

Louis Althusser — Lenin and Philosophy

Part I. page 11

.... My discourse will not, therefore, be philosophical.

It will be, however, for good reasons which arise from the particular point in theoretical history we are now at, a discourse in (dans) philosophy. But this discourse in philosophy will not altogether be a discourse of (de) philosophy. It will be, or will attempt to be, a discourse on (sur) philosophy. This signifies why you Society has answered ~~by~~ wishes in inviting me here to present a Communication to you.

That which I wish to say to you will merit this title if, as I hope, I am able to communicate to you something on (sur) philosophy; in brief, those rudimentary elements necessary to the concept of a theory of philosophy. Theory: something which, in a certain sense, anticipates a science.

This is why, therefore, I ask that you give attention to my title: Lenin and philosophy. Not the philosophy of Lenin, but Lenin on philosophy. I believe, in effect, that what we will do with Lenin, though not without precedent, has never been achieved. Here is where we must begin in order to hold that sort of discourse which can anticipate what may one day be a non, philosophical theory of philosophy.

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II. P. LL

If such is the great importance of Lenin in regards to our present purpose, we can, perhaps, begin by rapidly settling an old question long pending between academic philosophy, meaning French academic philosophy, and Lenin. As I am also an academician, and because I teach philosophy, I too am one of those "entendeurs" to whom Lenin addressed his "salut."

To my knowledge, apart from Henri Lefebvre, who devoted an excellent work to him, French academic philosophy has not deigned to interest itself in the man who led the greatest political revolution in modern history, and who, in addition, made a long and conscientious analysis in Materialism and Empirio-criticism, of the work of our compatriots, H. Poincarre, H. Duhem, and A. Rey, to speak of a few.

I hope those of our teachers whom I've forgotten will pardon me, but I have not been able to find -- during the last half century -- (and) excepting articles by philosophers or scientific communists) -- more than a few pages on Lenin: Sartre in Les Temps Modern of 1946 (Materialism and Revolution) Merleau-Ponty (in Les Aventures de la dialectique) and Ricoeur (in an article in Esprit).

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Ricoeur speaks here with respect for State and Revolution, but does not seem to me to have treated the "philosophy" of Lenin at all. Sartre says that the materialist philosophy of Engels and Lenin is "impensable," in the sense of an Unding, a notion which cannot be proved by simple reason because it is a naturalist metaphysic, pre-critical, pre-kantian, and pre-hegelian, but he generously recognizes the function of a Platonic "myth" which helps the proletarians to be revolutionaries. Merleau-Ponty dispenses with the question in a simple word: the philosophy of Lenin is an "expedient."

I will assuredly be disliked for raising the question, be it with all the required tact, but the actions of the French philosophical tradition for 150 years in cloaking its past is quite equal to all its open actions. It must be that the sight of this tradition is so difficult to support that not one French philosopher to this day has dared to make public its history.

N.L.?

*But why not
just PD's views
on their way to
philosophy*

Academic philosophy cannot, therefore, tolerate Lenin (or Marx) for two reasons, which are in fact one and the same reason. On the one hand, it cannot stand the idea that it has to learn something from (de) politics and from a particular politics. And on the other hand, it cannot support the idea that philosophy could be an object of a theory, that is to say of objective knowledge.

That this is, in the bargain, a politician like Lenin, an (innocent) "Naif", and one self-educated in philosophy, who had the audacity to advance the idea that a theory of philosophy is essential to a truly conscious (conscientie) and responsible practice (pratique) of philosophy, this evidently passes the bounds... (passer le mesure.)

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Academic philosophy or other, now never again can they be mistaken for each other (or, there can be no deception;) if it so fiercely resists this apparently accidently encounter with a simple political man who proposed to begin to know what ^{is} philosophy, it is because this encounter touches precisely the most sensitive point, the point at which it was most intolerable, the point of repulsion (du refoulé), that point upon which philosophy has traditionally been only

rumination — very precisely at the point where, to know itself in its theory, philosophy must recognize that it is only politics invested with a style (form?), politics carried on in a particular style, political rumination of a certain style.

