

There is a chapter in Gregory Elliott's book **Althusser: The Detour of Theory** (Verso, £10.95 pbk) called 'The Moment of Althusser'. In Britain the Althusserian moment was roughly the 70s. It started later than in France because of lags of translation and cultural assimilation and it did not end abruptly because 'moments' of this sort fade out at different rates for different people.

For me the moment of Althusser began in 1973 when I read his essay on 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'. I was at university in Italy. The place was riding the tide of late 60s radicalisation. The Chinese cultural revolution was a star in the East. Althusser argued that the education system, the family, the church and other institutions, function as an ideological state apparatus (ISA) which helps reproduce the conditions of production of capitalism. In periods of social stability, the ISAs play a more prominent part than the repressive state apparatuses (police, army, law courts) in ensuring the reproduction of capitalist society.

Why was the essay so influential? Because by treating the education system as a state apparatus it therefore identified its political nature. And by representing ideology as relayed through institutions and forming people as subjects from the outside, its account was more materialist.

Althusser's work was also important because it forced people to reflect on what marxism was and was not. Marxism did not provide a way of 'reading off' or predicting the course of political events from changes in production (economism), it did not place 'man' at the centre of the social process or see the goal of revolution as his liberation from alienation (humanism), and it did not conflate the

scientific knowledge of society with the self-knowledge and emancipation of the working class (historicism).

Althusser's ideas were deeply enmeshed with his historical circumstances. One of the principal merits of Gregory Elliott's book is to show this. When the Sino-Soviet dispute opened in the early 60s, Althusser sided with the Communist Party of China, criticising as superficial and revisionist the destalinisation that was taking place both in the Soviet Union and in his own party, the French Communist Party (PCF). His attacks on economism, humanism and historicism were, in this context, so many attempts to argue for a leftwing anti-stalinism and a revolutionary marxism against what he saw as a flood tide of rightwing deviation.

After 1967 Althusser had passed his creative peak. A phase of self-criticism and revision began. He was taken to task for his maoism by the party leadership and outwardly made peace with them. He never adequately grasped the political novelty of 1968. He suffered increasingly from depression. When in 1980 the publicity surrounding the death of his wife plunged him briefly back into the limelight he was already a spent force.

Why did the moment of Althusser pass in Britain? Elliott attributes it to the crisis of marxism and to neo-reformist attitudes on the Left in the Thatcher years. While there may be some truth in this, I believe it also has to do with limitations in Althusser's work itself. Take the ISAs essay. It is too functionalist. Its concept of 'apparatus' concedes too total a power to the state and too little to ideologies of opposition. Or take anti-humanism. Althusser was surely correct in saying that 'man' was not the centre or subject of the



**Althusser: Criticised for his anti-humanism**

social process. His argument has been very powerful both for marxism and for feminism. But he went too far in the other direction when he suggested that the real 'subjects' of the process were social and economic relations, that individuals were

### Louis Althusser

**1918:** Born in Birmendris, Algeria.

**1937:** Joins Catholic student movement.

**1939:** Called up for military service.

**1940:** Captured by Germans, held in a POW camp till 1945.

**1948:** Philosophy degree. Joins PCF.

**1965:** *For Marx* and (with Etienne Balibar and others) *Reading Capital* (translated into English in 1969 and 1970 respectively).

**1968:** Correspondence with Maria Antonietta Macciocchi (appears in English as *Letters from Inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser*, 1973). Writes in a letter dated May 1: 'I am quite seriously ill'.

**1969:** First assessment of

mere occupants of places assigned to them in the relations of production. It was right to move away from these aspects of Althusser, making more spaces for struggle in civil society and making subjectivity political once again. •

events of 1968. Says student protests were dominated by 'petty-bourgeois ideology' and subordinated to 'the economic class struggle of the 9m workers'.

**1970:** Publishes *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*. Translated in 1971 in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*.

**1971:** John Lewis, British Communist, writes article critical of Althusser's 'anti-humanism' in Jan/Feb *Marxism Today*. Althusser's reply is published in the October and November issues.

**1976:** Publishes *Essays in Self-Criticism*.

**1978:** 'The Crisis of Marxism', *Marxism Today*, July.

**1980:** Taken to St Anne's psychiatric hospital in Paris after having admitted to killing his wife Helene.



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## WHAT KIND OF RÉGIME JAILS AN EIGHT-YEAR OLD FOR 'INTIMIDATION'?

In South Africa, little Amos Khubeka, just 8 years old was arrested and charged with 'intimidation'. He was detained and refused bail. When his family finally saw him in the Middleburg Magistrates Court, his forehead was badly bruised and he was crying.

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sentation and conduct their own defence. And in the vast majority of cases no charge is ever brought.

A sample of former detainees aged 11-18 were questioned by women representing 14 voluntary organisations. Of the 40 children, no fewer than 24 had been kicked, punched, caned, slapped or sjambokked. Eight had been forced to exercise for long periods, and beaten for showing tiredness.

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