

The Conditions of Marx's Scientific Discovery:

On the New Definition of Philosophy

LOUIS ALTHUSSER

Introduction

This essay was first published by the English journal, Theoretical Practice, in January 1973. Louis Althusser is one of the leading Marxist philosophers in the world today. Born in Algeria in 1918 he teaches philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He has published several books including such important contributions to Marxism-Leninism as For Marx (1964), Reading Capital (1965), Lenin and Philosophy (1968) and Essays in Self-Criticism (1976). In this period when the development of Marxist-Leninist theory assumes such importance, the contribution of Althusser, as demonstrated in this essay, is extremely significant, in spite of the difficulties it presents.

* * * * *

1

If I were asked for a brief summary of the essential Thesis I have been trying to defend in my philosophical essays, I should say: Marx founded a new science: the science of History. I should add: this scientific discovery is a theoretical and political event without precedent in human history. And to be more precise: this event is irreversible.

A theoretical event. Before Marx, what can be called the "History continent" was occupied by ideological conceptions with a religious, or moral, or juridico-political inspiration, in brief by philosophies of history. They claimed to provide a representation of what takes place

in societies and in history. In fact all they did was to mask the mechanisms governing societies and history in distorted and deceptive notions. This mystification was no accident: it was integral to their function. These conceptions were indeed no more than the theoretical detachments of practical ideologies (religion, ethics, juridical ideology, political ideology, etc.) whose essential function is to reproduce the relations of production (= of exploitation) of class societies. It was by breaking with these ideological conceptions that Marx 'opened' the 'History-continent'. Opened: with the principles of historical materialism, with Capital and his other works. Opened: for, as Lenin said, Marx only laid down the "corner stones" of an immense domain which his successors have continued to explore, but whose vast extent and new problems demand unceasing efforts.

A political event. For Marx's scientific discovery was the beginning, and has become more and more the object and stake of a stubborn, implacable class struggle. By demonstrating that human history is the history of class societies, and hence of class exploitation and class rule, i. e., ultimately of class struggle, by demonstrating the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation and capitalist rule, Marx directly countered the interests of the ruling classes. Their ideologists were unleashed and are more and more unleashed against him. On the other side, the exploited, and above all the proletarians, have recognized in Marx's scientific theory 'their' truth: they have adopted it, and made it a weapon in their revolutionary class struggle. This recognition has a name in history: it is the Union (or else, as Lenin put it, the Fusion) of the workers' movement and Marxist theory. This confluence, the Union, this Fusion, has taken place neither spontaneously nor easily.

For the workers' movement, which existed well before the formation and spread of Marxist theory, was under the influence of petty-bourgeois ideological conceptions such as utopian socialism, anarchism, etc. Very lengthy work and a very long ideological and political struggle were necessary for this Fusion to form and acquire a histori-

cal existence. The very conditions of its realization and existence mean that this fusion cannot be a result achieved once and for all. Subject to the class struggle, it must be constantly defended in a bitter class struggle against the deviations and crises that threaten it: as testimony, take yesterday's betrayal by the Second International and today's split in the international communist movement.

One fact is indisputable: for one hundred years, the whole history of mankind has depended on the fusion of the workers' movement (and of the oppressed peoples) and Marxist theory (later, Marxist-Leninist theory). Stand back a little and you can see that, in different but convergent forms, this reality now dominates over the stage of world history: the struggle of the proletariat and of the oppressed peoples against imperialism. This fact is irreversible.

2

I could stop at these statements. However, if (whatever the places we occupy in this struggle) we wish to advance in the exploration of the 'History-continent', or (what, in one particular respect, is the same thing) to understand actively the contemporary forms of proletarian class struggle, we must go further. We have to ask ourselves the following question: on what conditions was Marx's scientific discovery possible?

To all appearance, this question is a detour. It is not a detour. To all appearances, it is a theoretical question. In fact, it has political implications clearly relevant to the current situation.

3

When, in my earlier essays, I showed that Marx's scientific discovery represented a 'break' or 'rupture' with previous ideological conceptions of history, what was I doing? What was I doing in speaking of a 'break' or 'rupture' between science and ideology? What was I doing in speaking of ideology?

I was drawing up a formal analysis, and I must now indicate its meaning and establish its limits.

Above all I was making an observation. I took note of a fact, of a theoretical event: the arrival of a scientific theory of History in a domain hitherto occupied by conceptions I described as ideological. Let me ignore for a moment this last description: ideological.

I showed that there was an irreducible difference between Marx's theory and these conceptions. To show this I compared their conceptual content and their modes of functioning.

