

Karl Marx's Critique of Modernity Through His Understanding of Ideology

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Abstract. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Rene Descartes' consolidates his understanding of the subject, arguing that the essence of the subject lies in her capacity for rational thought—and, importantly, not in her embeddedness in a socio-historical context, her rootedness in a body, or in her practical, worldly activity. Although Descartes put forward this view of the subject more than three centuries ago, it still continues to inform and remain dominant in the modern western world. Unbeknownst to Descartes, however, is that he gives expression to and buttresses what Karl Marx denounces as bourgeois ideology. It is the purpose of this paper to flesh out Marx's meaning behind bourgeois ideology in an effort to understand his critique not only of Descartes, but also, more importantly, of modernity and capitalism.

In the opening pages of *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx outlines the historical beginnings of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie. More importantly for this paper, however, is the historical foundation of bourgeois ideology that is generated by the above developments. That is, bourgeois ideology for Marx is an historical product which is produced by the socio-economic conditions underlying it. More specifically, Marx understands that ideology's substance and content is determined not only by the productive forces of modern industry and the corresponding relationships of production between the capitalist and proletariat, but also out of the class interest which seeks to further the life of capitalism. Despite the above historical situating of ideology, which Marx thinks is essential for class consciousness, ideology, as Marx understands it, repudiates its concrete origins and attempts to live an independent, ideal existence. That is, it takes what Marx considers historical reality—that concrete, material conditions provide the matrix of being and thought, determining both—and inverts it, asserting that it is the ideal which determines the material. A consequence of this inversion is that ideology negates what Marx considers the primary sociality and embodiedness of

wo/man and posits wo/man as an isolated, detached individual that is divorced from her bodily life. In this way, ideology mystifies wo/man's consciousness, obfuscating the conditions which determine existence. In doing so, ideology prevents the kind of practical activity which Marx thinks is essential for revolutionizing society and transcending capitalism. Thus, ideology buttresses capitalism and the position of the bourgeois, and this is perfectly understandable for Marx as ideology encompasses the ruling ideas of the bourgeoisie which are, on the one hand, produced and propagated by this very same class out of their own class interest and, on the other hand, impressed on the proletariat as well as reproduced by them.

To begin with, Marx's basic definition of ideology is that which inverts reality. That is, instead of materiality as primary in conditioning being and ideality, which is as Marx would have it, ideology asserts that it is ideality which is primary in conditioning being. An example of ideology is found in the Young Hegelians. As Marx highlights, the Young Hegelians divorce consciousness from its material foundation and posit it as leading an independent, ideal and abstract existence. Even more, they posit consciousness as primary, for they resolve and reduce all of existence—including wo/man's relationships—into a product of consciousness. Because of this, they argue that change comes about not from revolutionizing material conditions, but from changing consciousness. Thus, what limits wo/man isn't derived from the concrete but is a symptom of a disorder in consciousness. In Marx's words, they "logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations."¹ As Marx goes on to point out,

¹ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 149.

such a demand is nothing more than asserting that what is needed to better society is a change of perspective—that is, to “interpret reality in another way, i.e., to recognise it by means of another interpretation.”² In this way, the Young Hegelians aren't advocating wo/man to fight against existing material conditions. Instead, they are demanding wo/man fight against products of consciousness—against “‘phrases’.”³ Further, the Young Hegelians have no conception of sociality, for change is accomplished by an isolated individual. For Marx, however, such thinking is ideological across all its dimensions—in its divorcing wo/man from concrete, social life and in positing the primacy of consciousness not only by reducing social ills to a disordered consciousness, but also by reducing real social change to a change in consciousness. All of this for Marx mystifies reality as it fails to understand the material conditions of existence, and lacking this no real change can occur. As Marx puts it, “They forget [...] 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.”⁴ In this way, by reducing change to nothing but a conceptual matter, the philosophy of the Young Hegelians is clearly symptomatic of ideology, for it's practical effect is to prevent the kind of understanding and action needed to bring about real change—i.e., a drastic reorganization of the social, economic and political sphere. And only in this way can consciousness change—which, incidentally, as the Young Hegelians observed, does require change, but, again, following Marx, they are ignorant of the material conditions necessary for such a change to occur.

² *Ibid.*, 149.

