

Who makes history?

Althusser's anti-humanism

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Introduction

I am very much aware that in what follows I solve no philosophical problems. I attempt some conceptual clarifications and I propose some interpretations of theses of Louis Althusser. I hope this will at least make it possible to pose some problems more clearly than they are posed in Norman Geras' article 'Marxism and Proletarian Self-Emancipation'. I think that those of us who are Marxist philosophers can learn from Althusser. It is important that his work be debated, discussed, criticised and rectified. It's very important that we do not *dismiss* it. Norman Geras knows this and his very useful article 'Althusser's Marxism: an Account and Assessment' in *New Left Review* 71 Jan-Feb 1972 is a good example of a thoughtful study of Althusser. But I disagree with some things in this article. I think that Geras has misunderstood certain of Althusser's theses. I also think that these same misunderstandings are present in some of his comments about Althusser in his more recent essay. I think also that Geras' comments are based on his interpretation of Althusser's work up to 1965. As Geras himself points out however Althusser has rectified his own work in many respects since that date, he has warned us against certain interpretations of that earlier work, he has engaged in self-criticism, he has moved on. Geras seems not to have kept up with him. He seems no longer willing to learn. Now, instead of discussing him, he dismisses him.

Geras makes three comments about Althusser. Each of these is either false or is the kind of oversimplification which impedes theoretical research. They are as follows:

- (1) He claims that the doctrine that 'it is men who make history' is 'theoretically indigestible for the Althusserians'.
- (2) He says that Althusser's view that 'men are nothing more than the supports/effects of their social, political and ideological relations' is to be identified with 'the view of the masses as the true objects of their circumstances'.
- (3) He attributes to Althusser the view that the masses can only destroy and transform these relations 'by the power of a knowledge (Theoretical Practice) brought to them from elsewhere'.

In what follows I discuss these three comments in the order given.

The Humanist Formula

Geras' first remark is filled out as follows: 'It is men who make history albeit on the basis of objective conditions which they have to take as given'. Let us label this formula for convenience The Humanist Formula (HF). This 'significant truth' is said to be decisive because it 'represents Marx's break with the whole problematic I have just surveyed, and it informs all of Marx's more concrete and specific theoretical constructions... Men are neither passive effects nor omnipotent wills, but at once the subjects and objects of a practice which generates and transforms social and ideological structures, and transforms men themselves in the process'.

Now it is true that the formula 'It is men who make history on the basis of objective conditions which they have to take as given' is significant by

virtue of being a rejection of several alternative approaches to the problem of human history. It is a denial of the crude environmentalist thesis that circumstances make men, and also of the idealist thesis that men are masters of their circumstances. It is a rejection, therefore, as Geras points out, of a huge variety of positions of both the 'man makes history' kind and of the 'legislators/educators make history' kind (Rousseau, Robert Owen). The trouble is however that this rejection is not, in the above formula, achieved by the elaboration of concepts which are fundamentally different from those involved in these other (idealist, materialist) formulae. It simply takes the old concepts, designating sources of determination (men, circumstances), and instead of asserting the primacy of one source of determination over the other it says that history comes about as a result of a mixture of the two, a bit of one (men, not passive effects, subjects) and a bit of the other (objective conditions, not omnipotent wills, objects). It therefore is significant, at an ideological level (and that is important) but it contains no new knowledge. It does not tell us how to think about history, about men, about 'social conditions'. The important question is, does Marx provide other concepts which *do* constitute an important advance in understanding history, and are they such as to allow the formula 'men make history' to be replaced? Althusser's research has been based on the belief that the 'men make history' formula represents a 'break with the old problematic' only in the sense that it is a denial of positions taken within that problematic by other social theorists and philosophers: but it remains *within* that old problematic because the terms of the denial are still the terms of the old problematic. A genuine *break* is only achieved when old formulae are not simply *denied* but *replaced*.

Althusser argues that Marx did *replace* the old problematic, did *break* with it, did therefore provide *new* concepts. He also believes that it is important, both in theory and in politics, to identify the new concepts as clearly as possible and to learn how to operate with them rigorously. It is important because the old formula and the old concepts both impede theoretical research and are politically and ideologically dangerous. The old formula is one with which Sartre, for example, can happily operate. It is not rigorous enough to *demarkate* between marxist and non-marxist theory. Althusser's arguments about the scientific and political effects of the formula 'man makes history' are equally applicable to the formula 'men make history'. Philosophers who use this formula 'mix everything up' and thus they disarm revolutionary philosophers, theoreticians and militants. They disarm them because in effect they deprive them of an irreplaceable weapon: the objective knowledge of the conditions, mechanisms and forms of the class struggle... If the workers are told that 'it is men who make history' that helps to *disarm* them. It tends to make them think that they are all-powerful as men, whereas in fact they are disarmed as workers in the face of the power which is really in command: that of the bourgeoisie, which controls the *material* and *political* conditions determining history. The humanist line turns them away from the class-struggle, prevents them from making use of the only power they possess: that of their organisation as a class, by means of their class organisations (the trade unions, the party)' ('Reply to John Lewis: Self Criticism' Part 2, *Marxism Today*, November 1972).

