

NEWS

Althusser, the Party, Marxism

(1) Since the defeat of the left in the recent legislative elections, a widespread debate has developed within the French CP, reflecting the dissatisfaction felt by many militants with the leadership's conduct of the electoral campaign. Although this debate is by no means confined to the party's intellectuals, they provide the most visible evidence of it in the form of letters and articles published in the 'bourgeois' press, chiefly Le Monde. This allows the leadership, which continues to refuse to open any forum for discussion within the party's own press, to play on the themes of anti-intellectualism and the need for party unity in an attempt to circumscribe the criticism. Marchais also attempted to achieve the same effect by characterising the critics as the same as those who were opposed to the theses of the 22nd Congress, thereby suggesting that they included no-one beyond the handful of old stalinists on the one hand, and althusserians on the other, who criticised the abandonment of the notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in 1976. This particular move, however, is no longer credible since Jean Ellenstein, historian and principal publicist for the 'liberal eurocommunist' line within the party, published a series of three articles in Le Monde (April 13-14-15), analysing the defeat and the changes that need to be made within the party largely along the lines that it suffers not from too much of the 22nd Congress, but from not enough of it.

Amongst the intellectuals, the issues raised go well beyond questions of recent tactical errors, to the fundamental strategy and organisation of the party itself. They express widely divergent political points of view. Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of common ground between the two principal currents, the 'revisionist' Ellenstein line and the 'leninist' althusserian one: both agree that the party's present problems stem from the insufficiency of its analyses of 'Stalinism', and its failure to undertake any real confrontation with its own stalinist past. Secondly, both agree that a necessary precondition for any attempt to develop a new way forward which avoids the traditional alternatives is a greatly extended internal democracy; one which would permit ideas to circulate horizontally as well as vertically, and also allow effective participation by the base in decision making. Although the Ellenstein current probably enjoys wider support within the party generally, and certainly does among sections of the hierarchy, the strongest attack yet on the functioning of 'democratic centralism' was that made in a letter signed by Althusser, Balibar, G. Bois, G. Labica, J-P. Lefebvre and M. Moissonier. This letter, the main ideas of which were subsequently reiterated in an article by two militants published in the Nouvel Observateur, was originally published in Le Monde (6 April), after the party's own L'Humanité had refused to print it:

'In losing once more the elections to a government nevertheless worn by its divisions and by the unpopularity of its economic policy, the left has not only lost a battle. An immense hope, one may fear, has been destroyed for a long time.' After invoking the 'political weaknesses' and 'internal contradictions' of the left - the division amongst its parties,

the inadequacy of its language and objectives and its often too routinely electoralist conception of politics - and certain problems posed by the PCF's own conduct during the pre-electoral period, its frequent abrupt changes of line, for example, or its failure to transform itself into the instrument of a popular movement, the authors refer to the discussion which has developed since 19 March in the following terms: 'Communist militants see clearly that it is, in the long term, the influence and even the existence of the party that are in question, in particular in the working class.' They go on to criticise the party leadership's attitude to the defeat, summed up in its refusal to accept that the PCF bears any part of the responsibility, stating that 'We cannot accept the authoritarian affirmation by the Political Bureau, before any real analysis, that the line followed by the party was correct. We cannot accept a parody of a discussion on the basis of that affirmation.'

Finally, the authors propose 4 concrete measures aimed at enlarging the possibilities for democratic debate within the party; measures which, they suggest, represent the 'material and politically indispensable conditions of a real analysis and discussion', and which also, it might be added, may be situated perfectly within the perspective of Althusser's comments on 'democratic centralism' in his previously published remarks on the 22nd Congress. The proposals are as follows:

1 That, in view of the next Central Committee meeting (scheduled for 26-27 April), members of the Central and Federal Committees should attend local section and cellule meetings, to offer any elements of explanation they might have and to participate in the discussions and listen to the militants in order to report their ideas.

