

Letter to the Central Committee of the PCF, 18 March 1966¹

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A Letter to Comrades on the PCF's Central Committee

Dear Comrades,

I have taken very careful note of the resolution² passed at the last Central Committee meeting.

This resolution contains several theses of both theoretical and practical importance. To give only one example: the CC [Central Committee] had the merit to adopt theses on theoretical work, the development of Marxist theory and research, the conditions of this research (and the practical measures planned to further this research), as well as the role of intellectuals and their participation in the work of the Party, etc. These theses, which resume and

1. The translator gratefully thanks the Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine for permitting this letter to be published and especially thanks José Ruiz-Funes for his research help and editorial suggestions. The original is held at the IMEC in Paris under the code ALT2. A42-04.02 under the heading 'Lettre à Comité Central d'Argenteuil, 11–13 Mars 1966'. On both the translation and note, G.M. Goshgarian unselfishly provided excellent advice. Any errors that remain are the translator's. [Editorial note: To maintain typographic consistency, we have changed Althusser's underlined emphases to italics.]

2. The official title of the document has 'resolution' in the singular and most documents that refer to the resolution follow this pattern. Idiosyncratically, Althusser sometimes refers to the resolution in the plural, as a series of resolutions. He is not, however, consistent and, by the end of the letter, begins referring to the whole document in the singular. The translator has elected to retain Althusser's references to Resolutions I, II, and III. However, these should be taken only as references to different sections of one resolution, not to separate resolutions. He has also changed all of Althusser's references to 'resolutions' to the singular, 'resolution', so that the letter is internally consistent and in accord with standard usage.

develop the declarations of the PCF's Seventeenth Congress, should give a certain 'lift' to our theoretical work, a boost whose importance is widely recognised today.

Nevertheless, alongside these theses and occasionally in the very act of stating them, the resolution contains a certain number of developments, declarations, and arguments that appear to me to be – I cannot hide the fact – doubtful, poorly grounded, or seriously off the mark when viewed *from the standpoint of Marxist-Leninist principles*.³

I would like to explain my concerns to you very simply and frankly. I have in mind only the interests of the Party's Marxist-Leninist theory and would ask that you consider the following remarks in the spirit in which they are intended. That is, I would ask that you take them as a critique inspired by the acknowledged principles of Marxism-Leninism and as a contribution to the definition of a certain number of difficult but very important questions.

I. The resolution contains a contradiction

I will begin by examining a contradiction that the resolution appears to me to contain.

Resolution III affirms that

the development of science requires argument and research. The Communist Party will neither impede such debates nor impose its own *a priori* truths. Still less will it settle ongoing debates between specialists in an authoritarian fashion.

It is obvious that this theoretically and politically correct thesis bears not only on mathematics, the natural sciences, and the social sciences, but also on the *Marxist science of history* (historical materialism) and *Marxist philosophy* (dialectical materialism).

Indeed, the CC insists forcefully on the necessity of stimulating research into Marxist theory. It does so in order to bring this theory up to the level at which it can handle the difficult tasks before us.

Thus it is only natural that, regarding still unresolved points of Marxist theory on which theoretical research is underway and absolutely certain and acknowledged results have not been attained, the CC should recall that the Party 'will not impose its own *a priori* truths and, still less, settle ongoing discussions between specialists in authoritarian fashion.'

3. All emphases are Althusser's.

It is important to make this point very clear. In question here is not the substance of our theory as it stands today, the principles of Marxism-Leninism and the knowledge it has already definitely acquired. In the domain of established Marxist-Leninist theory, the Party cannot suspend judgement; on the contrary, it is its duty to intervene in order to recall the principles and knowledge acquired and developed by theory and class struggle, and to defend them against all the revisions and deviations that menace them. If the Party failed to do so, it would be renouncing its mission.

But what is in question here is something else entirely: namely, theoretical problems which *remain open* and upon which the great teachers of Marxism (beginning with Marx) *did not or are said not to have taken a position*. These are problems that have not been, or are said not to have been, posed or resolved and, for this reason, problems about which we still do not possess, or are said not to possess, reliable Marxist knowledge. This is, precisely, the case with theoretical research on problems that *remain open*, and on which the Party has good reason to suspend judgement. It must not 'settle matters in an authoritarian fashion' before research has produced demonstrable results, results that are incontestable and uncontested.

Now, this is where it seems to me that there is a contradiction: the same resolution that rightly invokes the principle of non-intervention on theoretical questions that *remain open*, does *in fact* intervene on several questions that, for the last few years, have been the object of theoretical research and discussion among specialists.

Allow me to explain myself.

Sometimes in casual formulae and sometimes in more categorical ones, the resolution does *in fact* take sides, directly or indirectly, on several questions that one can, *at the very least* (with a reservation that I will come to in a moment), consider to be *still open*. These questions are those of the *epistemological 'rupture'* between science and ideology, between the Marxist science of history and philosophies of history, and between Marxist philosophy and pre-Marxist idealism. They also include questions about the meaning of the expression 'Marxist humanism' as well as others about the Marxist theory of art and culture, and so on. I shall show this in detail in my letter.

The fact is that, on these questions that are of immense importance for Marxist theory and practice, the resolution does not suspend judgement. Instead, it 'settles' a theoretical debate that is still in progress, and, in so doing, it takes a stand *in favour* of conceptions defended by certain comrades (Garaudy, Aragon), and *against* others defended by other comrades (one of whom is the author of this letter).

