

Ernest Mandel
Mandel on Althusser,
Party and Class
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Mandel on Althusser is a translation, by John Marot, of the first two chapters of Ernest Mandel's book **A Response to Louis Althusser and Jean Ellenstein** (Edition La Brèche, Paris). With this article, we initiate what we hope will be a wide-ranging discussion on the problem of "the party." We hope the forthcoming discussion will not limit itself to the themes touched on by Mandel, but will go beyond them to include the specific problems of building a socialist party in the US, both in the long run, and in the immediate period. [1]

The appearance of four articles by Louis Althusser in **Le Monde** entitled, *What Can No Longer Continue in the Communist Party* and subsequently republished by Maspero under the same title enlarged with a lengthy polemical preface against George Marchais, (General Secretary of the French Communist Party, ed.) has revealed the *malaise* which currently prevails among the intellectuals of the PCF (French Communist Party). However, let there be no mistake. This is more than just a quarrel between intellectuals or a fictitious fight. Althusser and the appeal signed by 300 intellectuals have formulated only a few of the questions which thousands of Communist militants are asking themselves in the aftermath of the defeat of the Union of the Left on March 19th, 1978.

In this respect it is necessary to emphasize the significance of Althusser's evolution. For a long time he had confined himself to carrying out a theoretical struggle whose meaning was unclear to the rank and file militant and whose content was ambiguous if not apologetic. He then began to question the nature of Stalinism and the lack of any scientific (i.e., Marxist) explanation of the phenomenon of Stalinism (see his reply to John Lewis in **Essays in Self-Criticism**). But all this remained far removed from what he himself had termed the concrete analysis of a concrete situation. Even as he defended the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the debates of the French CP at the XXII Congress, he did so in such an abstract

manner that it could only have had a most limited impact at the rank and file level.

This time, however, his argument has at last become a political one. Revolutionary Marxists must, therefore, very attentively examine Louis Althusser's pamphlet and his articles. They must specify their agreements and disagreements with the positions that the Marxist philosopher currently defends. These obviously only constitute a stage in the evolution of his thought and political practice. The aim of this discussion is not only to clarify ideas, but to insure that this evolution proceeds as far as possible toward a full-fledged return to Leninism, to revolutionary Marxism.

The most remarkable parts of Althusser's articles are those which unveil and denounce the internal structure and functioning of the French Communist Party. Althusser doesn't call it by its real name, a name that we know all too well and that we must proclaim out loud: It is called bureaucratic centralism, antipode of democratic centralism. In a biting style, Althusser dismantles its mechanisms: an organization of full-time officials, virtually cut off from the working class and from civil society and incapable of subsisting outside of the party apparatus; a leadership which manipulates the rank and file and ensures its own survival through the automatic cooptation of the apparatus; a freedom of "discussion" among a rank and file that is strictly compartmentalized into cells or local sections, and powerfully reinforced by the principle of unanimity (of "collegial solidarity") which the leadership observes in its relations with the base; the myth that "the party is always right" or that "the central committee never makes mistakes," a myth which is the ideological correlative of a bureaucratic structure; a manipulative and exhortatory relationship between the party and the working class, in

which the former educates the latter but never learns from it, thereby sanctioning, theoretically, the hierarchical and quasi-military relationship between the leadership and the base.

All this is correctly analyzed and denounced. We may describe these structures as Stalinist, on the condition that we do not limit our understanding of this term to the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet State, of the CPSU and of the Communist International. In truth we are dealing with an evil which is not limited to these phenomena but extends far beyond them. This evil is called the workers' bureaucracy, the bureaucratization of large working class organizations in general. One need only take note of a recent event. At the Congress of German Trade-Union Confederation, the DGB, in May 1978, where undoubtedly many important things were discussed, 90% of the delegates were officials! This "labor parliament" was in fact a parliament of labor bureaucrats.

Two Remedies

Against this evil, two kinds of remedies may be used. The first is proposed by Althusser and is essentially political in character. It claims for itself a political theory and practice diametrically opposed to that of the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies which is founded upon a distrust and fear of the large masses of working people.

The emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves. The revolutionary vanguard party is an indispensable instrument in achieving this task but can in

no way substitute itself for the working class. A party wielding a correct revolutionary programme has a decisive advantage in the class struggle as that programme is the synthesis of all the lessons learned from past working class struggles. Its correct implementation is a function of numerous concrete factors peculiar to each situation. Moreover, new phenomena periodically arise which are unresolved at the programmatic level.

This is why the relationship of the vanguard party to the class is far more complex than the relationship between educator and educated. The educator himself constantly needs to be educated. He can only become so by correct practice within the class and in the class struggle. The only practical proof of his capacity to fulfill his role of vanguard is given by his ability to establish his political influence over ever wider layers of the working class and, ultimately, to acquire political hegemony over the majority of workers.

We assume that in the course of this long political struggle he will have learned as much from the spontaneity of the masses and of their class struggle as he will have taught *them* wider political conceptions. This obviously does not mean an opportunist adaptation to whatever the great majority of workers happen to believe at any given moment, something which, incidentally, can change very rapidly. But it does mean lending an attentive ear to what they have to say and doing so honestly and faithfully. No long lasting and effective antidote to the evil of bureaucracy is possible without these political and theoretical elements, reinforced by a whole series of safeguards (statutory, constitutional, material). We will not dwell on them. They have been for the most part enumerated by Marx and Lenin. We will mention only one additional principle: the obligatory presence, in all legislative and executive organs of workers, organizations and of future worker's state, of an absolute majority of

workers remaining in production, that is to say, of non-officials.

The second kind of remedy against the bureaucratic evil is more narrowly organizational in character. It has to do with *modus-operandi* of working class organizations, i.e. the preservation of workers' democracy.

In this regard the most we can do is note Louis Althusser's timidity. Having denounced a deep-seated and institutionalized evil, he concludes with two very modest proposals: 1) opening up the pages of the communist press to debate, and 2) securing the right to obtain information horizontally in order to guarantee a truly democratic debate. We are, of course, in favor of these proposals. However, even if they are necessary to insure a minimum of workers' democracy, they are still inadequate as a solid, lasting foundation. What distinguishes democratic from bureaucratic centralism is the right, in theory and in practice, to form tendencies.

Indeed, in any really centralized organization the leadership unavoidably enjoys the advantages accorded by centralization. It obtains information, centralizes the practical experiences of the party as a whole and transmits unitary instructions to all party organs. Draft resolutions or theses circulate in the party before congresses or national conferences. These constitute the foundation for all debates.

This is not in itself an evil. It is even an advantage, an indispensable feature of any functioning organic structure. To understand the objective role of this centralization is to understand that it is not merely an "organizational" or even administrative phenomenon, but represents a social and political necessity. What this centralization expresses is the attempt of Marxists, of communists, to overcome the fragmentation of the experience of the proletariat lived in

isolation, factory by factory, industry by industry, region by region. The interest of the class as a whole is different from that of its individual sectors or components and is brought out only through centralization of the practice and the experience of the class struggle. However, the mechanisms of centralization can not be made to work solely in favor of the leadership and at the same time preserve their functional objectivity and effectiveness from a class struggle perspective, unless one adopts the absurd Stalinist thesis that the leadership is infallible.

Minority Rights

Louis Althusser rightly rejects this thesis of leadership infallibility as a theoretical mystification. The entire history of the working class movement confirms him in this. From the moment the leadership is no longer expected to automatically formulate the correct political line on the basis of the centralized information at its disposal, the last argument in favor of bureaucratic centralism – its efficiency – collapses. From the moment the majority can be mistaken and the minority be in the right, it is useful for the party that the minority have the same possibility to influence the membership, the same access to information, the same right to draft resolutions as does the leadership. In this way the party has greater chances to both avoid mistakes and to correct them rapidly and discover their real cause.

The procedure we have just outlined is the bare minimum necessary to form tendencies: the right of members to collectively formulate political platforms, elaborate political proposals and draft resolutions other than those of the leadership and independently of the compartmentalization of cells, localities and regions; the right to submit them to the discussion of members and the votes of congresses by virtue of their dissemination to all members of the party; election of the leadership more or less according to the number of mandates garnered by various tendencies, while at the same time guaranteeing the majority coming out of the Congress the right to lead the party: the right to defend oneself orally in preparatory Congresses, local and regional, and to be allotted the same speaking time as that of the leadership's speakers.

