

Alex Callinicos

## Marxism and philosophy: a reply to Peter Binns

(Spring 1983)

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First published in **International Socialism** [2:19](#), Spring 1983.

Transcribed by Marven James Scott.

Marked up by [Einde O' Callaghan](#) for the **Encyclopaedia of Trotskyism On-Line (ETOL)**.

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It is a disconcerting, and also rather depressing, experience to be attacked from the rear by one's own comrades when engaged in fighting a common enemy. Such, at any rate, was my reaction to reading Peter Binns's lengthy critical notice of my **Is There a Future for Marxism?** [\[1\]](#)

My aim had been to offer a 'reasoned defence of Marxism' (C, 3). Obviously, I can't have succeeded very well, or must have expressed myself very badly to have invited an attack of such ferocity in the pages of **International Socialism**. That was my first thought on reading Peter's review.

My second thought was that much of his article was based on a misunderstanding. Peter appears to believe that the aim of my book, was to commend the virtues of Louis Althusser's attempted reconstruction of Marxism, and more generally of the French 'structuralist' and 'post-structuralist' philosophies of language fashionable in some intellectual quarters. Nothing could have been further from the truth, as even a superficial reading of **Is There a Future for Marxism?** ought to have shown. [\[2\]](#)

I must take some share of the responsibility for this misunderstanding, since perhaps if I had expressed myself more clearly it might not have arisen. Nevertheless, the effect is to make Peter's lengthy critique of Althusser beside the point, since most of his arguments are ones with which I agree, and indeed make, either in **Is There a Future for Marxism?** or its predecessor, **Althusser's Marxism**. However, I reject his remedy, which is to return to the philosophy expounded by Georg Lukacs in [History and Class Consciousness](#).

The purpose of this article is to remove some of the obscurities and misunderstandings surrounding my book by restating its central argument. At the same time, I will attempt to explain why Peter (and some other SWP philosophers) are mistaken in placing such hopes in Lukacs. Indeed, his attachment to **History and Class Consciousness** leads Peter into a deviation from classical Marxism which mirrors Althusser's. Whereas Althusser tends to reduce people to the passive 'supports' of self-sustaining structures, Peter is liable to a voluntaristic Marxism which accords primacy to the human will. This is most evident, as I shall show, in his discussion of knowledge and scientific method.

## **The 'Crisis of Marxism'**

It may be helpful to start by saying something about the circumstances in which I came to write **Is There a Future for Marxism?** I began serious work on it in 1978. This was a time when what we now call the downturn in the class struggle, both in Britain and throughout the rest of the advanced capitalist world, was becoming more and more apparent. I won't dwell on the political consequences of this development, since it has been a major theme of this journal since its first appearance in the present format. [3]

Suffice it to say that the bloom went off revolutionary politics – socialist revolution in the West no longer seemed imminent, as it had in the years between May 68 in France and the Portuguese revolution of 1974–5. Consequently, many of those attracted to revolutionary socialism in the late 1960s and early 1970s began to retreat back into one or other version of reformism, into some sort of ‘prefigurative’ socialism *à la* **Beyond the Fragments**, or into the Blanquism of the Red Brigades, etc. (These different positions have a lot more in common than first strikes the eye – underlying them all is a rejection of the industrial working class as the agency of revolutionary change.) I won’t dwell on the details, since they are only too familiar. The odyssey of Hilary Wainwright, from the International Marxist Group via the Lucas Alternative Plan and **Beyond the Fragments** to a job advising Ken Livingstone’s Greater London Council, sums the process up.

Naturally enough this process involved theoretical as well as political changes. One of the most notable was the appearance of a book, **Marx’s Capital and Capitalism Today**, by some of Althusser’s former British disciples, the most prominent of whom were Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, which constructed an elaborate theoretical apparatus in order to justify a return to what amounted to Weberian sociology and Bernsteinian revisionism. It was in the course of dismantling their construction for this journal [4] that I became aware that Hindess, Hirst and their co-thinkers were part of a much wider intellectual movement away from Marxism centred on France. A variety of figures on the Parisian scene were denouncing Marxism. Some, the *nouveaux philosophes*, were highly ephemeral and openly right-wing. Others, the so-called ‘philosophers of desire’, Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard etc, advocated what amounted to anarchism. And then there was the much more ambiguous figure of Foucault, sympathetic to the *nouveaux philosophes* (unlike his friend Deleuze, who produced a pamphlet attacking them), yet also

hostile to many of the more objectionable aspects of the French state (e.g., the prison system).

Exploring the work of these philosophers (of whom by far the most interesting and substantial are Deleuze and Foucault) I discovered that one of their fundamental themes was provided by the concept of *difference*. To oversimplify, for them reality is a collection of fragments. There is no structure, no underlying pattern to things, but simply random and chaotic contacts between these fragments. This view is not even atomistic – there are no fundamental elements of the universe, since everything derives its identity from the relationships in which it finds itself, and as these relationships change, so then do the things composing them. One implication of this conception of reality is that Marxism is completely mistaken when it analyses social formations as totalities, as social wholes whose character is determined by the relations of production prevailing in them.

This philosophy of difference has a variety of sources. One is the account of language developed by Saussure in his **Course in General Linguistics**. Saussure rejected the classical theory of language, found, for example, in Locke, according to whom words acquire their meaning individually, by virtue of the relationship between a sign and the object to which it refers. Rather, for Saussure, the meaning of an individual sign is determined by its place in the network of language, i.e., by its relationship to *other signs*. This relationship Saussure described as one of difference. Words derive their identity from the differences between them.

The significance of this account of language for our present purposes is two-fold. First, it can be generalized – we can move from saying that language is constituted by relations of difference to saying that reality is so constituted. This was the step taken by Deleuze. Secondly, the belief that words derive their meaning from their relations with other words lends support to the thesis that human thought (which is necessarily expressed in words) has no direct contact with reality. Our only

access to reality is through language. And given the way in which words constantly shift meanings (a process to which Deleuze, along with other 'post-structuralist' philosophers such as Lacan and Derrida, attach great importance), this suggests that we can acquire no secure knowledge of the world.

Another source which reinforced these conclusions was the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche had an essentially pluralist conception of reality, viewing it as chaos, lacking any underlying pattern. Moreover, he denied that the sciences provide any knowledge. Rather, the 'will to know' characteristic of science is an expression of the basic tendency running through the whole of reality, physical and biological as well as human and social, the will to power. Relations of domination, in which some are subordinated to and exploited by others, are an inherent feature of human life, indeed of life itself.

Nietzsche's thought has been especially important for Foucault, whose work in the mid-1970s came to focus on the claim that every society is pervaded by an 'apparatus' of 'power-knowledge'. This mechanism does not simply restrain people from doing what they would like; in some quite strong sense it *creates* them, endowing them with their very beliefs and desires. Power-knowledge is, according to Foucault, inescapable. All we can do is resist it. Any attempt to overturn the prevailing apparatus would, however, lead to the establishment of a new set of oppressive social relations. The fate of the October revolution proved this beyond any doubt. [5]

This very brief survey should give some idea of why these views should be repellent to any contributor to this journal. But why not simply ignore them? Why write a book about them? There are two answers to these questions. The first is that these ideas have been quite influential. Deleuze and Guattari may have had little impact on the British scene, where even the one English translation of any of their major works, **Anti-Œdipus**, is expensive and difficult to obtain. The picture is quite different in the USA, where they appear to have had considerable impact on

sections of the intellectual left, thanks partly to the enthusiastic advocacy of their views by the New York journal **Semiotext(e)**. Some of this will, I suspect, eventually trickle back to Britain (catching on to the Parisian fashion of a decade ago, as usual). The Christmas 1982 issue of **City Limits**, whose political views are those of the left-reformist pseudo-intelligentsia, contained not only an interview with Kathy Acker, a New York writer who acknowledged the intellectual inspiration of Deleuze and Guattari, but also two plugs for **Semiotext(e)** by reviewers.

