



Chris Harman

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This article appeared in *International Socialism* journal issue 21 in 1983, following an exchange of articles between Peter Binns and Alex Callinicos in the journal – *IS 2:17* and *IS 2:19* respectively – and a debate between Alex and me at the Marxist festival in London that year. Alex has since shifted some of his positions, but the revival of Marxism in recent years has led to others putting forward some of the Althusserian positions I criticised.

Many readers of this journal have expressed bewilderment at the arguments over philosophy between Peter Binns and Alex Callinicos. They have seen it as a matter of one obscure reference thrown out in opposition to another obscure reference, of a bartering of strange

academic names of no relevance to the very real problems revolutionary Marxists face in arguing our politics within the working class.

Yet the issues are important. If Alex is right, then many of the arguments we use every week in **Socialist Worker** (and which Alex himself uses in **The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx**) are faulty. If Peter is more than about 10 per cent wrong we are guilty of using simple minded formulae in our propaganda which might win a few new adherents to our party, but which shouldn't convince any one who goes into the question seriously.

To understand why this is – and why Peter had to use such a strong polemical tone in his original article – it is necessary to go back more than twenty years.

Two conservative orthodoxies

Revolutionary Marxists were then very few in number. The validity and the relevance of our ideas was denied by two great orthodoxies which had a stranglehold on discussion at every level – in the universities, in the media, in the working class movement. On the one hand, there were apologies for Western imperialism, on the other, apologies for Stalinist rule.

There were bitter struggles between the two orthodoxies. The adherents of one would often have no compunction about driving the adherents of the other from their jobs and even imprisoning them – in order to keep them quiet. Yet there was, despite that, an agreement between them on one thing. Both ideological systems denied any possibility of the mass of human beings whose labour kept their respective societies going from

taking control of those societies. They ruled out of court the possibility of the working class emancipating itself. Both rested upon the worship of accomplished facts.

In the West the ideological climate was very much expressed in two books by Sir Karl Popper – **The Open Society and Its Enemies**, and **The Poverty of Historicism**. These argued that everything that had happened in the 20th century was a result of misguided fanatics not understanding that you could not carry through wholesale change in society. It was, it was said, only possible to arrive at limited, partial and very provisional knowledge of society and its workings. Anyone who claimed otherwise was deluding themselves and others.

Such assumptions pervaded every area of intellectual debate. In philosophy, for example, the predominant school taught that the great issues that had dominated philosophical debate in past centuries were simply a result of not looking closely enough at the actual ways people used language in existing society. In sociology, the aim was to produce generalisations about the way people live in society as it is and the only argument was about how great were the generalisations you could make. In economics, similarly, what was studied was the principles which were said to underlie the making of business decisions today – without ever questioning whether the economy could be run in any other way. In political thought, the assumption was that an elite had to run society. The only argument was between conservative minded political theories, like Oakeshott, who argued the elite had to act on the basis of traditional ruling class intuition and Fabian theorists who argued, by contrast, that the methods of the physical sciences could be used to obtain the limited, partial knowledge needed to engage in ‘piecemeal social engineering’.

The ideology of the East was ostensibly opposed to all this. It argued for what it called ‘revolution’. Yet the structure of the ideology was very similar to the structure of the Western ideology. For it was a notion of revolution in which the party had

replaced the class, with the party in turn receiving its orders from a narrow elite. Revolution became a question of this elite replacing the existing ruling class.

The task of the elite was to impose on the rest of society certain general 'laws of development' whose character could be deduced from existing 'socialist' societies – the 'law' that the state must be strengthened and repression increased, the 'law' that the means of production must expand as fast as possible even if this meant cutting back on the consumption of the masses, the 'law' that gross inequality was necessary.

Human beings were no more in control of their own destinies under socialism than under capitalism. As one Russian philosopher Louchuk put it in 1955:

Under socialism ... the laws of social development are objective ones, operating independently from the consciousness and will of human beings, but under socialism the party, the state and society as a whole have the opportunity of comprehending those laws, consciously applying them in their activities and, by this very token, accelerating the course of societal development.

Preparation for the revolution consisted in obedience to the instructions of the rulers of those countries where 'socialism' already existed – even if those instructions meant making alliances with existing ruling classes and sabotaging revolutionary movements. For a real, 'scientific' understanding of the world was only available for the elite of elites, those who ruled in Moscow (and, on a lesser scale, to those who ruled in Peking). To challenge their calls for dirty compromises with one's own ruling class or to question the 'laws of development' prevailing under 'socialism' was to fall prey to 'leftism', 'idealism', 'voluntarism' or even worse. Accordingly, Stalinist philosophers were at pains to emphasise the gap between

this notion of the 'dialectic' as a set of laws of natural development accessible only to the elite from earlier 'Hegelian-Marxist' notions which stressed the explosive, contradictory nature of human development, with human beings continually rebelling against and 'superseding' the conditions under which they had been brought up.

So what dominated, East and West, were conservative conceptions of society. These stressed how limited were the changes which could be made to the existing order. Control had to be in the hands of small, restricted groups alone capable of access to the knowledge necessary to oversee such changes.

The domination of these two symmetrical ideological systems was a product of the defeat that the great wave of world revolution of 1917-23 had suffered. It could not be challenged by more than a few isolated revolutionaries until a new, spontaneous upsurge of workers struggle proved the existence of a force that could break 'accomplished facts' apart.

The challenge of '56

The first such stirrings took place in Eastern Europe in 1953 and 1956. Such practical challenges to the ruling orthodoxy found an echo among groupings of intellectuals in both East and West. They groped around for some theoretical standpoint which would enable them to come to terms with what had happened. The result was the birth of what was known at the time as 'the new left'.

This attempted to develop a version of Marxism in which there was room for the ideas of self-emancipation and freedom. Usually it did so by turning against the Stalinised version of Marxism that had prevailed so far, the clearly emancipatory,

revolutionary notions to be found in the earlier writings of Karl Marx – writings which had only recently been published at that time. ‘Marxist humanism’ was the result.

‘Marxist humanism’ was not a finished world view, but an intellectual staging post. For the new left of 1956 was not a coherent grouping, but a temporary gathering together of activists who had broken with Stalinism in disgust and were moving in all sorts of different directions. But it was an important staging post, for the best of the ex-Stalinists and for a new generation of socialists – usually active in CND in Britain and in the struggle against the Algerian war in France. They argued, against both the Stalinists and those ex-Stalinists who were drifting to the right out of disillusionment, that the emancipatory message of the young Marx was still present in the political and economic writings of the older Marx. Stalinism, by denying this, had turned Marxism into a caricature of itself, a dehumanised ‘science’ symmetrical with the dehumanised ‘social sciences’ of the West.

The ideological orthodoxies were not slow in trying to recover from the challenge they had encountered in 1956. As the memory of that year of revolution faded, a politically incoherent new left fell apart. By the early 1960s both Stalinism and social democracy were re-consolidating their positions, both in practice and in theory. Stalinism in particular showed its continued power by rebuilding the CPs in the West, until they had almost made up for the losses of 1956, and by re-establishing the myth of a ‘world communist movement’, able to hold a united conference of the world’s CPs as late as 1960.

But not everything was lost from the ferment of 1956. A small number of activists remained from it who had made contact with even smaller numbers of older revolutionary socialists. These survivors were usually on the margins of the working class movement, and could only maintain themselves through a very hard battle of ideas with the prevailing orthodoxies. Holding their own in these arguments meant not merely going forward,

but also reaching back to the years before Stalinism, to the great wave of world revolution of 1917-23. This meant resurrecting the ideas of Trotsky, of Rosa Luxemburg (witness Tony Cliff's little book on her, first produced in 1959), and those parts of Lenin the Stalinists never referred to.

But something else was required by those revolutionaries who had to confront the symmetrical methodologies of the orthodox ideologies. This was a challenge to their basic philosophical suppositions.

It was here that George Lukacs' **History and Class Consciousness** was so crucial. This work, published in 1923 (and virtually unobtainable throughout the Stalin period) was an exposition of the possibility of working class self emancipation – and so was in diametrical opposition both to the established orthodoxies of the early 1960s and to the vague, classless talk of simply human emancipation some of the 'Marxists humanists' had read into the ideas of the young Marx (e.g. Eric Fromm).

It was not (and is not) an easy book to read. It argued the possibility of working class self emancipation in terms of the German philosophical tradition from which its author had come. It was simplistic in the sense that it saw self emancipation as about to dawn, reflecting the spirit of the time in which it was written (its first chapter was a speech made by Lukacs as a leader of the Hungarian soviet government of 1919) – the spirit of the first two congresses of the Communist International with their calls for immediate world revolution, rather than of the third and fourth with their discussions on strategy and tactics. It tended to ignore the hard material realities in which workers live and out of which their emancipatory activity grows. In short, it neglected the concrete ideological and material struggles that lead to class consciousness. [2]

Yet despite all these faults, **History and Class Consciousness** had (and still has) one all important message: workers were not merely the objects of history, but could be its

subjects – they could come to understand and transform the world in a way no other class and no elite cut off from the proletariat could. The book was a philosophical clarion call, echoing over the years since the early Communist International to a new generation of revolutionaries trying to find their way to a Marxism free from Stalinist distortion.

The call was not always clearly heard. Some people confused it with the existentialism of Sartre and the phenomenology of Merleau Ponty, transmuting it into an academicism; others produced some useful work based on its ideas, but then slid back either towards liberal reformism (Alasdair McIntyre [3], for instance) or into a sectarian wilderness (Cliff Slaughter [4]). But for some of that generation, at least, it opened up the path towards authentic revolutionary theory and practice – which explains the attempts of the old **International Socialism** journal to publish parts of **History and Class Consciousness** back in 1966. (We were thwarted by the threat of a legal action for breach of copyright after printing a translation of the essay *What is Orthodox Marxism?*)

Althusser's 'Marxism'

This was the situation when Louis Althusser appeared on the scene. In **Pour Marx (For Marx**, a collection of essays that were first published in France in the early 1960s) and **Lire le Capital (Reading Capital**, published 1965) he set out to demolish the central tenets of the sort of Marxism we had been reconstructing. These works insisted:

1. Marxism was not a 'humanism' in the sense of a theory about how human beings can take

control of their own lives.

2. Marxism was not a theory developed by the workers movement as it became conscious of the society in which it struggled, but was a 'science' developed in the same way as Althusser saw the physical sciences developing – by a specialist group of scientists guided only by a concern for knowledge. It was impossible, he argued, for the mass of people living under capitalism to see through the appearance of things and grasp the essential structures of the system; such understanding was only open to an elite of 'theorists' who used 'science' to abstract from appearances.

All that is available to the masses is 'ideology' – a pre-scientific set of notions and beliefs – even when they are engaged in struggles which shake society to its foundations. Only the elite can go beyond 'ideology' to science. This elite will recognise that 'ideologies' are necessary to the masses, but will themselves see through such primitive notions.

3. The truth of the 'science' which this elite arrives at is not determined by its relation to the practice of the masses, but depends purely upon the degree to which it agrees with criteria for truth arrived at by science itself. The truth of any particular theory depends, said Althusser, upon its relationship to Theory (with a capital T).

4. The unity of theory and practice only makes sense for Althusser when you see the development of theory itself as a particular form of practice ('theoretical practice'), with its own means and methods of production.
5. Marx's words about turning Hegel 'on his head' are misleading. The Marxist dialectic is quite different to the Hegelian dialectic. The key to understanding society does not lie in seeing it as a 'totality', bound together by a single unitary force, but rather in seeing it as the articulation of different structures – the economic, ideological, political, etc. – all developing at different speeds and usually entering into crises at different points. 'Revolutionary crises' are not the expression of some single, fundamental contradiction in society, but of a particular 'conjuncture' when the crisis in one structure is 'overdetermined' by the simultaneous occurrence of crises in other structures.'Historical materialism' is the specialist study of the way in which different structures combine in any particular 'social formation' at any point in time. 'Dialectical materialism' is simply the name given to the scientific method which underlies other studies as disparate as physics or psychoanalysis. Once this is grasped, you have to throw all the dialectical terminology of Hegel – 'the unity of opposites', 'the transformation of quantity into quality', 'the negation of the negation', 'freedom and

necessity' – out the window. Stalin's 'expulsion of the "negation of the negation" from the domain of the Marxist dialectic', for example, 'might be evidence of the theoretical perspicacity of its author'. [5] Much more useful for historical materialism than Hegelian phrases is Mao Tse Tung's distinction between 'principal' and 'secondary' contradictions, each with its 'principal' and 'secondary' aspect.

6. Many people have not grasped these points, according to Althusser, because they had failed to see that there was a clear breaking point ('coupure') in the development of Marx's ideas. In his youth, influenced by Hegel and Feurbach, Marx spoke of 'human alienation', of history as the domination of human beings by the products of their own activity. But as he matured, argued Althusser, he came to see this was all nonsense. History was not the expression of an 'alienated human subject', but was a 'process without subject', operating in accordance with by laws akin to those of the physical sciences. In any society, including socialism, the mass of people would be the blind objects of such laws, blinkered by their pre-scientific ideologies from grasping what is really happening.

The extent to which Marx changed his ideas, Althusser insisted, was often missed, because in his later writings he often used phrases left over from his earlier standpoint.

But a ‘symptomatic reading’ of his text brought the crucial changes to light.

Our reaction to Althusser

It was hardly surprising that revolutionary Marxists reacted to the Althusserian arguments with outright hostility. If they were accepted, that meant the end of any notion of ‘socialism from below’. Althusser might be rejecting the flabbiness of much ‘Marxist humanism’. But the rejection was from the right – from the direction of the dominant prevailing orthodoxies – not from the left. It had as much in common with the revolutionary critique of the new left as today Tony Cliff’s theory of the downturn has in common with Eric Hobsbawm’s ‘forward march of Labour halted’.

This is not understood by people like Alex Callinicos today because they misconstrue the situation when Althusser came to prominence in the early and mid 1960s.

Stalinism was beginning to recover from the turmoil of 1956 when, in 1962, Khrushchev launched a second attack on the Stalin cult at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU. This attack was not endorsed by the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. They continued to praise Stalin, while launching attacks on ‘Russian revisionism’, disguised as attacks on the Yugoslav and Italian CPs. The Chinese not only argued against Khrushchev’s calls for détente (‘peaceful coexistence’), but suggested that nuclear war would not be a great disaster, since socialism could survive it! [6]

Throughout the world’s Communist Parties people who resented the demolition of the Stalin cult began to look

favourably on the Chinese polemics, even when, as with the French CP leaders, they would not consider questioning Russia's leadership of the world Communist movement. At the same time, leaders of other CPs (especially the Italian) used the new rows as an excuse for asserting their independence from Moscow – and justified this by relaxing the old ideological orthodoxy, allowing discussion of some of the 'Marxist humanist' ideas of 1956, of some of the old Bolsheviks like Bukharin, and even, in the case of the Italian YCL, of Trotsky.