It finds that Lenin is the first to make that clear. It finds also that he could only say it because he is a political, not just any political, but a proletarian leader. This is why Lenin is intolerable to philosophical rumination, just as intolerable, and I weigh my words carefully, as Freud is intolerable to psychological rumination.

One sees that, between Lenin and established philosophy, it is not only the misunderstandings and conflicts of circumstances, nor even the indignant reactions of irascible professors of philosophy, to whom a son of a school master, an insignificant lawyer — become revolutionary, declared without "caution" that they are, in their mass, petit bourgeois intellectual functionaries within the bourgeois educational system, as attendant ideologues, inculcating the masses of young students with the dogmas, also critics and post-critics, if you wish, of the ideology of their ruling classes. Between Lenin and the established philosophy there is a properly intolerable relation: that over which philosophy reigns is stung to the quick by that which it seeks to repel: poli

But to see how the relations between Lenin and philosophy arrived at this point, it is necessary to take a small detour, and, before speaking further about Lenin and philosophy in general, we must establish (fix) the place of Lenin in marxist philosophy, accordingly, to conjure up the state of marxist philosophy:

It is not a question which I can but outline here.

We are not in a position to do that here, and for an already determined reason: that is because it is justifiably necessary that we know just what this "X" is, of which there will be a question of making a history, and knowing this, that we be in a state of knowing whether or not this "X" has a History, that is to say, has a right to have a history.

Rather than outline, even very briefly, the "history" of marxist philosophy, I would like to make apparent, by running through those texts and those works which followed one another in History, the existence of a symptomatic difficulty.

This difficulty has caused ~~the~~ celebrated debates, debates which continue to this day. We could, to demonstrate its existence, run through the most common titles of these debates: what is the basis of marxist history? a science or a philosophy? Is marxism, at its root a philosophy,

a "philosophy of praxis," but what then of its pretensions to science, as proclaimed by Marx? On the contrary, is Marxism at its root, a science, historical materialism, science of history, but then what of its philosophy, dialectical materialism? Or further, if one accepts the classic distinction between historical materialism (science) and dialectical materialism (philosophy), how are we to think of this distinction: in traditional or new terms? Further, what is the relationship between materialism and the dialectic in dialectical materialism? Or, what is the dialectic: a simple method? or the entire philosophy?

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This difficulty which has nourished a great many debates, is symptomatic. I would suggest by this that it gives proof of a reality which is in part enigmatic, of which the classic questions which I have repeated are a certain treatment, that is to say, a certain interpretation. Very schematically, we say, that the classic formulations interpret this difficulty solely in terms of philosophic questions, and therefore, within what we have called philosophical rumination — therefore it is, without any doubt, necessary to consider these difficulties (and thereby by-passing the philosophical questions which caused these difficulties ?? E.) to consider them in terms of a problem, that is to say, in terms of objective

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knowledge (and therefore scientifically). Keeping this in
mind, it is not possible to understand the confusion
which has made thinking premature in terms of the philo-
sophical questions brought to bear on the essential theory
of Marxism, that is to say, the insistence that it is a
certain problem which has been able to produce philosophical
effects, but which, in the ~~the~~ final analysis, is not at
all a philosophical question.

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If I employ, by design, those terms which imply these
distinctions (scientific problem, philosophical question)
it is not to pass judgement on those who have helped to
sustain this confusion, because we have all supported it
and we have all had cause to think that it was, and is,
inevitable, to the point where marxist philosophy itself
has been and is in the same position, and for good reason. 22?

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Therefore, it will suffice to cast a glance at the
chapter which is Marxist philosophy, since the Theses on
Feurbach, to see that it offers a singular enough spectacle.

H.L.
If I will be permitted to leave aside the works of the
young Marx (I know I'm demanding a large concession from
some, in spite of the force of my reasons), and to
take up the declaration of Marx that the German Ideology
constituted the "settling of the score with his prior
philosophic beliefs (conscience)" and therefore a rupture

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and a transformation in his thought, -- and if one wishes to consider what happened between the Theses on Feurbach (1845) and AntiDuhring by Engels (1877), one cannot help but be struck by the long period of the philosophical void.