Formally, this partisanship brings the resolution into contradiction with itself; one cannot square the principle of non-intervention into ongoing

research and discussion with intervention into the very same research and discussion. Hence it is impossible not to ask: ‘Why this contradiction?’

Examining the questions on which the resolution takes a position and developing [where and how] these theses lead (or can lead) to *theoretical errors* should allow us to make this question more precise.

I will analyse three errors in turn: an error by omission (II); an error by suppression (III); and an error by ‘creation’ (IV).

II. An error by omission: the thesis on Marxist humanism

Resolution II approaches the question of ‘Marxist humanism’ by way of the affirmation that ‘there is a Marxist humanism’.

This affirmation of *existence* only makes sense if one situates it correctly, in the context of a polemic. It can only be understood as an affirmation opposed, word for word, to another, one of the ilk: *There is no* Marxist humanism.

If one tries to discover the above-mentioned thesis (‘there is not a Marxist humanism’), in our ‘ongoing research’, one will not find it in this form.

However, one will find in my essay ‘Marxism and Humanism’, as well as in [the journal] *La Nouvelle Critique*,⁴ a very precise and very different thesis, one that is the object of a long discussion in the collective work *Reading ‘Capital’*. This thesis affirms that the Marxist science of history and Marxist philosophy were only able to constitute themselves on the basis of a *rupture* with the humanist philosophies and anthropologies that preceded them. It maintains that Marxism is, *theoretically speaking* – that is to say, from the point of view of its *philosophical and scientific concepts* – an anti-humanism, or, more precisely, a theoretical a-humanism.

When we affirm this principle, we have something *extremely precise* in mind: namely, that, in Marx’s mature theory (science and philosophy) we do not find and will *never find*, among the scientific and philosophic principles comprising the *base* of this theory, any anthropological or humanist *concepts*. These concepts do figure in Marx’s early work (e.g., the concepts of humanism, alienation, disalienation, the ‘loss of human spirit’, etc.). At the time they were formulated, they were an organic part of the *still ideological* theory that Marx worked up out of existing philosophies, history, and even a *critique* of political economy (e.g., the 1844 *Manuscripts*). After the ‘rupture’ that *began* in 1845 and was only realised after years of work, Marx rejected the (*theoretical*) humanist/anthropological conceptions of his youth. These ideological concepts

4. Most probably a general reference to the anti-humanist arguments made in *La Nouvelle Critique*. See especially number 164 (May 1965).

disappeared and were *replaced by other concepts*. These are the well-known concepts of historical materialism: mode of production, juridical, political, and ideological superstructure, etc. The ‘humanist’ concept of ‘*alienated labour*’ disappeared as well, to be replaced by the *scientific* concept of ‘*wage-labour*’. Marx no longer needed these dated ‘humanist’ concepts. He had perceived that, far from yielding knowledge, these old concepts prevented him from producing knowledge of his object (the history of societies and the history of worldviews). That is why he *rejected* them clearly and decisively once he saw that he had to forge other, totally different concepts, in order to make good the claim to produce knowledge of his object. The *declaration* of this rupture may be found in black and white in *The German Ideology*, but it necessarily took many years before the rupture was totally ‘accomplished’.

To say that Marxism is, *theoretically* speaking, an anti-humanism or a-humanism, is quite simply to *observe* that, in Marx’s mature thought, theoretical-humanist concepts are absent and are *replaced* by new *scientific* concepts. This is a matter *of fact*. And we may add that neither Engels nor Lenin *ever re-introduced* into Marxism the concepts of theoretical humanism that Marx had *rejected*. One looks in vain in Engels or Lenin for even a single mention of concepts such as *alienation*, *alienated labour*, ‘the reappropriation of human nature’, etc.

It is quite remarkable that neither Marx, nor Engels, nor Lenin, nor Stalin *ever* declared that ‘Marxism is a humanism’. True, Gorky employed this formula; but we know that Lenin deemed Gorky to be a *petty-bourgeois* revolutionary because of his ideology.

We also know that the concepts of *theoretical humanism*, already present in Dühring, Bernstein, and the Russian populists, were put back on the communist agenda in the 1920s by the *left revisionists* (e.g., the young Lukács) and the *right revisionist* social democrats (e.g. Léon Blum).

Here is the thesis that I and many other comrades have defended: that the *theoretical* concepts of Marxist philosophy and science have nothing to do with the concepts of theoretical humanism. This thesis, I repeat, was the object of an extended demonstration in *Reading ‘Capital’*. It has yet to be seriously contested. That is to say, it has yet to be contested by a *serious* historical and philosophical argument. In fact, it would be an extremely difficult thesis to contest.

In the same texts in which this demonstration is made, I pointed out that, while the concept of humanism (along with its sub-concepts) is not a scientific concept, it *is* an ideological notion – and a moral ideological notion at that. The *ideological* validity of this concept is therefore not in question. In Marxism, when we speak of ideology, we are aware that ideology (e.g. moral ideology) is not a pure *illusion*, but a representation that, albeit skewed and illusory, nevertheless *alludes* to something real, whose existence it designates without,

however, providing (scientific) knowledge of it. Therefore, we can, to a certain extent, make use of, say, the expression ‘socialist humanism’ as an *ideological* expression, in order, preliminarily and roughly, to designate the *existence* of a number of *practical effects* expected to arise from the revolutionary activity of a Bolshevik party, such as the end of class exploitation, the improvement of the lot of the exploited, the disappearance of class exploitation, the end of political and ideological domination, etc.

