THREE DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY IN MARX?

A REJOINDER TO MÁRKUS

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I

Gyorgy Márkus's interesting article on Marx's concepts of ideology raises important points which must be discussed. In short, he argues that three different meanings of ideology can be found in Marx's writings which are used in different contexts and for different purposes. Márkus recognises that these three meanings of ideology are not completely independent from one another. But he is not very clear as to what are the common elements they share apart from stating that there is a vague unity in their practical intent and ultimate theoretical presuppositions. It is rather surprising that Márkus does not emphasise the most obvious common factor which, on his own implicit account, is the critical or negative character of the three meanings. This is only explicitly mentioned for the first 'unmasking' concept of ideology which designates "theories which conceive ideas and their systems as the mainspring of historical progress". And yet when he analyses the second meaning, ideology is shown "to explain away (and thereby apologise for) the most widely encountered experiences that contradict the seeming self-evidence of fetishistic categories". Similarly, the third concept of ideology refers to an alienated form of self-consciousness which "brings historical conflicts to awareness only by transposing them into what appears to be a sphere of mere imagination and thought".

In fact it would appear that, on Márkus's own account, the mechanism of ideology remains more or less the same for the 'three meanings' in so far as in all ideology one finds a form of 'masking', 'concealing', 'transposing' or 'explaining away'. The only difference seems to be the degree of generality of the cultural forms to which the same mechanism is applied: a specific theory in the 'first meaning', 'branches of cultural production' in the 'second meaning', and the whole culture in the 'third meaning'. So the three concepts of ideology differ not so much in their basic modus operandi as in the kinds of social consciousness they affect. But if the mechanism of ideology is the same and the forms of social consciousness are partially inclusive — a specific theory is part of a cultural branch and this, in its turn is part of the whole culture — is there any sense in talking about three different concepts of ideology? I do not think so.

But even if we agreed that it would be preferable to speak of a single concept of ideology in Marx, it does not seem to me that Márkus's implicit account of it fully represents Marx's views. My disagreement with Márkus has to do with four
related points: a vagueness or lack of specificity concerning what ideology masks or conceals; a mistaken explanation of what 'unmasking' entails: a serious problem with the extension of the concept of ideology; and finally, a misunderstanding of the relationship between science and ideology.

II

The first meaning of ideology according to Márkus underlines ideology as a form of idealism because it conceives ideas as the driving forces of historical evolution and supports the supremacy of spirit in history. But the context in which Marx first developed his concept of ideology is more precise than that. The criticism which Marx levels against the Young Hegelians is not so much that they conceive of ideas as the mainspring of historical progress as the fact that they conceive mistaken ideas as the source of the problems of humankind and therefore confine themselves to criticising ideas in the hope to solve those problems. The Young Hegelians want to fight against illusions of consciousness but "they forget, however, that to these phrases they themselves are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world". It is only in this precise context that one can understand what ideology masks: by concentrating on mistaken religious or theological ideas ideology conceals the real sources of the problems of humankind which are the material contradictions of social reality. Religious ideas are not the case of the problems but a consequence of the very existence of contradictions and oppression. Thus religion is for Marx an ideology inasmuch as it masks, and diverts the people's minds from, the real antagonisms existing in society. But the Young Hegelian's critique of religion is ideological too insofar as it conceals the real sources of religion in social contradictions and pretends that religious ideas by themselves constitute the problem of society.

Márkus asserts that ideology in its second meaning explains away those experiences which destroy fetishistic categories. I entirely agree with his analysis that the market does not ensure the undisturbed reproduction of social relations and that in periods of crisis 'appearances' tend to fade away. But he does not clarify what are those 'experiences' which can destroy the sway of fetishistic appearances and which need to be 'explained away'. Marx is quite clear about this: "in the crises of the world market, the contradictions and antagonisms of bourgeois production are strikingly revealed". It is the experience of these contradictions which have come up to the surface that ideology tries to conceal.

Márkus then affirms that ideology in its third meaning transpose historical conflicts into a sphere of mere imagination. Again for Marx those historical conflicts make reference to contradictory and inverted social relations, to the fact that the process of objectification "appears as a process of dispossession from the standpoint of labour or as appropriation of alien labour from the standpoint of capital", and hence to the fact that "this twisting and inversion is a real (phenomenon), not a merely supposed one existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists". This basic inversion at the level of production
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is nevertheless concealed at the level of circulation by "the final pattern of economic relations as seen on the surface" which shows the opposite, and this determines the emergence of ideology because "the distorted form in which the real inversion is expressed is naturally reproduced in the views of the agents of this mode of production".