Foucault is quite another matter. He is already established as a major figure, notably in the United States. A large conference devoted to his ideas took place in Los Angeles in 1981. His Mekon-like features peered out from the front page of the most substantial of the British intellectual weeklies, the **London Review of Books**, a couple of years ago. Even the notoriously parochial Anglo-Saxon philosophical establishment has been forced to take note of him. Hilary Putnam, a leading American philosopher, devotes quite a lot of space in his most recent book to refuting the relativism of Foucault's earlier works. [6] Nor is his influence confined purely to the intellectual sphere: there is a demonstrable convergence between the ideas of Foucault, and of Deleuze and Guattari, and the political strategy of the *autonomisti* in Italy. [7]

There is a second reason for taking Deleuze and Foucault seriously. This is, simply, that their arguments are *important*. They are not just fantasies spun from the brains of apparently endlessly inventive Parisian intellectuals (although they contain a strong dose of that). The thesis, for example, that power is a much more fundamental phenomenon than the class exploitation on which Marxism focusses, is a very widely held one on the left today. It provides an ideological justification, for example, of the strategy of 'movementism', the idea, in other words, that social liberation can only be achieved by a plurality of 'autonomous' movements each fighting a specific form of oppression. A stress on difference, and consequently the rejection of the Marxist

proposition of the primacy of the forces and relations of production, can, and has been used to justify a Eurocommunist strategy of a ‘popular democratic alliance’ of movements. [8] By examining, and criticizing these arguments in their most powerful form, which I believe to be as presented by Foucault and Deleuze, I hoped to vindicate the classical – and revolutionary – Marxism of Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, Luxemburg and Gramsci. I also intended to address various theoretical problems within Marxism which had contributed to the rise of the ‘philosophers of desire’.

It was in the context of my critique of Foucault and Deleuze (which, typically, Peter completely ignores), and that alone, that I discussed Althusser. I was not concerned to give a complete account and critique of his work, because I had already done that in **Althusser’s Marxism**. Peter is quite right to say that ‘in so far as he advances a political critique of Althusser here in **Is There a Future for Marxism?** it is quite peripheral.’ (B, 94). But then, I was simply taking as read the ‘political critique of Althusser’ I had already made in the earlier book, which concludes with these words:

*Thus, on the questions that divide revolutionaries from reformists, the questions of the revolutionary party and the struggle against the capitalist state, Althusser is silent or misleading. It is on this score, ultimately, that Marxists must take up a critical stance towards his work. [9]*

Peter argues, however, that, while rejecting Althusser’s liberal-Stalinist/reformist political conclusions, I accept the philosophical premisses from which, quite logically, he drew them:

*Yet for all his objections to Althusser’s specific political – and sometimes philosophical – conclusions, Alex never seriously questions the ... framework that leads to these conclusions, ... one is left with the overall conclusion that they are made to preserve Althusserianism – by ditching Althusser’s own conclusions at various points if need be.*

*At no point does he question the ... three foundations of Althusser's system ... On the contrary, if anything he endorses them. (B, 105)*

This last statement is demonstrably false. Let us take each of Peter's 'three foundations of Althusser's system'. They are: (i) Althusser's conception of society as a complex of discrete instances; (ii) his view of theory as autonomous of both reality and the class struggle; (iii) his account of ideology as a universal feature of all societies. I challenge Peter to show where in *Is There a Future for Marxism?* I 'endorse' any of these 'foundations'. Both (ii) and (iii) are the subject of considerable criticism in **Althusser's Marxism**. Moreover, as we shall see below, (i), and especially Althusser's doctrine of overdetermination are the target of an extended attack in **Is There a Future for Marxism?** Indeed, the point of my discussion of Althusser in that book is precisely to show his attempted reconstruction of Marxism founders on his attempt to introduce into historical materialism concepts specific to the philosophy of difference. It is little wonder, then, that, in Peter's words, I never try 'to directly defend (*sic*) the position that revolutionary politics actually stands in need of an Althusser-based philosophy' (B, 108), since no one is obliged to defend views which they do not hold. Peter's 'amazement' at this omission on my part reflects his own preconceptions about my position rather than any gap in my argument.

## **Lukacs and Hegelian Marxism**

Readers might respond to this by asking, If Althusser doesn't have the answers, why discuss him? Why not, as Peter proposes, fall back onto the version of Marxist philosophy most widely accepted in the SWP, namely that of Lukacs's **History and Class Consciousness**? To see why we can't do this, let's take a look at what Peter says about Lukacs. His aim is to vindicate



**History and Class Consciousness** as ‘an intervention of Marxism into philosophy. It is, quite simply, *a defence of the possibility of proletarian self-emancipation against claims to the contrary.*’ (B, 107). But it is not enough merely to use the words ‘proletarian self-emancipation’: we have to provide a theory of *how* socialist revolution is possible, and we have to act on that theory. [10] Thus, Althusser liked to call Marxist philosophy ‘the class struggle in theory’, yet his treatment of ideology as a necessary feature of every social formation meant that, no doubt contrary to his own subjective intentions, proletarian emancipation became a theoretical impossibility. [11] Now Lukacs also makes proletarian self-emancipation an impossibility, although from apparently the opposite starting point to Althusser’s.

This seems a scandalous proposition. Surely, **History and Class Consciousness** is concerned precisely to *vindicate* the self-emancipation of the working class? The answer is that it is, but that the concepts Lukacs uses prevent it from succeeding. His key concept is that of the proletariat as ‘the identical subject-object of the social and historical processes of evolution.’ [12] What Lukacs means here is the following. The processes of commodity exchange on which capitalist society rests are processes of reification. Social relations take the form of relations between things. Any comprehension of the whole becomes impossible. At the crux of reification is the worker, the source of the surplus-value on which capital accumulation depends, yet reduced to the status of a commodity, an object. It is only the proletariat who can understand the process as a whole, because it presupposes their exploitation and treatment as things. The most important prerequisite of socialist revolution is not, as Kautsky and the evolutionist Marxists of the Second International believed, the economic breakdown of capitalism, but workers coming to consciousness of the most basic facts about their existence. Once they have done so they become not

the object, but the subject of history, uniquely capable of transforming society.

What is wrong with Lukac's theory, thus baldly stated? Crucially, his use of the concept of subject. This is more than a purely verbal question. The concepts which we use predispose our approaches to specific issues. They therefore require detailed and careful scrutiny. It is striking how often the writings of Marx and Lenin are concerned with removing *conceptual* confusions – think, for example, of the [\*Critique of the Gotha Programme\*](#) or [\*Once Again on the Trade Unions\*](#). One of the things that philosophers can usefully do, but frequently do not, is to examine critically the concepts we use, to clarify them, and to unravel the history often distilled in them.

The term 'subject' has an especially rich and complex philosophical history. Indeed, modern philosophy arguably stems from a new conception of the subject, or self, first made by Descartes and other seventeenth-century philosophers. As Charles Taylor puts it, 'the modern subject is self-defining, where on previous views the subject is defined in relation to a cosmic order.' [13] What he means is this. Until the seventeenth century the subject was seen as essentially one small part of a wider universe. The meaning and purpose of the individual human being derived from those of the universe, and could only be discovered by studying it as part of that universe. This conception of the universe as a hierarchical cosmos obviously contributed to sustaining a feudal ideology in which everyone had their place in an order of ranks.

With Descartes, however, everything is reversed. In order to understand the world, we must start from the self. Descartes *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) is intended to show that the one thing the subject can be sure of itself. This would have seemed nonsense to a medieval philosopher, but from Descartes onwards the subject is conceived of as 'self-defining', that is, as the starting point, on which we must base our account of the world. The obvious problem is, as Gaston Bachelard somewhere

has the world say to Descartes, ‘once you have got rid of me, you won’t find it easy to get me back’. In other words, once we cut the self off from the world, how can we bridge the resulting chasm? Are we not left with a sceptical refusal to believe in a reality outside consciousness? Many early bourgeois philosophers solved this problem quite literally through a *deus ex machina*: Descartes, Locke and Berkeley all invoke God to solder the self and world back together. But once the progress of Newtonian physics, and of the struggle of the Enlightenment against feudal-religious ideology had made it possible to dispense with the hypothesis of God (as the physicist Laplace told Napoleon), the issue could no longer be burked.

It was the great philosophers of German classical idealism who, in the epoch of the French revolution, systematically explored the implications of the Cartesian redefinition of the self. Their answer, implicit in Kant but developed much further in the writings of his successors, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, is that once we start with the subject, we can only bind it back to the world by treating the world as *the product of the subject*. They opted in other words, for thorough-going idealism. It should be stressed that the subject which they regarded as constitutive of reality was not the empirical self, the individual human mind. German classical idealism treated reality as the creation of a *transcendental subject*, which somehow underlay the individual mind. This position was taken to its logical conclusion by the absolute idealism of Hegel, whose subject is the Absolute Idea, a sort of cosmic super-subject which gradually unwinds itself in the categories of logic, the laws of nature and the forms of human consciousness.

