For those familiar with Louis Althusser's published work, reading his relatively early essay entitled ‘Student Problems’ may be a surprising and even disconcerting experience. Part of the surprise lies in the fact that the essay exists at all. Although it was published in Nouvelle Critique (a Communist journal of international reputation) in January 1964 during Althusser’s most productive period, appearing shortly after ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’ and shortly before ‘Marxism and Humanism’, few references to it can be found in the voluminous literature on Althusser. Of course, to some extent, the essay's obscurity was determined by the fact that it was a political intervention in the very specific context of the French student movement in the period immediately following the end of the Algerian conflict, a context whose debates and polemics were not necessarily directly relevant to the student movements emerging elsewhere. Further, the intervention was not even aimed at the student movement as a whole but at the deeply divided and factionalized Communist student group, the Union des Étudiants Communistes (UEC).

But the essay was not completely ignored: rather, ‘Student Problems’ was overlooked primarily by those seeking to explicate Althusser’s work because they regarded his project as important and powerful. In contrast, some of those most consistently opposed to Althusser after 1968, such as Daniel Bensaïd and former student and co-author of Reading Capital Jacques Rancière, held up the essay as decisive, a text that did not require a symptomatic reading to glean from it the political (and not just theoretical) positions that Althusser otherwise carefully guarded.

To them, writing ten years after the essay’s publication and thus in a markedly different theoretical and political conjuncture, ‘Student Problems’ continued to express in an unusually clear and direct manner Althusser’s positions not simply in so far as they concerned Parisian student politics in the early 1960s, but in a general sense. In this way, the importance of the essay lay not simply in the ‘theoreticism’ of its arguments, namely that theory must precede and guide practice, nor in Althusser’s invocation of the PCF’s proletarian character to defend its positions against its petty-bourgeois, anarcho-syndicalist student critics (many of whom were members of the party), but in his de facto admission that the politics of the PCF demanded a defence of the order of the university as it existed in capitalist society. ‘Student Problems’ appeared to show with absolute clarity that to the extent that Althusser wrote from within the apparatus of the Communist Party, his philosophy was condemned to be, as Rancière recalled it, ‘a philosophy of order whose every principle divided us from the movement of revolt that was shaking the bourgeois order’, and most cunningly did so using the language of revolt itself.

Althusser’s critics – and both Bensaïd and Rancière remained unsparing in their criticism – have, regardless of what one thinks of their critiques, helped identify a more important reason for the silence that surrounds the essay in so much work on Althusser. The political and theoretical positions expressed there are not simply surprising but, for the vast majority of his readers, disturbing. Althusser’s insistence on the priority of theory over practice, an insistence that accords the vanguard party primacy permanently and in principle over the masses, and within the party a primacy of the leadership over the rank-and-file membership and of theoreticians and philosophers over all, resembles a crude version of a Stalinist politics whose utter failure was clear long before 1964. In addition, it made the demand for the autonomy of theoretical work within the party seem like a ruse to prevent criticism of the party bureaucracy by a membership deemed lacking in the necessary knowledge, whose ‘duty’ (devoir – a word that appears with alarming frequency in the essay) is passively to receive the theory – the correct interpretation of Marx and Lenin, as well as the
lessons to be drawn from the successes and failures of the communist movement—handed down to them by the intellectual leadership of the party.

Worse, Althusser’s essay showed with disarming honesty the degree to which the process of the transmission of knowledge in the PCF reproduced and in fact actively imitated the hierarchical order of the French university itself at the very moment that order had been called radically into question not only by the mass of non-party student activists but by both the right and left wings of the UEC (which meant that the students close to Althusser found themselves in a strange alliance with the PCF leadership against both left and right ‘deviations’). The broad French student movement had been radicalized in response to the Algerian War (even if as late as 1960), a cause that happily united left-wing students and faculty of all tendencies. Even here, however, the PCF played an ambiguous role, supporting Algerian independence only after 1958 and opposing as ‘adventurism’ the popular tactics of insoumission (resistance to conscription) and direct aid to the FLN until near the end of the war. The party’s timidity in a period of radicalization caused enormous turmoil among its youth and led to a rift between the PCF leadership and much of its student group, the UEC. After the conclusion of the Algerian War in 1962, the national French student organization, the Union Nationale des Étudiants de France (UNEF) (which consisted of a number of different factions, including the UEC), turned its attention to the university itself. Up until that point, the common cause that had linked students and faculty together, and that was experienced by its participants as a heroic struggle against French imperialism in Algeria and against the fascist OAS at home, had made issues of concern to students alone seem petty, trivial and above all divisive.

