

The Evolution of Ideology in Marxist Theory

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Abstract: This essay examines the usage of the notion of ideology first in its original formulation by Karl Marx in *The German Ideology* and later in the further developments made by Marxist theorists Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. The evolution of the notion of ideology is examined critically, analyzing the change in usage that occurred during the 20th century. The fundamental change is two-fold, first hegemony is substituted for ideology by Gramsci, thus focusing on strategic and practical matters, and secondly ideology is crucially modified by Althusser, completely overturning the previous connotations of the notion in its initial usage by Marx.

Keywords: ideology, dialectic, praxis, Gramsci, Althusser, Marxism

Introduction

If one examines the current state of Marxist philosophical discourse, one would immediately notice the prevalence of a certain notion – that of ideology. To explain the enduring relevance of this pertinent notion, we have to examine its origins in Marxist theory. The first significant aspect in the development of the notion of ideology appears in *The German Ideology*, precisely the analogy between ideology and the *camera obscura* device. Like the inverted image on the retina of a *camera obscura*, ideology inverts people's view of their relationships¹. From this characterization arises the necessity that theory should seek to unravel the illusions of ideology, therefore distancing Marxist theory from the established schools of philosophy at the time.

The Origin of Ideology

This leads us to the development of the notion of ideology in Marxist theory, that is, to false consciousness. The comprehension of the possibility of false consciousness is necessarily tied to the materialist under-

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 42.

standing of history. Labor ontology, at the nexus of historical materialism, states that humans enter into transformative relationships with nature in order to reproduce their basic existence. From this initial process follows the development of the productive forces, the relations of production and the division of labor. As a result of these processes, people form different moral, religious or metaphysical conceptions of the world, and precisely these forms of consciousness are ideological because they obscure the material processes within which they flourish. This is where the base-superstructure dialectic comes in, with ideology occupying a central position in maintaining the coherence of the base.

Significant for the project of dissipating ideology is the fact that the content of an ideology is historically determined:

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it.”²

Following the relation between the ruling class of a given epoch and the ideology they propagate; it should be noted that ideology by necessity must assume a universalist character, meaning that the perspective of the ruling class must be imposed on the subaltern. Given the ostensibly universalist character of an emergent ideology, two significant questions pertaining to individual agency arise:

1. Having indicated the source of ideology, what are the mechanisms of the development and proliferation of ideology?
2. How is it possible for the individual to overcome ideology?

To answer these two questions, we must turn, respectively, to Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and Althusser's concept of ideological apparatus.

Returning to Marx, in the *Theses on Feuerbach* we may find a basis for a further consideration on the second question. Specifically, the third thesis, which states that people are not only products of circumstances, but that people actually change their circumstances, and that the educator must also educate³. With the movement of the dialectic, the individual becomes aware of the changing circumstances and of his activ-

² Ibid., 67

³ Ibid., 569-570.

ity, and this is the first step in the constitution of revolutionary practice aimed at overturning social relations by changing the mode of production. We can assume that revolutionary practice would contain methods that would help the individual to unravel ideological illusions.

However, the formulation of the notion of ideology in *The German Ideology* remains at a somewhat abstract level. Since German philosophy is specifically considered, its attributes are ascribed to ideology in general in the analysis. Universalism, which was indeed a segment of liberal ideology at the time the text was written, is absent from subsequent ideological formations. For example, fascism as an ideology glorifies the private, whether in the form of race, nation or ethnicity. The philosophy underlying the political movement was certainly idealistic, but instead of appeals to rationality there was the construction of a heroic myth taken from the irrational voluntarism of Georges Sorel⁴.

It is worth noting, however, that *The German Ideology* is a text with a polemical purpose, written at a specific historical moment, with a specific task - not to produce a general theory of ideology, but to articulate the mistakes made in the philosophical speculations of the Young Hegelians, correcting and directing thought to a field of theoretical practice. Here I do not mean theoretical practice as already conceptualized by Marxists such as Adorno or Althusser, but the development of a theory that is aimed at the realization of the specific goals set by the historical specificity. It is not just a matter of philosophical criticism, but also of going beyond and setting the framework of modern philosophy in order to map the actual social issues of the time. Coming within the framework of the German idealist tradition, the Young Hegelians could only try to banish the phantom of religion that appeared to them as guilty of the order of things, or they could reverse speculative thinking, arriving at man as an abstraction in a static philosophical anthropology. This formulation of the ideology is at odds with that developed by Friedrich Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, and to summarize his position on the matter I will focus on three main points from the text.

