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Editorial Introduction to Louis Althusser's 'Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March 1966'

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Abstract

As an accompaniment to the translation into English of Louis Althusser's 'Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, March 18th, 1966', this note provides the historical and theoretical context necessary to understand Althusser's 'anti-humanist' interventions into French Communist Party policy decisions during the mid-1960s. Because nowhere else in Althusser's published writings do we see as clearly the political stakes involved in his philosophical project, nor the way in which this project evolved from a 'theoreticist' pursuit into a more practical one, the note also argues that the letter is of importance to Althusser scholars, to historians of Marxist thought, and to those interested in the relevance of Althusser's work to contemporary Marxist philosophy.

Keywords

Aragon, Althusser, Garaudy, communism, humanism, Marxism, philosophy, politics

On 13 March 1966, after three days of deliberation, the Central Committee of the French Communist Party (PCF) unanimously adopted a 'Resolution on Ideological and Cultural Problems'.¹ Ostensibly taking as its subject the relations between the PCF, intellectuals, and culture, this resolution was viewed by many as the moment when the PCF officially abandoned its Stalinist legacy and sought to better integrate itself into French and Western-European political life.² To those more interested in French Marxist philosophy than French Marxist politics, this document is also remembered as the text that delivered the Party's statement on the 'Humanist Controversy'. In this mode, it served not only as a resolution *on* the relationship among the PCF, intellectuals, and culture, but also as a resolution *of* the debates among Party intellectuals

1. Parti Communiste Français 1966, pp. 265–80.

2. Vigreux 2000, p. 214.

competing to have their revisions to Marxist-Leninist theory adopted as the PCF's official philosophy.

As prominent intellectuals and PCF Central Committee members, Louis Aragon and Roger Garaudy both participated in preliminary talks about the merits of humanist versus anti-humanist philosophies and in the three days of discussion, writing, and revision that immediately preceded the resolution's adoption. Records of these debates clearly indicate that these two intellectuals had their say, that they were heard, and that their voices informed the final document. However, because he was not, like Aragon and Garaudy, a Central Committee member, one of the controversy's principal protagonists was never heard from directly, and this despite the fact that he had originated the anti-humanist position. This intellectual was Louis Althusser.

Though shut out from participating in the series of debates that preceded the resolution (except by proxy and this only during preliminary discussions), Louis Althusser followed each exchange quite closely. He did so because he believed that literally everything was at stake with the resolution. This feeling about the resolution's importance was not limited to Althusser, or even to the intellectuals in competition with him for theoretical hegemony in the Party, but was widely shared among Central Committee members.³ Party members who were thoughtful and cared about the future of the PCF recognised this resolution as the culmination of the long period of introspection occasioned by Khrushchev's 1956 'Secret Speech' at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Long in coming, the resolution was intended to define the Party's post-Stalinist direction.⁴ At stake, then, were not only the dynamics among intellectuals, the Party, and culture, but also the Party's self-understanding. This was true in terms of its philosophy and with regard to its place in the domestic and international political landscape.

With no direct access to the Central Committee as it met for three days in the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil to draft the resolution, Althusser was placed in a reactive position. When the document appeared in Party daily *L'Humanité* on 15 March and Althusser discovered that, in the main, it did not include his anti-humanist position, he had basically two options. Given his position at the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), the first was to respond as an academic philosopher, authoring articles and books elucidating his anti-humanist Marxism and, thereby, indirectly demonstrating that the Party that claimed to be the instantiation of Marxist philosophy misunderstood this very philosophy.

3. Sève 2000, p. 66.

4. Sève 2000, p. 67.

Indeed, there is evidence that Althusser took this approach, seeking in work intended for publication to better support his arguments such that, eventually, everyone – including the Central Committee – would be won over to his understanding of Marxism. Most of this work went unpublished during Althusser's lifetime.⁵

Given his status as public intellectual and party member, the second option open to Althusser was to respond to the Central Committee directly. No doubt, this alternative might have had a more immediate effect than the other option, and it was pursued by Althusser – albeit in an even more abortive fashion than his attempts at academic refutation. Having carefully read the resolution as well as seemingly every published *intervention* [position paper] delivered by committee members during the Argenteuil discussions,⁶ Althusser took great pains to draft a letter to the Central Committee registering his objections to the resolution. In this letter, he sought to reveal its primary contradiction and to make plain its numerous theoretical errors. In addition, he attempted to indicate how the theoretical mistakes made in the resolution would lead the Party to tactical errors. Unlike the work intended for academic audiences, which did, in part, see the light of day, and had some effect on academic Marxist theory, this letter was probably never sent and it never found its audience.⁷

Whether the excuse for not sending his missive was depression, cowardice, or Althusser's habitual invocation of 'the conjuncture', this dispatch was and remains a document of some importance to Althusser scholars, to historians of Marxist thought, and to those interested in the relevance of Althusser's work to Marxist philosophy today. In this letter, and in the course of 'correcting' the Party's incorrect theses on the proper reading of Marx, Althusser states quite clearly his position on the way in which Marx must be read if one wishes to

5. The bulk of Althusser's work in this regard has been translated and published posthumously as 'The Humanist Controversy' in Althusser 2003, pp. 221–307. A small part of this text was excerpted by Althusser for the essay titled 'Sur le rapport de Marx à Hegel' that appeared in Althusser 1972. This was the only part of Althusser's efforts to clarify his anti-humanist position to see publication during his lifetime.

