

Karl Marx: Ideology

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one (possible) question to motivate a theory of ideology: if capitalism is so bad (alienating) and if history necessitates its overhaul, why haven't the proletariat revolted yet? why are class-based societies so stable?

Althusser (1970) has a nice distinction:

- Repressive State Apparatus (the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons)
- Ideological State Apparatuses (religion, family, law, trade-unions, culture, communication)

Gramsci (1971) has a similar distinction:

- “**hegemony**” which the dominant group exercises throughout society
- “**direct domination**” or command exercised through the State and “juridical” government.” (Gramsci 1971, 145)

another (slightly less ad hoc) question to motivate theory of ideology: is the model of society with productive forces, relations of production, and political/legal superstructure complete?

1. 'Ideology' Today

basic distinctions (Geuss 1981):

- descriptive (anthropological study of the beliefs and rituals characteristic of certain groups)
Freedman 2003: “we are all ideologists in that we have understandings of the political environment of which we are part, and have views about the merits and failings of that environment.” — this understanding is common in social science
- positive (worldview most appropriate in satisfying the needs of a group and furthering their interests)
- pejorative (citizens deluded about themselves, their society, their interests)

in sociology/psychology: “a style of thinking that is rigid in its adherence to a doctrine and resistance to evidence-based belief-updating and favorably oriented toward an in-group and antagonistic to out-groups” (Zmigrod 2022, 1072)

but ideology in the Marxist sense has to do with society (not just an individual's style of thinking) and power

epistemic falsity: value presented as fact, social as natural, particular interests as universal, self-fulfilling beliefs as already true, the possible as impossible

functional falsity: stabilises or legitimates actually deficient status quo

genetic falsity: due to a class position that shouldn't exist, e.g. Nietzsche's story about Christianity arising from domination by the slaves

ideology is **never completely, utterly false**:

“[Ideology] is consciousness which is objectively necessary and yet at the same time false, [it is] the intertwining of truth and falsehood, which is just as distinct from the whole truth as it is from the pure lie.” (Adorno, quoted in Ng 2015, 400)

otherwise, it would be mysterious why we accept ideology and how we can rid ourselves of it

2. Ideology in the *German Ideology*

one commonality of all different senses of ideology here: ideology is social/widely shared/the “ruling ideas” (*German Ideology*)

on all models here, pejorative ideology has a common function: undergird/stabilise/legitimise social status quo

different models of critical ideology:

- inversion model: camera obscura
“If, in all ideology, men and their relationships appear upside down, as in a *camera obscura*, then this phenomenon stems just as much from their historical life process as the inversion of objects on the retina stems from the process of direct physical life” (*German Ideology*)
example: historical idealism/Gedankenherrschaft: at base reality is taken to be spiritual, not material
- interest model: ruling class control not only material but also mental production to maximise own profit
“In every epoch the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas, that is, the class that is the dominant *material* power of society is at the same time its dominant *intellectual* power” (*German Ideology*, see also *Communist Manifesto*)
is this a kind of conspiracy?
- correspondence model: material life determines intellectual life
“The dominant thoughts are, furthermore, nothing but the ideal expression of the dominant material relations” (*German Ideology*)

example: “under the rule of the aristocracy the concepts of honour, loyalty, etc. dominated, while under the rule of the bourgeoisie it is the concepts of freedom, equality, etc.” (*German Ideology*)

on all models, pejorative ideology has a common cause: in the material conditions (productive forces + relations of production)
Marx speaks of “the dull compulsion of the economic”

— but how exactly does ideology emerge?

- one enabling factor is the division of labour between material and intellectual life
- Rosen (1996) tries out a functional explanation (cf. Cohen) for the correspondence model:
‘A exists because it is good for B’, or ‘if A exists, then A is good for B’
but this conditional can never be false!
we might also poke holes in what it means for A “to be good for” B.

3. Ideology in *Capital*

question: what is the value of a commodity? (like a table sold on the market)

three kinds of value:

- use value: “by its properties it satisfies human needs” (Capital)
- exchange value — what determines that?
can’t be use value because incommensurable
- value as “socially necessary labour time”: “the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour”
the labour theory of value (see also lecture 4)

> labour time determines (exchange) value, but this is not apparent

mysterious character of the commodity: “the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.” (Capital)

what does this mean? it means that value is viewed as intrinsic property of commodity, when actually extrinsic, endowed by labour
Marx calls this **commodity fetishism**.

“no chemist has ever discovered exchange value either in a pearl or a diamond”

why does fetishism exist? — three processes

- FIRST, due to “peculiar social character of the labour which produces [commodities]”
- which character? “private individuals who work independently of each other”
- this creates the appearance of “material relations between persons and social relations between things”.
- SECOND, the money form enforces this appearance
- money as universal means of exchange
- “precisely this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—... conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly.”
- “The adherents of the Monetary System did not see gold and silver as representing money as a social relation of production, but in the form of natural objects with peculiar social properties.”
- THIRD, domination: “the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite”
- this creates in the workers an idea of powerlessness.
- if power does not rest with them, it must rest with commodities

A commodity’s value is actually the socially necessary labour time invested to produce it. But due to the organisation of production and exchange this is not how things appear.

And the appearance doesn't change even after this discovery about the real locus of value is made.

analogy: "the scientific dissection of the air into its component parts left the atmosphere itself unaltered in its physical configuration"

bourgeois political economy speaks of value and exchange value in precisely this way, ignoring labour as the real source of value

fetishism is unique to capitalism:

- Robinson Crusoe on his island: labours to survive, he labours on different things/in different ways (fishing, hunting, tool making, ...) and takes different times to complete his task. "those relations contain all the essential determinants of value" but there is no exchange, no value in the commodity
- feudalism: "Personal dependence characterizes the social relations of material production as much as it does the other spheres of life based on that production." So there is "no need for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality"
- association of free men working with the means of production held in common: just like Robinson Crusoe. one part of their labour will become new means of production, another part will be divided among them

questions and objections about commodity fetishism:

- what would fetishism of services mean? (cf. work on reification, Honneth 2007; Lukács 1971)
- how does the value of fertile virgin soil fit into Marx' theory of value?
- do we really value commodities in the way he says?
- aren't prices determined by supply and demand rather than necessary labour time?

4. Objections and Further Questions about Ideology

- is Marx internally consistent? In the Communist Manifesto he writes that "for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, [the bourgeoisie] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." This sounds like the opposite of ideology.
- might there be other/better explanations why the workers don't revolt? (Heath on collective action problems)
- are people really this stupid? what makes Marx/Marxists less stupid? are theories of ideology paternalistic?
- there is empirical evidence for the existence of ideology (cf. Jost 1995) but this empirical evidence often has the tendency to universalise ideology, to present it as a human tendency irrespective of the particular social environment.
- how do we do ideology critique? does Marx already do ideology critique simply by writing about ideology?

Further Reading

Marx, K. *The German Ideology*. 3rd ed. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976.

Marx, Karl. 1991. "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret." In *Capital*. London: Penguin.

Geuss, Raymond. 1981. *The Idea of a Critical Theory*. (**highly recommend!**)