

POST-MARXIST MODES OF PRODUCTION

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According to whoever wrote the editorial 'notes' for Radical Philosophy 17, 'The present upsurge of fundamental Marxist researches may indicate an exit route from the circle of philosophy's deaths and rebirths, via which the problem of the specificity of "the philosophical" might be both subverted and understood'. And according to Graham Burchell in Radical Philosophy 18, two books of Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst 'may give some support to this hope'.

Are Hindess and Hirst the long-awaited intellectual hegemonogues of the British left? This is doubtful. Marxism needs, no doubt, to be transcended; but not, it seems to me, in favour of the phenomenalist relativism that pervades the writings of Hindess and Hirst and their co-thinkers. I want to discuss certain philosophical positions that have been advanced by them, especially in their writings in Economy and Society from 1974 to 1976 (including their letter of resignation from its Editorial Board and Hirst's 'Althusser and the Theory of Ideology') and Hirst's widely read Communist University of Cambridge lecture ('Problems and Advances in the Theory of Ideology' 1976 20p). That these sources correspond to the doctrines of their books can be confirmed from Graham Burchell's precis (RP18), from Andrew Collier's article (this issue), from Tim Putnam's review in Capital and Class (Spring 1978) and from Rod Aya's review in Monthly Review (January 1978).

Hindess and Hirst deny the realist view that scientific theories are valid to the extent that they correspond with what is objectively the case. Rather they urge that theories can only be 'validated' within their own terms(- they are all, therefore, no more 'valid' or 'invalid' than each other). As this renders the very idea of intellectual validation redundant, Hindess and Hirst insist on a practical, political criterion of acceptability in terms of the capacity to 'provide strategic leadership for political practice' (Resignation letter).

So it is for 'history' and for 'ideology'. Historians have no independent object; their practices 'define the past'. Ideology is not, on the other hand, a mis-representation of what science or history may truly represent: '...we do not have a truth/falsity, illusion/reality opposition here.' (Problems and Advances). Thus, historians' work is the activity of 'social and political ideologies'; and ideologies can be assessed only in terms of their political 'effects'.

I have stressed this common phenomenalist/pragmatist thread. But, as the arguments develop in specific ways according to the specific focus, I shall separate out four 'theses' for discussion purposes. I shall adopt what may be a tedious 'quotation' approach, at the risk of the radical and philistine unfairness that 'out of context' quoting achieves. I do this in order to display the sheer muddle of the work I am criticising, a muddle that brief summary, were it possible, could only conceal. I shall comment on four strands of thought:

- I Discourse Phenomenalism
- II Ideology and Hirst's Steamroller
- III Historical Fordism ('history is bunk')
- IV The Politicization of Analysis

I) Discourse Phenomenalism

Replying to a critical note of Ted Benton's (in Economy and Society - see 74-75), Hirst writes:

'My position is based on an attempt to break out of the circle of classical philosophy, to go beyond the opposition of idealism and materialism to break the connection of epistemological theory with metaphysics... it is not committed to making ontological assumptions about the status of objects independently of the discourse in which they are designated.'

Philosophical materialism, assuming 'that the real is ordered and knowable, that it is capable of giving rise to knowledge ... necessarily spiritualises matter or materialises ideas'.

These doctrines are developed further in Mode of Production and Social Formation, extensively quoted and summarised by Graham Burchell in RP18, and, among many other writings, in Marx's 'Capital' and Capitalism To-day (Hirst, Hindess, Cutler and Hussain). In general, Hirst et al argue, it is impossible to speak of objects existing independently of thought yet corresponding to thought in such a way that it can be said that the thought is true (or alternatively false) of such objects.