Those who followed the Italians were going along the path that eventually led to Eurocommunism – a nationally based reformism which had cut its ties with Moscow. By contrast, those who looked towards the Chinese seemed to be harder – but it was a harder Stalinism they preached. It reasserted with enthusiasm the traditional Stalinist themes of: (a) the denial of the self emancipation of the working class; the salvation of humanity still lay in the dictatorship of a single Stalinist Party, ruled with an iron rod by an enlightened elite, (b) a preparedness to engage in class collaboration if the party leadership decided it was necessary; this was justified by continued reference to the writings of world communism during the Stalin period (e.g. Dimitrov on the Popular Front) and to Mao's *On Contradiction* (written to justify the Popular Front with the Kuomintang against Japan in 1937).

Althusser's first essays in **Pour Marx** were part of this general 'pro-Chinese' attempt to strengthen the old orthodoxy against any watering down in the Italian direction. At the same time, they were a conscious reaction to the 'danger' that the arguments inside world communism would open up the door to the 'heresies' that had begun to appear in 1956. So some of their most bitter words were preserved for the 'theoretical leftism' of those philosophers (Lukacs, Korsch, Gramsci) who had turned to the authentic revolutionary communism of the early Comintern.

Alex Callinicos wants to 'leave aside the fairly complex question of Althusser's own relation to Stalinism'. But there was

a clear correlation between the philosophic contentions of **Pour Marx** and **Lire le Capital** and the attempts to revive Stalinism in the early 1960s.

Rejection of ‘humanism’ was grist to the mill of those who were prepared to consider nuclear war as a valid tactic in ‘the international class struggle’. The denial that the working class was able to come to any scientific ‘non-ideological’ understanding fitted in exactly with the conception of a dictatorial, Stalinist Party ordering the class about. The notion that revolution was just a question of moving from one structure of which people were simply the ‘bearers’ to another such structure, meant ‘revolution’ became just a shift from monopoly state capitalism to bureaucratic state capitalism.

The specific appeal of Althusser’s ideas, it is true, was not to the Stalinist apparatchiks (who probably never read him). The appeal was to the intellectual fellow travellers of socialism from above. [7]

Althusserianism enabled them to continue to accept the common sense view that Russia, Eastern Europe and China were ‘socialist’ – despite the clear absence of any element of workers’ power. For Althusser proved that the notion of real workers’ power was a ‘leftist philosophical’ error.

What is more, it permitted them to identify with Marxism without having to make the sacrifices the movement had once demanded of its intellectual supporters – that they engage in the practice of the workers’ movement. For now ‘theoretical practice’ was an activity in its own right, which could only be contaminated to its detriment by the ‘ideology’ which necessarily befogged the minds of workers.

What was more, it was an activity which did not demand any separation or rejection of the rest of the academic milieu. Since the methodology of Marxism was not now different to that of psychoanalysis, of certain schools of social anthropology, of structural linguistics, or even of American sociology, there was

no need to put one's academic career at risk by a fight against these approaches.

This appeal of Althusserianism to a specific section of the intellectual petty bourgeoisie enabled it to survive the demise of the early 1960s neo-Stalinist revival from which it sprang. The cultural revolution could shake (for a period) the Maoist version of Stalinist authoritarianism; the Czech events could lead the French CP briefly into the Eurocommunist camp; the French May of 1968 could give new life to authentic revolutionary Marxism; but making a successful academic career through 'theoretical practice' divorced from the class struggle would continue to appeal to the fellow travellers of one or other variety of socialism from above.

Genuine Marxists had to fight this theoretical fashion. We had to insist on the unity of theory and practice, on the possibility of the working class moving from false consciousness to self consciousness, on the contribution of workers' struggles to the development of a scientific understanding of the world, on socialism as the self emancipation of the working class. We also had to insist that by emancipating itself the working class provides the only guarantee for the future of humanity. In short, we had to refute each and every one of the points made by Althusser.

This was not a question of some refusal to 'develop theory' or to listen to critical ideas, as Alex seems to think. It was a question of fighting against a theoretical counter-revolution. The fact that the 'Marxist humanist' revolution against Stalinist theory in 1956 had not been complete, did not make the counter-revolution any less dangerous.

What did we argue concretely?

The revolutionary critique of Althusser

(1) Marxism is a humanism in a certain sense. It is an account of how, in its efforts to maintain itself against the rigours of nature a certain animal – *homo sapiens* – cooperates with others of its kind, creating societies which then come to dominate the lives of the species. In this way there arise different forms of economic and social organisations – and beyond a certain point in history – classes and states.

Althusser's denial of humanism rests upon his assertion that there is no single 'human nature' that can be the 'subject' of history. But such a subject exists at the beginning of history in the form of the biological species which has a unique way of interacting with the rest of nature. It is the way in which this subject labours on nature that determines the way in which a huge variety of different societies develop, in each of which a different 'human nature' emerges.

Out of a single, unitary process (humanity labouring) arise the most complex and elaborate of civilisations. The complex structures Althusser talks of are only explicable terms of their development out of this primordial interaction. This is what Marx means when he talks of the base and the superstructure – changes in the interaction of human beings with natures put a strain upon existing relations between human beings ('the relations of production') which result in new relations, new classes, new ideologies, etc.

For a long period of history the 'unitary' subject disappears. This might be called the phase of 'uneven development' – of different societies, following different paths, interacting with each other to a greater or lesser degree, but capable of independent development.

But this phase cannot outlast the rise of commodity production and then capitalism. For now the massive growth of the forces of production in some societies enables them to

undermine all the others. Uneven development becomes *combined and uneven development* [8] (a notion rejected by the Stalinist tradition and by Althusser, who only sees uneven development). Capitalism inexorably moves towards being a world system.

In the process, the unitary subject is recreated. For at the base of the system is a class defined not by its particular attributes (physical qualities, culture, skills, particular forms of labour) but by its *abstract, biologically human* ability to act upon its environment, i.e. by its ability to work, by its possession of labour power.

It is the activity of these workers that creates the whole edifice of the system about them. What dominates their lives is no longer some inevitable product of the attempt of human beings to come to terms with a hostile environment, but the products of a labour which has increasingly conquered that environment.

Yet the workers who have created this huge edifice are often not even able to satisfy the simple biological needs that motivated the struggle with nature in the first place, let alone the new needs that have arisen as society has developed. The working class is dominated by the products of its own activity. But not only the working class. For the onward course of capitalist society threatens the future of all humanity. The capitalists are 'happy in their alienation', as the young Marx put it, and will fight to preserve the existing society – but humanity as a whole will benefit if they lose.

To say Marxism is a humanism, is not to deny the class struggle (as both Althusser and the soggy socialist humanists claim). It is to emphasise the key role of the working class in emancipating all of humanity when it emancipates itself.

(2) Marxism as an understanding of society can only develop in close contact with the struggles of the working class.

Members of other classes in capitalist society can only see the structure of that society from the outside. They can only see the products of human labour as things; they cannot grasp the character of the activity that produces them, nor the historical development that brings it into being; the most they can do is see partial aspects of society, not its total development.

Or, to be more exact, they are inevitably blind to this once the capitalist class has completed its own struggle for ascendancy over society. In an earlier period the fight of the industrial bourgeoisie for supremacy meant it was engaged in an activity concerned with changing the existing structures of society, and developed the beginnings of an insight into society based upon this practice. So thinkers like Smith and Ricardo were forced to go beyond the acceptance of surface phenomena (what Marx called an 'exoteric' examination of things) to try to understand the processes of human activity underlying them (what he called 'esoteric' or scientific political economy). But once the practice of the bourgeoisie consists simply in keeping the routines of existing society going, it has no need for such scientific knowledge and, indeed, cannot even grasp what such knowledge is about, since its concepts are removed from reality as the bourgeoisie encounters it.