We can, *to a certain extent*, utilise this ‘humanist-socialist’ or ‘humanist-Marxist’ formula, but only after making three *very important* reservations.

The first reservation is that we steep ourselves in the fundamental truth that this formula has *no theoretical value*, in other words, no value as scientific knowledge.

The second reservation is that we recognise that we should use *much better* formulae, ones that are closer to scientific knowledge than this humanist formula and its corollaries. For example, we say something much more precise when we speak of *wage-labour* rather than of ‘alienated’ labour (a humanist formula); we do the same when we speak of *class exploitation* rather than of ‘economic alienation,’ and so on.

This second reservation is extremely important. For we have learned from Marx and Lenin that one cannot use such ideological formulae with impunity. When, ignoring the *scientific* formulae at our disposal, we employ ideological formulae (such as humanist formulae), we risk being *contaminated by them* and relapsing from science into ideology (as did the revisionists Dühring, Bernstein, and Léon Blum, ‘humanists’ all). Ideology is not inactive, but acts on those who accept it: that is why the ideological *struggle*, the struggle against ideology, is one of the principal parts of Marxism.

Of course, in order to distinguish ourselves from the barbarians in the world, we can call ourselves ‘humanists.’ However, that which makes us communists is *not just the fact that we are not barbarians*. There is a deeper *reason* that both requires and enables us not to be barbarians: possession of *scientific* knowledge of the historical process. We do not content ourselves with *moral* principles and declarations but, rather, link these moral principles, these principles of moral ideology (for example, humanist principles) to the reality of the relations of production and the relations between social classes. What makes us communists is that we *see clearly* into moral ideology and that we call things by their proper names. Communists can really be human because they are not ‘humanists,’ because our actions do not rest upon moral (and therefore *ideological*) principles, but upon *scientific* ones.

We can therefore perfectly well do without the ideological concepts of humanism, *even from a practical standpoint*. Indeed, if we are not to expose our scientific *theory* to the contagion of their *ideology* and end up falling back on

pre-Marxist, pre-scientific positions, it is very much in our interest to do without the ideological concepts of humanism *even at the practical level*.

Why, then, should we ever make use of the term ‘humanism,’ and of the concepts derived from it? We should do so *carefully, under well-defined conditions, and only in order to make ourselves understood when first approaching* those people whom we need to address and who conceive their ideal in terms of (petty-bourgeois or Christian) humanist ideologies. I repeat: *carefully* and *on a first approach*, for our theory *runs real risks* if we *systematically* employ these formulae and if we conceive our own theory in humanist terms. This is naturally a temptation when one systematically employs such formulae.

It is here that my third reservation comes into play. If we ask why neither Marx (in *Capital* and afterwards), nor Engels, nor Lenin, nor Stalin *ever* declared that ‘*Marxism is a humanism*’, we will see that they did not do so for crucial political reasons. As soon as words and expressions are used in the political and ideological class struggle, they cease to be simple concepts and become weapons, and will be for a long time yet, in a veritable fight unto death, a veritable class struggle. To be precise: the term ‘*humanism*’ has always been employed by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology – including petty-bourgeois interpretations of Marxism – *in mortal combat* with another term, one which is absolutely vital for revolutionaries: *class struggle*. It is this *reality*, verified a thousand times over in the practice of class struggle, which explains why Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin were *never* willing to proclaim that ‘Marxism is a humanism’.

To sum up:

- 1) The concepts of theoretical humanism (humanism, the human essence, alienation, disalienation, loss of the human essence, reappropriation of the human essence, the Whole Man, the generic essence of man, etc.) are foreign to *Marxist theory*. Both in its historical-materialist and dialectical-materialist aspects, Marxist theory comprises *completely different scientific concepts* that bear no relationship at all to the ideological concepts of humanism.
- 2) As *ideological* concepts, humanistic concepts can have a practical value. Nevertheless, we have every interest in avoiding such concepts (and, in any case, in carefully controlling them *when it is indispensable that we use them at the pragmatic level*). For, inasmuch as they are ideological, these concepts can contaminate our theory and expose this theory to serious dangers, including that of *theoretical revisionism*. The ideological danger represented by the *pragmatic usage* of these humanist concepts has in the last analysis to do with the very deep (petty-bourgeois) class nature of humanist ideologies.

- 3) We must recall the political, class reasons that have *barred* the classics of Marxism from declaring that ‘Marxism is a humanism’, and we must draw the appropriate consequences.

Now that this has been made clear, what do we find in Resolution II? We find a few phrases on ‘Marxist humanism,’ without a single allusion to the two *fundamental problems* that the concept of humanism (and its sub-concepts) poses for Marxism:

- 1) the problem of *the bases* for its claims (scientific or ideological);
- 2) the problem of the ideological struggle between *humanism* and *class struggle*.