Their conceptual content. I showed that Marx had replaced the old basic concepts (which I call notions) of the Philosophies of History with absolutely new, unprecedented concepts, concepts which were 'nowhere to be found' in the old conceptions. Where the Philosophies of History spoke of man, economic subject, need, systems of need, civil society, alienation, theft, injustice, mind, freedom- where they even spoke of 'society'- Marx began to speak of mode of production, productive forces, relations of production, social formation, infrastructure, superstructure, ideologies, classes, class struggle, etc. I concluded that there was not a relationship of continuity (even in the case of Classical Political Economy) between the system of Marxist concepts and the system of pre-Marxist notions. This absence of a relationship of continuity, this theoretical difference, this dialectical 'leap', I called an 'epistemological break', a 'rupture'.

Their modes of functioning. I showed that in practice Marxist theory functioned quite differently from the old pre-Marxist conceptions. It was clear to me that the basic system of concepts of Marxist theory functioned in the mode of the 'theory' of a science: as a 'basic' conceptual apparatus opening onto the 'infinity' of its object (Lenin), i.e., destined endlessly to pose and confront problems so as to produce new knowledges. Let us say: as a provisional truth for the(infinite) conquest of new knowledges, themselves capable (in certain conjunctures) of renewing this first truth.

By comparison, it was clear to me that the basic theory of the old conceptions, far from functioning as a (provisional) truth for the production of new knowledges, presented itself practically, on the contrary, as the Truth of History, as exhaustive, definitive and absolute knowledge of it, in short as a system closed in on itself, without any development because without any object in the scientific sense of the term, and only ever finding in the real its own mirror reflection. Here too I concluded that there was a radical difference between Marx's theory and previous conceptions, and I spoke of an 'epistemological break' and of a 'rupture'.

Finally, I described these earlier conceptions as ideological, and thought the 'epistemological break' or 'rupture' which I had observed as a theoretical discontinuity between Marxist science on the one hand and its ideological pre-history on the other. Let me specify: not between science in general and ideology in general, but between Marxist science and its own ideological pre-history. However, what enabled me to say that the pre-Marxist conceptions were ideological? Or, what comes to the same thing, what meaning did I give to the term ideology?

An ideological conception does not have the mark of the ideological stamped on its forehead, or in its heart, whatever meaning is given to the term ideological. On the contrary, it presents itself as the Truth. It can only be described as such from without and after the event: from the standpoint of the existence of the Marxist science of History. I say: not just from the standpoint of the existence of Marxist science as a science, but from the standpoint of Marxist science as a science of History.

Indeed, once it emerges in the history of theories and has established that it is a science, every science makes its own theoretical pre-history, from which it has broken, appear as erroneous, false, untrue. That is how it treats it practically: this treatment is a moment of its history. But there are always philosophers to draw different conclusions: to found on this recurrent (retrospective) practice

an idealist theory of the opposition between Truth and Error, between Knowledge and Ignorance, and even (assuming that they take the term ideology in a non-Marxist sense) between Science and Ideology, in general.

This effect of recurrence (retrospection) also occurs in the case of the Marxist science: when the science emerged, it necessarily made its own pre-history appear as erroneous, but at the same time and in addition it made it appear as ideological in the Marxist sense of the term. Better, it made its own pre-history appear as erroneous because ideological, and treated it practically as such. Not only does it designate the error, it provides the historical, class reasons for this error. In this way it prevents the exploitation of the 'break' between science and its pre-history as the idealist opposition between Truth and Error, Knowledge and Ignorance.

On what principle does this difference and unprecedented advantage rest? On the fact that the science founded by Marx is the science of the history of social formations. As such, it gives for the first time a scientific content to the concept of ideology. Ideologies are not illusions pure and simple (Error), but bodies of representations existing in institutions and practices: they feature in the superstructure and are based in the class struggle. If the science founded by Marx makes the theoretical conceptions inscribed in its own pre-history appear as ideological, it is therefore not just in order to denounce them as false: it is also in order to say that they present themselves as true and were and still are accepted as true and in order to provide the reasons for this necessity. If the theoretical conceptions with which Marx broke (to simplify, let me say: the philosophies of history) deserve the description ideological, it is because they were the theoretical detachments of practical ideologies fulfilling necessary functions in the reproduction of the relations of production in a given class society.

If this is so, the 'break' between Marxist science and its ideological pre-history refers us to something quite dif-

ferent from a theory of the difference between science and ideology, to something quite different from an epistemology. It refers us on the one hand to a theory of the superstructure, in which feature the State and Ideologies (I have attempted to say something about this in my article on Ideological State Apparatuses).² It refers us on the other hand to a theory of the material conditions (production), the social conditions (division of labor, class struggle), ideological conditions and philosophical conditions of the processes of the production of knowledges. These two theories derive in the last instance from historical materialism.

