

# Discussion

## Leninism versus proletarian self-emancipation

Norman Geras argues (RP6, pp20-22) convincingly that Marx's theory of socialist revolution is grounded on the fundamental principle that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself'. Marx held to this view throughout his entire forty years of socialist political activity, and it distinguished his theory of socialist change from that both of those who appealed to princes, governments and industrialists to change the world for the benefit of the working class (such as Owen and Saint Simon) and of those who relied on the determined action of some enlightened minority of professional revolutionaries to liberate the workers (such as Buonarrotti, Blanqui and Weitling).

Marx saw that the very social position of the working class within capitalist society as a non-owning exploited wealth-producing class forced it to struggle against its capitalist conditions of existence. This 'movement' of the working class was implicitly socialist since the struggle was ultimately over who should control the means of production: the minority capitalist class or the working class (= society as a whole)? At first, Marx believed, the movement of the working class would be unconscious and unorganized but in time, as the workers gained more experience of the class struggle and the workings of capitalism, it would become more and more consciously socialist and democratically organized by the workers themselves. The emergence of socialist consciousness out of the daily class struggle of the workers could thus be said to be 'spontaneous' in the sense that it would require no intervention by people from outside the working class to bring it about (not that such people could not take part in this process, but their participation was not essential or crucial); socialist propaganda and agitation would indeed be necessary but this would come to be carried out by workers themselves whose socialist ideas would have been derived from an interpretation of the class' experience of capitalism.

In short, it was Marx's view that the working class would gain 'spontaneously' in the course of their struggle with the capitalist class, the confidence in their own ability and the degree of understanding and democratic self-organisation needed to carry out the socialist revolution. The end result would be an autonomous, independent movement of the socialist-minded and democratically-organised working class aimed at winning control of political power in order to abolish capitalism. As Marx put it, 'the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority'.<sup>1</sup>

(This in fact was Marx's conception of 'the workers' party'. He did not see the party of the working class as a self-appointed elite of professional revolutionaries, as did the Blanquists, but as the mass democratic movement of the working class to capture political power with a view to establishing Socialism, the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production.)<sup>2</sup>

Geras speaks of this process as the 'education' of the working class, not in the sense of being taught by people from outside their class but in the sense of them 'learning' in the course of their own struggles, to organise themselves democratically and to do without capitalist ideas and leaders. Geras adds 'this education of the proletariat is part and parcel of the socialist revolution which would be unthinkable without it' (my emphasis). Undoubtedly this was Marx's view. But was it Lenin's? Here

Geras becomes less convincing as he tries to argue that it was.

Lenin, as is well known, in his pamphlet *What Is To Be Done*<sup>3</sup>, written in 1901-2, declared:

*The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation etc. The theory of Socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals.* (pp50-51)

*Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside of the economic struggle, from outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers.* (pl33, Lenin's emphasis)

*The spontaneous working-class movement by itself is able to create (and inevitably creates) only trade unionism, and working-class trade-unionist politics are precisely working-class bourgeois politics.* (pp159-60)

Lenin went on to argue that the people who would have to bring 'socialist consciousness' to the working class 'from without' would be 'professional revolutionaries', drawn at first mainly from the ranks of the bourgeois intelligentsia. In fact he argued that the Russian Social Democratic party should be such an 'organisation of professional revolutionaries', acting as the vanguard of the working class.

According to Geras, Lenin's view that the workers on their own are capable only of producing a 'trade union consciousness' is 'a thesis he soon abandoned'. Evidence to refute this claim will be offered later, but one thing can now be stated with certainty: Lenin never abandoned its corollary, the theory of the vanguard party.

The task of his vanguard party, to be composed of professional revolutionaries under a strict central control, was to 'lead' the working class, offering them slogans to follow and struggle for. It is the very antithesis of Marx's theory of proletarian self-emancipation.

