

## Irrationalism and Marxism

How should the philosophies of crisis be combated? For some time, Communists have had to pay rather more systematic attention to a number of ideological themes whose contemporary weight cannot be put down to chance. In the economic field, the phenomenon involves such notions as ‘the limits of growth’, ‘zero growth’, and the ‘risks’ and ‘harmful effects’ (for ‘man’ and ‘nature’) of intensive industrialization. At the social level, it involves a renewal of anarchist arguments directed against ‘institutions’ and ‘power’, and proclaiming the necessity of immediate ‘abolition’ of the Family, the School, Medicine and the Courts. On the philosophical plane, it involves yet another challenge to ‘the value of science’ as a mode of knowledge and source of social progress—be it in favour of religious (Ilich) or mystic-naturalist (‘Princeton Gnosticism’) themes, or be it in favour of nihilist and irrationalist ones (Deleuze-Guattari). It need hardly be stressed that, for us, the problem is not *whether* these themes have to be combated at a practical and ideological level, but *how*, from what point of view, the struggle should be waged. It is a philosophical question. It is a political question.

A number of points can be made at once. However diverse they may be, all these ideological themes shore up the attempts of the big bourgeoisie to 'solve' the crisis in its own way and to its own advantage. They do this by presenting the crisis as inevitable, by proclaiming the need for austerity, and by substituting for the real social causes such imaginary ones as Technology and Science—abstractions held to blame for all manner of evils. Furthermore, of course, a considerable part of this offensive is preconcerted and articulated to immediate objectives (whose possible effects on manual and intellectual workers have to be concealed): namely, the 'restructuring' of capitalist production and, perhaps, the beginning of a displacement of the centres of capital accumulation towards other, formerly 'underdeveloped' regions of the world that appear, by virtue of their cheap labour force and 'strong' régimes, as the new paradise of free enterprise. Hence the accompanying curtailment or selective limitation of expenditure on education and scientific and technological research.<sup>1</sup> Folk wisdom puts it very well: He who wishes to drown his dog, first makes it out to be rabid.

To an important degree, these ideological themes are simply a mechanical *inversion* of those which used to be put forward in the previous period, often by the very same professional ideologues. Thus, the myth of 'growth' as the ideal of modern times becomes that of 'zero growth'; the myth of the power and intrinsic value of science and technology passes into that of their impotence and harmfulness. The *very same notions*—'industrial civilization', 'consumer society', 'automation', etc.—are now given a minus sign instead of a plus.

Finally, beside the 'right-wing' variant of these ideological themes, a 'left' version can also be advanced, through which part of the opposition to the present régime is 'recuperated' or deflected, at least at this level. The objective result is to weaken the workers' struggles and multiply the obstacles to the fighting *unity* of workers, other employees, peasants and intellectuals. If responsibility for the danger posed by atomic power-stations lies with nuclear physics, then it is the latter that must be denounced, rather than the complete subordination of industrial and energy policy to a few domestic or American monopolies. If any medicine other than the 'barefoot' kind is the social or 'psycho-social' 'cause' of illness, then medicine itself must be attacked, rather than discriminatory treatment, the wretched inadequacy of hospitals and dispensaries, or the all-powerful drug trusts. If growth, extended education, scientific research and technical progress are *inherently* contradictory and

---

<sup>1</sup> The new conjuncture is very different from that of the fifties and sixties, when 'miraculous' rates of profit sustained a continuous process of expansion of capital accumulation in France. Today, the big bourgeoisie is caught in a formidable contradiction. On the one hand, its political power depends on the maintenance of its (hegemonic and uneven) alliance with the 'middle layers' of society, including intellectual wage-earners and even a fraction of the working class. On the other hand, it is becoming absolutely essential to suppress anything that, from the point of view of capital, contributes to the massive *faux frais* or 'privileges' of these *same layers*; in other words, it is becoming essential to speed up their *proletarianization*, beginning with an attack on their *security* (both Social Security and job security) and their *qualification* (of which the general cultural level forms an integral part). This contradiction is becoming visible today and is, in the long term, of an explosive character.

oppressive, then the struggle for a revolutionary transformation of society, *for socialism*, is just a pipe-dream.

In the light of these facts and of the experiences of the past, Communists have set themselves the urgent task of uncompromising struggle against such ideological themes. They see this as an integral part of their fight against austerity policies and big capital's attempts to exploit the crisis, as well as for the development of the popular movement. This communist *response* often attaches considerable importance to the idea of *irrationalism*, arguing that this is being fostered in a more or less deliberate manner, or that at any rate the ruling (bourgeois) ideology is *tending to slide* towards irrationalism. The following schema might, therefore, be advanced: whereas, throughout the historical period of its economic rise and political dominance, the bourgeoisie above all developed *rationalist* ideology and philosophies, exalting the advance of knowledge or advance through knowledge, this tendency is *inverted* in the epoch of its crisis and decay. Whether it likes it or not, the bourgeoisie now falls prey to irrationalism. By contrast, the working class, which represents the *future* of human society, appears henceforth as the bearer and defender of philosophical *rationalism*, enabling it to make progress and enter a new field of action. Thus, today, the working class situates itself within a tradition that has been shown to be correct by past struggles (notably those in the epoch of fascism; in France, for example, Georges Politzer, Maurice Thorez and others already combated fascism under the banner of Descartes).