- 1 'Objects of discourse are constituted in and through the discourses which refer to them' (Capitalism To-day, p216)
- 2 'What is specified in theoretical discourse cannot be specified extra-discursively: it can be conceived only through that discourse or a related, critical, or complementary one' (Capitalism To-day, p229)
- 3 This 'is not to deny forms of existence outside discourse but it is to deny that existence takes the form of objects representable in discourse' (Social Formation, p21)
- 4 'The rejection of epistemology implies that the relation between discourse and its objects cannot be conceived as an epistemological relation at all' (Social Formation, p22)

Response (in reverse order):

R4

Epistemology is the enquiry into the kinds of 'justifications' or lack of them, that there are for different kinds of belief. It begins on the simple basis that claims are made, beliefs are held etc, as true. When, for example, Hirst et al assert that 'the relation between discourse and its

objects cannot be conceived as an epistemological relation', the question whether what they say is to be accepted is an 'epistemological' one. Similarly, if I am accused of misrepresenting their position, or of being ignorant of its historical background etc, an epistemic claim is being made. You can't bludgeon epistemology away.

R3

If you say 'the ice won't break' and promptly fall through it, it seems reasonable to say, once your teeth stop chattering, that the ice's 'form of existence' failed to correspond with your beliefs. And this remark seems to imply both a distinction between your 'discourse' and 'existence'; and the 'representability' of 'existence' in 'discourse' - a correspondence. Hirst et al often speak of 'discourse' and 'existence' ('reality' in scare quotes) as if one could, albeit to attack the idea, speak of a relation between 'discourse-in-general' and 'reality-in-general'. But, apart from anything else, it needs to be stressed that discourses are themselves as real as anything else and that, therefore, Hirst et al's ban ought to fall on the idea that discourses exist 'in a form representable in discourse'. Talk about discourses is not relevantly different in this respect from talk about ice - or about 'forms of existence outside discourse' for that matter.

R2

It is tautological to say that you cannot 'specify' anything save through discourse. (compare: 'you cannot perceive anything save through having perceptual experiences', the innocent truism with which Berkeley launches his position). But that a thing cannot be discoursed about save through words or conceived save through concepts does not establish its linguistic or conceptual status. (Nor does the tautology that a 'speaker' is defined in terms of language establish that speakers are verbal entities.) It is a further question whether language is a condition of knowledge. As I think that animals know things, and that Hirst et al fail to recognize the significance of our 'animal' faculties, it will be clear where I stand on that issue.

In this passage, Hirst et al speak of 'related' or 'complementary discourses' as referring to 'a common discourse-object ('it'). It is difficult to see how they can consistently speak in this way since object 'A'-in-discourse D lacks criteria of identity (same at the level of homonymy) with object 'A₁'-in-discourse D₁. I am assuming here that discourses can be (objectively) individuated, an assumption hard to reconcile with the doctrines in question.

R1

Hirst et al's claims here form part of a discourse. Hence the things they 'refer' to - other discourses (Marxism etc) - are ex hypothesi constituted by the Hirst discourse. Hence they cannot claim to be telling us anything. They cannot be 'referring' at all. (Even a fiction pretends to be about people etc). Yet they certainly write as if they have something to tell us.

It is important to note that the view under discussion lends as much intellectual legitimacy to Christian Science, Scientology, or Astrology - each of which 'refers' to various 'objects' and 'processes' - as to Botany Microbiology or linguistics. Removing epistemological 'tyranny' consecrates



real tyranny. Come back Lysenko, all is forgotten.

I have been concerned to show the 'self-stultifying' character of the Hirst, Hindess, Cutler, Hussain type of position - to bring out its 'unspeakability'. As a reading even of Graham Burchell's summary brings home, their work is replete with claims about 'epistemology's' hunt for 'privileged access', 'the immediately given', 'absolute guarantees' etc. But it is a painful achievement of 'bourgeois' epistemology to have questioned these el dorados of philosophy and it seems to me a minor scandal that ancient slogans have been wheeled out in the guise of space-age semiology to condemn most 'hitherto existing' thought to the rubbish tip.