The theory of the vanguard party has a curious history. Lenin did not invent it; it was already current amongst the pre-Marxist Russian revolutionaries and was held by Lenin himself even before he embraced Marxism - or, rather, some of Marx's views. The group Lenin had previously belonged to had been influenced by the ideas of the Russian Blanquist, Tkachev. Lenin's choice of the title *What Is To Be Done?* was also significant since this was the title of a novel by Chernyshevsky who Lenin admired and who also favoured a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries. This idea seems first to have been introduced into the Russian anti-Tsarist movement in the 1850s by the poet Ogarev, a collaborator of Alexander Herzen. Ogarev had been greatly impressed by Buonarrotti's *Conspiracy of the Equals* (which advances the view, quoted by Geras in his article, about the workers being so demoralized by capitalism that they would be unable to liberate themselves and so would have to be liberated by some enlightened minority). In fact, what is the vanguard party of professional revolutionaries but the modern form of the 'secret society' favoured by Buonarrotti, Blanqui, Weitling and the others (revolutionary nationalists as well as utopian communists), and rejected so decisively by Marx even in the 1840s?

Even if Lenin did abandon his view that, left to themselves, the workers are only capable of acquiring a reformist, trade unionist consciousness, his theory of the vanguard party is enough to demonstrate that he did not hold Marx's theory of proletarian self-emancipation. But we promised to try to show that Lenin never did in fact abandon the views expressed in *What Is To Be Done*.

One implication of the Marxist theory of proletarian self-emancipation is that the immense majority of the working class must be consciously involved in the socialist revolution against capitalism. 'The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority', as Marx put it.<sup>1</sup>

Now the Bolshevik coup in November 1917, carried out under the guise of protecting the rights of the Congress of Soviets, did not enjoy conscious majority support, at least not for Socialism, though their slogan 'Peace, Bread and Land' was widely popular. For instance, elections to the Constituent Assembly, held after the Bolshevik coup and so under the Bolshevik government, gave them only about 25 per cent of the votes.

John Reed, a sympathetic American journalist, whose famous account of the Bolshevik coup *Ten Days That Shook The World*<sup>4</sup> was commended by Lenin in a foreword, quotes Lenin as replying to this kind of criticism in a speech he made to the Congress of Peasants Soviets on 27 November 1917:

*If Socialism can only be realized when the intellectual development of all the people permits it, then we shall not see Socialism for at least five hundred years... The Socialist political party - this is the vanguard of the working class; it must not allow itself to be halted by the lack of education of the mass average, but it must lead the masses, using the Soviets as organs of revolutionary initiative...*

(p415. Reed's emphasis and omissions)

Compare this with the passage, quoted by Geras, from the utopian communist weitting ('to want to wait ... until all are suitably enlightened, would mean to abandon the thing altogether')! Not of course that it is a question of 'all' the workers needing to be socialists before there can be Socialism. Marx, in rejecting the view that Socialism could be established by some enlightened minority, was merely saying that a sufficient majority of them would have to be.

Having seized power before the working class (and, even less, the 80 per cent peasant majority of the population) had prepared themselves for Socialism, all the Bolshevik government could do, as Lenin himself openly admitted<sup>5</sup>, was to establish state capitalism in Russia. There is evidence in his last articles written in 1923<sup>6</sup> that Lenin was beginning to realise the impossible position the Bolsheviks had got themselves into. By seizing power in the political chaos following the breakdown of the Tsarist regime under the impact of a modern war which backward Russia was economically unable to sustain, they had become the government of a huge country, hardly culturally prepared for capitalism, let alone Socialism.