Resolution II declares that ‘*there is a Marxist humanism*’, that it is not ‘*abstract*’ like bourgeois humanism (but this provides no response to the question of the bases for its claims – and the opposition of abstract and concrete is not, understood in this way, a Marxist distinction); that it ‘flows from the historical task of the working class’, that it ‘in no way signifies the rejection of an objective conception of reality for the sake of a vague impulse of the heart’, that, on the contrary, ‘it bases its approach on a rigorously scientific conception of the world’, etc.

- 1) The first problem, the question of the *bases* for humanism’s pretensions (which is precisely the object of ‘ongoing research’ and debate), is not posed.
- 2) The second question, which does not need to be made the object of research (for it summarises all the experience of the communist movement), is not evoked.

This double silence is regrettable and, as we shall see, its consequences are not long in coming. Simply *omit* these two problems, and a spiritualist ideology familiar to all of us will leap into Marxism through the breach of the omission – the spiritualist ideology which holds that Marxism is a ‘philosophy of man’, a ‘philosophy of the creation of man by man’, etc. It does not limit itself to one role or to one *practical* use, but lays claim to being the *theoretical* truth of Marxism itself.

Let us speak clearly. This ‘Marxist’-humanist ideology is today represented by the philosophy of our comrade Garaudy. By reminding us that Marxism is founded ‘on a scientific conception of the world,’ and must not be confused with a ‘vague impulse of the heart’, Resolution II proposes to *limit the scope*

and the effects of this ideology. However, it only limits this ideology's effects (just as Resolution III limits its effects with respect to religion) without undermining its existence, since the decisive question of the non-validity, from a scientific standpoint, of 'humanist' concepts is passed over in silence.

I speak directly and frankly. Resolution II is stated in terms that reflect the theoretical *compromise* concluded with the humanist ideology of our comrade Garaudy. It reminds him that he must not go too far. However, *in exchange*, nothing is said about the philosophical question as to whether the grounds for the claims of humanist theory are ideological or scientific. In addition, nothing is said about the crucial problem of humanism versus class struggle. Thus, the floodgates are left open to this ideology. As we will soon see in connection with art and culture, this ideology loses no time turning all this to its advantage.

I do not *say theoretical compromise* by accident. Both Marx, in his 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', and Lenin have taught us that, in order to forge *unity* (with no trace of class collaboration), communists can make almost any sort of compromise, *with one exception: theoretical compromise*. This is because a theoretical compromise is always made between theory and an ideology. This type of compromise always ends up turning against theory, never against ideology. In a moment, we will see the proof of this proposition.

III. An error by suppression: the thesis of 'the absence of a rupture in the vast creative movement of the human spirit'

It is Resolution I that proclaims this thesis. The thesis is stated in terms that have nothing at all to do with Marx, but that inevitably bring to mind the language of idealist philosophers of history (Hegel, Brunshvieg). To be more precise, they bring to mind the language of certain *spiritualist philosophers of creation* (V. Cousin, Bergson, etc.).

Every attentive reader will wonder why this sentence surges up here, altogether unexpectedly, at the end of a paragraph on art and culture (a paragraph I will soon discuss).

In order to begin to understand this sentence, one has to compare it with another from Resolution II, which states that: 'Marxism is no more an alien body in the world of culture than the proletarians are barbarians camping in the city. Marxism is born from the development of culture and it gives meaning to all that humanity has achieved.'

Yet drawing a connection between these two passages does not make everything perfectly clear. In order to understand the implications of these sentences, we need to know something about the 'ongoing research' in which the resolution intervenes, and takes sides.

In fact, what the declarations *condemn* are specific theses advanced about the ‘break’ or ‘epistemological rupture’ that have been argued at length in *For Marx* and *Reading ‘Capital’*.

The theses I defend are intended to shed light on a *reality* that Marx clearly recognised in his scientific work and that has to do, above all, with the ‘epistemological break’ that separates a science from the ideology which gave birth to it. These theses also bring out other ‘ruptural’ phenomena (‘qualitative leaps,’ dialectical ‘threshold,’ etc.) that have occurred in the history of the development of human knowledge. The most famous instance of these theses is provided by *Marxist theory itself*. On the basis of a detailed argument that has yet to be seriously contested, and by following Marx very carefully, I have shown that Marxist science [historical materialism] and Marxist philosophy [dialectical materialism] were only able to constitute themselves on the basis of an ‘epistemological rupture’ with previous ideological theories, namely, the philosophy of history and classical philosophy. This is, in the Marxist-Leninist tradition, a perfectly *classical* thesis.

When Marx declared that the conception of the essential principles of the science of history had only been made possible by a ‘settling of accounts with his former philosophical conscience’,⁵ he himself became the first to recognise the reality and necessity of this rupture. Here, too, I have done no more than to return to the terms and the contents of Marx’s work and to the classical-Marxist tradition in order to comment on them with some precision.

It is to this set of theses, theses organically bound up with Marxist-Leninist theory, theses that it is impossible to dissociate from Marxist-Leninist theory, theses indispensable to Marxist-Leninist theory, that Resolution II opposes the calm affirmation of ‘the absence of a rupture in the vast creative movement of the human spirit’.

