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*Stuart Hall*

## The Problem of Ideology— Marxism without Guarantees

In the past two or three decades, marxist theory has been going through a remarkable, but lop-sided and uneven revival. On the one hand, it has come once again to provide the principal pole of opposition to "bourgeois" social thought. On the other hand, many young intellectuals have passed *through* the revival and, after a heady and rapid apprenticeship, gone right out the other side again. They have "settled their accounts" with marxism and moved on to fresh intellectual fields and pastures: but not quite. *Post-marxism* remains one of our largest and most flourishing contemporary theoretical schools. The post-marxists use marxist concepts while constantly demonstrating their inadequacy. They seem, in fact, to continue to stand on the shoulders of the very theories they have just definitely destroyed. Had marxism not existed, "post-marxism" would have had to invent it, so that "deconstructing" it once more would give the "deconstructionists" something further to do. All this gives marxism a curious life-after-death quality. It is constantly being "transcended" and "preserved." There is no more instructive site from which to observe this process than that of ideology itself.

I do not intend to trace through once again the precise twists and turns of these recent disputes, nor to try to follow the intricate theorizing which has attended them. Instead, I want to place the debates about ideology in the wider context of marxist theory as a whole. I also want to pose it as a general *problem*—a problem of theory, because it is also a problem of politics and strategy. I want to identify the most telling weaknesses and limitations in the classical marxist formulations about ideology; and to assess what has been gained, what deserves to be lost, and what needs to be retained—and perhaps rethought—in the light of the critiques.

But first, why has the problem of ideology occupied so prominent a place within marxist debate in recent years? Perry Anderson (1976), in his magisterial sweep of the Western European marxist intellectual scene, noted the intense preoccupation in these quarters with problems relating to philosophy, epistemology, ideology and the superstructures. He clearly regarded this as a deformation in the development of marxist thought. The privileging of *these* questions in marxism, he argued, reflected the general isolation of Western European marxist intellectuals from the imperatives of mass political struggle and organization; their divorce from the "controlling tensions of a direct or active relationship to a proletarian audience"; their distance from "popular practice" and their continuing subjection to the dominance of bourgeois thought. This had

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resulted, he argued, in a general disengagement from the classical themes and problems of the mature Marx and of marxism. The over-preoccupation with the ideological could be taken as an eloquent sign of this.

There is much to this argument—as those who have survived the theoreticist deluge in “Western marxism” in recent years will testify. The emphases of “Western marxism” may well account for *the way* the problem of ideology was constructed, *how* the debate has been conducted and *the degree* to which it has been abstracted into the high realms of speculative theory. But I think we must reject any implication that, but for the distortions produced by “Western marxism,” marxist theory could have comfortably proceeded on its appointed path, following the established agenda: leaving the problem of ideology to its subordinate, second-order place. The rise to visibility of the problem of ideology has a more objective basis. First, the real developments which have taken place in the means by which mass consciousness is shaped and transformed—the massive growth of the “cultural industries.” Second, the troubling questions of the “consent” of the mass of the working class to the system in advanced capitalist societies in Europe and thus their partial stabilization, against all expectations. Of course, “consent” is *not* maintained through the mechanisms of ideology alone. But the two cannot be divorced. It also reflects certain real theoretical weaknesses in the original marxist formulations about ideology. And it throws light on some of the most critical issues in political strategy and the politics of the socialist movement in advanced capitalist societies.

In briefly reviewing some of these questions, I want to foreground, not so much the theory as the *problem* of ideology. The *problem* of ideology is to give an account, within a materialist theory, of how social ideas arise. We need to understand what their role is in a particular social formation, so as to inform the struggle to change society and open the road towards a socialist transformation of society. By ideology I mean the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.

The problem of ideology, therefore, concerns the ways in which ideas of different kinds grip the minds of masses, and thereby become a “material force.” In this, more politicized, perspective, the theory of ideology helps us to analyze how a particular set of ideas comes to dominate the social thinking of a historical bloc, in Gramsci’s sense; and, thus, helps to unite such a bloc from the inside, and maintain its dominance and leadership over society as a whole. It has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation. It has also to do with the processes by which new forms of consciousness, new conceptions of the world, arise, which move the masses of the people into historical action against the prevailing system. These questions are at *stake* in a range of social struggles. It is to explain them, in order that we may better comprehend and master the terrain of ideological struggle, that we need not only a theory but a theory adequate to the complexities of what we are trying to explain.

No such theory exists, fully prepackaged, in Marx and Engels’s works. Marx developed no general explanation of how social ideas worked, comparable to his historico-theoretical work on the economic forms and relations of the capitalist mode of production. His remarks in this area were never intended to have a “law-like” status. And, mistaking them for statements of that more fully theorized kind may well be where the problem of ideology for marxism first began. In fact, his

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theorizing on this subject was much more *ad hoc*. There are consequently severe fluctuations in Marx's usage of the term. In our time—as you will see in the definition I offered above—the term "ideology" has come to have a wider, more descriptive, less systematic reference, than it did in the classical marxist texts. We *now* use it to refer to *all* organized forms of social thinking. This leaves open the degree and nature of its "distortions." It certainly refers to the domain of practical thinking and reasoning (the form, after all, in which most ideas are likely to grip the minds of the masses and draw them into action), rather than simply to well-elaborated and internally consistent "systems of thought." We mean the practical as well as the theoretical knowledges which enable people to "figure out" society, and within whose categories and discourses we "live out" and "experience" our objective positioning in social relations.

Marx did, on many occasions, use the term "ideology," practically, in this way. So its usage with this meaning is in fact sanctioned by his work.

