted Marxist theory. Others have been more explicit about the specifically structuralist directions he took and have pointed to the political trajectory of Althusser and some of his post-Althusserian followers. I have argued that Althusser's formulations lead in the direction of cutting off theory from politics. There are three sorts of evidence that support this analysis: Althusser's own political history; others' views of the political consequences of his thought; and the ideas of some of his followers—most importantly, Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst.

Althusser's political activity has been described as "naive and sporadic" (Benton

1984, 15) and his politics as “oddly apolitical” (Callinicos 1982, 59). While he worked for theoretical autonomy from the French Communist Party (PCF) he was unwilling to challenge its political authority. In addition, Althusser was notably absent during the events of May ’68. Although he was ill at the time, even the next spring he did not seem to have understood the extent to which students and part of the working class had moved far past the PCF (Elliott 1987, 241). There seems to be agreement that when the “ruptural unity” Althusser had theorized occurred in May ’68, its theorist ignored it. “The ‘most important event in Western history’ since 1945 found Althusser politically wanting” (Elliott 1987, 243).

But this may have been an individual failure to understand political events. What is more important is the direction in which his theoretical works point. A number of commentators have argued that Althusser’s arguments preclude real analysis, and tend toward both idealist and relativist conclusions. There is, first, his argument for the irreducible heterogeneity of the social world, for different spheres with different standards, but with the same identical structure—that of production. Althusser knows in advance of analysis the form any practice will take. What is pre-given is the process of transforming a raw material into a product, effected by human labor (Callinicos 1982, 63).

Althusser’s development of the concept of theoretical practice as distinct from political practice, even in the context of Althusser’s own struggle against reductionism leads to a new kind of reductionism—a reduction of the dialectical unity of science/philosophy and politics to two realities, each of which has lost connection with the other. Because Althusser does not make the dialectical unity of theory and practice central to his account of science, he allows historical materialism to become simply a science (almost) like any other. It becomes a self-contained arena of production that differs from other self-contained arenas only because knowledges rather than chairs are produced. This stress on science as its own self-contained reality can only support academic Marxism. It suggests that the only appropriate standards are those internal to the practice of producing scientific knowledge and thereby supports the production of knowledge in isolation from organizational ties to struggles for liberation.

Third, there is Althusser’s formulation of history as a process without a subject, that is his reduction of agency to structure. Perry Anderson states that Althusser abolished subjects except as an illusory effect of ideology and notes that a short time later his former student, Foucault, proclaimed the end of man (1984, 38; Elliott 1987, 325). This reduction had several consequences: Althusser was unable to conceptualize struggle and change (Callinicos 1987, 3). In addition, Althusser’s argument that subjects are constituted by means of ideological state apparatuses indicates that subjects acquire subjectivity simultaneously with their subjection to authority. The structure is primary and it is difficult to see how any oppositional subjects could be formed (Benton 1984, 139; Callinicos 1987, 155, 236).

Fourth, Althusser’s formulations lead him into both relativism and idealism. Relativism emerges first in his argument that each practice has standards interior to

it, and cannot be judged by standards appropriate to other practices, that is, that each practice has its own time and history. Ted Benton has argued that structuralism itself generates pressures toward relativism. He notes the impact of decentering the subject as a bestower of meaning and excluding the idea of reference from the theory of meaning. The result is that all that is left is an understanding of language as a system of mutually defining differences (Benton 1984, 180). The idealist strains emerge in Althusser's tendency to collapse the base into the superstructure. In his emphasis on the ideological state apparatuses, the economy is occluded, and even the state comes to take a minor role (Callinicos 1982, 76; Elliott 1987, 233).

But it is with the work of Hindess and Hirst in their trajectory from "hyper-" to "post-Althusserianism" (Elliott 1987, 5) that one can see even more clearly the effects of Althusser's ideas as they extend his work in more poststructuralist directions. Hindess and Hirst have come to see Marxist theory as an obstacle to socialist politics (Benton 1984, 182). In their work, language has become both "absolutized" and "unhinged from reality" (Anderson 1984, 45; Callinicos 1982, 169). Hindess and Hirst argue that there is no access to reality independent of discourse. The entities discourse refers to are constituted in and by it (an echo of Althusser's view of the constitution of subjects and a theme familiar in poststructuralism). Thus, they end up committed to a dualist ontology with, on one side, discourse and, on the other, an external reality to which discourse has no access. The result is the abandonment of the view that theoretical work can provide knowledge of a reality beyond itself. They have been charged with attacking all conceptual thought (Callinicos 1982, 189). And at least one commentator has wondered why such a position is any less dogmatic than claims that reality is knowable (Benton 1984, 182, 195).

The relativism of their position is much more apparent than Althusser's: once discourse is set free from any anchorage in the real, criteria that enable us to choose among discourses vanish (Callinicos 1982, 173). And the tendencies toward idealism in Althusser become more evident. Hindess and Hirst have argued that the "forms of thought must determine the order of connections in the real: the logical relations of inclusion and exclusion between concepts determine what is and is not possible in reality." The result is a collapse of the real into theoretical discourse (Benton 1984, 184).

Althusser argued in his own defense that the principle tendency of his work was to defend Marxism against the most threatening forms of bourgeois ideology—humanism, historicism, pragmatism, evolutionism, philosophical idealism, and so on. But he admitted that the secondary, theoreticist tendency of his work was harmful (Althusser 1976, 149). Although I cannot share this evaluation of his work, Althusser's statements of intent can be important guides for political thinking. Thus, for example, Althusser argued that along the path of the process of knowledge he tried to show that theory was itself a practice in opposition to pragmatism, that he tried to argue that Marxist theory should not be a slave to pragmatic tactical political decisions (Althusser 1976, 169). Along this path, Althusser argued that his

motive was to develop what he called a “radical double opposition to empiricism, and to Hegel” (Althusser 1976, 190).³³

What was at stake was the relative autonomy of theory. Althusser made similar arguments for the positions he took along the other paths. His theoretical anti-humanism was, he said, an attempt to combat dogmatism not from the Right but from the Left (Althusser 1976, 170). His thesis of “determination in the last instance by the economy” was intended to oppose both economism and idealism. The argument for determination by the economy was an argument against idealism, an attempt to put himself on the side of materialism. The argument for the last instance was an effort to call attention to the complexity of the process and thereby to argue against economism (Althusser 1976, 177). He made much the same arguments for his other theses.

These statements along with Althusser’s argument for the importance of thinking in extremes, are perhaps the most important contribution Althusser made. The enemies Althusser was attempting to combat are real enemies, and we should take his political thought, but not his theoretical advice.

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33. In opposition to empiricism, Althusser is arguing that seeing the importance of the production of knowledge is a “way of recalling Lenin’s astonishing remark, that Marx *only laid the foundation stones* of a theory which we must at all costs develop in every direction. It is a way of saying: Marxist theory can fall behind history and even behind itself, if ever it believes that it has arrived” (Althusser 1976, 195). The opposition to Hegel contained in Althusser’s understanding of the process of production of knowledge was the stress on the dual nature of the process—the continued existence of the concrete objects and the creation of an object of knowledge.

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