

The Ideological Structure

by Marta Harnecker

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1. INTRODUCTION (1)

In the previous chapters we have seen that marxist theory holds that in all societies there are three levels: the economic level, the juridico-political level, and the ideological level. The articulation of these three levels among themselves is a complex set of relationships, with the economic level being determinant in the last instance.

If we use Marx and Engels' architectural metaphor of a building with a foundation or infrastructure and a superstructure which rests on this foundation, it can be said the ideology belongs to the superstructure. But ideology is not limited to being solely an instance of the superstructure, it exists in other parts of the social structure as well, IT IS THE CEMENT THAT HOLDS THE BUILDING TOGETHER. Ideology makes people adhere to their roles, their functions, and their social relations.

Ideology penetrates into all human activities, including the economic and political practices. It appears in their attitudes toward the requirements of production, the conception that the workers have of the mechanism of production. It is present in political attitudes and judgements, in cynicism, in honesty, in resignation, and in rebellion. It governs family behavior, relations with other persons and with nature. It is present in our judgements about "the meaning of life", etc.

Ideology is present to such a degree in all of our acts and gestures that it becomes INDISCERNIBLE FROM THE WAY WE EXPERIENCE LIFE, and for this reason, all our immediate analyses of "life" are profoundly marked by the action of ideology.

When we think that we are faced with a clear and unobstructed perception of reality or with a pure practice, what we really have is a perception or practice which is "impure", influenced by the invisible structures of ideology. Since one does not perceive his/her own actions, one tends to take one's perceptions of things and of the world as perceptions of the "thing itself" without realizing that this perception only takes place under the distorting action of ideology.

2. THE CONTENT OF THE IDEOLOGICAL LEVEL

The ideological level is, therefore, an objective reality, indispensable for the existence of every society, even a communist society.

What is the content of this level? It is formed by two kinds of systems: *the system of ideas and social representations* (ideology in the strict sense) and the *system of attitudes and social behavior* (customs).

The SYSTEM OF IDEAS AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS includes the political, juridical, moral, religious, aesthetic, and philosophical ideas of mankind in a given society. These ideas are given in the form of different views of the world and of man's role in it. Ideologies are not objective, scientific representations of the world, but representations filled with imaginary elements; rather than describe reality, they express desires, hopes, nostalgia. Ideologies can contain elements of knowledge, but what predominate are those elements which have the FUNCTION OF ADAPTING TO REALITY. Human beings live their relations to the world within ideology.

It is this which transforms their consciousness, their attitudes and their conduct in order to adjust them to their duties and conditions of existence. For example: religious ideology which treats the issues and feelings around suffering and death gives the exploited the ideas that permit them to better endure their conditions of existence.

THE SYSTEM OF ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL BEHAVIORS is made up of all the habits, customs, and tendencies necessary to act in a certain way. It is easier for someone to change his view of the world, that is, his ideology in the strict sense, than to change his customary ways of living and dealing practically with crucial situations. For this reason ideology in the strict sense and the system of attitudes and behaviors are not always identical. The dialectical relations that are established between them range from total or partial correlation to contradiction.

It is important to pay attention to the system of attitudes and behaviors, since through it are expressed specific ideological tendencies. Thus, for example, certain CUSTOMS, "work habits" a certain "style of leadership and command" which can be contrary to proletarian ideology can be found in socialist militants or leaders. These work habits and styles of leadership can, if they are permitted, become widespread, and hence become signs of social distinction (conscious or unconscious) in the ideological class struggle. The bureaucratic or technocratic behavior of some marxist leaders reveals the penetration of bourgeois ideology into the ranks of the working class.

3. IDEOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL CLASSES (2)

We have seen that both in a classless society and in a class society ideology has the function of reinforcing a given relation of human beings with each other and with their conditions of existence, adapting individuals to the tasks that society sets for them.

In class society this function is dominated by the way human beings are divided into classes. Ideology, in this case, is supposed to ASSURE THAT PEOPLE REMAIN IN THE GENERAL STRUCTURE OF CLASS EXPLOITATION. It is supposed to assure the domination of one class over the rest, making the exploited accept the conditions of their exploitation as if they were based on the "will of God", or "nature" or "moral duty", etc.

