

Jan. 29, 1968

Alfonso Roberts:-

Please forgive me for not commenting on "Contradiction and Over-determination" by Louis Althusser which you were kind enough to photocopy for me last summer. At first the delay was due to the fact that I had no chance to read the essay as I was preoccupied with my new book-in-progress, Philosophy and Revolution. Then, when I finally did get to read it, I was so disappointed by the writings of a man who had so long been built up as an "original thinker, a new young French philosopher" that I could not get myself to write. Two very different types of events prompt this letter. One is the fact that Louis Althusser has since become a leader of pro-Maoist trend within the French CP, or at least has so scared the Central Committee with his influence over young students and the possibility that, whereas an outright Maoist "party" failed to get much of a following in France, a Maoist position that has a philosophic Althusserian turn may speak "sufficiently in French" as to win a following and split their intellectual periphery, that they have told him that, whereas he may continue his "specialty" (freedom in purely abstract discussions), he may not meddle in politics.

The second, and, to me, the more important reason for this note is your that is to say, your continuing many-sided study of Marxism that is very obviously not narrowly factional. Olga has told me about the latest material you ordered. (She has sent you my Notes for Lectures on Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks and the American Worker pamphlet and I herewith enclose my 1946-47 articles on the Nature of the Russian Economy, but I do not have Johnson's 1941 Resolution, nor for that matter, my own of the same year with the same title "Russia is a State-Capitalist Society". But since this is 1968, not 1941, I think it is important to move and I find out that you do not have my piece "Marx's Humanism, Today". I will send you a copy. It is important, both objectively and "subjectively" since it also answers the question of Humanism to which the translator and/or editor of Althusser's article makes some snide remarks. Who was the translator—CLR "ames"?)

Now then the Althusser essay, the very title of which I found intellectually abhorrent because it was vulgarly economist despite all its pretense to a non-economist approach, not to mention the fact that the word itself, overdetermination, has Freudian origins. Remember that Marx attacked not only economists and vulgar Communists but also "abstract materialists" (natural scientists in a word, all those who did not appreciate in full the meaning of History, as past, as present, as future; history, not as Althusser understands as "the run of History.. through the multiform world of the superstructure" (p. 32), but History in Marx's sense of people, workers shaping history, resolving contradictions in life and not only in thought, and thereby developing the multi-dimensional in Man. Althusser, in typically intellectualist fashion, is too preoccupied with "infrastructure-superstructure complex" (p. 31) to be able to listen, much less hear, the Subject, Man himself. What he, therefore, tells the reader to grapple with is dogmatism-anti-dogmatism, and that only as those above interpret it, and thus he never confronts the living strata below unless it is as something to draw out your pity. But Marx didn't speak only of "cold, hunger for his poor worker", as Althusser would have; the distinguishing, distinctive mark of Marxism as against all other, all other--socialists, communists, utopians, anarchists, syndicalists--was that the worker was a thinking human being, a creative moulder of history--"working, thinking, fighting, bleeding Paris--almost forgetful, in its incubation of a new society, of the cannibals at its gates--radiant in the enthusiasm of its historic initiative!"

So heavily does Althusser's anti-Hegelianism weigh him down, prey upon him, that it takes him 17 pages out of a 21 page article before he ever gets down to the subject-matter, much less the living subject, at issue. He then attributes to Engels (to Engels who said that there would have been no "scientific socialism" had there been no Hegelian philosophy!\*) a break not only with the "Hegelian principle of explanation by self-consciousness (ideology) but also with the Hegelian

14016

these of phenomenon-essence-truth-of. We are definitely concerned with a new relationship between new terms." (p.31) Outside of the fact that a new relationship is not something that merely relates "terms" as if we were engaged in a game of words, the elevation of an 1890 letter by Engels as "the new" for our age is nothing but a subterfuge for saying that nothing has really been left us by our founders, that "experiential protocol" (whatever the hell that means!) "largely remains to be elaborated" (p.39). "Who has attempted to follow up the explorations of Marx and Engels? I can only think of Gramsci." Relegated to a footnote at this point is a reference to Lukacs.

To be precise, it constitutes but one sentence of the footnote; it is worth, however, a whole chapter (if I had the time to spare) for it reveals the whole degradation of thought that Stalinism has brought into the movement. (O, naturally, it is only "philosophically" since now that Stalin is dead and the established state authority permits one to speak of his "crimes" no one except Mao is any longer a proclaimed Stalinist!) Here is that priceless sentence: "Lukacs' essays, which are limited to the history of literature and philosophy, seem to me to be contaminated with a guilty Hegelianism as if Lukacs wanted to absolve through Hegel his upbringing by Simmel and Dilthey."

Note, first, the little conjunction that joins very different, even opposed, fields: literature and philosophy"; these fields are opposed not just "in general" but very specifically in Lukacs since, in matters of literature, Lukacs was analyzing what others had done whereas in philosophy he is a true original. Long before anyone, including Lukacs, had known the full extent of Marx's Hegelian roots (even the Social Democracy had never bothered to publish those precious archives of Marx which they inherited), Lukacs had elaborated this relationship that, though it was written in 1923, remains unequalled to this day by any other Marxist, Gramsci included. Althusser, on the other hand, hasn't even the simple decency to refer you to that work so that the reader can check for himself. (The most famous chapter of Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein, "What is Orthodox Marxism?" has recently been translated into English: International Socialism, Spring and Summer 1966)

Stalinist

Secondly, and crucially, note the gratuitous/amalgam-building in the reference to Lukacs' alleged "upbringing by Simmel and Dilthey". Whatever these reactionary philosophers had to do with Lukacs's "upbringing", it is a fact that they nowhere figured in Lukacs' thinking and activity over nearly a half century, that is to say, from the moment he became a Marxist not a single grain of their philosophy is present in the matter at issue, the essays which constituted his original philosophic contribution, that were repudiated by him under Stalinist pressure when Lukacs capitulated to Stalinism, and which now are remembered, ~~not~~ not because of his philosophic "errors", but because he dared, for a few miraculous weeks of the Hungarian Revolution, to associate himself with it.

Above all, what is it that Althusser really means to say with his phrase "guilty Hegelianism"; he doesn't bother to explain here because he isn't so much interested in attacking "Hegel" or Lukacs as he is in attacking Marx's "Hegelianism". Oh, how Hegel haunts these apologists for the State. "I shall not evade the most burning issue", concludes Althusser, "it seems to me that either the whole logic of 'sublation' must be rejected, or we must give up any attempt to explain how the proud and generous Russian people bore Stalin's crimes and repression with such resignation; how the Bolshevik Party could tolerate them; and how a Communist leader could order them." (p.34) Poor Hegel, he now gets blamed for Stalin's crimes! The logic of sublation, that is to say, the dialectic of transcendence, is to lead us, not to freedom, but to whitewash of Russian state-capitalism; and, if it doesn't as it surely can't and won't, then, ~~we~~ we must "drive this phantom back into the night" (p.35) Fini. No doubt Mao will help Althusser do just that; but Marx won't.

Yours, *for*

14017