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Marxism and Althusser

# 1970: Althusser corrects Marx

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

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**Written during 1969, this essay criticizes Althusser's interpretation of the 'mature' Marx as breaking with the influence of Hegel and with the concept of alienation. Without denying the discontinuity in Marx's thinking, Mandel thought that Marx based his analysis on a materialist interpretation of Hegel's dialectic. Mandel argued that rather than abandoning the notion of alienation, Marx changed this concept from an anthropological to a historical, materialist one. A 'the call to revolutionary action by the proletariat' replacing a 'philosophical conclusion on the plane of thoughts, ideas, intellectual work'. [1]**

Althusser however had transformed Marxism into something 'static', without understanding that its basis is 'the historically perishable nature of all 'structures''. [2]

Writing in the aftermath of May 68, this was a discussion that for Mandel had direct political implications.

The publication of the first volume of Marx's *Capital* in paperback (in French) is an important event. [3] It is evidence of the growing popularity of Marxist ideas, or more precisely, evidence of the fact that bourgeois publishing houses are conscious of the massive demand that they can satisfy in this sphere, conscious of their capacity to transform *Capital* into a mass of commodities whose exchange value (and the surplus value which it contains) is easily realisable on the market.

Marcuse grieves when he discovers in this phenomenon the diabolical ability of bourgeois society in our epoch to integrate all the writers of the left and even leftists (of which Marx remains the prototype). We believe that he is wrong.

The fact that 699 pages of closely-typed paper are sold in some tens of thousands of copies and gain profit for capitalist publishers confirms of course the tendency of bourgeois society to transform into commodities everything which it can lay its hands on; the promotion of the sale of *Capital* as a financial undertaking is only possible, however, because this book satisfies a social demand, because in fact it has a use value. This use value of *Capital* is not of course the consolidation of the socio-economic system based on generalised commodity production, that is the capitalist mode of production. On the contrary, the use value of *Capital* is the demystification of that mode of production and contributing in this fashion to its destruction and overthrow.

In this sense the publication of *Capital* in paperback is a witness not to the strength but to the growing contradictions of bourgeois society, just as Lenin's famous witticism according to which the capitalist before the last will sell the rope to hang the last one is not a proof of the ability of the bourgeoisie to integrate everything, even weapons to fight itself with. And it does not just evidence this in a general abstract meaning of the term but in a far more exact sense.

The growing response to Marxist publications in France is a product of May '68, a product of the revolutionary crisis which shook French capitalist society and which considerably increased scepticism about the chances of survival of this society. If a section of the capitalist class sees in it a way of rapidly accumulating *Capital* before the flood sweeps it away with the rest of its brothers, fellow thieves and collaborators, so much the better for them! There's no reason to complain, in fact exactly the opposite.

The paperback does not gain very much, however, from the Preface with which Louis Althusser introduces it. Of

course, not everything is bad about this introduction. There are some useful and learned pieces of advice in it, although they should be treated cautiously. The object of *Capital* is precisely delimited; the analysis of the capitalist mode of production, of a particular and specific mode of production, and not the analysis of any 'general laws' which regulate the economic life of humanity in every epoch. The nature of surplus value - one of the essential economic discoveries of Marx - is summarised in a succinct, correct manner. The link between *Capital* and Lenin's analysis of the world imperialist system is sketched, although incompletely. [4] The importance and reality of total social *Capital* are correctly put into focus. Althusser knows his Marx and of course it is preferable to see *Capital* prefaced by someone who at least knows what it's about, rather than by a writer who would see in *Capital* merely the corrected continuation of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, or an essay on the necessity of reorganising society on the basis of aprioristic moral principles.

Having said this, we must add that this foreword suffers from a series of fundamental faults which the reading of Marx by Althusser contains. And it offers us the opportunity to pose some of its weaknesses in the shape of a warning as much for the readers of *Capital* as for the works of Louis Althusser.