But ideology is not simply a "pious lie" invented by the exploiters to trick the exploited. It serves them as a bond of social cohesion that they act as members of the same class, that of exploiters. The "pious lie" of ideology has, thus, a double purpose: IT IS EXERCISED OVER THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE EXPLOITED TO MAKE THEM ACCEPT AS NATURAL THEIR CONDITION OF BEING EXPLOITED AND IS EXERCISED OVER THE MEMBERS OF THE DOMINANT CLASS TO PERMIT THEM TO PRACTICE, IN A NATURAL WAY, THEIR EXPLOITATION AND DOMINATION.

4. IDEOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

Ideology, like all of social reality, is only intelligible through its structure. Ideology brings with it representations, images, signs, etc., but these elements mean nothing in isolation. It is the system of ideology, its mode of combining its elements that give them meaning; it is its structure that determines its significance and its function. Since it is determined by its STRUCTURE, ideology is greater than the sum of all the ways in which it is lived by one or another individual. Ideology, therefore, is not reducible to the individual forms in which it is lived, and for this reason it can be the OBJECT OF OBJECTIVE STUDY. For this reason we can speak of the nature of ideology and examine it.

5. IDEOLOGICAL REGIONS

The objective study of ideology enables us to see that, in spite of its being a reality that is diffused throughout the entire social body, it can be divided, into particular regions, centered around different themes. In this way we can distinguish relatively autonomous regions in the heart of the ideological realm, for example: moral, religious, juridical, political, aesthetic, and philosophical ideology, etc.

Not all of these regions have always existed in history. It is possible to foresee that certain ones will disappear or be mixed with others in the course of the history of socialism and communism.

In relation to the social classes which exist in different societies, one or another region dominates the others. In this way we can explain, for example, the remarks of Marx and Engels about the dominant influence of ideology in all the movements of peasant rebellion from the XIVth century to the XVIIIth, and even in certain primitive forms in the workers' movement. Religious ideology seems to dominate as an ideological region in the history of certain oppressed races, as with the Negroes in the US.

6. PRACTICAL IDEOLOGIES AND THEORETICAL IDEOLOGIES

In each of the previously mentioned regions, ideology can exist in two forms: 1) a more or less diffuse, unreflective form or as a PRACTICAL IDEOLOGY and 2) a more or less conscious, systematized and reflective form, as a THEORETICAL IDEOLOGY.

We know that religious ideologies can exist which have rules, rites, etc. without having a theological system; the appearance of a theology represents a higher level of theoretical systematizations of religious ideology. The same occurs within the other regions of ideology. They can exist under a non-theoretical, unsystematic form, the form of customs, tendencies, preferences, etc. . . or, on the contrary, under a systematic and reflective form like moral "theory", political "theory", etc. The highest theoretical form of ideology is

philosophy in the traditional sense of the word. It is important to clarify right now that these "THEORETICAL IDEOLOGIES" can contain scientific elements, but since these elements are contained within an ideological structure, they can provide only partial knowledge which is distorted or limited by its location within this structure.

7. IDEOLOGICAL TENDENCIES

Not only are there areas or regions of ideology, but there exist, in addition, different ideological tendencies.

By stating that "the dominant ideas are the ideas of the dominant class" Marx shows us how to study diverse ideological tendencies. In the same way that there are dominant classes and dominated classes, there are dominant and dominated ideologies.

Therefore, within the ideological level in general, we can observe the existence of DIFFERENT IDEOLOGICAL TENDENCIES WHICH EXPRESS THE "REPRESENTATIONS" OF THE DIFFERENT SOCIAL CLASSES: bourgeois, petty bourgeois, and proletarian ideology.

But we should not lose sight of the fact that in capitalist societies petty bourgeois and proletarian ideologies are SUBORDINATED to those of the ruling class, which always win out despite the protests of the exploited. This scientific truth is of decisive importance in understanding the history of the workers' movement and of communist practice. What does Marx mean when he says that bourgeois ideology dominates the other ideologies, particularly proletarian ideology? It means that worker protest against exploitation is expressed within the very structure of the system, and to a large degree, within the representations and frames of reference of dominant bourgeois ideology, for example the workers' struggle for greater purchasing power for consumer goods. The pressure of bourgeois ideology is such that the working class cannot, by itself, free itself from that ideology. What it can do is to express its protests and hopes, using certain elements of bourgeois ideology, but it continues being its prisoner, locked into the dominant structure. IN ORDER FOR SPONTANEOUS WORKER IDEOLOGY TO BECOME LIBERATED FROM BOURGEOIS IDEOLOGY IT IS NECESSARY THAT IT RECEIVE, FROM WITHOUT, THE AID OF SCIENCE and that it be transformed under the influence of this new element, radically different from ideology.