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The XI^e Theses on Feurbach proclaimed: "Philosophy must not merely interpret the world, it must act to transform it." This simple phrase seems to promise a new philosophy, which was not interpretation but transformation of the world. This is, moreover, the way it has been read, more than a half century later by Iabriola, then later by Gramsci, who has defined marxism as essentially a new philosophy, a "philosophy of praxis." Perhaps it is necessary to recognize the truth, that this prophetic phrase did not immediately produce any new philosophy, in any case, any new philosophic discussion. On the contrary, it opened only a long period of philosophic silence. This long silence was only publicly broken because of what has all the appearances of an unexpected accident, an intervention precipitated by Engels, forced to enter into ideological battle against Duhring, constrained to "meet him on his own ground," to make known the political consequences of the the "philosophical" writings of a deputed professor of mathematics, who was having a dangerous ~~influence~~

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influence on German Socialism.

There, therefore, is a strange situation, a Thesis which seemed to announce a revolution in philosophy — then a philosophic silence of 30 years, and finally several unexpected (improvised) chapters of philosophic polemic, published by Engels for political and ideological reasons, an introduction to a remarkable summary of the scientific theories of Marx.

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Must we conclude that we are the victims of an illusion of philosophic retrospect in reading the XI^e of the Theses as an announcement of a philosophic revolution? Yes and No.

But before saying no, I believe it is first necessary to

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say seriously, Yes. Yes, we are, in essence, victims of

a philosophical illusion. That which is announced in the

Theses on Feuerbach was, in the necessary philosophic

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language, a declaration of rupture with all "interpretive"

philosophy, a far different thing than a new philosophy:

a new science, the science of history, for which Marx was

going to present the first foundations, although in a

fragile form, in the German Ideology.

The philosophical void which followed the announcement in the XI Theses is, therefore, the fullness (le plein) of a science, it is the fullness of an intense work, long and painful, which created an unprecedented science, which

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was going to consume the rest of Marx's life, to the last drafts of Capital, which he was never able to complete. This is the scientific fullness which represents the primary profound reason for the XI Theses, even ⁹⁵ it prophetically announced an event capable of profoundly effecting philosophy (capable de marquer la philosophie), it could not justify philosophy, but had to proclaim the radical suppression (abolition?) of all existing philosophy, to bring to the fore the theoretical beginnings of Marx's scientific discovery.

This radical suppression of philosophy is, as everyone knows, ^{deal with} set down at length in The German Ideology. It is necessary, Marx says here, to dispense with all the philosophical nonsense, and to begin the study of positive reality, to tear away the veils from philosophy and to see at ~~the~~ last, reality as it is.

The German Ideology bases the abolition of philosophy on the theory that philosophy is hallucination and mystification, or like a dream, created in what I call the daytime naps (les restes diurnes) of the real history of concrete men, "les restes diurnes" clothed in a purely imaginary existence, where the order of things is completely reversed.

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Philosophy, like religion and ethics is only ideology. it has no history, all that seems to go on in it, in reality goes on outside of it, in the only real history, that of the material life of men. Science is that same reality, known by its actions, which dethrone and destroy the ideologies which violate it: in the first ranks of these ideologies is philosophy.

First Inference. If Marx truly opened up a new continent in scientific knowledge, his scientific discovery must have provoked some major alteration in philosophy. The XI Theses was, perhaps, ahead of its time: it announced loud and clear a major event in philosophy. It seems that this could (puisse) be the case.

Second Inference. Philosophy only exists in its backwardness (dans son retard) in respect to the challenge of science (sur la provocation scientifique). Marxist philosophy must therefore be backward in relation to the marxist science of history. It seems clear that this is the case. As testimony to this is the void of 30 years between the Theses on Feurbach and Antiduhring, ~~and~~ this is also testified to by the subsequent diffuse rambling on the subject, as we have continued, in the company of many others, to do nothing but mark time.