It is this tradition, the tradition of German classical idealism, which Lukacs sets himself in when he calls the proletariat the ‘absolute subject-object’. One can see why he does it. Like Marx before him, he wishes to stress the active role of the proletariat in transforming society, rather than regard socialism as the inevitable outcome of a process of natural evolution. And fair

enough, one might say. By comparison both with earlier Marxist philosophers (with the exception of Marx himself), and with most later ones, **History and Class Consciousness** displays at once considerable erudition, a close acquaintance with the Marxist classics, and a political urgency that have rarely, if ever, been equalled. It is one of the great masterworks of Marxist philosophy.

Nevertheless, Lukacs's position is rendered untenable by his attempt to characterize the proletariat as the 'absolute subject-object'. This is for two reasons. First, one feature of the classical concept of the subject is that it is necessarily a *unity*. Lukacs would have been well acquainted with Kant's attempt to prove in the **Critique of Pure Reason** that the very fact of consciousness presupposes the existence of a unitary self. Now, it is no longer really acceptable to regard even individual human beings as unities. Freud has shown just how complex and multi-layered the human person is, our conscious mental life overlaying a chaotic welter of repressed thoughts themselves arisen from the clash of certain basic drives.

Applied to the working class, his notion of a unitary self is a disaster, theoretically and politically. For it suggests that the proletariat can without any difficulty become a 'class for itself, united and conscious of its historical role. The most important lesson of Lenin's work is that the process through which class consciousness is formed is a long, difficult, complex, and uncertain process, depending upon the coincidence of workers' struggles and a revolutionary party. One could put it like this: the working class can *become* a subject, consciously shaping history, but this is not inevitable. Lukacs, by assuming that the proletariat *is* a subject, ignores the historical struggles which are necessary to *make* it into a subject. Even Peter notes that Lukacs is 'weak on the process through which class consciousness can be developed' (**B**, 106), but makes no attempt to explain this defect, which he plainly regards as incidental. In my view, this crucial weakness flows from the very premisses of Lukacs's

position, from his conception of the proletariat as ‘absolute subject-object’.

Secondly, the unity a subject possesses is a unity of *consciousness*. Without its self-awareness, the subject does not exist. A view of history which treats classes as subjects will naturally tend to accord primacy to *consciousness*. This is evident in Lukacs’s at a variety of points. For example, he sometimes seems to see the attainment of class consciousness by the proletariat as itself dissolving the structures of capitalism, without the need for any material struggle to destroy the bourgeois state, and to replace it with one based on workers’ councils. Thus, Lukacs writes that ‘*the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object*’. [14] And he argues that the determining role of the forces and relations of production is characteristic only of capitalism ruled as it is by commodity fetishism, and will cease under communism. [15] This claim is completely at odds with Marx, who insisted that even communism would depend on the ‘realm of necessity’, i.e. ‘the sphere of actual material production’. [16] It is symptomatic of a ‘Marxism’ which accords a central role to consciousness.

Lukacs’s conception of the proletariat as the ‘absolute subject-object’ can partly be explained by the ‘Romantic anti-capitalism’ (as he later called it) from which he came to Marxism in 1918. Previously Lukacs had repudiated the reification of bourgeois society in the name of a lost Golden Age, and of a cult of the individual artist. With his conversion to revolutionary socialism, Michael Lowy points out in his sympathetic intellectual biography of the young Lukacs ‘tragic nostalgia for a mythical golden age of the past is transformed into passionate hope for the future – hope that the proletariat as the messiah-class of history, will secure the world’s redemption through the path of revolution.’ [17]

*History and Class Consciousness* is best understood as a work of transition between the ‘Romantic anti-capitalism’ of Lukacs’s youth, still very strong during his Left-Communist phase

between 1918 and 1923, and the more materialist position of the last two essays in the book, [\*Critical Observations on Rosa Luxemburg's Critique of the Russian Revolution\*](#), and [\*Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization\*](#), and of [Lenin](#) (1924). Unfortunately, this transition was never really completed, because of brute realities outside thought – the postwar stabilization of Western capitalism, and the triumph of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Consequently, Lukacs's later writings, although of undoubted interest, are scarred by his political accommodation to Stalinism and to bourgeois democracy. [18]

I hope I have provided some grounds for believing that **History and Class Consciousness** is not a satisfactory 'alternative starting point for Marxism in philosophy' to Althusser's writings (B, 120). Indeed, Peter's enthusiasm for the early Lukacs leads him into idealistic excesses comparable to those of his mentor. Consider the following statement:

*Lukacs solves the problem of whether, in the creation of a truly communist society, there would be anything beyond the limits of the power of the proletariat, by demonstrating that everything that needs to be changed depends ultimately on the activity – and therefore also the consciousness – of the working class itself, and thus no such impediments exist. (B, 107)*

'No impediments exist' to 'the creation of a truly communist society'? This is an astonishing statement by the co-author of a critique of the 'Marxism of the Will' of Castro and Guevara. [19] It is reminiscent of the ultra-left leaders of the Communist League, by whom, according to Marx, 'the revolution is seen not as the result of an effort of *will*'. [20] The objective circumstances in which workers find themselves are irrelevant, apparently – all that matters is the 'consciousness ... and activity of the working class'.

Peter challenges those who reject **History and Class Consciousness** 'to replace Lukacs's theory of how the self-emancipation of the working class is possible with another theory that has the same effect.' (B, 107–8) The only correct

reply to this challenge is to say that such a theory already exists – *in Marx himself*. For Marx provides an account, which is completely lacking in Lukacs, of how revolutionary class consciousness arises.

In [The Poverty of Philosophy](#) and other writings of the late 1840s and early 1850s, Marx argues that the capacity which workers possess to overthrow capitalism, and to construct communism, arises from their objective position within bourgeois relations of production. It is the collective exploitation which workers experience in the capitalist process of production that provides them with both the incentive and the means to resist that exploitation, and it is from this collective organization that the dictatorship of the proletariat arises. It is in the course of the struggles generated within the process of production that the working class acquires consciousness of its historical role, becoming a ‘class for itself’.

I do not claim that this theory is adequate as it stands. It requires supplementation by an analysis of the obstacles to the formation of class consciousness arising from bourgeois political and ideological domination. The conclusion of this analysis is the necessity of a revolutionary party built through participation in the class struggle. The proletariat becomes a ‘class for itself’, a genuine revolutionary subject, only through the interaction between party and class. [21] Nevertheless, Marx shows that ‘the self-emancipation of the working class is possible’ only by virtue of certain structural conditions, namely those created by the forces and relations of capitalist production, which endow the proletariat with the capacity to transform society. There is little more than a hint of all this in Lukacs, because by treating the working class as the ‘absolute subject-object’ he has wished away the problem. Any serious treatment of the question of class consciousness, however, must start with Marx.

## **Humanism and the class struggle**

The moral of the previous section is that ‘a defence of the possibility of proletarian self-emancipation’ requires an account of the objective conditions on which it depends. It is in this context that Althusser, whatever his failings, seems to me important. What did he say that was of lasting significance?

First, Althusser challenged previous accounts of the relation between Marx and Hegel. He pointed out that these accounts too often relied either on metaphors (such as the claim that Marx set Hegel on his feet), or on the distinction between Hegel’s dialectical and revolutionary method and his idealistic and conservative system. (Both the metaphor and the distinction are found in Engels’s [Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy](#), for example.)

Althusser argued that it is impossible to make such a distinction between method and system in Hegel. As Hegel puts it himself, ‘the form is the indwelling content of the concrete process itself.’ [22] The categories of the Hegelian logic, including those celebrated by Engels, like the transformation of quantity into quality, through their own internal development generate the concrete reality of nature and human society. The master category of the dialectic, the negation of the negation, plays a central role in the Hegelian system of absolute idealism by restoring the unity of the world in the Absolute Idea. Indeed, the Absolute only exists in the structure of the dialectic itself, in the circular course it describes, from immediate unity through its disruption thanks to the emergence of contradictions to the re-establishment of an enriched unity in the negation of the negation: ‘In its essential nature the truth is subject: being so it is merely the dialectical movement, this self-producing course of activity, maintaining its advance by returning back on itself.’ [23]

Althusser’s interpretation of Hegel (an interpretation largely shared by Theodor Adorno) seems to me indisputable. [24] It is not, at any rate, challenged by Peter, whose one reference to my discussion of Hegel (C, 81–2, 112–19) involves a confusion



between a criticism made of Hegel and some earlier remarks on Lukacs (B, 124–5, n35). The implication of this critique is that the effect of attempts to import Hegelian categories wholesale into Marxism will be to distort and dilute the latter's materialism.