My response has been written from a broadly empiricist and realist standpoint - the standpoint scoldingly ascribed to much of Marx by Hirst and his co-thinkers. I do not deny that there are big difficulties for such a position. What I do deny however is that the philosophical work of Hirst, Hindess et al constitutes a serious challenge to that standpoint. Its a priori celebration of the impossibility of argument or discussion with the uninitiated functions, moreover, to ghettoise the left-intelligentsia even as it aims to liberate it from a fetishised 'Marxism', and to promote within it an almost paranoid irrationalism.

II) Ideology and Hirst's Steamroller

Marx did not invent the idea that people live their lives more or less befogged by illusion. What he did was to argue, against Enlightenment reformers' trust in verbal education presented by the educated, that these illusions were systematically bound up with people's 'real life conditions', particularly with their economic conditions. Hirst well expresses Marx's view: 'Reality generates false recognitions of itself by subjecting subjects to circumstances in which their experience is distorted.' (Althusser and the Theory of Ideology). What Hindess and Hirst try to do, however, largely following Althusser, is to refute, in one transcendental argument, both the Marxian orthodoxy and the more general idea of ideology as illusion or misrepresentation:

'The consequence of rejecting the concept of "representation" is to destroy the classic Marxist problem of ideology.' (Althusser and the Theory of Ideology).

I shall address myself to the above article and to the 'more detailed' Problems and Advances pamphlet, bearing in mind that these articles advance their theses in critical co-operation with Althusserianism. (I think I omit explications of Althusser that Hirst himself rejects.)

Once again I quote:

- 1 'Ideology is not a distorted representation of reality.' (Problems and Advances, p2)
'... signification; the products of signifying practices, do not "represent" anything outside them, they cannot serve as a means of expression of class interests or of (functional) misrecognition of social relations.' ('Althusser and Ideology')
'... the means of representation determine the represented. This obliterates the classical problem of "representation".' ('Althusser and Ideology')
'Knowledge is [not] formed through the consciousness or experience of human subjects' as is maintained by 'Classical Empiricism'. (Problems and Advances, p2)
'Althusser denies that knowledge through experience is possible and therefore that class positions automatically generate experience-effects' ('Althusser and Ideology')
'You can see here [in the "empiricist" view] that the reality or truth of ideology is outside it in the prior determination ... of the system of places: It follows that reductionism is a legitimate mode of analysis.' (Problems and Advances, p4)
- 2 'Ideology is not ideal or spiritual' (Problems and Advances, p6)
'Ideas do not exist as spiritual entities. Ideologies are social relations, they are as real as the economy.' (Problems and Advances, p7)
'For Althusser, ideas are real and not "ideal" because they are always inscribed in social practices and are expressed in objective social forms (languages, rituals etc.) As such they have definite effects.' (Problems and Advances, p7)
'Ideology is a set of social practices and social representations and rituals: it is a structure of social relationships.' (Problems and Advances, p6)
- 3 'Ideology is not illusory for the reason we've given before; it is not illusion, it is not falsity, because how can something which has effects be false? it would be like saying that a black pudding is false, or a steamroller is false.' (Problems and Advances, p14)
'The struggles involved are for the removal of real ideological obstacles; social practices, not illusions.' (Problems and Advances, p14)

Response (in reverse order):

R3

Ideology, we are told, is not illusion, because ideology has effects (people actually go to work, to war; to Wembley etc). Therefore it cannot be false, any more than a black pudding or steamroller can... Sufferers from delusions, nightmares,

hallucinations etc will rejoice at this panacea. Their errors are, as a matter of logic, harmless and ineffectual. Not that Hirst even thinks that what has effects could be true either. Steamrollers cannot be that. Generally, though, we could retort, with the 'plain man' of bourgeois epistemology, that beliefs, outlooks, perspectives, assumptions, perceptions true or false, can and do have (real and determinate) effects. The argument is an invalid steamroller, a fallacious black pudding. Yet Hirst accords it a central place. And why any one should think that a struggle against illusions is not a struggle against 'real obstacles' eludes me.