Without doubt, then, this question is of both theoretical and practical importance. But we also know that it is crucial gradually to refine our ideas and theses: for, with regard to ideological struggle just as on any other political terrain, no position is ever *spontaneously* one hundred per cent correct and effective. It is the combination of concrete analysis of the present with the theoretical lessons of Marxism that will allow us to refine our positions, through discussion and comparison of experiences. In this spirit, I offer the following reflections on the question of *rationalism* and *irrationalism*.

### What is Irrationalism?

In a certain sense, irrationalism evades by internal necessity any unified, systematic definition. Its significance and influence are not based on a coherent system, capable of providing ideological and institutional armour to the whole of society. To speak of irrationalism is to designate an ensemble of diverse tendencies that *react against*, or present themselves as 'critiques' of, scientific, political, economic Reason or rationality, drawing upon an ideological past and thereby testifying to its persistence. It is of the highest importance, however, not to confuse the essentially *modern* phenomenon of irrationalism with the ideologies that *preceded rationalism*—especially with the dominant ideology of pre-capitalist feudal societies: *religion*. What must be understood is the relationship between contemporary irrationalism and the profoundly altered forms of myth and religion that 'survive' today. The relationship is very unequal and calls in turn for distinctions of great practical consequence.

It is not difficult to identify, particularly in France, a 'vulgar', but by no means insignificant, form of irrationalism: a more or less homogeneous mixture of superstitions, *pseudo*-scientific and *para*-scientific beliefs (whose prophets range from Albert Ducrocq to Uri Geller), nature-worship, and religion ( Lourdes!). This is *a very important phenomenon*. But it is not, at bottom, qualitatively new, however great and variable the publicity accorded it by the ideological policies of the bourgeois press and radio. On the contrary, the phenomenon has a long ancestry.

What are its causes? It is not enough to invoke the age-old *ignorance* of the masses, for that is in no sense a natural or absolute condition. Ultimately, we must rather recall *the contradictions and limits* that still affect the *education* given to the masses in a class society like our own. The bedrock of vulgar irrationalism, underlying all the operations of ideological mystification treated here, is at once the residue and the by-product of bourgeois education—above all, therefore, of 'secular' primary-school education itself. We are thus led back whether we like it or not to the historical contradictions of the latter. For although it involves an unprecedented extension of popular instruction, such primary schooling does not overcome inequality of knowledge: in the last analysis, it even tends to reproduce and strengthen it, by *isolating* science from the practice of the masses as a barely glimpsed 'mystery'. The result is a dual ideological exploitation of the popular *masses* and of *scientists* and other intellectuals. At the same time, and despite appearances, this 'secular' schooling represents a historical compromise with religious ideology, whereby the struggle between the two is not ended but *confined* within certain limits. ('The school belongs to the teacher, the church to the priest', 'To each his own truth'). In essence, the bourgeois idea of secularity (which, as we shall see, is specifically positivist in character) signifies that, once the 'excesses' of militant rationalism among teachers have been reabsorbed and repressed, the school does not set itself the task of *overtly criticizing* religion; or, to be more precise, it does not set itself the task of *explaining* the content, social foundations and (contradictory) historical function of religion. Thus, ignorance of what religion *really is* ultimately *serves* religion itself—its 'superstitious' revivals and the various surrogates that mimic science and shroud it in mysticism. Lack of knowledge opens the way to the monstrous phenomenon of para-scientific religiosity.

Seemingly opposed to this mass irrationalism is a sophisticated and relatively esoteric form, peculiar to professional *philosophers* (including the theoreticians of diverse 'human sciences' and literary disciplines). The masses are to a varying degree susceptible to irrationalism, which nevertheless inhabits only the gaps in their common sense. But some philosophers *live* (in every sense of the term) on and for irrationalism. Moreover, the origins of philosophical irrationalism go back a long way: it is not often remembered that 'Enlightenment philosophy' itself, that bourgeois rationalism of the eighteenth century, already had its counterpoint in a current of mysticism, pietism, 'Mesmerism' and 'illumination' that was to run into the vast nineteenth-century constellation of 'philosophies of nature' (Schelling), 'romantic philosophy' (Novalis), Christian existentialism (starting with Kierkegaard), and so on. Alongside this *religious* phenomenon was an *atheist and anarchist* irrationalist current, initiated by Stirner and Nietzsche. Both the one and

the other claim to be ‘critical’ philosophies, opposed to the ‘imperialism’ of Reason, Concept and ‘System’ (the terrible Hegelian system!), to rational theology or to that ‘new theology’ called science—and both lead directly, through Bergson and Heidegger, to the contemporary philosophies of Desire, Life, metaphysical Revolt, Violence, ‘transgression’, and so on (from Reich, Marcuse and Bataille to Deleuze, Edgar Morin et al.). Part of their inspiration is *anti*-scientific, another part *para*-scientific (as is expressed by their exploitation of the contradictions of biology, psychoanalysis and ethnology). An important symptom is the fact that, whereas mass irrationalism tends to be an overt force of political conservatism, or even reaction, the irrationalism of the philosophers is, *in the particular conditions of present-day France* (those of ‘before’ and ‘after’ May 68), rather of an anarchist type: on the order of the day is not the straightforward negation of the struggle of exploited classes, but its transcendence or drowning in the imaginary conflicts of Power and Sex.