Althusser's most important attempt to substantiate this claim is in his discussion of the concept of 'expressive totality' which he claims is characteristic of Lukacs and other Hegelian Marxists. This is 'a totality all of whose parts are so many "*totalparts*" each expressing the others, and each expressing the social totality that contains them, because each in itself contains in the immediate form of its expression the essence of the totality itself.' [25] One example of this is Hegel's **Philosophy of History**, where all the aspects of a given epoch form a totality 'which is *reflected in a unique internal principle*, which is *the truth* of all these concrete determinations'. [26] Another example is Lukacs's theory of reification, which is seen as pervading all the aspects of capitalist society, from the economy itself to art and philosophy. [27]

Conceiving a social formation as an 'expressive totality' involves treating the different aspects of social life as expressions of some core or basic principle. The effect, Althusser argues, is reductionism: these different aspects possess no life and movement of their own, but merely exist as indices of their underlying essence. Althusser merely sets out the argument, without attempting to substantiate it in any detail. It is perfectly possible, however, to do so. Lukacs's analysis of reification is particularly liable to a reduction of the structures of consciousness to the economy. This tendency was taken much further by the Frankfurt school, who used Lukacs's concept of reification as the basis of a general critique of bourgeois ideology. The analyses of the 'culture industry' by Adorno and Horkheimer treat jazz, cinema and logical positivism merely as aspects of commodity fetishism, and as proofs of the power of

bourgeois culture to entrap and mystify the masses, reducing them to the status of mindless zombies. [28]

Many people will find this argument hard to swallow. Surely Lukacs and the Frankfurt school were rebelling against the economic reductionism of the Second International? But we should remember that Lukacs's reductionism in this case is symptomatic of his general tendency to collapse the structural conditions of working-class emancipation into forms of consciousness. This is not an isolated case. A reductionism of consciousness, which in practice gives primacy to ideology and culture rather than to the forces and relations of production, is highly characteristic of the 'Western Marxist' reaction against the vulgar Marxism of Kautsky and Stalin.

A good example is the work of Edward Thompson and other British Marxist historians. As Perry Anderson has pointed out, **The Making of the English Working Class** involves not 'a conjoint exploration of the objective assemblage and transformation of a labour-force by the Industrial Revolution, and of the subjective germination of a class culture in response to it', but rather only the latter element, so that 'the complex manifold of objective-subjective determinations whose totalization actually generated the English working class' becomes 'a simple dialectic between suffering and resistance whose whole movement is internal to the subjectivity of the class'. [29]

As Anderson points out, Thompson's account of class is one which seeks 'to detach class from its objective anchorage in determinate relations of production, and identify it with subjective consciousness or culture'. [30] Anderson correctly invokes G.A. Cohen's incisive critique of Thompson and restatement of the Marxist concept of class as determined, not by an individual's consciousness, but his or her position within the relations of production. [31]

I hope these examples lend support to the claim that the importation of Hegelian categories into Marxism encourages a reduction of objective structures to forms of consciousness. A second aspect of Althusser's philosophical intervention was his reassessment of Marx's intellectual development. I refer here, of course, to the famous claim that an 'epistemological' break in 1845 separates Marx's early and more humanist writings from his later and more mature thought.

While I would not endorse the detail of Althusser's argument, it seems to be basically correct. Prior to 1845 Marx's writings are deeply influenced by the humanist philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, and it is the latter's concept of human 'species-being' that organizes the analysis of the Paris [Manuscripts of 1844](#). As Peter himself acknowledges (**B**, 124, n29), Marx's concept of the proletariat in this period is as the passive, material element of a revolution whose active principle will be Left Hegelian philosophy. Everything is transformed, however, once Marx replaces the concept of species-being with those of the forces and relations of production, the anchor-stones of the materialist conception of history.

Henceforth, the working class is the dynamic element in the revolutionary process, endowed with the capacity to transform society by its position in capitalist relations of production. The beginnings of this shift can be traced in the **Manuscripts**, but it is realized in what Althusser calls the 'Works of the Break', the *Theses on Feuerbach* (February 1845) and **The German Ideology** (1845–6), and completed only by the introduction in **The Poverty of Philosophy** (1847) of the concept of the relations of production. [\[32\]](#)

One does not have to be an Althusserian to accept this analysis. It is most convincingly stated by Michael Lowy, a follower of Lukacs and Goldmann, in his brilliant **La Theorie de la revolution chez le jeune Marx**, and broadly endorsed by the quasi Althusserian Georges Labica in **Marxism and the Status of Philosophy**, and by Hal Draper, a writer very close to

our own traditions, in **Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution**. Yet it has been bitterly resisted. Why?

The reasons seem to me chiefly political. Some of them are quite respectable – the fear, clearly expressed in Peter's review of my book, that Althusser's 'theoretical anti-humanism' will provide ideological legitimation for a revamped Stalinism which writes out of history the self-activity of the masses, and accepts the bureaucratic state capitalism of the East as 'really existing socialism'. [33] Leaving aside the fairly complex question of Althusser's own relation to Stalinism, let me say why I think that humanist Marxism contains its own dangers.

I should first make clear that I do not believe that Marxism has no theory of human nature. On the contrary, the conception outlined by Marx in the **Manuscripts** of human beings as producers actively transforming their environment and themselves is to be found in later writings such as [The German Ideology](#) and [Capital](#), and provides historical materialism with an essential underpinning. [34] I would go so far as to agree with Edward Thompson that this theory of human nature gives Marxism the basis of the ethical dimension it requires. However, it is a logical consequence of this theory that human nature is not a set of unchanging beliefs, desires, and dispositions, but is 'the ensemble of social relations' [35], changing as society does. Therefore, to understand what human beings are like in any given historical period we must start from the forces and relations of production which both set limits to what they can achieve, but also endow them with the capacity to make and remake the world in specific ways.

This approach naturally focusses on the classes formed within definite relations of production, and on the struggle between them that is generated by the form of exploitation implicated in these relations. It is this, the most distinctive element of historical materialism which tends to become lost in humanist versions of Marxism. Edward Thompson will serve once again as an example of this tendency. Take **Whigs and Hunters**, in

some ways Thompson's finest work, which reveals the hidden antagonisms beneath the serene and rational countenance of early Georgian England. Yet consider the nature of the struggle he reveals, one involving in Berkshire at least, 'a declining gentry and yeoman class confronted with greater command of money and of influence', and prepared to use force to defend customary forest rights against these incomers. [36] The Blacks, as they were called, formed a veritable popular front of exploited and exploiting classes, stretching 'from gentry and substantial yeomen to labourers' [37], and above to use such ruling-class institutions as trial by jury at times in their defence. I wish to say nothing that would lessen the power and subtlety of Thompson's analysis, but merely to note how his superb historical imagination should fix on an episode in which the political issue was one which to some degree transcended class antagonisms. [38]

In his recent political practice Thompson has of course focussed on what he regards as questions transcending class. Nuclear disarmament is for him the classic case of such an issue, being a matter in which everyone of whatever class has an interest, and therefore one to which the methods of class struggle are irrelevant. It is not enough, in my view, to explain this by the residues of liberal internationalism and popular-front Stalinism in Thompson's politics, important though these factors are. [39] Rather Thompson's populism is a logical consequence of a humanist Marxism which moves directly from a conception of human nature to immediate historical and political questions without passing through the necessary stage of an analysis of the forces and relations of production which structure social formations.

It should be clear that I regard Althusser's chief merit to be that of having focussed on the structural conditions of social transformation, thus providing a corrective to the tendency of humanist and Hegelian Marxists to collapse these conditions into forms of consciousness. Does that mean that I accept his positive

account of these conditions as correct? The answer is no. It should be obvious to any reader of **Is There a Future for Marxism?** that I broadly agree with Peter's perceptive critique of the concept of overdetermination which provides the basis of Althusser's attempt to reformulate the notion of economic determination in terms of difference. While I think that Althusser correctly stressed against the Hegelian Marxists the necessary complexity of any social formation, the implication of his account of economic causality is effectively to dissolve the social whole into its constituent elements, a move actually made by Hindess and Hirst. (See **C**, 71–80, 163–7, and **B**, 98–101).

Moreover, Althusser tends to treat the structure of the social whole as somehow opposed to and separate from the practices and struggles through which history is made and remade. The effect is to make historical change a mystery. In Chapter 5 of **Is There a Future of Marxism?** I offered a different account of structure, one which treats the structure of a mode of production as constituted by the antagonisms it contains, notably the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, and the contradiction internal to the relations of production between exploiters and exploited. Such an approach, which I based on my reading of **Capital**, seemed to offer a more fruitful way of dealing with the problems of historical analysis and political change than anything offered by either Lukacs or Althusser. While not claiming any originality for this approach (it is there in Marx), and while only too aware of the brief and sketchy nature of my account of it, I still regard it as worthy of more discussion than Peter's curt dismissal. (**B**, 93). Presumably he believes that Lukacs has all the answers. I hope I have dispelled that particular illusion.

## **Materialism versus pragmatism**

The voluntarism which I have already detected in Peter's Lukacs-derived version of Marxism is most evident in his discussion of my attempt in **Is There a Future for Marxism?** to sustain the orthodox Marxist account of the relation between thought and reality. This position is sometimes called epistemological or philosophical materialism, sometimes known by the more technical term of realism. A good definition of this doctrine was recently given by Michael Dummett:

*The primary tenet of realism, as applied to some given class of statements, is that each statement in the class is determined as true or not true, independently of our knowledge, by some objective reality whose existence and constitution is, again, independent of our knowledge.* [40]

The attractions of realism to any Marxist and, indeed, to most sensible people should be obvious. It asserts the existence of a reality independent of our thought. As such, it is incompatible with idealism. [41] It further insists that our theories must be judged by the degree to which they correspond to the world. Thought must be seen, ultimately, as a *reflection* of what exists outside it, rather than an autonomous process, like Hegel's Absolute Idea.

Yet Peter insists on rejecting realism. In this he is not alone. Realism has been under constant attack from philosophers for much of this century. The reasons for this include not only philosophers' innate propensity to idealism, but also the 'revolution of language' which has affected in the past few decades not only French but also Anglo-American philosophy.

The problem arises from the fact that while realism as stated above treats thought as reflecting a reality which exists independently of it, it does not explain the nature of the relation between the two. *How* does thought reflect reality? The philosophers of the seventeenth century had a simple answer to this question. They treated thought as a *representation* of external reality. You find Locke, for example, arguing that our minds contain ideas which are in some complex way images of

things outside our heads. The words we use in turn are signs of ideas, which are themselves signs of things. This view of thought was atomistic, psychologistic, and individualistic. It was atomistic in the sense that it conceived us acquiring ideas, and words their meaning one by one, through a succession of individual contacts between mind and things. It was psychologistic because it tended to reduce any critical analysis of the concepts we possess to a causal explanation of how the ideas in question were induced in us by the outside world. This psychologism received its *reductio ad absurdum* in J.S. Mill's [System of Logic](#), which sought to reduce mathematical concepts to such activities as counting. It was individualistic because thought was conceived as a relationship between the individual subject and the external world.

This is not the place to explore in detail what was wrong with this account of thought. Three German philosophers, Kant, Hegel, and Frege, played the most important part in demolishing it. They showed, first, that thought is *objective*. As Kant put it, when one is analysing thought one is interested less in the 'question of fact' of how certain beliefs were arrived at, but rather in the 'question of right' of whether one *is justified* in holding these beliefs. What is at issue is not the psychological question of the empirical genesis of beliefs, but with the logical issue of their internal consistency and empirical support. It followed that one could properly understand thought only '*holistically*', as a system of interdependent beliefs. This is one respect in which Hegel was right in trying to explore the systematic connections between concepts, even though it has taken modern logicians like Quine to formulate this truth in an acceptable form. Thirdly, thought is inseparable from its expression in *language*. This was a point first made by Herder in the eighteenth century, taken up by Marx, and definitively established by the later Wittgenstein. Finally, and in close connection with the preceding point, thought is *social*. Language



is necessarily a public activity, and the meanings of expressions depend on the linguistic practices of a community of speakers.

The problem I sought to address in **Is There a Future for Marxism?** was whether realism can survive the collapse of the representational account of thought. Once we say that thought and language are inseparable and the meanings of words are bound up with each other rather than deriving directly from the objects to which they refer, how can we regard thought as a *reflection* of reality? The French ‘post-structuralists’ – Deleuze, Derrida etc. – argue with great vigour that we cannot, that discourse creates the world, or worlds, in which we live. The force and consistency with which they make this point was one factor behind my focussing on them, but much the same sort of argument can be found in the work of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers, notably in Richard Rorty’s **Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature**. Indeed, a major debate is being conducted around the question of realism and ‘anti-realism’ in the philosophy of language between Dummett and the followers of Donald Davidson.

Peter’s response to this problem has all the subtlety and sophistication of Dr Johnson confronted on a famous occasion with the idealism of Berkeley. Boswell tells the story:

*After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley’s ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I shall never forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, I refute it thus.’ [42]*

Peter, like Dr Johnson, responds to the threat of idealism by opting for a crude version of pragmatism – in other words, the doctrine (formulated and developed chiefly by James, Peirce, Dewey and other American philosophers) that scientific theories are to be accepted or rejected on the basis of their practical consequences. As Peter puts it, ‘scientific advance is (to be) seen

in terms of its consequences for increased potential human power' (B, 116).

Since he expounds this view in the form of a critique of my own position, it would be sensible to say something about the latter. My intention was primarily to expound a defensible version of the philosophical stance taken in all the Marxist classics. Marx and Lenin accepted the realism outlined at the beginning of this section. Thus, Marx writes that 'the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into the forms of thought'. [43] Similarly, according to Lenin, 'matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to man by his sensations, and which is copied, photographed and reflected by our sensations, while existing independently of them'. [44]

The passage just cited comes from [Materialism and Empirio-Criticism](#), a work that is bitterly attacked by Peter as being part of a 'Kautskyite world view' which 'led to "tailism", Menshevism etc., [and] which precluded a section of the working class from consciously separating themselves off into a revolutionary party so as to act as a distinguishable vanguard within the class.' (B, 122 nl0). This sort of ultra-left nonsense has been allowed too much currency among revolutionaries to go unchallenged any longer. Peter does not acknowledge the source of this interpretation of **Materialism and Empirio-Criticism**, namely the writings of the intellectual patron of Left Communism after the First World War, Anton Pannekoek, where it was used in an attempt to trace the source of the bureaucratization of the Soviet state and the Comintern to Lenin's thought. [45]

In reality, far from representing a surrender to Menshevism, **Materialism and Empirio-Criticism** was part of Lenin's struggle to preserve an independent revolutionary party in the grim and difficult years which followed the defeat of the 1905 Revolution. The book appeared in 1908 as a response to the arguments of the ultra-left wing of the Bolsheviks led by A.A.

Bogdanov, who, in addition to rejecting any participation in elections to the Duma, had fallen for the fashionable anti-realist views of some philosophers. The most important of these was the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach, whose claim that there was no reality beyond our sensations gained some currency in the light of the crisis of classical mechanics which was to give birth to Einstein's theory of special relativity. Lenin's intervention was thus both philosophical and political: he sought to defend Marxism, and its materialist underpinnings, from the ideological inroads being made in the Bolsheviks by a school of trendy idealists. [46]

Peter attempts to preserve some shreds of a Leninist theoretical underpinning to his politics by claiming that 'Lenin ... later *decisively rejected*' the views expressed in **Materialism and Empirio-Criticism**, a move 'registered at a consciously philosophical level in his **Philosophical Notebooks** of 1914' (B, 122, n10). This claim amounts to a confusion of two distinct questions. I have already noted above that realism involves treating thought as a reflection of an independently existing reality, without necessarily prejudging the question of precisely *how* thought reflects reality. There is little doubt that in **Materialism and Empirio-Criticism** Lenin accepts an account of thought that is very similar to Locke's representational view, for which the key question is: 'Are our sensations *copies* of bodies and things, or are bodies complexes of sensations' (as Mach, Berkeley and Bogdanov believed)? [47]

Now in the **Philosophical Notebooks**, under the impact of his reading of Hegel, Lenin rejects the atomistic, psychologistic and individualistic conception of thought involved in the representational view. He comes to see that thought must be seen as a complex of concepts. Does this mean that he rejects realism, abandoning the thesis that thought is a reflection of reality? Absolutely not, as the following passage renders clear beyond any doubt:

*Knowledge is the reflection of nature by man. But this is not a simple, not an immediate, not a complete reflection, but the process of a series of abstractions, the formation and development of concepts, laws, etc., and these concepts, laws, etc. (thought, science = 'the logical Idea') embrace conditionally, approximate, the universal law-governed character of eternally moving and developing nature. Here there are **actually**, objectively, **three** members: (1) nature; (2) human cognition = the human **brain** (as the highest product of this same nature), and (3) the form of reflection of nature in human cognition, and this form consists precisely of concepts, laws, categories, etc. Man cannot comprehend = reflect = mirror nature **as a whole**, in its completeness, its 'immediate totality', he can only **eternally** come closer to this, creating abstractions, concepts, laws, a scientific picture of the world. [48]*

Lenin thus rejects the belief that thought somehow directly mirrors the world. Rather, we try to understand the world by formulating theories about it. They are only likely to succeed in accurately reflecting the nature of reality through a lengthy process of trial and error, as a result of which mistaken theories are rejected: 'Cognition is the eternal, endless approximation of thought to the object. The *reflection* of nature in men's thought must be understood not 'lifelessly' not 'abstractly', not *devoid of movement, not without contradictions*, but in the eternal *process* of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution. [49]

Now in **Is There a Future for Marxism?** I tried to formulate an account of the development of the sciences which would give detailed content to this philosophical position, which may be summed up in the aphorism: 'the coincidence of thought with the object is a *process*'. [50] Lenin developed this position in the course of his reading of Hegel, a reading which would, incidentally, have made the old idealist's hair stand on end. ('I am in general trying to read Hegel materialistically', Lenin remarked cheerfully '— that is to say, I cast aside for the most part God, the Absolute, the Pure Idea, etc. '; everything, that is,

that gave the dialectic its point for Hegel!) [51] He was not obliged, nor did he attempt to develop in much detail his view of thought as coinciding with reality. The present seems a good time to start doing this, particularly since we can benefit from the critiques of positivism developed most effectively by those who were once its adherents – most notably Quine and Popper. [52] I sought to do so by drawing on the writings of Imre Lakatos, whose philosophy of science offers the best available account of ‘the eternal, endless approximation of thought to the object’ by providing criteria to assess the progress and degeneration of what he calls ‘scientific research programmes’. [53]

I shall not take up space setting out Lakatos’s position since Peter, aside from a shameful, and best forgotten attempt to smear me by association with the monetarism of Hayek which Zhdanov would have envied [54], does not offer any detailed arguments against Lakatos. He is concerned, rather, to cast doubt on the idea that the history of the sciences can be viewed as closer and closer approximation to the truth irrespective of how we characterize this approximation. Peter uses two main arguments. The first comes down to asking how can such a view account for the fact that research programmes which at one stage were rejected as degenerating in Lakatos’s terms later came to be accepted by scientists. For example, in the eighteenth century Newton’s theory of light as a stream of particles was rejected in favour of Huygens’s wave theory, which in turn gave way at the beginning of this century to quantum mechanics, which, like Newton, treated light as composed of discrete packages. But, on a realist account, says Peter, where theories reflect how the world is, then either light was corpuscular in Newton’s time, then became wave-like, and has finally become corpuscular, or the adoption of the wave-theory was a regression, even though, in Lakatos’s terms, it was theoretically and empirically progressive relative to Newton’s. Either alternative seems unpalatable.

Peter's dilemma, happily for realists, is a phoney one. In the first place, it is only at the most vulgar and superficial level that Newton's corpuscular theory can be regarded as identical to quantum mechanics. Far from the two theories being the same, the formulation of quantum mechanics entailed the rejection of some assumptions fundamental to Newton's research programme in its entirety. Indeed, as Peter acknowledges in a footnote (B, 127, n52), physicists have been obliged to conceive of light as possessing *both* wave-like and corpuscular properties, which is a world away from the idea that twentieth-century physics involved a return to Newton.

Secondly, we have to see scientific research programmes as *attempts* to uncover the nature of reality. Any truth they possess is likely to be highly approximate. Even the best-corroborated programme will probably turn out, in time, to be false. The best example of this is, of course, Newtonian physics, regarded as self-evidently true in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, shown to be false at the beginning of the twentieth. Refuted research programmes do not simply disappear, however. Elements of them are usually incorporated in their successors: so Newtonian mechanics prove to be a special case of relativity theory.

Peter's mistake comes down partly, I think, to the empiricist mistake of conceiving scientific progress on a realist view as an accumulation of facts, which once discovered, form part of the heritage of science. Once we see, with Lenin, that science consists of *theories*, and not facts, then we can understand that its progress may well be a complex one, involving what appear to be retreats as well as advances. Take, for example, the philosophy of vitalism in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Often based on idealist and religious premises, this position rejected the mechanical conception of nature deriving from Newton. Historians of biology have pointed out that, reactionary though this philosophy might seem, it focussed attention on the phenomenon of the living organism,

and of the inability of existing scientific theories to account for it. In this way, vitalism served to lay the basis for such breakthroughs in our understanding of life as the discovery of the organic cell and the formulation of the theory of evolution, even though these developments destroyed religious conceptions of nature. [55] The history of the sciences is a dialectical process which moves in a spiral, not a straight line.

The empiricism latent in Peter's attack on realism becomes more evident in his second argument. Here he argues that if theories reflect reality, why prefer Newton's account of motion to Aristotle's since the latter 'so obviously, so immediately and so accurately seemed to reflect physical reality?' (B, 117) A mere moment's reflection on this example provides a conclusive reply. Newton's theory of motion is based on the law of inertia, which states that bodies will move in a straight line unless interfered with by outside forces. Now the law of inertia is a *theoretical* abstraction: it states, not what we actually observe, not what *appears* to be the case, but what underlies these appearances. The actual behaviour of bodies as it presents itself to our observation differs from that described by the law of inertia – they move only when pushed or pulled. The *appearance* seem to fit Aristotle's theory, according to which motion is abnormal and only occurs when a body is moved from its natural place.

It is only at the level of the appearances that Aristotle's theory is a more accurate reflection of reality than Newton's. But the whole point of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century was to challenge theories based on how bodies appear to behave, and to explain this apparent behaviour in terms of some more fundamental level of reality *beneath* the appearances. Thus, Alexandre Koyre writes:

*Aristotelian reasoning presupposes ... that sense-perception permits us to apprehend physical reality directly ... And that, consequently, a physical theory cannot place in doubt what is given immediately in perception.*

*But Galileo explicitly denies this. He starts from directly contradictory claims ... [among which is the assertion] that physical **reality** is not given to the senses, but on the contrary, apprehended by reason. [56]*

The science of Newton and Galileo – and, one might add, of Einstein [57] – involves a view of reality as *complex*, involving a number of different levels, the most fundamental of which are not given directly in experience. The task of science is to reveal these underlying levels, and it is to the extent that they succeed in doing so that we must regard them as more accurate reflections of reality than those theories which merely summarize what is given to us in sense-perception. This conception of scientific method is, of course, shared by Marx. He regards the labour theory of value as an instrument which will permit him to penetrate beneath the appearances of capitalist society to the underlying reality. Rather than deluge the reader with quotations, I shall select just one. Marx attacks vulgar economy (those such as Samuel Bailey and Nassau Senior who rejected the labour theory of value) which ‘feels particularly at home in the estranged outward appearances of economic relations ... these relations seem the more self-evident the more their internal relationships are concealed from it ... But all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things coincided.’ [58]

Like the vulgar economists, Peter identifies ‘the outward appearance and the essence of things’. It is only on such a basis that he can regard Aristotelian physics as more accurately reflecting reality than that of Newton and Galileo. This vulgar empiricism is married, in his positive account of scientific progress, to an equally vulgar pragmatism. A theory counts as progress if it serves ‘as a tool through which human power over nature (is) ... – at least potentially – increased.’ (B, 116) So, the ‘new science’ triumphed in the seventeenth century because ‘you cannot use Aristotle to solve for example a practical problem in ballistics, but you can use Newton.’ (B, 117)



Let's note first just how vague Peter's conception of human power is: 'it covers at the one end the spectacular technological achievements of modern industry, and at the other the results of *any* novel experiment even when confined to the laboratory' (B, 127, n53). The vagueness is very convenient: it enables Peter to blur two quite different ways in which scientific theory and practice are related. One is what Gaston Bachelard called 'phenomotechnics' – the experimental practices undertaken by scientists in order to test their theories, often indeed, interfering with nature to create artificial experimental conditions not to be found in the normal course of things [59], but with the aim of confirming or disproving their hypotheses. The other is the *use* of scientific theories which are held by scientists as being well corroborated under experimental conditions to increase our power over nature – what is sometimes called applied science or technology. Now the first form of practice is internal to science – since it is essential to establishing the truth or falsity of theories, while the second is not. By collapsing experimental practice into technology Peter can argue that scientific theories which do not have any immediate technological payoff are still accepted because of their practical utility – i.e. their experimental success in the laboratory.