This means that ideology is not a simple error and that it entails more than a vague and general form of masking. In order for an error to become ideological it has to explain away the contradictions of society. This clarifies the function of ideology. By concealing the existence of the antagonism it helps preserve the antithesis and checks the revolutionary action of the negative side of the contradiction (the proletariat) which seeks to abolish it. In this sense all ideology serves the interests of the ruling class insofar as this class being the conservative side of the antagonism seeks to reproduce the contradiction. Furthermore, my interpretation shows that if all ideology entails a distorted form of consciousness not all forms of false consciousness are ideology. This is why ideology is a restricted concept which cannot be equated with a general and vague notion of false consciousness. I shall come back to this point further below.

III

We are now in a position to assess what the 'unmasking' of ideology means. For Márkus 'unmasking' has to do with the demonstration of the social determination or social genesis of ideas and more concretely it consists "in the reduction of systems of thought to the conscious or unconscious social interests which they express. To discover behind the haughty phrases about the transcendent power or external rule of ideas, the hidden sway of well-defined — but completely unthematized — narrow class or group interests is to radically refute their validity." This is of course a Mannheimian way of understanding 'unmasking', but it has very little to do with Marx. According to Mannheim the consciousness of all parties and classes is ideological inasmuch as social determination affects all of them. The fact that systems of thought are socially determined and therefore ideological, ultimately limits the claim to validity which they can posit; in other words, social determination means that all positions are partial and can lay no claim to exclusive validity. If all forms of consciousness are ideological and limited because they are socially determined, it is only natural that the unmasking of ideology should take the form of showing the particular interests to which each system of thought can be traced. In this way their validity is, if not totally refuted, at least partially impaired.

But Marx did not equate the negative character of ideology with the social determination of knowledge. If ideology serves the interests of the ruling class it is not necessarily because it has been produced by that class. The relationship between ideology and ruling class interests need not be genetic. Other classes too can produce ideology insofar as by being involved in a limited material mode of activity they try to solve in consciousness contradictions which they cannot overcome in practice. This leads to distortions which mask those contradictions. So their thought may be ideological, not because it serves their own interests,
but because the concealment of antagonisms objectively works in favour of the ruling class interests. This means that, by definition, there cannot be an ideology which serves the interests of dominated classes.

Yet the fact that ideology necessarily works for the ruling class does not mean that all ideas that serve the ruling class are ideological. Marx never meant to assert that all bourgeois ideas masked contradictions even though they may be all connected with bourgeois interests. Even more, Marx accepted and recognized that his own ideas wanted to serve the interests of the proletariat, but that was no reason for him to call his ideas ideology. In fact ideology has not to do with ideas serving the interests of different classes but with ideas which, by concealing contradictory relations, work for the dominant class. Hence the unmasking of ideology is not related to discovering the real interests which lie behind systems of thought. For Marx the unmasking of ideology is related to showing how certain ideas distort reality by explaining away its contradictory nature.

Marx did not only criticize forms of ideology produced by the ruling class but he also tried to unmask ideologies which were either produced by, or purported to serve the interests of, the proletariat. For instance he unmasked the theories of Ravenstone and others because they perceived the problem of capitalism as lying in the existence and development of machinery, natural science, art, etc., which depend on capital and are therefore produced in opposition to the workers. Of them Marx writes that “they share the narrow-mindedness of the economists (although from a diametrically opposite position) for they confuse the contradictory form of this development with its content. The latter wish to perpetuate the contradiction on account of its results. The former are determined to sacrifice the fruits which have developed within the antagonistic form, in order to get rid of the contradiction”¹³ This was also the weakness of the Luddite movement, which showed a clear-cut example of early working-class ideology. According to Marx “it took both time and experience before the work-people learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and to direct their attacks, not against the material instruments of production, but against the mode in which they are used”.¹⁴ In both these cases the real contradictions of capitalism are displaced out of sight and a different cause is highlighted which seems to be responsible for the workers' problems. But of course the struggle against that seeming cause cannot lead to the solution of the true contradictions of capitalism.

IV

In Márkus's account Marx's concept of ideology suffers a process of inflation: it progressively covers specific theories, entire cultural branches and finally the whole culture of society. Does the evidence from Marx's writings support such an extended scope for the concept of ideology? I do not think so. Márkus's main argument to identify ideology with a cultural branch is based on the 1859 'Preface' where Marx speaks of the "ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out".¹⁵ This is a notoriously difficult
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passage to interpret because of its succinctness, and it seems to me to be inappropriate to sustain a whole argument about the extension of ideology unless one can find corroborative evidence elsewhere. Mármkus does not supply such evidence.