But that is not all. Despite the possibility of overlap, it seems necessary in practice to distinguish carefully between this professional philosophy and what should really be termed the *irrationalism of scientists*. We are talking now of a quite new phenomenon, which requires our undivided attention. For it concerns the specific current forms of the ‘*spontaneous philosophy of scientists*’: that is to say, the ways in which the ruling ideology exercises its hold over scientific workers when they are, on the whole, feeling more and more acutely the contradictions of society. The original and specific feature is not so much the thematic content of the irrationalism, according to which some scientists declare that they ‘no longer believe in science’, either as an *institution* (science is a mere instrument of power, of the *existing* powers) or as a mode of *knowledge* (science is an ‘ideology’, or even Ideology *par excellence*). As Lenin said in another period, such notions are ‘old hat’ in philosophy. No, what is new is, on the one hand, the fact that they most often present themselves in the terminology of Marxism, ‘tinkering around’ with and turning inside out its major theses; and, on the other hand, that they *deeply* penetrate the scientific milieu through their numerous variants and are sometimes concretized in *practices*—veritable ‘ideological acts’ which, though frequently aborted, continually re-emerge in quest of favourable conditions: in individual challenges to the administrative structures of research and education, in the ‘ecological struggle’, and in ‘marginal’ political actions. What are the historical bases of this tendency? What significance can it assume for Communists? What unformulated ‘question’ thereby makes itself heard, requiring a fitting answer from the Marxists? I shall return to these points after recalling certain struggles fought by the last generation.

### Past Struggles against Irrationalism

As a matter of fact, this is not the first time we have faced a conjuncture in which the different forms of irrationalism have exhibited a tendency to *fusion*. In the thirties and forties, Marxism, and especially Communist philosophers, waged a systematic struggle against irrationalism—and they did so in the name of *rationalism*. In France, Politzer victoriously carried out this task with the support of eminent scientists like Paul Langevin, Marcel Prenant and Henri Wallon. At the same time, Lukács

devoted a whole area of his work to the question. At this level, too, it was then a matter of combating *fascism*, which the bourgeoisie had made into its bulwark against proletarian revolution, its offensive weapon against the European workers, in order to surmount the gravest crisis yet known by the capitalist system. Without going over the entire history of this struggle, we can draw out some important gains, as well as a number of problems raised by the experience.

Politzer and Lukács demonstrated that the official ideology of Nazism (that of blood and race, of *Lebensraum*) was not an isolated phenomenon or an artificial invention. It had long been prepared by the current of philosophical irrationalism—by Bergson in France, by Nietzsche and Heidegger in Germany—and gradually transmitted to intellectual milieux by the ‘inversion’ of the values of scientific progress and bourgeois political democracy, which had been intimately connected in classical rationalism. They showed further that the spread of irrationalism corresponded to a period of open crisis, in which the *historical limitations* and barbaric character of capitalism became clear to vast masses of men and women under the impact of imperialist wars and the Soviet revolution. Bourgeois democracy then appeared for what it was: a form of dictatorship of a possessing class, of ‘money’, that can at any moment topple into violence if the circumstances so dictate. Politzer and Lukács demonstrated that irrationalism was fundamentally a means of struggle *against the revolutionary ideology*, and thus against *Marxist philosophy*, dialectical materialism.

In this respect, a revealing game of general post takes place: whereas irrationalism of the fascist type brands ‘Descartes’ (or Kant) as the forerunners and theoretical inspirers of ‘materialism’ and Marxism, the *rationalist* philosophers of the bourgeois University (Benda, Koyré et al.) denounce in Marxism a form of irrationalism, on a par with Nazism (sic),<sup>2</sup> and oppose to it the very same Plato, Descartes and Kant. The bourgeoisie thus fights on two fronts—as do the Marxists. In a sense, the battle of ideas is waged over the question: for or against Descartes? Who is the *real* ‘Descartes’, the *real* Kant: a progressive *or* a reactionary, a materialist *or* an idealist?

Strange stakes—the importance of which cannot be grasped unless it is seen that, in the Marxist camp and in the conditions of the epoch, this struggle has remained of a fundamentally *defensive* character. To be sure, it made a weighty contribution to the *unity* around the working class of the popular forces (including intellectual workers) who struggled against fascism, then joined the Resistance, and later fought against the ‘Cold War’ and for peace. But did it achieve a lasting *shift* in the ideological front and advance the overall struggle of Marxism against bourgeois ideology? That is another question. By laying claim to the heritage of philosophical rationalism, and by forging an ‘alliance’ with intellectuals and scientists *on that basis*, Marxism blocked *one* of the forms of bourgeois ideology; but, against that, it was led to present (and think of) itself either as a form of ‘rationalism’, or as the ‘modern’ continuation of rationalism, or as a philosophy of which rationalism is a ‘constituent part’.

---

<sup>2</sup> They thus pave the way for the theory of ‘totalitarianism’, which formed the ideological anthem of the post-war ‘Free World’.