Lenin responded to criticism on this as follows:

*Our opponents told us repeatedly that we were rash in undertaking to implant Socialism in an insufficiently cultured country. But they were misled by our having started from the end opposite to that prescribed by theory (the theory of pedants of all kinds), because in our country the political and social revolution preceded the cultural revolution, that very cultural revolution which nevertheless now confronts us.*

(p34)

And, in a comment on an account of the Russian revolution written by Sukhanov, an unaligned left-wing Russian Social Democrat<sup>7</sup>,

*You say that civilization is necessary for the building of socialism. Very good. But why could we not first create such prerequisites of civilization in our country as the expulsion of the landowners and the Russian capitalists, and then start moving towards Socialism? Where, in what books, have you read that such variations of the customary historical order of events are impermissible or impossible?*  
(p39)

Now this is very revealing. The 'theory' and the 'books' Lenin mentions can only be those of Marx. And the answer to his questions is ably provided in the first part of Geras' article in *Radical Philosophy* 6! For by 'cultural revolution' Lenin clearly means the process of working class preparation for Socialism which Marx held had to be carried out, by the efforts of the workers themselves of course, before 'the political and social revolution' to overthrow capitalism. To quote Geras again, 'this education of the proletariat is part and parcel of the socialist revolution which would be unthinkable without it'. Unthinkable for Marx, but evidently not for Lenin.

The theory advanced in these last articles of Lenin's is that the 'vanguard' party is entitled to seize power when it can, establish its dictatorship in the name (and name only, in practice) of the working class and then, having driven out the capitalists, landowners and their ideologists, proceed to educate the working class (and peasantry) to Socialism. Is not this the notion of an 'educational dictatorship' Geras criticizes Marcuse for toying with? Just how far had Lenin gone from Marxism - or had he even been near it, in the light of his views of both 1901-2 and 1922-3?

Adam Buick

#### NOTES

- 1 *The Communist Manifesto*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1954, p64
- 2 Compare, for instance, J B Sanderson, *An Interpretation of the Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, Longmans, 1969:  
  
*Full revolutionary consciousness was thus the destination of the proletariat, and indeed their numbers could only be decisive when they were (as Marx put it in 1864) 'united by combination and led by knowledge', when they were, in effect, transformed into a gigantic political party.* (p85)
- 3 *What Is To Be Done*, FLPH, Moscow, no date.
- 4 *Ten Days That Shook The World*, Modern Library, - 1960 edition
- 5 See, for instance, 'Left-Wing' Childness and Petty Bourgeois Mentality, which appeared as a series of articles in *Pravda*, on May 9, 10 and 11, 1917, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968
- 6 *Lenin's Last Letters and Articles*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, no date.
- 7 *The Russian Revolution of 1917: 'A Personal Record'* by N. N. Sukhanov, translated and edited by Joel Carmichael, Q.U.P.

## Laing's social philosophy

Unfortunately, like most Marxists (in my experience), Joe Warrington ('Laing's Social Philosophy' RP4, pp10-16) seems to feel threatened by anything in the nature of mysticism, and in order to protect himself, creates a caricature of the thing in question, which he then proceeds all too easily to

demolish. Thus the Laing thesis that some schizophrenics are pioneering for us the exploration of inner space becomes, with Warrington, the assertion that all schizophrenics are alleged by Laing to possess this gift. He then goes on to assume the very mantle of moderation and good sense, for himself as *against* Laing, which Laing himself had taken very great pains to assume! Thus, Warrington says 'Let's simply say, so as not to insult anyone, that some schizophrenics are swines, and some are good people ...' etc. But listen to Laing himself: 'Some people labelled schizophrenic (not all, and not necessarily) manifest behaviour in words, gestures, actions ... that is unusual. Sometimes (not always not not necessarily) this unusual behaviour ... expresses, wittingly or unwittingly, unusual experiences that the person is undergoing. Sometimes (not always and not necessarily) these unusual experiences that are expressed by unusual behaviour appear to be part of a potentially orderly, natural sequence of experiences.' (*The Politics of Experience*, Penguin edition p102; see also p105, p108)

Perhaps there is something a little flamboyant and histrionic in the way Laing present his thesis. But it is more helpful to remember that Laing was pleading with us, and his tone in *Politics of Experience* was appropriately passionate.