The fundamental Leninist thesis of "INTERVENTION" in the workers' movement or the necessary "FUSION" OF MARXIST THEORY WITH THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT is therefore neither an arbitrary thesis nor an account of historical accident. It is based, on the contrary, on the very nature of ideology and the absolute limits of the natural development of the spontaneous ideology of the working class.

8. THE ORIGIN OF THE DEFORMED AND FALSIFIED CHARACTER OF IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS (3)

Ideologies contain an element of knowledge of reality, but this is always found integrated into a whole system of representation which, from its inception, is a deformed and falsified system of reality.

What is the origin of the necessarily deformed and falsified character of ideology?

Does it originate in the necessity of the ruling class to deceive the classes which it subordinates in order to maintain its domination over them?

In order to answer this question, let us first analyze the limits of all spontaneous consciousness of reality.

To do this we shall use one of Marx's analyses from volume III of *Capital*, Chapter IX, about the general rate of profit.

Let us briefly put in context the paragraphs that interest us. In this chapter Marx shows that originally the rates of profit of each branch of production differ greatly, one from another, but that, through the effect of competition, these rates tend to be equalized in an average rate of profit. The prices of production, in the capitalist system of production, are established by adding to the cost of production of commodities a percentage of profit calculated on the basis of the average rate of profit. This means that the individual capitalist does not receive exactly the surplus value which he produces. From the mass of surplus value produced in a given period by total social capital, he receives only a quantity proportional to the capital he has invested.

This is, in brief, what Marx says in the following text:

So far as profits are concerned, the various capitalists are just so many stockholders in a stock company in which the shares of profit are uniformly divided per 100, so that profits differ in the case of the individual capitalists only in accordance with the amount of capital invested by each in the aggregate enterprise, i.e., according to this investment in social production as a whole, according to the number of his shares. Therefore, the portion of the price of commodities which replaces the elements of capital consumed in the production of these commodities, the portion, therefore, which will have to be used to buy back these consumed capital values, i.e., their cost-price, depends entirely on the outline of capital within the respective spheres of production. But the other element of the price of commodities, the capital added to this cost-price, does not depend on the amount of capital produced in a given sphere of production by a given capital in a given period of time. It depends on the mass of profit which falls

as an average for any given period to each individual capital as a aliquot part of the total social capital invested in social production. (4)

A few pages beyond Marx shows how this affects the consciousness of the agents of production, i.e., the separation or difference in magnitude between the surplus value produced by the capitalist and the profit received for the capital he has invested:

The actual difference of magnitude between profit and surplus value. . . in the various spheres of production now completely conceals the true nature and origin of profit not only from the capitalist, who has a special interest in deceiving himself on this score, but from the laborer. (5)

And a few paragraphs later he remarks on:

. . . The utter incapacity of the practical capitalist, blinded by competition as he is, and incapable of penetrating its phenomena, to recognize the inner essence and inner structure of this process behind its outer appearances. (6)

We can thus draw some important conclusions for the study of ideology from this analysis by Marx.

Marx indicates that the fundamental base of the capitalist economic structure (that is, surplus value, the true source of profit) is completely hidden from the consciousness of the agents of production (the capitalists and workers). From this we can conclude that the perception which the agents of production have of the production process, even those who form part of the ruling class, is a deformed and falsified perception. This deformation of reality does not, therefore, come from the will of the ruling class to deceive, but rather from the objective character of the economic system as such (that is to say, the difference in size between surplus value and profit).

We can, therefore, conclude that the distortion of reality proper by ideological knowledge is not explained by a kind of "bad conscience" or "the will to deceive" of the ruling classes but rather is owed fundamentally to the NECESSARY OPAQUENESS OF SOCIAL REALITIES THAT ARE COMPLEX STRUCTURES, AND WHICH CAN ONLY BE KNOWN THROUGH A SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF THEM.

In effect, in real life, human beings are found effectively determined by OBJECTIVE STRUCTURES (relations of production, class political relations, etc.), their practical life convinces them of the existence of these realities, it makes them perceive SOME OBJECTIVE EFFECTS of the action of these structures but it conceals their essence. They cannot, through simple perception, arrive at a true KNOWLEDGE of these structures. The knowledge of the mechanisms of the different social structures can only be the result of another activity different from the simple perception that comes from everyday life: SCIENTIFIC activity.

In the same way knowledge of the laws of nature cannot be the product either of simple, technical activity or of simple perception - which only provide observations, empirical knowledge and technical recipes.