Now today we cannot overlook what history subsequently taught us, on the social plane as well as that of 'ideas'. Let us simply jot down these lessons at random: fascism is an *exceptional*, but not fortuitous, politico-ideological form within the history of imperialism; the defence of Marxism as a type of rationalism was pregnant with internal *contradictions*—for, besides Politzer and Lukács, it mobilized in 'the defence of reason' an ultra-revisionist tendency (the Frankfurt School of Horkheimer and Adorno) which was capable of *turning into* irrationalism (Marcuse); this mode of defence *coincided* in time with a theoretical stagnation and mechanistic deformation of Marxism (Stalin); and finally, through the very forms of its reliance on *scientific* knowledge, Marxism found itself being dragged into grave *errors*, or at least into an inability to forestall these and distinguish clearly their roots—witness the 'condemnation' of psychoanalysis as 'an ideology without a future' and 'a regression towards the unconscious', at a level well short of scientific rationality, or witness the influence of Lysenko's doctrines, resting on the equation: Mendelian genetics = Weissmann's vitalist mysticism = racism.<sup>3</sup>

What was thus, to a considerable extent, masked was the fact that the irrationalism and obscurantism of Nazism constituted an anti-scientific philosophy only in 'theory', that is, on the surface: in no sense did it aim *in practice* to limit or block Germany's scientific and technological development in the service of large-scale industry and militarism—quite the contrary! Nor, above all, did it seek to curb *the 'rationality' and 'rationalization' of exploitation, of 'scientific' political propaganda and the concentration camp 'system'*. It was, then, this *contradictory* aspect of irrationalism that threatened to pass unnoticed.<sup>4</sup>

In order to see things more clearly today, it is therefore necessary to pose a twofold question: 1. What is the historical significance of philosophical rationalism? 2. What connection is there, in our epoch, between an economic and social *crisis* of capitalism, situated in the general context of imperialist crisis, and the contradictions of the ruling ideology?

### What is Rationalism?

Our present task is not to recapitulate the whole history of philosophical rationalism: it may well be that its origins are as old as philosophy itself, stretching right back to Antiquity (Democritus, Aristotle). We are concerned rather with the structure of rationalism as *the dominant philosophy* of the modern epoch, and with the direction of its tendency of development. We shall have to examine the dialectical relationship that arises, as a function of given historical conditions, between the two determining tendencies of philosophy: materialism and idealism. Like any philosophy, rationalism is a compromise formation—a product of the *struggle* between materialism and idealism under the continuing

---

<sup>3</sup> On this *decisive*, and persistently repressed point, see Dominique Lecourt, *Proletarian Science? The Case of Lysenko*, NLB 1977.

<sup>4</sup> See Brecht's remarkable 1937 text, 'Rede über die Widerstandskraft der Vernunft' (Speech on Reason's Capacity to Resist), in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 20, Frankfurt 1967.

dominance of the latter.<sup>5</sup> The following point is decisive: ‘in’ rationalism, or rather in its development and process of variation, a specific form of materialist tendency enters as a constituent element. Conversely, during a whole period, this materialism *exists in no other form* than that of a component of rationalism, *on the ‘terrain’ of the rationalism that it itself helps to create.* (There is not *over here* a timeless Materialism existing as a hidden presence, and *over there* its ‘expression’ in rationalist form, within the ‘limits’ of rationalism.)

What then is the specific form, corresponding to the historical conditions of the ascendant bourgeois class and the development of capitalism at the expense of serf modes of production and their feudal-despotic superstructure? It is the materialism of *anti-religious* struggle: of the critique of religion and theology, and thus—on the philosophical plane—of *spiritualism*. As an anti-religious tendency, this materialism subtends the ensemble of uneven forms of classical ‘metaphysical’ or ‘empiricist’ rationalism. Rationalism is materialist *in so far as* it is opposed to religion and spiritualism (in unequal degrees). But this feature is not by itself sufficient. The characteristic element of rationalism is struggle against religion *by and for the science of nature: by* the latter, because rationalism borrows from it, in order to ‘refute’ religion, those concepts and ‘methods’ whose philosophical generalization allows the critique of theology, miracles, revelation, providence, and so forth; *for* it, because, in exchange, this critique continually seeks to shatter (at least some of) the ideological fetters on the progress and productive application of the science of nature.

Already at this level we can see that the force of the materialist component must *vary* with the historical form of rationalism—not only with the development of scientific knowledge and the strength of the bond established between science and philosophy, but also with the weight of a particular philosophy in the struggle unfolding on its own terrain. Certain variants are altogether paradoxical. Thus, rationalism may take on the shape of a ‘rational theology’; while, at the same time, the struggle against theology may assume another compromise form, setting against Faith not Reason, but its ‘opposite’: Experience, Feeling and Life. This is the first sign of that symmetrical *couplet* that will be constituted by rationalism and irrationalism—the function of which will change according to the conjuncture.

But this characteristic is still not sufficient to account for the variants and contradictions of rationalism, or for the *unevenness* of its relationship with materialism. In order to understand this relation, we must grasp that recourse to the science of nature against religion is by no means rooted in a simple confrontation of the two. It is rationalism itself that imagines and declares that there is an *immediate* incompatibility between science and religion, capable of setting the one against the other; and that the outward form of this is an incompatibility between natural light and revelation, between reason and myth (or the mystical), understanding and

---

<sup>5</sup> See the article by Pierre Macherey: ‘L’histoire de la philosophie considérée comme une lutte de tendance’, *La Pensée* No. 185, February 1976; and my talk at the CERM series on dialectics: *Sur la contradiction* (forthcoming).



faith (or superstition and prejudice), nature and 'the supernatural', truth and error (or illusion). In reality, however, this relation is *produced* under the impact of another 'cause' of the rationalist position: that is to say, by a mediation of a *practical*, and even 'political' order.

The deepest cause of rationalism's struggle against spiritualism was, in fact, the practical opposition between the religious conception of the world and *bourgeois law*. In and through the elaboration of *juridical ideology*, which provided it with a theoretical guarantee and a day-to-day practice, bourgeois law was able to evolve according to the historical process required by the development of the relations of production and the national State.<sup>6</sup> Historical analysis of rationalism (and of the very category of Reason or rationality) demonstrates that the struggle against religion for and by the science of nature had *as an internal condition* the struggle against religion *for and by the development of law* and bourgeois juridical ideology.