6. These published *interventions* and Althusser's marginal notes on them are preserved in his archive, see: ALT2.A43-04.04, Fonds Althusser, Institut Mémoire de l'Édition Contemporaine, Paris, France.

7. In writing this note, ten primary and eight secondary accounts of the humanist controversy were reviewed. Three of these secondary accounts consulted PCF archives. Not one mentions the Central Committee as having received this letter. All, however, remark on the centrality of Althusser's position in the debates and it is relatively certain that, had such a letter been sent, it would have been discussed. In his correspondence from the time and in his recollections of the controversy afterwards, Althusser mentions writing the letter but does not mention having sent it or having received a response.

avoid a return to Stalinism or a politically hazardous detour into humanist Marxism. Of course, this hermeneutic strategy is developed elsewhere by Althusser and in a more sophisticated way. However, nowhere in his published writings do we see as clearly the political stakes involved in Althusser's philosophical project, nor can we see the way in which this project evolved from a 'theoreticist' project into a more practical one. As G.M. Goshgarian notes in his introduction to *The Humanist Controversy*, Althusser's dealings with the Party between 1966–7 were crucial to the development of his thought.⁸ Written in 1966, when Althusser was perhaps most involved with trying to re-direct the Party, this document represents a crucial link between the Althusser of *Reading 'Capital'* and the Althusser of *Lenin and Philosophy*. Inasmuch as, with this text, we see an example of philosophy working to criticise and challenge ideological notions about the world and thereby to inform political practice, it can also be seen to perform that function which Althusser will claim, in the writings recently compiled as *Philosophy of the Encounter*, to be the proper role of materialist philosophy.⁹ To the extent that it does this, it allows us to see how such engaged theory might function today.

As it was written in response to a specific resolution, at a specific moment, and from a specific place, one cannot read this letter as pure political philosophy. Yes, Althusser does opine in it about the nature of the political world, about the 'essence' of man, and about the difference between truth and ideology. However, he also writes about how Marxist principles and concepts demand a specific course of action, at a particular historical moment, and in a particular place. While these concerns certainly make the letter of more than philosophical interest, they also make it harder to engage with its ideas. Especially as the moment that Althusser sought to intervene into is, today, rather remote, before we identify the specific theoretical positions that inform the resolution it is probably best to review what was at stake in its adoption. Having accomplished this, it should then be possible to consider Althusser's reaction to the resolution and to demonstrate how this reaction is informed by the arguments he advanced in his work from the early 1960s. Finally, this note will show how this reaction represents an instance of philosophy informing political practice, a move that Althusser will later champion as *the* role for philosophy but that is undertaken here without a conscious understanding of its proper function.

If the debates at Argenteuil and the resolution that resulted from them were about how the PCF would de-Stalinise, then the Central Committee had much to consider in this regard. Not only did it have to articulate a new party

8. Goshgarian 2003, pp. xi–xii.

9. Althusser 2006, pp. 231, 287.

philosophy – one which could replace Stalinist ‘diamat’ – but it also had to think about how any new positions it took would inform and influence its political affiliations. Domestically, this meant worrying about its connection not only to the broader French Left but also to that group of which it had always considered itself to be the representative, the working class. Further complicating these considerations was the problem of its rapport with an increasingly important group with which it had historically enjoyed a troubled relationship, intellectuals. This group had recently been expanded by the PCF to include not only scientists, academics, artists, and students but also professionals such as teachers, architects, and engineers.¹⁰ Given that these sub-groups often identified (or failed to identify) with the PCF for quite different reasons, the range of domestic relationships that the PCF had to reconsider was dizzying. No less complex were its international affiliations. Though still following Moscow’s lead and desirous of maintaining a close relationship with the CPSU, Russia’s policy reversals, its squabbles with China, its treatment of artists and intellectuals, and its unpopular military and diplomatic actions made it difficult for the French Party to align itself with the Soviet Union in the way it had done for nearly half a century.

Along with domestic and international relations, also under review at Argenteuil was the Party’s automatic seconding of Stalin’s interpretation of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. After 1956, it was no longer an easy task to defend a theory of history which insisted that the Soviet Union was the historical agent preordained to lead the world to communism. Nor was it easy to accept this theory’s corollary, that every national Communist party must unquestionably support the CPSU’s actions. Also difficult to swallow was the epistemology promulgated by Stalin and Zhdanov and justified by the aforementioned philosophy of history, which insisted on the ideological character of all proletarian thought and on the infallibility of proletarian knowledge.¹¹ When the Soviet Union’s claims to be the ultimate exemplar of an enlightened, egalitarian, free, and prosperous nation were belied by Khrushchev’s speech and by the Soviet invasion of Hungary, each of these theories – as well as the distinctions and principles that undergirded them – became suspect.