Granting that the text is ambiguous, it is also possible to try an alternative interpretation which is not all-inclusive. Marx is not saying that the whole of philosophy, politics and aesthetics are ideological, he is just opposing his analysis of the economic conditions of production to some specific legal, religious, economic, political and philosophic forms which are ideological and in which men become conscious of the conflict. He includes there only those political, legal and philosophic forms which up to his time happened to be ideological. For ultimately, his own theory contains political, philosophical and economic elements which are not ideological. He is not trying to oppose science on the one side against philosophy, aesthetics and politics as totally ideological on the other side. When Marx says that he and Engels wanted to "settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience" he does not mean that all philosophy of whatever kind is irretrievably ideological, only the idealist and metaphysical philosophy they knew in their time. This is why Engels writes that "as soon as we realised ... that the task of philosophy thus stated means nothing but the task that a single philosopher should accomplish that which can only be accomplish by the entire human race in its progressive development — as soon as we realise that, there is an end to all philosophy in the hitherto accepted sense of the word".

Mármkus confidently asserts that "Marx repeatedly and emphatically states that bourgeois economy as a whole is a form of ideology". Political economy therefore is yet another cultural branch which becomes ideological. But Mármkus offers no textual support for this assertion. I have not found a single quotation in Marx's writings which bears this out. On the contrary, Marx is always very careful to distinguish between vulgar political economy which is ideology and classical political economy which is science. Mármkus accepts this distinction between the apologetic pseudo-science of vulgar economy and the scientific economy of the classics, but then he insists in calling both of them ideology. So classical political economy is at the same time ideology and science. This makes sense from the point of view of a positive Leninist concept which equates ideology with the ideas which serve the interests of a class: political economy is ideology insofar as it is bourgeois. But this does not make sense from the point of view of Marx's negative concept of ideology.

Marx never condemned the whole of bourgeois thought as ideological. This is not to deny that classical political economy despite its scientific achievements made several mistakes which Marx wanted to correct, some of which were ideological or became ideological. Yet not all the scientific inadequacies of Ricardo were ideological. As Marx conceived it, Ricardo's lack of precision and most of his errors and confusions result from his method, which despite being deficient, is historically justified. But at the same time Ricardo's theory insofar as it could not account for, or simply denied the existence of, crises and contradictions, became ideological the moment these crises and antagonisms
emerged. However, these ideological distortions by no means compromise the whole of Ricardo's analyses. In this sense the difference between classical political economy and vulgar political economy is one between a science which may have some ideological distortions and mere ideology pretending to have scientific status. To the extent that ideology has a negative meaning, the ideological and the scientific are mutually exclusive enterprises which cannot overlap in the main thrust of their activities but which can, of course, contain limited 'enclaves' from the opposite.

Márkus's further extension of the concept of ideology to cover the whole culture of society has no support whatsoever in Marx's writings. The only quotation that Márkus uses to uphold his case does not refer to ideology at all but rather to the more general principle of the social determination of knowledge. What that quotation says is simply that thoughts, ideas and language are not autonomous but are expressions of real life. It is indeed true that the culture of society is socially determined. But this is very different from saying that it is ideology. This does not make sense for a critical concept of ideology such as Marx's because it would entail that the totality of the cultural production of society is somehow impaired including, of course, the thought of the critic himself. This is contradictory. Marx's thought has been often accused of dogmatism precisely because of the belief that he criticises the whole culture as ideological with the exception of his own thought. But as we have seen this is not the way Marx understands ideology. For him ideology is not a blanket concept used to indict a whole culture or even the whole of bourgeois thought simply because they represent bourgeois interests. This is why he can distinguish between "the ideological component parts of the ruling class" and "the free spiritual production of this particular social formation". The latter means intellectual production free from ideology although not necessarily free from class determination.