A basic conclusion follows from the above: the element of materialism that enters the constitution of rationalism is not only affected from within by the uneven degrees of struggle and compromise between religion and science of nature. It is not enough to 'pull it clear' of this limitation for it to appear 'in person'. For it is affected above all by the fact that its coming into play depends upon bourgeois ideology, and thus by the fact that the struggle against religious idealism takes place under the internal domination of *another idealism*: the juridical idealism of natural law and the free individual subject.

We can now understand that paradoxical circumstance with which we are still bound up today: rationalism is all the more 'consistent' in anti-religious struggle, all the 'purer' and more clearly demarcated from spiritualism and its own congenital *alter ego* irrationalism, the greater its consistency as a philosophical realization of bourgeois juridical idealism. Scientific 'rationality' *represents* juridical 'rationality'. Thus, its strong and typical form is the elaboration of the category of Reason *in accordance with* a conception of society as Nature, as the realization of human nature (and not of the designs and laws of divine providence), and as a mechanical and harmonious system of 'natural' relations between reasonable individuals.<sup>7</sup>

Only if we go back to this *internal* structure of philosophical rationalism can we clearly see the principle and the forms that characterize the dominant philosophical ideology when capitalism has definitively prevailed over feudalism, and when, at the same time, the *proletarian* class struggle is developing and giving rise to a radically *new* form of materialism (that dialectical materialism which is invested in the

---

<sup>6</sup> On this and other points, see the remarkable 1887 article by Engels and Kautsky, 'Juristic Socialism', in Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, Moscow 1975, pp. 235–8.

<sup>7</sup> The bourgeois philosophical *myth* of Reason—that revolutionary goddess—continues to express the *unity* of a universal human *faculty* of Nature. It thus has the sovereign power to delimit the field of error and the field of truth, and to become incarnate in the advance of the sciences. See the converging analyses of Louis Althusser: *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*, Paris 1974; 'Elements of Self-Criticism', and 'Is it simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy? (the text of his Amiens thesis) in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, London 1976.

revolutionary science of social formations). What are these forms? Above all, those of contemporary positivism and neo-positivism.<sup>8</sup> *Positivism is still a form of rationalism*, combining the heritages of empiricism (Hume) and formalism (Leibniz), tending to present all phenomena of nature and society as amenable to logic and observation, ‘reasoning’, ‘calculation’ or ‘the experimental method’, and proclaiming on those grounds the ‘end’ of irrationalism, ‘fetishism’, mysticism, and so on. But positivism is a form of rationalism whose internal resilience has grown markedly slacker than was the case in its classical period; conversely, its materialist element, although still present as in any philosophy, occupies an increasingly subordinate position. For in positivism,<sup>9</sup> despite its continual proclamations, the struggle against spiritualism and religious ideology becomes altogether formal. Its appearance is no longer that of a *partition: on one side*, the language and rational, technical operations of science, *on the other*, the language and ‘irrational’ rites of religion, ‘metaphysics’, and ‘myth’; on one side, the needs and advances of knowledge, on the other the indissoluble residue of feeling, of pathology.

By granting the ‘irrational’ character of religion, positivism offers the latter a rosy future. And religion has not failed to accept the role offered it, under cover of *complementing* scientific knowledge—still in need of ‘spiritual completion’. Much more than any previous form of rationalism, positivism provides a solid foundation for the development of the couplet rationalism/irrationalism, and for the formation of *irrationalist* philosophies. In the last analysis, the opposition science/religion (or science/the mystical) *has changed meaning*. Its function of combating religion is now only of secondary significance, while it tends first and foremost to counterpose *science* to the materialist conception of *history* and to dialectics, presenting them as modern avatars of religion, animism, and so on. Conversely, the *juridical* ideological basis of rationalism is undergoing a noteworthy shift. No longer is it a question of ‘founding’ a policy and state form on Law and Reason, whose universal principles emanate from human nature. Indeed, the tendency is in the opposite direction—towards founding the interpretation and practice of law (and even of *raison d’État*) on the political opposition between the two types of society: on the one hand, the ‘free’ societies, on the other, the ‘totalitarian’ ones that are supposed to realize a certain ‘ideology’ and impose it on the individual by force (look at the East!).

We are now in a position to understand that positivism can be, for modern capitalism, *the dominant form of the dominant ideology* (in philosophy), and, as we shall see more clearly in a moment, the internal basis of irrationalism itself. But the question then arises: how is this

---

<sup>8</sup> A word of caution is necessary here. For a whole period, positivism was relatively weak within the French *university* tradition of philosophy. But this should not obscure the fact that it is the *dominant* form of philosophical idealism in the modern capitalist world. Nor should we be deceived by the fact that present-day positivism is incapable of organizing itself into ‘systems’ on the model of classical metaphysical rationalism: the form of such a system is itself relative in the history of philosophy. Ever since Hegel, the terror that the notion inspires has forced on all idealist philosophy the form of an *anti-system*.

<sup>9</sup> All the more so in the case of contemporary neo-positivism—from Mach to Carnap and ‘heretics’ like Popper, whose best-known disciple and defender in France is the eminent biologist Jacques Monod.

ideological configuration affected by the onset of the historical crisis of capitalism?