The "shortcomings" of the first volume of *Capital*

Louis Althusser expresses a mitigated judgment for the book he prefaces. Of course, Volume One of *Capital* is a work of genius, a revolutionary work of historical import. But it also does not go far enough. Our severe critic summarises in this way his opinion on these insufficiencies:

*Volume One contains further theoretical difficulties, linked to the preceding ones or to other problems.*

*For example, the theory of the distinction which has to be introduced between value and the value-form; for example, the theory of the socially necessary quantity of labour; for example, the theory of simple and compound labour; for example, the theory of social needs, etc. For example, the theory of the organic composition of Capital. For example, the famous theory of the 'fetishism' of commodities and its later generalization.*

All these questions – and many others – constitute real, objective difficulties to which Volume One gives either provisional or partial solutions. Why this incompleteness? (p. 88-89)

Althusser gives two reasons; first because Marx had the whole of *Capital* in mind when he wrote Volume One and he could not put all four volumes in the first; hence the anticipatory character of the analysis (Althusser carefully avoids mentioning that an exposition of all the economic discoveries of Marx in one volume is in the *Grundrisse* which he does not like much because it is too much marked by Hegelianism). Finally, because *Capital* itself bears "survivals in Marx's language and even in his thought of the influence of Hegel's thought" (p. 89)

Here then are *Capital* and poor Marx himself in the dock; must we burn these heretics or not? Is our Grand Inquisitor already preparing the stake from which only the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and *Marginal Notes on Wagner's 'Lehrbuch der Politischen Ökonomie'* escape? Doubtless the reduction of "pure Marxism" to these two occasional and polemical works of Marx has so very incongruous a character that even a man like Althusser, in general bereft of a sense of humour, recoils before the enormous burst of laughter that he risks provoking. We won't burn *Capital* then; well simply declare Volume One inadequate (but not just Volume One, as we'll see in a moment).

The inquisitor, however, if he has a heavy hand, has also a clumsy one. The example that Althusser chooses to unmask the Hegelian influence on *Capital* reveals Althusser his own inadequate assimilation of Marxism. It is the beginning of *Capital* that he considers Hegelian:

*In the grip of a Hegelian conception of science (for Hegel, all science is philosophical and therefore every true science has to found its own beginnings), Marx then thought that the principle that "every beginning is difficult ... holds in all sciences". In fact, Volume One Part I follows a method of presentation whose difficulty largely derives from this Hegelian prejudice. Moreover, Marx redrafted this beginning a dozen times before giving it its 'definitive' form – as if he was struggling with a difficulty which was not just one of presentation – and with good reason. (p. 87).*

Now, what is this all about? It concerns the fact that Marx began the analysis of *Capital* by an analysis of the commodity. Is this a concession to the Hegelian conception of science? Certainly not. It is the expression of a concept of history founded on dialectical materialism. The point is not that a science should found its own beginning (the idealist dialectic) but to search for the secrets of a mode of production in its historical, material and social origins (materialist dialectic). The fundamental weakness of Althusser resides in his refusal to distinguish the two methods, which is because of his suspicions about the materialist dialectic as being Hegelian, and in his *de facto* rejection of the dialectic for these reasons.

Why did Marx begin *Capital* by an analysis of commodities, not as a Hegelian but precisely as a Marxist? Because contrary to Althusser he did not want to analyse the capitalist mode of production as something static, as an immobile structure, separated from the past and the future. What he sought to do has been summarized with "much accuracy" by Marx himself in the following formula: "to illuminate the laws which regulate the birth, life, growing and death of a given social organism and its replacement by another superior order". [5] And as soon as one understands this scientific plan of Marx, the beginning of *Capital* ceases to be a simple Hegelian flirt, or worse, just a concession to an idealist conception of science which 'has to found its own beginnings', but becomes a reply to the question: where does capitalism come from? What are its essential contradictions?

Capitalism is the generalised production of commodities. It is the mode of production in which for the first time in the history of society labour force and all means of production become commodities. To discover the secrets of the commodity in the relations of production which create it, is to unveil the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist mode of production itself, for these contradictions are all contained in embryo in the commodity itself.

