

## *Ideology and Practice*

### The Material and Social Production of Human Existence

*Will Spisso*

When attempting an analysis of the Marxist concept of ideology, one should consider the broad scope of such an investigation. The British philosopher and literary critic, Terry Eagleton, observes that there is no single adequate definition of ideology.<sup>1</sup> In his work titled *Ideology: An Introduction*, he begins with a list of sixteen different definitions of the term. He also recognizes that there are more. Subsequently, Eagleton notes that not all of the definitions are compatible with one another. He recognizes that these definitions may or may not be pejorative, and he notes that these definitions may or may not involve epistemological questions.<sup>2</sup> To this we can add the observations of the author of *The Concept of Ideology*, Jorge Larrain, who states that Marx's concept of ideology is not clearly defined in one text or one uniform theory. Instead, "it must be theoretically worked out from what little Marx wrote of it."<sup>3</sup> This "working out" is what this essay seeks to do, in a brief and general sense.

The concept of ideology will be examined from a Marxist perspective, which will elucidate the analyses of Marxist thinkers, such as Eagleton and Larrain. When understood through a Marxist perspective,

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*Will Spisso is a fourth-year student at the University of Victoria. He is currently enrolled in the honours program in the political science department, and his primary areas of academic focus are political theory and international relations. He is also interested in twentieth-century history and social psychology. When he is not involved in school, he enjoys going to the gym, cooking, travelling, and writing fiction. Will is originally from Vernon, BC. He graduated from high school there in 2003. He began his undergraduate degree the next year at UVic. He hopes to attend law school in Canada after he completes his political sciences studies.*

three major characteristics of ideology will be apparent: to be of any value, ideology must reflect the real and practical social conditions within a society; the social conditions in a society that serve as the basis for an ideological framework will reflect the productive forces in that society; and an ideology that reflects productive forces will serve to promote the interests of the dominant social group or class within the relations of production. The paper will conclude with an analysis of Marxist ideology as it relates to human agency.

Ideology arises from conscious thought, and it is influenced by the prevalent ideas within a given society. However, ideology should not exist as an abstraction. According to Marx, thought, which produces an ideological perspective, should be grounded in the social reality of the people that adhere to this perspective. Consequently, ideology involves a cognisant apprehension of social reality. Marx opposes ideology that insists on the power of forces outside of man,<sup>4</sup> which in secular terms translates to a stance against an abstract determination of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> While maintaining the independence of consciousness from external being, ideology, as described by Marx, seeks to end forms of dualism that would separate consciousness from reality.<sup>6</sup>

In *The German Ideology*, Marx criticizes German philosophy because he observes its failure to connect with the reality of the German people. He exclaims that such philosophy combats phrases with other phrases, and "they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world."<sup>7</sup> This failure renders ideology ineffective, and these philosophical views fail to constitute a true ideology. In condemnation, Marx asserts that "philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."<sup>8</sup> This famous statement is taken from his *Theses on Feuerbach*, which addresses the insights of the German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach influenced Marx's philosophy, and although Marx accepted some of his views, he also criticized Feuerbach for failing to address philosophical concerns as expressions of contradiction and suffering in the real world.<sup>9</sup>

The *Theses on Feuerbach* illustrate Marx's criticism of an ideological framework separated from human activity. Marx accepts Feuerbach's belief that man has created God, and consequently, it is a false inversion to assert that God created mankind. Although Feuerbach's analyses extend beyond abstraction, he fails to ground his philosophy in human practice. Marx writes that "Feuerbach, not satisfied with abstract think-

ing, appeals to sensuous contemplation, but he does not conceive sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity."<sup>10</sup>