Workers too accept the bourgeois definitions of reality for much of the time. But struggle begins to lift the veil from their eyes. When they begin to struggle, for example, over the length of the working day, they begin to see that it is their exertions that have produced the wealth of existing society. They begin to understand the nature of exploitation and to grasp the underlying character of capitalism.

This movement towards a consciousness of their own position, and therefore of the nature of capitalist society as a whole, is not automatic. The new ideas have to battle with old notions that still befog the minds of workers. And this battle takes the form of a polarisation within the class between those who begin to see things more clearly and those who see them less so. Full clarity is

only possible when intellectuals arise (either from within the working class itself or from groups in other classes who are attracted to the struggles of workers, as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg etc. were) who both ‘distil out’ the elements of truth the workers have arrived at in struggle from the remnants of the old notions, and then integrate into them the true but partial insights arrived at by sections of the bourgeoisie.

The process of abstraction which enables Marxism to cut through the appearance of things to the real forces underneath can only begin because the practical struggles of workers lead them to begin to see through appearances; but the process cannot be completed until the working class develops revolutionary intellectuals and a revolutionary theory of its own; the revolutionary party is the key to binding theory and practice together in this way.

Once you grasp this, you can see how the working class can free itself from the ruling class through struggle – something which is incomprehensible to the Althusserians, which is why they have to insist workers cannot escape from the realm of ‘ideology’.

(3) Any attempt to break this unity of theory and practice ends up confronting all the contradictions which beset classical bourgeois philosophy. Above all, it cannot solve the problem of how thought relates to reality.

Marx argued in the *Theses on Feurbach* that philosophy before him divided into two main streams.

One was materialist, in the sense of recognising a world external to human sensation and thought. But it soon ran into a problem: how can we test the validity of our impressions of the world, since all our contact with the world is through these impressions?

Some materialist philosophers (e.g. Locke) attempted to make a distinction between some impressions of the world which

‘resembled’ external reality, and others that didn’t. But the procedure was bound to be very arbitrary and to tend to accept as ‘real’ that which fitted in with current ideology. It certainly proved no basis for developing a scientific perspective which challenged existing preconceptions. Some philosophers (e.g. Hume) drew the conclusion that we could know nothing with certainty, and what we thought of as truth was really a product of our own psychological disposition. Still others (e.g. Berkeley) reached back to an essentially religious conception to explain knowledge: it was God who organised our perceptions.

The ‘correspondence’ theory of truth of the materialists seemed to work so long as no one questioned the common sense interpretations of human impressions that prevailed in existing society. The moment anyone started making critical judgements, it fell apart, giving way to idealism or scepticism.

The second philosophical tendency was that of ‘idealism’. The philosophers in this tradition insisted that the key to truth lay with human reasoning. Any idea we could deduce from certain basic principles was true; any idea we could not was false. The logical coherence of our ideas was the test of their truth, not any one-to-one correspondence with reality.

This did not mean these philosophers denied the existence of the external world. It did mean, however, they tended to see the external world itself as in some way produced by (or corresponding to) thought (or, at least, the valuable elements in the external world as produced by thought). It was ideas (whether human or of God) which underlay what we think of as the impressions of material things.

But this view led to all sorts of problems. As the German philosopher Kant showed, from simple ‘first principles’, it was quite easy to deduce quite opposed notions (what he called ‘antinomies’). The search for coherence in the realm of ideas alone led you straight into contradiction.

In the *Theses on Feurbach* Marx suggests that the materialist ‘correspondence’ theory of truth and the idealist ‘coherence’ theory both fail because they are one-sided. The materialist view correctly sees that human beings are part of the material world. But it fails to work out any criteria for judging how correct our knowledge of that world is. This is because it conceives of our relation to it as purely passive, contemplative. Impressions of the world around us hit us, and our brains have somehow to make sense of them.

Idealism, by contrast, falls down because it tends to deny the independent existence of the external world. But it does have one advantage over traditional materialism. It sees the role of the human mind as active – as intervening in reality.

Marx argued that for materialism to overcome its problems, it has to integrate this element of activity into its own ideas. It has to conceive of humanity’s relationship with the world not as contemplative, but as practical.

It is because human beings are engaged in transforming the world in practice that they can come to grasp which ideas about it are true and which false. Above all, it is the revolutionary activity of a class which enables it to approach the truth, because in making a practical challenge to all of existing reality it is testing all ideas about existing reality. As Marx put it:

“The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but a practical question. Man must prove the truth, I.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking, in practice. The dispute over the reality and non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question ... All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory into mysticism find their rational practical solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”

Althusser will have none of this. He downgrades the importance of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. They were

produced, he claims, during the 'break', before Marx got his ideas clear. As a result they are 'riddles'. The mature Marx, he insists, did not see truth as based in revolutionary practice, but in 'theoretical practice', something done by scientists according to their own procedures. But this leads the Althusserian school into all the problems classically associated with philosophy. Althusser's starting point is that of a 'contemplative materialist', with a correspondence theory of truth. But he then has to find some criteria for distinguishing 'true' from 'false' impressions. 'Theory' (with a capital T, remember), he says, will provide the answer. This, he says, enables us to process existing notions of the world and develop more advanced ones. Theory comes to validate itself.

But this merely shifts the question from being about how you distinguish a true impression from a false one, into how you distinguish a true theory from a false one. We are back in the old problem of all idealist 'coherence' theories of truth – why should one view of the world developed logically out of first principles be better than another developed in the same way?

It is a very short step from Althusser to the view that there are many, different 'theoretical discourses' (a Marxist, a feminist, a psychoanalytical, etc.) all equally valid – or even to the views adopted by some ex-Althusserians in France, who deny the validity of any theory. By abandoning the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Althusser slides down the slope from materialism through idealism to complete subjectivism!

(4) Althusser's claim that the Marxist dialectic cannot be seen as Hegelian dialectic 'stood on its head' is connected with the preceding points. Hegel, a German philosopher

attempting to grapple with the contradictions in existing philosophy already pointed out by Kant, grasped three key things:

- a. Each preceding view of the world contained contradictions which led to its dissolution into a different view of the world.
- b. The predominance of one or other view of the world was connected with the general notions people had in a particular period. So the history of philosophy was really just one way of looking at the history of changes in notions governing human society. It was history from a particular point of view. The contradictions of philosophy were the contradictions of human reality.
- c. These contradictions do not simply lead to a gradual development of things as they are (quantitative changes), but also to sharp breaks, when things change completely (qualitative change), as new notions come to take the place of old notions. Human beings who have been brought up in, and conditioned by, a particular society are pushed in a certain direction by it, but then react back upon it, coming to a greater or lesser degree of consciousness of its contradictions, and reshaping it.

These features of social change are sometimes referred to, somewhat misleadingly, as the 'laws of dialectic' – the

unity of opposites, the change from quantity to quality, the negation of the negation.

Marx's inversion of the dialectic consisted in insisting that the succession of different sets of ideas seen by Hegel as a purely intellectual process (he called it the development of the *Geist* – i.e. Spirit or Mind), was in fact rooted in the material circumstances in which human beings found themselves. This led them to corresponding sorts of social activity (labour, the formation of the state, private property and the family, the division into classes, and so on) which in turn shaped the way they saw the world.

The way one view of the world gives way to another is not a matter of pure, intellectual development. Rather each view of the world corresponds to the limited perspective of reality open to particular groups or classes in society. The change from one perspective to another takes place as the different groups or classes attempt to impose their view of the world on the rest of society as part of their mutual struggle for domination.

Thus you can see the 'contemplative materialism' of the late 17th century English philosopher Locke as fitting nearly in with the needs of a class which increasingly controls the process of material production in society and seeks to bring the general ideology of society gradually to accord with that control. It sees 'truth' in the accordance of ideas with material production.