### 'Social Crisis' and 'Ideological Crisis'

I recalled above, in necessarily schematic form, the interpretation that a large number of Communists give of the relations between economic-political crisis and ideological crisis, with regard to present-day irrationalist tendencies. According to that interpretation, the bourgeoisie is constrained, by the very nature of the difficulties facing it, *to have recourse* to irrationalism, to reverse its previous ideological tendency, and to utilize irrationalism as *an instrument* of its defensive political *strategy*. Let me put it simply. Taken literally, this analysis seems to me at once idealist and mechanistic. Idealist, because it suggests that the bourgeoisie of today and yesterday *exerts complete control over 'its own' ideas*: that it invents and 'manufactures' them to meet the needs of its cause, imposing them on the whole of society with a degree of success that depends on its material strength and the resistance it encounters. Mechanistic, because the evolution of the ideological 'instrument' would then refer us to the following undialectical and over-simple schema: in the period of ascendant capital, science (in general) is 'useful' to capital—it serves it and is *therefore* a positive ideological value; conversely, in the period of crisis and decline, science (in general) is no longer useful to capital—it rises up against it and *therefore* becomes a negative ideological value.

Now, such is not the meaning of the fundamental Marxist thesis that 'the ruling ideology is the ideology of the ruling class'. The ruling ideology is constituted neither automatically nor upon a decision of the ruling class. The bourgeoisie is materially *caught* in 'its' ruling ideology: it is *determined by* the ideology, which, historically speaking, it imposes on society. It does not have the supernatural power 'freely' to invent and vary its ideology, to adapt it like an instrument to the more or less durable and contradictory 'needs' of the conjuncture. Of course, there does exist an *ideological policy* of the bourgeoisie—and even of a particular fraction (big capital and the State)—which tends to develop and spread certain ideological and philosophical themes by means of the publishing trade, the press and the audio-visual media. The ruling class does indeed dispose of concerted 'ideological management'. But this policy can exist only in determinate *material conditions*, and in the context of *contradictions* that it is quite powerless to escape. What is involved here in practice?

One possible explanation would be as follows. In order to act on the ideological plane, the bourgeoisie needs men, especially 'active ideologues' or 'functionaries of ideology'—and not only individuals able to create philosophical, economic or sociological themes, but above all a *mass* of diverse intellectuals, whether or not they are recognized as such. Now, these latter will not 'parade' up and down like an army. Orders cannot simply be handed down to them for execution. The 'response' of these intellectuals (that is to say, their initiatives and their receptivity) depends on the conjuncture, the state of struggles, the relationship of forces, and the way in which they themselves have been 'formed'. But this explanation is not yet sufficient. In fact, it is circular. The decisive factor is not the men (i.e. the 'minds'), even taken as a whole. It is rather the

material constraints of ideological practice, the *social relations* within which they operate, and hence the structure and contradictions of the historically constituted *ideological state apparatuses*.<sup>10</sup> These material conditions must be *taken into account* if we are to analyse (and as far as possible foresee) the *ideological* effects of the economic and political crisis of capitalism.

As we are dealing with rationalism and irrationalism—and thus with relations between the sciences, philosophy and bourgeois society—let us make a final necessary digression. Ever since its constitution, rationalism has been *integrally* bound up with a certain *organization* of intellectual labour (hence of labour *tout court*)—and especially of scientific labour, teaching and the application of the sciences to production. To an essential degree, the theoretical contradictions of rationalism reflect the inescapable contradictions of the social organization produced by capitalist development. The autonomy and omnipotence of Reason, the mutual application of Reason and Liberty (liberty being *founded* on freedom *of thought*), the normative opposition of Reason and Unreason, Truth and Error—these typical themes of philosophical rationalism are at once the expression and the denial of a given social status of intellectual labour and scientific research. For capitalism, whose technical basis is as Marx said ‘revolutionary’, determines an unprecedented and uninterrupted extension of intellectual labour, *elevating* it above and *apart* from ‘manual’ labour within the very process of production. At the same time, however, capitalism must *control* and subordinate to itself this same intellectual labour: it must select the bearers of science and technology, rigidly grading the education system, and orient research according to profitability and ‘usefulness’ (which, more often than not, is unpredictable).

From this point of view, the classical form of rationalism *also* corresponded to a transitional stage of groping towards an unstable ‘equilibrium’ between *individual* scientific labour (left to chance personal ‘talents’) and direct *state* intervention in the shape of subsidies and academies. This too was a period when (higher) education remained a narrow privilege, and when mass instruction was left to the priests and parsons. By contrast, positivism is organically linked to *socialization* of education, scientific research and medicine. It is organically linked to the development of ‘public’ or ‘private’ research institutions (particularly universities) which provide intellectual labour with wide-scale material resources and, thereby, with a necessary twofold illusion. First, *the illusion* that scientific research and teaching are themselves *scientifically organized*; that the application of technology is ‘rational’ or ‘optimal’. Secondly, *the illusion of its own autonomy*: the idea that it is in the service not of capital, but of Science, Society, Humanity; that it exists *alongside* political power, exchanging services with it on the basis of an equality of values; and that it stands *above* the people, the manual workers of town and country—albeit only on the basis of a democratic hierarchy of merit and education, and in order that it may paternalistically return to the people its due in knowledge and technological benefits available to all. As guarantor of

---

<sup>10</sup> See Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in *Lenin and Philosophy*, London 1971.

this illusory autonomy, positivism is the 'organic' philosophy of the bourgeois division of labour.