R2

There is a tendency in Marxism (much advertised in the writings of Acton, Plamenatz etc) to set up a dualism of thought (ideology) and reality (economy); as if the 'economic base' could even be abstractly conceptualised save as involving human goals, intentions or calculations. But then how can such things be 'superstructural'? And Hirst rightly notes a bad tendency to equate the 'economic' with the 'real' and the 'ideological' with the 'unreal' - thus their insistence on the reality of ideology: religious activity exists as much as does economic activity. (Whether their de-epistemologist vision allows them any such ontological claims is another matter.) But their abandonment of vulgar marxism immerses them in other vulgarities.

If anything exists as a spiritual entity, it nonetheless exists and may have effects. It is a false antithesis to counterpose (in precisely the style of vulgar materialism) the mental to the real, albeit that Hirst's fallacy is concealed through a punning use of 'ideal' (= 'unreal'? = 'mental'?). This vulgar materialist assumption, I suggest, drives Hirst into identifying ideologies with their material and hence 'objective' embodiments, expressions or vehicles. Thus the shuffle between insisting (correctly) that ideologies are 'inscribed', 'expressed', 'represented', in rituals etc, and insisting that they are such practices. But a practice is only 'ideological' in virtue of its significance or meaning, in so far as it 'signifies'. Hence, while 'ideological struggle' might consist in the destruction or suppression of monuments or rituals, only dogmatism could blind us to the capacity of ideology to live on in people's brains. And only a dogmatic behaviourism would blind us to the distinction between the 'criticism of weapons and the weapons of criticism': between altered 'behaviour' and altered 'outlook'.

Human social practice 'communicates' a meaning: a ritual's movements signify what its words say about the order of the world, a businessman's suit and manner signify his busy, successful, probity. But that such 'signification' is general does not entail that 'signifying practices do not "represent" anything outside them'. In order to reverse the rhetorical effect of Hirst's spiritual/material contrast, consider the practices associated with physicalist ideologies of mental illness. Illnesses, depressions etc may 'present themselves' as simply happening for no good reason and doctors may encourage this by prescribing pills etc. Yet, one who investigates such practice, such a 'mode of experiencing', may suggest that this ideology misrepresents what is in fact a significant process - an impotent, despairing protest, a response to abandonment or whatever. If this were the case, as it might be, it would involve an 'ideology representing something outside itself', even though what is represented (the illness) may itself

be 'ideological'. One 'discourse' may misrepresent another; discourses can rely on 'meta-discourses' which misrepresent them. (Though they negotiate through echoes, blind people often speak of a 'sixth sense' or a 'cheek sensation' as guiding them.) Hirst denies that ideologies 'represent' - and hence 'misrepresent'. Sexist ideologies do not (distortedly) represent women as naturally inferior? Racist ideologies do not consign non-whites to perpetual savagery? Religious ideologies do not represent the world as the creation of gods? Capitalist ideologies do not represent human freedom and welfare as necessitating the private ownership of the means of production? The position may have earned its admirers through the sheer effrontery of its assertion.

R1

Empiricists traditionally present the paradigm of 'the knowledge relation' as an object causing (with the aid of other conditions) an experience of it (you see the apple because it affects your senses etc). Hence, as Hirst says, it focuses on origins (causes). Such a model, says Hirst, dominates traditional Marxism: the economy effects one's perception of it, but, depending on one's class vantage point, one's perception may be distorted. As Hirst mock-quotes 'If one is a finance capitalist one will see the world differently than if one is an artisan'. Hirst goes on to treat this 'vulgar Marxism' as an application of empiricist assumptions. But if you believe that ideologies 'represent' things as the case (illusorily) and that, however false they are, they nonetheless 'represent' (in another sense of that word - manifest, issue from) the 'actual life conditions', in which the relevant experiences have occurred, you are not compelled to embrace vulgar Marxism. Nor are you compelled to embrace 'reductionism', for any view of knowledge as a causal phenomenon would still need to distinguish causes which 'produce' knowledge from causes which don't. For example, the bright sunlight might cause you to recognize it. But some diseases or drugs might cause the same experience. Thus, when Marxists say 'you only think that because you are a petit-bourgeois' they need to show (a) the connection of consequence between the belief and the class position, and (b) how this position is epistemically relevant ('distorting'). Only by a pre-emptive insistence that economic conditions alone are real conditions would vulgar Marxism identify itself with empiricism (see certain passages in *The German Ideology*). Thus, as Hirst rightly suggests, the classical view of ideology involves 'causal' and 'epistemic' dimensions. And, contrary to Hirst, we might go