Thus, for example, he spoke in a famous passage of the "ideological forms in which men become conscious of...conflict and fight it out" (Marx, 1970, p. 21). In *Capital* he frequently, in asides, addresses the "everyday consciousness" of the capitalist entrepreneur; or the "common sense of capitalism." By this he means the forms of spontaneous thought within which the capitalist represents to himself the workings of the capitalist system and "lives out" (i.e., genuinely experiences) his practical relations to it. Indeed, there are already clues there to the subsequent uses of the term which many, I suspect, do not believe could be warranted from Marx's own work. For example, the spontaneous forms of "practical bourgeois consciousness" are real, but they cannot be *adequate* forms of thought, since there are aspects of the capitalist system—the generation of surplus value, for example—which simply cannot be "thought" or explained, using those vulgar categories. On the other hand, they can't be *false* in any simple sense either, since these practical bourgeois men seem capable enough of making profit, working the system, sustaining its relations, exploiting labor, without benefit of a more sophisticated or "truer" understanding of what they are involved in. To take another example, it is a fair deduction from what Marx said, that the *same* sets of relations—the capitalist circuit—can be represented in several *different ways* or (as the modern school would say) represented within different systems of discourse.

To name but three—there is the discourse of "bourgeois common sense"; the sophisticated theories of the classical political economists, like Ricardo, from whom Marx learned so much; and, of course, Marx's own theoretical discourse—the discourse of *Capital* itself.

As soon as we divorce ourselves from a religious and doctrinal reading of Marx, therefore, the openings between many of the classical uses of the term, and its more recent elaborations, are not as closed as current theoreticist polemics would lead us to believe.

Nevertheless, the fact is that Marx most often used "ideology" to refer specifically to the manifestations of bourgeois thought; and above all to its negative and distorted features. Also, he tended to employ it—in, for example, *The German Ideology*, the joint work of Marx and Engels—in contestation against what he thought were incorrect ideas: often, of a well-informed and systematic kind (what we would *now* call "theoretical ideologies," or, following Gramsci, "philosophies"; as opposed to the categories of practical consciousness, or what Gramsci called "common sense"). Marx used the term as a critical weapon against the speculative mysteries of Hegelianism; against religion and the critique of religion; against idealist philosophy, and political economy of the vulgar and degenerated varieties. In *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of*

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*Philosophy* Marx and Engels were combatting bourgeois ideas. They were contesting the anti-materialist philosophy which underpinned the dominance of those ideas. In order to make their polemical point, they simplified many of their formulations. Our subsequent problems have arisen, in part, from treating these polemical inversions as the basis for a labour of *positive* general theorizing.

Within that broad framework of usage, Marx advances certain more fully elaborated theses, which have come to form the theoretical basis of the theory in its so-called classical form. First the materialist premise: ideas arise from and reflect the material conditions and circumstances in which they are generated. They express social relations and their contradictions in thought. The notion that ideas provide the motor of history, or proceed independent of material relations and generate their own autonomous effects is, specifically, what is declared as speculative, and illusory about bourgeois ideology. Second, the thesis of determinateness: ideas are only the dependent effects of the ultimately determining level in the social formation—the economic in the last instance. So that transformations in the latter will show up, sooner or later, as corresponding modifications in the former. Thirdly, the fixed correspondences between dominance in the socio-economic sphere and the ideological; "ruling ideas" are the ideas of the "ruling class"—the class position of the latter providing the coupling and the guarantee of correspondence with the former.

The critique of the classical theory has been addressed precisely to these propositions. To say that ideas are "mere reflexes" establishes their materialism but leaves them without specific effects; a realm of pure dependency. To say that ideas are determined "in the last instance" by the economic is to set out along the economic reductionist road. Ultimately, ideas can be reduced to the essence of their truth—their economic content. The only stopping point before this ultimate reductionism arises through the attempt to delay it a little and preserve some space for maneuver by increasing the number of "mediations." To say that the "ruling-ness" of a class is the guarantee of the dominance of certain ideas is to ascribe them as the exclusive property of that class, and to define particular forms of consciousness as class-specific.

It should be noted that, though these criticisms are directly addressed to formulations concerning the problem of ideology, they in effect recapitulate the substance of the more general and wide-ranging criticism advanced against classical marxism itself: its rigid structural determinacy, its reductionism of two varieties—class and economic; its way of conceptualizing the social formation itself. Marx's model of ideology has been criticized because it did not conceptualize the social formation as a determinate complex formation, composed of different practices, but as a *simple* (or, as Althusser called it in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, an "expressive") structure. By this Althusser meant that one practice—"the economic"—determines in a direct manner all others, and each effect is simply and simultaneously reproduced correspondingly (i.e., "expressed") on all other levels.

Those who know the literature and the debates will easily identify the main lines of the more specific revisions advanced, from different sides, against these positions. They begin with the denial that any such simple correspondences exist, or that the "superstructures" are totally devoid of their own specific effects, in Engels's gloss on "what Marx thought" (especially in the later correspondence). The glosses by Engels are immensely fruitful, suggestive and generative. They provide, not the solution to the problem of ideology, but the starting point of all serious reflection on the problem. The simplifications developed, he argued, because Marx was in contestation with the speculative idealism of his day. They were one-sided distortions, the necessary exaggerations of polemic. The criticisms

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lead on through the richly tapestried efforts of marxist theorists like Lukacs to hold, polemically, to the strict orthodoxy of a particular "Hegelian" reading of Marx, while in practice introducing a whole range of "mediating and intermediary factors" which soften and displace the drive towards reductionism and economism implicit in some of Marx's original formulations. They include Gramsci—but from another direction—whose contribution will be discussed at a later place in the argument. They culminate in the highly sophisticated theoretical interventions of Althusser and the Althusserians: their contestation of economic and class reductionism and of the "expressive totality" approach.