2 That the report and discussion at the next Central Committee meeting be immediately and integrally published, either in L'Humanité or if need be in a special pamphlet.

3 That, on the basis of that publication, a forum for discussion be immediately set up in the party's press, where all communists might intervene to contribute to the party's reflection.

4 That the next party congress be a truly extraordinary congress by the forms of its preparation and conduct ... that it must publicly express the real debates inside the party, up to the final sessions. That it should organise the election of delegates in a totally democratic manner, eliminating the filtering of candidates by Candidature Committees. That it should be truly sovereign, that is to say, elaborate for itself, after discussion, the line to be adopted by the whole party, instead of simply recording a resolution established in advance.'

(2) On a slightly more abstract level of theoretical determination, it seems that the crisis of the international communist movement has at last become, for Althusser, a crisis in marxism itself. At a Colloquium organised by Il Manifesto in Venice during November 1977, on 'Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies', Althusser delivered a long speech in which he said: 'Let us not be afraid to say that Marxism is in crisis. Something has happened in the working class conscience.'

There is no longer any living ideal.'

This 'salutory' crisis, however, which signals the 'necessity to transform marxism', was by no means the occasion for regret, he went on to say: 'On the contrary, one can say: At last, the crisis has exploded in full daylight! For it is not a recent phenomenon. It began during the 30s and even before. Marxism was fixed and blocked in formulas, in a political line and practices. We cannot settle this crisis by invoking Stalin. The heritage was not pure at a certain moment in history and then travestied. Marxism in its purity is a myth. We find ourselves today before the vital necessity to revise a certain idea that we have made ourselves of the masters of marxism. These were men like us, who advanced into unknown domains, who were exposed to committing errors and even to saying silly things.' (Le Monde, 15 November 1977)

More recently, in a long interview with Rossana Rossanda published in Il Manifesto (4 April 1978), Althusser went further on the need to reconsider marxism, in particular with regard to the fact that it does not have a theory of the State: 'Marxist theory says almost nothing on the State, nor on ideology and ideologies, nor on politics, nor on the organisations of class struggle.' There is a blind spot at this point 'as if Marx was paralysed by the bourgeois representation of the State and of politics etc, to the extent that this was only reproduced in a negative form.' The task before us, Althusser explained as follows: 'In the same way that Marx consciously presented Capital as a critique of political economy, we must manage to achieve the aim that he could not: to think a critique of politics as it is adopted by the ideology and practice of bourgeois politics...' '... The communist party is constructed exactly on the model of the bourgeois political apparatus, with its parliament which "discusses" (the militant base) and its "elected" leadership which, whatever happens, has the means to maintain itself in place and to assure

the domination of its line by the apparatus of its functionaries. It is obvious that this profound contamination of the conception of politics by bourgeois ideology is the point on which will be won or lost the future of working class organisations.' Althusser is convinced that the party must never be a part of the State apparatus, since its role is precisely to destroy and transform the bourgeois State apparatus, and then to assist the withering away of the new revolutionary State. If the party founds itself in the State, the USSR is the result. Hence a CP must never consider itself a party of government, even if, in certain circumstances, it can participate in government. Althusser believes that without 'autonomy of the party (and not of politics) in relation to the State', we shall never go beyond the bourgeois State, however reformed. Without this autonomy, the alternative is either class collaboration or the Party-State with all its consequences. (Le Monde, 7 April)

(3) Finally, for serious Capital scholars, a new book has appeared in Althusser's 'Theorie' series: Le Concept de Loi Economique dans Le Capital, by Gerard Dumenil. Dumenil reworks much of the ground central to the original althusserian 'reading' of Capital, from a different perspective and with different results. He rejects the notion that Marx's text proceeds by 'theoretical production' in favour of the view that it proceeds by posing concepts, exploring the theoretical space both opened up and limited by that 'positioning', then posing new concepts which enlarge the theoretical field, and so on. The real object of his careful research, then, is nothing other than the logic of Marx's thought, the 'analysis of the cognitive process' which he is not averse to calling a theory of knowledge. The book contains a long introduction by Althusser.