If Stalinism had become increasingly unpalatable even to long-serving members of the French Communist Party, then one can only guess at its lack of appeal to new members and to potential sympathisers. Reform was needed. Though carried by Stalinist inertia for four years, the PCF did begin in the early 1960s to consider and debate substantive changes. Still very much tied

10. Santamaria 1999, pp. 74–5; Courtois and Lazar 1995, pp. 323–4.

11. Lewis 2005, pp. 118–27.

to the Soviets, this reflection was encouraged in 1961 by the Twenty-Second Congress of the CPSU, where the Party announced the end of the dictatorship of the proletariat and suggested that there were many possible routes to socialism. This reconsideration was also accelerated in the middle of the decade by the death of the long-serving French Communist Party General Secretary Maurice Thorez and by Waldeck Rochet's assumption of the position in 1964.

In addition to both internal and external pressures to reform and to the domestic, international, and philosophical concerns detailed above, the PCF had a bevy of other issues to address with the Argenteuil resolution. Following some hesitant moves towards affiliation that it had begun in 1961,¹² by mid-decade, the PCF leadership had judged that, in a union with the broader Left, it had a chance of obtaining a parliamentary majority and of instituting reforms. Further tilting the Party away from international issues, and therefore away from Moscow, was a change in its economic analysis. No longer did the PCF hew to a global theory of imperialism. Instead, it was moving to endorse the theory of 'state monopoly capitalism'.¹³ Because this theory focused on the relationship between French industry and the French state as the nexus of wealth concentration and as the cause of class division, the importance of domestic issues in PCF politics was naturally foregrounded.

Though new political possibilities and new economic theses drove the resolution's drafters to consider the PCF's domestic situation in a new light, it was a queer kind of international relation – one mostly engaged in by dissident Party members – that drove the Central Committee to reflect on matters philosophical. Because PCF members and potential sympathisers were well aware of, and often sympathetic to, the possibilities for party constitution and theoretical reform evidenced by the Chinese and Italian Parties, the PCF's long tradition of shadowing every Soviet thought and gesture was thrown into unflattering relief. In an era when the Italian Communist Party had successfully instituted democratic reforms and when China had embraced a policy of total cultural reform and renewal, the French Party's long-standing practice of democratic centralism and of taking direction exclusively from Moscow appeared as anachronistic as its insistence that French workers were becoming increasingly impoverished.¹⁴

Despite frequent statements concerning the 'revisionism' of the Italians and against the 'dogmatism' of the Chinese, the Party was well aware that these positions had attracted many of its most dynamic and visible members. Even

12. Adereth 1984, pp. 175–7.

13. Courtois and Lazar 1995, p. 323.

14. Courtois and Lazar 1995, p. 325.

if they did not have a clear grasp of the theories supporting the accomplishments of Togliatti and Mao, students at France's *grandes écoles* evinced a particular fascination with these alternative formulations of Marxism-Leninism. As factions were forming within the PCF between those members who stuck to the party line and those (mostly students and intellectuals) who looked to Italian and Chinese models for theoretical inspiration, the French Communist Party reflected dissensions within the international Communist movement.¹⁵

By mid-decade, foreign influences were not the only causes of a philosophical crisis within the PCF. The discrediting of Stalinist *diamat* as well as the opening of party theoretical journals and presses to multiple perspectives at the beginning of the 1960s allowed a limited plurality of alternatives to Stalin's interpretation of Marxist-Leninist philosophy to be aired and debated. Sometimes, these revisions lined up with foreign theories, sometimes they did not. For instance, Garaudy's humanism was occasionally labelled 'Italian' while Althusser's anti-humanism was often decried as 'Chinese' or 'Maoist'. Even when they did not follow foreign patterns, these alternatives were identified by the Party leadership as either 'dogmatist' or 'revisionist' and criticised for their separation of theory from practice.¹⁶ Despite the PCF's initial reaction to these new interpretations of Marxism, it was apparent by the early 1960s that the Party needed openly to repudiate *diamat* and to endorse an alternative if it wanted to attract and retain those members who thought philosophy to be important for the Communist movement. For the most part, these were intellectuals.

Recognising this need for philosophical reform, the party press Éditions Sociales released a new summary of Marxist philosophy in 1962.¹⁷ This official statement, however, did not quell debate. Soon after its release, the party leadership found itself faced with the need to make a choice between the various 'dogmatist' and 'revisionist' philosophies being aired by prominent intellectuals associated with the Party. After a period that included incredibly well-attended public debates as well as more intimate discussions between party philosophers, progressive theologians, and non-party left intellectuals,¹⁸ the Party settled on Garaudy's socialist humanism as its official philosophy and on Garaudy as its party philosopher.¹⁹ Militating against this settlement of opinion, though, were two tensions within the Party. One was caused by students and intellectuals desirous of revisions that were more radical and

15. Bowd 1999, pp. 53–4.

16. Bowd 1999, pp. 48, 58–9.

17. Rochet 1962.

18. Besse 2000, p. 33.

19. Bowd 1999, p. 52.

more philosophically substantive than Garaudy was prepared to offer.²⁰ Another challenge to the official approbation of Garaudy's humanism was the party leadership's own workerist bias. This bias tended to reinforce the view that, despite being founded and led by intellectuals in the early twentieth century, the Party did not need these figures now because the Party was itself a type of 'collective intellectual that brings socialism to the working class and to the people'.²¹ Being its own organic intellectual, the Party did not need bourgeois professors or poets to tell it what to think or what to do.