By contrast, idealism tended to predominate in societies in which the capitalist middle class was still not predominant economically. Those who wanted to follow Britain in developing capitalist production had to conceive of reshaping material reality completely. Hence the stress on the need to make the world fit in with the 'truth' as indicated by ideas.

Hegel could integrate such diverse views into a total coherent, though idealist, view of human development because he lived at precisely the point at which the bourgeoisie was consolidating its hold over the countries of Western Europe. He wrote as the

armies of the French revolution swept continental Europe and the industrial revolution began to transform Britain. He was the philosopher of the culmination of the bourgeois revolution.

But this culmination was necessarily an incomplete culmination. As it challenged the old ruling classes for control of society, the bourgeoisie found it was encouraging a challenge to all class rule, including its own, from the urban poor. In panic it rushed to make agreements with the old ruling classes. So the French revolution 'culminated' in an emperor who grasped to his bosom (forcibly, if necessary) the old religion and the old aristocracy, the German bourgeoisie crept to power under the cloak of the Prussian monarchy and the Italian bourgeoisie allowed a King to unify their country for them.

As it was in practice, so it had to be in philosophy. Hegel brought together the different, partial truths the thinkers of the bourgeoisie had grasped as their class battled for power – but in a religious, mystical way. His dialectic was the philosophical counterpart of Bonaparte's army: both carried forward the bourgeois revolution, yet led it to compromise with conservatism of the old order.

'Turning Hegel on his head', meant for Marx, freeing Hegel's attempts to integrate these partial truths from the compromise with mysticism and religion. It meant 'reading Hegel' from the point of view of a new revolutionary class which had nothing to fear from further historical change – the working class. Contradiction then becomes contradiction inside capitalist society. The transformation of quantity into quality becomes the way in which bourgeois society itself throws up new elements it cannot control. The negation of the negation becomes the creation of a class by capitalist production which is driven to react back upon that production in a revolutionary way. The behaviour of that class can only be understood on the basis of its conditioning within capitalism, but then it comes to understand its conditioning and consciously to transform both society and itself.

It was such a view which enabled Lenin to write that he was ‘trying to read Hegel materialistically – that is to say I cast aside for the most part God, the Absolute, the Pure Idea etc.’ – something which the Althusserians cannot make any sense of (according to Alex, Lenin’s approach means casting away ‘everything which gave the dialectic its point for Hegel’ – Alex just cannot understand that the revolutionary, dialectical character of Hegel’s thought can only come to the fore when you cast away his compromises with the old ruling ideas).

The Althusserians refer to all such attempts to grasp ‘the rational core’ hidden inside the ‘mystical shell’ of Hegel as ‘Hegelian Marxism’ – whether the attempt is by Marx, by Lenin or by the ‘philosophical leftists’ Korsch and Lukacs. In reality what they are rejecting is revolutionary Marxism, socialism from below.

Hegelian ideas play a role in the development of socialism from below because Hegelian ideas are a summation, in a mystical form, of the ideas developed by the bourgeoisie when it was a revolutionary class, cutting into the old society in practice and therefore discovering truth about history in theory. The revolutionary workers movement has to take over these ideas, demystify them, and transform them on the basis of its own practical discoveries, if it is to understand its own road to power.

[9]

That is what is meant when it is said there are three component sources to Marxism – German classical philosophy, British political economy, and French socialism. In the fusion of the three, the limitations of each are overcome.

In the process of synthesis, the Hegelian concept of dialectics undergoes changes. But important elements of it remain relevant. This is especially the case for a notion Althusser wants to jettison -that of the totality.

Hegel saw any particular society as bound together by a dominating idea. The rest of society was an expression of this

single idea, what is sometimes called an ‘expressive totality’. It was the contradictions in this idea which led to change.

Marxist materialism obviously rejects this. But at the same time it understands why Hegel could see things so. There is something which underlies everything else in bourgeois society. That something is commodity production and, in particular, the existence of labour power as a commodity. The capitalist exploitation of labour dissolves all pre-existing social forms, transmuting them into elements of a single capitalist world. Every tangible object is continually being reduced to a simple expression of a single, unitary substance – abstract labour. Every element of unevenness is continually being combined with every other element of unevenness to provide the totality which is the world market. And because at the base of this stands the single process of capitalist exploitation of labour, a single set of contradictions arise (the falling rate of profit, etc.) which ultimately drag whole of capitalist society towards revolutionary crisis.

The Hegelian ‘expressive totality’ is, in fact, a mystical way of viewing a real totality – a world system in which billions of different acts of concrete labour are continually being reduced to abstract labour, a process which necessarily gives rise to explosive contradictions.

Of course, the contradictions work themselves out in concrete situations. Capitalism’s impact upon different pre-existing societies with different geographical locations, raw materials and so on, gives rise to capitalist societies with important differences from each other. Its crises do not hit all parts of the system at the same time with exactly the same impact. There is unevenness in development. But it is unevenness which is combined by the way in which commodity production underlying each particular society is part of a world system. As Trotsky pointed out, polemicising against Bukharin and Stalin in 1928, to speak only of uneven development is to ignore precisely the factor which

differentiates capitalism (especially in the imperialist epoch) from pre-capitalist societies.

Yet this is what Althusser does when he sees society as an articulation of different structures, developing within each country at different speeds to each other.

Althusser drops the notion of the 'totality' because for him it brings forward 'leftist' visions of world revolution. The concept will not fit at all with the sorts of class alliances he was taught were the ABC of Communist tactics by Stalin and Mao. But in dropping the totality, he loses something central for our understanding of capitalism as a world system.

(5) Finally, the 'break' between the 'young' and the 'mature' Marx. Back in the mid-sixties opponents of Althusserianism put a lot of effort into proving no such clear break existed. Fortunately, no such effort is now required. For the Althusserians themselves were eventually forced to shift their ground. Already in his introduction to **For Marx**, written in 1965, Althusser admitted that the 'break' as conceived by him was not fully completed until 1857 (so that, for instance, the **Communist Manifesto** was not a fully mature work!). And in the later work, **Reading Capital**, his collaborator Rancière admits that in **Capital** itself 'there are two different structures' so that 'Marx continually tends to think of the *Entfremdung* (estrangement) of capitalist relations on the model of alienation of the substantial subject'. [10] So although 'we can determine a break... Marx himself never truly seized and conceptualised the difference'. In other words, the 'break' is something imposed on to Marx by the Althusserians!

In fact, it is quite easy to trace the development of Marx's ideas without any such notion. In the early 1840s Marx was a follower of Feuerbach. He endorsed his criticism that Hegel did not grasp that the religious and other notions he saw dominating society were merely products of humanity's species being (i.e. of human nature). But then, in 1844, Marx began to turn Feuerbach's methods against Feuerbach himself. 'Species being' itself was a product of human activity in history. Humanity had created itself out of its own social labour on nature. The alienation of humanity was no longer simply the alienation of an animal which had created a structure beyond its control, but of an animal which itself had been transformed in a whole number of different ways as it created this structure, yet still rebelled against the structure.

In subsequent writings there was a development, a deepening, a historicising of Marx's early ideas – but no sharp break involving wholesale rejection of them.

This critique of Althusser would have been more or less shared by most members of the then International Socialists who had gone into the matter. But it was never written up into a finished statement.

This was for two interconnected reasons. First the influence of Althusserianism was always restricted to a layer of academics and students. Our emphasis in that period was to extend the influence of revolutionary ideas from their narrow student base at the end of the 1960s to the workers activists involved in the strikes of 1969-74. In this situation, engaging in polemics over philosophy with Althusser came bottom of everyone's list of priorities.