Althusser's revisions (in *For Marx* and, especially, in the "Ideological State Apparatuses" chapter of *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*) sponsored a decisive move away from the "distorted ideas" and "false consciousness" approach to ideology. It opened the gate to a more linguistic or "discursive" conception of ideology. It put on the agenda the whole neglected issue of how ideology becomes internalized, how we come to speak "spontaneously," within the limits of the categories of thought which exist outside us and which can more accurately be said to think us. (This is the so-called problem of the interpellation of subjects at the center of ideological discourse. It led to the subsequent bringing into marxism of the psychoanalytic interpretations of how individuals enter into the ideological categories of language at all.) In insisting (e.g., in "Ideological State Apparatuses") on the *function* of ideology in the reproduction of social relations of production and (in *Essays in Self-Criticism*) on the metaphorical utility of the base-superstructure metaphor, Althusser attempted some last-hour regrouping on the classical marxist terrain.

But his first revision was too "functionalist." If the function of ideology is to "reproduce" capitalist social relations according to the "requirements" of the system, how does one account for subversive ideas or for ideological struggle? And the second was too "orthodox." It was Althusser who had displaced so thoroughly the "base/superstructure" metaphor! In fact, the doors he opened provided precisely the exit points through which many abandoned the problematic of the classical marxist theory of ideology altogether. They gave up, not only Marx's particular way in *The German Ideology* of coupling "ruling class and ruling ideas," but the very preoccupations with the class structuring of ideology, and its role in the generation and maintenance of hegemony.

Discourse and psychoanalytic theories, originally conceived as theoretical supports to the critical work of theory revision and development, provided instead categories which substituted for those of the earlier paradigm. Thus, the very real gaps and lacunae in the "objective" thrust of marxist theory, around the modalities of consciousness and the "subjectification" of ideologies, which Althusser's use of the terms "interpellation" (borrowed from Freud) and "positioning" (borrowed from Lacan) were intended to address, became themselves the exclusive object of the exercise. The *only* problem about ideology was the problem of how ideological subjects were formed through the psychoanalytic processes. The theoretical tensions were then untied. This is the long descent of "revisionist" work on ideology, which leads ultimately (in Foucault) to the abolition of the category of "ideology" altogether. Yet its highly sophisticated theorists, for reasons quite obscure, continue to insist that their theories are "really" materialist, political, historical, and so on: as if haunted by Marx's ghost still rattling around in the theoretical machine.

I have recapitulated this story in an immensely abbreviated form because I do not intend to engage in detail with its conjectures and refutations. Instead, I want to pick up their thread, acknowledging their force and cogency at least in modifying substantially the classical propositions about ideology, and, in the

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light of them, to reexamine some of the earlier formulations by Marx, and consider whether they can be refashioned and developed in the positive light of the criticisms advanced—as most good theories ought to be capable of—without losing some of the essential qualities and insights (what used to be called the “rational core”) which they originally possessed. Crudely speaking, that is because—as I hope to show—I acknowledge the immense force of many of the criticisms advanced. But I am not convinced that they wholly and entirely abolish every useful insight, every essential starting point, in a materialist theory of ideology. If, according to the fashionable canon, all that is left, in the light of the devastatingly advanced, clever and cogent critiques, is the labour of perpetual “deconstruction,” this essay is devoted to a little modest work of “reconstruction”—without, I hope, being too defaced by ritual orthodoxy.

Take, for example, the extremely tricky ground of the “distortions” of ideology, and the question of “false consciousness.” Now it is not difficult to see why these kinds of formulations have brought Marx’s critics bearing down on him. “Distortions” opens immediately the question as to why some people—those living their relation to their conditions of existence through the categories of a distorted ideology—cannot recognise that it is distorted, while we, with our superior wisdom, or armed with properly formed concepts, can. Are the “distortions” simply falsehoods? Are they deliberately sponsored falsifications? If so, by whom? Does ideology really function like conscious class propaganda? And if ideology is the product or function of “the structure” rather than of a group of conspirators, how *does* an economic *structure* generate a guaranteed set of ideological effects? The terms are, clearly, unhelpful as they stand. They make both the masses and the capitalists look like judgemental dopes. They also entail a peculiar view of the formation of alternative forms of consciousness. Presumably, they arise as scales fall from people’s eyes or as they wake up, as if from a dream, and, all at once, see the light, glance directly through the transparency of things immediately to their essential truth, their concealed structural processes. This is an account of the development of working class consciousness founded on the rather surprising model of St. Paul and the Damascus Road.

Let us undertake a little excavation work of our own. Marx did not assume that, because Hegel was the summit of speculative bourgeois thought, and because the “Hegelians” vulgarized and etherealized his thought, that Hegel was therefore not a thinker to be reckoned with, a figure worth learning from. More so with classical political economy, from Smith to Ricardo, where again the distinctions between different levels of an ideological formation are important. There is classical political economy which Marx calls “scientific”; its vulgarisers engaged in “mere apologetics”; and the “everyday consciousness” in which practical bourgeois entrepreneurs calculate their odds informed by, but utterly unconscious (until Thatcherism appeared) of, Ricardo’s or Adam Smith’s advanced thoughts on the subject. Even more instructive is Marx’s insistence that (a) classical political economy *was* a powerful, substantial scientific body of work, which (b) *nevertheless*, contained an essential ideological limit, a distortion. This distortion was not, according to Marx, anything directly to do with technical errors or absences in their argument, but with a broader prohibition. Specifically, the distorted or ideological features arose from the fact that they *assumed* the categories of bourgeois political economy as the foundations of all economic calculation, refusing to see the historical determinacy of their starting-points and premisses; and, at the other end, from the assumption that, with capitalist production, economic development had achieved, not simply its highest point to date (Marx agreed with that), but its final conclusion and apogee. There could be

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no new forms of economic relations after it. Its forms and relations would go on forever. The distortions, to be precise, within bourgeois theoretical ideology at its more "scientific" were, nevertheless, real and substantial. They did not destroy many aspects of its scientific validity—hence it was not "false" simply because it was confined within the limits and horizon of bourgeois thought. On the other hand, the distortions limited its scientific validity, its capacity to advance beyond certain points, its ability to resolve its own internal contradictions, its power to think outside the skin of the social relations reflected in it.