Everyone knows that the concepts at work in the expressions ‘human spirit’, ‘movement of the human spirit’, and ‘creative movement’ have their place, not in Marxist theory, but in the idealist and *spiritualist* philosophies of Hegel, Bergson, Teilhard de Chardin, etc. However, if we can, let’s leave the words aside and proceed to their contents. One wonders what becomes of the fundamental distinction between science and ideology (and all its consequences, especially those involving Marx) in this ‘vast creative movement without rupture’. One also wonders how to think, *without rupture*, the law of development by qualitative leaps.⁶

5. Marx 1977, pp. 261–5.

6. Althusser may be referring here to Engels’ argument in *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)* (Engels 1939, p. 53); but he probably also means to refer to Stalin’s schematisation of dialectical law (Stalin 1972, pp. 304–5). Every Committee member would no

Some will doubtless object that it is necessary to speak the language of our interlocutors and that we must not frighten those who ‘believe’ in the ‘creative development of the human spirit’ (e.g., intellectuals, socialists and Teilhardien Catholics, or other ‘men of good will’) by showing them that the revolution presupposes – in theory as well as in politics – certain phenomena involving *ruptures*, and violent ruptures at that.

Nevertheless, I don’t believe that any Marxist sufficiently instructed in Marxist theory could consent under this pretext to such concessions without being alarmed at the theoretical and practical consequences that they would inevitably involve.

To consider only one of these consequences, let us examine how Marxism is presented to us in this ‘vast creative movement without rupture.’

The conjunction of the two sentences that follow one another in Resolution II: ‘Marxism is not an alien body in the world of culture’ and ‘there is a Marxist humanism’, reveals the full meaning of this concession. Far from being *critical* scientific *knowledge* of the achievements of human history (knowledge that is both *discriminating* and *judgemental*, retaining this but rejecting that), and far from providing both *knowledge* and *critical judgement* of history and ‘culture’, Marxism is dissolved into the ‘culture of humanity’, hence into ‘the vast creative movement of the human spirit’, that unbroken continuity where everything is put on the same level and Marxist humanism naturally and ‘without rupture’ extends the ‘abstract’ humanisms that preceded it. This watering down of Marxism evidently goes hand in hand with the suppression of the distinction between science and ideology and with the suppression of the radical theoretical distinction that separates Marxist science and philosophy (revolutionary theories), from previous philosophies.

We shall now observe this philosophy at work in the Resolution’s theory of art and culture.

IV. An error by ‘creation’: the theory of art and culture

I deeply regret having to point out that the theory of art and culture that operates in Resolution I lands us full-square in *idealism* and bourgeois ideology.

Let’s begin with art.

We are told that all the mystery of art resides within its ‘creator.’ But, ‘what is a creator,’ the resolution asks? It replies that ‘the creator is not a simple fabricator of products to whom all of the components are given; he is not a

doubt have learned this schema by heart. This reference shows that Althusser was not beyond using accepted Stalinist principles for their rhetorical effect.

mere arranger. There is, in every work of art, a part irreducible to its elements; this part is man himself.'

At first glance, this 'brilliant' formula seems to be saying something. However, in truth, it is *hollow*, as the falsely self-evident propositions of the prevailing ideology always are. Hollow and – as we shall see – dubious and dangerous.

What do the authors of the resolution mean by the affirmation that there is, in all art, a 'part irreducible to its elements' and that this part is 'man himself'? They express themselves quite clearly in the next sentence: 'only *this* writer was capable of creating *this* work'. If the fact that artists are *not interchangeable* is sufficient to constitute a theory of art, then we have not come very far. If it is this platitude that fills the immense void of 'man himself', let the reader judge the theoretical capacities of this concept of '*man*', a concept that we here see directly employed for the first time at the *theoretical* level, alongside the concepts of creator, creation, etc.

I mean something very precise: the theory of art given to us by the resolution and immediately extrapolated into a theory of culture is, properly speaking, a '*humanist*' theory of art and culture, a theory in which the concepts of *humanism* are consciously and systematically employed.

Using this specific example, we shall see what one may expect from the '*theoretical*' utilisation of humanist concepts. From the perspective of knowledge, we can expect results that are *empty*, yet full of ideological errors. From the perspective of politics, we can expect positions fraught with danger.

When one tries to develop a theory of art that proclaims: 'the essence of art is *man*, that is, the part due to human *creation*,' and 'the creator is not an arranger, but adds to the given materials an irreducible element, *man himself*', one manipulates the concepts of man, *creation*, *creator*, given, etc. These concepts *seem* to have a meaning, they *seem* to teach us something. Despite appearances, however, they are *impoverished* and *empty*.

After centuries of idealist and spiritualist aesthetics and particularly after having just lived through 150 years of spiritualist philosophy – 150 years devoted to singing philosophical hymns in praise of art – we now know perfectly well what is to be expected of an aesthetic that is satisfied merely to manipulate concepts like man, creation, creator, creative freedom, etc. All that these concepts have begotten is the monuments of *academic spiritualism* represented by the works of V. Cousin, Ravaisson, Lachelier, Bergson, their various epigones and, today, Malraux. And this is no accident. We know perfectly well that it is impossible to construct a materialist aesthetic or a materialist history of art by manipulating, or by returning over and over again to these *idealist* and *spiritualist* concepts of man, creation, creator, creative freedom, etc.

For the humanist concepts that the resolution brings to bear are epistemologically *empty*; that is, they are empty from the standpoint of knowledge. However, because *ideology abhors a vacuum*, these concepts are, unfortunately, *ideologically full*. Full, that is to say, replete with idealistic values, the values of the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie. Ultimately, ‘*Man*’ in humanist ideology, is always *something*, the sign or bearer of certain ‘*values*’. For example: man is creative power, the ‘creation of man by man’, etc., that is, just so many *petty-bourgeois* notions. In the way *petty-bourgeois* ideology employs the term – Marx and Lenin never ceased to repeat this – ‘*Man*’ is a notion employed in order *to mask the class struggle*.

Devoid of knowledge, but full of idealist or spiritualist ideology: that is what humanist concepts are.

How does it happen that we are so *easily* tempted to employ concepts such as ‘creative man’ and other humanist concepts when talking about art, *particularly when talking about art*? To be sure, we realise that the same concepts are also employed in history and political economy. We know, for instance, that it has been claimed that the Marxist conception of history rests upon a *philosophical* conception of *man* as ‘creator of himself,’ that we have seen this act of ‘self-creation’ in the form of work, etc. However, when we hear such things said, we are immediately on our guard. We remember that, in the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, Marx told us that it was bourgeois ideology which developed the theme of the ‘*creative*’ power *of work*, and we recall that Marx criticised and rejected the concept of *creation* across the board. Yet, when the subject is art, we tend to drop our guard. Why?

We do this for an important historical reason of which we should become aware. It is not by accident that, today, the domain *par excellence* in which humanist philosophy (i.e. moral and religious philosophy) takes refuge is the artistic one. This is because, for many reasons, art has become the secular religion of modern times. Properly speaking, it has become the ‘*sacred*’ in contemporary Western societies (at any rate, it has become so for petty-bourgeois intellectuals and the social classes who think of themselves as ‘cultivated’). One day, we shall have to write a history of the substitution of the secular *religion of art* for *religion properly so called*. This substitution took place in France during the nineteenth century and was the effect of a counter-revolutionary reaction which sought, in art, something to put in the place of the religious values that the Revolution had undermined.

As Lucien Sève has lucidly observed, every great nineteenth-century French philosopher, from Cousin through Ravaisson and Lachelier to Bergson, has celebrated the *secular religion of art* in his *spiritualist* philosophy. These philosophies are but the lay echo of a religion that has been rendered partially

obsolete. That is why these philosophers borrow this sacred vocabulary from religion and speak of ‘blessed treasures’, ‘creators’, ‘creative freedom’, etc. Malraux, the new high priest of this secular religion of art has been speaking this ideological language for years. I find it deplorable that we should borrow this suspect language from such a reactionary tradition.

Does one really have to point out that these concepts of man, creator, creation, etc., far from *clarifying* matters, obscure and *obstruct our thinking*? In no way do they permit us to *think* their object (in this case, the production of aesthetic effects). Rather, if they speak to ‘the heart’ of people of a religious bent, they rule out the least positive thought about their object.

Without doubt, we do not have many texts by Marx, Engels, or Lenin on art. However, they have given us several precious leads and, above all, we do find in Marx rigorous *theoretical principles*. Initially, when ‘research is currently underway’, these permit us to properly *pose* the theoretical question of the nature of the *aesthetic process*.

Of course, these Marxist theoretical principles have nothing to do with *humanist* concepts (must I repeat myself?), even those deemed ‘aesthetic’.

There’s the rub: instead of indicating the existence of an unresolved problem, a problem calling for in-depth work and research, Resolution I has given us an idealist-spiritualist theory of art, a theory that comes to us directly from the writings and thoughts of our comrades Garaudy and Aragon.

We can see quite clearly one consequence for Marxism of this opening of the door to humanist ideology: while we have been able to ‘*contain*’ its influence in the field of religion, it has, *on the other hand*, taken control of art, and decked it out with a bourgeois idealist theory.

We shall be even more firmly persuaded of this when we turn to the theory of ‘culture’ that the resolution puts before us.

What is ‘culture’?

The concept of culture poses very difficult problems, problems that demand in-depth research and work. We have received this concept from the same bourgeois ideology that produced the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It has been reprised by a long string of idealist philosophers, beginning with Kant and Hegel and on through the ‘cultural constructivists’ now found in the American academy. In its present state, ‘culture’ is one of the concepts most deeply contaminated by bourgeois ideology. As we shall see, perhaps more than any other concept, it invites a rigorous Marxist critique.

Yet Resolution I treats this concept as if it were unproblematic, as if its meaning were obvious and transparent.

‘*Culture*’, affirms the resolution, ‘is the accumulated treasure of human creation’ (with this distinction: ‘animals don’t create’).

To this general definition, the resolution adds certain clarifications. Culture is not only the works of the past

that we are content to dust off from time to time in order to make them appealing to current tastes. For where else does the past begin? Our cultural heritage evolves every day. It has always been created in the present. It is the present which becomes the past, which becomes our heritage. That is why the right of creative persons to pursue their research must never be infringed...

The 'that is why' which begins the last sentence is particularly unclear. Truly, we do not see the link between the closing sentence on the freedom of research and the sentences that precede it. How might we explain this closing sentence? By acknowledging that precisely the same 'creative freedom' has been at work from the origins of culture down to the present day; or, to put it differently, that 'there is no rupture in the vast creative movement of the human spirit'.

No rupture. Let's take a very close look at what this means in the realm of 'culture'.