Althusser repeatedly quotes with pleasure Lenin as the pure and true interpreter of Marxist thought (freed from its Hegelian fetters). Now what is Lenin's opinion on the very subject that concerns us? Here is what he said about it in his works on the *Logic of Hegel*:

*Marx applied Hegel's dialectics in its rational form to political economy [...] Just as the simple form of value, the individual act of exchange of one given commodity for another, already includes in an undeveloped form all the main contradictions of Capitalism,—so the simplest generalisation, the first and simplest formation of notions (judgments, syllogisms, etc.) already denotes man's ever deeper cognition of the objective connection of the world. Here is where one should look for the true meaning, significance and role of Hegel's Logic. [6]*

And again of the same meaning:

*If Marx did not leave behind him a "Logic" (with a capital letter), he did leave the logic of Capital, and this ought to be utilised to the full in this question. In Capital, Marx applied to a single science logic, dialectics and the theory of knowledge of materialism [three words are not needed: it is one and the same thing] which has taken everything valuable in Hegel and developed it further.*

Commodity—money— capital production of absolute surplus value - production of relative surplus value-form

The history of capitalism and the analysis of the concepts summing it up.

The beginning—the most simple, ordinary, mass, immediate “Being”: the single commodity (“Sein” in political economy). The analysis of it as a social relation. A double analysis, deductive and inductive —logical and historical (forms of value).

Testing by facts or by practice respectively, is to be found here in each step of the analysis. Cf. concerning the question of Essence versus Appearance — price and value — demand and supply versus “value” (= crystallised labour) — wages and the price of labour-power. [7]

One can see quite clearly that Lenin approves of and highly appreciates the method that Marx used in the writing of Chapter One of *Capital*. He even sees there the specific characteristic of the materialist dialectic applied by Marx to the study of the capitalist relations of production. He does not define like Althusser this Marxist method simply as a research for abstract concepts permitting an analysis of an abstract reality (the capitalist mode of production in general). He defines it as the unity of two opposites, deduction and induction, as the synthesis of two opposites: “The history of capitalism and the analysis of the concepts which summarise it”, that is at one and the same time both abstract and general capitalism (without this work of abstraction one gets lost in a thousand insignificant and meaningless details, one is incapable of grasping the trends of historical development, one loses the prey for its shadow) and concrete historically developed capitalism (without this return to the concrete and to history, without this checking through practice, one gets lost in unreal abstractions, bearing no reference to social reality, which must be understood before it can be consciously changed).

We would be interested to hear what Althusser thinks of those passages full of the wisdom and profundity of Lenin on Marx’s method. Has Lenin himself also mistaken Hegelianism and Marxism? Is he also suspect of heresy? Must we burn him along with the first chapter of *Capital*?

## The labour theory of value, the organic composition of capitals and the laws of motion of capitalism

The lack of understanding that Louis Althusser shows with respect to the first chapter of Volume One of *Capital*, and his rejection of the materialist dialectic, integrating abstract deductive analysis and historical genetic analysis, leads him more over to several serious theoretical errors. Two of these errors appear in his introduction to the Garnier-Flammarion pocketbook edition of *Capital*.

When he is accounting for “the great theoretical difficulties of Volume I”, above all those which are concentrated in the terrible Section One, on the subject of the famous labour theory of value, he states:

*Let me very briefly give the principles of a solution.*

*Marx’s “labour theory of value” which all bourgeois “economists” and ideologists have used against him in their scornful condemnations, is intelligible, but only as a special case of a theory which Marx and Engels called the “law of value” or the law of the distribution of the available labour power between the various branches of production, a distribution indispensable to the reproduction of the conditions of production. (p. 87)*

The “solution” which Althusser gives is particularly unfortunate. It is contrary to the letter and to the spirit of the writings of Marx and Engels on this question. *Nowhere* does Marx talk about a “law of value” as a general theory applying to every society. What Marx explains is that every human society must effect a certain economy of labour

time, a more or less proportional distribution of this quantity between different branches of social and economic activity. But this general law - it is indeed one - must precisely not be confused with the law of value, which is only one particular application of this law to a specific type of socio-economic organisation, a society based on the production of commodities.

Althusser refers to the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* as Marx's most mature economic text. If he had wished to pay attention to the question of the Law of Value, he would have noticed that Marx wrote there:

*Within the co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labour employed on the products appear here as the value of these products, as a material quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labour no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of total labour.* [8] VIII

In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx states explicitly that commodity production and the production of value exist only because this total social labour is fragmented into private labours executed independently of each other. (p. 69 of the Flammarion edition of *Capital*). [9] And here is the whole sense of the famous "law of value": it fulfils the function of establishing spontaneously that proportional division of the labour force between different economic activities which, in a non-market society, is consciously realised by the collective, whether this be by of means habit, customs and ritual in primitive society or by the socialist plan (based on the associated producers) to take up Marx's formula again.