What then of the claim that this formula, which has been used by 'all of the greatest Marxist thinkers and revolutionary militants' (Geras) is 'theoretically indigestible for the Althusserians'? This claim amounts implicitly to saying that any formula used by Marx, Engels and Lenin must not be tampered with. I, as a Marxist, reject this and so, of course, does Norman Geras. The formula was used, in fact, as an important political weapon by Marx, Engels and Lenin. It was used to combat, for example, certain forms of crude mechanical determinism (and revisionist politics) within the Second

International. But it is not philosophically, scientifically or politically adequate and it is important to find a better weapon if we can.

This is clearly illustrated by one of the most famous of the texts in which HF occurs - Engels letter to Bloch of 1890 (*Selected Works*, 1962 edition, vol.2, p488). In this letter Engels also refers us, for confirmation, to perhaps the most famous of all the occurrences of HF in Marx's writings, that in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In the letter Engels says 'We make history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions. Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive...' Engels' explicit concern here is to combat 'economic determinism'. He does this by emphasising the *political and ideological* elements 'also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles'. So far so good. The trouble is, however, that Engels is in the position of having set up a thesis (a correct one) in a form that invites more questions than he can answer. The 'economic element is ultimately determining' but the superstructure also 'play a part'. There is scarcely a text in all of the works of Marx and Engels which has suffered so many different interpretations, most of them bourgeois and incorrect, or which is so obviously open to the charge of evading all the issues. The questions of how it is possible for 'economic elements' and superstructures to be in such a combination, of just what they are and how they function, are not answered here, and the interpretation to be given to HF is therefore not specified.

In the next paragraph of the letter Engels attempts a brief philosophical exposition of the way in which men are agents in the historical process. That is, he attempts to explain HF. He does this in terms of the metaphor of the parallelogram of forces. The combination of individual wills produces a process which works unconsciously so that the overall effect is something that no individual has willed. In this exposition Engels in effect falls back into the old problematic in which individual wills are determined by the combination of micro-contingencies ('circumstances') and combine in a way that seems to be pure magic to produce intelligible history. The fact that this is a 'classic text' has not prevented Althusser from demonstrating its philosophical weakness, the way it fails to give an historical materialist account of the determination of 'individuality', and of the way in which men are the makers of history. (He has done this in the Appendix to his article 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', *For Marx*, pp.117-128). In this text (the Appendix) Althusser makes no attempt to solve the problems he raises. The general problem of the relation between Marxist theory and philosophy is what underlies these particular questions. About this he says 'But perhaps we may have to be convinced of the existence of the problem before we will find either the will or the way to pose it correctly and then resolve it'. And this, I think, is my position also on Geras' article. What he takes as *solutions* (which at a certain level, against certain enemies, as weapons, are 'solutions') rest on a philosophical basis which is no solution at all. We need to be convinced of the fact that Marxist philosophy is in an embryonic state, and we need to discover the will and the way to develop it beyond the state in which it has been left to us by Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Althusser's Anti-Humanist Formulae

Does Althusser provide us with a replacement for the formula 'men make history'? In fact he has provided two. They are both 'anti-humanist' and I will label them for convenience AF1 and AF2. They are as follows:

AF1 'It is the masses which make history. The class-struggle is the motor of history'.

AF1 occurs more frequently in Althusser's more recent work (see, for example, 'Reply to John Lewis: Self-Criticism' in *Marxism Today* October and November 1972). But not only in his more recent work. It is also present in *For Marx* for example (p215). The question is whether it is compatible with AF2. This occurs only in scattered passages and is never given systematic exposition. Because of this I give two versions of it which may not in fact be equivalent.

AF2 'The "subjects" of history are given human societies' (*For Marx* p.231)

'The true subjects of the practices of social production are the relations of production. Men are never anything more than the bearers/supports/effects of these relations'.

This latter version is not a direct quote from Althusser but is an attempt to state clearly what is meant by the *only* passage in his work in which he offers a general formula (a formula not related only to the analysis of theoretical practice) to express the implications of his theory of the social totality for the problem 'Who makes history?'. The direct quote is as follows:

The structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the 'supports' (Träger) of these functions. The true 'subjects' (in the sense of constitutive subjects of the process) are therefore not these occupants or functionaries, are not, despite all appearances, the 'obviousnesses' of the 'given' if naive anthropology, 'concrete individuals', 'real men' - but the definition and distribution of these places and functions. The true 'subjects' are these definers and distributors: the relations of production (and political and ideological social relations).'