On the contrary, it must be the product of a special activity, different from immediate activities, the product of SCIENTIFIC activity, which CAPTURES "THROUGH THE APPEARANCES THE ESSENCE AND THE STRUCTURE OF THESE REALITIES."

This is the real reason for the existence of ideology as a deformed and falsified representation. This is the real reason which allows us to understand why, even in classless societies, ideology will continue to exist. The particular forms of ideology can vary tremendously, from the myths of primitive societies to the different ideological forms of modern society, (moral, religious, aesthetic, juridical, political ideology, etc.) but in every society, class or not, ideology survives as necessarily deformed and falsified knowledge. The effect of this deformation can be greater or lesser, and it continues to exist so long as its cause exists: the structural nature of society which produces ideology as one of its organic effects.

It is erroneous, therefore, to believe that the deformed and falsified character of ideology is owed to pure and simple ignorance or to a myth totally created by a group and a class. Marxism has broken with this conception of ideology which was, basically, an idealist conception.

In class societies this first deformation is combined with a supplementary deformation which dominates the former. One of the fundamental attainments of Marxist theory is precisely the affirmation that in a class society ideology is always class ideology, whose content is determined by the class struggle, and in which society the dominant ideology is the ideology of the ruling class.

Nevertheless, if this truth is taken by itself it runs the danger of falling into an erroneous conception about the nature of ideology; the danger of thinking that ideological representation is a useful lie invented by the ruling class to dominate the classes which it subordinates to itself, as if the members of the ruling class possessed THE TRUTH and were able to escape the effects of deformation produced by every ideology. However, to state this is not to deny that the ruling class can consciously use the effects of deformation to fortify its dominant position.

There is no doubt that the deformation of ideology is dominated, in class society, by the specific effects of the division of classes, the role which these classes play in the social structure, etc. but this fact in no way changes the general principle, which explains in the last instance, the necessary deformation of all ideological representation by the STRUCTURAL CHARACTER OF EVERY SOCIETY.

9. IDEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC DETERMINATION

We have seen that the ideological level is constituted by the joining of representation and social behavior. According to Marxism, the GUIDELINE which allows us to explain these ideas and behavior is the way in which human beings produce material goods, that is, the economic structure of society. It is not, therefore, their ideas which determine behavior, but the way in which people participate in the production of material goods which determine their thoughts and actions.

But by saying that the economy determines human ideas, are we not implying the reduction of the ideological level to a simple reflection of the economics?

Marxism does not contend that ideology can simply be reduced to economics. It asserts, on the contrary, that the IDEOLOGICAL LEVEL HAS ITS OWN CONTENT, AND ITS OWN LAWS OF OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT. As we saw above, this level is constituted by diverse ideological tendencies (bourgeois, petty bourgeois, proletarian, etc.) of which one dominates the rest, and therefore determines to a certain degree their forms of existence. On the other hand, the dominant region (religious, moral, philosophical, etc.) is not directly determined by the economy but by the characteristics belonging to the ideological structure of a given society. According to the religious or lay traditions of a given society, the dominant bourgeois ideology will be transmitted through religious, moral, or philosophical expressions. The ruling class always knows to utilize the language which permits it to achieve the greatest communication with the dominated class. It gives a class content to the IDEOLOGICAL MATERIAL which presents itself as the tradition, habits and customs of that given society.

The ideological level is not the simple reflection of the economic level but a reality which has its own structure and its own laws of operation and development (pre-existing ideological material, a dominant tendency with a form of acting on the subordinate tendencies, etc.). Economic determinism acts on this structure in its entirety. Therefore the ideological product is the result of two kinds of determinations: one internal to the ideological structure itself and the other external (juridico-political and economic). THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS DIRECT, MECHANICAL DETERMINATION BY THE ECONOMY, BUT RATHER A COMPLEX, STRUCTURAL DETERMINATION.

Let us see what Engels has to say in this respect in a letter to Conrad Schmidt, October 27, 1890:

As to the realms of ideology. . . religion, philosophy, etc. - these have a prehistoric stock, found in existence by, and taken over in, the historical period, of what we would today call bunk.

That is, each new historical period (marked by a new economic determination) finds itself faced with material inherited from the previous historical period, and it is on this material that the new economic determination acts.