First of all, it means that there is no real ruptural difference, no discontinuity *at the heart of culture itself*. It is significant that Resolution I includes *science*, *technology* and the *arts* in culture, but does not insist on the *difference* that – at the heart of culture – distinguishes these different elements. Now, even *assuming* that culture comprises nothing beyond the sciences, technology, and the fine arts (we shall see in a moment that *this assumption is false*), it is essential that we clearly mark out that which *distinguishes* each of these elements from the others and that we also indicate clearly which of the three is *fundamental* and *determinant* of the others. The fundamental, determinant element is *scientific knowledge*.

Assuming, again, that 'culture' can be reduced to these three pursuits, we can arrive at a materialist conception of culture only if we stipulate that culture contains *different levels* of reality and that the fundamental level of 'culture' is constituted by the *level of scientific knowledge*, not that of technology or the fine arts.

Against this materialist thesis, Resolution I manifestly defends a different, idealist thesis according to which 'culture' (defined by these three elements) consists, above all, of *works of art*. We can see this quite clearly in the paragraph that begins: 'What is a creator?' *Art alone*, not science, is in question here. A little later, when science reappears, it is only in order to introduce a remark that *reverses the hierarchy of the real*: 'artistic and literary creation is as valuable as scientific creation, *for which it [science] often paves the way*'. However, in the context of a 'definition' or 'culture', it would be much more precise to say *the*

contrary: namely, that it is [scientific] knowledge which ‘paves the way for art,’ and that the greatest artists, the most accomplished, are such because their work is nourished by existing knowledges, especially the most scientific, the most critical, the most revolutionary.

‘No rupture in the vast creative movement of the human spirit’, no rupture in the history of culture... Let us again take up this theme and follow it through to its consequences.

Behind this conception of the ‘unbroken creative movement of the human spirit’ there lies concealed an *idealist* and therefore bourgeois conception of ‘culture’. It is *idealist* insofar as it has suppressed from culture *all traces of the existence of social classes and the class struggle*. Let’s look more closely at this suppression by approaching the question by two different paths, both of which lead to the same result.

How do we introduce the reality of social classes and class struggle if the subject of culture is the ‘human spirit?’⁷ At length and quite definitively, Marx explains to us in *The German Ideology* and elsewhere that the concept of the *human spirit* is an ideological, idealist, and even spiritualist concept fashioned by spiritualist-idealist philosophy *in order to make the reality of social classes disappear*. If, when we speak of culture, we refer to the *human spirit* and its ‘unbroken’ development, *we are obliged* to keep silent about the existence of social classes and social struggle. On the other hand, if we wish to speak of classes and class struggle, we have to renounce the concept of the *human spirit*.

We can arrive at the same conclusion by a different path. We noted earlier that the resolution defines culture with reference to *three elements*: science, technology, and the fine arts. Now, even if we provisionally admit this definition of culture, we must also note that it contains a very serious omission, that of a *fourth element* in which the existence of social classes is expressed both directly and indirectly. This element is that of *ideologies*.

Indeed, it is unthinkable to speak of ‘culture’ without including the various forms of ideology in this category: religious, moral, political, juridical, aesthetic, and philosophical. Each comprises an *organic* component of ‘culture’ and directly introduces, into the very *heart of culture*, the reality and the effects of class struggle. Marx, Engels, and Lenin warned us often enough of the deleterious role that the constant pressure of *ideologies* (and, through them, the *class struggle*) plays in the development of both *science and philosophy*. This reality is felt still more keenly in the case of works of art. Not only are they saturated with the ideologies from which they are born, and thus indissolubly

7. Subject should be understood here as agent, rather than subject-matter.

endowed with both an aesthetic and ideological meaning, but, they are also *perceived and appreciated* by readers, spectators, and listeners who are *themselves caught in the web of the dominant ideology*. Do we even need to mention religious, moral, political, or philosophical *ideologies*? To recognise the active presence of ideology in ‘culture’ is to recognise that culture is *directly* divided and haunted by the reality of *social classes* and the effects of *class struggle*.

It is precisely this reality that the resolution passes over in silence. In the conception put forward by the resolution, culture has to do only with the ‘human spirit,’ with ‘creations’ and ‘creators’. Between people (whether they be ‘creators’ or ‘consumers’ of culture) and works of culture (our ‘treasure’), the massive and opaque thickness of *ideologies* due to *the presence of social classes in cultural life* has disappeared. The difficult problems of the *distinction*, of the *rupture* by which science tears itself away from ideology, by which art detaches itself from ideology; the difficult problems of the scientific, theoretical, or aesthetic training by which individuals might liberate themselves from their ideological fetters in order to enter into contact with scientific knowledge on the one hand and with works of art on the other, the class positions that express themselves both directly and indirectly in religion, morality, philosophy, etc., all these problems have vanished, and with them the presence in culture of *social classes* and of class struggle.

Accordingly, culture appears as a pure and unsullied ‘treasure’, as the tranquil universe of knowledge and, above all, of the arts, in which man’s creative powers are exercised without restraint.