To come to another point. Joe Warrington writes 'Overindulgence in the subjective leads to excessive importance being placed upon what are regarded as revelatory experiences, mystical or ones produced by drugs. This is very noticeable in *The Politics of Experience*. The world of action is left intact and Laing ends up abreast of all forms of permanent-moment addiction. Illumination is to come from the subjective switch, not from objective reality.' Now, firstly, to pronounce the words 'objective reality' in this bald way is to beg the whole question. One of the most important of Laing's points is that some schizophrenics can help us to re-discover 'objective reality', in the sense of 'the totality of what is the case' (p117) which must include our *subjective* feelings among other things. This is a very difficult area of discussion, admittedly, and I am not competent to develop the argument, but there seems to me to be no excuse at all in an article in a journal calling itself *Radical Philosophy* for stating the subjective-objective dichotomy in so crude a manner and just leaving it there.

Secondly, though I wholeheartedly agree with Joe Warrington about the political quietism of many, perhaps most, 'Nirvana-seekers' I can only protest that there is no *intrinsic* connection between contemplative mysticism and political 'reaction' (to use terms very loosely). I know that historically speaking my case is poor. But prophetically speaking, it is not going to be like that any more! The later work of the mystic and hermit Thomas Merton seems to me to represent the strongest current now, and there you have a very forthright repudiation of capitalism and its values.

The last point I would like to make concerns narcissism, which Joe Warrington cites as very characteristic of many schizoid people. The point really at issue here is whether those types of schizoid people whom Laing regards as 'pioneers' also fall into the hopelessly narcissistic category - taking narcissism in Joe Warrington's sense 'of an obviously developed failure to interpret personal relations in a manner independent of one's own subjective feelings.' Joe Warrington gives no evidence, no indication at all, that these two categories coincide. The charge against Laing on this particular point is therefore without meaning. Moreover, an examination of the text of *The Politics of Experience* strongly suggests that 'pioneering' schizoids could hardly be narcissists in the above sense. Narcissism, in the sense we have agreed upon, would seem to imply something stagnant and immovable. But the most powerful impression that comes through in Laing's account

(indeed it is more than an impression, it is plain statement often enough) is that the 'pioneer' schizoid works through his sickness, and comes out on the other side, sometimes in quite a short time. Says Joe Warrington 'The gut-thing about schizophrenia is dreadful, dreadful unhappiness.' In the great majority of cases, yes. But the gut-thing about *some* schizophrenic experiences (if that is what we must continue to call them) is this *victory*, this perception and grasp of new meaning.

What degree of dynamism and creativeness is subsequently achieved by these fortunate few is an interesting question, and one which I wish Laing would follow up and tell us about. But even if it does not match up to the dynamic style and achievement of a St Paul, even if those who have 'come through' do not acquire the kind of centrality in our culture that the shaman, after he has conquered his sickness, acquires in his, even if their sense of new meaning remains private and their lives obscure, their experience will have been worthwhile, both to them and to us, and Laing's work justified - not only because it has preserved them, but because it will have prepared us and our descendants for an experience that is likely to become more common and which we must learn to take and treat in the right way. That is, laing's way - or we are left with the *Brave New World* way, no longer a matter of signs and portents but a sinister and growing reality.

David Britton

## The triviality of Althusser

What is the relationship of theory to practice? Or to use the language favoured by Althusser, what is the relationship of 'theoretical practice' to 'political practice'? To those who realise that the two must be made to be relatively close, as with Gramsci for instance ('The unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of mechanical fact, but a part of the historical process...'), no *general* answers need be given. The need for such an answer only occurs when the two are assumed to have a relative autonomy. That Althusser makes such an assumption is to be found clearly stated in *For Marx* pp184-5, where he posits three levels of theory ('Generalities 1, 2 and 3'), and asserts that 'The work whereby Generality 1 becomes Generality 3 ... only involves the process of theoretical practice, that is, it all takes place "within knowledge"'.

The formulation of the 'new problematic' and such like, are seen as the tasks (among others) of 'theoretical practice'. John Mepham's piece 'Who makes history?' (*RP6*, pp23-30) takes Norman Geras (*RP6*, pp20-22) to task for attributing to Althusser the view 'that the masses can only destroy and transform these relations (of the workers to capital) "by the power of a knowledge (Theoretical Practice) brought to them from elsewhere"'. Thus Mepham stresses the autonomy of 'theoretical practice' from 'political practice'. 'Political practice' indeed, appears to be quite self-sufficient. It doesn't need 'theoretical practice' to guide it on its way: '... it is in any case political practice and *not* theoretical practice which transforms social relations' (p29). Elsewhere, Mepham is less clear - in fact he directly contradicts himself: 'In concrete, revolutionary political practice it is important to ... discover which classes and fractions of classes are or could be in alliance with the proletariat... So even abstract formulae can be more or less rigorous and can point the way more or less clearly to correct political practice' (p26). What is this if it is not just that 'misinterpretation' of Althusser which Mepham accuses Geras of making? Perhaps Mepham would reply that these abstract formulae are the

abstractions of 'political' not 'theoretical' practice. But this is entirely beside the point - what is at issue is Althusser's elitism. So long as the only account he gives us of how these abstract formulae are created is the one above i.e. outside the class struggle - what conclusion can we draw other than Geras's? You can call these abstract formulae 'political' and 'theoretical', but that won't alter the substance of the charge. The charge remains valid until Althusser adopts something like Gramsci's view of the creation of revolutionary theory organically, *within* the class.

Does Althusser believe that the masses need a knowledge brought in from elsewhere in order to smash capitalism, or not? If Mepham's interpretation is right, then he is hopelessly contradictory and totally confused. Mepham seems to intimate such a confusion in himself and Althusser: '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.' (p29). It hardly needs to be added that if this latest Mepham thesis is correct, both the Mepham and the Geras interpretation of Althusser's elitism will be equally derivable from Althusser's various tomes. Yet the conclusion that Mepham draws from this diagnosed vacillation on such a crucial question, is not to consign all this Althusser-talk to the dustbin (where it belongs if he is right), but to stress that '... it is important to emphasize what we can learn from his work about the relation between theory and politics!' (p29).

From the point of view of Althusser's (and Mepham's) self-images as lefties, let us hope that Geras is right, and Mepham wrong on Althusser's elitism. For just suppose that Mepham were right - where would that leave all the stuff that Althusser (and he himself) have written these past few years on Marxism? If it is the masses and not the intellectuals who make history, and if Geras is wrong to accuse Althusser of proclaiming the need to bring theory to the masses from the outside, what is the point of such theory? It would be self-confessedly quite redundant to the process of the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society, would it not? Remember that the whole notion of a specifically *theoretical* 'practice' is based upon the assumption that 'the process of theoretical practice ... all takes place "within knowledge"'. No room here for revolutionary theory to play the kind of organic and internal role *within* working class struggles that was stressed so strongly by Gramsci and Lenin; so either the Althusser line is the pedagogic-elitist one of Joseph Stalin and Sidney Webb ('Socialism' from above) - or it is a way of dissipating energies to an intellectual activity which cannot even pretend to change social reality. At least according to Geras, Althusser (and Mepham) appear as trying to change society. But if Mepham is right, Althusser is actually trying to divert people from this task, and what's more Mepham is too.

So long as Althusserians retain a notion of 'theoretical practice' - that is of an intellectual activity which has its own autonomy, which is to be separated from the workers' struggles, which fails to address itself primarily to the task of the development of those struggles along the road to proletarian self-emancipation, it will and must zigzag erratically from elitism to reactionary philistinism. Geras was therefore (correctly) adopting the most *charitable* interpretation in opting for the former. Mepham's 'theoretical practice' on the other hand, is 'theoretical practice' with its balls cut off - useless, diversionary and an impediment to the development of the sort of theory for the proletariat which would be politically productive.