(*Reading Capital* p.180)

We are on difficult ground here for various reasons. (i) There are very few passages in which Althusser uses the concept of *Träger* in relation to the problem of how we are to understand history. In fact the only other discussion of the concept in this relation seems to be in *Reading Capital* pp. 111-112 where he attempts to replace the 'false problem' of 'the role of the individual in history' with the problem of 'the historical forms of existence of individuality'. (ii) In relation between his various uses of the concept is that they are all in one way or another based on a generalised concept of 'practice' as forms of production in which specific forms of work transform material to produce new objects. For a clear exposition of this concept see Norman Geras' *NLR* article. The problem is that in spite of the fact that this concept is central it nowhere receives anything like adequate presentation or justification. For example it is not at all clear what might be meant by 'the places and functions determined by the social relations of ideological practice' or what the relation is between the concept of social relations and that of theoretical practice. That is, there is at work here a half-cocked analogy in which certain concepts derived from the analysis of the process of material production are generalised to cover also other processes (object, material, work, transformation); and other concepts, with a different origin, are associated with them in a way that leaves them more or less totally obscured (functions, places, distributors, supports/effects). Some other concepts (structure, relations) occur sometimes as part of the half-cocked analogy and sometimes independently of it. (iii) This structuralist terminology (the second group of concepts above) has more or less completely disappeared from Althusser's later work and was more or less absent also from his work prior to *Reading Capital*. It should be noted in what follows that Althusser's

anti-humanism is not specifically dependent on his use of the concepts of this analogy (the first two groups of concepts above). This is true not only of his anti-humanism but also of his analysis of the dialectic inasmuch as this relies on the concept's contradiction, overdetermination, conjuncture etc. In fact almost everything in *For Marx* survives a criticism of the structuralist generalised concept of practice.

The First Anti-Humanist Formula

I imagine that Norman Geras would not want to deny the truth of AF1. The question is in what relation does AF1 stand to HF? Althusser claims that it is an advance on HF, that it captures an essential truth of Marxist theory, whereas HF does not, and that it is important to insist on a rigorous exclusion of HF in favour of AF1. Are the two formulae incompatible (in spite of the fact that many people have asserted them both)? Or is it merely a matter of a difference of emphasis which has ideological importance? Since Althusser claims that the formulae have effects both in politics and in science he clearly regards the two competing formulae as incompatible and not just differing in ideological or pedagogical power or usefulness. But he also clearly regards them not as incompatible in the logical sense that they could not both be true but as existing within different problematics. They are conceptually incompatible - the concepts cannot coherently coexist within a discourse. Why?

If you want to engage in political practice what kinds of knowledge do you need? Knowledge of *What*? The formula 'men make history under definite objective circumstances' suggests that you would need to know about *men*, and this in two senses. You would need to know what men are, that is you would need to know *human nature*. And you would need to know what men are in the particular situation. You would need to know their subjective states, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices etc. This is how political economy thought about men. And also empiricist philosophy, utilitarianism etc. This is how 'politicians' talk about men. Listen to them talking about the crisis in the British economy - listen to Jenkins and Maudling. 'The trouble is that we do not have confidence in our ability to compete in world markets'. 'We need a new attitude to work and a new sense of responsibility towards the less well off'. They believe that men make history and that if only Englishmen, and especially English workers, had a different attitude the crisis would disappear. And it's not just that we must defend the workers against this rubbish because they're too dumb to know any better. On the contrary, they are by and large more likely to be suspicious about such talk, to be spontaneously cynical about such talk, than are 'the intellectuals'. There was hardly ever an intellectual who sold himself to a TV discussion program without talking rubbish like this. Of course I'm not accusing Norman Geras of talking in such a way. What I'm saying is that the formula 'men make history' invites such talk (and also much more sophisticated talk of course; existentialist talk, libertarian-utopian talk, *Telos*-talk). And it does not immediately hit such talk over the head with the decisive and all-important counter-concepts: the *class-struggle*.

Then one would need to know about 'the objective conditions'. And one enormous problem here is to know what on earth this means. It does in fact seem more like a vacant space, in which any old bourgeois concept could settle, than a concept. One would then have to try to understand in what way these 'objective conditions' somehow leave 'causal gaps' within which individual men could operate. You would try to understand what room there is for the play of individual wills, how individuals might intervene so as to decisively alter the historical outcome which is otherwise inscribed in the determin-

ation of the 'objective conditions'. You might see it as impossible for men (all men) to intervene, but only possible for some man (Rousseau's Legislator) or some group of men (the educators in Robert Owen). The formula does not tell one *which* men it will have to be. How is it possible in these terms to think of men acting as *members of a class* engaged in class-struggle? How does the decisive fact discovered by Marx that society is class society enter? Does it enter as a fact about men (individual men aggregated)? Or as a fact about 'objective circumstances' (acting on men who are somehow ontologically prior to their class-membership)? Classes are not reducible to their individual members plus the 'human relations' between them. Nor are they circumstances external to their members which those members take as given. Social relations of production are reproduced continually but the agents of this process of reproduction are not men *simpliciter*. The wage-labourer who sells his labour power for a wage thereby reproduces the relation in which he stands to capital because he produces surplus-value which the capitalist can use as capital, to pay his wages next time round, or to buy raw materials or whatever. But it is the fact that the labourer is precisely a wage-labourer, that he sells his labour power to the owner of capital, that labour power is precisely a commodity that sells for less than it can produce, it is these *relations* that reproduce themselves (over the process of social production as a whole) in the production and appropriation of surplus value. We have here an example of a process in which a social relation reproduces itself, although the individual's agency, in this case his human labour power and all the specific skills, techniques and knowledges that constitute it in the particular case, while being indispensably involved in the process of reproduction, is not the agency which effects the reproduction.