But if this is so then Marx's scientific theory itself has to be interrogated about the conditions of its own 'irruption' into the field of the ideological conceptions with which it broke.

4

The great Marxists (Marx above all, Engels, then Lenin) certainly felt that it was not sufficient to observe the emergence of a new science, but that it was necessary to provide an analysis, in conformity with the principles of the Marxist science, of the conditions of this emergence.

The first elements of an analysis are to be found in Engels and Lenin in the form of the 'Three Sources' of Marxism: German philosophy, English Political Economy and French Socialism.

Let us not be drawn into error by the old metaphor of 'sources' and its attendant idealist notions (origin, interiority of the current, etc.). What is particularly noteworthy in this 'classical' theory is first that it thinks Marx's discovery not in terms of the genius of an individual or author, but in terms of a conjunction of different and independent theoretical elements (Three sources).

Only after does it present the conjunction as having produced a fundamentally novel effect with respect to the elements that went into the conjunction: an example of a 'qualitative leap', an essential category of the materialist dialectic.

20.

However, Engels and Lenin do not stop there. They do not defend a purely internal, purely 'epistemological' conception of the emergence of the Marxist science. They recall that these three theoretical elements refer to a practical background: to a material, social and political history, dominated by decisive transformations in productive forces and relations of production, by centuries of class struggle between the rising bourgeoisie and the feudal aristocracy, dominated lastly by the first great actions of proletarian class struggle. In a word they recall that it is practical (economic, political, and ideological) realities that are represented theoretically, in more or less abstract forms, in German philosophy, English Political Economy and French Socialism.

They are represented in them, but at the same time they are distorted, mystified and masked in them, since these theoretical elements are profoundly ideological in nature. This is where the decisive question arises.

It is indeed insufficient to observe that the conjunction of these three theoretical elements produced the emergence of the Marxist science. It also has to be asked how this ideological conjunction was able to produce a scientific disjunction, this confluence a 'rupture'. In other words, it has to be asked how and why, in the event of this conjunction, Marxist thought was able to leave ideology: or else, what is the displacement that produced this amazing transformation, what is the change in standpoint that brought to light what had been masked, overturned the meaning of what had been achieved, and discovered in the facts an unknown necessity.

I should like to propose the first elements of an answer to this question by putting forward the following thesis: it was by moving over (se déplaçant) on to absolutely unprecedented, proletarian theoretical class positions that Marx activated the effectivity of the theoretical conjunction from which emerged the science of history.

5

This can be shown by running roughly through the 'moments'

21.

of the 'development' of the thought of the Young Marx. Four years separate the liberal-radical articles of the Rheinische Zeitung from the revolutionary rupture of 1845, registered in the Theses on Feurbach and the German Ideology by the famous formulae proclaiming the 'settling of accounts' with 'our erstwhile philosophical conscience' and the arrival of a new philosophy that would stop 'interpreting the world' in order to 'change it.' During these four years we see a scion of the Rhenish bourgeoisie move from bourgeois-radical political and philosophical positions to petty-bourgeois-humanist positions, and then to communist-materialist positions (an unprecedented revolutionary materialism).

Let me specify the aspects of this development.

We find the Young Marx conjointly changing the object of his reflection (broadly he moves from Law to the State and then to Political Economy); changing his philosophical position (he moves from Hegel to Feurbach and then to revolutionary materialism); and changing his political position (he moves from radical bourgeois liberalism to petty-bourgeois humanism and then to communism). Even in their dislocations, these changes are profoundly linked together. However, they must not be fused into a single structureless unity, for they intervene at different levels and each of them has a distinct part to play in the process of transformation of the Young Marx's thought.

It can be said that in this process, in which the object occupies the forestage, it is the political(class) position that occupies the determinant place, but the philosophical position that occupies the central place, for it is the last that ensures the theoretical relationship between the political position and the object of reflection. This can be verified empirically in the history of the Young Marx. It was indeed politics that made him move from one object to the other (schematically: from Press Laws to the State and then to Political Economy), but each time this move was realized and expressed in the form of a new philosophical position. From one point of view the philosoph-

ical position seems to be the theoretical expression of the political (and ideological) class position. From another this translation of the political position into theory (in the form of a philosophical position) seems to be the condition of the theoretical relation to the object of reflection.

If this is so, and if philosophy does indeed represent politics in theory, it can be said that the Young Marx's philosophical position represents, in its variations, the theoretical class conditions of his reflection. If this is so, it will come as no surprise that the rupture of 1845, which inaugurated the foundation of a new science, was first expressed in the form of a philosophical rupture, of a 'settling of accounts' with the erstwhile philosophical conscience, and beneath the proclamation of a philosophical position without precedent.