Hence, ideology for Marx is not only a negative concept, but it is also a restricted concept. It is restricted in a double sense: on the one hand it does not cover whole cultural branches or entire cultures insofar as it seems absurd to believe that they, in their totality, mask the contradictions of society. On the other hand it does not cover all kinds of errors and distortions apart from those which have to do with the misrepresentation of social antagonisms. It is because Márkus over-extends the scope of ideology that he can conceive of "Marx's rather strange combination of a radical philosophical criticism of the total culture of bourgeois society as alienated-ideological with the unquestioned acceptance of the validity of inherited cultural criteria, above all those of the sciences". As it stands this combination is a paradox, a contradiction in terms. But this is so only because Márkus has started with the mistaken assumption that Marx questions the whole culture as ideological. Marx does not do that and has no problem in appreciating the scientific and artistic progress which the bourgeoisie has brought about. Even more, as we saw, he is critical of the ideological position of those adversaries of capitalism who want to get rid of the scientific and artistic fruits of capitalist development, because they throw away the baby together with the bath water.
This leads us to the problem of Marx's understanding of science and to the vexing question of the relationship between science and ideology. I have not got the space to go into these matters in any great depth. But I can touch on the following points. Márkus affirms that Marx has a rather uncritical attitude toward the cultural form of the natural sciences and wants to follow its model. One cannot deny that on the whole Marx considers science as a progressive and liberating element in society and conceives of his own theory as scientific. Yet this does not prevent him from being aware of the shortcomings of natural sciences, nor does he fully understand his own intellectual enterprise in conformity with the cultural model of the natural sciences. At the very least he is aware of some differences, the most important of which has to do with the exclusion of history in natural sciences. In Capital Marx argues that "the weak points in the abstract materialism of natural science, a materialism that excludes history and its process, are at once evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions of its spokesmen whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own speciality." Marx accepts that a non-historical method applied to nature can discover its laws whereas the same method applied to society produces ideological deceptions insofar as it can only reduce social relations to the state of autonomous nature facing men from without.

For Márkus Marx's supposedly uncritical attitude toward natural sciences is coupled with an essentially 'negativistic' conception of everyday consciousness. It is true that Marx's analyses in Capital provide the basis for understanding why both capitalists and workers may be trapped in the fetishistic world of appearances which they encounter in their daily activities. Both workers and capitalists tend to be "blinded by competition" and the fetishistic inversion of subject and object "necessarily produces certain correspondingly inverted conceptions, a transposed consciousness which is further developed by the metamorphoses and modifications of the actual circulation process". Márkus following Korsch denies that Marx ever applied the term ideology to the phenomena of everyday consciousness. It seems to me that this 'transposed consciousness' is precisely an example of ideological forms which arise in the spontaneous consciousness of men and women as a result of their daily practice. But whether or not we call those spontaneous forms ideology, it is clear that for Marx the phenomenal forms or appearances of social relations do not produce by themselves a univocal form of deception or mystification. The practical standpoint of the subject is crucial. Phenomenal forms are spontaneously reproduced in consciousness, not as an unavoidable automatic result, but as a likely consequence of men's limited daily practice of reproduction. Other forms of practice which one may call revolutionary determine different forms of consciousness. This political practice and its subversive forms of consciousness can emerge because also in their daily practice men experience its contradictory nature. This at least Márkus recognises.

So the everyday consciousness of the masses is not bound to be ideological and mystified although it may tend to be. This depends on how latent or apparent
contradictions have become and on the way in which people experience them. It is important to emphasise this point for although Marx's theory of class consciousness may not be as advanced as Gramsci's, it cannot either be assimilated with Althusser's and in general the Leninist idea that the spontaneous consciousness of the proletariat is inevitably deficient and can only be changed by the importation of a science which has been fully worked out by intellectuals from without the class. This is not the way Marx understands the relationship between science and ideological consciousness. The discovery of the labour theory of value is for Marx a momentous scientific achievement but he knows that "by no means dissipates the mist through which the social character of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves". Ideology cannot be overcome by science, it cannot be "dissolved by mental criticism...but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug...". When Márkus affirms that "the Marxian theory of ideology therefore in fact assimilates the relationship of critical theory and its addressees into the model of 'learning a science'..." he makes a mistake. Marx did not have a "programme of overcoming the 'illusions of ideology' through a simultaneous 'scientisation and popularisation' of theory...". The relationship between science and ideology cannot be construed as the opposition between truth and error. For Marx revolutionary practice is the only way to overcome ideology at its roots by solving the real contradictions which give rise to it. If mere ideas or illusions were the real chains of men, as the Young Hegelians believed, then a scientific critique of those illusions would suffice to dispel them. But distorted ideas cannot be detached from the material conditions of their production. Only by revolutionising these conditions can ideology be destroyed.