Third Inference. We have some chances of finding, in the early ~~stages~~ developments of the marxist science, some theoretical elements more advanced than we might think which should be worked out, with the perspective we now have of the "backwardness" of marxist philosophy. (meaning that marxist philosophy is behind the times in view of the development of ~~the~~ "scientific marxism. B.) ((there doesn't seem to be a precise english equiv

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N.I.
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Lenin said that it is in Marx's Capital that we must look for his dialectic, -- by which he meant the Marxist philosophy itself. It must have been here, in Capital, that the new philosophic categories are forged or achieved; they are surly in this work, in a "practical state". ("etat pratique.") It seems that this could be the case. It is necessary to read Capital and start to work.

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We can now say it. The time that Marx couldn't find, the philosophic hurriedness of Engels, the dictates of ideological struggle, or Lenin's having to content himself with fighting his enemies on their own ground, all of these might be good excuses, but they do not provide a reason.

The final reason, ~~x~~ is that the times were not ripe, that the night had not fallen, and that neither Marx himself, nor Engels, nor ~~Engels~~ Lenin were able any longer to write the great philosophic work lacking to marxism. One way or another, ~~they~~ if they came after the science on which it depends, they came too late (to create) an indispensable philosophy, which could only have been born ^{too} late (retard).

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From this concept of necessary "lateness" (retard) all can be made clear, all, including the misunderstanding of those who, like the young Lukacs, and Gramsci, and many other who don't have their genius, who have waxed impatient (pousse l'impatience) before this too slowly born philosophy, to the point of declaring that it was already born a long time ago, that its origins, that of Theses on Feuerbach, and therefore well before the beginnings of the science of marxism itself — and who, when asked for proof of this, simply say that all science is a "super-structure," that all existing science is therefore, at its roots, positivist because it is bourgeois, that the marxist "science" can be nothing but philosophic, and ~~that~~ marxism a philosophy, a post-hegelian philosophy, or a "philosophy of praxis."

From this concept of necessary "lateness" (retard), many other difficulties can also be cleared up, even to the political history of marxist organizations, of their failures and their crises. If it is true, as the whole marxist tradition professes, that the greatest event in the history of the class struggle — that is to say practically in human history — is the union of marxist theory and the workers movement, one can understand (on concoit) that the

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internal equilibrium of this unit could be menaced by these theoretical errors that are called "deviations" be they unconscious; One can understand the political importance ^{of these} ~~errors~~ one can understand the political importance of these ~~errors~~ fierce theoretical debates, unloosed in the socialist, then communist, movements, that which Lenin called simply "nuances". Because, as he said in What is to be Done, "on a simple nuance could depend the future of the Social Democratic Party, for a long time, for many years."

We could be tempted therefore to think that marxist theory is what it is, a science and a philosophy, and the philosophy having become "behind" (ayant du retarder) the science, which ~~was~~ checked its development; that at bottom these theoretical deviations were inevitable, not only because of the effects of the class struggle on the theory, but because of the internal time-lag (decalage) of the theory itself.

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Part III, p. 55

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It is in this manner that Lenin answer, and he is the first to do so, because no one, even Engels, did it before him, since the prophecy of the XI^o Theses. He replied in the "style" of his philosophic practice (pratique). A savage practice (pratique) in the sense that Fraud spoke of a savage analysis, which did not furnish the theoretic titles of its operations, and which ~~made explicit~~ ^{denounced} the philosophy of "interpretation" of the world, that one could call the philosophy of the deneqation. A savage ~~practice~~ practice perhaps greater than one might wish, but what has not begun by being savage?

The fact is that this practice (pratique) is a new philosophic practice: new in the sense that it is no longer rumination which is only the practice of deneqation, or the philosophy which never leaves off intervening "politically" in the debates where the real destiny of science is at stake (played out) between the scientist, which they ^{up hold} establish, and the ideology ^{threatens them} ~~which attacks~~, and which never leaves off intervening "scientifically" in the struggles where the fate of the classes is at stake (played out), between the scientist which they set up and the ideologue which they ~~maintain~~ ^{threatens} which ~~denies~~ them, denying perhaps fiercely, in the philosophic "theory" that they do intervene; new in that this is a practice (pratique) which renounces this deneqation, and which, knowing what

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denegation, and which knowing what it must do, acts according to what it is.