The first refers to the historical need of the growing French bourgeoisie to construct its own ideology suited to its class position, beyond the already existing - religion and theology. The second, relating to the

⁴ Irving Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.

criticism of a philosophy of history that masks the material forces at work in history by importing content from philosophical ideology. The third point, and the most important, concerns the state, among whose functions the first ideological power over man manifests itself⁵.

The presentation of all spheres of theoretical activity as ideological, in their capacity to conceal the primacy of material conditions over human reproduction, hypostasize the concept ideology as a fundamental, immutable part of human societies, which ultimately undermines the development of social analysis. It is necessary for a distinction to be made between religious and ideological consciousness, the ideological being similar in content to the former, but completely emptied of content pertaining to the divine. Also, the institutional constitution of the ideological consciousness onto the subject is radically different from the religious one, and not only because of the difference in the historical circumstances of the emergence of a given consciousness. It can be said that the religious consciousness can also be absorbed by the ideological one, for example in the image of Jesus Christ - in different nations, the facial features and other characteristics are depicted according to a generalized version of the phenotype of the given people.

Regarding the question of ideological power, here we find a development of the abstract concept of ideology as false consciousness and an outline of later theories, referring to the analysis of the mechanisms of reproduction and flourishing of ideology in Gramsci and later Althusser.

The illusory unity appearing as the image of the state is as much an ideological force as it is an ensemble of tools and practices of the ruling class. The second ideological force, therefore, is law, which sanctions economic facts, legitimizing the order of things through their transformation into law. Religion and philosophy are defined as the highest ideologies, because they are separated the most from the material, economic basis.

Despite their quality as the most remote from the material base, philosophy and religion can hardly be said to be the leading or highest forms of ideology today. In an extensive survey of the field of modern philosophy, one can only ask whether its poverty is not due to the fact that it has ceased to be a leading ideology. The reductionist view, which treats philosophy as an ideology, ignores the fact that without the foun-

⁵ Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 53.

dation laid by speculative thinking, there would be no dialectical method and materialist analysis at all. This is due to the formulation of the concept of ideology as an illusory consciousness that posits abstract ideas as the driving force underlying human activity instead of material conditions. As a criterion for determining certain spheres of human activity as ideological, it is their quality to distort human consciousness from understanding the material conditions that condition it.

If we turn our attention to the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, we find a development of the notion of ideology with the conceptualization of *ideological forms*—the legal, religious, political, artistic, and philosophical forms of thought through which the individual can realize the nature of class conflict and to address it.⁶

The ideological form develops the notion of "ideology" by concretizing ideology as a sphere of human activity in which the conflict between the potential for realization of the of class society and the reproduction of consciousness takes place, concealing this social fact. Together with the explanation of ideological power, which further concretizes the problem of ideology by directing it already to the state organs that reproduce ideology, we reach the absolute limit to which Marx and Engels reach in their conceptualization of ideology.

The aporia of ideology, as a notion initially, is that as the question is posed, an idealistic problematic is juxtaposed with a materialistic method. Materialist analysis can only consider the effects of an ideology and the institutionalized practices of producing the ideology. The relationship between the content of an ideology and its perception by the individual are processes that can only be speculated upon, abandoning materialist analysis in favor of psychoanalysis or psychologism. Ultimately, human activity is driven by the material conditions in which it is practiced, not by abstract ideas, or at least that is the materialist position.

The orientation towards the analysis of the relation between the commodity and the worker (or the consumer as an end) is commendable precisely because it overcomes the shortcomings caused by the dependence on the notion of ideology. The only question remains, what should be done with the notion of ideology.

⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1904), 12.

The Gramscian Turn

For Gramsci ideology is of secondary importance and when using the term in various fragments, he refers to ideology as a critical, sometimes positive or neutral term. He himself reflects these different ways of using the term in political discourse, defining it as a mistake that the notion of "ideology" is used both for the superstructure that is necessary for the functioning of a particular structure and the arbitrary reflections of particular individuals.

Through this essay, we can assume that Gramsci considers the question of ideology to be primarily about material forces that produce given conceptions of the world to legitimize the status quo and produce the consciousness necessary for the reproduction of production and social relations.

As for the misunderstanding of ideology that Gramsci points out, it is due to a three-step process:

1. Ideology is identified as different from the base, and it is argued that it is not ideology that changes the base, but vice versa.

2. It is argued that a political action is "ideological", that it is insufficient in its potential to change the base, even though it is aimed at this direction and is therefore said to be worthless.