In other cases, cases of political relations for example, we might not be able to present what is involved in quite the same way (on this more below). But we could at least say this. An individual man is always some determinate kind of man (a proletarian, a functionary in the State apparatus, a petty bourgeois etc), not in the sense that men are the kinds of beings who always exist already-determined-internally by virtue of the fact that they occupy some place in a system of social relations. I think that in this restricted sense it is true that men are 'representatives' or 'personifications' or 'effects' of places in a system of social relations; and that the formula 'men make history' is conceptually incompatible with this important assertion.

Political practice guided by the formula 'The masses make history; the class struggle is the motor of history' is different from the political practice suggested by HF. The central concept of the theory of political practice is the concept of the conjuncture. The concept conjuncture replaces the concept 'circumstances' (although not always the word) in the writings of Lenin and Mao. Althusser has done more than any other contemporary western philosopher to clarify the concept of conjuncture and to locate it within the science of historical materialism. As far as knowledge is concerned the task in political practice is the analysis of 'the present situation', and that means an analysis in terms of classes, fractions of classes, alliances between classes, primary and secondary contradictions, tendencies etc etc. On the basis of this knowledge, which is not, incidentally, the kind of knowledge produced by professional bourgeois intellectuals, which is not the kind of knowledge that they are trained or equipped to produce, political practice can transform the balances of forces and ultimately can transform the system of social relations. This practice is possible only by class organisations, by cooperative and combative class action. Althusser has never denied, as far as I know, that individual agents

are operative within the class struggle nor that the subjective conditions of the various members of the different classes are an important aspect of the balance of class forces. On the contrary he has often asserted precisely that. For example in *For Marx* he explains just why no theory of imperialism (or of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital* come to that) could replace the specific knowledge and other aspects of political practice. 'As if a single word (imperialism) could thus magically dissolve the reality of an irreplaceable practice, the revolutionaries' practice, their lives, their sufferings, their sacrifices, their efforts, in short, their concrete history, by the use made of another practice, based on the first, the practice of a historian - that is of a scientist, who necessarily reflects on necessity's *fait accompli*; as if the theoretical practice of a classical historian who analyses the past could be confused with the practice of a revolutionary leader who reflects on the present in the present, on the necessity to be achieved, on the means to produce it, on the strategic application points for these means; in short, on his own action, for he does act on concrete history.' (p.179)

What has been denied is that it is these individual agents who make history. It is not just that individual agents very often do not know what they are doing, do not understand the meaning or consequences of their actions (this is what is involved in the Engels metaphor of the parallelogram of forces mentioned above). It is that they, as individual agents, could not do what in fact gets done. No individual worker could be said to be the agent who by his actions reproduces the social relations of the capitalist mode of production, and nor could individual workers taken together, aggregated, be said to be this agent. No individual revolutionary militant, not even Lenin or Mao, could be said to be the agent who transformed the social relations of production, and nor could all the revolutionary militants taken individually and aggregated be said to have been this agent either. And yet the social relations of production are reproduced and are transformed and will be transformed.

It is worth noting here that AF1 is not only preferable to HF but also to the formula 'The self-emancipation of the proletariat'. This for two reasons. The first is that 'proletariat' is not the name of a self but of a class. The second is that emancipation is to be achieved not by the proletariat but by the 'masses'. This is an important political reminder of how these abstract formulae are to be applied in particular, concrete historical situations. In concrete, revolutionary political practice it is important to identify 'the masses' or 'the people' i.e. to discover which classes and fractions of classes are or could be in alliance with the proletariat (poor peasants, petty bourgeoisie, subproletariats). 'As long as you can't answer the question: What, today, comprises the people in a given country (today, because the composition of the people varies historically; in a given country, because the composition of the people changes from place to place), you can't do anything in politics. Only by knowing what 'the people' means can you then develop: (1) a mass political line; (2) corresponding political actions.' (Althusser in Macciocchi's *Letters from inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser*, New Left Books, 1973). So even abstract formulae can be more or less rigorous and can point the way more or less clearly to correct political practice.

The Second Anti-Humanist Formula

What is the difference between what I above called the restricted sense in which men are 'personifications' or 'effects' of places in a system of social relations and the second version of AF2, 'The true subjects of the practices of social production are the relations of production. Men are never anything

more than the bearers/supports/effects of these relations'? One might say that this restricted sense is, as it stands, a way of locating the site of important theoretical and philosophical problems. It is not a theory. It is not a solution to these problems. But it does help to indicate something of the content that concepts in such a theory would have to have. It indicates that we need to understand the efficacy of structures of social relations and of classes, and it indicates that our understanding of what it is to be a human individual, a subject, will be dependent on and not prior to this understanding of classes (compared with the situation in most philosophy where this order of things is reversed). As I understand it AF2 is a formula which is based on an attempt to provide at least the outlines of such a theory and of such solutions. There are many criticisms that could be made of this formula. But if I am right about its theoretical origins at least one kind of criticism will be quite wrong. This is any criticism that is based on the identification of the view that men are the supports/effects of social relations with the view that 'the masses are the total objects of their circumstances'. Here we have arrived at the second of Geras' comments with which I am slowly dealing in this discussion. My reply to this second comment is that, regardless of other criticisms of AF2 one may wish to make, it is to completely miss the whole point of AF2 to criticise it on the basis of an identification of it with another formula, which it is in fact designed to replace; or to interpret it in terms of a problematic with which it is meant to mark a break.