In any case it seems to me that Márkus is wrestling with a very crucial question when at the end of his article he sees problems in both the position which does not reflect upon itself as determined and which as a theory "can locate the emancipatory impulses of its own subject and addressee, the working class, only in the form of unarticulated needs, frustrations and anxieties..." and the position that directly challenges "the autonomy of high culture in the name of social emancipation". Yet I am not happy with the way in which this question is solved or rather left unsolved with a vague final invocation to apply the theory of ideology to the theory of ideology itself. I have already argued that Marx is not totally uncritical about science, but what is more important, he does not see in it the cure to all problems and ideology in particular. What Márkus misses seems to me is Marx's emphasis on a liberating practice. The emancipatory impulses of the working class Marx sees not in the form of mere frustrations and unarticulated needs, but in its real struggles which he first encounters during his exile in Paris. This encounter is crucial for the development of Marx's theory and he readily recognises this fact. This means that Marx accepts that his own theory is determined and that he has become a theoretician of the proletarian class because the actual struggles of the proletariat are sufficiently developed and have assumed clearer outlines. So Marx's conception of the emancipatory impulses of the proletariat was not at all 'negativistic'. If anything, perhaps his
view was a bit too 'optimistic'. Marx's science wanted to express a movement which was going on, it was not as in Lenin an attempt to 'import' a scientific theory separately constructed into the inevitably deficient consciousness of the class. Yet at the same time there is no doubt that Marx's theory is not an automatic outcome of class struggle and that it maintains its relative autonomy.

Marxism has clearly outlived the original situation in which it was produced and this has happened because the validity of its ideas, as is the case with many other theories, is not fully tied up with their social genesis. But this does not mean that a theory can survive purely on the basis of a supposedly immanent force. Social determination of thought must be understood as a continuous process of re-animation of ideas in the context of new practices, as a process whereby even old ideas can become forms through which men or women can live and formulate their new problems and struggle for their solution. No theory can survive if this reference to practice does not exist. Márkus seems to believe that Marxism not only was not originally aware of its own determination but, even worse, it survives today in a total divorce from practice. As he puts it "Marxist theory enjoys an unprecedented 'scientific' (i.e. academic) respectability, while at the same time its theoretically 'respectable' (intellectually honest and serious) forms have no impact or connection with radical social movements of any kind". This statement is really striking for its total blindness to recent contemporary history. Did Marxism have nothing to do with the independence of Angola and Mozambique, with the liberation of South Vietnam and Nicaragua from corrupt regimes, with the short-lived democratic experiment of Popular Unity in Chile? Has Marxism no connection with Eurocommunist parties, with peace movements and women's movements all over the world? One can, of course, disagree with particular aspects or policies of these movements. One can and indeed must be more drastically critical of the totalitarian aspects of other experiences which also claim to follow Marxism in Eastern Europe, and here, perhaps, also doubt whether Marxism itself subsists as an intellectually honest and serious enterprise. But Márkus cannot seriously maintain that a respectable and honest Marxism has no impact or connection with radical social movements of any kind without at the same time depriving himself of the basis on which alone can be understood why Marxism has survived as an academically respectable theory.

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Notes

2. Ibid., p. 85.
3. Ibid., p. 90.
4. Ibid., p. 95.


16. Ibid.


19. See for instance K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Martin Lawrence, London, 1966, p. 43: “Ricardo's theory of values is the scientific interpretation of actual economic life . . . Ricardo establishes the truth of his formula by deriving it from all economic relations, and by explaining in this way all phenomena, even those . . . which at first sight seem to contradict it; it is precisely that which makes his doctrine a scientific system.” See also *Capital*, Vol. III, p. 830: “it is the great merit of classical economy to have destroyed this false appearance and illusion . . . this personification of things and conversion of production into entities, this religion of everyday life”; and *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Vol. II, p. 106: “… to examine how matters stand with the contradiction between the apparent and the actual movement of the system. This then is Ricardo's great historical significance for science”.


21. G. Márkus, op. cit., p. 94: “(T)he autonomisation of thoughts and ideas is only a consequence of the autonomisation of personal relations and contacts between individuals . . . (N)either thoughts, nor language constitute a realm of their own; they are merely expressions of real life”.


24. Ibid.


27. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 79.


This does not diminish the important contribution of science to the unmasking of ideology. But science is no substitute for revolutionary practice. In Marx's terms we might say that science contributes to the 'theoretical collapse' of ideology but cannot by itself bring about its collapse in practice. See K. Marx, letter to Kugelman, 11 July, 1868, Selected Correspondence, Progress, Moscow, 1975, p. 52.

32. G. Márkus, op. cit., p. 100.

33. Ibid., p. 101.

34. See K. Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, op. cit., p. 117: "science, which is produced by the historical movement and associating itself consciously with it, has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary".