

Louis Althusser

**LENIN AND PHILOSOPHY
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
BY BEN BREWSTER



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Foreword

I am glad to be able to extend a few words of welcome to the reader who does me the honour of opening this book.

I trust him: he will understand the political, ideological and theoretical arguments which inspired the already old philosophical essays in the Appendix; he will discern in them an internal evolution and displacement giving rise to the new Theses which appear in 'Lenin and Philosophy', 'Preface to *Capital* Volume One' and 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'; he will realize that it is in the direction opened by the indications in these last texts that I now feel it necessary to pursue an investigation which I began more than fifteen years ago.

If I wished to sum up the peculiar object and ambitions of this investigation in a few words, I should say, *first*, that at a time and in a world which either stubbornly fight against Marx or cover him in academic honours while distorting him in bourgeois interpretations (economism, technocratism, humanism), I have tried to re-emphasize the fact that we owe to him the greatest discovery of human history: the discovery that opens for men the way to a *scientific* (materialist and dialectical) understanding of their own history as a history of the class struggle.

I should *then* say that this science cannot be a science like any other, a science for 'everyone'. Precisely because it

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reveals the mechanisms of class exploitation, repression and domination, in the economy, in politics and in ideology, it cannot be recognized by *everyone*. This science, which brings the social classes face to face with their truth, is unbearable for the bourgeoisie and its allies, who reject it and take refuge in their so-called 'social sciences': it is only acceptable to the proletariat, whom it 'represents' (Marx). That is why the proletariat has recognized it as its own property, and has set it to work in its practice: in the hands of the Workers' Movement, Marxist science has

become the theoretical weapon of the revolution.

I should say, *lastly*, that *class conditions in theory* had to be achieved for Marx to be able to conceive and carry out his *scientific* work. So long as he remained on bourgeois and petty-bourgeois positions, Marx was still subject to the ruling ideology, whose function it is to mask the mechanisms of class exploitation. But it is only from the point of view of class exploitation that it is possible to see and analyse the mechanisms of a class society and therefore to produce a scientific knowledge of it. The story of Marx's Early Works and his rupture with his 'erstwhile philosophical consciousness' prove this: in order to fulfil the conditions that govern the science of history, Marx had to abandon his bourgeois and then petty-bourgeois class positions and adopt the class positions of the proletariat. That these class conditions are not 'given' in advance, that all Marx's work contributed to their elaboration, makes no difference to this principle: it is only from the point of view of the exploited class that it is possible to discover, against all bourgeois ideology and even against classical Political Economy, the mechanisms of those relations of exploitation, the relations of production of a class society.

When one reads Marx's works, this *change of position* takes the form of a '*critique*': a constant critique, from the Early

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Works to *Capital* (subtitled 'A Critique of Political Economy'). One might therefore think that it was a matter of a purely intellectual development. Certainly, Marx's extraordinary critical intelligence is at work in this development. But on Marx's own admission, it is the theoretical effect of a determinant cause: the struggle of the contemporary classes, and above all, since they gave it its meaning, the first forms of the class struggle (before 1848) and then the great class struggles *of the proletariat* (1848-49; 1871). That political class struggle can have radical effects in theory, this we know: the political class struggle resounds in the ideological and philosophical class struggle; it can therefore succeed in transforming class positions in theory. Without the proletariat's class struggle, Marx could not have adopted the point of view of class exploitation, or carried out his scientific work. In this scientific work, which bears the mark of all his culture and genius, he has given back to the Workers' Movement in a theoretical form what he took from it in a political and ideological form.

I close on this comment because it is vital for us, who live one hundred years after *Capital*. Marx's work, although completely scientific, is not something gained which is securely available to us. In order to defend Marx's work, in order to develop and apply it, we are subject to the same class conditions in theory. It is only on the positions of the proletariat that it is possible to provide a radical critique of the new forms of bourgeois ideology, to obtain thereby a clear view of the mechanisms of imperialism and to advance in the construction of

socialism. The struggle for Marxist science and Marxist philosophy is today, as it was yesterday, a form of political and ideological class struggle. This struggle entails a radical critique of all forms of bourgeois ideology and of all 'bourgeois' interpretations of Marxism. At the same time, it demands the maximum attention to the

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resources, new forms and inventions of the class struggle of the proletariat and of the oppressed peoples of the world. In a time like ours, dominated by the split in the International Communist Movement, we still need to meditate this lesson of Marx's: of this man for whom the proletarian revolutions of 1848 had opened the way to science, this man who attended the school of the Commune in order to be able to map out the future of socialism.

Louis Althusser
Paris, June 1970

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Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon

Interview conducted by
Maria Antonietta Macciocchi

1

Can you tell us a little about your personal history? What brought you to Marxist philosophy?

In 1948, when I was 30, I became a teacher of philosophy and joined

the PCF. Philosophy was an interest; I was trying to make it my profession. Politics was a passion; I was trying to become a Communist militant.

My interest in philosophy was aroused by materialism and its critical function: for *scientific* knowledge, against all the mystifications of *ideological* 'knowledge'. Against the merely moral denunciation of myths and lies, for their rational and rigorous criticism. My passion for politics was inspired by the revolutionary instinct, intelligence, courage and heroism of the working class in its struggle for socialism. The War and the long years of captivity had brought me into living contact with workers and peasants, and acquainted me with Communist militants.

It was politics which decided everything. Not politics in general: Marxist-Leninist politics.

First I had to find them and understand them. That is always extremely difficult for an intellectual. It was just as difficult in the fifties and sixties, for reasons with which you are familiar: the consequences of the 'cult', the Twentieth Congress, then the crisis of the international Communist

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Movement. Above all, it was not easy to resist the spread of contemporary 'humanist' ideology, and bourgeois ideology's other assaults on Marxism.

Once I had a better understanding of Marxist-Leninist politics, I began to have a passion for philosophy too, for at last I began to understand the great thesis of Marx, Lenin and Gramsci: that philosophy is fundamentally political.

Everything that I have written, at first alone, later in collaboration with younger comrades and friends, revolves, despite the 'abstraction' of our essays, around these very concrete questions.

2

Can you be more precise: why is it generally so difficult to be a Communist in philosophy?

To be a Communist in philosophy is to become a partisan and artisan of Marxist-Leninist philosophy: of dialectical materialism.

It is not easy to become a Marxist-Leninist philosopher. Like every 'intellectual', a philosophy teacher is a petty bourgeois. When he opens his mouth, it is petty-bourgeois ideology that speaks: its resources and

ruses are infinite.

You know what Lenin says about 'intellectuals'. Individually certain of them may (politically) be declared *revolutionaries*, and courageous ones. But as a mass, they remain 'incurably' *petty-bourgeois* in ideology. Gorky himself was, for Lenin, who admired his talents, a petty-bourgeois revolutionary. To become 'ideologists of the working class' (Lenin), 'organic intellectuals' of the proletariat (Gramsci), intellectuals have to carry out a radical revolution in their ideas: a long, painful and difficult re-education. An endless external and *internal* struggle.

Proletarians have a 'class instinct' which helps them on

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the way to proletarian 'class positions'. Intellectuals, on the contrary, have a petty-bourgeois class instinct which fiercely resists this transition.

A proletarian *class position* is more than a mere proletarian 'class instinct'. It is the consciousness and practice which conform with the *objective* reality of the proletarian class struggle. Class instinct is subjective and spontaneous. Class position is objective and rational. To arrive at proletarian class positions, the class instinct of proletarians only needs to be *educated*; the class instinct of the petty bourgeoisie, and hence of intellectuals, has, on the contrary, to be *revolutionized*. This education and this revolution are, in the last analysis, determined by proletarian class struggle conducted on the basis of the principles of Marxist-Leninist *theory*.

As the *Communist Manifesto* says, knowledge of this *theory* can help *certain* intellectuals to go over to working class positions.

Marxist-Leninist theory includes a *science* (historical materialism) and a *philosophy* (dialectical materialism).

Marxist-Leninist philosophy is therefore one of the two *theoretical* weapons indispensable to the class struggle of the proletariat. Communist militants must assimilate and use the principles of the theory: science and philosophy. The proletarian revolution needs militants who are both scientists (historical materialism) and philosophers (dialectical materialism) to assist in the defence and development of theory.

The formation of these philosophers runs up against two great difficulties.

A first -- *political* -- difficulty. A professional philosopher who joins the Party remains, ideologically, a petty bourgeois. He must revolutionize his thought in order to occupy a proletarian class position in philosophy.

This political difficulty is '*determinant* in the last instance'.

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A second -- *theoretical* -- difficulty. We know in what direction and with what principles we must work in order to define this class position in *philosophy*. But we must develop Marxist philosophy: it is theoretically and politically urgent to do so. Now, this work is vast and difficult. For in Marxist theory, philosophy has lagged behind the science of history.

Today, in our countries, this is the 'dominant' difficulty.

3

You therefore distinguish between a science and a philosophy in Marxist theory? As you know, this distinction is often contested today.

I know. But this 'contestation' is an old story.

To be extremely schematic, it may be said that, in the history of the Marxist movement, the suppression of this distinction has expressed either a rightist or a leftist deviation. The rightist deviation suppresses philosophy: only science is left (positivism). The leftist deviation suppresses science: only philosophy is left (subjectivism). There are 'exceptions' to this (cases of 'inversion'), but they 'confirm' the rule.

The great leaders of the Marxist Workers' Movement from Marx and Engels to today have always said: these deviations are the result of the influence and domination of bourgeois ideology over Marxism. For their part, they always defended the distinction (science, philosophy), not only for theoretical, but also for vital political reasons. Think of Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* or '*Left-Wing*' *Communism*. His reasons are blindingly obvious.

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4

How do you justify this distinction between science and philosophy in Marxist theory?

I shall answer you by formulating a number of provisional and schematic theses.

1. The fusion of Marxist theory and the Workers' Movement is the most important event in the whole history of the class struggle, i.e. in practically the whole of human *history* (first effects: the socialist revolutions).

2. Marxist theory (science and philosophy) represents an unprecedented revolution in the history of human knowledge.

3. Marx founded a new science: the science of history. Let me use an image. The sciences we are familiar with have been installed in a number of great 'continents'. Before Marx, two such continents had been opened up to scientific knowledge: the continent of Mathematics and the continent of Physics. The first by the Greeks (Thales), the second by Galileo. Marx opened up a third continent to scientific knowledge: the continent of History.

4. The opening up of this new continent has induced a revolution in philosophy. That is a law: philosophy is always linked to the sciences.

Philosophy was born (with Plato) at the opening up of the continent of Mathematics. It was transformed (with Descartes) by the opening up of the continent of Physics. Today it is being revolutionized by the opening up of the continent of History by Marx. This revolution is called dialectical materialism.

Transformations of philosophy are always rebounds from great scientific discoveries. Hence *in essentials*, they arise *after the event*. That is why philosophy has lagged behind

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science in Marxist theory. There are other reasons which we all know about. But at present this is the dominant one.

5. As a mass, only proletarian militants have recognized the revolutionary scope of Marx's scientific discovery. Their political practice has been transformed by it.

And here we come to the greatest *theoretical* scandal in contemporary history.

As a mass, the intellectuals, on the contrary, even those whose 'professional' concern it is (specialists in the human sciences, philosophers), have not really recognized, or have refused to recognize, the unprecedented scope of Marx's scientific discovery, which they have condemned and despised, and which they distort when they do discuss it.

With a few exceptions, they are still 'dabbling' in political economy, sociology, ethnology, 'anthropology', 'social psychology', etc., etc. . . ., even today, *one hundred years after Capital*, just as some *Aristotelian* physicists were still 'dabbling' in physics, *fifty years after Galileo*. Their 'theories' are ideological anachronisms, rejuvenated with a large dose of intellectual subtleties and ultra-modern mathematical techniques.

But this theoretical scandal is not a scandal at all. It is an effect of the ideological class struggle: for it is bourgeois ideology, bourgeois 'culture' which is in power, which exercises 'hegemony'. As a mass, the intellectuals, including many Communist and Marxist intellectuals, are, *with exceptions*, dominated in their theories by bourgeois ideology. *With exceptions*, the same thing happens in the 'human' sciences.