When, in May 1964, Waldeck Rochet formally resurrected the idea of a Union of the Left at the PCF's Seventeenth Congress, the unsettled state of the Party's philosophy became a practical problem. As the Socialists and other left parties had been burned many times before by a PCF whose allegiance to the Soviet Union and to international Communism came before any domestic union, they needed abundant reassurance that the Communists had changed. Garaudy's ethic of dialogue and his philosophy of socialist humanism probably went a long way towards mending theoretical and political fences. Nevertheless, there was still the Party's workerist bias to contend with, as well as the pressure on the Party by intellectuals for more radical and substantive revisions (as well as for ones more in keeping with its traditions). The force of these tensions was certainly felt at the series of discussions on culture and class that followed the Seventeenth Congress.²² Also, and perhaps more prominently, the tension among intellectuals was evidenced in the Party's leading theoretical journal, *La Nouvelle Critique*, where thinkers espousing the humanist position debated those defending anti-humanism.²³ Further disturbing the Party's attempt to present a unified, predictable, and benign face to the broader Left was the publication in autumn 1965 of Louis Althusser's books *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*. Though published by a 'dissident' press, these books were written by a somewhat prominent party member and they seemed to attack many of the ideals and principles held dear by socialists and other humanists.

Sensing the need for the PCF to resolve these issues if it wanted to move forward with a politics of unity, Waldeck Rochet organised a meeting of party philosophers to discuss the Party's (theoretical) identity problem. Held at Choisy-le-Roi in January 1966, these discussions had the goal of 'testing, through the exchange of many perspectives, theoretical questions currently being debated by communist philosophers and the setting out of the conditions

20. Sève 2000, pp. 63–4.

21. Maurice Thorez as quoted in Juquin 2000, p. 80. My translation.

22. Juquin 2000, pp. 81–2.

23. See *La Nouvelle Critique* 164 (May 1965); as well as Matonti 2005, pp. 71–5; Bowd 1999, p. 61; Juquin 2000, pp. 81–5.

for the collective work in which each comrade can bring his particular contribution'.²⁴ Remembered by participants as extremely tense,²⁵ discussion focused on the relative merits of Garaudy's argument in *De l'anathème au dialogue* (1965) as against Althusser's arguments in *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*.²⁶ As one of the meeting's most vocal participants, Garaudy viciously attacked Althusser's reading of Marx. Sick with a nervous malady, Althusser did not attend the meeting. However, his position was defended by Michel Verret who also took the time to read from a text that Althusser had previously circulated among his students.²⁷ Hearing from ally and meeting participant Pierre Macherey that the *garaudistes* were apparently on the defensive and that they had attacked his position with 'violence, bad faith, and idiocies', Althusser was hopeful after Choisy-le-Roi that his anti-humanist philosophy would win the day.²⁸ Therefore, in the weeks leading up to the conference at Argenteuil, he was optimistic about what the document eventually issued as 'Resolution on Ideological and Cultural Problems' would contain.

As at Choisy, discussions at Argenteuil were disputatious and full of emotion. Charged with composing a resolution that would take up no more than one page in *L'Humanité* and that was readable by everyone, a committee of five meeting under the direction of Louis Aragon first listened to the *interventions* of various Central Committee members and then went to work.²⁹ As these *interventions* have been preserved, it is possible to match-up the substance of each with the contents of the final document and to determine whose thoughts manifest themselves in the final document and to what extent.³⁰ It is apparent from even a cursory glance that the positions of Louis Aragon and Roger Garaudy comprise the document's theoretical core and take up much of its length. This preliminary judgement as to the extent and importance of Aragon's and Garaudy's contributions is confirmed by first-hand accounts of the meetings.³¹

24. Suret-Canale 2000, p. 125. My translation.

25. Lucien Sève as quoted by François Matheron in Matheron 2000, p. 171.

26. Matheron 2000, p. 170; Geerlandt 1978, p. 30.

27. This text appeared in English as 'Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle' in Althusser 1990, pp. 1–43.

28. Matheron 2000, p. 172.

29. Besse 2000, pp. 40–2.

30. Edited official transcripts of these interventions appeared in *Cahiers du communisme*, 5–6 (May–June 1966): 9–263. Unexpurgated tape recordings of these interventions are retained in the PCF archives and, in at least one case, the trouble has been taken to compare the original to its official version. For this comparison, see Léo Figuères, 'Aragon et la resolution du Comité central d'Argenteuil', and Aragon 2000, pp. 135–52.

31. One of the chief sources for this note, *Les Annales de la Société des amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet*, 2, includes a half-dozen such accounts.

In charge of the document's drafting as well as a member of the Central Committee and the Political Bureau, Louis Aragon was perhaps in the best position to influence the resolution. That he was widely celebrated in France for his literary work and was a confidant of both Maurice Thorez and Waldeck Rochet could only have amplified his voice at Argenteuil.³² As resolutely anti-Stalinist as anyone else on the Central Committee and as committed to the Party, Aragon desired a resolution expressive of a theory that supported a strong, united organisation but which would avoid the dogmatism, rigidity, and exclusivity that Stalin's theory demanded.³³ Because he believed that culture is advanced by scientists and artists, he also wanted to see the document state that intellectuals are as essential to the revolution as the proletariat. Given the importance he attributed to 'intellectual workers', he was also particularly concerned about their status in the Party and their freedom to pursue research. Despite this concern, Aragon also maintained that the need for political expediency trumped every other demand, including that of freedom of research.³⁴ Each of these ideas shows up in the completed resolution, some implicitly, others explicitly. However, insofar as each of these opinions reveal themselves in the resolution's repeated references to man as creator, none is quite so explicit as Aragon's idea of the link between cultural achievement and revolution.

Having a rather low opinion of philosophical speculation, Aragon's 'philosophy' was derived more from sentiment than from rational argument.³⁵ This view of philosophy as well as his beliefs about the role of the Party and the status of culture would obviously pitch Aragon against someone like Althusser, who thought that philosophy or 'theory' was the most important thing for the Party and who doubted that 'culture' could do anything more than reproduce itself.³⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that Aragon attacked Althusser's philosophy both during his *intervention* at Argenteuil and in a letter sent to Waldeck Rochet two months before the meeting.³⁷ The attacks bear more than a passing resemblance to the charges Meletus levelled at Socrates. Repeating the accusations of 'corrupting the youth' and of 'impiety', Aragon chastised Althusser for his encouragement of 'Maoist' students at the ENS and for insisting on the importance of philosophical ideals over against the demands of political facts³⁸ – not crimes against the city but against the Party. Aragon

32. Juquin 2000, p. 87.

33. Juquin, 2000, pp. 87–9.

34. Louis Aragon in a letter to Waldeck Rochet quoted by Juquin 2000, p. 100, (see also pp. 87, 98).

35. Bowd 1999, p. 64.

36. Aragon 2000, pp. 135–6.

37. Aragon 2000, pp. 131–4.

38. Juquin 2000, pp. 100–2.

believed that Althusser's philosophy weakened the PCF politically and he argued that Althusser's emphasis on the importance of theory would result in the Party's domination by a 'technocratic-theoretical' élite.³⁹ He alleged as well that the PCF's politics – especially its politics of unity – would suffer from this domination.

While Aragon was perhaps at the peak of his influence in 1966, Garaudy's was on the wane. Were it not for Althusser's challenge to his socialist humanism, a Party that had grown less and less enthusiastic about his philosophical concessions to the Socialists and to the Christian Left might have already marginalised Garaudy.⁴⁰ Althusser's theoretical intervention, however, provided Garaudy with a new platform for his humanism. This renewed prominence permitted him to play a substantial role in the discussions at Argenteuil and Choisy. While never enamoured with his humanist philosophy, Aragon sought an alliance with Garaudy during the debates in order to create a block that would resist not only Althusser's anti-humanist theory but also any retrenchment by the Party in Stalinist orthodoxy. Given the Party's inertia, this retrenchment looked all too easy for it to carry out.⁴¹ By teaming up with Garaudy and other 'humanists', Aragon was able to argue more effectively for his vision of 'socialism with a human face' and to push de-Stalinisation to its limits.⁴²

Because Garaudy's humanist philosophy fitted well with Aragon's estimation of the vast creative powers of the human spirit, this alliance proved to be a strong one. Though Garaudy was by 1966 no longer the 'party philosopher', he still sat on the Central Committee and was director of the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Marxistes. While the former position gave him access to PCF leadership, the latter gave him oversight of the Party's theoretical journals. As fervent an anti-Stalinist as he was once a Stalinist,⁴³ Garaudy had for years been arguing for increased philosophical pluralism within the Party and for opening up the PCF theoretically and politically to outside influences. In contrast to Aragon's positions, these ideas were philosophically supported. Having wholeheartedly embraced Marx's early work as his true philosophy, Garaudy developed a humanist Marxism that made use of notions he found in works like the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843) and *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* such as 'species being', 'alienation', 'disalienation', and 'whole man'.⁴⁴ With these notions, Garaudy

39. Bowd 1999, pp. 59, 61.

40. Sève 2000, p. 64.

41. Sève 2000, pp. 69, 70.

42. Juquin 2000, pp. 88, 91.

43. For an example of Garaudy's Stalinist phase see Garaudy 1948, p. 31. For an example of the about-face turn to anti-Stalinism, see Garaudy 1960.