Making their liability to increase human power the criterion for the acceptance or rejection of scientific theories is vague in another sense. Note that Peter refers to the *potential* use of a theory to increase human power. This suggests that a theory may be regarded as superior to its rivals because, perhaps hundreds of years later, it found some technological application, even if it had none at the time. One can think of examples – for many years Copernicus's astronomy was of no greater practical utility in mapping the movement of heavenly bodies than Ptolemy's – it merely did so more economically. Was there therefore no reason for preferring one to the other?

When he turns to the social sciences Peter collapses into ever more abject idealism. Marxism he calls a 'class science' (B,

119), reviving the absurdities of Zhdanov. His reasons for doing so are identical to those given by Max Weber in attempting to provide an alternative approach to understanding capitalist society to that of Marx. ‘The real world is such an immense complexity of different interrelated strands of things’ (B, 118) that we are obliged to select certain aspects as objects of study. Our selection will be governed by our political objectives – so Marxism will be interested in different things from those studied by the bourgeoisie. Very similar arguments are made by Hindess and Hirst: theories do not reflect reality, this is mere ‘rationalism’, our approach to intellectual problems will be a function of our political views. The only difference between them and Peter is that he does draw the logical consequence of his views, which is that we can never obtain any objective knowledge of the world.

Do I need to spell out in any detail how different this position is from that of the classical Marxists? Marx did not claim to be studying a different world to that analysed by political economy – he sought to provide a superior, because more scientific, more objective picture of the *same* reality as that explored by Smith, Ricardo and even Malthus and Senior.

Does this mean that there is nothing to be said for the conception of theories as tools? Of course not. Ultimately scientific theories are of interest to us because of their practical applications. But what is the basis of their utility? Why does one theory have more fruitful practical consequences than another? The answer is that it has these because it is a more accurate reflection of reality than its rivals. It is better guide to practice, because it is a better guide to the inner structure of the world of which human beings are, ultimately, a rather small part.

Lenin points out that the implication of pragmatism is solipsism, in other words the belief that nothing exists outside the self. That self need not be an individual self – it can be a collective one, a class, or even the human species. Pragmatism collapses into solipsism because it denies what is the essence of

realism, namely that our ability to act upon and transform the world depends upon the existence, in nature and society, of tendencies and powers which we have to understand and use before we can succeed in practice. Practical success depends on the structure of reality, and therefore on our knowledge of that structure:

*Knowledge can be useful ... in human practice ... only when it reflects objective truth, truth which is independent of man. For the materialist the 'success' of practice proves the correspondence between our ideas and the objective nature of the things we perceive. For the solipsist 'success' is everything needed **by me in practice**. [60]*

The rejection of realism deprives us of rational grounds for being Marxists. For if the Marxism is to be judged by its practical consequences, then we are in trouble. The only successful proletarian revolution, that of October 1917, succumbed to bureaucratic degeneration, and as the bourgeois critics constantly point out, there has never been a victorious revolution in the advanced capitalist world. Of course, our reply is to say that these failures were not inevitable, and can be remedied in the future. But what *reasons* do we have for saying this? Only Marxism's superiority to bourgeois sociology and economics in explaining the behaviour of modern capitalist societies (and indeed of their precursors). So the basis for accepting Marxism is not its immediate practical efficacy, but its claim to provide a more accurate reflection of reality than its rivals. Otherwise, what grounds would we have for continuing the hard slog of sustaining a revolutionary party in highly adverse conditions? It is the intellectual confidence provided by Marxism that periods of downturn like the present do not last indefinitely that keeps us going. It is no accident that Lenin found himself defending Marxist realism in a time of retreat similar to (although far worse than) the present. He was right then, and he is still right.

## A Final Plea

What, then, is left of Peter's critique of **Is There a Future for Marxism?** Very little, I believe. We have seen how his own position involve a voluntaristic version of Marxism which, under pressure, collapses into relativism and idealism. And the demolition of Althusser to which he devotes much of his review makes sense only on the false assumption that my position is essentially the same as Althusser's.

I do not, however, wish to end on a negative note. For I agree with Peter that 'in real history all "logics" are *concrete* rather than abstract.' (B, 126, n39) In other words, what people actually do in practice may conflict with, rather than flow logically from their stated beliefs. Bad philosophy, of the sort I have exposed in Peter, does not necessarily lead to bad politics. Karl Liebknecht was a philosophical idealist, and rejected the determining role of the economy and the labour theory of value. This did not prevent him from being a thousand times better revolutionary than more 'orthodox' Marxists such as Kautsky, Plekhanov or Bauer. (This is not to say that there is *no* relation between theoretical beliefs and political action – obviously there is, but it is often highly complex.)

It is interesting that, even when he was about to launch on his polemic against Bogdanov, Lenin sought to separate philosophical from political questions. In a letter to Gorky of 25 February 1908, he wrote:

*Some sort of fight among the Bolsheviks on the question of philosophy I regard now as quite unavoidable. It would be stupid, however, to split on this ... To hinder the application of the tactics of revolutionary Social-Democracy in the workers' party for the sake of disputes on the question of materialism or Machism, would be, in my opinion, unpardonable folly. We ought to fight over philosophy in such a way that **Proletary** and the Bolsheviks ... **would not be affected by it.** And that is quite possible. [61]*

A similar spirit should inform our own discussions. This does not mean a liberal ‘tolerance’ of views with which we disagree: I am quite prepared to fight for my own position, and to attack the sort of errors I have uncovered in Peter’s article. But the basis on which debates of this nature should be conducted is a common acceptance of the fact that we are all pursuing the same goal of working-class self-emancipation, and seeking to clarify the revolutionary Marxism we share, not merely to knock down each others’ positions.

I feel strongly on this point because I offered my book especially as a contribution to discussion, in the hope that the arguments set out in it, especially those in chapters 5–7 when I expound my own views and not those of others, would receive serious attention from those of my comrades interested in such matters. The entirely negative response well expressed in Peter’s review but not confined to it, the refusal even to consider my arguments on historical materialism and the dialectic, the insistence on pigeonholing the book into a category (‘Althusserianism’) into which it manifestly does not fit, were a great disappointment to me.

It is especially a danger at a time such as the present that revolutionaries will simply retreat into the stronghold of orthodoxy, pulling up the drawbridge behind them. Mike Kidron, writing in this journal in the days before he said goodbye to the working class, coined the phrase ‘Maginot Marxism’. He had Ernest Mandel in mind [\[62\]](#), but a similarly defensive attitude, a refusal to admit that Marxism requires anything except reiteration, runs through Peter’s article – for example, in the passage where he tries to persuade us that Marx’s few scattered remarks on language can be taken to be a systematic *theory* which obviates the necessity of considering other accounts of language such as Saussure’s (B, 97). I remain convinced that ‘classical Marxism is not a seamless robe, a monolith’, but involves ‘gaps, aporias, too-hasty answers’ and therefore requires ‘conceptual development’ (C, 4). Our tradition has been

marked by its intellectual daring, its willingness to question the accepted truths. It would be sad, even disastrous if that ceased to be true of us now. I appeal to those, like Peter, who so hastily rejected my book, not merely to hide behind old and misleading formulations which close off debate – the question ‘Lukacs or Althusser?’ for example, but to engage in the far more open minded debate that is necessary if Marxist philosophy is to make progress. In the words of Oliver Cromwell to the Scottish Estates, ‘I beseech ye in the bowels of Christ to think it possible that ye might be wrong.’

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## Notes

**Note by ETOL:** In the print version of this article there are two notes numbered “54” – this has been corrected in this online version

1. P. Binns, *What are the Tasks of Marxism in Philosophy?*, **IS 2:17**, Autumn 1982 (cited in the text as **B**), reviewing A. Callinicos, **Is There a Future for Marxism?** (London 1982; cited in the text as **C**). I shall refer to two other books of mine, **Althusser’s Marxism** (London 1976) and **Marxism and Philosophy** (Oxford 1983), as **AM** and **MP** respectively, to G. Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (London 1971) as **HCC**, and to Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Moscow 1947) as **MEC**.