If this is so, one can therefore surmise that it is doubtlessly ~~not~~ not by accident that this unprecedented effect was provoked by the scientific discovery of Marx, and thought (worked out) by a political proletarian leader. Thus, in a word, if the philosophy was ushered into the world by the first science of human history, it was in Greece, in a class society, and knowing that ~~the~~ class exploitation could have its effects, ^{should} one would not be astonished that these effects have also taken the form, classic in class societies, where the dominant classes deny that they dominate, of a philosophic denegation of the domination of philosophy by politics. ^{should} One would not be astonished therefore that ~~and~~ the scientific knowledge of the mechanisms of class domination, and all its effects, worked out by Marx and applied by Lenin, ~~has provoked in philosophy, this extraordinary change~~ has provoked in philosophy, this extraordinary change which shakes the fantasies of denegation (denial) which philosophy repeats to itself, so that men will believe it, and that philosophy itself will believe it, that it is above politics, as it above classes.

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As a result, ~~it~~ it was Lenin alone who could grasp the matter and sense of that prophetic phrase in the XI^e Theses On Feuerbach (even till now) "Philosophies have interpreted the world: it must act to change it" Did this phrase promise a new philosophy? I think not. Philosophy will not be abolished: philosophy will remain philosophy. But knowing what is its practice (pratique), and knowing what it is, or beginning to know what it is, it could be transformed little by little. Less than ever, can we say that marxism is a new philosophy: a philosophy of praxis. At its heart, marxist theory is a science: a singular science but a science. The new which marxism introduced into philosophy is the new practice (pratique) of philosophy. Marxism is not a (new) philosophy of praxis, but a (new) practice (pratique) of philosophy.

This new practice of philosophy could transform philosophy. And perhaps even in some measure aid in the transformation of the world. But only aid, because it is not the theoreticians, the scholars or the philosophers, it is no longer the gentlemen (les hommes) which make history -- but the "masses," that is to say the classes united into the the same class struggle.

February, 1930

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Part IV. p. 43

On this point, it is necessary to recognize that the insistence of Lenin is ~~whitewash~~ without respect or boundaries. At least in Materialism and Empirio-criticism (for on this point the tone changes in the Notes (Cahiers)), he throws aside all the "nuances," all the distinctions, the niceties, all the theoretic subtleties which philosophy tried to think of as its "object," as nothing but sophisms, subtle distinctions, the arguments of professors, the arrangements, the compromises whose sole object is to hide the real retreat from ^{the} debate in which all philosophy is engaged: the struggle between materialism and idealism. No more than in politics, is there a third voice, of half-measure, of bastardized positions. There are basically only idealists and materialists. All those who do not declare themselves openly are either materialists or "shy" idealists (Kant, Hume.)

N.L.

H.E.??

But then it is necessary to go a bit further, and to say that if the whole history of philosophy is only the tiresome repetition of the same argument, or consists of a single and unique struggle, philosophy is nothing more than the struggle of tendencies, the "impalpable" of which Kant spoke, but which we cast therefore as the pure and simple subjectivity of ideological struggle. This is to say that, properly speaking, Philosophy has no object, in

Part IV, p. 44

the sense that science has an object.

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Lenin suggests (via γ), there is no way which proves that
 Lenin thought this way. All holds together. He stated that
 one could no more demonstrate the highest principles of
 materialism than one could demonstrate (or refute) this is
 what annoyed Diderot the principles of idealism. One cannot
 demonstrate them because they can not be the object of a
 knowledge, meaning of a knowledge comparable to that of a
 science which demonstrates the properties of its objects.

Philosophy has not, therefore, any object. This is all. (?)
 If nothing happens in philosophy, it is simply because it has
 no object. If, in effect, something happens in the sciences,
 it is because they have an object, of which they can extend
 the knowledge, it is this which gives them a history. As
 philosophy has no object, nothing can happen in it. The
 absence of its history is only a repetition of the absence
 of its object.

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