Secondly, by the early 1970s, Althusserianism itself was beginning to disintegrate. The internal contradictions in its argument came to the fore just as its initial motivation – the last ditch defence of Stalinist methodology in the early 1960s – fell apart under the impact of political events. But the positive points

in our argument about the nature of Marxism and the relation of theory and practice were implicit in innumerable articles and pamphlets. [11]

Alex's views

How do Alex's ideas fit in with the approach we developed? His philosophical ideas have undergone considerable changes over the last ten years. But they have all rested on the assumption that there was something very positive in Althusser's critique of the so called 'Hegelian Marxism' of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Lukacs and Gramsci (like Althusser, Alex generally keeps quiet about the 'Hegelian Marxism' of Lenin's philosophical notebooks!).

So in **Althusser's Marxism** (1976) Alex criticised many particular items in the Althusserian canon. But he began by accepting the basic Althusserian starting points:

1. Marxism, he accepted, was not a humanism. He quoted favourably Althusser's description of history as a 'process without a subject' – so that it could not be seen as the result of accumulated human action. In his reply to Peter Binns, Alex maintains this deep hostility to any notion of Marxism as 'humanism'.
2. He accepted Althusser's contention that the worker is as incapable of grasping the real character of capitalism as is the bourgeois. 'The agents of capitalist production,' he wrote, 'worker and capitalist alike, are "entrapped"

by the mystified way in which the relations of production appear.’

3. From this it followed, as with Althusser, that knowledge of society could only be developed by scientists operating apart from the class struggle, guided by purely theoretical criteria. He paraphrased Althusser favourably saying, ‘theory is autonomous ... Theoretical practice is a distinct and autonomous practice which is not reducible to other elements in the social formation. To say otherwise, Alex argued, both in **Althusser’s Marxism** and in his reply to Peter Binns, is to ‘revive the analyses of Zhdanov’ (Stalin’s ideological hatchetman) by claiming there are two ‘class sciences’ – one for the bourgeois and one for the proletariat. It is also to believe you can arrive at scientific truth merely by looking at the superficial appearance of things.
4. He was (and is) enthusiastic about the Althusserian rejection of the Hegelian dialectic, especially the ‘negation of the negation’. This fits in with his overall view of Hegel as essentially a religious thinker (despite the quite different estimate of Marx, Engels and Lenin on the question).
5. Finally, he accepted Althusser’s claim for a ‘break’ in Marx’s work – although in his latest writing Alex reduces this simply to a change in some of Marx’s ideas just before the writing of the **German Ideology** (a contention it is difficult to argue with, and a far cry from

Althusserian claim that Marx's really mature work did not appear until 1857, or even in the 1870s).

6. Overall, Alex has regarded Althusser as making a decisive contribution to the development of Marxism. He dedicated his latest work, **Marxism and Philosophy**, to him, claiming, 'that it is to Louis Althusser more than any other individual or group that we owe the current renaissance of Marxist philosophy'. Recent developments suggest that for many of Althusser's followers the word 'demise' would be more appropriate than 'renaissance'. But this rare tribute for a Trotskyist to pay a Stalinist certainly sums up the starting point of Alex's own approach to the issues.

If that were the end of the matter, there would be little more to say. Everything we have said in criticism of Althusser would apply to Alex's own 'theoretical practice'.

Fortunately, things are not so simple. For in **Althusser's Marxism** and in **Is there a Future for Marxism?** Alex did explore the way in which the Althusserian school has undergone self-dissolution. He did criticise many of the individual points made by Althusser.

In his writings since – in **Marxism and Philosophy** and his reply to Peter Binns – he has gone even further. He has come to agree with some of the contentions he once denounced 'Hegelian Marxism' for accepting – the effective continuity of Marx's thought from 1844 onwards, the recognition that the working class can come to a consciousness (and not just a confused 'ideological' interpretation) of its position within capitalism, the

role of collective struggle in developing this, the fact that Marxism is not simply a ‘science’ among other sciences, but is ‘the theory of working class self emancipation’. [12]

Yet in all this there is inconsistency. For he does not see how his conclusions are in complete contradiction to his Althusserian starting point. He is in the invidious position of someone who spends much of his life studying inconsistencies in the Royal laundry bills without realising the King has no clothes!

At the same time, his lack of a clear starting point leads Alex to some amazing conclusions. In **Marxism and Philosophy** he ends up breaking with Marx on the question of the relation between the forces and relations of production and by rejecting Marx’s account of the fetishism of commodities.

He argues, against the ‘version of historical materialism expounded in Marx’s 1859 *Preface to the **Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy***, in which ‘the development of the productive forces is seen as the independent variable in explaining historical change’. By contrast, Alex wants to hold we have to ‘start from the relations of production’ and ‘treat them, not the forces of production as the independent variable’.

Now this is an interesting position to hold. But it is not a Marxist position. And it explains nothing. For where do the relations of production come from?

Marx has a very simple explanation – they arise as human beings are forced to cooperate together in different ways to control their environment i.e. to produce. The relations of production grow out of the development of the forces of production, although they can become (and often are) are a fetter on the further development of the forces of production. At this point either the relations of production are changed by revolutionary upheaval, or society stagnates and even declines (as with the collapse of the Roman Empire).

If you refuse to see things in this way, then logically you are forced back to an idealist position, which sees changes of peoples

ideas as the motor of social development. Alex's move to such a position is a clear sign of how the collapse of Althusserianism has led straight from contemplative materialism to idealism. [13]

His rejection of Marx's account of the fetishism of commodities is equally a product of starting from Althusserian premises. The Althusserians and post-Althusserians argue human beings can have no experience which is not a result of preceding conceptual structures. Therefore, argues Alex, it is quite wrong to say, as Marx does, that looking at the appearance of things under capitalism automatically leads you to wrong conclusions. Why? Because, he claims, you have no access to immediate experience. 'Even our acquaintance with the capitalist system at the most everyday levels involves some conceptualisation. Vulgar economy is, like **Capital**, a theorisation of reality which admits of no unique interpretation'.

Here again, Alex's failure to come to terms with the relation between ideas and practice leads him astray. Concepts do not come out of nowhere. They are generated by human beings' interaction with each other and the world. If that interaction is of a particularly limited sort (as is the interaction of that takes place through the market under capitalism) then a particularly limited understanding of society will be generated by it.

In this way, the false consciousness of reality is continually being generated among those involved in circulating commodities under capitalism. That is what 'the fetishism of commodities' is about. Alex cannot see this, because he makes the mistake characteristic of much academic philosophy of seeing the development of concepts and the development of practice as two different things – and then getting involved in endless worries about how concepts can relate to reality.

To escape from these confusions, Alex has to recognise that his initial high evaluation of Althusser was wrong, a quirk of his own intellectual development, and that the Althusserian system has to be rejected in its entirety as an alien import into Marxism,

reflecting the combined influence of Stalinism and academicism on sections of the intelligentsia who were attracted to the left in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Concretely, this means Alex has to come to terms with five things:

(1) Accepting that Marxism is a humanism in the sense in which I have argued earlier. It is a theory of how human beings have made history, changing themselves in the process, so that there arise a succession of different modes of production, in each one of which the majority of people find themselves oppressed by the products of their own past activity.

(2) Accepting that the working class has a privileged situation when it comes to understanding capitalism. Insofar as it struggles against exploitation, it begins to cut through the appearances of the system and to gain insights into its working. Its situation in this respect is quite different to that of the capitalist class.

(3) Accepting that theory cannot develop in isolation from practice – that, at the end of the day, revolutionary practice is the test of the theory. This is not at all the same as ‘pragmatism’ – the view of certain American philosophers from the earlier part of this century that questions of truth can be reduced to questions of utility.

Nor does it mean, as Alex seems to believe, that knowledge is an immediate product of activity. Each form of human activity opens up a different, limited perspective on the objective reality underlying appearances. ‘Science’ is a set of procedures by which we attempt to integrate these different perspectives into a single, total picture. It involves abstracting from what we learn from

particular practices. But the test of the correctness of the abstractions we make cannot be anything else than practical experience.

To believe otherwise puts you on the downward slope towards subjectivist idealism – the end point of British empiricism and, two centuries later, of French Althusserianism.

It is only practice that enables us to challenge the established notions provided to us by existing society. Of course practice itself is influenced by these notions. To that extent, a change in social practice does imply a change in our understanding of reality. To claim otherwise would be to pretend that somehow or other a small, elite group of theorists could stand outside the society of which they are part. It would, in the words of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, be to divide society into two parts, one of which stands above society.

But this does not mean that the science based upon such socially determined practice does not contain an element of truth. It is truth from a certain point of view. It is a stage on the road to a fuller truth, from a wider point of view.

Unless we are complete idealists, believing that science is the journey of disembodied reason on the road to absolute cognition, we have to recognise this applies to all science, including physical science.

The conditions which determine the range of practical experimentation of scientists on the one hand, and the notions they receive from existing society on the other, do affect the ‘scientific’ understanding of nature in any society. As society changes under the impact of socialist revolution, so wider perspectives and new forms of explanation will grow up, enabling people to grasp things which at the moment are clouded in obscurity.

Recognising this is not at all the same as Zhdanovism – the idea that some individual can decree what is ‘working class’ physical science and what is ‘bourgeois’ physical science

(especially when the individual is a state capitalist dictator, concerned only with trying to find magical means for accelerating capital accumulation).

And certainly, no one can fulfil Alex's rhetorical demand that we tell him what a working class physical science would look like. We cannot jump out of history and arrive now at an understanding which will only be possible when proletarian revolution has produced a classless, stateless society, in which human interaction with and conceptualisation of nature is no longer constrained by the limited partial practices of a class society.

But we can, and must, recognise that present day science is a result of the activity of particular human beings, whose ways of acting and thinking are determined by the society in which they find themselves. Socially determined ways of acting and thinking define (limit, direct) what they learn about nature and the ways in which they attempt to integrate these bits of learning through abstraction. Once society has changed, the ways of thinking and acting will change – and so too will the nature of scientific knowledge. Science as it exists now will be seen as only a set of limited, partial truths.

This is the only way of conceiving the development of science which is compatible with materialism. It is therefore the only sure protection both against contemplative materialism which degenerates into idealism and then subjectivism (as Althusser's does) and against those who see science simply as an ideological expression of practical interests. It can reject both because it sees the move from capitalism to socialism as involving a move from lower (narrower, more superficial) forms of practice to higher (more universal, more critical) forms of practice.

Here, it must be said, Peter Binns' critique of Alex does not provide a fully clear account of the relation between science and practice. Some of his formulation give the impression that we cannot get any knowledge, however partial, of objective reality.

But, by definition, practice involves human beings interacting with an external reality.

Instead of seeing that practice means coming to grips with reality, so beginning to cut through appearances and to grasp aspects of objective reality, Peter's formulations come close to denying there is such a thing as objective knowledge. Instead of moving from Alex's contemplative materialism to a materialism based on revolutionary practice, he comes close to falling into complete relativism, for which science does not arrive at truths, even partial truths. [14]

(4) Alex needs to recognise that there is a 'rational core' to the mysticism of Hegel. Hegel did try to integrate into a total system the various, limited perspectives on the world developed by the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary phase. In so doing, he laid the basis for an understanding of human reality in terms of unity and disunity, continuity and contradiction, quantitative change and qualitative change, being conditioned and consciously reacting back upon those conditions – in short, he pointed to a dialectical grasp of social reality.

Alex has to learn to see Hegel through the revolutionary eyes of a Marx or a Lenin, and to turn away from the jaundiced, 'socialism from above' vision of an Althusser.

(5) Finally, he has to come fully clean on the question of the 'two Marxs'. I will not dwell on the point, because he has come close to doing so in **Marxism and Philosophy**. But he still has to take that little additional step, of seeing that the attempt to impose a 'break' between the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* and the Marx of **Capital** was part of a programme designed to rescue Marx for Stalinism and academicism.

Alex has not, so far, carried through this total recasting of his philosophical perspective, so as to enable it to accommodate the conclusions he has been coming to in a piecemeal fashion. Why?

We have already looked at length at one key problem for him – that of his refusal to come to terms in theory with the relation between theory and practice he accepts in practice. There seem to be two other problems.

First, he argues that what he calls ‘Hegelian Marxism’ leads into the trap of a sentimental socialism which abandons any class perspective. This, he says, has happened to innumerable ‘Marxist humanists’ and has to be avoided at all costs.

There is this danger, of course, with the sort of ‘Socialist Humanism’ which arose as an intellectual staging post for those recoiling from Stalinism in 1956. [15] But you cannot avoid the dangers by denying the ‘humanistic’ elements in Marxism.

When people like E.P. Thompson say the bomb will destroy humanity and therefore is not a class issue, you can’t reply by saying that, since it is not a class issue, then it does not concern us (especially if in doing so you use the philosophical terminology of supporters of both the ‘workers bomb’ and the French *‘force de frappe’*!). You have to point out that although the bomb will destroy all humanity, only working class action can stop that happening. Working class revolution is the precondition for humanity as a whole moving forward or even surviving. The choice is workers’ revolution or the mutual destruction of the contending classes, socialism or barbarism.

Instead of seeing things in such a way, Alex takes refuge in a trite bit of intellectual trickery. He lumps together Lukacs’ **History and Class Consciousness**, the Frankfurt school of Adorno and Horkheimer and E.P. Thompson to show where ‘Hegelian Marxism’ leads. This is really no more than a silly use of the ‘amalgam technique’ used by apologists for Stalin in the 1930s (‘Trotsky opposes Stalin, Hitler opposes Stalin, therefore Trotsky is an ally of Hitler’). In fact, the message of **History**

and Class Consciousness is that ‘the fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of mankind) will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness ... Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism’. And so the work argues for revolutionary workers councils and a revolutionary party.

This was certainly not the message of the Frankfurt school – a group of left reformist academics in exile in from Hitler’s Germany. And it is certainly not the message of E.P. Thompson, with his call for people of goodwill to banish nuclear war. In fact, Thompson’s prescriptions have infinitely more in common with the strategic justification for popular fronts which underlies the Althusserian bowdlerisation of ‘historical materialism’ than with the proletarian revolutionism (even if it was over-hasty proletarian revolutionism) of Lukacs in 1919-23.

Alex’s final concern is that we must not fall into ‘Maginot Marxism’ – a purely defensive posture – by refusing to learn from developments in bourgeois ideology since Marx’s death.

Of course, we must appropriate the partial truths discovered by bourgeois, reformist and Stalinist theorists. But in the case of knowledge of society, we can only do so properly if we remember that since the bourgeoisie ceased being a revolutionary class, its social practice – and therefore its social theory – has been extremely limited.

Even when we are dealing with an area of investigation fairly close to reality, like the collecting of social statistics, we have to carry through a most rigorous criticism both of the form and the content of the information provided to us by established, bourgeois social science’ before we can integrate it into our own knowledge. When we are dealing with attempts to develop general theories of society, the economy, and the development of thought, we have to be a hundred times more critical.

We have to emphasise just how limited is the practice of English language philosophers, American sociologists, French

Althusserians, German ‘critical theorists’. In each case they are attempting to develop theories without attempting to change reality – and in very many cases without even attempting to understand it (hence the spectacle of philosophers of history who do not engage in historical research, of philosophers of science who would not even recognise a test tube if they saw one, of ‘grand theorists’ of sociology whose experience of society is restricted to the academic sherry party, of linguistic theorists who speak only English).