44. See G.M. Goshgarian's endnote to Althusser 2003, p. 219, n. 10.

constructed a philosophical anthropology in which man is described as being in the process of overcoming his alienation through acts of self-creation. To this philosophy of history, Garaudy added an epistemology which he intended to function as an alternative to Stalin's theory of knowledge. Thus, rather than maintaining with Stalin and Zhdanov that only the proletariat held true knowledge about the world, Garaudy argued that all classes and all peoples potentially possess knowledge that may be useful to humanity in its struggle to overcome alienation. In addition, he specified that the way to access this knowledge and to make use of it practically was through dialogue and collective action.⁴⁵ Though Garaudy's philosophy does not come across in the document as explicitly as do Aragon's positions, it is quite visible in the resolution's endorsement of humanism, in its frequent mention of the 'whole man', and in its calls for the pursuit of socialist goals by diverse paths.

In contrast to his own humanism as well as to the Stalinist tradition of economism, Garaudy viewed Althusser's Marxism as an 'aberration'.⁴⁶ Like Aragon, he believed that Althusser put far too much emphasis on the importance of theory. Garaudy was especially outraged by Althusser's hierarchisation of practices, a ranking that put philosophy on top as the 'theory of theoretical practices' and which subsumed politics beneath it. As for the gambit that followed from this hierarchisation, namely, to have theorists lead the Party,⁴⁷ Garaudy saw it as a deliberate attempt on Althusser's part to reject the 'criterion of practice' and publicly chastised him for this mistake, reminding the wayward professor that 'the fundamental responsibility for every Communist is neither theoretical nor scientific, it his responsibility with regard to the Party'.⁴⁸

Given Althusser's absence during the resolution's drafting and considering Garaudy's and Aragon's dominance of the meeting at Argenteuil, it is a bit of a surprise that Althusser's positions make any appearance at all in the completed document. The wide dissemination of his arguments, his status with young intellectuals, his wider prestige, and the fact that – in at least one respect – his goals for party reform were not incompatible with Aragon's were enough, however, to ensure that Althusser enjoyed some support on the Committee and that some of his ideas were present in the document.⁴⁹ This influence is evident where the resolution seconds Althusser's understanding of historical and dialectical materialism with its statement that Marxism is founded on a

45. Grellard 2000, pp. 190–4.

46. Matheron 2000, p. 171.

47. Goshgarian 2003, pp. xi–xii.

48. Roger Garaudy as quoted in Matheron 2000, p. 171. My translation.

49. See especially the *intervention* of Michel Simon 1966, pp.109–35. Simon's comments on why he was not even more supportive of Althusser's position appear in Matonti 2005, p. 105.

‘rigorously scientific conception of the world’. It is also evident in its declaration that ‘incumbent on Marxist-Leninist parties is the responsibility for theory’.⁵⁰ With Althusser being as hostile to Zhdanovism as Aragon, his understanding of historical materialism also comes through in the resolution’s calls for freedom of scientific research. Indeed, it is on this position where the sentiments of the *maître à penser* and the *grand écrivain* are most in accord (though for different reasons).

As with every other Althusserian position that found its way into the document, surrounding statements weaken the full impact of this call for freedom of research. For example, the resolution’s unwillingness to distinguish scientific from artistic pursuits blunts Althusser’s call for a social-scientific research agenda that might come to direct party action. Likewise, whereas Althusser would have insisted that those most capable of discharging the Party’s ‘responsibility for theory’ are professional theorists, the final document distorts this position (and evidences the Party’s workerist bias) with the specification that theory is the responsibility ‘of intellectuals just as much as it is of workers and peasants’.⁵¹ Finally, in the most glaring instance of the erosion of Althusser’s platform, the resolution precedes its declaration that Marxism is an objective science by an affirmation that Marxism is a type of humanism.

For Althusser the anti-humanist, Marxism’s scientific status means that it cannot make use of pre-scientific, ideological, or mystical notions like ‘human being’, ‘human essence’, and ‘humanity’s goal’. It is the repeated modification of his philosophical positions, such as the combination of scientific concepts with ideological ones, that appears to have really set Althusser off when he first read the resolution. As it contains in germ most of the arguments that he made in the finished letter to the Central Committee presented here, a note that he wrote to the Cercle Politzer (his Marxist study group at the ENS) probably best represents Althusser’s first reaction to the resolution. The analysis is very harsh in tone and pulls no punches in its criticism of the Central Committee for its ‘theoretical compromise’, for its endorsement of ‘spiritualism’, and for its failure to admonish Garaudy sufficiently’.⁵² Though much lengthier and not nearly so devoid of politesse as the note to the Cercle Politzer, the first draft of Althusser’s letter to the Central Committee differs little in content and tone. However, now added to the memo’s criticisms of Garaudy and its charge of theoretical compromise are personal pleas for consideration, extended exegeses of the resolution’s main points, and references to canonical Marxist

50. Parti Communiste Français 1966, pp. 273, 277–8.

51. Parti Communiste Français 1966, p. 278.

52. Althusser 1966.

texts. Also added is a healthy dose of sarcasm. Though, after three additional drafts, it is much refined and augmented, this initial draft's agreements, exegeses, and earnestness also characterise the completed letter. Largely missing from this fifth and final draft, however, are the personal pleas and the sarcastic tone that mark the initial attempt. From a comparison of all the drafts, the seriousness with which Althusser took his response is everywhere manifest. From draft to draft, each emendation and change is designed to make his arguments more clear and – by means of politesse – more palatable to members of the Central Committee.⁵³