3. It comes to the claim that any ideology is a "pure" phenomenon and therefore useless and unnecessary⁷.

For Gramsci ideology is meaningful only as a value neutral notion. It is not necessarily related to false consciousness but to Sorel's notion of the myth, as something which is necessary to provoke an individual towards political praxis. Following Sorel, for Gramsci there are organic ideologies, which are formed as a result of the lived experience of a given class and arbitrary ideologies, which are formed out of the whims of an individual. For the possibility of political praxis in general, ideologies are an unreplaceable necessity, which guides individuals to form masses, helping them achieve strategic victories in their struggles.

Gramsci considered ideology an abstract field of inquiry, as opposed to the concrete analysis of the methods and apparatuses operating in civil society, which are administered by the organic intellectuals of a class. These methods and apparatuses determine the thought content of

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 199.

the ideology in relation to the needs of the class they represent. In Gramsci's scheme of the integral state, which contains at once the coercive and hegemonic apparatuses immanent to the organization of the respective state and civil society, the secondary nature of ideology is due to the fact that ideology is not itself a driving force, but a moment of the consolidation of hegemony. In the process of the formation of a hegemony, ideology plays the role of a persuasive and driving force, the content of which is created by the organic intellectuals of a given class. It is aimed at the cultivation of political consciousness among the representatives of the given class, motivating them to organize them into a historical bloc which, at its creation, will pose a serious threat to the reproduction of life in the integral state. Hegemony also aims at the assimilation of the traditional intellectuals - representatives of the class that was dominant in a previous historical moment. Because of their social function, which is not directly related to the reproduction of production relations, these traditional intellectuals are alienated from the current mode of production.

Althusser's Contribution

In order to be able to articulate a Marxist theory of the state, which, according to Althusser, was lacking in Marx, Althusser introduced two key concepts – *the repressive state apparatus* (RSA) and *the ideological state apparatus* (ISA).

The repressive state apparatuses are the government, the administration, the army, the police, the courts and the prison⁸. The criterion for the distinction is that repressive state apparatuses function through violence (as repression, e.g. administrative repression, can take a non-physical form of violence). While ideological state apparatuses, according to Althusser, are religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade union, communicative and cultural⁹.

They function through ideology and reside in the private sphere. However, in extreme circumstances the ISA may repress in a covert manner, such as schools and churches using methods of punishment, persecution, selection, not only to discipline the "shepherds" but also the

⁸ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, (London:Verso Books, 2014), 239.

⁹ Ibid., 248.

flock. As the ruling class holds the political power in a given society, it also controls the repressive state apparatuses. Therefore, this class also spreads its ideology through the ISA, thus seemingly constructing the image of a neutral civil society. After explicating the mechanism that propagates ideology, Althusser turns to correcting the errors that found in Marx's theory of ideology. The main mistake, according to Althusser, is that for Marx ideology is formulated in a purely positivist context, that is, it is an illusion, a dream, a poverty of thought. Ideology is therefore an imaginary bricolage that has no material form or history. In an attempt to deepen Marx's elaboration, Althusser formulated two theses to explicate the structure and functioning of ideology.

The first thesis is that ideology represents the imagined relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence¹⁰. Ideology is the illusory attitude by which people understand their real conditions, and it is precisely the illusory nature of this attitude that underlines any ideological distortion. Therefore, the object represented in ideology is not the system of real relations which determine the existence of individuals, but the illusory relation of these individuals to the real relations through which they live. With this development, the problem to be addressed by the theory of ideology is no longer the original source or reason for the existence of ideology, but why individuals' perception of their real attitudes is illusory.

The second thesis that Althusser develops is that ideology has a material reality. If an individual believes in a religious system, his belief derives from the ideas of the individual in question, that is, from him as a subject with a consciousness that contains the ideas of his belief¹¹. The ideological belief thus appears in the individual's mind as an irreducible part of his identity and thus recognizes himself in the ideology he has unwillingly adopted. A logical 'conceptual' arrangement is created in the individual's mind, by the flow of the process in which the individual recognizes the ideas in his mind as ideas in which he believes. As a consequence of this ideological individuation, the individual is now compelled to act in a certain manner in accordance with the tenets of his ideology.

By introducing this second thesis, Althusser overcomes the idealist problematic of ideas that has been central to the theory of ideology to date and introduces the materialist analysis of the concrete practices that

¹⁰ Ibid., 258.

¹¹ Ibid., 261

derive from a given ideology. Also, with the introduction of ISA, one can look at how an institution propagates a given ideology.

In character, Althusser's concept of ISA is not fundamentally different from Gramsci's concept of ideology. Althusser's critique of hegemony, that it creates an illusory autonomy of politics and thereby neutralizes politics in general, can be applied here. The difference is that with Althusser, every social relation becomes ideological. This generalization of the ideological, risks obscuring the nuance of the relationship between social institutions and the material conditions in which they exist. As an example, instead of presenting the family as an ideological apparatus, when analyzing the real relationship of the family and the relations of production, it will be revealed that capitalist society, with the tendency of social atomization and division of labor, destroys the family as an institution, or at least in its traditional form.