So we cannot simply accept their ‘discoveries’ uncritically – we have to criticise and transform them before we can use them for our own purposes. And so there can be no question of simply tacking the ideas of a Lakatos or Levi-Strauss, a Saussure or a Popper, on to the ideas of Marx.

Nor should there be any question of accepting at face value the conclusions of international reformism and centrism (Poulantzas, Anderson, Löwy, Habermas etc.). Their perspective is often as limited as that of bourgeois academicism, and their theoretical conclusions as sloppy. Instead of quoting them as disembodied expressions of the search for truth (one of Alex’s most annoying habits), we have to treat them with the greatest suspicion if we are to disentangle from the mass of dross a few insights into reality. We have to insist there can be no revolutionary theory without revolutionary practice – just as we insist there can be no revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory.

At the beginning of this article, I said that if Alex was right, then many of the things we say in **Socialist Worker** every week are wrong. This is still the case, despite the number of individual points Alex has quietly conceded.

One short paragraph from his reply to Peter Binns proves the point. Alex denounces a statement by Peter to the effect that ‘no impediments exist to the creation of a truly communist society’ once the working class has come to a clear consciousness of

itself. This, we are told, is an idealistic excess, ‘an astonishing statement by the co-author of a critique of the “Marxism of the Will” of Castro and Guevara’.

Alex’s comment shows he does not understand a very simple truth of Marxism. Advanced capitalism has carried the forces of production, world wide, to the point at which natural scarcity is no longer the problem facing humanity. What cramps human development is the artificial scarcity created by the capitalist relations of production. And all that is required to get rid of these is the working class world wide, coming to consciousness of this fact. We say ‘all that is required’, without underestimating the problems involved in bringing about this transformation of consciousness. As Lukacs wrote in March 1920 (when things seemed much more hopeful than they do now) we face ‘the great distance that the proletariat has to travel ideologically’ – but when it has travelled that distance, there is no natural impediment holding it back.

In this respect, the situation under advanced capitalism is quite different from that under previous class societies. In them, exploitation and oppression were a reflection of natural necessity (the impossibility of the forces of production developing without the division into classes). Today, exploitation and oppression are a result of the way in which past human activity has congealed into a system, capitalism, which constrains present human activity. Yet that system would fall apart if only those whose labour keeps it going (in the factories, the offices, the armies, the police forces, the prisons) realised this and turned against their exploiters.

This is not true in the individual parts of the world system taken by themselves – especially in those parts where centuries of colonialism and imperialism have forced the national forces of production backwards. It is pure voluntarism to believe you could move straight to communism in countries like Cambodia, Cuba, Nicaragua or China, even if there were genuine forms of workers’ power.

But if it is ‘voluntarism’ to believe it is possible on the basis of international proletarian revolution by the coming to consciousness of the world class, what are we fighting for?

The Alex who writes every week in **Socialist Worker** understands perfectly that ‘no impediment’ would face the world working class if it did rise up, overthrow its exploiters and set itself on the path to communism. So why does the Alex who sits down to write philosophy see things differently?

It is because he still has not grasped that the whole basis of the Althusserian method is to confuse ‘socialism from above’ (the state capitalism, which has developed in individual, relatively backward countries, cut off from the the massive advances of the world forces of production) with the socialism from below which is possible on the basis of working class revolution on an international scale. And therefore he himself slips into the trap of believing what would be ‘voluntarist’ if it were attempted in a Cuba or a Nicaragua would be voluntaristic if attempted by the working class of several advanced countries.

If residual Althusserians can make someone as astute as Alex Callinicos fall into such elementary errors, it is indeed something to be fought.

Notes

1. The following people have given me invaluable assistance by commenting on the various drafts of this article: Peter Binns, John Molyneux, Ann Rogers, John Rees. I also owe thanks to everyone – including Alex Callinicos – who took part on the discussion on these issues at the SWP’s *Marxism* 83.

2. These criticisms of **History and Class Consciousness** do not however, justify Alex’s description of it as a work of transition between the “Romantic anti-capitalism” of Lukacs’ youth, still very strong during his Left-Communist phase between 1918 and 1923, and the more materialist position of the last two essays in the book and of **Lenin** (1924). In fact Lukacs stopped being any sort of ‘Left-

Communist' a good 18 months before the book was finished. It is true that, like so many other early adherents to the Comintern, he was initially a principled adherent of abstention from parliamentary elections, writing an article to this effect. But it was also true that he changed his views on reading Lenin's **Left Wing Communism** on its publication (in 1920). Similarly, although he wrote an enthusiastic defence of the ultra-left 'theory of the offensive' at the time of the German March Action of 1921, he again rapidly changed his mind after discussions with Lenin – and spoke against it at the Third Congress of the Comintern (August 1921), earning a bitter rebuke from the mentor of the German CP, Karl Radek (for details, see Michel Löwy, **George Lukacs, From Romanticism to Bolshevism**, London 1979, pp.158-164).

3. See his *Out of the Moral Wilderness* (**New Reasoner**, 1960); *Breaking the Chains of Reason* (in E.P. Thompson (ed.), **Out of Apathy**, 1960) and **What is Marxist Theory For?** (Socialist Labour League pamphlet, 1960).

4. See especially his *What is revolutionary leadership?*, in **Labour Review**, October-November 1960.

5. **For Marx**, footnote p.200.

6. 'If imperialism should unleash nuclear war ... it would only result in the extinction of imperialism and definitely not in the extinction of mankind' (**The Differences Between Comrade Togliatti and Us**, Peking 1963). This pamphlet contains all the political elements you find in Althusser – an apparently 'anti-revisionist tone', a belief in the supra-historical laws of the 'construction of socialism' enunciated by Stalinism, and a willing support for class collaboration (for instance, a campaign to get a multilateral ban on nuclear weapons).

7. In this country, for example, the editors of **New Left Review** moved overnight from worshipping at the shrine of the 'existential Marxism' of Merleau Ponty and Sartre to a wild if relatively short lived infatuation with Althusser.

8. This notion was best elaborated in Trotsky's **History of the Russian Revolution** and **The Third International After Lenin**. But the basic concept is implicit in Marx's notion of abstract labour, and the idea of the world economy as it appears in the writings of Luxemburg, Lenin, and the young Bukharin on Imperialism.

9. Such a view of the relation of theory and practice is implicit in many of Lenin's writings after 1905. But it is best spelt out in the sections of Gramsci's **Prison Notebooks** on the relation between ideas and practice, especially the section *What is Philosophy?* It is no accident these are the sections almost completely ignored by 'Gramscian' academics who support the Labour left or Eurocommunism.

10. **Lire le Capital**, p.194.

11. See for example, Tony Cliff, **Lenin** (four volumes); Chris Harman, **Party and Class**; John Molyneux, **Marxism and the Party**.

12. Which Alex himself describes in **Is there a future for Marxism?**

13. One reason why Alex falls into this trap is that he sees the book of the Oxford philosopher Cohen (**Marx's Theory of History: A Defence**) as providing an account of the orthodox position – instead of looking at the accounts given in our tradition.

14. Carried to their logical conclusion, some of Peter Binns' formulations would produce a subjectivism very similar to that of the post-Althusserians, with their 'different modes of discourse'. You find such subjectivism among followers of 'radical science', who deny even the partial truth of the conclusions of existing science. This is not Peter's position – but some of his expressions are open to an interpretation leading in that direction.

15. For an example of the confusion which is possible, see the collection of essays, **Socialist Humanism**, edited by Erich Fromm in 1966.