Now this relation between Marx and the classical political economists represents a far more complex way of posing the relation between "truth" and "falsehood" *inside* a so-called scientific mode of thought, than many of Marx's critics have assumed. Indeed, critical theorists, in their search for greater theoretical vigour, an absolute divide between "science" and "ideology" and a clean epistemological break between "bourgeois" and "non-bourgeois" ideas, have done much themselves to simplify the relations which Marx, not so much argued, as established in practice (i.e., in terms of how he actually used classical political economy as both a support and adversary). We can rename the specific "distortions," of which Marx accused political economy, to remind us later of their general applicability. Marx called them the *eternalization* of relations which are in fact historically specific; and the *naturalization* effect—treating what are the products of a specific historical development as if universally valid, and arising not through historical processes but, as it were, from Nature itself.

We can consider one of the most contested points—the "falseness" or distortions of ideology, from another standpoint. It is well known that Marx attributed the spontaneous categories of vulgar bourgeois thought to its grounding in the "surface forms" of the capitalist circuit. Specifically, Marx identified the importance of the market and market exchange, where things were sold and profits made. This approach, as Marx argued, left aside the critical domain—the "hidden abode"—of capitalist production itself. Some of his most important formulations flow from this argument.

In summary, the argument is as follows. Market exchange is what appears to govern and regulate economic processes under capitalism. Market relations are sustained by a number of elements and these appear (are represented) in every discourse which tries to explain the capitalist circuit from this standpoint. The market brings together, under conditions of equal exchange, consumers and producers who do not—and need not, given the market's "hidden hand"—know one another. Similarly, the *labour* market brings together those who have something to sell (labour power) and those who have something to buy with (wages): a "fair price" is struck. Since the market works, as it were, by magic, harmonizing needs and their satisfaction "blindly," there is no compulsion about it. We can "choose" to buy and sell, or not (and presumably take the consequences: though this part is *not* so well represented in the discourses of the market, which are more elaborated on the *positive* side of market-choice than they are on its *negative* consequences). Buyer or seller need not be driven by goodwill, or love of his neighbour or fellow-feeling to succeed in the market game. In fact, the market works best if each party to the transaction consults only his or her self-interest directly. It is a system driven by the real and practical imperatives of self-interest. Yet it achieves satisfaction of a kind, all round. The capitalist hires his labour and makes his profit; the landlord lets his property and gets a rent; the worker gets her wages and thus can buy the goods she needs.

Now market-exchange also "appears" in a rather different sense. It is the part of the capitalist circuit which everyone can plainly *see*, the bit we all experience daily. Without buying and selling, in a money economy, we would all physically

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and socially come to a halt very quickly. Unless we are deeply involved in other aspects of the capitalist process, we would not necessarily know much about the other parts of the circuit which are necessary if capital is to be valorized and if the whole process is to reproduce itself and expand. And yet, unless commodities are produced there is nothing to sell; and—Marx argued, at any rate—it is first in production itself that labour is exploited. Whereas the kind of "exploitation" which a market-ideology is best able to see and grasp is "profiteering"—taking too big a rake-off on the market price. So the market is the part of the system which is universally encountered and experienced. It is the obvious, the visible part: the part which constantly *appears*.

Now, if you extrapolate from this generative set of categories, based on market exchange, it is possible to extend it to other spheres of social life, and to see them as, also, constituted on a similar model. And this is precisely what Marx, in a justly famous passage, suggests happens:

This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase power of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. (Marx, 1967, p. 176)

In short, our ideas of "Freedom," "Equality," "Property" and "Bentham" (i.e., Individualism)—the ruling ideological principles of the bourgeois lexicon, and the key political themes which, in our time, have made a powerful and compelling return to the ideological stage under the auspices of Mrs. Thatcher and neoliberalism—may derive from the categories we use in our practical, common sense thinking about the market economy. This is how there arises, out of daily, mundane experience the powerful categories of bourgeois legal, political, social and philosophical thought.

This is a critical *locus classicus* of the debate; from this Marx extrapolated several of the theses which have come to form the contested territory of the theory of ideology. First, he established as a *source* of "ideas" a particular point or moment of the economic circuit of capital. Second, he demonstrates how the translation from the economic to ideological categories can be effected; from the "market exchange of equivalents" to the bourgeois notions of "Freedom" and "Equality"; from the fact that each must possess the means of exchange to the legal categories of property rights. Third, he defines in a more precise manner what he means by "distortion." For this "taking off" from the exchange point of the recircuit of capital is an ideological process. It "obscures, hides, conceals"—the terms are all in the text—another set of relations: the relations, which do *not* appear on the surface but are concealed in the "hidden abode" of production (where property, ownership, the exploitation of waged labour and the expropriation of surplus value all take place). The ideological categories "hide" this underlying reality, and *substitute* for all that the "truth" of market relations. In many ways, then, the passage contains all the so-called cardinal sins of the classical marxist theory of ideology rolled into one: economic reductionism, a too simple correspondence between the economic and the political ideological; the true v. false, real v. distortion, "true" consciousness v. false consciousness distinctions.



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However, it also seems to me possible to "re-read" the passage from the standpoint of many contemporary critiques in such a way as (a) to retain many of the profound insights of the original, while (b) expanding it, using some of the theories of ideology developed in more recent times.