Like an instructor in the Party school's (and, maybe, like a scholastic philosopher citing Holy Scripture), Althusser refers throughout the letter to the founders of Marxism-Leninism as authority. In this mode, he repeatedly appeals to accepted Marxist-Leninist laws and principles, recalling the Central Committee to them and pointing out the contradictions with the laws that the resolution contains. The bulk of his arguments start from the premise that Marx, Engels, and Lenin have given the Communist Party revelations about the nature of the world that need be preserved in their purity if the Party is to achieve its goals. Appealing as it does to the Party's traditions as well as to its well-inculcated self-understanding, this is probably a wise rhetorical strategy (and one that Althusser had great difficulty weaning himself away from). In itself, however, it would never be sufficient to argue for and encourage the departure from Stalinism that is ostensibly Althusser's goal. This is especially the case as so much of this understanding of Marx, Engels, and Lenin seems indebted to Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*.⁵⁴ So, like a good scholastic philosopher (but not like most party philosophy instructors), Althusser constructs out of these authoritative sources an original interpretation of Marx that resists Stalinist tendencies and reveals the Garaudian and Aragonian understandings of Marxism that dominate the resolution to be theoretically and politically misguided.

53. Apparently added as well is a false dateline, 18 March. The letter may have been pre-dated by Althusser so as to indicate to the Central Committee the seriousness with which he took the resolution or it may simply indicate the day that he started to compose the letter. Given both the number and extent of revisions as well as the existence of a note by Althusser to Franca Madonia from 21 March indicating that the letter was still in preparation (Althusser 1998, p. 664), it is probable that Althusser took at least a week to revise and amend the various drafts. For more on the letter's drafting see Matheron 2000, p. 176.

54. As Gregory Elliott makes clear in the chapter 'Questions of Stalinism' from *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, Althusser's relationship to Stalin's theory and to Stalinism is complex and often contradictory. As late as 1969, and long after he had first publicly criticised Stalinism, Althusser still sometimes referred favourably to Stalin's theory. See Elliott 1987, pp. 268–70.

Of course, persuasively arguing that true Marxism is and always has been anti-humanist and that anti-humanism is not a Stalinist position is possible only if one ignores the many humanist elements present in Marx's and Engels's texts as well as in the PCF's history.⁵⁵ Aware of these traditions and perhaps anticipating this counter-argument, Althusser does not content himself with selectively citing Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Rather, he uses the arguments that he developed in *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'* in order to demonstrate that the resolution makes numerous theoretical errors. The most obvious example of this mobilisation of philosophy is Althusser's juxtaposition of the resolution's affirmation of the necessity of free research with the declaration that 'there is a Marxist humanism'.⁵⁶ As he points out to the Committee almost *ad nauseam*, this declaration prematurely resolves the controversy about whether 'the human' is a scientific or ideological concept. Subtler than the highlighting of this error are the ways in which Althusser deploys his theory of Marxist concepts in order to unmask the ideological notions endorsed by the resolution. Also less obvious, but no less a part of the letter's argument is its use of the schema that Althusser developed in *Reading 'Capital'*, which specified that philosophy is its own practice and that it must not be contaminated with ideology. Every reader of Althusser will also notice where the theory of the 'break' between the young Marx and the mature Marx serves to advance his contention that dialectical materialism is in no way a spiritualism and that historical materialism is a science.

The combined force of these contentions is intended to suggest to the Central Committee an alternative to Stalinism that – unlike the resolution's alternative – is not revisionist. In lieu of embracing humanist values and celebrating 'creators', Althusser argues in the letter that the correct path can only be found by giving theory its due, by being scientific, and by paying attention to the words, actions, and even the silences of Marx. Therefore, in addition to insisting that the words Marxists use correspond to their theory and that the Party should maintain a specialised scientific vocabulary, he reminds the Central Committee of the importance that Lenin always gave to theory and the rights that Marx and Engels had already accorded it at the Gotha Unity Congress. As yet another antidote to revisionism, Althusser

55. The PCF's humanist impulses were particularly evident immediately following World War II and during the Front National. They were also present at the party's founding in the early 1920s by idealists such as Romain Rolland and Boris Souvarine. Though one does not have to make as strong a claim for Marx's humanism as does John Roche in his recent article 'Marx and Humanism' (Roche 2005, pp. 335–48), few would dispute the claim that there are humanistic elements present throughout Marx's and Engels's *œuvre*.

56. Parti Communiste Français 1966, pp. 273, 280.

warns that the resolution's over-valuing of art and culture will fatally compromise its ability to understand the world and direct the revolution. That is because this embrace of art and culture stems from and leads to a vast overestimation of the role that 'creators' play in the revolutionary process.