The concepts supports/social relations are specifically designed to replace, not to be translations of, the concepts men/circumstances. They do this by attempting at any rate to theorise a relation in which 'men' and 'structures of social relations' are internally related and mutually determining rather than externally related and causally co-mingling. The trouble with the Geras comment then is that it is so wrong that it makes any criticism or discussion of AF2 impossible. This is equally true of his remark in the *NLR* article in which he sums up his exposition of AF2 by saying 'Thus, the human subject is definitively abolished'. It would of course take more than any intellectual operations in Althusser's head, however byzantine, to abolish human subjects. An attempt has been made to explain human subjectivity, to identify human agents as effects of social relations, to deny that human subjects are the subjects of the social processes we call history. Is this to abolish them? It is rather as if a philosopher who defended the 'identity thesis' were criticised on the grounds that he had abolished human pains. It is the kind of remark that merely cuts off discussion.

However, at this point I want to deal separately with two distinct problems. (1) There may be involved in Geras' rejection of Althusser's AF2 certain implicit general assumptions about the question 'Who makes history?' with which I would agree. What is at stake here is this. What kinds of abstraction and what concepts do we need in order to understand social formations, political practice and history? Can we formulate some very general criteria of what would count as mistaken answers to these questions? Now I think this is a very risky enterprise because the possibility of rigour is very limited. But we can try. (2) The second problem I'll try to deal with is that of the interpretation of AF2. Geras relies on an interpretation which I think is incorrect. What is the correct one?

In answer to the first question here, to be treated with caution are some possibilities.

(1) Whatever might be meant by saying that men are 'ensembles of social relations' in Marx's formulation, or 'supports/effects' of social relations in the Althusserian 'improvement', such a formula must not be given an interpretation which is incompatible with the fact that human social relations are only possible because they involve (whatever that means)

men and not, say, rocks or dogs. There is an intelligible and important problem here: how, by virtue of what, is it possible for there to be human social relations? Such a question does not necessarily involve the assumption that we need a 'science of man' but it does involve the assumption that there must be sciences other than the science of social formations, sciences such as linguistics, psychoanalytic theory, anthropology. In as much as the phrase 'never anything more than...' in AF2 is a denial of this then it is a mistake. What Althusser is, correctly, keen to emphasise is that such sciences cannot be subsumed under a general heading, 'the study of human nature', where this is given the interpretation it was given by all philosophical and proto-scientific enquiries concerning man before Marx (and by and large since Marx also). Thus is he concerned to emphasise that one cannot first study 'human nature' and then, on that basis, study human social relations. What he has neglected to emphasise (although he has never denied it and clearly believes it to be true) is that the science of social formations does not exhaust the scientific knowledge of human life.

(2) A connected point: if Althusser has not abolished the human subject has he at any rate sought to abolish the concept of 'the human subject', or the concepts 'man' and 'men'? I said earlier than HF and AF1 are conceptually incompatible. I take this to mean that there is no admissible concept of 'men' or 'subject', but that any such concept could not be the same concept as that of 'men' (and 'subject') as they exist within either the pre-Marxian problematic or in the ideological discourse of everyday life. That this is, in part, what Althusser means, and that he is not in the absurd position of having asserted that men do not exist, is clear for example in *For Marx* (pp.229, 243) 'It is impossible to know anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes.... Once the scientific analysis of this real object has been undertaken, we discover that a knowledge of concrete (real) men, that is a knowledge of that ensemble of the social relations is only possible on the condition that we do completely without the theoretical services of the concept of man (in the sense in which it existed in its theoretical claims even before the displacement).' But I would certainly agree that such statements are not so rigorous that one could guarantee that they could not have undesirable effects in politics and science.

(3) Geras may be relying on the criterion that any view would be incorrect (and would have undesirable effects in politics) if that view had the implication that human subjectivity and human agency are only epiphenomenal to the process of historical change; that is that they are not implicated in the causal mechanisms which produce that change. I agree with this. The question of whether Althusser has views which do have this implication is a difficult one. Certainly he would not admit to holding such views. They would not only contradict other views that he clearly does hold (e.g. about political practice) but would amount to a version of reductivist materialist determinism that so much of his work on the dialectic and on overdetermination etc has sought to refute. However, Geras is right when he insists (*NLR* article) on the Althusserian view that 'the rigour of a text counts for more than the intentions of its subject-author'.