It is not permissible then to confuse the general law with its particular form of application under the reign of commodity production. Far from being a particular application of a more general law called the 'law of value', the labour theory of value explains precisely why and how this law of value succeeds the direct economy of labour time, which is the rule of pre-market societies. But to be able to admit that, Althusser would have to reintroduce history into *Capital* which he obstinately refuses to do. Most of all, he would have to admit that Chapter One of Volume One (where all that is explained in a profound manner, albeit in a language which makes understanding difficult sometimes) is more than a simple flirt with Hegelian terminology.

Let us add that the grave theoretical error committed by Althusser over the question of the Law of Value is not without relationship to his Stalinist ideological origins, with his ambivalent and ambiguous relationship with respect to Stalinism. We know that it was Stalin who brought an appearance of orthodoxy to this fundamental revision of Marxism, which consists in affirming that the law of value applies just the same in the Soviet economy (and even in all socialist economy).

Althusser promises us an analysis of what is "called by a name which is not at all Marxist, the 'period of the cult of personality'." We kindly advise him to begin rather from this question and from the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* to understand the roots of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet state. To try to explain this by the particular crime of Stalin of presumably making Marx's *Preface to Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* his main text of reference would surely lead Althusser into a theoretical dead end.

Althusser's second theoretical error concerns the question of the organic composition of *Capital*. He discovers a "very serious misunderstanding" which "relates to the necessity of reading Marx's text *very closely*". According to Althusser, the vast majority of readers of *Capital* would have seen in the organic composition of capital (the relationship between constant capital and variable capital) a theory of the firm, or to employ Marxist terms, a theory of the unity of production. Yet Marx said very clearly the contrary: he always talks of the composition of total social capital, but in the context of a concrete example.

It is possible that certain bourgeois economists see in the question of the organic composition of capital above

everything else, or even only, a theory of the firm. Althusser is right to call them to order (we mention to him, however, that almost all commentators who lay claim to the name of Marxism have avoided this mistake, which seems elementary). But Althusser is wrong when he concludes from it that Marx always talks about the social organic composition of capital, that is to say of capital in its entirety and only of this social capital.

The whole Marxist theory of the equalisation of the rate of profit, that is the whole Marxist theory of capitalist competition, is founded on the existence of an organic composition of capital that is different in different branches of production. One finds the concept again all through Part Two of Volume Three of *Capital* (Chapters 8 to 11). It plays equally a principal role in the Marxist theory of land rent. In order not to tire the reader with numerous quotations, we will limit ourselves to one only:

*Now, if capitals in different spheres of production, calculated in per cent, i. e., capitals of equal magnitude, produce unequal profits in consequence of their different organic composition, then it follows that the profits of unequal capitals in different spheres of production cannot be proportional to their respective magnitudes, or that profits in different spheres of production are not proportional to the magnitude of the respective capitals invested in them.* [10]

We mention this error of Althusser not out of pedantry, but because it relates to the author's methodological weakness. We have already said that Althusser's introduction does not mention the aspect of the object of *Capital* that is the chief aspect for Marx himself: the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production. Now these laws of motion follow from competition (that is, private ownership of the means of production and generalised commodity production). But the word "competition" is scarcely mentioned in the introduction. It does not appear for example in Pages 81 and 82 to explain the reasons why capital develops the machine system more and more. Althusser is correct to give great importance to the idea of social capital as created by Marx. But he is wrong to lose sight of the fact that for Marx capitalism means an aggregate social capital which can appear only in the form of different capitals, that is to say which always presupposes competition. [11] Here we have the fundamental methodological error revealed by this 'small' error concerning the organic composition of capital. [12]

## Althusser and historical materialism

This same methodological error is not without relation to the most astonishing passage that the Introduction contains: a full-scale attack on Marx's *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

*A last trace of Hegelian influence, this time a flagrant and extremely harmful one (since all the theoreticians of "reification" and "alienation" have found in it the "foundation" for their idealist interpretations of Marx's thought): the theory of fetishism (The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof, Part I, Chapter 1, Section 4).*