Observing that man has the power to change the conditions of his existence, Marx contends that people are not purely the products of circumstance, since their own actions dictate the circumstances that they find themselves in.<sup>11</sup> This argument has its basis in the concept of *praxis*. Praxis refers to "the free, universal, creative and self-creative activity through which man creates (makes, produces) and changes (shapes) his historical human world and himself."<sup>12</sup> Praxis is an activity specific to man by which he shapes the world around him. Therefore, it entails an interaction of man with the reality of his existence, which is a social reality, and it necessitates a transformation of this reality by human activity (practice). Marx writes that men shape history, but they do not do this under circumstances that they choose themselves. Their circumstances are transmitted to them from the past.<sup>13</sup> However, Larrain responds to this statement by recognizing that "these 'given circumstances' are the consolidation of what men themselves produce by means of their practice."<sup>14</sup>

In *The Concept of Ideology*, Larrain describes the fundamental features of practice, as outlined by Marx. The first feature of practice is its function in the production of man's material existence. The earliest act of man was practical activity, exercised upon nature, which allowed him to produce the means of his subsistence. Practice first appears as this type of labour, which is aimed at securing man's existence and reproducing material life. A second dimension of practice is that it is an intentional activity with a goal. Marx writes that men distinguish themselves from animals by consciousness. This is because practice, as a human function, is a conscious activity. Without consciousness, practice would take an animalistic form as an instinct rather than a conscious form that allows man to take deliberate action.<sup>15</sup>

The third component is that practice results in the transformation of men themselves. Practical activity cannot oppose any aspect of man because it coincides with his being, and as it establishes a specific way of being, it becomes the force that determines mankind in its totality. Furthermore, practice presupposes the interaction of individuals with each other as they engage in productive processes. Therefore, it is an intentional activity that links material and social life. In producing man's being, it produces the material and social conditions of his existence.<sup>16</sup>

Marx believes that people ultimately produce their social reality through practice. Since this suggests that they are not pawns at the mercy of uncontrollable circumstances or forces, it supports the supposition that man has created God. For Marx, this means that the notion of God has arisen from human practice. Therefore, he agrees with Feuerbach's stance against an inverted view of God (as the creator of man), but he disagrees with Feuerbach's interpretation of this inversion as a mere illusion or philosophical alienation.<sup>17</sup> Instead, this alienation is a product of praxis under specific relations of production, such as capitalism.

Alienation is the process by which people become estranged from the social reality that they both produce and exist within. In *Estranged Labour*, Marx describes how alienation arises from actual material conditions. He recognizes that the worker, under capitalism, is alienated in the act of production, and he is alienated from the product of his labour, which is merely the summary of the production process.<sup>18</sup> Although, under different social relations, alienation may occur in different forms, it will remain a product of the actual material conditions, which are based on the relations of production and the forces of production. This is because the existing social relations are, in fact, a product of the relations of production and forces of production. Therefore, Marx believes that it is problematic to introduce a purely philosophical critique of alienation, including a critique of alienation arising from religion, which does not consider the actual conditions of social relations and human practice. This is why Marx does not accept the final analyses of German philosophy or Feuerbach. Larrain writes that "the sense of Marx's critique of Feuerbach is this: what seems to be objective reality is by no means pure datum; on the contrary it is to be understood as the historical product of man's practice."<sup>19</sup>

The ideological consequence of Marx's rejection of a purely philosophical interpretation of religion is evident in *The German Ideology*. In this work, Marx criticizes German philosophy for subsuming "dominant metaphysical, political, juridical, moral and other conceptions under the class of religious or theological conceptions; [by which] every dominant relationship was pronounced a religious relationship."<sup>20</sup> Religion, as the dominant influence on social institutions, instigated the development of a German ideology, but based it on flawed (that is, flawed from a Marxist perspective) philosophy. This is because German philosophy was founded on a purely philosophical interpretation of religion, which dis-

associated it from a foundation based in the necessary practical elements of man's social reality.