In regard to culture, do we really need to recall the repeated declarations of Lenin who – precisely because they are antagonistic and incompatible – opposed ‘bourgeois culture’ to ‘proletarian culture’? Is it necessary to recall that these propositions were not advanced lightly, but were destined to reveal the *class nature* of each and every ‘culture’? Did Lenin not speak of the necessity of a ‘cultural revolution’ for socialism? We need only take these classic theses seriously to question the ‘definition’ of ‘culture’ proposed by the resolution. For Marxism, the ‘heart’ of culture is not science, technology, or the fine arts, *but the ideologies*. If this thesis is correct, the conclusion must be that, in regard to culture, the resolution speaks of everything *except that which is essential*: namely, ideologies and the class struggles of which these ideologies are the expression.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that – in the conception of culture presented by the resolution, one which omits the presence and the class meaning of *ideologies* – certain problems become strangely ‘simple.’

One example of this simplification: the fate of art is entrusted by the resolution to artists, to the masters of a universe that is their own creation. The

difficult but very important problem of the *Party's cultural policy*, of its political and ideological intervention in the inevitable ideological struggle that must be waged against the ideology that constitutes the heart of 'culture' and that endlessly besieges the sciences, philosophy, and the arts – this crucial problem is passed over in silence.

Another example: Resolution I speaks at length about the misdeeds of the political monopolies against the development of the sciences and the arts. However, these monopolies' policies are described as *external* to the sciences, as if there were a simple *screen* between people on the one side and the 'treasure of culture' on the other. Resolution I does not define *ideology* as the form by which the political haunts the inmost soul of culture. It speaks of a politics *external* to culture, not of the politics *internal* to culture. Thus, in monopoly capitalism, only the 'constraints of capitalism' come between men and the 'treasure of culture'; these 'constraints' are, in sum, an obstacle or screen exterior to 'men' and to 'culture'. Once this obstacle is surmounted, 'a humanity freed of the constraints and fetters that impose on it an "egoistic calculus" *will be able to find this treasure and appropriate it in its totality*'. No, things are not this simple, for the suppression of capitalism does not suppress political and *ideological* problems. This is to say that it does not suppress the *problems of class*, of culture. It does not do so because they form an organic part of it, in socialist society *as well*.

In the same extremely simple manner, the resolution settles the problem of intellectuals: 'Intellectuals who seek to free themselves from the material and ideological constraints that the bourgeoisie imposes on their activity have no choice but to pursue an alliance with the working class'. However, we know very well that intellectuals, even those 'who seek to free themselves...' *cannot pursue* this alliance. They cannot do so for a *class* reason: as a group, intellectuals are petty-bourgeois. This is proven every day. In the vast *majority of cases*, the bourgeoisie has no trouble binding intellectuals to it, using a thousand different means, among them the themes of petty-bourgeois ideology that it maintains for the use of the petty-bourgeois 'intellectuals'. These themes constitute an organic part of contemporary culture. They make it possible for the intellectuals to bear their enslavement, in the act, if need be, of *protesting* against it (this is the foundation of 'humanism').

Such is the theory of culture presented to us in the resolution. *It is a bourgeois-idealist theory of culture, not a proletarian-Marxist one*. It is not by chance that this idealist theory speaks the *spiritualist* language of the 'creative movement of the human spirit' and that it *omits* the reality of social classes in culture and the class struggles that take place therein. This *spiritualist language* is necessary in order to mask and consecrate this omission.

I do not claim that the questions I raise are easy ones. They cannot be settled with a few neat phrases. However, precisely for that reason, it is to be regretted that the resolution has risked an endeavour to which our comrades Garaudy and Aragon have seen fit to commit the whole Central Committee.

One more word. It seems to me that the concrete example of the theory of art and culture that Resolution I offers allows us to ascertain the price to be paid for a *lack of theoretical vigilance* and, particularly, for the effective *theoretical compromise* concluded between Marxist theory and the humanist ideology of our comrade Garaudy.

Because the fundamental question of the non-validity, from a scientific standpoint, of 'humanist' concepts has not been posed, we end up with this result: the door stands wide open to humanist ideology, which can now pose as Marxist theory. We don't need to wait for the consequences; they are inscribed in the bourgeois-idealist theory of art and culture that we have just analysed.

V. In conclusion

I come to my conclusion.

What reason can one give for accepting a 'theoretical compromise?' '*Political reasons,*' it will be said.

It will be said that it is a matter of translating our Party's politics of unity into reality, and of making ourselves understood to our socialist comrades, intellectuals, and Christian workers. The temptation will be strong to justify this or that presentation or formulation of our positions in a *language* that is not our own for the sake of 'dialogue', because of the need to broach frankly and courageously the problems that 'put obstacles' in the way of unity.

Once engaged in this process, it is both *indispensable* and, at the same time, *very difficult to be vigilant*. The 'dynamic of unity' is not a one-way street: it can contaminate our struggles as well as our conceptions.

In accord with the principles defended by our comrade Waldeck Rochet as to our relations with the Christian Left, I hold that the more deeply we are engaged in a politics of unity, *the more we must stand firmly on our own principles*, the more we must be vigilant about the state of our own *theoretical* conceptions. It is enough to re-read the documents published by Marx and Engels on the occasion of the Gotha Unity Congress in order to see that the *defence of theoretical principles was, from their standpoint, the absolute precondition for any politics of unity*. Communists have everything to gain by affirming and defending the purity of their *theoretical* conceptions, particularly at a time when the question of unity is the order of the day.

I hope that this letter, the remarks I make in it, and even the critical words that it contains will be read and understood as a contribution to the defence of the purity of Marxist-Leninist theory.

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18 March 1966

Translated by William S. Lewis

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