6. The same scandalous situation in philosophy. Who has understood the astounding philosophical revolution induced by Marx's discovery? Only proletarian militants and leaders. As a mass, on the contrary, professional philosophers have not even suspected it. When they mention Marx it is always, with extremely rare exceptions, to attack

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him, to condemn him, to 'absorb' him, to exploit him or to *revise* him.

Those, like Engels and Lenin, who have defended dialectical materialism, are treated as philosophically insignificant. The real scandal is that certain Marxist philosophers have succumbed to the same infection, in the name of 'anti-dogmatism'. But here, too, the reason is the same: the effect of the ideological class struggle. For it is bourgeois ideology, bourgeois 'culture', which is in power.

7. The crucial tasks of the Communist movement *in theory* :

-- to recognize and know the revolutionary theoretical scope of Marxist-Leninist science and philosophy;

-- to struggle against the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois world outlook which always threatens Marxist theory, and which deeply impregnates it today. The *general* form of this world outlook: *Economism* (today 'technocracy') and its 'spiritual complement' *Ethical Idealism* (today 'Humanism'). Economism and Ethical Idealism have constituted the basic opposition in the bourgeois world outlook since the origins of the bourgeoisie. The current *philosophical* form of this world outlook: *neo-positivism* and its 'spiritual complement', existentialist-phenomenological subjectivism. The variant *peculiar* to the Human Sciences: the *ideology* called 'structuralist';

-- to conquer for science the majority of the Human Sciences, above all, the Social Sciences, which, with exceptions, have occupied as

imposters the continent of History, the continent whose keys Marx has given us;

-- to develop the new science and philosophy with all the necessary rigour and daring, linking them to the requirements and inventions of the practice of revolutionary class struggle.

In *theory*, the decisive link at present: Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

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5

You have said two apparently contradictory or different things : 1. philosophy is basically political ; 2. philosophy is linked to the sciences. How do you conceive this double relationship?

Here again I shall give my answer in the form of schematic and provisional theses.

1. The class positions in confrontation in the class struggle are '*represented*' in the domain of practical ideologies (religious, ethical, legal, political, aesthetic ideologies) by *world outlooks* of antagonistic tendencies: in the last instance idealist (bourgeois) and materialist (proletarian). Everyone had a world outlook spontaneously.

2. World outlooks are *represented* in the domain of *theory* (science + the 'theoretical' ideologies which surround science and scientists) by *philosophy*. Philosophy represents the class struggle in theory. That is why philosophy is a struggle (*Kampf* said Kant), and basically a *political* struggle: a class struggle. Everyone is not a philosopher spontaneously, but everyone may become one.

3. Philosophy exists as soon as the theoretical *domain* exists: as soon as a *science* (in the strict sense) exists. Without sciences, no philosophy, only world outlooks. The *stake* in the battle and the *battle-field* must be distinguished. The ultimate stake of philosophical struggle is the struggle *for hegemony* between the two great tendencies in world outlook (materialist and idealist). The *main* battlefield in this struggle is scientific knowledge: for it or against it. The number-one philosophical battle therefore takes place on the frontier between the scientific and the ideological. There the idealist philosophies which exploit the sciences struggle against the materialist philosophies which serve the sciences. The philosophical struggle is a sector of the class struggle between world outlooks. In the past, materialism has always been *dominated* by idealism.

4. The science founded by Marx has changed the whole situation in the theoretical domain. It is a *new* science: the science of history. Therefore, for the first time ever, it has enabled us to know the world outlooks which philosophy represents in theory; it enables us to know philosophy. It provides the means to transform the world outlooks (revolutionary class struggle conducted according to the principles of Marxist theory). Philosophy is therefore doubly revolutionized. Mechanistic materialism, 'idealistic in history', becomes dialectical materialism. The balance of forces is reversed: now materialism can dominate idealism in philosophy, and, if the political conditions are realized, it can carry the class struggle for hegemony between world outlooks.

Marxist-Leninist philosophy, or dialectical materialism, represents the proletarian class struggle *in theory*. In the union of Marxist theory and the Workers' Movement (the *ultimate* reality of the union of theory and practice) philosophy ceases, as Marx said, to 'interpret the world'. It becomes a weapon with which 'to change it': *revolution*.