But it is not only a question of inherited ideological material, but also, and above all in the case of ideologies which have come to acquire an elevated degree of systematization, of an 'instrumentation' which permits this material to be developed, in libraries, archives, research projects, educational structure, etc. The poverty or wealth of a country's philosophy, for example, does not depend directly on the country's economic poverty or richness but on the poverty or richness of the philosophical material and 'instrumentation' inherited from the earlier period.

Engels says the following about this in the letter cited above:

Here economy creates nothing new, but it determines the way in which the thought material found in existence is altered and further developed, and that too for the most part indirect for it is the political, legal, and moral reflexes which exert the greatest direct influence on philosophy.

If we insist on the relative autonomy of the ideological structures with respect to the economic structure, it is not only for the desire to be theoretically precise, but because of the GRAVE POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS WHICH IGNORING IT CAN HAVE.

Many critics of Marxism try to deny the validity of this theory, asserting that Marx was incorrect in respect to the working class: "to the degree that capitalism has been developing, the working class - instead of growing and maturing in class consciousness - becomes more bourgeois, adapting more and more to the system". If Marxism were to maintain that class consciousness or ideology is a simple reflection of economic conditions, one could doubtlessly assert that Marx was incorrect. But Marxism maintains something quite different: economic conditions create the objective material conditions (concentrations of great masses of workers in urban centers; technical division and organization of labor with the factories, which creates among the workers habits of cooperation and discipline, mobility of labor between areas which permits the discovery of new horizons, etc.) which serve as the base for reaching proletarian class consciousness, but these conditions DO NOT PROVOKE, DO NOT CREATE ANYTHING DIRECTLY. In order that the proletariat discover its true class interests, that is, to come to acquire proletarian class consciousness, requires the intervention of extra-economic factors; it is necessary to put Marxist theory in the hands of the proletariat, the only instrument capable of freeing the proletarian ideological tendency from economist and reformist deformations, products of the dominant bourgeois ideology.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have studied the ideological structure. We have seen what place it occupies within society, what relations exist between it and the social classes, what is the origin of the necessarily deformed and falsified nature of ideological representations, and, finally, how economic determination acts on the ideological structure.

We have looked at the following concepts of the general theory of historical materialism; ideological structure, -ideological regions, -ideological tendencies, -practical ideologies, and -theoretical ideologies.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the place of ideology within the social structure?
2. What is the content of the ideological structure?
3. Why do attitudes and behavior form part of the ideological structure?
4. What is the relation of ideology to social classes?
5. Can the proletariat have an independent ideology?
6. In what sense is ideology a structure?
7. What is an ideological region?
8. Can you give an example of a practical ideology and a theoretical ideology?
9. What is an ideological tendency?
10. What is the origin of the necessarily deformed and falsified character of ideology?
11. What does it imply to assert that this character is owed solely to the interest of the ruling class to deceive?
12. Does the degree of maturity and richness of a society's ideology depend on a people's economic wealth?
13. How does economic determinism act on ideology?

THEMES FOR REFLECTION

1. Can science be considered a theoretical ideology?
2. What are the causes of the reformist attitudes of many unions?
3. In what moment of the class struggle does the ideological struggle acquire a preponderant role?
4. What role can religious ideologies play in Latin America?

ENDNOTES

1. On this point we base ourselves entirely on the article, "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation and the Ideological Struggle", by Louis Althusser (in Spanish) in *Casa de las Americas* num. 34, Havana, Cuba p.19-20.
2. In this point we base ourselves on the previously cited article by Althusser, p. 20-22. The concept of social classes will be thoroughly treated in Chapter X. Meanwhile we shall put forward the definition which we give there and which we shall study: "Social classes are antagonistic social groups in which one group appropriates the labor of the other because of the different places they occupy in the economic structure of a given mode of production, places which are fundamentally determined by the specific forms in which they are related to the means of production". As examples of these antagonistic classes we give owners and slaves; landlords and serfs; and capitalists and workers.
3. Based fundamentally on Althusser's article "On the Concept of Ideology" in Spanish in *Polemica sobre marxismo y humanismo*, Siglo XXI, Mexico, 1966, p. 183-186 and in the article by Emilio Ipola "Los Lenguajes del Marxismo en lo que se Refiere al Analisis de la Cuota de Ganancia Media Realizado por Marx en el Libro III de *El Capital*"
4. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 3., p. 158-9.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
6. *Ibid.*

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URGENT TASKS

journal of the revolutionary left

number 6

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Published Quarterly. Single issue \$2.00. Four issues \$7.00.
Sojourner Truth Organization, Box 8493, Chicago, IL 60680