After Algerian independence in 1962, however, distinctively student concerns and struggles re-emerged. The UNEF reasserted itself as a trade union specifically for students, whom it regarded as intellectual workers united with the classical proletariat by a common alienation. Not content to demand more financial aid, better facilities and a greater variety of courses, it demanded a student wage. Nor did the UNEF limit itself to economic demands: it argued for student participation in administrative and even curricular decisions on an equal footing with faculty. It criticized the ‘individualist’ nature of instruction, where, despite overcrowded classes, the only relation was the vertical one between student and professor understood as a relation between one who does not (yet) know and one who does. In opposition, it proposed to collectivize knowledge by constituting working groups in which the group as a whole would take responsibility for learning and to search for alternatives to the exams so central to French academic life, but whose pedagogical efficacy was (and is) highly questionable. Radicalized students, including many within the UEC itself, consciously rejected as ‘apolitical’ and ‘economistic’ any strategy that focused primarily on economic reforms designed to improve student life and make the universities more accessible. Their demands were part of a ‘global contestation’. Whatever our judgement of the French student movement of the early 1960s from the perspective of the present, this was not a movement of a privileged elite seeking to extend its privileges. These were students for whom state repression was not an abstraction: many of them had felt the blow of a police truncheon, the terror of being fired upon and the sight of wounded and dead comrades, and had done so out of solidarity with a struggle against their own imperialism.

It is all the more surprising, then, to read the author of ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, the theoretician of the constant displacement of contradictions and the champion of the concrete analysis of the concrete situation, deducing the correct politics of the student movement from the abstract class position of students rather than from the impulses and imperatives proper to the French student movement in the historical conjuncture. It is perhaps stranger still to read the theoretician of the ISAs and champion of the Chinese Cultural Revolution claiming that bourgeois domination manifests itself not in the material existence of the university, its rituals, its modes of discipline and its individualizing mechanisms, all of which are thereby absolved of any role in class domination and placed off-limits to political struggle, but in the content of instruction alone. But perhaps most striking of all is the granting of the primacy of theory over practice, as if the correct theory must precede political practice as its condition of possibility. After all, Althusser had
argued the contrary in 1962 in ‘The Piccolo Teatro’: ‘there is no true critique which is not immanent and already real and material before it is conscious’, and repeated throughout For Marx and Reading Capital that conceptual problems, as well as their solutions, must be posed first in the practical state before they can be grasped theoretically. Immanent in the practice of mass struggle were theses and hypotheses that might and often did elude official leaderships and party intellectuals for a very long time.

How, then, are we to understand the place of this essay in Althusser’s corpus and even more in the movement by which it became what it is? One response is associated with Jacques Rancière, who, ten years after its publication and after Althusser’s work had undergone important transformations, argued that ‘Student Problems’ represented nothing less than a pure expression of the logico-political consequence of Althusser’s theory in general, the real Althusser, beneath the rhetoric of struggle and resistance. Another response, the inverse of the first, would be to declare ‘Student Problems’ absolutely extraneous to Althusser’s theoretical and political trajectory, whether because it was yet another example of Althusser’s over-clever tactical manoeuvres designed to placate the PCF leadership (and therefore not truly representative of his thought), or because it represented the brief phase in which Althusser saw himself as the enunciator of the Theory of theoretical practices, a phase the quickly gave way to positions that nullified nearly every political statement in the essay.