It is worth noting that German philosophy, and hence German ideology, was influenced by religion. However, this is not of the utmost importance. The failure of German philosophers to observe the origin of religion in human practice is of greater significance. Marx's subsequent criticism of this failure allows us to see the most essential aspect of the social relations that shape ideology, which is that they arise from human practice. Religion establishes particular social relations, but, according to Marx, it is itself a particular social relation, albeit one that alienates men from praxis. It causes this alienation because it prevents man from understanding the ability that he has to shape the world around him, and it places this ability in an external being. By doing this, it separates man's consciousness from reality. Nevertheless, religion, like other ideological relations, arises from human practice. It is created by man. Therefore, it offers a demonstration of how ideology is shaped by praxis, and it demonstrates the failure of a purely philosophical critique of ideology.

Marx proposes a model that divides society into what has been labelled the base and the superstructure. The base refers to the economic relations in society, under which workers produce their material existence. Alex Callinicos, in *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory*, asserts that the base is made up of the forces of production and relations of production. However, Gerald Allen Cohen, in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, defines the base as the relations of production and law. Nevertheless, the base is comprised of economic relations. These economic relations are the material relations of every day existence by which man creates his social reality through practice. Consequently, it is from these economic relations that the other relations in society arise. These relations are known as the superstructure. Although there is also some debate over how to define the superstructure precisely, it can be said that it consists of ideological relations, which include religion and politics.

Today, ideology is often defined in terms of politics. It has been used to describe the platforms of political parties or the beliefs of ruling classes within a given state or territory. However, Marx believes that the political relations within a given society, like religion, arise from the actual (material) conditions of man's existence. They are built upon the base. Political economy, which is a theoretical method of analysis, which examines the influence of politics on these economic relations, can conceal the social relations that arise as a result of economic forces. Marx

writes that "political economy conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labour by not considering the direct relationship between the worker (labour) and production."<sup>21</sup>

Contradiction refers to a "situation which allows the satisfaction of one end at the cost of another".<sup>22</sup> Marx writes that ideological relations, such as capitalist political economy, can give rise to false perceptions of social reality "by referring to a distortion of thought which stems from, and conceals, social contradictions".<sup>23</sup> This takes place when ideology fails to express (or falsely expresses) the contradictions and sufferings of the real world.<sup>24</sup> According to Marx, political economy conceals social reality when it produces policies that fail to recognize contradictory relationships. He asserts that this failure ignores the degradation of the worker under capitalism, and it disregards the worker's alienation from the productive process and the product he produces.<sup>25</sup>

It is this contradictory relationship between the base and man's material existence that causes a false perception of social reality. As political economy ignores the actual state of workers under capitalism, it fails to recognize the contradictions that Marx describes. It does not take into account that in reality

the more the worker by his labour appropriates the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of the means of life in the double respect: first the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labour- to be his labour's means of life; and secondly, that it more and more ceases to be means of life in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, capitalist political economy lacks an effective ideological basis because it estranges the worker from his reality. It is based on contradictions which mask the actual consequences and conditions of the worker's action (labour) with a distorted explanation of his reality (social existence).

It should be subsequently noted that, according to Marx, it is not only political economy, but the practice of politics as a whole, which stems from economic relations. He writes, "The relations of different nations to each other depend upon [the development of] its productive forces ... but also the whole internal structure of the nation itself depends on the stage of development reached by its production and its internal and external intercourse."<sup>27</sup> It has been shown that by Marxist definition, ideology must reflect actual economic relations (the base) and

the actions that these relations entail (praxis). Ideological relationships must still be interpreted on this level when they are given a political connotation. This is apparent when one recognizes that politics is likewise founded on the base and praxis. Hence, when ideology promotes contradictory relations in politics, it contributes to the false perception of social reality created by political economy (which labels economic relations in a contradictory fashion).

The *Culture of Prejudice*, which provides a neo-Marxist critique of the social sciences, defines ideology as "a system of ideas that defends and promotes the interests of a dominant social group or class."<sup>28</sup> This sits well with Marx's notion of contradiction, which dictates that one group will benefit at the cost of another. In *Estranged Labour*, Marx writes that if "the product of labour does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker."<sup>29</sup> Alienation is the result of man's contradictory relationship with other men. Accordingly, if ideology is corrupted to reflect this contradiction, it will function in ways that cause it to promote the interests of the dominant social group. As demonstrated by capitalist political economy, the result is a society that comes to be dominated by the ideas of the ruling class.