In each draft of the letter to the Central Committee, Althusser states his belief that a compromise has been struck with Garaudy and Aragon and he warns that this theoretical concession will compromise the Party's attempts at reformation. In this initial judgment of the resolution, Althusser was in agreement with many other concerned observers. Subsequently, most commentators on the resolution have affirmed this opinion and have added the retrospective judgment that, though the resolution may have allowed the Party to retain more intellectuals, its overall effect was to limit reforms, to reinforce the leadership's clout, and to limit the influence of scientific research on party policy.⁵⁷

While Althusser probably never mailed his letter of objection to the resolution, he did get a chance during the summer of 1966 to make its arguments to the person then most capable of registering it, Waldeck Rochet.⁵⁸ The fact that this audience occurred demonstrates that Althusser did have a voice in the Party. However, if the meaning of words lies in their effects, then one can say that the Central Committee never 'got' the letter and that Rochet was not persuaded by his conversation with Althusser.⁵⁹ Certainly, neither communication convinced the PCF to prioritise theory and respect scientific research.

Despite never having its intended effect on the French Communist Party, the writing of this letter and the formulation of its arguments did affect Althusser. While perhaps not conscious of how it would do so when he wrote the letter, the missive strives to offer a critique that may 'assist in the transformation of the world'.⁶⁰ Though, in March 1966, Althusser believed philosophy's role to be much greater,⁶¹ he would later identify this function as philosophy's actual role. Eventually, through the process of formulating

57. For critics who view the resolution as a compromise and for more on the extent of its effects see: Bowd 1999, pp. 63, 66n, 67; Geerlandt 1978, p. 132; Juquin 2000, pp. 108–13; Matonti 2005, pp. 107–9; Matheron 2000, p. 169; Olivera and Pudal 2000, p. 264; Sève 2000, p. 71; Vargas 2000, pp. 246–7; Vigneux 2000, pp. 214–15.

58. In his droll account of the interview with Rochet, Althusser almost cites verbatim the letter's argument. See Althusser 2000, pp. 182–3.

59. An indication of Rochet's attitude towards Althusser is to be found in his summary discourse at Argenteuil where the General Secretary indirectly reproaches Althusser for 'separating Marxist theory from Marxist practice' and for doing theoretical work that is 'too abstract' (Rochet as quoted in Vigneux 2000, p. 213).

60. Althusser 1971, p. 68.

61. Althusser 1993, p. 171.

materialist arguments about the nature of the world and observing these arguments' effects, Althusser came to revise his original estimation of philosophy's worth. He also began to assign to it the role just mentioned.⁶² Read as an instance of this type of criticism and not in the way Althusser originally intended it to be read (that is, as Marx's true philosophy unmasking its would be revisionists), the letter clearly appears as a philosophical argument designed to push the Party away from Stalinism on the one hand and humanism on the other. As this and subsequent attempts by Althusser to encourage party reforms largely failed or remained uncompleted,⁶³ it cannot be said that he learned of this function for philosophy solely from the Party's positive reaction to his arguments. However, the Party's lack of response to his efforts at theoretical reform certainly taught him not to overestimate philosophy's power.

That this lesson stuck with him is not only evidenced by Althusser's argument from the late 1970s and mid-1980s that philosophy works 'by way of ideologies on real, concrete practices' in order to change these practices;⁶⁴ it is also demonstrated in the account of his philosophical development from his autobiography *L'Avenir dure longtemps*. Here, Althusser reiterates his argument against the resolution and recalls his failure to get Rochet to admit the importance for communist practice of theory and of clear scientific concepts.⁶⁵ In this new telling of the events around the resolution, he also notes that any possible influence that this 1966 interview may have had was not due to the fact that he had presented strong philosophical arguments that the Party was unable to refute. Instead, the possibility of influencing the Party existed because the arguments he made in the early 1960s in theoretical journals had persuaded a number of students and other intellectuals that anti-humanism was a viable theoretical option for the Party.⁶⁶ In 1966, the Central Committee and Rochet had to respond to Althusser, but not because of his arguments' rigour and strength. Rather, they had to listen to him and partly to incorporate his views because his arguments had created a faction that the Party wished to retain.

This retrospective realisation by Althusser's of the actual role that philosophy plays in the world does not vitiate the philosophical importance of the arguments contained in this letter to the Central Committee. Though this is not the only place these arguments were made⁶⁷ and though he later abandoned

62. Matheron 2000, p. 179; Goshgarian 2003.

63. Goshgarian 2003, p. xi.

64. Althusser 1994, p. 170; Althusser 2006, p. 280.

65. Althusser 1993, pp. 197–8.

66. Althusser 1993, p. 198.

67. See Althusser 2003, especially 'The Philosophical Conjuncture and Marxist Theoretical Research', pp. 1–19.

some of its claims (most notably those on the status of philosophy), he also developed ideas from the letter on scientificity and on the role that ideology plays in culture into constitutive parts of his philosophy. In addition to its philosophical value, the manner in which the letter demonstrates that Althusser's work between 1960 and 1965 was no mere scholastic exercise makes it into an important document of intellectual history. Contrary to the caricature of Althusser's work of the early to mid-1960s – which portrays it as the hermetic exercises of an academic philosopher intent on developing a Marxism incorporating fashionable psychoanalytic, anthropological, and hermeneutic theories – this letter reveals the way in which the arguments Althusser made during this period were intended to have a political effect. Indeed, it demonstrates this even if Althusser himself was not then fully conscious of how philosophy produces such effects.

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