Both approaches deny the conflictual and irreducibly contradictory character of Althusser’s work and finally fail to acknowledge the tumult that this essay introduces into our conception of his thought. To read ‘Student Problems’ neither as secret truth nor as irrelevant anomaly, but nevertheless as a genuine part of Althusser’s thought as a whole, compels us to see his philosophy from beginning to end as haunted and propelled by its own discrepancies, a philosophy whose greatest resistances were internal to it, a philosophy at war with itself, as if, to cite Hegel, it perpetually confronted itself as its own true other. Althusser’s repeated insistence on the primacy of practice over theory and on the necessary opacity of the field in which political practice operated might in this sense be read as a reaction against, or flight from, what remained, despite everything he wrote, a wish glimpsed fully only in ‘Student Problems’: that the correct theory could act as a guarantee of correct practice.

Notes

2. Both Bensaïd and Rancière had been militants in the UEC at the time Althusser wrote ‘Student Problems’ in 1964, and both attacked him ten years later: Bensaïd as part of the Trotskyist-inspired collective work Contre Althusser (10/18, Paris, 1974), and Rancière from the perspective of Maoism in his La Léçon d’Althusser (PUF, Paris, 1974).
4. In fact, it was the so-called ‘Italian’ wing of the UEC, considered by its opponents to be a right-wing, social-democratic ‘response’ to Stalinism influenced by the Italian Communist Party, which most enthusiastically promoted pedagogical reforms. Supporting the project of a Marxist humanism according to which the concept of alienation replaced class struggle as the motor of history, the ‘Italians’, in concert with other non-Communist radical currents in the student movement, launched a critique of what we might call the individualizing and hierarchizing mechanisms of higher education. While Althusser violently denounced this critique in ‘Student Problems’, his ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ essay, written six years later, nevertheless bears its imprint. Further, the critique, shorn of its humanist trapping, would also reappear, without attribution of course, in later denunciations of the university inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution.
5. It should be noted, however, that once the PCF entered the struggle in earnest it immediately became the target of ferocious repression. Eight of its members were killed at a single demonstration at the Charonne Metro station in February 1962.
7. We might compare ‘Student Problems’ to some of Althusser’s later texts on the student movements. In April 1969, he responded to an article by Michel Verret in La Pensée, which was extremely critical of the movement in the universities in May 1968 as the pseudo-revolt of privileged youth as much against their parents as against the established order. Here Althusser argues for the great significance of the student revolt, including its critique of the academy. He reminds Verret that the student movement had its origins in the struggle against French imperialism, a fact that he himself had ignored in ‘Student Problems’. In a later two-part piece published in the PCF weekly France-Nouvelle (no. 1393, 23–30 July 1972, and no. 1394, 1–7 August 1972), ‘Sur une erreur politique’, he criticizes the decision on the part of a relatively small group to boycott the annual aggregation exams. He does so, however, on tactical rather than principled grounds, arguing that the boycotters did not establish a mass base for their actions. Finally, we should note that a text by Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, L’école capitaliste en France (Maspéro, Paris, 1971), was the published expression of a collective reflection on the ‘educational state apparatus’, whose participants included Étienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey.
Student problems

Louis Althusser

What are the theoretical principles of Marxism that should and can come into play in the scientific analysis of the university milieu to which students, along with teachers, research workers and administrators, belong? Essentially, the Marxist concepts of the technical and social divisions of labour. Marx applied these principles in the analysis of capitalist society. They are valid for the analysis of all human societies (in the sense that social training [formation] relies upon a determined mode of production). They are valid a fortiori for a particular social reality like the university, which belongs for obvious reasons to every modern society, capitalist, socialist or communist.

A society lives and develops by a labour process carried on by people in a particular mode of production. The labour process, which is a total social process, gives to each individual who makes up this society a place in the division of labour. The division of labour thus defines the various jobs [postes] or positions that a society assigns to the individuals who compose it, in a labour process that maintains its life and development.

Marx has shown that the division of labour has two forms, which are sometimes distinct and sometimes confused, either in the jobs, and the individuals, or in their results; the technical division and the social division of labour.