Without these rights, discussion forums and elimination of compartmentalization will have a largely superficial impact. In the end they will not give rank and file militants and minorities the possibility to work out programs other than those of the leadership. The latter will retain the monopoly of political direction which is meaningless if it does not have, as it does not, a monopoly on wisdom and truth. Bureaucratic centrism reproduces itself more or less automatically. The equality of the membership remains a purely formal one insofar as the membership does not possess the right of association and consultation necessary to alter the party's political line. This right remains the sole prerogative of the leadership.

Is the Right to Form Tendencies Contrary to Leninism?

A number of objections have been raised with respect to the right to form tendencies. In the first instance it is alleged that it is contrary to Leninism, since the 10th Congress of the CPSU, at Lenin's initiative, forbade the formation of factions. In fact, the episode proves the opposite of what those who point to it seek to prove. For if factions are banned 18 years after the founding of the Party, it means that they were allowed prior to the 10th Congress and that their prohibition can only be explained with due reference to exceptional conditions. In reality, the entire history of Bolshevism is riddled with faction fights. Let us add that the 10th Congress only forbade factions and not the right to form tendencies.

At this same Congress of the CPSU where factions were banned, Lenin rejected an amendment by Riazanov eliminating the right to form tendencies i.e. the right of members in various cells, sections or regions of the party, including members in the executive organs of the party to formulate political platforms and submit them to a vote of the Congress. Vigorously defending the right to form tendencies he wrote:

“We cannot deprive the Party and the members of the CC of the right to appeal to the party in the event of disagreement on fundamental issues. I can not imagine how we can do such a thing. The present Congress cannot in any way bind the elections to the next congress. Supposing we are faced with a question like, say, the conclusion of the Brest peace? Can you guarantee that no such question can arise? We cannot give such a guarantee. (*Riazanov: On one question only?*) Certainly. But your resolution says: no elections according to platforms. I don't think we are in a position to prohibit this...

If circumstances should make for fundamental disagreements, can we prohibit them from being brought before the judgment of the whole Party. No! This is an extreme and unrealistic demand which I move to reject.” (Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol.32, p.261).

Even earlier during the same debate on the banning of factions, Lenin had reminded the leaders of the Workers’ Opposition of the following:

“250,000 copies of the Workers’ Opposition platform have been published in the Party’s central organ. We have examined it from all angles and perspectives, we have elected delegates on its basis, and finally we have convened this congress which is summing up the political discussion” (**Ibid.**, p.267).

Moreover, at the same Congress different political platforms reflecting serious disagreements over the trade union question were put to a vote of the Congress. It then elected a new central committee according to the number of ballots garnered by each platform! Proof positive that at this Congress, the right to form tendencies was upheld not abolished.

Let us add that the prohibition of factions by the Congress was viewed as a temporary and extraordinary measure and not as a new statutory norm. The proof is that the CPSU did not request the International to implement this measure.

It is then alleged that the creation of permanent tendencies leads to a situation where the “party is no longer made up of multifarious and divergent sensibilities and intellects which complement or confront one another. Thereby enriching the collectivity, but instead becomes frozen in resentment, in rancor, and in tenacious hatreds ever ready to take future revenge ... Discussion ceases (and) traps are set by making a mental note of an opponent’s slip

of the tongue which is supposed to reveal his authentic nature ... An outlandish picture? No. Ask about the settling of accounts between tendencies of this or that socialist local or this or that far-left organization.” (*Le mecanisme de la tendance*, **France Nouvelle**, June 5, 1978).

There is a great deal of truth in this critique of permanent and ossified tendencies. But it speaks not to the right to form tendencies but to its abuse.

Duration of Tendencies

Normally a tendency is formed with the approach of a congress or with an important development in the class struggle. After the congress has made its decisions, the tendency dissolves and allows the majority to implement its political line. If necessary it reconstitutes itself on the eve of the next congress and reopens the debate on the basis of newly acquired experience. Only in this way can the dialectic, “freedom of discussion to determine a line – disciplined execution of the majority line – democratic reexamination of the line in the light of democratic experience,” operate freely and constructively. At the same time, any refusal to execute the decision of the majority at a democratically elected congress where freedom of discussion has been guaranteed violates the majority’s rights and as such is profoundly anti-democratic even if it is made in the name of factions or of cliques

formed around “leading personalities.” Here, again, it is an abuse of the right to form tendencies and not of the right itself.

Permanent tendencies mark the existence of an unhealthy situation. Certain guidelines in the right to form tendencies are necessary. Our movement is proud of having abided by them in a most exemplary fashion: it constitutes a virtually unique example in the working class movement. We don't say that we do so in an ideal manner, or that we have the answer to everything. We are ready to honestly discuss these matters with the comrades of the communist opposition and with other currents in the workers' movement.

But one thing we are sure of. The negation, limitation or suppression of the right to form tendencies is in any case a thousand times more dangerous and destructive than its abuse. When Henri Malberg has the nerve to claim that the right to form tendencies permits neither clarity of political choices nor rapid elaboration of a political line, he is uttering a monstrous sophism. Will he dare deny that if the right to form tendencies had been respected, it might have been possible to change the German CP's obstinate 5 year line on “social fascism,” a line which greatly contributed to Hitler's victory in 1933? Will he dare claim that if the right to form tendencies had been respected in the CPSU Stalin could still have pursued for 25 years agricultural policies so mistaken that they resulted in a per capita production of certain animal and vegetable products that was lower in 1953 than in 1916?

Bureaucratic centralism, the manipulation of worker's organizations by officialdom, the violation of elected officials of decisions made by congresses (a routine phenomenon in a social-democracy), the stifling of free discussion and initiative in the rank and file allowing them to choose

between different political lines, these are obstacles which must be fought mercilessly. If they are not overcome, neither the free development of the class struggle nor the victory of the working class can be assured.

Such is, in any case, the conclusion which we share with Louis Althusser. For us, the right to form tendencies is an indispensable precondition to successfully carry out this struggle.

The Role of the Ranks in a United Front

The most important political stance taken by Althusser in his four articles is the one favoring unified *rank and file committees* in implementing a united front or organizations. In the first place he rejects a parliamentary conception of alliances understood as an agreement between political *organizations* “owning their electoral base” in favor of a conception of unity as “a struggle carried out by the organized section of the working class aimed at extending its influence.” He then proceeds to indict the leadership of the French CP for having remained with a conception of the Union of the Left as an agreement arrived at “from the top” and concludes: “The leadership, contrary to the positions it had adopted within the context of the Popular Front of 1934-36, opposed the formation of popular committees. In fact, the leadership, instead of anchoring the unity of the left in the struggle for the

masses, opted for a *struggle between organizations* under cover of remaining true to the *Common Program* (of CP and SP – *ed.*). It thereby successfully replaced a unified electoral policy... by a sectarian one which falsely identified the domination of one party over another with proletarian hegemony and leadership of the popular movement.

“From 1972 to 1977 nothing was done to encourage, or promote rank and file initiatives and the embryonic forms of unity between manual and intellectual workers. Worse: any proposals favoring popular committees had been rejected as they risked being *manipulated*. Now, having for so many years throttled the initiative of the masses they turned around and appealed for help to those same masses. Refusing to be *manipulated*, one ended up simply by manipulating the masses. (L. Althusser, **What can no longer continue in the Communist Party**, pp.114-115).

Let us leave aside the label suggested for the popular committees which is in any case a secondary matter. Neither should we dwell on Althusser’s notion that unity at the rank and file level and negotiations between organizations are counterposed. Far from being contradictory, a united front at the base and a united front at the top reciprocally condition one another, at least partially. Failure to understand this is to risk serious sectarian deviations. We shall return to this later.

The crucial thing is Althusser’s insistence on the role to be played by the organization and initiative of the masses in a unitary process arriving at “fundamentally changing” the political, economic and social conditions of France. It is a

very important contribution, as important to the debate within the PCF as it is to the debate within the working class and the mass movement as a whole toward understanding the causes and consequences of the electoral defeat of March 1978.

The entire history of the 20th century bears witness to this. The tumultuous intensification of the class struggle in an industrialized capitalist country, nay, more the “decisive change” of social and political structures is impossible without the extra-parliamentary mobilization and self-organization of the workers and toiling masses. (In the good old days Marxists called this “decisive change,” a social revolution, a socialist revolution or – horror of horrors! – a proletarian revolution, but now “we” abandon this terminology so as not to “frighten the marginal voter” who nonetheless managed to slip through our fingers on the 12th and 19th of March 1978). (These are the dates of the 2-stage national elections in France which the left lost, even though its victory had been generally anticipated only a few months earlier. – *ed.*)

Even a centrist such as Kautsky gave the worker’s councils – soviets – a decisive role in the socialist transformation of society. The belief that one can obtain decisive change through purely electoral and parliamentary means is contradicted by the entire course of history. It identifies the political stance of ideologues calling themselves communist with that of the pre-1914 and post 1918 right wing of the Social Democracy. It is not only unreal and utopian but profoundly anti-democratic.

At the root of this elector list conception lies a congenital distrust of the masses by political general staffs possessing the “True Science” and founded upon in the last analysis a fear of mass initiatives that might escape their control. The masses are considered too backward, too uncultured, too

crude, too little conscious and too incompetent to be able to resolve the decisive problems confronting the country's future with their own initiatives and actions. Dropping a ballot in a voting booth every 4 years, this is their only, their sacred, democratic right. But letting them *directly* decide whether or not bosses are still needed or bankers, or generals or a nuclear strike force, no, this cannot be, this is too risky, too dangerous. Besides, who can fail to note that rank and file committees are ideally suited to manipulation by demagogues and ultra-leftists. Meanwhile, we all know that voters are of course never manipulated, that campaign promises are always kept, and that parliaments vote in strict conformity with the wishes of the electorate. Real power in the hands of the "experienced" politicians and none at all in the hands of the "inexperienced" masses. Here, in the nutshell, is the wisdom of our great "democrats," prudent champions of indirect but of course ... representative democracy.

To insist on the deeply anti-democratic nature of bourgeois, petty bourgeois and reformist propaganda against direct workers' democracy, against rank and file committees, is to contribute to the indispensable and salutary task of ideological demystification. It is a shameful lie to portray the debate as one pitting supporters favoring more democracy against those favoring less. The truth is just the opposite.

Revolutionary Marxists and those in favor of the revolutionary path with the exception of Stalinist-Maoists (are they still in favor of the revolutionary path?) favor the *extension and not restriction* of rights, freedoms and political power of the masses and the citizenry not only in the economic, social and cultural realm, but particularly and especially in the political realm. They favor the transfer of power currently wielded and exercised by permanent

bureaucratic apparatuses (the well-known state machinery) to masses of organized citizens elected and recallable at any moment by the will of the voters.

The Initiative of the Masses

This is the meaning of Lenin's thesis developed in **State and Revolution**, that the workers' state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, is the first state in the history of humanity that must begin to wither away as soon as it is born. This withering away is precisely the spectacular broadening of direct democracy at the rank and file level. This becomes realizable only under definite material and political conditions: a reduction in the length of the working day, plurality of political parties and tendencies, unhindered access to the mass media, the right to exercise all fundamental democratic liberties. These desiderata are indispensable for the real, and not formal and largely bogus operation of workers' councils.

We will be told that we have skirted the more modest issue, raised by Althusser, of "popular committees." We do not believe so. There is an organic link, an internal coherence between a communist political orientation systematically favoring mass initiatives at the rank and file level *and* their self-organization in day to day struggles. There is an organic link between the conception, shared by Marx and Lenin, of the seizure of power by the proletariat, and the model of the Workers' State of tomorrow, of socialist democracy and of socialist construction as an immediate

task that we defend in the working class. Whoever does not see this coherence and seeks to sidestep it can only expect terrible disappointments not only among the masses but in the vanguard as well. It serves as a lodestar in proletarian and popular struggles even in the absence of revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situations. *The masses must learn how to organize independently*, and how can they if not through the experience of self-organization acquired in the course of struggle. Only through multiplying and generalizing the practice of holding general assemblies at the work place (and in the community, among students, etc.): only by multiplying and generalizing the practice of democratically elected strike committees by general assemblies of strikers; only by multiplying and generalizing the practice of the united rank and file committees to which Althusser refers, can this training be obtained. Workers' councils will spring up only through the accumulation of such experiences acquired bit by bit, yesterday and today.

To this unified and coherent conception of the self-organization of the masses in the course of partial struggles, of the socialist revolution and socialist construction, corresponds an equally well defined conception of what a genuine communist party is and what a genuine communist politics is. This conception can be summed up as: *The Party aids the class's self-organization and self-rule without ever substituting itself for it*. The Party argues for its (correct) political line within the committees and councils. It can hope to win over the majority of workers to this only if conditions are favorable and if the line is correct! If it does not win them over or if it loses influence among them, then the class struggle, revolution, and the construction of socialism will enter into severe crises. These will be either partially overcome or not overcome at all. But the party must struggle in the class by political means only and never

by administrative or repressive means. *All power to councils and committees not all power to the party*: such is the conclusion.

This does not at all diminish the decisive importance of the revolutionary party in the class struggle, in the overthrow of capitalism and in the construction of socialism. On the contrary, it underlines even more its vital importance. The spontaneity of the masses by itself does not and cannot solve the key problems facing the future of humanity. But a genuine communist party is nothing other than the vanguard of the working class on the road to its self-organization and self-emancipation and not the substitute or manipulator of the class. This is the essence of the question.

“Natural Leaders”

Understood in this way the revolutionary party, far from being a self-proclaimed vanguard, can become one only insofar as *it wins for itself a vanguard role within the class as it really is*. There is nothing arrogant and sectarian about a vanguard proletarian leader who by definition must learn how to win the attention, the esteem and finally the political trust of his fellow workers. He does so not merely thanks to his militancy, but by his knowledge, his tactical and organizational abilities, and his personal gifts as a “natural leader.” He must be the product of an authentic process of selection within the class.

An authentic communist party is one which gathers within it the maximum number of “natural leaders” of the working class at the work place. It gives them the education and political experience necessary for them to transcend their narrow personal experiences, inevitably fragmentary, so that they may contribute the entire range of their own experiences and initiatives toward not only consolidating and building their party, but equally toward the development of the consciousness of the class as a whole. For this they must be able to exercise their judgement and retain a critical and independent intellect.

Here we are at the heart of the matter. No qualitative progress is possible either in building such a communist party or allowing free scope to the class struggle without an unbridled development of the most varied forms of workers’ independent organizations, that is, without unified rank and file committees. By refusing to encourage the formation of “popular committees” the leaders of the PCF had right from the start contributed decisively toward the failure of effecting the “important change” and getting rid of the Giscard-Barre regime in France, regardless of the future evolution of social democratic leaders and their tactical stance with respect to the PCF.

Behind this refusal lies a whole series of fundamental, strategic alternatives and choices which Althusser does not analyze but which we will have to dwell on. They are tied to the very nature of the “change” that is sought.

There is a reason here to bring to light a striking contradiction in the position that the leadership of the PCF defends. Speaking at the festival of **Avantgarde** George Marchais exclaimed: “Look at what’s happening right now. Everywhere, in every organization, in every region, discontent is growing and the struggle takes on a sharpness, a militancy and a determination rarely attained.”

Now this tide of discontent and protest is not solely directed against individual employers, against lay-offs and speedups, against the nibbling away of purchasing power and deteriorating conditions of work and life. It is also aimed at the government's policies as a whole, particularly at the scandalous rate hikes in the public services and in price increases which were implemented by Barre after an electoral campaign where such inflation, it was said, would come only in the event of a victory of the Left.

Marchais recognizes that this vast movement of protest is in fact the 3rd run-off of the elections, a defiant protest against bourgeois rule. But how can one take it on by isolated and fragmented strikes? Isn't it obvious that the protest movement must be unified and centralized in order for it to reach its goal? Isn't it obvious that very important allies of the working class must join this movement: women, youth, environmentalists? Isn't it right to think that this unification can only occur within the framework of unified rank and file committees when it has utterly failed to occur within an electoral one? We wager that George Marchais, in between insults and slander about the manipulation of dissidents with the PCF by the bourgeoisie, will most likely refuse to answer such a clear and elementary question. In one fell swoop he will have shown just who – Marchais himself, the communist dissidents or the far left – is side-stepping the burning questions of the moment: how to get rid of Giscard-Barre and their policies responsible for misery and oppression.

Note

1. The articles by Louis Althusser which Mandel refers to have been translated into English by Patrick Camiller as *What Must*

Change in the Party and published in **New Left Review 109**,
May-June 1978, pp.19-45.