The reader will realize that I cannot go into these different points, each of which demands a whole demonstration to itself. Nevertheless, I have signalled them, for, along with the very ambiguous and (alas!) famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), the Hegelianism and evolutionism (evolutionism being a poor man's Hegelianism) in which they are steeped have made ravages in the history of the Marxist Workers' Movement. I note that Lenin did not give in to the influence of these Hegelian-evolutionist pages *for a single moment*, for otherwise he could not have fought the betrayal of the Second International, built up the Bolshevik Party, conquered State power at the head of the mass of the Russian people in order to install the dictatorship of the proletariat, or begun the construction of socialism. (p. 92)

Althusser is not lucky with his *bete noires*. Yesterday it was the Marxist theory of alienation. The assertion of Althusser according to which alienation is a pre-Marxist concept which practically no longer appears in the works

after the 1844 Manuscripts (*Pour Marx*) shows itself to be untenable; we have shown this in *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx. 1843 to Capital*. [13] Althusser acknowledges this now in his introduction. [14] But he does so only to pass over to a new untenable *bete noire*: “that not for one moment would Lenin have succumbed to the influence of these evolutionary Hegelian pages” that the *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* constitutes.

Now without looking for all the passages of Lenin's work where these Hegelian evolutionary passages are quoted with approval, it is sufficient to mention one revealing text. Written during the second half of 1914, in a biography of Marx which summarises the whole Marxist doctrine, Lenin wrote as follows: “In the preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx gives an integral formulation of the fundamental principles of materialism as applied to human society and its history, in the following words...” [15]

A long quotation of the most striking passages of this Preface follows, indeed the longest quotation from Marx contained in this whole text of Lenin which mentions moreover all the principle works of Marx known at this time. The least that one can say is that “these Hegelian evolutionary pages”, far from not having influenced Lenin “for a single moment”, were considered by him (as they were indeed by most Marxists) as a complete formulation of the fundamental theses of historical materialism.

But Althusser's mishaps do not stop there. Since he considers this “complete formulation of the fundamental theses” of historical materialism as “Hegelian-evolutionary”, it is useful to quote a passage of the same text of Lenin on the subject of Marxism, which throws quite an interesting light on the manner which the idealist Lenin (or should one say the *gauchiste* Lenin?) conceptualised the links between evolutionism and Hegelianism:

*In our times, the idea of development, of evolution, has almost completely penetrated social consciousness, only in other ways, and not through Hegelian philosophy. Still, this idea, as formulated by Marx and Engels on the basis of Hegels' philosophy, is far more comprehensive and far richer in content than the current idea of evolution is. A development that repeats, as it were, stages that have already been passed, but repeats them in a different way, on a higher basis (“the negation of the negation”), a development, so to speak, that proceeds in spirals, not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions; “breaks in continuity”; the transformation of quantity into quality; inner impulses towards development, imparted by the contradiction and conflict of the various forces and tendencies acting on a given body, or within a given phenomenon, or within a given society; the interdependence and the closest and indissoluble connection between all aspects of any phenomenon (history constantly revealing ever new aspects), a connection that provides a uniform, and universal process of motion, one that follows definite laws—these are some of the features of dialectics as a doctrine of development that is richer than the conventional one. [16]*

Let us note in passing that in contrast to Althusser, Lenin imitates “Marx's folly” and integrates in his turn the “negation of the negation” into the laws of the dialectic. Althusser, following in Stalin's footsteps, believes that this wretched “negation of the negation” has not stopped creating havoc - but really how can one be astonished with the Marxist folly of Lenin? [17] Surely the passage that we have just quoted shows that Lenin, in contrast to Althusser, claims evolutionism for his own (this “poor man's Hegelianism” according to Althusser). And does not this same Lenin indulge in sin to the extent of preferring a particular type of evolutionism, which is precisely evolutionism as corrected by Hegel, namely a conception of evolution, of universal change, which sees in it not just a succession of gradual changes but also sharp changes by leaps? That is to say, a conception of evolution which integrates the concept of revolution, which conceives change as the union of continuity and discontinuity? It was Lenin's opinion that this brilliant content of Hegel's dialectic had been preserved by Marx and Engels (“rescued” as the founders of Marxism said themselves) by putting it back on its feet, that is in considering that the fundamental movement from which the theoretical work must begin is that of the material and objective reality of matter, nature and human society and not that of the Absolute Idea. Althusser has the right to express a different opinion, of course; but he has no right to present it under the guise of Marxism-Leninism, for Marx and Lenin have many times expressed the contrary opinion.



It is difficult to understand what elements of vulgar “evolutionism” (that is to say, opposed to the idea of transformation by jumps, leaps and revolutions) are present in the famous *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. On the contrary, we find ourselves confronted with a succinct account of the theory of social revolution, the universal form of passage from one mode of production to another. Is Althusser's criticism limited then to the fact that the formula “dictatorship of the proletariat” does not appear in it? If this was the case, however, he would be able to level the same criticism at *Capital* itself where one would search in vain for these words. Only people of bad faith could demand that the representatives of so complex and rich a theory as revolutionary Marxism should reproduce all the basic concepts of this theory in every one of their writings, independently of the object and specific function of them.

### *Althusser's motives*

Doubtless it will always remain a mystery to everyone (unless Althusser decides to enlighten us on the subject) why the influence that the *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* could have exercised on Lenin would have hindered him from fighting the betrayal of the Second International or to struggle successfully for the conquest of power in Russia, not to mention the obstacle that this *Preface* would have constituted in the way of the Leninist theory of the Party and in the construction of the Bolshevik Party. The real situation is that the scholastic ideas which Althusser opposes to the materialist dialectic of Marx and Lenin are very close to the mechanical evolutionism of a Kautsky or a Guesde and the other leaders of the Second International, which led them directly to the shameful capitulation of August 1914.

The *Preface to the Contribution* bases the possibility of social revolutions on the materialist finding of structural crises of the mode of production (conflicts between the development of the productive forces and the social relationships of production). That is the same fundamental approach which all revolutionary Marxists before and after 1914 followed in revealing the nature of imperialism as that of a regime leading to a structural crisis of the world capitalist system. It is by opposing to this fundamental methodological approach all kinds of mechanistic and partial sophisms (and forgetting this lesson of Hegel, taken up by Marx and Lenin) that leads one to consider the imperialist war as “in interdependence and close, indissoluble connection” with the aspects of one and the same phenomenon: the world crisis of the imperialist system. In this way, the Social Democrats could successively argue that imperialism was only one aspect among others of “monopoly capitalism”, that imperialist wars contain “elements” of national defence, that “the party should not cut itself off from the masses ‘drunken with chauvinism’”, to justify their shameful refusal to fight against the imperialist war, as they had solemnly pledged to do.

By starting from the same dialectical conception of the crisis of the imperialist system (of the capitalist mode of production functioning as a contradictory but unified totality on a world scale), Lenin was able in April 1917 to agree with Trotsky's brilliant prediction that it was precisely because of the backward state of Russia that the revolution there could lead in an 'uninterrupted' manner to the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. For in the era of fully developed imperialism, the domination of the imperialist monopolies of the world market and of the economy of the underdeveloped countries (where they are allied with the indigenous possessing classes) blocks the possibility of a capitalist growth of the productive forces in such countries. Imperialist domination thereby prevents a solution of the agrarian question within the framework of capitalism (through development of agriculture “in the American style”, as Lenin still thought on the eve of the First World War), and leaves these countries only the choice between stagnation in underdeveloped structures or the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the poor peasantry.

Althusser's Introduction does not mention these fundamental options that were at the basis of Leninist action in 1914 and 1917. Likewise, it objectively contradicts Lenin's fundamental option that was at the basis of *What is to be Done?* and the creation of the Bolshevik party. [18] When he approaches the concrete problems of working class and revolutionary strategy, it is only in a sterile scholastic form:

*a class struggle which is deliberately restricted* to the domain of economic struggle alone has always remained and will always remain a defensive one, i.e. one with no hope of ever overthrowing the capitalist regime. .... Only a political struggle can “reverse steam” and go beyond these limits, thereby ceasing to be a defensive struggle and becoming an offensive one. ... [This] has been the number-one question of the International Workers' Movement since it “fused” with Marxist theory. (p. 84)

Or even worse:

*Marx thus proves irrefutably ... from here to the revolutionary seizure of power ... the working class can have no other objective, and hence no other resource, than to struggle against the effects of exploitation produced by the growth of productivity, in order to limit these effects....* (p. 82)

If Lenin had limited himself to this scholasticism, he would certainly have produced neither *What is to be Done*, nor *Imperialism*, nor *State and Revolution!* Already the Communist Manifesto teaches us that any economic struggle of the proletariat is a political struggle, once it acquires a certain scope. On the other hand, any social democrat from Guy Mollet to Willy Brandt, not to mention Wilson and Spaak, will heartily applaud the notion that only a political struggle can “reverse steam”. Since World War I, the number-one question for the international workers movement is not to get lost in Byzantine distinctions between “economic struggles” and “political struggles”, between the “defensive” and the “offensive”, but to recognize that the epoch of capitalist decline makes it objectively possible, periodically, to transform recurrent large-scale proletarian struggles (be they economic or political) into struggles towards the overall contestation of the capitalist relations of production and the overthrow of the bourgeois state.

This is what Lenin and the founders of the Communist International taught. This is the “Hegelian”, that is to say dialectical, spirit of the famous Preface. It is also – by the way – the main lesson to be learned from May 1968 in France. Perhaps it is to avoid an open confrontation with this problem that Althusser is brought to “correct” Marx and Lenin? [19] The future will soon tell us.

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[1] Ernest Mandel, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx. 1843 to Capital*(London, 2015), p. 159.

[2] Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel. A rebel's dream deferred* (London, 2009), 129.

[3] Marx, *Le Capital*, Livre I. Paris 1969, Garnier Flammarion, pp. 699. Louis Althusser's introduction takes up pp. 7-30. Quotations from Althusser used here are from the translation by Ben Brewster, published in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* and online at [marxists.org](#). Page numbers given in the text refer to Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London, 1971).

[4] Althusser is correct to say that “capitalist exploitation in capitalist enterprises exists only as a simple part of a generalised system of exploitation”. But he could have referred to passages in *Capital* which allow a theory of unequal exchange to be based on this subject, and not only to those which refer to primitive accumulation.

[5] See the postscript to the 2nd German edition of Volume One of *Capital*, reproduced in part in the same paperback, p.583

[6] See Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, Volume 38 of the Fourth Edition of the Collected Works, pp. 178, 179. Online at [marxists.org](http://marxists.org).

[7] *Philosophical Notebooks*, Volume 38, p 317, 318. Online at [marxists.org](http://marxists.org).

[8] Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Online at [marxists.org](http://marxists.org).

[9] Editors note: This is specifically a reference to "As a general rule, articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labour of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work independently of each other. The sum total of the labour of all these private individuals forms the aggregate labour of society." (p. 165 of *Capital* Volume I (London, 1979). The French text reads: "En général, des objets d'utilité ne deviennent des marchandises que parce qu'ils sont les produits de travaux privés exécutés indépendamment les uns des autres. L'ensemble de ces travaux privés forme le travail social."

[10] Marx, *Capital* Volume 3, p. 114. Online at: [marxists.org](http://marxists.org).

[11] Marx, *Capital* Volume 3, p. 214. Online at [marxists.org](http://marxists.org).

[12] Let us point out another one of Althusser's mistakes. Concerning overtime, he writes: "Overtime seems to 'cost the capitalists a great deal' since they pay time-and-a quarter, time-and-a-half or even double time as compared with normal rates. But in reality it is to their advantage since it makes it possible to run the 'machines', which have a shorter life because of the rapidity of technological progress, twenty-four hours a day. In other words, overtime enables the capitalists to draw the maximum profit from 'productivity'."

Continuous production allows a more rapid depreciation (reproduction) of fixed capital, that is agreed. Marx explained that the total amount of annual surplus value depends not only on the mass of variable capital and the rate of surplus value, but also on the length of the reproduction cycle of circulating capital. Althusser should have mentioned this factor to make his argument intelligible. For to "run the machines twenty-four hours a day" in itself does not increase surplus value by a penny. Surplus value is only produced by living labour and not by machines. In order for overtime to increase capitalist profits, the rate of surplus value must be such that, in spite of overtime wage, the worker continues to produce surplus value. If overtime is paid at double the normal wage, for example, only a rate of surplus value in excess of 100 per cent makes the introduction of overtime profitable to the employers under normal conditions.