The concepts of the second Anti-Humanist Formula

Now for the problem of the interpretation of AF2. I do not want to minimize the difficulties involved in understanding AF2. These difficulties are certainly in part caused by the fact that Althusser has made no attempt to give to AF2 the extended exposition that it requires. The off-hand way in which this formula is sometimes dropped into the argument without detailed exposition is bound to have, as Althusser would put it, undesirable effects

in science and politics.

As I understand it the concept 'support' (*Träger*) as used by Althusser has two quite distinct origins. The first origin is in structural linguistics and related areas of research such as structuralist literary analysis and psychoanalytic theory. In the sections in *Reading Capital* in which Althusser discusses (theoretical and ideological) discourse, symptomatic reading and so on he is, without ever discussing the problems involved, leaning heavily on the methods and concepts of these 'structuralist' sciences, in particular on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory (hence the appearance of the concept of 'the unconscious of a test'). Now I do not want to attempt here any discussion or assessment of this aspect of Althusser's work except to say that the concept of 'subject' is very much in the nature of a *problem* for all the structuralist influenced theoretical enquiries. Inasmuch as Althusser gives the impression in *Reading Capital* that he is relying in these sections on some body of accomplished philosophical research he is guilty of at least evasion. For all the back-peddalling in the 'Forward' ('we believe that despite the terminological ambiguity the profound tendency of our texts was not attached to the "structuralist ideology"') I think he can be accused of having allowed some attachment to give his work a false sense of rigour.

Notice however, that I am not saying that this attachment to a structuralist terminology and method, as applied to the analysis of texts, is *wrong*. The particular form of abstraction involved in this approach raises serious questions. One practises an abstraction that produces, as an object of analysis, a text. For the purposes of analysis one severs the links which existed between the production of the (real, concrete) text and (a) the activity of a subject-author and (b) a social formation. (On the latter aspect of the abstraction see Geras' useful discussion in the *NLR* article). Althusser practises this abstraction but does not discuss *how it is possible*, nor demonstrate its limits. I agree with Geras that this lack of discussion leads Althusser (and this is even truer of Rancière) to adopt positions which are idealist.

Träger in Capital

The second source of the concept '*Träger*' is its use by Marx in *Capital*. Let us be quite clear about this. The concept is *not* just one which was invented by Althusser in order to give a modish structuralist flavour to his work. It is Marx's concept; it occurs regularly throughout *Capital*. If we need a philosophical exposition of it (this is not because there is any *a priori* obligation on us to defend Althusser. It is because we need to understand Marx).

In Marx's use the concept is once again produced by abstraction, in this case with the production of the concept 'men only in so far as they are bearers/ effects of the economic social relations of production of the capitalist mode of production (CMP)'. The question is, what is it that makes this abstraction possible? I can't provide here the detailed analysis of *Capital* that would be required to answer that question properly. But my emphasis is this: the concept *Träger* does seem to be an important aspect of the scientific achievement of *Capital*. Therefore it is important not to *dismiss* it. It is important to study it and understand it and on *that* basis to decide whether or not the use made of it by Althusser is correct.

Here are three points about Marx's use of *Träger* and its variants in *Capital*. Each of them is related to the inadequacy of the concepts 'men' and 'circumstances' in the analysis of the CMP.

(1) *Capital* vol 1 p.592. Here the capitalist is said to be 'personified capital'. In his actions the capitalist is 'the effect of the social mechanism of which he is but one of the wheels. The development of capitalist production makes it constantly necessary to keep increasing the amount of capital laid out in a given industrial undertaking, and competi-

tion makes the immanent laws of capitalist production to be felt by each individual capitalist as external coercive laws'.

One of the points of the concept 'effect/support' is then to get at the way in which each individual capitalist (or worker) is related to the necessity which derives from the laws of operation of the system as a whole. There are only a certain number of 'places' in this system which an individual can occupy (schematically, capitalist of the industrial, landlord, merchant varieties, productive and unproductive labour etc) and these places are continually reproduced and continually develop in what 'they' demand of their occupants. Certain laws operate in the process of reproduction of these places and relations; competition between individual capitals, exploitation of wage-labour by the appropriation of surplus value and so on.

(2) p.152: 'As the conscious representative (*Träger*) of this movement, the possessor of money becomes a capitalist. His person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which the money starts and to which it returns. The expansion of value, which is the objective basis or mainspring of the circulation M-C-M, becomes his subjective aim, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more and more wealth in the abstract becomes the sole motive of his operations, that he functions as a capitalist, that is, as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will.'

The point here is to do with the way in which occupying a 'place' in the structure of the social relations of production is related to the subjectivity of the individual 'representative', to his consciousness and his will. This seems to be the area of discussion that Althusser has in mind when he talks of the problem of the 'historical forms of the existence of individuality' (*Reading Capital* p.112). But these human subjects, although they are subjects active within the process of social production are not given as the subjects of that process, nor are they given as the objects of that process (these are Geras' concepts - he says that men are both of these). In so far as he occupies a place (is a capitalist for example) it is because the objective basis of circulation (expansion of value) becomes his subjective aim (ownership of wealth in the abstract, money).