Capitalist production is defined in Marx's terms as a circuit. This circuit explains not only production and consumption, but *reproduction*—the ways in which the conditions for keeping the circuit moving are sustained. Each moment is vital to the generation and realization of value. Each establishes certain determinate conditions for the other—that is, each is dependent on or determinate for the other. Thus, if some part of what is realized through sale is not paid as wages to labour, labour cannot reproduce itself, physically and socially, to work and buy again another day. This "production," too, is dependent on "consumption"; even though in the analysis Marx tends to insist on the prior analytic value to be accorded to the relations of *production*. (This in itself has had serious consequences, since it has led marxists not only to prioritize "production" but to argue as if the moments of "consumption and exchange" are of no value or importance to the theory—a fatal, one-side productivist reading.)

Now this circuit can be construed, ideologically, in different ways. This is something which modern theorists of ideology insist on, as against the vulgar conception of ideology as arising from a fixed and unalterable relation between the economic relation and how it is "expressed" or represented in ideas. Modern theorists have tended to arrive at this break with a simple notion of economic determinacy over ideology through their borrowing from recent work on the nature of language and discourse. Language is the medium *par excellence* through which things are "represented" in thought and thus the medium in which ideology is generated and transformed. But in language, the same social relation can be *differently* represented and construed. And this is so, they would argue, because language by its nature is *not fixed* in a one-to-one relation to its referent but is "multi-referential": it can construct different meanings around what is apparently the same social relation or phenomenon.

It may or may not be the case, that, in the passage under discussion, Marx is using a fixed, determinate and unalterable relationship between market exchange and how it is appropriated in thought. But you will see from what I have said that I do not believe this to be so. As I understand it, "the market" means one thing in vulgar bourgeois political economy and the spontaneous consciousness of practical bourgeois men, and quite another thing in marxist economic analysis. So my argument would be that, implicitly, Marx is saying that, in a world where markets exist and market exchange dominates economic life, it would be distinctly odd if there were no *category* allowing us to think, speak and act in relation to it. In *that* sense, all economic categories—bourgeois or marxist—express existing social relations. But I think it *also* follows from the argument that market relations are not always represented by the same categories of thought.

There is no fixed and unalterable relation between what the market is, and how it is construed within an ideological or explanatory framework. We could even say that one of the purposes of *Capital* is precisely to *displace* the discourse of bourgeois political economy—the discourse in which the market is most usually and obviously understood—and to replace it with another discourse, that of the market as it fits into the marxist schema. If the point is not pressed too literally, therefore, the two kinds of approaches to the understanding of ideology are not totally contradictory.

What, then, about the "distortions" of bourgeois political economy as an ideology? One way of reading this is to think that, since Marx calls bourgeois

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political economy "distorted," it must be *false*. Thus those who live their relation to economic life exclusively within its categories of thought and experience are, by definition, in "false consciousness." Again, we must be on our guard here about arguments too easily won. For one thing, Marx makes an important distinction between "vulgar" versions of political economy and more advanced versions, like that of Ricardo, which he says clearly, "has scientific value." But, still, what can he mean by "false" and "distorted" in this context?

He cannot mean that "the market" does not exist. In fact, it is *all too real*. It is the very life-blood of capitalism, from one viewpoint. Without it capitalism would never have broken through the framework of feudalism; and without its ceaseless continuation, the circuits of capital would come to a sudden and disastrous halt. I think we can only make sense of these terms if we think of giving an account of an economic circuit, which consists of several interconnected moments, from the vantage point of *one* of those moments alone. If, in our explanation, we privilege one moment only, and do not take account of the differentiated whole or "ensemble" of which it is a part; or if we use categories of thought, appropriate to one such moment alone, to explain the whole process; then we are in danger of giving what Marx would have called (after Hegel) a "one-sided" account.

One-sided explanations are always a distortion. Not in the sense that they are a lie about the system, but in the sense that a "half-truth" cannot be the whole truth about anything. With those ideas, you will always represent a part of the whole. You will thereby produce an explanation which is only *partially* adequate—and in that sense, "false." Also, if you use only "market categories and concepts" to understand the capitalist circuit as a whole, there are literally many aspects of it which you cannot see. In that sense, the categories of market exchange obscure and mystify our understanding of the capitalist process: that is they do not enable us to see or formulate other aspects invisible.

Is the worker who lives his or her relation to the circuits of capitalist production exclusively through the categories of a "fair price" and a "fair wage," in "false consciousness"? Yes, if by that we mean there is something about her situation which she cannot grasp with the categories she is using; something about the process as a whole which is systematically hidden because the available concepts only give her a grasp of one of its many-sided moments. No, if by that we mean that she is utterly deluded about what goes on under capitalism.

The falseness therefore arises, not from the fact that the market is an illusion, a trick, a sleight-of-hand, but only in the sense that it is an *inadequate* explanation of a process. It has also substituted one part of the process for the whole—a procedure which, in linguistics, is known as "metonymy" and in anthropology, psychoanalysis and (with special meaning) in Marx's work, as *fetishism*. The other "lost" moments of the circuit are, however, unconscious, not in the Freudian sense, because they have been repressed from consciousness, but in the sense of being invisible, given the concepts and categories we are using.

This also helps to explain the otherwise extremely confusing terminology in *Capital*, concerning what "appears on the surface" (which is sometimes said to be "merely phenomenal": i.e., not very important, not the real thing); and what lies "hidden beneath," and is embedded in the structure, not lying about the surface. It is crucial to see, however—as the market exchange/production example makes clear—that "surface" and "phenomenal" do not mean false or illusory, in the ordinary sense of the words. The market is no more or less "real" than other aspects—production for example. In Marx's terms production is only where, analytically, we ought to start the analysis of the circuit: "the act through which

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the whole process again runs its course" (Marx, 1971). But production is not independent of the circuit, since profits made and labour hired in the market must flow back into production. So, "real" expresses only some theoretical primacy which marxist analysis gives to production. In any other sense, market exchange is as much a real process materially, and an absolutely "real" requirement of the system—as any other part: they are all "moments of one process" (Marx, 1971).

There is also a problem about "appearance" and "surface" as terms. Appearances may connote something which is "false": surface forms do not seem to run as deep as "deep structures." These linguistic connotations have the unfortunate effect of making us rank the different moments in terms of their being more/less real, more/less important. But from another viewpoint, what is on the surface, what constantly appears, is what we are always seeing, what we encounter daily, what we come to take for granted as the obvious and manifest form of the process. It is not surprising, then, that we come spontaneously to *think* of the capitalist system in terms of the bits of it which constantly engage us, and which so manifestly announce their presence. What chance does the extraction of "surplus labour" have, as a concept, as against the hard fact of wages in the pocket, savings in the bank, pennies in the slot, money in the till. Even the nineteenth century economist, Nassau Senior, couldn't actually put his hand on the hour in the day when the worker worked for the surplus and not to replace his or her own subsistence.

In a world saturated by money exchange, and everywhere mediated by money, the "market" experience is *the* most immediate, daily and universal experience of the economic system for everyone. It is therefore not surprising that we take the market for granted, do not question what makes it possible, what it is founded or premised on. It should not surprise us if the mass of working people don't possess the concepts with which to cut into the process at another point, frame another set of questions, and bring to the surface or reveal what the overwhelming facticity of the market constantly renders invisible. It is clear why we should generate, out of these fundamental categories for which we have found everyday words, phrases and idiomatic expressions in practical consciousness, the *model* of other social and political relations. After all, they too belong to the same system and appear to work according to its protocols. Thus we see, in the "free choice" of the market, the material symbol of the more abstract freedoms; or in the self-interest and intrinsic competitiveness of market advantage the "representation" of something natural, normal and universal about human nature itself.

Let me now draw some tentative conclusions from the "re-reading" I have offered about the meaning of Marx's passage in the light of more recent critiques and the new theories advanced.

The analysis is no longer organized around the distinction between the "real" and the "false." The obscuring or mystifying effects of ideology are no longer seen as the product of a trick or magical illusion. Nor are they simply attributed to false consciousness, in which our poor, benighted, untheoretical proletarians are forever immured. The relations in which people exist are the "real relations" which the categories and concepts they use help them to grasp and articulate in thought. But—and here we may be on a route contrary to emphasis from that with which "materialism" is usually associated—the economic relations themselves cannot prescribe a single, fixed and unalterable way of conceptualizing it. It can be "expressed" within different ideological discourses. What's more, these discourses can employ the conceptual model and transpose it into other, more strictly "ideological," domains. For example, it can develop a discourse—e.g. latter-day Monetarism—which deduces the grand value of "Freedom" from the freedom from compulsion which brings men and women, once again, every

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working day, into the labour market. We have also by-passed the distinction "true" and "false," replacing them with other, more accurate terms: like "partial" and "adequate," or "one-sided" and "in its differentiated totality." To say that a theoretical discourse allows us to grasp a concrete relation "in thought" adequately means that the discourse provides us with a more complete grasp of all the different relations of which that relation is composed, and of the many determinations which form its conditions of existence. It means that our grasp is concrete and whole, rather than a thin, one-sided abstraction. One-sided explanations, which are partial, part-for-the-whole, types of explanation, and which allow us only to abstract one element out (the market, for example) and explain that are inadequate *precisely on those grounds*. For that reason alone, they may be considered "false." Though, strictly speaking, the term is misleading if what we have in mind is some simple, all-or-nothing distinction between the True and the False, or between Science and Ideology. Fortunately or unfortunately, social explanations rarely fall into such neat pigeonholes.

In our "re-reading," we have also attempted to take on board a number of secondary propositions, derived from the more recent theorizing about "ideology" in an effort to see how incompatible they are with Marx's formulation. As we have seen, the explanation relates to concepts, ideas, terminology, categories, perhaps also images and symbols (money; the wage packet; freedom) which allow us to grasp some aspect of a social process *in thought*. These enable us to represent to ourselves and to others how the system works, why it functions as it does.

The same process—capitalist production and exchange—can be expressed within a different ideological framework, by the use of different "systems of representation." There is the discourse of "the market," the discourse of "production," the discourse of "the circuits": each produces a different definition of the system. Each also locates us differently—as worker, capitalist, wage worker, wage slave, producer, consumer, etc. Each thus *situates us* as social actors or as a member of a social group in a particular relation to the process and prescribes certain social identities for us. The ideological categories in use, in other words, *position us* in relation to the account of the process as depicted in the discourse. The worker who relates to his or her condition of existence in the capitalist process as "consumer"—who enters the system, so to speak, through that gateway—participates in the process by way of a different practice from those who are inscribed in the system as "skilled labourer"—or not inscribed in it at all, as "housewife." All these inscriptions have effects which are real. They make a material difference, since how we act in certain situations depends on what our definitions of the situation are.