(A) The technical division of work corresponds to all jobs whose existence is exclusively justified by the technical necessities that define the mode of production at a given moment in its development in a given society. These technical necessities are defined objectively and are therefore scientifically definable in every society. For example, the production of consumer goods in a given society that has at its disposal definite instruments and means of production necessarily brings with it a technical division of labour. In a factory this technical division of labour comprises not only the technical jobs (skilled workers, unskilled workers etc.) but also administrative jobs (overseers in charge of the organization or the control of a complex process, engineers, technical management of the business etc.).

Under this relationship an institution like a university (corresponding to the technical necessities of economic as well as scientific production by its pedagogic function, and by its major role in scientific development and research) is basically a part of the technical division of labour in a given modern society. Its role in the technical division of labour consists of undertaking the pedagogic training [formation] of future technical, scientific and social cadres of the society, and of participating in creative scientific work. Pedagogical training [la formation pédagogique] – that is, the transmission of the knowledge [savoir] that exists in a society, knowledge which conditions the existence and development of the labour process of the society, is a vital necessity for every society; pedagogical training is therefore based above all on the technical division of labour.

(B) The social division of labour expresses a completely different aspect of the division of labour. Its function is to ensure the work process of the society in the forms of class structure and domination. The social division of labour is therefore only technical in the sense that it reflects the mode (social, political, ideological) of domination in the social work process.

In this way the state is, with its instruments – army, police, law courts, and so on – and with all the personnel and all the jobs attached to these means of class domination, the basis par excellence of the social division of labour. This division has profound repercussions at every level of the production process. The management of a factory is not only a form of the technical division of labour; the greatest part of its commercial and publicity apparatus, and so on, and of its internal apparatus for controlling and repressing the workers (legal or otherwise), comes under the social division of labour. Miners see in the foreman, generally speaking, an ex-worker risen to the rank of overseer,
working in the boss’s interests, and therefore the state’s, an exemplary instance of the social division of labour under cover of the technical division of labour. Certain jobs (certain members of the management, even certain engineers) are directly a matter of the social division of labour in a factory. Other jobs have a dual function: technical division and social division united in a single job. The management often puts workers into this social function of control/repression over their comrades. Some men are thus given two contradictory functions; if they accept these jobs and obligations, the relation of social forces, at decisive moments, sometimes push them towards the boss and sometimes towards the workers.

The same thing applies to the university, but in very special conditions which must absolutely be understood.

What is traditionally called the ‘independence of the university’ or its freedoms [franchises] (for example the fact that the police may not enter any university establishment without having been invited by the vice chancellor or his representative; the fact that professors are almost always chosen by their peers, etc.) demonstrates the special and ‘privileged’ situation of the university in relation to the social division of labour.

Why does the university enjoy such ‘privilege’? A long struggle of resistance to power, over centuries, has given the university this special situation which shelters it to some extent from government enterprises – that is, from the class politics of the bourgeoisie. After a thousand and one forms of the long struggle which has established and reinforced it, class society has had to yield to the organization that distributes the knowledge it needs (and that, as it distributes it, is often the most likely to produce it, in the form of scientific knowledge it needs (and that, as it distributes it, is often the most likely to produce it, in the form of scientific knowledge it needs (and that, as it distributes it, is often the most likely to produce it, in the form of scientific knowledge it needs, as the very air it breathes, as the basic condition for all scientific research, with the ideology of economic and political ‘liberalism’ of the bourgeoisie. It would be extremely dangerous to confuse scientific forms, sometimes necessarily individual, which command in given circumstances all creative scientific activity, with the juridical and political forms of bourgeois individualist ideology. (For centuries scientific discoveries were often the work of isolated individuals: Marx himself made his discovery alone, with Engels; Lenin worked alone in two or three decisive moments for the history of humanity.) To amalgamate individual research (sometimes absolutely indispensable) with bourgeois judicial, political and ideological individualism, to oppose collective forms to the well-grounded individual or liberal forms of scientific research; to condemn the latter as if they were manifestations of the bourgeoisie’s ‘liberal’ or ‘individualist’ ideology; these are very dangerous points of view, as much from the pedagogic as from the political and ideological standpoint. For Marxists, it is not the form in which knowledge is either transmitted or absorbed or discovered that constitutes the ‘decisive link’, but the quality of the knowledge itself.