In order to understand the ideological effects of the historical crisis of capitalism, we must therefore take into account the development of contradictions in the social division of labour and in the functioning of the ideological state apparatuses. The fact that these contradictions *are becoming more acute* does not spell a *break* with the bourgeois forms of the division of labour. As we know, such an occurrence cannot *precede*, but rather presupposes, a revolutionary transformation of capitalist *relations of production* and the capitalist superstructure. In the epoch of imperialism, the development of the productive forces is more and more *uneven*, but also more and more *rapid*. Its contradiction is an internal one (internal to 'the scientific-technological revolution'), and has repercussions on both the character of scientific research and its relation to social production. Capitalism must *at one and the same time* speed up the process of technological innovation *and* subject it more tightly to the immediate profitability of big capital; expand scientific and technical training *and* generalize the relative de-skilling of labour-power; develop social security and the physical upkeep of the worker *and* ways of exploiting him more intensively, wearing him out. That is why the crisis of capitalism actually breeds irrationalism, which presents the contradictions of the system as if they were *insoluble* (except on the plane of utopias, 'turning the clock back', or other products of the individual imagination). But this always appears *on the ground* of positivism—as its complement and apparent inversion. Irrationalism is not, and can never become, the dominant form of bourgeois ideology at the level of society as a whole. It can only signal the acuteness of the contradictions to which the ruling positivism offers an imaginary solution. We have come to our final question.

### What is the Main Enemy Today?

*The main enemy is not irrationalism* (in philosophy), however persistent it may be. We should leave no room for ambiguity on this point. To admit that irrationalism is a *secondary* ideological enemy involves no compromise on the part of Marxism and the Communists—no underestimation of it either. It must rather lead to precise identification of the modalities of the struggle against irrationalism. We can formulate the task as follows: *in the secondary enemy* (irrationalism), *to set our sights on and combat the main enemy* itself (positivism); hence to wage not a defensive, but an *offensive* struggle, touching the very *foundations* of the relationship of forces, and finally making it 'budge'. Let us schematically give the reasons for this.

In the very conditions of capitalist crisis, the relative *fusion* of the *different* forms of irrationalism (vulgar, philosophical, and the irrationalism of scientists)—a process that allows it to win *recognition* as such, by sketching out the union of an esoteric philosophy with a broad world-view, albeit full of gaps—is a phenomenon of the *political conjuncture*.<sup>11</sup> Why are we

---

<sup>11</sup> It seems to me that we should critically re-assess the question of the relations between irrationalism and fascism. We tended to make of fascism the politico-economic *form* of decaying capitalism—at the same time as we misestimated, following the Russian Revolution, the real possibilities of imperialist expansion and the time of its collapse.

witnessing, precisely in France *today*, the advance of irrationalism to a front-line position? After all, the French bourgeoisie has been trying since the fifties and sixties to adapt its superstructure of ideological apparatuses (education and culture, the family, politics) to the requirements of 'modern' capitalism; seeking for that purpose to develop the variants of positivism according to the models of Britain, America and Germany, at the expense of the old spiritualist-moral tradition of French idealism. Why then has this frontal attack been *arrested*? May-June 1968, coming on top of the world defeats inflicted on imperialism, brought the contradictions of the ideological apparatuses into the light of day, and aroused the ideological revolt of masses of young people against the forms of the division of labour in which big capital sought to enclose their future. It thus forced the ruling ideology to make an about-turn—to don (for how long?) the mask of its apparent opposite. Irrationalism is the unstable form of a compromise imposed by circumstances on the ruling ideology without its knowledge: it is *at one and the same time* the mask of positivism (as ecology and 'zero growth' are the local and provisional masks of capitalist accumulation<sup>12</sup>) *and* the symptom of the resistance it encounters.

Consistent struggle against irrationalism involves an attack on its very roots—on its internal driving force. But, for that very reason, it must not be *accepted at face value*. In the most significant forms of modern irrationalism—the para-scientific and pseudo-scientific forms that exert the greatest influence—positivism is present to a larger degree than ever. In reality, irrationalism never involves more than a *fictional* struggle against 'science' and 'technology'; for if it provides a means to limit them, it thereby diminishes its capacity to utilize and *control* these requisites of the capitalist system. Present-day irrationalism (especially the irrationalism of *scientists*, which expresses both their profound revolt and the continuing hold of the dominant ideological relations) nearly always betrays its positivist determination. Indeed, that is what allows the big bourgeoisie to 'flirt' with it, in order to strengthen technocracy and defend monopoly capitalism and state capitalism. If irrationalism criticizes the harmful effects of 'growth', it is in the name of the statistics and forecasts of Harvard computers! If it makes an appeal for utopia, it is in the name of the 'objective facts' and 'experimental results' of the social crisis! If it denounces 'pure science', it is in the name of the 'superior efficacy' of 'folk wisdom' or 'barefoot medicine'! If it attacks 'Knowledge' as an institution, a form of repression and an ideology, it is in the very name of the positivist conception of *the power of science* and of science as a technical-administrative (logical and social or 'sociological'<sup>13</sup>) procedure! This is the determination that must be attacked in order to expose the roots of irrationalism.

If this analysis is correct, then our fight against irrationalism can *no longer* be waged *in the name of Reason and rationalism*: neither in the name of a

---

<sup>12</sup> Already we hear the explanation: the struggle against pollution and for nature is a 'luxury' that the 'underdeveloped' countries cannot afford and that it would be unjust to impose on them. In other words, there is to be no artificial obstacle to the industrialization of the 'third world', i.e. to the export of capital!