I believe that a similar kind of "re-reading" can be made in relation to another set of propositions about ideology which has in recent years been vigorously contested: namely, the class-determination of ideas and the direct correspondences between "ruling ideas" and "ruling classes." Laclau (1977) has demonstrated definitively the untenable nature of the proposition that classes, as such, are the subjects of fixed and ascribed class ideologies. He has also dismantled the proposition that particular ideas and concepts "belong" exclusively to one particular class. He demonstrates, with considerable effect, the failure of any social formation to correspond to this picture of ascribed class ideologies. He argues cogently why the notion of particular ideas being fixed permanently to a particular class is antithetical to what we now know about the very nature of language and discourse. Ideas and concepts do not occur, in language or thought, in that single, isolated, way with their content and reference irremovably fixed. Language in its widest sense is the vehicle of practical reasoning, calculation and

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consciousness, because of the ways by which certain meanings and references have been historically secured. But its cogency depends on the "logics" which connect one proposition to another in a chain of connected meanings; where the social connotations and historical meaning are condensed and reverberate off one another. Moreover, these chains are never permanently secured, either in their internal systems of meanings, or in terms of the social classes and groups to which they "belong." Otherwise, the notion of ideological struggle and the transformations of consciousness—questions central to the politics of any marxist project—would be an empty sham, the dance of dead rhetorical figures.

It is precisely because language, the medium of thought and ideological calculation, is "multi-accentual," as Volosinov put it, that the field of the ideological is always a field of "intersecting accents" and the "intersecting of differently oriented social interests":

Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result differently orientated accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes the arena of the class struggle... A sign that has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle—which, so to speak, crosses beyond the pale of class struggle, inevitably loses force, degenerating into allegory and becoming the object not of live social intelligibility but of philological comprehension. (Volosinov, 1973, p. 23)

This approach replaces the notion of fixed ideological meanings and class-ascribed ideologies with the concepts of ideological terrains of struggle and the task of ideological transformation. It is the general movement in this direction, away from an abstract general theory of ideology, and towards the more concrete analysis of how, in particular historical situations, ideas "organise human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.," which makes the work of Gramsci (from whom that quotation (1971) is taken) a figure of seminal importance in the development of marxist thinking in the domain of the ideological.

One of the consequences of this kind of revisionist work has often been to destroy altogether the *problem* of the class structuring of ideology and the ways in which ideology intervenes in social struggles. Often this approach replaces the inadequate notions of ideologies ascribed in blocks to classes with an equally unsatisfactory "discursive" notion which implies total free floatingness of all ideological elements and discourses. The image of great, immovable class battalions heaving their ascribed ideological luggage about the field of struggle, with their ideological number-plates on their backs, as Poulantzas once put it, is replaced here by the infinity of subtle variations through which the elements of a discourse appear spontaneously to combine and recombine with each other, without material constraints of any kind other than that provided by the discursive operations themselves.

Now it is perfectly correct to suggest that the concept "democracy" does not have a totally fixed meaning, which can be ascribed exclusively to the discourse of bourgeois forms of political representation. "Democracy" in the discourse of the "Free West" does not carry the same meaning as it does when we speak of "popular-democratic" struggle or of deepening the democratic content of political life. We cannot allow the term to be wholly expropriated into the discourse of the Right. Instead, we need to develop a strategic contestation around the concept itself. Of course, this is no mere "discursive" operation. Powerful symbols and slogans of that kind, with a powerfully positive political charge, do not swing about from side to side in language or ideological representation alone. The expropriation of the concept has to be contested through the development of a series of polemics, through the conduct of particular forms of ideological struggle: to detach one meaning of the concept from the domain of public

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consciousness and supplant it within the logic of another political discourse. Gramsci argued precisely that ideological struggle does not take place by displacing one whole, integral, class-mode of thought with another wholly-formed system of ideas:

What matters is the criticism to which such an ideological complex is subjected by the first representatives of the new historical phase. This criticism makes possible a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideological used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken to be primary—becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex. The old collective will dissolves into its contradictory elements since the subordinate ones develop socially, etc. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 195)

In short, his is a "war of position" conception of ideological struggle. It also means articulating the different conceptions of "democracy" within a whole chain of associated ideas. And it means articulating this process of ideological de-construction and re-construction to a set of organised political positions, and to a particular set of social forces. Ideologies do not become effective as a material force because they emanate from the needs of fully-formed social classes. But the reverse is also true—though it puts the relationship between ideas and social forces the opposite way round. No ideological conception can ever become materially effective unless and until it *can be* articulated to the field of political and social forces and to the struggles between different forces at stake.

Certainly, it is not necessarily a form of vulgar materialism to say that, though we cannot ascribe ideas to class position in certain fixed combinations, ideas *do* arise from and *may reflect* the material conditions in which social groups and classes exist. In that sense—i.e. historically—there may well be certain *tendential alignments*—between, say, those who stand in a "corner shop" relation to the processes of modern capitalist development, and the fact that they may therefore be predisposed to imagine that the whole advanced economy of capitalism can be conceptualized in this "corner shop" way. I think this is what Marx meant in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* when he said that it was not necessary for people actually to make their living as members of the old petty bourgeoisie for them to be attracted to petty bourgeois ideas. Nevertheless, there was, he suggested, some relationship, or tendency, between the objective position of that class fraction, and the limits and horizons of thought to which they would be "spontaneously" attracted. This was a judgement about the "characteristic forms of thought" appropriate as an ideal-type to certain positions in the social structure. It was definitely not a simple equation in actual historical reality between class position and ideas. The point about "tendential historical relations" is that there is nothing inevitable, necessary or fixed forever about them. The tendential lines of forces define only the *givenness* of the historical terrain.

They indicate how the terrain has been structured, historically. Thus it is perfectly possible for the idea of "the nation" to be given a progressive meaning and connotation, embodying a national-popular collective will, as Gramsci argued. Nevertheless, in a society like Britain, the idea of "nation" has been consistently articulated towards the right. Ideas of "national identity" and "national greatness" are intimately bound up with imperial supremacy, tinged with racist connotations, and underpinned by a four-century long history of colonisation, world market supremacy, imperial expansion and global destiny over native peoples. It is therefore much more difficult to give the notion of "Britain" a socially radical or democratic reference. These associations are not given for all time. But they are difficult to break because the ideological terrain of this particular social formation has been so powerfully structured in that way by

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its previous history. These historical connections define the ways in which the ideological terrain of a particular society has been mapped out. They are the "traces" which Gramsci (1971) mentioned: the "stratified deposits in popular philosophy" (p. 324), which no longer have an inventory, but which establish and define the fields along which ideological struggle is *likely* to move.