University liberalism is today a real political value in the struggle against the transformation of the educational organization into an instrument subject to the objectives of the ruling technocracy – that is, to the objectives of the monopolistic bourgeoisie. To neglect this value would be to commit a political mistake. To alienate academics because, being ‘liberal’, they are ‘old hat’, and to violate the university’s liberal traditions, would be to commit a political mistake. To condemn ‘individualism’ in general, without carefully distinguishing bourgeois ideological individualism from the need for individual research in all cases, would be, according to the particular instance, either a scientific or a political error, or both (and particularly in the case where individual work is carried on in rational collective forms that can only flourish where there is a development and rationalization over and above that of the individual work itself).

Scientific knowledge of the conditions and the points of application of the social division of labour and its effects in the university is indispensable to all political (and trade-union) work in the university.

Now, what is remarkable is that in the case of the university the social division of labour, and therefore class domination, comes massively into play, but not only – or even mainly – where student and non-student theorists look for it. It comes massively into play, and in a ‘blinding’ way (which doubtless is why one does
not always ‘see’ it), in the very object of intellectual work; in the knowledge the university is commissioned to distribute to the students.

One can easily see the general effects of the social division of labour – that is, class domination – in certain serious government measures (control of the appointments of teachers by head teachers [préfets], creation of the job of general secretary of national education, politic manoeuvrings behind the nomination of vice chancellors, projects for reforming teaching along technocratic, anti-democratic lines, etc.). Governmental projects to reform teaching are the most dangerous, for they will be able to lean on certain erroneous claims based on theoretical confusions. (For example, the most enlightened technocrats are not, in principle, hostile to ‘student wages’, with a good limited intake [of students] and suitably precocious professional training, one that is detestable to science but useful to technocracy.) In any case, the struggle for university reform goes beyond the framework of the student struggle alone, and concerns the whole teaching body in its three levels – technical, teaching and research institutions; it also concerns the whole nation, which is to say in what most directly concerns us, the workers’ organizations, the worker’s unions, and in particular the CGT and the Communist Party. The battle to be waged calls for the union of all abilities and of all university and popular forces.

However, if one ‘saw’ the effects of the social division of labour only in governmental political and administrative measures, the dominant classes’ primary strategic point of action, the action of its ideology – which reaches the very centre of the knowledge that students receive from their masters – this point of action, the true fortress of class interest in the university, would remain intact. For it is in the very nature of the knowledge which it gives students that the bourgeoisie exerts on them, if not in the short term then at least in the middle term, its most profound influence. Through the knowledge taught at university passes the permanent dividing line between technical and social divisions of labour, the most constant and profound of class divisions.

Is the knowledge distributed a true science? If yes, then its distribution really corresponds to technical necessity, and then the pedagogic function is essentially healthy, even if its forms are relatively ‘old’ and need reforming. Is the knowledge distributed a pure ideology? As in certain subjects and courses? If yes, then education is in the service of an ideology, and therefore of a class policy, even if the ‘forms’ of teaching are very ‘modern’. Is the nature of the knowledge that is taught doubtful, are the ‘sciences’ that are taught still uncertain, problematic, without a definite status, hesitating between ideology and science, and generally settling at the level of techniques shot through with ideology? Then the pedagogic function is itself ambiguous, with two uses, one part technical, the other politico-ideological, whether the forms within which this half-knowledge is distributed are ‘outdated’ or modern. All students will recognize here most of the literary disciplines, literary history, philosophy, law in its general form, and even sometimes history, which are often a place for the reigning aesthetic, ethical, judicial or political ideology, and almost all the so-called ‘human’ sciences, which are the chosen ground for the contemporary positivist technocratic ideology. Even in the natural sciences, teachers, students and researchers will be able to recognize in the pedagogic presentation of their subject the effects of the positivist ideology which is massively entrenched in the natural sciences, without ‘contestation’. And if the forms of teaching natural science, including practical work, inspire in the students nothing but passivity, then the students are right. They resist through their passivity, not so much the aberrant pedagogic forms as the deep-seated reason for this aberration: the positivist ideology which chops up a living science into so many segments of a dead body, and makes the students swallow them by force, as if scientific truth were a thing. If it happens that these ‘things’ stick in the throats of the
students and teachers then they are right. As long as the reason for this (positivist) thingification of science is not denounced, as long as true pedagogic reform is not imposed against the reigning positivism that prevails in the natural sciences (including medicine and pharmacy) and often in the arts, by demanding, for example, instruction in the epistemology of every science and in the philosophy of the sciences, for all disciplines (everywhere, in the arts as much as in the sciences) and a new conception of the subject matter of science, one requiring adequate new pedagogic forms – as long as this is not done, the essential thing remains to be done.3