2. One reader, Paul Wood, was so struck by the difference between my book as presented by Peter, and the actual text (which he only read after Peter’s review) that he was moved to write a piece exposing the outrageous misrepresentations perpetrated by that review. It should be published as a warning to reviewers whose polemical zeal gets the better of them.

3. See C. Harman, *The Crisis of the European Revolutionary Left*, **IS 2:4**, Spring 1979.

4. A. Callinicos, *Marx’s Capital and Capitalism Today – a Critique*, **IS 2:2**, Autumn 1978.

5. See now the collection of interviews edited by Colin Gordon and published as M. Foucault, **Power/Knowledge** (Brighton 1980).

[6.](#) H. Putnam, **Reason, Truth and History** (Cambridge 1981), 155–62.

[7.](#) J. Fuller, [The New “Workerism” – the Politics of the Italian Autonomists](#), **IS 2:8**, Spring 1980, and **Semiotext(e)**, Special Italian Issue.

[8.](#) E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Socialist Strategy – What Next?*, **Marxism Today**, January 1981. This argument will presumably be developed in more depth in the same authors’ forthcoming **Hegemony and Socialist Strategy**.

[9.](#) **AM**, 106.

[10.](#) Peter sometimes suggests that lip service is enough. He says that I ‘fail... to *mention* the self-emancipation of the working class’ (**B**, 120: emphasis added). But see **C**, 213–17, where I not only mention, but seek to ground theoretically the concept of proletarian self-emancipation. Has Peter *read* my book?

[11.](#) **AM**, ch. 4

[12.](#) **HCC**, 148.

[13.](#) C. Taylor, **Hegel** (Cambridge 1975), 6.

[14.](#) **HCC**, 178.

[15.](#) **Ibid.**, *The Changing Function of Historical Materialism*.

[16.](#) Marx, **Capital III** (Moscow 1971), 8209.

[17.](#) M. Lowy, **Georg Lukacs – From Romanticism to Bolshevism** (London 1979), 165.

[18.](#) See **Ibid.**, 193–204, and **MP**, 70–9, 83–4.

[19.](#) P. Binns and M. Gonzalez, [Cuba, Castro and Socialism](#), **IS 2:8**, Spring 1980.

[20.](#) Marx and Engels, **Collected Works** (London 1978), 626.

[21.](#) M. Weber, **Marxisme et conscience de classe** (Paris 1975), J. Molyneux, **Marxism and The Party** (London 1978), and the summary of Marx’s theory of working-class self-emancipation in A. Callinicos, **The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx** (London 1983), ch. 7.

[22.](#) Hegel, [The Phenomenology of Mind](#) (London 1966), 115.

[23.](#) **Ibid.**, 123.

[24.](#) See L. Althusser, *Marx's Relation to Hegel*, **Politics and History** (London 1972), and T.W. Adorno, **Negative Dialectics** (London 1973). A more radical critique of Hegel along somewhat similar lines will be found in M. Rosen, **The Hegelian Dialectic and its Criticism** (Cambridge 1982).

[25.](#) L. Althusser and E. Balibar, **Reading Capital** (London 1970), 94.

[26.](#) L. Althusser, **For Marx** (London 1969), 101.

[27.](#) For an interpretation along these lines see G. Stedman-Jones, *The Marxism of the Early Lukacs*, **New Left Review** 70, November–December 1971.

[28.](#) M. Horkheimer, **Eclipse of Reason** (New York 1947), M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, **Dialectic of Enlightenment** (London 1973).

[29.](#) P. Anderson, **Arguments within English Marxism** (London 1980), 32, 38.

[30.](#) *Ibid.*, 42. See also R. Johnson, *Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese and Socialist-Humanist History*, **History Workshop** 6, Autumn 1978.

[31.](#) G.A. Cohen, **Karl Marx's Theory of History** (Oxford 1978), 73–7.

[32.](#) See **MP**, ch. 2.

[33.](#) See also S. Clarke *et al.*, **One-Dimensional Marxism** (London 1980). This critique of Althusser is pretty one-dimensional, too. Clarke is the most vigorous exponent of a Marxism which combats 'economism' by reducing everything to the class struggle. See his *Socialist Humanism and the Critique of Economism*, **History Workshop** 8, where we learn of 'the central role of the working class in the transition ... from feudalism to capitalism'! (150) I discuss this sort of voluntarist Marxism in **C**, ch. 6,

[34.](#) See **MP**, 37–44, 52–3.

[35.](#) Marx and Engels, **Collected Works** (London 1976), 4.

[36.](#) E.P. Thompson, **Whigs and Hunters** (Harmondsworth 1977), 108.

[37.](#) *Ibid.*, 157.

[38.](#) See also the discussion of **Whigs and Hunters** in Anderson, 87–97.



- [39.](#) See my *The Ingredient of Humanity*, **Socialist Review 9**, February 1979.
- [40.](#) M. Dummett, **The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy** (London 1981), 434. See also **MP**, ch. 5.
- [41.](#) Peter argues that even Berkeley was a realist on this definition, since he believed that some of our ideas are induced in us by God (**B**, 126 n44). Well, the definition can easily be modified to deal with this objection by saying that realism requires the existence of reality independent of *any* thought, including God's. In my original discussion of realism (**C**, ch. 7) I perhaps naively assumed that no-one today would invoke the existence of God as a premiss of their arguments (even Dummett, a prominent Catholic layman, does not bring God into his philosophy), and so did not anticipate such footling criticisms. If realism is as 'empty' as Peter claims why has it been attacked by such an impressive array of philosophers in recent years – not only Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, but also Dummett, Quine, Rorty and Putnam?
- [42.](#) Boswell, **Life of Johnson** (Oxford 1970), 333.
- [43.](#) Marx, **Capital I** (Harmondsworth 1976), 102.
- [44.](#) **MEC**, 116.
- [45.](#) A. Pannekoek, **Lenin as Philosopher**. See also K. Korsch, **Marxism and Philosophy** (London 1970).
- [46.](#) The best discussion of **MEC** is D. Lecourt, **Une Crise et son enjeu** (Paris 1973).
- [47.](#) **MEC**, 146. See G.A. Paul, *Lenin's Theory of Perception*, **Analysis 5** (1938). Incidentally, where on earth did Peter get the idea that Locke sees 'reality as *consisting* of sensations' (**B**, 122, n10)? It seems that it is not only my book which he attacks without having properly read.
- [48.](#) Lenin, *Collected Works*, xxxviii (Moscow 1961), 182.
- [49.](#) **Ibid.**, 195.
- [50.](#) **Ibid.**, 194.
- [51.](#) **Ibid.**, 104.
- [52.](#) See W.V.O. Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, in **From a Logical Point of View** (New York 1963) and K.R. Popper, **The Logical of Scientific Discovery** (London 1968).

[53.](#) I. Lakatos, **Philosophical Papers** (2 vols., Cambridge 1978).

[54.](#) Peter writes: ‘Alex invokes the support of the philosophy of science of the school associated with von Hayek and Popper’ (**B**, 113). There is no such school. While both Popper and Hayek are anti-Marxist ideologues who sought to undermine historical materialism by advocating ‘methodological individualism’, they do not have a common ‘philosophy of science’. Hayek’s views clearly derive from the methodological writings of Carl Menger, the founder of the Austrian marginal school of economics. Popper, on the other hand, formulated his philosophy of science as a dissident member of the Vienna circle. Lakatos again is a different matter, influenced profoundly by Hegel as well as Popper, and to his death an admirer of **MEC**. It is in any case vulgar and silly to think that one can deal with theories (especially those as abstract and complex as the ones under discussion) merely by pointing to the reactionary political views of those expounding them. By such a criterion Marx and Lenin should never have studied Hegel, Lukacs, never have studied Weber, Gramsci, never have studied Bergson and Croce.

[55.](#) See F.X. Jacob, **The Logic of Living Systems** (London 1974).

[56.](#) A. Koyre, **Etudes Galileenes** (Paris 1966), 220.

[57.](#) A. Einstein, *On the Method of Theoretical Physics*, in **Ideas and Opinions**.

[58.](#) Marx, **Capital III**, 817.

[59.](#) See R. Bhaskar, **A Realist Theory of Science** (Hassocks 1978).

[60.](#) **MEC**, 126.

[61.](#) Lenin, **Collected Works**, xiii (Moscow 1962), 453–4.

[62.](#) M. Kidron, *Maginot Marxism*, reprinted in **Capitalism and Theory** (London 1974).