Geras is absolutely correct to claim that in the present epoch, proletarian self-emancipation is absolutely central, and not at all incidental to historical materialism (pp20-22). And it is quite

extraordinary that Mepham should bend this into what he claims to be the 'Humanist Formula'. Under the rules of 'filling out' Geras, Mepham *dilutes* the central claim to 'It is men who make history albeit on the basis of objective conditions which they have to take as given'. Mepham 'contrasts' this 'humanism' with two 'anti-humanist' theses which he claims to find in Althusser: (1) It is the *masses* which make history. The class-struggle is the motor of history. (2) 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.

Consider (1) first. I take it that Mepham's addition of 'the class struggle is the motor of history' is gratuitous to its sense. For Marx clearly accepted this as axiomatic right in the middle of what Althusser believed to be his 'humanistic' period (e.g. in the 'German Ideology' 1846-7). Equally Geras's articles make him quite unequivocal on the question too. (We shall have reasons for doubting whether Mepham himself is so clear, as will become obvious later). So that are we left with? Or rather, who is the humanist? Is it our supposed 'anti-humanist' who utters the banal generality 'It is the *masses* who make history', or is it rather Geras (and Marx), who, after an analysis of the specific *dynamic* of capitalist society, believe that the liberation of 'the masses' can occur *only* through the self-emancipation of the *proletariat*? - who believe that to adopt any other primary goal would be completely self-defeating? Presumably (and hopefully) Mepham agrees with Geras here. Yet it is the Geras formulation which follows from the scientific understanding of bourgeois society to be found in Marx's 'Capital' - the Mepham formulation could have been put forward by any old populist, anarchist or democrat who believed in change from below. It is the Mepham formulation, through failing to distinguish the proletariat from other human masses which therefore comes nearer to 'humanism' in its pejorative sense.

The trouble with Mepham is that he just won't recognise Althusser for the reactionary old windbag that he undeniably is. He just doesn't want to think about the fundamental contradictions that are there and cannot be removed. We have seen one instance of this already: 'theoretical practice' is either a reactionary diversion from the class struggle, or it relates to it one-sidedly, condescendingly Fabian-like in its elitism. We have seen how Mepham makes his choice, and how he covers up following this through to its logical conclusion by pretending that the contradiction is merely a lacuna ('Althusser has not produced a satisfactory account ... of the relation between theory and politics'). But Mepham gets into even deeper water with the second 'anti-humanist' thesis. To recapitulate; the second thesis stresses the reality of the relations of production as opposed to men, as the 'true subjects'. Unlike the first thesis, Mepham is unhappy about it for a number of reasons, but wants to preserve its 'positive features'.

Mepham believes that the second thesis is significant for two reasons. Firstly because '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' (p26). Secondly because it is an 'attempt to theorise a relationship in which "men" and "structures of social relations" are internally related and mutually determining rather than externally related and causally co-mingling' (p26). But Mepham roundly condemns anything else he finds in the thesis. 'Althusser', we learn, '... has made no attempt to give (it) the extended exposition that it requires' (p27), and 'he can be accused of having allowed some attachment (to a structuralist ideology) to give his work a false sense of rigour' (p27). His lack of discussion on the possibility and limits of abstraction 'leads

Althusser ... to adopt positions which are idealist' (p27). Mepham even admits '... 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... The question of whether Althusser has views which do have this implication is a difficult one.'!! (p27)

Just what game does Mepham think Althusser is playing here? He clarifies this point earlier on in his paper. Apparently the *concepts* which Geras is using and the ones which Althusser is using are 'conceptually incompatible - the concepts cannot coherently exist within a discourse' (p25). And it is important to reject Geras's in favour of Althusser's - why? Because Geras-concepts are compatible with (though do not follow from) 'beliefs that men make history and that if only Englishmen, and especially English workers, had a different attitude the crisis would disappear... What I'm saying is that (this)... invites such talk.' (p25) In case you missed the punch-line, it's that Althusser-concepts, being incompatible with Geras-concepts, can't contain such consequences - they remain pure, unadulterated, conceptually crystalline. That's why Geras-concepts (but presumably only Geras-concepts and not Althusser-concepts) do not 'immediately hit such talk over the head with the decisive and all-important counter-concepts: the *class-struggle*' (p25).

But where, we might ask, does Mepham, or Mepham-Althusser stand on this question? And how does this compare with the Geras position? For a start it is clearly a travesty of Geras, and of the concepts he uses, to pretend that his view is even remotely compatible with the 'national interest' bullshit which Mepham flings at him. On the contrary, for Geras: 'The problem of the transformation and emancipation of man is, in the first instance, the problem of the transformation and emancipation of the proletariat ... the education of the proletariat is simply the process by which it acquires an autonomous class consciousness and through which it forms autonomous class organizations up to and including the institutions of dual power and of the future proletarian state' (p21). Geras's central contention, the title of his paper, and its entire content, the concept 'proletarian self-emancipation', indeed everything about it so explicitly refutes Mepham's absurd charge, that there is no need to dwell on it further. But where does Mepham's Althusser stand here? Much more equivocally, to put it mildly. For 'the masses' replaces 'the proletariat' in his formulation. Unimportant in itself, perhaps, but that's just a prelude to pushing aside the proletariat and its struggles against capital from the centre of the state, to be replaced by mushy maoist waffle about 'the people', 'class alliances' etc (p26). When Lenin fought for the allegiance of the peasantry in 1917, he made the important qualification that any class alliance must be under the leadership of the proletariat. No such qualifications can be found in Mepham's piece. For this reason class *collaboration* occupies a position not at all subordinate to class *struggle* in his essay. While Geras, therefore has an unequivocal proletarian class line, the same cannot be said for Mepham. If anyone is, conceptually speaking, opening the door for 'national interest' mongers, it is thus Mepham himself who is doing so. For failing to subordinate class collaboration to proletarian class struggle is precisely what makes possible the posing of 'national questions' before class questions.

But wait a minute, what has class struggle got to do with Althusser in the first place? Read Lenin and Trotsky and you'll find it in every sentence, every thought. Pick up one of Louis A's weighty tomes, and you'll have to scratch pretty deep to come across the slightest whiff of it, smothered as it would be by 'overdeterminations' of 'structures-in-dominance', 'problematics', 'epistemological breaks', 'conjunctures' etc. In fact, Mepham, for

all his talk about hitting 'national interest' talk over the head with the 'decisive and all-important counter-concept: the class-struggle', considers 'class-struggle' to be so unimportant that he doesn't even use it in his exposition of the crucial Althusserian categories. True, he includes it (but as a disconnected addendum) when he mentions the first 'anti-humanist' formula, but he makes it quite clear that so far from being decisive and all-important, the notion of class-struggle is just a species of political practice (like class-collaboration): and that 'political practice' is itself just one among many practices ('theoretical', 'scientific' etc).

Now there is a good reason for this failure to make the concept of class-struggle decisive and all-important, and it is connected with Mepham's misunderstandings over the subject and dynamic of history. What distinguishes revolutionaries from gradualists on the question of historical change? Largely it is because the former see history divided into reasonably clearly definable *epochs*, each with its own contradictions and dynamic, and each, by working through these contradictions, creating the real potential for the next epoch. Mepham seems to look at things differently. Instead of epochs we get structures of relations. Instead of revolutions we get, for instance a transformation from 'economic class-struggle' to 'political class-struggle'. Instead of the relations of production being burst asunder we get the 'transition period ... in which the intervention of political practice, instead of conserving the limits and producing its effects within their determination, displaces them and transforms them' (p28). This terminology by itself of course does not make Mepham a gradualist, but like gradualists, he tends to blur a fundamental distinction between say, the proletarian revolution and the dynamics of capitalist society, and it is from this that his confusion stems. 'Political class struggle' present in all periods, becomes dominant in the 'period of transition between modes of production' according to this view. Again what is wrong is not so much what is said, it is rather what is left out.

In a nutshell, Mepham tailors Althusser as follows: The second 'anti-humanist' formula is OK, but within limits. The subject of history can indeed be the relations of production, but in periods of crisis 'political practice' becomes predominant, negating the original correspondence between the different levels. What then becomes the subject of history? Mepham doesn't say! Instead he makes the comment '... 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'. Quite so, but if this is the whole point of the exercise, he might at least tell us who or what is to be the *subject* of change in this most crucial of all historical moments! He knows it can't be the relations of production that remain the subjects of historical change because the 'ruptural unity' destroys them. Why then is he so coy about admitting that such an event as the socialist revolution can be the act of none other than the proletariat?

Actually he is entirely wrong about the agency or subject for the dynamic of capitalist society. It certainly isn't the relations of production, even though this plays a part in the *source* of the dynamic - it is the contradiction between forces and relations of production which is the real source. But even this isn't the *agency* at work in capitalism. *The real agency is capital itself*. Now of course capital is a relationship to production (though not of production), but it becomes an agent in the process as a *thing* rather than as a relationship. Although capital is a parasite on labour, it still remains, as a thing, the agent in the capitalist reproduction and expansion process. As Marx put it 'Through the exchange with the worker, capital has appropriated labour itself; labour has become one of its moments, which now acts as a fructifying vitality upon its

merely existent and hence dead objectivity ... capital itself becomes a process. Labour is the yeast thrown into it, which starts it fermenting...' (Grundrisse pp297-8)

In short, Mepham's Althusser is a mass of confusions. On the one hand he believes in the autonomy of 'political practice' (and therefore to the triviality [at best] of 'theoretical practice'), of there being no need to bring theory to the class from outside. And on the other hand he wants theory to be able to point the way to correct political practice. He accuses Geras of 'humanism' while adopting much more 'humanistic' (in a bad sense) positions than Geras. He accuses Geras of using concepts which encourage class collaboration, when it is precisely his own and not Geras's concepts which do this. Finally, he both misunderstands the difference between the historic dynamic of capitalism's development and the moment in history at which the proletariat seizes power, and is totally confused over the nature of the agency or subject of change in each case.

Peter Binns  
December 1973

### Continued from page 27

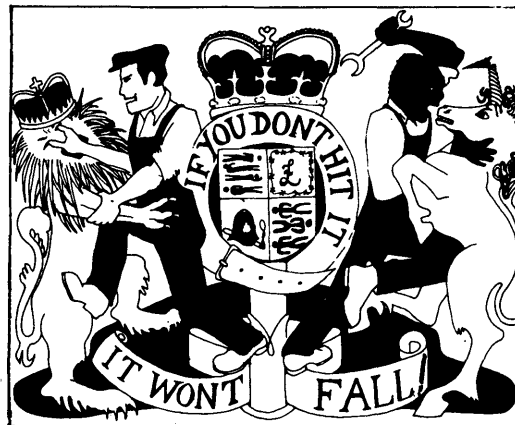
- the Meditations. From 'I think' he passes easily via 'I am a thinking thing' to 'I am a substance whose essence is to think'. Similarly, from 'Genet steals' the good peasants derived 'Genet is a thief': and the precise meaning of this for them was, 'Genet is a substance whose essence is to steal'. In this way the act is generalized into the propensity to steal, and substantiated in Genet: and the essence (or character) so constituted can then be used to explain the act.
- 6 Sartre makes no distinction between self-for-Another (i.e. some particular other person) and self-for-any-other. See below, page
  - 7 Unlike Laing and Cooper, Sartre is not interested in this type of analysis - and in any case he knows virtually nothing about this particular family.
  - 8 Again, Sartre conflates self-for-Another with self-for-any-other. The foster parents are therefore treated as no more than the representatives of French peasantry (of even French society) to Genet. Sartre assumes that an alienated relationship existed between Genet and his foster parents prior to the act of stealing.
  - 9 In fact, because it is founded upon inaccurate analysis of the nature of historical change, the ideology prevents the most effective preventative action from being taken.
  - 10 In Heidegger's terminology, 'das Mann'.

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