[13] Mandel, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx*, especially chapter 10, p. 176-184.

[14] P. 97 where Althusser coldly remarks that the *Grundrisse* is deeply marked by Hegel's thought.

[15] Lenin, *Karl Marx. A Brief Biographical Sketch With an Exposition of Marxism*, Chapter 2, "The Marxist Doctrine". Online at [marxists.org](http://marxists.org).

[16] *Ibidem*.

[17] "The same Hegelian influence comes to light in the imprudent formulation in Chapter 32 of Volume One Part VIII, where Marx, discussing the 'expropriation of the expropriators', declares, 'It is the negation of the negation.' Imprudent, since its ravages have not yet come to an end, despite the fact that Stalin was right, for once, to suppress 'the negation of the negation' from the laws of the dialectic, it must be said to the advantage of other, even more serious errors."

[18] By the absurd thesis according to which the workers have no difficulty in understanding the theory of surplus value, while the petty bourgeois intellectuals "who have no direct experience of capitalist exploitation, but who are, on the contrary, ruled in their practices and consciousness by the ideology of the ruling class, bourgeois ideology," cannot understand this theory (p. 9). Or further on: "nine-tenths of the ideas these intellectuals have in their heads about Marxism are false".

We have always thought that "the ruling ideology of every society is the ideology of the ruling class". For Althusser this primary truth of historical materialism becomes: "the dominant ideology of the ruling class is the ideology of the ruling class", in other words, an empty tautology. If the workers were, by the mere fact of their experience, liberated from the influence of the ideology of the ruling class, why would a vanguard party, a

Bolshevik party, a communist party be necessary? It would be sufficient to gather all the workers, so that they would spontaneously express, simply because they have “experience of exploitation”, the ready-made Marxist theory! Is it not from the opposite hypothesis, namely the predominant influence of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology on the workers as well, that Lenin explains in *What is to be Done?* the necessity for the vanguard party?

By the way, who is this Althusser who makes such strange assertions? He does not seem to be a worker from the Renault car factory. Could he be one of those sinister “academics”, of whom he himself says that 90 per cent of the ideas they have about Marxism are of necessity false? Could Althusser have wanted to expose, in a daring act of indirect self-criticism, how little we should care about his “Introduction”?

[19] We read this in the “Introduction”: *The question of wages is a question of class struggle. It is not settled 'by itself', but by class struggle: above all by the different forms of strike, eventually leading to general strike. Such a general strike is purely economic [sic] and therefore defensive (“a defence of the material and moral interests of the labourers”, a struggle against the double capitalist tendency to increase labour-time and reduce wages) or takes a political and therefore offensive form (struggle for the conquest of State power, socialist revolution and the construction of socialism); all those who know the distinctions made by Marx, Engels and Lenin know the difference between the political class struggle and the economic class struggle.* (p. 16).

Here the metaphysical scholasticism leads almost openly to apologetics. It is not a question of the general strike 'in the abstract'; it is the general strike of May 1968 that is referred to. The 'Marxist theorist' Althusser comes to the rescue of the reformist practitioners Waldeck-Rochet and Séguy, who would have been right not to “follow the *gauchistes*”, since it is necessary to know how to distinguish an “economic class struggle” from a “political class struggle”.

One can imagine the rebukes with which Lenin would have castigated our philosopher who strays into politics after having wandered for a long time in the desert of political economy. Offer us a little line then, just ten words, from Marx and Lenin, O dear master, to prove to us that those revolutionaries were following you in your metaphysical ramblings and were also conceiving of “defensive and economic general strikes” (again, we are dealing with a general strike with occupation of factories!).

Althusser's impudence is really boundless, when one knows that Lenin analyzed the way in which the Russian revolution of 1905 developed the combination of economic strikes and political strikes in mass strikes, and wrote that “It would be an irreparable mistake if the workers failed to understand the great singularity, the great significance, the great necessity, and the great fundamental importance of precisely such ‘intertwining’.[of economic and political strikes] (Lenin, *Economic and Political Strikes*, 1912. Online at [marxists.org](http://marxists.org)). It is true that on the basis of this Leninist conception of the mass strike, it is impossible to justify the policy of the PCF, in May 1968.