<sup>13</sup> See on this point Michel Pecheux, *Les Vérités de La Palice*, Paris 1975.

(utopian) return to the rationalism that existed prior to its 'positivist deviation', nor in that of a 'new' rationalism. Such a course would result in developing not the materialism, but the idealism of scientific workers; not what is revolutionary in their consciousness, but what prevents it from becoming fully so. Above all, it would recoil with great force *upon the camp of Marxism itself*, which enjoys no natural 'immunity' in its own development. By thus apparently strengthening its alliance with the natural sciences and productive technology, Marxism would itself be weakened before the bourgeois ideology of 'the human sciences', political economy and politics *tout court*. As we have seen recently, it must on no account allow economic and political problems to be posed in terms of 'rationality' and 'irrationality'; in terms of logical choices between 'models' of rational social administration (the approach common to the big bourgeoisie and social democracy). It must rather present them in terms of class struggles.

Marxism has to achieve the effective combination of two perspectives, all the more indissociable in that the crisis of capitalism seems more decisive and closer to the *nature* of present-day social relations. One of these perspectives is 'tactical': *respond* at once to the change of direction of bourgeois ideology. The other is 'strategic': *pave the way* for proletarian ideological hegemony, in the perspective of socialist revolution. For, in fact, socialist revolution is the *only* true 'solution' to the social contradictions of which the development of irrationalism constitutes an ideological symptom. Of course, we are talking not of an automatic, miraculous solution, but of one *to be constructed* by the historical action of the proletariat, grouping all toilers around itself—a solution whose foundations are already appearing in outline in the political *practice* of the proletariat. However, this is not a matter of Reason or rationality, a simple alternative to the 'reason' or 'unreason' of monopoly capital and the technocratic division of labour. It is above all a question of struggle, of class struggle.

In essence, then, *Marxism is not a 'rationalism'*. And that is precisely why, as long as it is and remains *alive*—which cannot be taken for granted—it can successfully oppose irrationalism. To be more precise, as a philosophy invested in a science and a mode of politics, Marxism *is not a theoretical rationalism*—in the same sense in which, as has been correctly argued, it is not a *theoretical* humanism. Marxism arose and has developed both *from* and *against* rationalism, as a *new*, 'consistent' form of materialism—that is, the first to *reverse* the domination of idealism over materialism that is preserved by rationalism. For at the root of Marxism there lies a dual revolutionary break with rationalism: the constitution of the history of societies as an object of science (which is *ruled out* by rationalist 'generalization' of 'the laws of nature'); and the break with the secret driving force of that generalization—namely, the point of view taken by *juridical* ideology in considering social relations.

Does this mean that the philosophical struggle of Marxism is directed equally 'against irrationalism' and 'against rationalism', as if they formed a symmetrical couplet? Of course not. To think that would precisely be to ignore the internal contradiction of the history of philosophy (as well as the way in which Lenin, in particular, treats and makes use of Diderot,

Feuerbach, Hegel, and even Duhem and Abel Rey!). Just because Marxist materialism is *not* a rationalism, and because in a certain sense the latter is its *main* enemy in the couplet rationalism/irrationalism, it can and must draw from careful study of rationalism a number of elements that will prove invaluable in its philosophical struggle. But this alliance, or this support, is subject to two imperative conditions.

First, any thesis or philosophical category so employed must be *extracted* from the form in which it was produced, so that its basic determining contradiction may come to light, and so that its materialist tendency may be recovered, drawn out and set straight. This requires a new philosophical labour, which consists not of mechanical 'selection', but of genuine transformation. In this process, *certain* theses and categories will clearly play a much more crucial role than others—especially when they represent the 'excesses' of classical rationalism, of which positivism has ceaselessly tried to rid itself. Most important among these are all categories expressing the *objective universality* and 'absolute' reality of natural causality, and locating the material *interaction* of phenomena as the determining cause of their 'motion'.<sup>14</sup> Other categories, by contrast, will have to be disarticulated and displaced (for example, experience and totality). Others still will tend to be *eliminated* (Reason; Human Nature; Pre-established Harmony; the Basis of Knowledge—whether '*a priori*' or 'sensory'; Empirical Truth and Rational Truth; *de jure* and *de facto* Subject, and so on).

However, the first condition is itself dependent on a second. These philosophical 'elements' must be completed by, or rather *subordinated to*, other ones which, for their part, have nothing to do with rationalist philosophy and which provide the current basis for any recourse to it. These include philosophical elements—the categories and theses of dialectical materialism: process, *contradiction*. They include scientific elements of historical materialism, above all original ones that still have to be developed, concerning the social relations of production, ideological social relations, the *ideological state apparatuses*, and the corresponding forms of class struggle in the epoch of imperialism. Finally, they include political elements, involving proletarian policy towards culture, popular education, the sciences and their place in the *social division of labour*. Thus Marxists, Communists, have no shortage of work: its very urgency proves that the conditions exist for its successful accomplishment.

*Translated by Patrick Camiller*

---

<sup>14</sup> In this respect, Althusser has over a period of time repeatedly drawn our attention to the importance of Spinoza's philosophy for Marxism. For Spinoza scandalized both his contemporaries and posterity by *reversing* the internal structure of classical rationalism: instead of openly or secretly *founding* recognition of the objectivity of the science of nature on the ideology and freedom of the individual subject, he explains that the only real freedom is a finite and determinate natural power. See the interesting book by P. F. Moreau, *Spinoza*, Paris.