The number one strategic point where class domination over the minds of researchers, teachers and students is at stake is the nature of the knowledge taught, knowledge which a class division cuts into two: science on the one hand and ideology on the other.

The pedagogic function
Since this knowledge calls directly into question the pedagogic function on which the university is based, it is necessary to provide an objective analysis of the latter.

The pedagogic function has as its object the transmission of a determinate knowledge to subjects who do not possess it. Therefore the pedagogic situation is based on the absolute condition of an inequality between a knowledge and a lack of knowledge. Those to whom society transmits, through its pedagogical institutions, the knowledge that it has decided they should assimilate, represent the side of non-knowledge, or, if you prefer (since a non-knowledge is also a certain knowledge), the side of unequal–inferior knowledge. Those whom society puts in charge of transmitting to the non-knowers the knowledge that they possess represent the side of knowledge, or those who have unequal–superior knowledge. The famous pupil–teacher, lecturer–student, relationship is the technical expression of this fundamental pedagogic relationship. As a general rule society gives the job of teacher to past students who have become teachers and who are therefore older than their pupils. But teachers can, in certain cases (adult education, retraining courses, etc.) be younger than their pupils; this is very frequently the case during periods of great political and social transformation, for instance during mass literacy campaigns (the USSR after 1917, China after 1949, and Cuba or Algeria today), or for giving basic education to political leaders who have risen directly from the masses (e.g. the Rabotfak in the USSR hailed by their alumnus Khrushchev). In any case, at least in non-primitive societies, the pupil–teacher relationship is not based on an age difference, but on the fundamental pedagogical relationship between a knowing or knowledge [savoir] and the non-knowledge of this same knowledge.

A slogan which proclaims ‘The Sorbonne for the Students!’ should be examined under this precise relationship. If this slogan means the Sorbonne does not belong to the police, it is correct. But the Sorbonne does not belong only to the students; it also belongs to their teachers, and to the organization that enables the pedagogical relation to function, and so also to its ‘technical’ administrators. To forget this, in a slogan directed against a government that allows the police to enter the Sorbonne, is pedagogically a mistake, and politically an insult to the convictions of the majority of the teachers.

To stress the age difference or difference of generations in order to combat a number of admittedly backward institutions can also be a mistake. It’s not the age of people or of institutions that automatically determines their pedagogical value, but the actual role they fulfil in teaching. Those who are systematically against the old and in favour of the new should beware the traps of governmental ‘novelty’. Technocracy is overflowing with intelligent people and new ideas. One should not confuse a claim for renewal, scientifically based, which is always objectively progressive, with the simple attraction of novelty which can lead straight to utopia and its political dangers.

No pedagogic questions, which all presuppose unequal knowledge between teachers and students, can be settled on the basis of pedagogic equality between teachers and students. It is a legitimate claim that students be represented on all the consultative management committees of a faculty or of a school, assuming that they are old enough to attend university. But students are mistaken in demanding that in these pedagogical organizations their representatives should have powers of decision equal to those of the representatives of the teachers, for this does not correspond with the reality of the pedagogical function. Student demand for equal representation or even majority representation in the management of student activities outside the teaching situation is valid, for it corresponds to a social and political reality and not to a pedagogical reality. Student demands for a representation that corresponds to their position and their importance in the consultative administrative committees (not strictly speaking pedagogical) are also justifiable. But it is erroneous to transfer a demand (for equal representation) from one sector where it is
objectively justified (the coordination of activities) to a sector where it is not justified (the coordination of syllabuses and of properly pedagogical institutions).