6

Are these the reasons which have made you say that it is essential to read Capital today?

Yes. It is essential to read and study *Capital*.

-- in order really to understand, in all its scope and all its scientific and philosophical consequences, what proletarian militants have long understood in practice: the revolutionary character of Marxist theory.

-- in order to defend that theory against all the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois interpretations, i.e. revisions, which seriously threaten it today: in the first place the opposition Economism/Humanism.

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-- in order to develop Marxist theory and produce the scientific concepts indispensable to the analysis of the class struggle today, in our countries and elsewhere.

It is essential to read and study *Capital*. I should add, it is necessary, essential to read and study Lenin, and all the great texts, old and new, to which has been consigned the experience of the class struggle of the international Workers' Movement. It is essential to study the practical works of the Revolutionary Workers' Movement in their reality, their problems and their contradictions: their past and, above all, their

present history.

In our countries there are immense resources for the revolutionary class struggle today. But they must be sought where they are: in the exploited masses. They will not be 'discovered' without close contact with the masses, and without the weapons of Marxist-Leninist theory. The bourgeois ideological notions of 'industrial society', 'neo-capitalism', 'new working class', 'affluent society', 'alienation' and *tutti quanti* are anti-scientific and anti-Marxist: built to fight revolutionaries.

I should therefore add one further remark: the most important of all.

In order really to understand what one 'reads' and studies in these theoretical, political and historical works, one must directly experience oneself the two *realities* which determine them through and through: 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. For if theory enables us to understand the laws of history, it is not intellectuals, nor even theoreticians, it is the *masses* who make history. It is essential to learn with theory -- but at the same time and crucially, it is essential to learn with the masses.

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7

You attach a great deal of importance to rigour, including a rigorous vocabulary. Why is that?

A single word sums up the master function of philosophical practice: '*to draw a dividing line*' between the true ideas and false ideas. Lenin's words.

But the same word sums up one of the essential operations in the direction of the practice of class struggle: '*to draw a dividing line*' between the antagonistic classes. Between our class friends and our class enemies.

It is the same word. A theoretical dividing line between true ideas and false ideas. A political dividing line between the people (the proletariat and its allies) and the people's enemies.

Philosophy represents the people's class struggle in theory. In return it helps the people to distinguish in *theory* and in all *ideas* (political, ethical, aesthetic, etc.) between true ideas and false ideas. In principle, true ideas always serve the people; false ideas always serve the enemies of the people.

Why does philosophy fight over words? The realities of the class struggle are 'represented' by 'ideas' which are 'represented' by words. In scientific and philosophical reasoning, the words (concepts, categories) are 'instruments' of knowledge. But in political, ideological and philosophical struggle, the words are also weapons, explosives or tranquillizers and poisons. Occasionally, the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word. Certain words struggle amongst themselves as enemies. Other words are the site of an ambiguity: the stake in a decisive but undecided battle.

For example : Communists struggle for the suppression

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of *classes* and for a communist society, where, one day, all men will be free and brothers. However, the whole classical Marxist tradition has refused to say that Marxism is a *Humanism*. Why? Because *practically*, i.e. in *the facts*, the word Humanism is exploited by an ideology which uses it to fight, i.e. to kill, another, true, word, and one vital to the proletariat: the *class struggle*.

For example : revolutionaries know that, *in the last instance*, everything depends not on techniques, weapons, etc., but on militants, on their class consciousness, their devotion and their courage. However, 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*.

At the same time, philosophy, even in the lengthy works where it is most abstract and difficult, fights over words: against lying words, against ambiguous words; for correct words. It fights over 'shades of opinion'.

Lenin said: 'Only short-sighted people can consider factional disputes and a strict differentiation between shades of opinion inopportune or superfluous. The fate of Russian Social-Democracy for very many years to come may depend on the strengthening of one or the other "shade".' (*What is to be Done?*).

The philosophical fight over words is a part of the political fight. Marxist-Leninist philosophy can only complete its abstract, rigorous and systematic theoretical work on condition that it fights both about very 'scholarly' words (concept, theory, dialectic, alienation, etc.) and about very simple words (man, masses, people, class struggle).

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