(3) On the other hand it is only in so far as men personify economic social relations of production that they enter into the analysis of the CMP *Capital* vol.1 p.85 'In the course of our investigation we shall, in general, find that the characters who appear on the economic stage are but the personifications of the economic relations that exist between them' (or in another translation - 'as bearers (*Träger*) of which they encounter each other'). This is of course the fundamental point about Marx's analysis on which Balibar relies on his exposition of the '*Träger*' concept in *Reading Capital*. It is essential that we investigate the significance of this face, that Marx demonstrates the structure of the social process of the capitalist production, its reproduction and the laws of its development without having to discuss (as subjects, as individuals with consciousness and will) except in so far as they 'personify' or are 'effects of' the social relations of production. And let us not underestimate the scope of Marx's discoveries about the CMP made on this basis. Not just the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. But also the laws of development; the concentration of capital, the socialisation of productive forces (development of forms of organisation and cooperation), the extension of capitalist social relations to all branches of production and the formation of a world market, the constitution of an industrial reserve army, and the decline in the average rate of profit. (This list is an approximation of that given by Balibar in *Reading Capital* p.284). As far as this analysis is concerned Marx nowhere relies on the notion that 'men make history' and it is surely correct that this notion would in fact have con-

stituted an obstacle to the production of this scientific knowledge. (The one reference Geras gives to *Capital* as a source for this formula is actually a quote from Vico.)

The limits of the '*Träger*' concept

What are the limits of the knowledge given in *Capital*? The absence of 'men' in *Capital* is determined by the limits of the object of the theory given in that text. That object is the economic instance of the CMP. I shall raise two issues about the extent to which concepts found in *Capital* might not be sufficient for the production of knowledge of other objects. Is the conceptual restriction, whereby men enter only in so far as they are supports/ effects of social relations of production, possible when it is a matter of knowledge of periods in which the political class struggle is dominant, for example of periods of transition between modes of production? And secondly is this restriction possible when it is a matter of knowledge of a conjuncture?

The mechanisms of the structures of the economic social relations of the CMP as described in *Capital* only operate on the assumption of the dominance of the economic instance, and of the successful articulation of this instance with the operations of the structures of the political and ideological instances. One might ask what is involved in that assumption. Whatever the answer to that question outside the limits of this assumption the laws of the capitalist economic structures break down (or have yet to be established). This is clearly seen in *Capital* in its treatment of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and marginally in its few remarks about the dissolution of capitalism. In those parts of *Capital* in which Marx is discussing periods such as these, when political class struggle is dominant his analysis no longer operates within the same conceptual limits. In relation to the transition from feudalism to capitalism Marx says (p.737) that once the CMP is established the reproduction of the social classes can be left to 'the natural laws of production' i.e. to his (the worker's) dependence on capital, a dependence springing from, and guaranteed in perpetuity by the conditions of production themselves. It is otherwise during the historic genesis of capitalist production'. In this genesis capitalist social relations were established by force and by the use of the State, in short by political and ideological class struggle

As Balibar puts in (*Reading Capital* p.306ff) 'Instead of an intervention governed by the limits of the mode of production, primitive accumulation shows us an intervention of political practice, in its different forms, whose result is to transform and fix the limits of the mode of production... In a transition period there is a 'non-correspondence' (between the different levels) because the mode of intervention of political practice, instead of conserving the limits and producing its effects within their determination, displaces them and transforms them'. Are there laws of development of such a process which could be analysed in the same way that the laws of the development of capitalism are analysed in *Capital*? Balibar's discussion of the possibilities of analysis here is as follows: 'But the analysis of this struggle and of the political social relations which it implies is not part of the study of the structure of production. The analysis of the transformation of the limits therefore requires a theory of the different times of the economic structure and of the class struggle, and of their articulation in the social structure. To understand how they can be joined together in the unity of a conjuncture (e.g. how, if other conditions are fulfilled, the crisis can be the occasion for a - revolutionary - transformation of the structure of production) depends on this, as Althusser has shown in an earlier study ('Contradiction and Overdetermination')'. (*Reading Capital*

p.293). Indeed everything depends on this. What kind of knowledge is knowledge of a conjuncture? What forms of abstraction and of conceptual restriction are possible here? What has Althusser shown, in his famous essay, about conjunctural analysis?

Althusser cites Lenin's statement 'The soul of Marxism is the concrete analysis of a concrete situation'. *Capital* does not, by itself, provide such a concrete analysis; it develops some of the concepts for such analyses. Althusser's insistence on the formula 'the masses make history; the class struggle is the motor of history' is related to his investigation of what is involved in the concrete analysis of a concrete situation. In these discussions, which he conducts in terms of the concepts 'primary and secondary contradictions', 'uneven development', 'the complex whole with the unity of a structure articulated in dominance' etc. Althusser does not rely on a doctrine that in a knowledge of a conjuncture men would only appear in so far as they are the 'effects/supports' of the places distributed by the social relations of production. What he does rely on is what I called above 'the restricted sense' of this concept that men enter always as members of classes, or of fractions of classes and as engaged in class struggles and operating with class ideologies. But there is all the difference in the world between talking about bourgeois ideology and talking about 'supports of the ideological relations of production' or 'personification of political social relations' or whatever. The stronger sense, that involved in AF2, would suggest that the structure of class relations, and its development and transformation, could be known 'with the precision of natural science', and would be experienced as external necessities beyond men's control. And yet the whole point of revolutionary political practice is to know how to act so as to shift the basic balance of forces in a concrete situation, and ultimately to produce a 'ruptural unity' in which the decisive transformation can come about.