When students want their work relationships with their teachers, which generally presuppose even in higher education an inequality between a knowledge and the non-knowledge of that knowledge, to be organized as if there existed a genuine equality of knowledge between teachers and students, they risk committing themselves to a confusion. The attraction that scientific research exercises can foster this error. The collective forms of work that exist in the practice of scientific research presuppose, precisely, that equality of knowledge between researchers that renders their exchanges and collaboration fruitful. But research doesn’t just presuppose an equality of knowledge, but an equality in the knowledge that is indispensable for conducting true research, rather than its simulacrum. Students should convince themselves of the need for long training in order really to do research, unless they mean by research the technical division of piecemeal investigations, dubbed research by capitalist society, which abound in both the natural sciences and the humanities, and where the researcher is more a blind operative of fragmented tasks arranged by others than a true researcher – these are ‘semi-researchers’, victims of the consequences of the positivist ideology that dominates the field of research itself. In any case, we must not call the mere personal or collective rediscovery of an already existing knowledge research – otherwise we would have to take bibliographical work for scientific research.

Collective work whose goal is the assimilation of an existing knowledge can have a rational direction and meaning [sens]. The methodological organization of this collective labour has a direction and meaning: it can save students a lot of time and effort. But any method that seeks to hasten the assimilation of existing knowledge by casting about in the darkness, however full of good ‘participational’ intentions, is technically bad: determined collective work only has a meaning and direction if it is led by teachers or their assistants, teachers who have exactly that knowledge which the students need to acquire, and who have the scientific technique for transmitting that knowledge. This scientific technique is called ‘pedagogy’. The ideology of self-instruction, however noble (in fact its enthusiasm cannot ever last long), which distrusts all ‘directional’ forms, which distinguishes between ‘classical’ work groups led by teachers (considered ‘old-style’ and quasi-passive) from groups deemed ‘authentic’ because they are ‘democratic’ (i.e. reluctant to call on a teacher for help), rests on an incorrect conception of the reality not only of research but even of simple pedagogical work (which presumes that those who possess knowledge will help the students tasked with acquiring it). Such an anarcho-'democratic' conception of pedagogy can only lead students to disappointment. It is absurd to waste time rediscovering by uncertain methods, and at the cost of considerable effort, knowledge to which there exists a path that is infinitely more direct, since it is rational. The students who might proceed this way will in fact postpone the moment when they might acquire the training they need to become the researchers they wish to be.

They also risk alienating the goodwill of their professors, who are thus unjustly treated with suspicion in their own pedagogical activity, and whose knowledge is held to be superfluous. They may even alienate them politically, to the point of transforming possible allies and comrades in struggle into enemies of the political or trade-union cause that the students defend. By retarding their scientific training, students who content themselves with ‘participationist’ methods, through which they give themselves the ‘democratic’ illusion of knowledge, will get stuck for a long time in a half-knowledge – that is, in a state that does not give them the weapons of scientific learning.

It is no accident that a reactionary bourgeois or ‘technocratic’ government prefers half-knowledge in all things, and that, on the contrary, the revolutionary cause is always indissolubly linked with knowledge, in other words science. It is much easier to manipulate intellectuals with a weak scientific training than intellectuals with a strong one, to manipulate them and submit them to a policy which, whatever certain people say, is being implemented with considerable skill. What the government fears above all is the scientific and critical training of the intellectuals it is nonetheless obliged to train, in order to provide itself with cadres and teachers.

Note
1. To avoid any misunderstanding, I should specify that what matters, in the problem posed by teacher/student activity, is to distinguish the form of teaching (i.e. pedagogical methods that are more or less valid) from the content of teaching (i.e. knowledge that is more or less scientific or more or less ideological); and then, once this distinction has been made, to determine which is the principal and which is the secondary point – which element is dominant and which subordinate. It is content (knowledge) which is dominant, and the form subordinate. Needless to say, this conclusion does not imply that we should neglect the transformation of the forms of teaching! But we must treat it in its reality; that is, as a function of the content which in the last instance is dominant, as a function of taught knowledge.