³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

A further elaboration of ideology is to be found in Marx's criticism of Ludwig Feuerbach. As Marx observes in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Feuerbach begins noting that religious alienation is symptomatic of a split in reality, a separation between "a religious, imaginary world and a real one."⁵ For Feuerbach, this split is redeemable, for the religious world must be resolved into the secular, real one by showing that it is derived from the latter. However, for Marx, such a suggestion misses the principal task to be accomplished. As Marx reasons, "For the fact that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis."⁶ In other words, Feuerbach overlooks the fact that religion is a function of a disordered, contradiction-ridden secular world, and it is only in addressing and resolving this contradiction that religion can be transcended. That Feuerbach neglects this is clearly a sign of ideology for Marx, for all that harmfully mystifies the concrete conditions of existence is ideological.

Marx goes on to explain two other dimensions of ideology—the absolute primacy of objectivity and the reduction of sensuousness to contemplation. To begin with, in further explaining the means by which the contradictions within the secular world are resolved, Marx advocates that "The latter [the secular basis] must itself [...] first be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionized in practice."⁷ Thus, first the contradiction existing in the material world must be understood, but Marx doesn't stop at the mere contemplation of the contradiction. Indeed, Marx notes that this is the "chief defect of all hitherto existing

⁵ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 144.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

materialism—that of Feuerbach included [...].” That is, Marx sees that for such materialists “the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively.”⁸ That is, materialists prior to Marx not only asserted the absolute primacy of objectivity in determining subjectivity, but also advised that contemplation is the means by which one engages with reality. Thus, in speaking of the former, it is impressed upon wo/man that she has no agency with which to determine her existence. Moreover, in speaking of the latter, such contemplation—and not practical activity—is regarded as sensuous activity. Marx, however, is strongly against both approaches.

On the one hand, the primacy of objectivity—that is, the absolute primacy of the objective where subjectivity plays no determining role—could with reason be labeled as ideological as it prevents the kind of active engagement with social conditions that Marx prescribes and subverts Marx's understanding that subjectivity can affect existing conditions. Thus, Marx explains that “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and change upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances [...].”⁹ However, one must be careful with this passage, for Marx is clearly not asserting the primacy of subjectivity. Indeed, this understanding of Marx would be in opposition to Marx's own understanding that wo/man is embedded and determined by the socio-historical process within which she lives. Instead, if one is to be in accord with Marx, this sentence must be read as asserting that while historical conditions do determine existence, it is through the agency—agency understood in reference to the given socio-

⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

historical process and not as absolute freedom of the will—of wo/man that those conditions change. If Marx is understood in this vein, then all barriers that prevent this from reaching consciousness can be called ideological, for, in the case of capitalism, it is serving to strengthen a fixation to a social order which benefits the small bourgeois minority by instilling in the subject a sense of powerlessness over existing conditions.

On the other hand, Marx labels anything that reduces social action to contemplation as ideological. Indeed, contemplation, although helping one to understand the contradictions within the material world, is of no avail in removing them. For this, Marx advocates concrete social action, and this is the meaning behind his urging that the contradictions underlying the genesis of religion must be “revolutionised in practice.”¹⁰ That is, Marx encourages progressive action that aims to removing the contradictions embedded in the material world. Indeed, such action exemplifies sensuousness for Marx—something Feuerbach's theory lacks, for “he does not conceive sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity.”¹¹ Instead, Feuerbach “appeals to *sensuous contemplation*.”¹² However, this view of sensuousness as reduced to contemplation is clearly ideological, for it explicitly reduces wo/man to an isolated, Cartesian “thinking thing.” And this, in turn, carries with it a whole host of ideological elements—namely, that consciousness is disembodied. More importantly, it is symptomatic of alienation from bodily life, a state of affairs, it could be argued, facilitated by the socio-economic foundation of capitalism.

For Marx, however, it is essential to ground subjectivity on true sensuousness—bodily, practical life. Indeed, without this dimension the historical conditioning of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹² *Ibid.*, 144.

subjectivity is lost and the inseparable complement to thought—bodily, practical action—is ignored. But for Marx this understanding is essential as, to begin with, it is bodily, practical life which determines being. This is nowhere more clear than in the opening pages of *The German Ideology* where Marx lays down the essential idea which governs his own historiography: “The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals.”¹³ It is important to point out here that Marx doesn't begin with consciousness, but emphasizes that history must begin with the manner in which wo/man lives, and for Marx this demands an appreciation for the bodily, practical life of wo/man. This is explicitly stated by Marx: “the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature.”¹⁴ Thus the physical construction of wo/man and how this construction determines wo/man's relationship to the natural, empirical world must be understood. In turn, the body of wo/man determines the manner of productive life available to wo/man. Marx writes, “[men] begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation.”¹⁵ Again, the emphasis for Marx is on the bodily life of wo/man—namely, the manner in which they exert themselves to produce the means with which to survive. However, Marx reminds his readers that this historic act shouldn't be taken as merely the reproduction of wo/man's physical existence. “Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part.”¹⁶ Here Marx is expressing the fact that the act of production is

¹³ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” 149.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

an existential expression of wo/man. That is, by acting upon the material world and producing her means of existence, s/he is producing the manner in which she will live. Thus, in a word, material production determines life. In Marx's words, "As individuals express their life, so they are."¹⁷

Now, it is only after an analysis of productive life that consciousness can be approached by Marx. In this way, Marx is clearly making the assertion that consciousness is embodied, for it is bodily activity which determines consciousness. Even more, Marx regards consciousness as "a social product, and [it] remains so as long as men exist at all."¹⁸ This is so for Marx because consciousness, along with language, is derived from wo/man's dependency on others. He states, "language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men."¹⁹

Now, what is revealed in the preceding is that Marx understands that subjectivity is bound and determined by bodily, practical life; that the psyche is formed out of the mode of productive life; and that wo/man is essentially a social animal and that she is irrevocably dependent on others. Because of these premises, it is clear why Marx not only advocates for practical action to complement thought, but also argues that sensuousness must be understood bodily and not contemplatively. With the former, because the mode of production determines life, if one desires social change, then it is essential to transform the manner in which life is produced, and this demands that steps be taken to revolutionize—through action—the conditions of existence. With the latter, the preceding change can only occur through bodily, sensuous action, and reducing sensuousness to contemplation misses this point.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

It is in this vein that a discussion of Marx's understanding of ideology can be framed. Indeed, if ideology essentially amounts to the mystification of wo/man, then ideology obfuscates the above historical premises laid down by Marx and asserts that the subject is disembodied, detached from material life and is posited as fundamentally independent. And important for Marx, the effects of such an ideology can only hamper the proletariat from attaining class consciousness. Indeed, if the proletariat conceives of herself as solely a mind detached from her body, then she will be prevented from seeing that the bodily dimension of being determines her mind and, more importantly, her life. This has severe consequences, for then the proletariat will reduce the social ills existing in the world to a disordered consciousness and will engage in the action which the Young Hegelians and Feuerbach prescribed—contemplation. However, this misses Marx's crucial point that their bodily engagement with materiality is determining consciousness as well as—along with the existing objective productive forces—producing the social ills the proletariat is seeking to annul. As such, for Marx it is only through a change in the manner in which life is produced that circumstances—consciousness and life, for example—can be altered. Marx argues this point, writing that his historiography “does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice.” Because of this, Marx underscores that:

all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism [...], but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which give rise to this idealistic humbug, that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history [...].²⁰

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

In this passage, Marx is, on the one hand, highlighting that ideology has a historical foundation and that the ideological reduction of action to contemplation is a product of existing socio-economic conditions. On the other hand, Marx is pointing out consciousness is derived from social relationships and that only through a change in these relations can consciousness change. It is out of such a primary emphasis on concrete change and revolution and not isolated contemplation that Marx's argues "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."²¹ Thus, again, contemplation of a disordered world isn't enough, for this only serves to prolong the existence of that which one is seeking to annul. More specifically, isolated contemplation of capitalism and the corresponding contradictions undergirding the suffering and alienation of wo/man only serves the interests of the bourgeoisie to further extend their rule, and in this respect contemplation, considered in itself and without its essential complement of action, is ideological.

This essential unity of theory and practice underlying this point of Marx's is demonstrated in his point that "Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice."²² That is, thinking considered in and by itself lacks the truth value that comes from integrating one's thinking and practice. Indeed, to debate the value of thinking isolated from practice is for Marx "purely a *scholastic* question." In other words, it is a matter for ideology and bourgeois intellectuals. However, Marx isn't interested in such questions, for the only questions which matter are *practical* ones—ones that are posited in relationship to the concrete situation of wo/man and that point the way towards the action wo/man can take in order

²¹ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 145.

²² *Ibid.*, 144.

to alleviate her suffering in capitalist society. It is in this vein that Marx reminds his readers that “All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”²³ Here, Marx is criticizing the mystifying—i.e., ideological—effect that comes about from the separation of theory and practice, for such a separation only obfuscates the means by which the clarification and consciousness of the proletariat can be actualized into practice. Indeed, it is in this integration and in the understanding of such a practice that Marx thinks the demystification of the workers' consciousness can begin.

A further dimension of Feuerbach which is clearly ideological is his view of the isolated subject. As Marx makes clear, concomitant with Feuerbach's emphasis on contemplation is his reduction of wo/man to an isolated, individual being. Thus, Marx relates, “The highest point attained by contemplative materialism, that is, materialism which does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the contemplation of single individuals in civil society.”²⁴ Because of this limitation, Marx argues that Feuerbach overlooks the primary sociality of wo/man. This is evident in Marx's criticism of Feuerbach's tracking back “the religious essence into the human essence,” for Feuerbach arrives at the human essence by abstracting wo/man from her embeddedness in history. By doing so, he is unable to appreciate, according to Marx, that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”²⁵ In other words, the human essence isn't to be abstracted from its socio-material foundation and posited as an a priori genus. To do so would miss sight of the fact that any essence attributed to wo/man encompasses at its

²³ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

most basic level the social relationships determining her. Indeed, it would commit one to viewing wo/man as detached from those who, to Marx, determine her. This is as Marx grasps it, for he writes that Feuerbach, because of his understanding of the human essence, is committed “To abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract—*isolated*—human individual.”²⁶ Thus, because Feuerbach misunderstands the human essence, he is unable, on the one hand, to appreciate the socio-historical foundation of religion, and, consequently, he is compelled to abstract it from its true foundation and, on the other hand, he binds himself to a view of subjectivity as marked by detachment and isolation. For Marx, however, this misses an essential point: “Feuerbach [...] does not see that the ‘religious sentiment’ is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyzes belongs in reality to a particular form of society.”²⁷ In this way, Marx underscores that wo/man is irrevocably a social animal and all ideological products generated from her—religion included—are to be understood as socially determined. It is because of this understanding that Marx seeks to move beyond the view of civil society by materialists such as Feuerbach and propose a new understanding of society—that of “*human* society, or socialised humanity.” That Feuerbach is unable to grasp this essential sociality of wo/man, however, clearly marks his philosophy as ideological. Indeed, the understanding of wo/man as isolated and detached from those around her not only further undercuts the kind of practical social action that Marx views as the only means to alleviate suffering within capitalism and prevents the class consciousness which is

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

essential for what Marx takes as the coming proletarian revolution, but also it is symptomatic of the alienation of capitalist society.

As Marx makes clear, ideology across all its dimensions—its abstraction from the historical process and inversion of the fact that the material determines the ideal; its reduction of wo/man to an isolated, detached, disembodied, contemplative being; and its separation of theory from practice—is determined by the ruling, bourgeois class out of its own interest. Indeed, Marx points out that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force.”²⁸ That is, the dominant ideas of an age are determined by the class which rules. Thus, because the bourgeois control the material means of production, they have the privilege of controlling the means by which ideas are produced. In line with this thought, Marx writes, “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production [...]”; hence, “the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.” As this makes clear, the proletariat, because they lack the means of material production, they lack the means of mental production, and, consequently, they are dominated by the ideas which are espoused by the ruling class. And, as Marx emphasizes, such ideas are an expression of the socio-economic order. He writes, “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas [...]”²⁹ Hence, the ruling ideas of bourgeois society are not only derived from the capitalist/proletariat relationship, but also serve to reinforce this relationship and solidify the bourgeoisie’s

²⁸ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” 172.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 172-73.

dominance. All such ideas, then, are properly called ideology by Marx. In this way, all the multivalent sides of ideology discussed above are an expression and solidification of class relationships. Because of this, ideology, of course, mystifies and obfuscates what Marx considers to be the material premises of human existence because only in this way can ideology further the existence capitalist society.

Ideology, then, for Marx has multiple dimensions. Broadly speaking, ideology refers to the ruling ideas determined and produced by the bourgeoisie. More specifically, it refers to the picture of a subject abstracted from history, isolated from others, detached from bodily life and reduced to a thinking thing. Although these ideas present themselves as lacking a socio-politico-economic dimension, positing themselves as natural and eternal, this for Marx is nothing more than another effect of ideology. Indeed, by positing themselves in this way, they naturalize ideas as well as conditions of existence which are historically determined. In this way, ideology for Marx mystifies consciousness, preventing the worker from attaining consciousness of her historical situation. Because of this, Marxism can with justice be thought of as demystification, or as providing the means by which the worker can become conscious of herself.