This astonishing dialectic can be seen at work in the 1844 Manuscripts. A close examination of them reveals the extent of the theoretical drama Marx must have lived through in this text (he never published it or even spoke of it again). The crisis of the Manuscripts is summed up in the insupportable contradiction between the political position and philosophical position confronting one another in a reflection on the object: Political Economy. Politically, Marx wrote the Manuscripts as a communist, making the impossible theoretical gamble of using in the service of his convictions the notions, analyses and contradictions of the economists, putting in the forefront what he was unable to think as capitalist exploitation: what he called 'alienated labor'.

Theoretically he wrote them on petty-bourgeois philosophical positions, making the impossible gamble of introducing Hegel into Feurbach so as to be able to speak of labor in alienation and History in Man. The Manuscripts are the moving but implacable protocols of an insupportable crisis: the crisis that confronts an object enclosed in its ideological bounds with incompatible political and class positions.

The crisis came to a head in the Theses on Feuerbach and in The German Ideology: at any rate, these works announced that it had come to a head, they contain the 'germ' of a 'new world outlook' (Engels). What changed in the sparks of the Theses was not Marx's political position, but his philosophical position. Marx abandoned Feurbach once and for all, he broke with the whole philosophical tradition of 'interpreting the world' and advanced into the unknown lands of a revolutionary materialism. This new position then expressed in philosophy Marx's political position. I should say: Marx had made a first step, but a decisive, irreducible step, towards proletarian class theoretical (philosophical) positions.

Here again it is politics that was the determinant element: the deeper and deeper committment to participation in the political struggles of the proletariat. Here too, from the theoretical standpoint, it is philosophy that had central place. For it was on the basis of this theoretical class position that Marx's reflection on his object, Political Economy, was to take a radically new direction: to break with all the ideological conceptions in order to develop the principles of the science of History.

That is how I should take the liberty to interpret the theory of the 'Three Sources'. The conjunction of the three theoretical elements (German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism) could only have its effect (Marx's scientific discovery) by a displacement that led the Young Marx not only onto proletarian political class positions, but also onto proletarian theoretical class positions. Without the politics nothing would have happened: but without the philosophy, the politics would not have found theoretical expression, indispensable to the scientific knowledge of its object.

I shall just add a few words more.

First to point out that the new philosophical position announced in the Theses were only announced in them; that it was thus not given at one stroke or complete; that it

has been ceaselessly elaborated tacitly or explicitly in the later theoretical and political works of Marx and his successors, and more generally in the history of the Fusion of the Workers' Movement and Marxist theory; that this elaboration is the dual effect on it of Marxist-Leninist science and Marxist-Leninist political practice.

Second, to point out that it is not surprising that the adoption of a proletarian philosophical position (even in 'germ') is indispensable to the foundation of the science of History, i.e., to the analysis of the mechanisms of class exploitation and class rule. In every class society these mechanisms are covered up-masked-mystified by an enormous layer of ideological representations; the philosophies of history, etc., are their theoretical form. For these mechanisms to become visible, it is necessary to leave these ideologies, i.e., 'to settle accounts' with the philosophical conscience that is the basic theoretical expression of these ideologies. Hence it is necessary to abandon the theoretical position of the ruling classes and to take up the standpoint from which these mechanisms can become visible, i.e., the standpoint of the proletariat. It is not enough to adopt a proletarian political position. This political position must be elaborated into a theoretical (philosophical) position for what is visible from the standpoint of the proletariat to be conceived and thought in its causes and mechanisms. Without this displacement, the Science of History is unthinkable and impossible.

6

Lastly to return to my starting-point, let me add that this detour via the conditions of the emergence of the science of history is not a scholarly detour. On the contrary: it recalls us the the current situation. For what was demanded of the Young Marx is still demanded of us, and more than ever. More than ever, in order to 'develop' Marxist thoery, i.e., in order to analyse the new forms of capitalist-imperialist exploitation and rule, more than ever in order to ensure a correct Fusion between the workers' movement and Marxist-Leninist theory, we must take up proletarian theoretical (philosophical) positions; take

them up, i.e., elaborate them on the basis of proletarian political positions, by a radical critique of all the ideologies of the ruling class. Without revolutionary theory, said Lenin, no revolutionary movement. I can write: without proletarian theoretical (philosophical) positions, no 'development' of Marxist theory, and no correct Fusion of the Workers' Movement and Marxist theory.

July 1970.

Notes

- 1 This text was not published in French. Althusser wrote it as part of the rectification of his earlier positions on Marxist philosophy. It was published in English to help clarify his remarks in the essay, 'Reply to John Lewis (Self-Criticism)', now available in the volume Essays in Self-Criticism (NLB, 1976). Copyright Louis Althusser 1970, translation copyright Theoretical Practice, 1973.
- 2 Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays (NLB, 1971), pp. 121-73, (Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127-86.