That terrain, Gramsci suggested, was above all the terrain of what he called "common sense": a historical, not a natural or universal or spontaneous form of popular thinking, necessarily "fragmentary, disjointed and episodic." The "subject" of common sense—is composed of very contradictory ideological formations—"it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over" (p. 324). And yet, because this network of pre-existing traces and common-sense elements constitutes the realm of practical thinking for the masses of the people, Gramsci insisted that it was precisely on this terrain that ideological struggle most frequently took place. "Common sense" became one of the stakes over which ideological struggle is conducted. Ultimately, "The relation between common sense and the upper level of philosophy is assured by 'politics'..." (p. 331).

Ideas only become effective if they do, in the end, *connect* with a particular constellation of social forces. In that sense, ideological struggle is a part of the general social struggle for mastery and leadership—in short for hegemony. But "hegemony" in Gramsci's sense requires, not the simple escalation of a whole class to power, with its fully formed "philosophy," but the *process* by which a historical bloc of social forces is constructed and the ascendancy of that bloc secured. So the way we conceptualize the relationship between "ruling ideas" and "ruling classes" is best thought in terms of the processes of "hegemonic domination."

On the other hand, to abandon the question or problem of "rule"—of hegemony, domination and authority—because the ways in which it was originally posed are unsatisfactory is to cast the baby out with the bath-water. Ruling ideas are not guaranteed their dominance by their already given coupling with ruling classes. Rather, the effective coupling of dominant ideas *to* the historical bloc which has acquired hegemonic power in a particular period is what the process of ideological struggle is *intended to secure*. It is the object of the exercise—not the playing out of an already written and concluded script.

It will be clear that, although the argument has been conducted in connection with the problem of ideology, it has much wider ramifications for the development of marxist theory as a whole. The general question at issue is a particular conception of "theory": theory as the working out of a set of guarantees. What is also at issue is a particular definition of "determination." It is clear from the "reading" I offered earlier that the economic aspect of capitalist production processes has real limiting and constraining effects (i.e. determinancy), for the categories in which the circuits of production are *thought*, ideologically, and vice versa. The economic provides the repertoire of categories which will be used, in thought. What the economic cannot do is (a) to provide the *contents* of the particular thoughts of particular social classes or groups at any specific time; (b) to fix or guarantee for all time which ideas will be made use of by which classes. The determinancy of the economic for the ideological can, therefore, be only in terms of the former setting the limits for defining the terrain of operations, establishing the "raw materials," of thought. Material circumstances are the net of constraints, the "conditions of existence" for practical thought and calculation about society.

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This is a different conception of "determinacy" from that which is entailed by the normal sense of "economic determinism," or by the expressive totality way of conceiving the relations between the different practices in a social formation. The relations between these different levels are, indeed, *determinate*: i.e. mutually determining. The structure of social practices—the ensemble—is therefore neither free floating or immaterial. But nor is it a transitive structure, in which its intelligibility lies exclusively in the one-way transmission of effects from base upwards. The economic *cannot* effect a final closure on the domain of ideology, in the strict sense of always guaranteeing a result. It cannot always secure a particular set of correspondences or always deliver particular modes of reasoning to particular classes according to their place within its system. This is precisely because (a) ideological categories are developed, generated and transformed according to their own laws of development and evolution; though, of course, they are generated *out* of given materials. It is also because (b) of the necessary "openness" of historical development to practice and struggle. We have to acknowledge the real indeterminacy of the political—the level which condenses all the other levels of practice and secures their functioning in a particular system of power.

This relative openness or relative indeterminacy is necessary to marxism itself as a theory. What is "scientific" about the marxist theory of politics is that it seeks to understand the limits to political action given by the terrain on which it operates. This terrain is defined, not by forces we can predict with the certainty of natural science, but by the existing balance of social forces, the specific nature of the concrete conjuncture. It is "scientific" because it understands itself as determinate; and because it seeks to develop a practice which is theoretically informed. But it is *not* "scientific" in the sense that political outcomes and the consequences of the conduct of political struggles are foreordained in the economic stars.

Understanding "determinacy" in terms of setting of limits, the establishment of parameters, the defining of the space of operations, the concrete conditions of existence, the "givenness" of social practices, rather than in terms of the absolute predictability of particular outcomes, is the only basis of a "marxism without final guarantees." It establishes the *open horizon* of marxist theorizing—determinacy without guaranteed closures. The paradigm of perfectly closed, perfectly predictable, systems of thought is religion or astrology, not science. It would be preferable, from this perspective, to think of the "materialism" of marxist theory in terms of "determination by the economic in the *first* instance," since marxism is surely correct, against all idealisms, to insist that no social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located. However, "determination in the last instance" has long been the repository of the lost dream or illusion of theoretical *certainty*. And this has been bought at considerable cost, since certainty stimulates orthodoxy, the frozen rituals and intonation of already witnessed truth, and all the other attributes of a theory that is incapable of fresh insights. It represents the end of the *process of theorizing*, of the development and refinement of new concepts and explanations which, alone, is the sign of a living body of thought, capable still of engaging an grasping something of the truth about new historical realities.

*Sociology*  
*Open University*



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*Editor's Note: This essay originally appeared in Marx: 100 Years On, B. Matthews (ed.), London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1983; we wish to thank the publisher for permission to reprint it here.*