Althusser's Critique of Gramsci

One of Althusser's main theoretical projects was to expound the logic of Capital. According to him, the aim of Marxist philosophy was to extract this logic into a coherent form, contained in practical form throughout Marx's work, as a model of conceptual rigor and a tendency towards systematicity, removing the idealistic sediment from Hegel. With the unpublished manuscript *Marx in his Limits*, Althusser completely abandoned this theoretical project, already criticizing Marx for the fact that Capital is essentially a Hegelian work, but also criticizing how Marx develops the concept of ideology and the way in which Gramsci continues this work. The main criticism of Marx regarding his position on the notion of ideology is that he continues the tradition of classical philosophy by considering the problem of ideology as a problem related to the form of consciousness, that is, to the "object" of consciousness¹². For Althusser, the fundamental problem of Marx's conception of ideology is the overreliance on ideas, ignoring the material side of ideology, meaning that the fundamental problem of ideology can be solved with the intellectual absorption of "correct" ideas, replacing the ones producing false consciousness. Therefore, for Althusser, Marx never manages to consider the material existence of ideologies and their

¹² Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, (London: Verso, 2006), 135.

material influence on the class struggle. After criticizing Marx, Althusser turns to Gramsci, seeking to prove his inability to articulate the material influence of ideologies by introducing the concept of hegemony. I should mention here that initially, in his earlier works, Althusser was enthusiastic about Gramsci's contribution, declaring him to be a significant theorist who continued the work of Marx and Engels. In the 1970s, however, Gramsci was elevated as the leading theorist of the reformist Eurocommunist parties¹³, which led Althusser to rethink his contribution. Althusser criticizes Gramsci on two lines. Firstly, for regressing from Machiavelli's position in his analysis of power. Secondly, the criticism relevant to the analysis of Gramsci's ideology is found in the manuscript *Marx in his Limits*. Althusser begins his criticism by pointing out that Gramsci uses the concept of hegemony imprecisely and in very different contexts. The main shortcomings that Althusser finds in the explication of hegemony are two. The first is that the concept of hegemony is based on the Hegelian understanding of the state, in which the state appears as the main educator that drives human development¹⁴. Therefore, the problematic raised by the introduction of the concept of hegemony remains solely at the level of culture. That is, the goal of hegemony is to uplift the average man to an enlightened citizen. Within the framework of political organization, Gramsci argues that a given political party, before reaching political power, must develop its hegemony, after which the transition to a regulated society will be possible, where the end of history is realized and only individuals remain to improve themselves in free association. The second and more decisive flaw, according to Althusser, is the autonomy of politics, which Althusser sees as an inevitable consequence of the theory of hegemony. This autonomy is generated by the sublimation of the state and civil society in hegemony. Because of this unity, for Gramsci every social question becomes political, with hegemony occupying the supreme place in politics. This necessarily leads to an identification of politics with culture and thus every cultural matter becomes a political question, thus nullifying the primacy of politics. With this position Gramsci abolishes the distinction between base and superstructure, therefore eliminating the possibility of thinking about

¹³ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 150.

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, (London: Verso, 2006), 146.

political action at all. Because of these two fundamental errors of Gramsci, Althusser states that through the concept of hegemony one cannot think about the material reality of ideology, in an attempt to distance Gramsci from his conception of the ideological state apparatus.

Conclusion

Both Gramsci and Althusser meaningfully expound on the notion of ideology, adapting it towards the challenges presented by the post-Fordism development in the West. The notion of hegemony first used in Gramsci's notebooks after his imprisonment by the fascist Italian state, further concretizes the problematic initially posed by the notion of ideology. Ideology appears as a secondary characteristic of hegemony, depriving it of the central stage it previously assumed. What remains is a question of strategy and tactics with ideological discourse being relegated to the background.

Althusser's contribution to Marxist theory however, re-centers ideology as the key Marxist notion. To accomplish such a theoretical feat Althusser has to fundamentally alter the content of ideology, however, and thus ideology now has to be regarded as a material force. Furthermore, ideology now is posited as an integral part of the human condition, implying that ideology has always existed in some form in human society. The Enlightenment character of the original notion of ideology, as used by Marx, is now shattered. Further advancements in Marxist theory made by Slavoj Žižek (a follower of Althusser) expand the usage of ideology by involving Lacanian psychoanalysis, furthering the irrationalism first expounded by Althusser.