Chapter Nine

‘An Absolute Humanism of History’

From the theoretical stand-point, Marxism is no more a historicism than it is a humanism. [...] in many respects both historicism and humanism depend on the same ideological problematic; [...] theoretically speaking, Marxism is, in a single movement and by virtue of the unique epistemological rupture which established it, an anti-humanism and an anti-historicism.¹

To a much greater extent than even his attack upon Gramsci’s absolute historicism, Althusser’s rejection of the Prison Notebooks’s ‘absolute humanism’ was an authorless theatre in which the dramatis personae stepped forwarded in borrowed robes in order to do mock battle with absent antagonists. As we have seen, Reading ‘Capital’ argued that the humanist and historicist problematic underlying Gramsci’s thought originally emerged in post-World-War I revolutionary leftism, with its appeal to the ‘will’ to make the revolution and rejection of the mechanism of the Second International.² It was then reactivated, by ‘usually a generous or skilful but “rightist” misappropriation’, in the post-Stalin period,³ now

¹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 119.
² Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 140.
³ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 119.
reinforced by a ‘canonical’ reference to Marx’s rediscovered youthful works. In reality, it was the political position represented by this latter-day avatar and not its supposed theoretical predecessor that constituted the true object of Althusser’s polemic. Just as the critique of the *Prison Notebooks*’s absolute historicism was more appropriately deployed against other, ‘weaker’ forms of historicism from his own time, so Althusser’s rejection of Gramsci’s ‘absolute humanism of history’ was aimed against very different positions that had emerged in the French Communist Party and the international Communist movement after 1956. These positions were encapsulated in the slogans ‘Marxism is the humanism of our time’ and ‘Everything for Man’. The ‘socialist humanism’ of the post-1956 conjuncture (penetrating to, or rather, captured by, sections of the leadership, particularly following the Sino-Soviet split) rallied around ‘the prophetic promise’ Marx made in the 1844 *Manuscripts*: ‘Communism [...] as the real appropriation of the human essence through and for men [...] this communism as a fully developed naturalism—Humanism’.4 A new ‘orthodoxy’ aimed to develop this intuition not merely in political terms, but as a refoundation of Marxist theory in the wake of the demise of Stalinist Diamat’s status as the ‘official’ Marxist philosophy of the international Communist movement.

### 9.1. The humanist controversy

Althusser fired his opening volleys against this current in the essay ‘Marxism and Humanism’. His intention was to offer an alternative refoundation, ‘from the left’, of Marxist theory and Marxist philosophy in particular. The essay was originally written in October 1963, following an invitation to participate in a symposium on ‘Socialist Humanism’ by Erich Fromm; Fromm promptly declined to publish it. It was eventually published almost simultaneously in both French and Italian in mid-1964 and subsequently collected in *For Marx* (1965).5 Against recent ‘revisionist’ changes in the Soviet Union and those pending in the French Communist Party, ‘Marxism and Humanism’ advanced the thesis that Marx’s thought had been constituted by a radical

---