

July 2016

A Letter from Louis Althusser on Gramsci's Thought

Louis Althusser

Recommended Citation

Althusser, Louis (2016) "A Letter from Louis Althusser on Gramsci's Thought," *Décalages*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1.

This Archive is brought to you for free and open access by OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Décalages* by an authorized editor of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact cdla@oxy.edu.

LOUIS ALTHUSSER

A Letter on Gramsci's Thought

Rinascita, 15 March 1968

Translated from Italian by Warren Montag

*On December 1, 1967, Comrade Rino Dal Sasso published a response to a chapter from Louis Althusser's **Reading Capital** that appeared in the journal **Trimestre** (Pescara). Althusser responded to Dal Sasso in a letter that we have published here together with a brief response by Dal Sasso and interventions by Nicola Badaloni, Galvano Della Volpe and Luciano Gruppi.*

It was with great interest that I read your note on my text, "Marxism is not a Historicism," which appeared in the journal *Trimestre*. I saw that your critique, even as it expressed some fundamental reservations, was attentive to what I was trying to "say" even when I did not completely succeed in doing so.

You are right: my clumsy attempt to reconcile certain of Gramsci's themes with some of Coletti's theses was presented without the necessary historical and theoretical justification. I understood what you said concerning the interpretation of certain of Gramsci's "theoretical formulas" which cannot be judged when they are abstracted from his "concrete" thought. But you will agree with me that simply referring to the existence of an author's "concrete thought" is not enough automatically to dissipate the ambiguities that may be implicit in the "abstract" formulas of his "theory." Between the abstract theory and the concrete thought of an author as mature, responsible and conscious as Gramsci there must certainly exist a profound unity of inspiration. If one or another of his abstract formulas should give rise to an error, it is essential to know if his "concrete thought" reflects or "concretely" legitimizes, or, on the contrary, corrects and eliminates *this error*. The correction of this error must be *demonstrated* in "concrete thought," given that the mere invocation of "concrete thought" offers nothing more than a moral guarantee.

At this point I must confess that the best studies of Gramsci's "thought" that I have been able to read have not corrected the "theoretical" error that I will now attempt to explain.

And it is at this precise and clearly specified point that I believe it is possible to discern this "theoretical" error.

Against the entire positivist current of the interpretation of Marxism (and in this respect, his importance is immense, given that he had the lucidity and courage to struggle against the dominant opinions), Gramsci saw and thought *one* of the constitutive determinations of every philosophy: the relation that philosophy establishes with politics. But he did not truly see, specify and think *the other*: the relation philosophy establishes with the sciences.

Theoretically speaking, this is Gramsci's weak point: a number of Italian Marxist philosophers have emphasized this weakness in very clear terms. Gramsci expressed in some hastily written and superficial passages an obviously insufficient, not to say false, conception of science. He was content to repeat extremely ambiguous and dubious formulas from Croce: an "instrumentalist" and "superstructuralist" theory of the sciences.

If we wish to understand the objective aspect of these formulas, we might say that they indicate:

- 1) First, the place that a science occupies in a determinate practice where it is only one element among others, and its function in this practice (for example, Marxist theory is *one* of the elements of Marxist political practice and serves as the "tool" of "method" and as a "guide" for "action"). This leads to instrumentalism.
- 2) Second, the *site* that the sciences occupy in a given social formation in relation to its instances (infrastructure, juridico-political superstructure, "ideological" superstructure). In this sense, the sciences occupy a place "on the side of the superstructure." From this follows "superstructuralism."

But these formulas assign the sciences to a place within a topography without being able to account for what properly distinguishes them: the production of objective knowledges. From this follows a very important consequence.

Because Gramsci did not think the specific relation that philosophy establishes with the sciences, he constantly tends to reduce and completely assimilate "philosophy" to a "worldview," leaving only a simple formal difference to distinguish them.

In effect, what distinguishes philosophy ("philosophies") in Gramsci's eyes from a worldview (everyone's worldview: it is because every man has a worldview that Gramsci says "every man is a philosopher") is only what he calls its superior *coherence*. It remains clear that this difference is purely formal, in that Gramsci describes it as merely a difference in the degree of coherence, without explaining

the reason for this coherence or the difference in degree. Of course, Gramsci also speaks of the “systematic” or “rational” character of philosophy (the philosophy of the philosophers and of Marxism), but these terms, which explain nothing in particular, do nothing but repeat in other forms what has already been asserted concerning “coherence.”

But coherence, systematicity, and even rationality as such, are not distinctive or specific *philosophical* criteria. There are perfectly coherent, systematic, and even rational expositions of various *worldviews* that cannot be confused with philosophy, an example of which would be the theoretical presentations of the religious conception of the world in theology.

In reality, to give an account of what Gramsci seeks to identify as proper to philosophy when he invokes its “coherence,” it is necessary refer to the specific relation philosophy establishes with the sciences. It is this relation that confers on philosophy the characteristics described by Gramsci (coherence, systematicity, rationality), except that now these characteristics cease to be formal, because they acquire a precise content, defined not by rationality *in general* but by *the* specific form of the dominant “rationality” that exists at a given moment in the sciences with which philosophy establishes a specific relation. Contemporaneous worldviews, in contrast, either establish no relation to these sciences or establish with them a “relation” entirely distinct from a philosophical relation.