In *Ideology*, Eagleton argues that if ideology refers to any set of beliefs motivated by social interests, as it has come to today, it cannot simply signify the dominant forms of thought in society.<sup>30</sup> Eagleton calls for a broader definition. He asserts that ideology often "refers to the way in which signs, meanings and values help reproduce a dominant social power, but it can also denote any significant conjuncture between discourse and political interests ... the former meaning is pejorative, while the latter is more neutral."<sup>31</sup> However, it is the position of this essay that since political interests, like other facets of ideology, are derived from a combination of the base and human practice, they will be subject to the influence of dominant social powers at times of contradiction between the base, superstructure, practice, and social reality. Because this contradiction is a fundamental feature of social existence under capitalism, it is not unfair to assume that ideology, political or otherwise, will be subject to the influence of the ruling class. Although this recognition of contradiction within the capitalist system and the recognition of ruling class dominance within capitalism may be pejorative, it reflects the conditions of capitalist social reality.

The *Theses on Feuerbach* demonstrate Marx's criticism of ideology that is separated from human activity. Marx's rejection of a purely phi-

losophical method of ideology is also evident in *The German Ideology*. Ideology should reflect praxis. Praxis is an activity specific to man by which he shapes the world around him through practice. By this exercise of practice, man has the power to change the conditions of his existence. Practice also allows man to produce his material and social existence, and it distinguishes mankind from animals because practice constitutes conscious activity that is uniquely human. Practice is a way of being specific to mankind. Consequently, religion and politics are built upon human practice, as are all other social relations that arise from an ideological framework.

The distinction of a base and superstructure allows us to see the foundation of ideology (superstructure) on the economic relations (base), within which man creates his social reality thorough practice. Although ideology is often defined in terms of politics, the political relations that arise in a given society are built upon the base. Subsequently, the political policies that analyze and affect economics, known as political economy, may create false perceptions of social reality if they fail to recognize contradictory relationships that arise among the base, the superstructure, human practice, and social reality. It is through this contradiction that the interests of the ruling class come to dominate ideology. This is because contradiction necessitates the benefit of one group at the cost of another. Marx observes that the activity that oppresses man is human activity; it comes from "the domination, the coercion, and the yoke of another man."<sup>32</sup> Since, under capitalism, this contradiction is a feature of social existence, ideology will be subject to the influence of the ruling class, which dominates the other classes.

It is apparent that ideology should reflect the real and practical social conditions within a society. These social conditions, in turn, reflect the productive forces in that society. However, if these productive forces cause alienation, this leads to contradiction. As a result, an ideology that reflects a contradictory relationship within the productive forces will promote the interests of the dominant social group or class within the relations of production. Thus, we can observe the contradictory nature of ideology under capitalism, which allows ideological elements to function as instruments of exploitation. This, however, is a flawed ideology. At its essence, ideology should reflect relations of production that do not cause alienation. Marx proposes communism as this form of production. When production occurs without exploitation, an ideology can arise that expresses social relations without contradiction.

However, communism itself is not immune to the problem of alienation, which plagues other ideologies. Marx believed that in its purist form, it would end alienation, but it has historically faced the same problems as other ideological conceptions. Although one should not confuse communism with Stalinism, the Cold War showed that Marxist ideology can also be co-opted by the ruling class. Joseph Stalin's totalitarian rule in the Soviet Union provides ample illustration of this. For example, the exploitation of workers under Stalin's Five-Year Plans was horrific, but it was carried out under the rubric of communist ideology.

Much of the criticism of capitalism by Marxists asserts that central aspects of the capitalist system are fundamentally exploitative. They would posit that Marxism, as Marx envisaged it, is not exploitative, and it has only been made so throughout history when the ruling class used it to mobilize people in ways that are actually contrary to the Marxist ideal. However, this makes Marxism susceptible to the criticisms that Marx himself made of German philosophy. It has a sound theoretical basis, but it has been difficult to translate this theory into reality. There has not yet been a state governed by Marxist doctrine as Marx intended. Of course, Marx believed that communism would preclude the need for the state altogether, since a society free of inequality and exploitation would cause the state to wither away. Perhaps this is why Marxist ideals have been criticized as utopian.

Marx's original ideas have been greatly expounded upon by modern political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, feminists, as well as other experts from various fields of study. What most of the neo-Marxist approaches have in common is that they attempt to use the foundational ideas that Marx provided to critique the world as it is today. This is an attempt to reconcile Marxism with current material reality. If humans do create their social existence through an interaction with the material world, we must take note of a material world that already exists. This includes dominant ideologies that serve the interests of particular segments of society, most especially the ruling classes. This essay does not advocate communism as a means of social or political organization; that is beyond the scope or intention of this work. Instead, it is meant to draw attention to human agency, especially in relation to notions of ideology.

Marx realized that humans live within particular material structures that have been developed historically into present reality. Hence, his historical-materialist approach. Nevertheless, he did not believe that humans are doomed to their present reality. He called for people to

change exploitative structures. This is echoed by Larrain's observation that although circumstances are transmitted to us throughout history, these circumstances were shaped by humans in other historical periods as they interacted with their own material reality. Through praxis, we have the ability to change our world presently. Consequently, we also decide its future. Marx argues that a legitimate ideological framework is not separated from practice, and it must not alienate people from the reality of their material existence. Although a dominant ideology may not achieve these ends, we must recognize that people have the power to work within existing historically-transmitted structures to enact change, perhaps changing the nature of dominant structures in the process.

Poverty, racism, environmental degradation, unjust violence, and gender inequality are still major concerns in our present society. The fact that humans have created these problems should not be the lasting testament of human agency. We also have the capacity to fight these injustices, and human agency allows people to shape their material world in a way that can create a better social existence. Today, Canadians have the opportunity to shape government policy through action. It is an aspect of our historically-transmitted reality that we should not take lightly. Citizens can vote, lobby government, write letters to members of Parliament, or exercise their political rights in a number of ways. Many individuals look upon politics with an attitude of cynicism, but feelings of dissatisfaction will not change anything for the better if they remain separate from reality. Dominant groups in the ruling classes may still wield a disproportionately high amount of influence and capital, but this does not justify capitulation to unjust policies. Injustice will remain as long as its opposition is rooted only in philosophy. If you cannot bear the current state of government, run for office yourself. At the very least, cast a ballot. For change to occur, we must engage the material world. Otherwise, we alienate ourselves from our capacity to enact change. This robs us of a fundamental aspect of human existence: the ability to create our material and social reality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 1991), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1979), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Because the sources that were used in this essay commonly refer to humans as “man” and refer to humankind “as mankind”, these terms will be used for literary simplicity. This usage is not meant to ignore the contribution of women, and the terms “man,” “mankind,” “him,” and “his” can be thought of as references to humankind as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: NLB, 1980), 31.

<sup>6</sup> Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 149.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *The Marx Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 145.

<sup>9</sup> Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 219.

<sup>10</sup> Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 144.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Bottomore, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 384.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Concept of Ideology*, Larrain (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1979), 42.

<sup>14</sup> Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>17</sup> *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 219.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, “Estranged Labour,” in *The Marx Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 71.

<sup>19</sup> Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, *The German Ideology*, 148.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, *Estranged Labour*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Bottomore, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>25</sup> Marx, *Estranged Labour*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, *The German Ideology*, 150. This refers to the intercourse of individuals with one another in a particular mode of production, which arises from a population increase.

<sup>28</sup> Judith C. Blackwell, Murray E.G. Smith, and John S. Sorenson, *Culture of Prejudice: Arguments in Critical Social Science*, (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003), 340.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, *Estranged Labour*, 78.

<sup>30</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Estranged Labour*, 78.