so far as to say that Marx did establish the importance of economic conditions in shaping human experience and human outlooks and that Hirst's arguments, despite their assimilation of the general conceptualization of 'ideology' to a vulgar economic reductionism, do not refute this general view, but trade on the weakness of the specific vulgar theory which identifies 'reality' with the economy. As a corollary, the insistence on a pluralistic view of human social life does not require the abandonment of empiricism or realism.

III) Historical Fordism: 'History is Bunk'

That history cannot be a science in the sense that physics or even political economy might be follows simply from the qualitative complexity of individual events, processes, things, people. This is not to rule out that historians can be 'scientific' in method and approach: sifting evidence, comparing different situations to confirm or shake their hypotheses etc. But such banalities are swept away by the Hirst Hindess broom. They attack historical research (they may except research into the history of their own thought) as (a) impossible and (b) irrelevant. (Apart from their books, the Resignation Letter is pertinent here.) History, they say, is not 'a coherent and possible object of research'.

- 1 'History is not a given object ... since (by definition) it does not exist.'
(Resignation letter)
- 2 'These are only practices of writing and constituting definite histories. These practices define the past and transform artefacts (documents, bones, palaces, kitchen middens etc.) into representations of the hitherto existing...'
(Resignation letter)
- 3 'It can be argued that, as the conditions of existence of social relations must be constantly re-produced in order for them to exist, no analysis of hitherto existing social relations has any relevance or epistemological privilege'
(Resignation letter)
- 4 'Only teleology can ascribe an effectivity to the hitherto existing'
(Resignation letter)
- 5 'Marxism is anti-historical because it is committed to history in another sense of the word, to the crucial struggles of our age.'
(Resignation letter)
[Althusser struggles laudably to] 'reconstitute a Marxism ... capable ... of providing strategic leadership for political practice.'
(Resignation letter)

Response (again to take these claims backwards):

R5

If Hindess and Hirst deny the 'effectivity' of the past on the present (4) this can only be, I take it, because the past precedes the present (has already gone out of 'existence' in their mortal phraseology). But, alas, the present precedes the future. Hence by their own argument 'strategic' theory is as 'absurd' as poring over old documents to establish how things came to be as they are. For the present can have no 'effectivity' in the future. Plans,

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campaigns etc (however short term!) are absurd - doomed to go out of existence before their goals come about!

R4

Aristotle thought that efficient causes were co-existent with their effects. And, while Hume defined causes as antecedent to their effects, students of philosophy know that causality is a hellish problem. But those prone to accept Hindess and Hirst's a priori doctrine of impotence of antecedents should at least be concerned that it rules out the striking of a match as causally relevant to the later boiling of the kettle. That we are dealing here with a short-term sequence is irrelevant to the point of principle (10 minutes is a long time in philosophy). A hard doctrine! Hindess and Hirst speak here of 'teleology'. This seems mere paper-bag-bursting.

R3

The 'need' for 'constant' 'reproduction' of 'conditions of existence' amounts, as far as I can see, simply to the 'need' for conditions to hold for the occurrence of whatever occurs - whether that be persistence or obliteration. How much this involves 're-production' in the sense of the bringing about of new instances of things or processes, is a further question. But that re-production occurs over time and is dependent on historically 'provided' materials and forms (which may or may not themselves be exhaustible) is obvious. And that historical research might assist enquiry into the capacity or likelihood of 'things' such as an amenable workforce being 'reproduced' in certain conditions is obvious too. The necessity of continual re-production has no tendency to render history irrelevant.

R2

If there are 'definite' practices of writing history then these practices ('discourses'?) are themselves historical events. But ex hypothesi H & H cannot consistently speak of such things. (It is typical of theoretical phenomenism to adopt a realist position towards theoretical endeavours just as 'phenomenology' thinks it can at once 'bracket reality' and quote people's - real - accounts of 'reality'.) That historians can 'define' the past by 'constituting' the meaning of artefacts (bones?) in accordance with their own 'ideology' is a crass mockery of disciplined historical enquiry.

R1

I do not know of anyone, even among those who believe there are 'given objects' at all, who think 'history is a given object'. Knowledge of the past (like knowledge of the future) necessarily involves having 'presently available evidence'. Hindess and Hirst for example claim to have 'consistently opposed' empiricism, including that of the (Economy and Society) editorial. The remaining editors reply that H & H helped write the editorial. Are we then to accept Hindess and Hirst's (historical) claim? We have now to investigate the evidence. Do Hindess and Hirst licence us regarding such things to think what accords with our 'ideological and political' practices? Are these 'the given'?

Hindess and Hirst are attacking what they argue to be an 'academicist' wallowing in the past that they see as characteristic of many 'Marxists'. In this attack they produce dangerous and self-destructive weapons - yet they go on writing as if they believe the world will go on 'reproducing' at least readers.

IV) The Politicization of Analysis

Hindess and Hirst abandon epistemic questions (questions of truth, evidence, probability etc) in favour of a frankly 'political' criterion (continuing the 'theory in the interest of politics' line of their Resignation Letter). This view is developed, for example, in Hirst's 'Althusser and the Theory of Ideology'.

- 1 'Class analysis we may retain, not in the sense of sociological reduction but of political evaluation. Not a reference to origin but a consideration of effect. ('... to recognize ideological forms as "bourgeois" involves taking a political stand on what is and is not bourgeois'). (Althusser and the Theory of Ideology')
- 2 '... calculation of political consequences ...' (Althusser and the Theory of Ideology')
- 3 '... what the calculation of effect is depends upon one's political position... Consequences can be deduced from a definite political position...' (Althusser and the Theory of Ideology') (Women's struggles) 'may be important in creating the basis on which an important section of the population is prepared to take socialist agitation seriously' (Problems and Advances, p14)
- 4 'The struggles involved are for the removal of real ideological obstacles, social practices, not illusions.' (Problems and Advances, p14)

(Compare the concluding section of Graham Burchell's review article.)

Response (in reverse order):

R4

I have pointed out already the fallacy of counterposing illusions to real forces. Illusions occur and have effects. Struggle against them is real struggle which consists in more than words. To counterpose politics to education (or to dis-illusionment) is fallacious as well as dangerous.

R3

In place of the dogmatic schoolteacher lecturing to the ignorant, Hindess and Hirst offer us the manipulator backing movements on purely socialist-utilitarian lines. That the women's movement might have as much to teach as to learn from illusion-free male leftists is not on Hirst's cards. Rather it is seen as a useful force to be backed, theoretically legitimated and not to be argued with or criticised (though its theories will no doubt be criticised for empiricism, 'humanism' etc). Followers of the left will recognize the antiquity of this opportunist approach - and the shifts and reversals of 'analysis' that it entails.



R2 :

If I believed in the imminent collapse of capitalism from forces internal to the economy (falling rate of profit etc), then my evaluation of movements would be affected by this. But Hindess and Hirst, while pointing this out, insist that my calculation of consequences is itself a function of my political position (evaluation). So we are in a messy circle. Contrary to them, it might be thought vital for political activity that predictions be minimally contaminated by wishes ('pessimism of the intellect': Gramsci). Here again Hindess and Hirst's contempt for empirical reason lands them in gross subjectivism - a politics of wish-fulfilment

R1

Hindess and Hirst are right to stress the distinction between the ORIGIN and the political tendency of ideas and ideologies, and right to highlight the double talk that has tried to conceal this distinction in the name of preserving dogmatic versions of 'class analysis'. But they offer a pragmatist reductionism in place of a class-origin reductionism. Thus, for example, in denying that 'bourgeois ideology' is 'bourgeois' in virtue of its

origins they rule out of account the possibility that some aspects of the bourgeoisie's class outlook might be progressive even true. Or rather they insist on their own doubletalk which would deny its bourgeois status, in virtue of its supposed serviceability to socialist revolution.

Generally speaking, a pragmatist reduction fails to avoid the epistemic issue. For the question always arises: will this line have these (desirable or undesirable) effects? (See my reply to Peter Binns RP3; and see Andrew Collier's 'Truth and Practice' RP5). Moreover, a politics, which not only downgrades questions of truth (Machiavellianism) but systematically seeks to extrude such issues from its frame of reference, must, I suggest, be a politics of contempt - a practical anti-humanism. The extrusion can never be achieved. Always it will be a matter of hiding uncomfortable truths or promulgating useful fictions. It is handy, however, to think that, outside one's system, no justification need be sought for one's beliefs and one's practices.

IN DEFENCE OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Andrew Collier

My aim in this paper is to criticise a post-Althusserian tendency which urges us to ditch the whole project of epistemology; I shall also say something about the conditions for an epistemology which will not lay itself open to the objections raised against epistemology by this tendency insofar as those objections are valid. And I shall make some brief comments about some of the outstanding problems for an epistemology which is to cope with the human sciences - problems which are not made to disappear, but merely evaded, by the rejection of epistemology.

My task is therefore a polemical one - the defence of what I regard as already established positions of materialist epistemology, against new versions of idealism, albeit shamefaced (or as they say in the trade, 'de-negated') versions. (1)

1) Epistemology after Althusser

'The identification of which I spoke in introducing (the Hegelian Marxists') work - of the problem of the unity of theory and practice and the problem of the relation between science and its object is an invalid and illicit conflation of questions of quite a different order. The first problem is the fundamental problem of Marxist politics: how to give ideas a material force.... The second problem is an epistemological one: how to guaran-

tee that a theory does in fact provide a knowledge of the reality it claims to explain.'

(Alex Callinicos, Althusser's Marxism, pp22-23)

Part of the value of Althusser's work in epistemology is that he has cleared up this 'historical' confusion. Theoretical production is itself a practice with its own criteria of success, not a mere effect of other - economic, political or ideological - practices. The political question is then, not the relation of theory-in-general to practice-in-general, but rather the problem: how to secure the transformation of the 'political' practice of class struggle from an economic and reformist one (which it will spontaneously tend to be) into one which raises the issue of state power, through the intervention of Marxist theory into that practice. In this context, for Althusser as for Lenin, the unity of theory and practice is not a theoretical given but a practical task. The Marxist theory which must be united with the class struggle is not itself a mere epiphenomenon of that struggle; its relation to the struggle is that it yields knowledge of the society that generates it; and because it does so it enables the workers' movement to fight clearsightedly, without the blinkers of bourgeois ideology.

Yet, surprisingly enough, Callinicos goes on to criticise Althusser for not realising that he has provided the basis for abolishing epistemology altogether. If he has done so, what comes of his anti-historicist work which took place within epistemology?

There seem to be three points of departure for the anti-epistemologists in Althusser's thought. Firstly there is his contention - through all phases of his work - that the criteria of validity of a theoretical practice are internal to it. This is said to rule out any general criterion; and epistemology is said to be precisely the pursuit of general criteria. Here

¹ I admit to feeling that it is somewhat shameful to be re-iterating this position at a time when we need to break new ground in scientific epistemology, and when philosophers such as Roy Bhaskar are doing so. But it is a shameful necessity, for while idealism enjoys a revival unparalleled since Edwardian times - and precisely among self-styled radicals - really new knowledge will be prevented from having the political effects that it deserves.

What is most disconcerting is that modern idealists are not only unaware that their sophisms have long since been refuted; they are even unaware that they are idealists. Who can doubt that, if Bishop Berkeley had been alive today, he would have re-titled his major work 'Towards a Materialist Theory of Perception'?