This schematic analysis (assuming that it is not false) demonstrates that philosophies establish a determinate relation with the existing worldviews. This relation is, to be sure, finally an organic relation of philosophy to politics, because worldviews exist only in the class struggle (a moment in the class struggle in the strict, that is, political sense) as contraries. But philosophies cannot be defined solely by the relation to politics (if this were the case, they would be no more than worldviews, even if these worldviews were “political”). They are defined as philosophies (and this is their *specific* difference) by the specific difference they establish, *at the same time*, with the sciences or more precisely with the dominant form of “rationality” that exists at that moment in the sciences.

This double relation refers implicitly to an *original* synthesis in which the nature of philosophy as philosophy properly exists, as distinct from worldviews as it is from the sciences. It is clear that philosophies have worldviews in themselves or, better, are “bearers” of worldviews, from which derives the *validity* of Engels’ and Lenin’s theory of philosophy as a struggle between two tendencies, materialism and idealism, a struggle that consists of an ideological *class struggle* between

opposing worldviews. At the same time, it should be understood that philosophies are distinct from other, non-philosophical worldviews because, in opposition to what are simply worldviews, they establish a specific relation to the sciences.

It is necessary to recognize that under such conditions, Gramsci, lacking the correct conception of the sciences and of the specific relation between philosophy and the sciences, could not give a complete and correct definition of philosophy. He certainly saw the fundamental relation of philosophy to politics, but he could not discern philosophy's specific relation to the sciences. The result was undoubtedly the error of his "theoretical" conception of politics. To my knowledge, this error did not disappear in Gramsci's "concrete thought."

If we acknowledge this error, we can easily understand how it resulted in the tendency, quite pronounced in Gramsci's case, to confuse Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism) with the science of history (whose "general theory" is "historical materialism"). This confusion is established in Gramsci 1) by the suppression of the classical terminology of dialectical materialism (which he criticized for its positivist resonances, without discerning the effective content designated by this appellation, that is, the relation of philosophy to the sciences) and 2) by an amalgam of the science of history and philosophy under a *single* heading, the "philosophy of practice." I believe that in this case, it is not a matter of a simple terminological recomposition without theoretical and practical effects.

I completely agree that that in my insistence on the sciences there is something of "the French cultural tradition" and its orientation to the "Enlightenment." But I don't think that we can avoid taking seriously the objective question of a correct theory of the sciences and of the relation of philosophy to the sciences by means of a simple explanation of the historicist type, a "sociology of knowledge." Nor can we avoid the question of Gramsci's corresponding theses by means of a sociological explanation based solely on "the Italian tradition." We already have a sufficient distance from our own respective "national cultures," and as *Marxist-Leninists* are sufficiently forewarned against sociologistic relativism, which is nothing more than a direct product of bourgeois ideology as it concerns the conception history, to be able to reject this simple "comparativist" point of view which functions purely and simply as bourgeois ideology when it claims to be able to account for the *theoretical* content of a proposition. This "sociologism" is, if I may say so, an excellent example of the havoc that the vulgar "historicist" conception of Marxism can cause. I say "vulgar," knowing that in spite of its objective errors, is far from being vulgar. But in fact our daily experience in the

most varied circumstances possible of the harmful theoretical and political effects of the objective error that the notion of “historicism” contains (even if to escape relativism it is declared “absolute”) *oblige*s us to pose the question of the “instrumentality” of its usage and, beyond this purely pragmatic question, that of its *theoretical validity*.

Above all, we must “save” or safeguard whatever is *authentic* in Gramsci's historicism, despite its dubious formulation and its inevitable theoretical errors. What is authentic in Gramsci's historicism is the affirmation of the political nature of philosophy, the thesis of the historical character of social formations (and of the modes of production of which they are composed), the correlative thesis of the *possibility* of revolution, the demand for the *unification of theory and practice*, etc. Why does its name, established by a long tradition, not serve to represent these realities? On the contrary, if we persist in wanting to “save” what is authentic in Gramsci's historicism, we must avoid at all costs any compromise (and the very use of the word constantly itself invites compromise) with (bourgeois) relativist ideologies of knowledge that are thought to account for an objective theoretical content (*true* scientific knowledge or a *correct* philosophical thesis) by reducing it exclusively to its “historical” conditions.

The history of these *theoretical* (that is, scientific and philosophical in the strict sense of these terms) contents is undoubtedly a *history*. But:

1. This history cannot be conceived as a simple empirical process recorded in chronological form. It is necessary to think it within the theoretical concepts of the Marxist science of history.
2. It is a history *sui generis* that, despite the fact that it is inscribed in the history of social formations and is articulated on the basis of this history (which in general is what is meant by the word “history”), is not reducible, purely and simply, to this history, even if it is conceived outside of any empiricism and within the theoretical concepts of the Marxist science of history.

But the very mention of these essential distinctions directs us once again to the interpretation of Marxism and to Gramsci, among others. We might suspect that on this point as well, by which I mean on the way the nature of the Marxist *science* of history (in its difference with Marxist *philosophy*) is conceptualized, Gramsci's errors concerning the sciences and philosophy (and his silence with regard to the relation between philosophy and the sciences), are not without theoretical and practical consequences.

I hope that I will have a chance at some point to speak at greater length on this topic. But I am extremely happy that our Italian comrades who know not only Gramsci's abstract theory, but his concrete thought as well, will for their part contribute to a process of reflection whose importance cannot pass unnoticed.

Fraternally yours,

L. Althusser