Paul Patton

Human Rights in West Germany

The Russell Tribunal on the condition of human rights in West Germany held its first session from 29 March to 6 April. At the end of the hearings the jury was asked the following four questions:

- 1 Are citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany denied the right to pursue a career in public service because of their political beliefs?
- 2 Does the operation of the Berufsverbote represent a serious threat to human rights?
- 3 Does the operation of the Berufsverbote take place in such a fashion as to discriminate against people holding a particular political opinion?
- 4 Is the operation of the Berufsverbote related to discriminatory practises by other institutions, in particular trade unions, professional organisations and churches?

The jury unanimously replied 'Yes' to the first three questions in a secret ballot. Seven replied 'Yes' to question 4, 1 abstained and eight replied 'Further evidence necessary'.

The tribunal should be congratulated that it met at all. The West German establishment attacked it with an unsavoury mixture of smear and threat, claiming that the tribunal was part of an international campaign against the Federal Republic, that it was unconcerned with violations of human rights by left-wing regimes, that its members were communists or the dupes of communism etc. Germans

thinking of supporting the tribunal were crudely reminded that loyalty to the state did not mean co-operating with those involved in 'defaming' it. The campaign against the tribunal had the unintended effect of giving its members first hand experience of the atmosphere of political paranoia within which the Berufsverbote are operated.

All opposition is perceived as part of a systematic conspiracy and the fact that the conspirators should appeal to principles of human rights is no evidence of common ground between West Germany's self-understanding as a democratic state and its critics. It only makes the conspirators' attack the more insidious for being 'subtle'. Activities are judged not by the legitimacy of their aims but by the desirability of their effects. Thus the claim that West Germany violates human rights is not seriously considered, but the effect that this might have on West Germany's international reputation is. Remembering the reactions to the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation's efforts on behalf of Soviet dissidents one is inclined to laugh. When they were supporting Soviet dissidents they were attacked as anti-communists, when they support leftists in West Germany they suddenly become communists. They must be doing something right!

The lowest depths of calumny were reached by the 'liberal Der Spiegel which included, as illustration to a highly derogatory article on the tribunal, a photograph of a letter sent by the director of the foundation, Christopher Farley, to the East German

President, Willi Stoph, in which Farley asks Stoph to use his good offices to enable the imprisoned East German dissident Rudolf Bahro to participate as a jury member in the tribunal. The Spiegel caption read 'Wooing Communists' (Werbung ffr Kommunisten). Der Spiegel's article was exemplary for West German political practice: background information was produced on this or that member of the tribunal who had worked together with communists in some way - participated in congresses or written for CP-supported publications. No mention was made of their records as activists against repression in Eastern Europe, nor was there any attempt to justify the implicit assumption that anyone who goes so far as to treat communists as legitimate political agents at all cannot be neutral but must be 'objectively' a supporter. However absurd the smears on the Tribunal, once they have been publicly endorsed by Government and League of Trade Unions the state employee or trade unionist ignores them at his or her peril. Just as the Berufsverbote require the civil servant to acknowledge that it is not his/her but the executive's right to decide which (legal) parties or political activities are inherently 'hostile to the constitution', so, too, support of the Russell Tribunal becomes an act of insubordination.

The tribunal, then, touched a very raw nerve in the West German establishment, and it is not hard to see why; at the centre of the Berufsverbote stands the question of the employee's loyalty to the 'Free and Democratic Basic Order' (FDGO). Not only must the employee not work against this established order, he/she is required to affirm that it is, in fact, free and democratic. As well as being questioned directly on their political attitudes candidates find themselves facing questions such as 'Do you consider that the judgement that the DKP is hostile to the constitution is constitutional?' and participation in activities against the Berufsverbote has been sufficient reason for candidates to receive Berufsverbote themselves. As one victim of the double-bind logic of the Berufsverbote put it to the tribunal:

"I may, or, to be precise, must acknowledge these constitutional principles, but when I call upon them and hence put their real content to the test they no longer have any validity for me." Whoever defends the right of communists to be heard puts themselves 'on their side' and, hence, outside the range of those whose opinions need to be taken into account.

An international tribunal is in a unique position to be able to challenge the self-reinforcing premises of West German practice without itself becoming its victim, and this, it seems to me, is sufficient justification for the existence of a Russell Tribunal on West Germany. But the situation is clearly different from that of previous tribunals on the war in south-east Asia and on repression in Latin America. The president of the jury, Vladimir Dedijer, said in his opening address:

"It is not a matter of condemning an illegitimate regime (Unrechtsregime). Our task is to bring once again and more into the open dangers which threaten the unrestricted validity of human rights. But basic human rights are embodied in the constitution of the Federal Republic itself. For this reason the tribunal acts and judges on principle within the framework of legality and legitimacy of the Federal Republic of Germany itself. The Federal Republic will be assessed according to the standard of its own constitution."

This statement seems to suggest that the difference is a matter of a transcendental division of political regimes into the 'illegitimate' and the 'constitutional' (rechtsstaatlich). But however is this division supposed to express itself in practice? Stalin's regime - surely as barbarous and arbitrary as any - operated under a constitution so free and democratic as to bring tears to the eyes. Was the Soviet Union under Stalin 'essentially' constitutional? If not, what is the mark of those countries with constitutions which are 'constitutional' distinguishing them from those which are not? Not that one should deny the differences between West Germany and Vietnam - or East Germany or the Soviet Union for that matter. But to do it by dividing up regimes into the 'constitutional' and the rest seems to me a (typically Teutonic) piece of pointless sophistry. It is dangerous, too, for Dedijer commits the tribunal in advance to the position that the constitution, 'properly interpreted', fails to support the operation of the Berufsverbote. In fact the legal situation (as an excellent report to the tribunal by Prof. Ulrich Preuss showed) is by no means so simple that one can dismiss the court decisions endorsing the Berufsverbote as merely arbitrary.

The question of the legality and legitimacy of the Berufsverbote highlights what is to me the major difference between this and previous Russell tribunals; what is at issue here is not facts but interpretations. Where previous tribunals offered a forum for allegations about events such as murder and torture which were strenuously denied by the authorities, the facts in this case (although the Government hardly goes out of its way to attract publicity) are not seriously in dispute.

The German Supreme Court itself set out to define the 'political loyalty obligation' for state employees so question 1 (whether political beliefs are a criterion for citizen's exclusion from public service) is hardly likely to be very controversial. The West German government doesn't claim that political selection doesn't take place. What it claims is that this is legitimate practice, supported by the constitution. Unless the tribunal is able to confront this claim holding hearings of particular cases does no more than bring to the notice of jury members what those who have followed the progress of the Berufsverbote already know; that tens of thousands of men and women are subjected to investigation and interrogation in a way which is humiliating and psychically emasculating. Not knowing what action, however private, trivial or long-forgotten will 'count' against them, they are denied even the minimal respect of having their views treated as something more than 'symptoms' of political disease.

It would be unfair, before the tribunal has produced its final report, to predict that it will fail to go beyond this and deal with the political and juridical roots of the matter. Nevertheless the membership of the jury - the lack of members with specialist legal knowledge and/or knowledge of West Germany - and the quality of some of their interventions leads me to fear that the tribunal will fail to take full advantage of a very important opportunity.

Mike Rosen

NB The proceedings of the first session of the Tribunal have been published in Germany: 3. Internationales Russell-Tribunal zur Situation der Menschenrechte in der BRD. Band 1, Rotbuch-Verlag, Berlin, 1978.

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