Theory and Politics

The problem of knowledge of the conjuncture brings me, at last, to the third of Norman Geras' comments on Althusser which I wish to discuss. The problem here is theory and its relation to politics. Even less than with the above problems is it possible for me to do justice here to the complex issues involved.

Geras says that it follows from Althusser's AF2 that men can only transform social relations 'by the power of a knowledge (Theoretical Practice) brought to them from elsewhere'. This is taken by Geras as following from the doctrine that men are nothing more than the supports/effects of social relations. It does not in fact so follow. On the incorrect interpretation of this doctrine given in his essay (which equates the doctrine with the view that 'the masses are the total objects of their circumstances') it would not follow because there would be no elsewhere for theoretical practice to come from. This is so because the doctrine that men are supports of social relations, whatever interpretation it is given, is a doctrine about all men and not just about the masses. So there would be no possibility of some men, e.g. intellectuals, being different from the masses in this respect and hence being the 'elsewhere' from which the power to transform social relations by theoretical practice could come. If, however, we take instead the interpretation of the 'supports/effects' doctrine that is implicit in Geras' *NLR* article we find the following. The concepts 'supports/effects' are given content by their place in the more general theory that men function as occupants of places in systems of social practices (economic, political, ideological, scientific). These practices are 'mechanisms' whereby various kinds of production occur by work performed on different kinds of objects. Now Althusser explicitly identifies political practice as the practice which transforms social relations

by work performed on the object 'the present conjuncture'. We have the problem of what it means to say that within these practices men are 'supports/effects', and the question of whether this whole conceptual construction is in any case based on a generalisation of concepts which in Marx perform a much more restricted role. But whatever the answers to these questions it is quite clear (i) that to the extent that men are not the subjects of the processes performed by political practice they are to exactly the same extent not the subjects of processes which come about as a result of theoretical practice. Theoretical practice could not therefore be brought from anywhere at all to save men from the consequences of not being the subjects of social processes. And (ii) that it is in any case political practice and not theoretical practice which transforms social relations.

So it is quite impossible to find room within this theory for the view that theoretical practice is the practice which transforms social relations or for the view that theoretical practice is achieved by some group within society but elsewhere than with the masses; e.g. by intellectuals or philosophers. There is thus no basis in any of this for Geras' charge (*NLR* p.84) that for Althusser 'the relation between Marxist theory and the working class is a unilateral and purely pedagogic one: the intellectuals 'give' the class the knowledge it needs. This is only the final consequence of every idealism: elitism. When knowledge celebrates its autonomy, the philosophers celebrate their dominance'. It is certainly true that Althusser has not produced a satisfactory account of the 'mechanisms' which produce knowledge, nor of the relationship between theory and politics. Althusser has himself pointed this out. But it is equally clear that the abstract thought objects 'Theoretical Practice' and 'Political Practice' do not designate real objects which are to be found distributed respectively to the social groups known as 'the intellectuals' and 'the masses'.

On a connected point, it is also perfectly clear that the concepts 'science' and 'ideology' do not refer to realities (systems of representations) which can be located in the heads of, respectively, intellectuals (or philosophers) on the one hand and the masses on the other. If the masses live ideologically according to Althusser this is not because they are the masses but because they are men, and this goes for intellectuals too. Whether the ideology is one which is mystificatory or one which 'depends on science - which has never been the case before' (*Reading Capital* p.131) depends not on the bearer of that ideology being an intellectual or a worker but on that ideology being produced within bourgeois or socialist society.

These points about Althusser are important not just because it is important to defend him against a charge of being an elitist, but because it is important to emphasise what we can learn from his work about the relation between theory and politics. Two themes run throughout his work which are not only direct refutations of the charge that he is an elitist but which are also important truths which it is important for us to understand and assimilate. The first of these is the centrality in Marxist theory and practice of the knowledge of conjunctures which I have already mentioned. Revolutionary political practice is not guided by Marxist science in the abstract, but by the application of Marxist science within the political class struggle to concrete situations. Put like this one can see the absurdity of supposing that the task of producing the knowledge required in political practice and for political practice should fall on the shoulders of that thoroughly unrevolutionary bourgeois group 'the intellectuals'. And this is the second theme; the intellectuals. Here one should study the following texts by Althusser: 'Interview on Philosophy' and 'Preface to *Capital*' both in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New Left Books 1971) and Althusser's contributions to Macciocchi's *Letters from Inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser*