

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY IN MARX*

György Márkus

There is surprising agreement concerning the significance of Marx's theory of ideology, inasmuch as it is generally regarded as one of his major contributions both to a general social theory and to philosophy. Through the introduction of this theory, Marx is said to have seriously contributed to a fundamental reorientation—an historically and socially oriented "turn"—in the treatment of problems concerning human knowledge and cognition. This agreement about the historical importance of the theory nevertheless goes hand in hand with an almost complete disagreement about the content of these significant views. Both Marxist and non-Marxist interpretations of the Marxian concept of ideology seem to disagree about even the most elementary questions concerning its meaning. Does the notion of ideology carry a negative-pejorative emphasis, or is it in this respect value-neutral and therefore capable of being applied to Marx's own theory, which could in turn be characterised (at least in its intentions) as a "scientific ideology"? Does science, including the natural sciences, represent the principal opposite of ideology, or is it just one of the forms of its manifestations? Is the theory of ideology essentially a *genetic* one, dealing above all with problems concerning the historical origin of ideas regarded as *effects* of other causes? Or is it a *functional* theory that basically deals with problems related to the effects which ideas and their systems—treated as relatively independent *causes*—can and do have in other areas of socially significant behaviour? To all these, certainly very basic, questions one can find widely differing, even diametrically opposed, answers.

The situation becomes even more paradoxical if one turns from the secondary interpretative literature toward those perhaps more significant writings which attempt to continue the tradition initiated by the Marxian conception of ideology. On the one hand, it seems unclear how these theories can appeal to a common ancestry at all, since they deal with quite divergent, almost unrelated topics. In the so-called concept of "ideological state apparatuses" developed in structuralist Marxism by Althusser, for instance, the term "ideology" refers essentially to the functioning of such institutions as the family, the school system, the Church, and the mass media. In the works of Marxists such as Lukács or Lucien Goldmann, however, ideology almost exclusively denotes the paradigmatic products of high culture—great philosophical systems, exemplary works of art, the historically most significant social and economic theories, and so on. On the other hand, and despite the radically divergent problematics they deal

*This is an expanded and revised draft of a lecture first presented at the Department of Philosophy, New School for Social Research, New York, April 1981.

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

with under the common name of ideology, both of these views have one thing in common, namely, that their standpoint is strangely irreconcilable with the best known, so to say "introductory", statement of Marx on ideology: it is not ideas which make or transform history, because ideas are mere sublimates of material life activities in the heads of individuals. So Althusser regards the ideological state apparatuses as organisations through whose operation the empirical individual first becomes constituted as the allegedly active subject in society; these apparatuses are ascribed a determining role in the reproduction of the dominant system of social relations. Analogously, representatives of so-called humanist or historicist Marxism—especially following the historical trauma of Fascism—have either underlined the emancipatory potential of (at least some) products of autonomous high culture, or (like Adorno and Horkheimer) they have emphasized that the loss of the autonomy of high culture has been one of the basic causes of a foreclosure of real possibilities of emancipation in modern society.

I have referred here, essentially for rhetorical purposes, to the vagaries which mark the history of the reception and interpretation of the Marxian conception of ideology, to find some justification for a renewed attempt to disentangle an old and rather boring question: What did Marx mean by "ideology"? But the problems just indicated may perhaps also provide some initial support for my own emphasis on the complexity and heterogeneity of the theoretical concept of ideology as it is actually used within the texts of Marx. I shall try to argue in the following that Marx deployed this concept in distinctly different contexts, for different purposes and that, accordingly, this concept has recognizably different meanings in his writings. And while the *three* different meanings of ideology I shall try to distinguish are clearly interconnected, any attempt to perceive these as various aspects of a unified broader approach contains not only some significant *lacunae*—a fact indicated by Marx himself—but may well also contain some inner strains which are not so easy to overcome.

I

If one turns to the very texts of Marx in which he either directly addressed (or at least alluded to) the problematics of ideology, it becomes rather evident that the term is most frequently used in a critical, directly *polemical* way. In *The German Ideology*, for instance, the concept of ideology invariably has a negative, what is more, *unmasking* meaning. It designates those philosophical and social-political theories which conceive ideas and their systems as the mainsprings of historical progress. Ideological theories transform themselves—and thereby their creators, the intellectuals—into the hidden demiurges of history. True, at some points Marx seems to operate even in these polemical contexts with a broader concept, one that embraces all those cultural objectifications which history by reference to some metahistorical, eternal principle in general (thus the Feuerbachian theory of religion is regarded as ideological since it explains

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS

religion in terms of an ahistorical human essence). But, fundamentally, the critique of ideology in this sense means the "unmasking" of any attempt to demonstrate the supremacy of spirit in history.¹ The concept of ideology is a polemical tool directed against all variants of *historical idealism*. In opposition to this idealism, Marx poses his theoretical and, above all, practical materialism: it is not theoretical transformations of interpretations of the world, but the practical transformation of the material life conditions of society and the material life-activities of products that constitutes the terrain of decisive social struggles through which the fate of human progress is resolved. This is precisely the (rather simple) point of the famous, and often over-interpreted, metaphor about the *camera obscura*: in ideologies, as in a *camera obscura*, everything appears upside-down because—*per definitionem*—ideological systems of belief suppose themselves to be the ultimate determinants of human material activities whereas, in real life, the practically enacted and institutionalised relations between producers constitute both the ultimate source and the criterion of efficacy for the culturally elaborated systems of social belief.

To this concept of ideology corresponds a definite intellectual practice—that of critically *unmasking* beliefs through a demonstration of their social determination and genesis. In these polemical contexts, Marx employs a genetic method of critique of ideologies, the essence of which 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 eternal rule of ideas, the hidden sway of well-defined—but completely unthematized—narrow class or group interests is to radically refute their validity. And it is in the context of this criticism as unmasking that ideologies appear—perhaps at first glance in a contradictory way—both as alien to real-life speculations and as transpositions of the dominant material relations of power into the realm of thought. By transforming definite social interests into the requirements of human reason as such, these systems of thought contribute to the stabilisation of the given relations of social domination: the fixation of belief becomes a mode of legitimation.

It is possible that by borrowing the term "ideology" from the last representatives of the French Enlightenment, Destutt de Tracy and his small philosophical coterie, Marx indicates an awareness about the traditions and roots of his own conception. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that his polemical, unmasking concept of ideology stands in a relation of direct continuity with some elements in the heritage of the Enlightenment, particularly with its "critique of prejudices", conceived as socially induced deformations of reason. So one can trace back—as Hans Barth actually did—the intellectual ancestry of this concept to the Baconian criticism of the idols of marketplace and theatre—or even further, to the sophists and to Greek enlightenment in general. But one should also add that Marx is the *critic* of this tradition as well as its continuator. From the standpoint of his theory of ideology, a criticism of prejudices in the name of an impartial reason or an eternal and normatively conceived human nature is itself deeply ideological. Marx's polemics against the hidden interests constituting and

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

determining the systems of ideology are not conducted in the name of an ahistoric rationality allegedly able to overcome all historical limitations; they are instead conducted in the name of historically and socially defined, concrete and "limited" needs and sufferings which are produced and induced by the same social interests. In the contexts we are speaking about, the theory of ideology to a large extent provides a criticism, even a self-criticism, of the "professional consciousness" of intellectuals who, as "producers of ideas", are bent on ascribing a mythical efficacy to their own activity. In this way they create for their own activity a bogus legitimation, and thereby they render themselves incapable of understanding its real social determination and function: through this lack of critical self-awareness they become—often quite unwittingly—apologists of a given, pre-fixed system of social domination and injustice.

II

If this polemical unmasking concept of "ideology" is the most frequent, preponderant one in Marx's writings, there are, however, passages in his works where the same term acquires another, *systematic-explanatory* meaning. One has only to look at the famous *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, to see an example of this non-polemical type of meaning. Here ideology clearly designates not a specific, criticizable type of socio-philosophic theory but a much broader range of human activities: definite branches of "cultural production" (*geistige Produktion*) and their products, and a corresponding level of social interaction and conflict. The main function of this explanatory, essentially *functional* concept of ideology is to provide a *part* of the answer to the question Marx already posed in *The German Ideology*: How, and through what mechanisms do the ideas of the ruling class become the ruling ideas in society? This question is evidently equivalent to the Weberian problem of how systems of social rule are legitimated under conditions of inequality and exploitation.

At this point one "philological" remark is pertinent. In the whole corpus of his writings, as Korsch pointed out, Marx never applied the term "ideology" to the phenomena of everyday consciousness. For him (and in opposition to many latter-day Marxists), the social domination of the ideas of the dominating class is primarily not the result of the latter's monopoly over the means of dissemination of ideas; it is not a matter of indoctrination into a definite type of culture produced aside from everyday practical life and only intellectually superimposed over its actors. On the contrary, it is Marx's theory of the social determination of everyday thinking which provides the basis both for an answer to the question posed above and for an understanding of the functional role of ideologies in society. It is therefore necessary to elaborate briefly on this point, which can be designated as a theory of "false consciousness"—a term which of course appears only in Engels.

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS

According to Marx, a social system like capitalism, at least in some negative sense, is *self-legitimizing*. Through the very working of its socio-economic mechanisms it produces in the individuals caught up in its practices a matrix of thought, a way of directly perceiving and interpreting social reality which systematically excludes the possibility of its overcoming, both through imagination and action. I am referring here of course to the Marxian theory of *fetishism* which is primarily discussed in his later economic writings. In these writings, Marx argues that for those who are engaged in the market activities of selling and buying—i.e., practically every member of a capitalist society—social relations with other individuals inevitably appear as relations between things; what is more, these anonymous social functions assume the appearance of matters which are seemingly contingent upon free individual choice. This personification of social roles constitutes the reverse side of the fetishistic reification of social relations. This distorted and mystifying way of understanding the world in which individuals live and act is not primarily the result of some specific process of acculturation in the sense of the transmission to, and appropriation by, individuals of some institutionally fixed "doctrines". Rather, it is the direct outcome of the *experienced life-activities* of the concerned individuals. Marx certainly did not deny the role of language, and generally that of a broadly conceived inherited culture in the formation of "false consciousness". As a matter of fact, he was keenly interested in the social function of language, though his remarks on this count hardly go beyond a somewhat naively historical etymology. But he did insist that the "bewitchment of intellect" primarily derives not from "language idling" but from historically constituted life-conditions. What he underlines again and again is the fact that fetishistic modes of thought "arise from the relations of production themselves", that they are the "direct and spontaneous outcomes" of the elemental social practices of individuals. These forms of thinking directly fix and merely generalize the practical life-experiences of the *isolated* social actors; fetishistic forms of thinking enable individual social agents to orient themselves *successfully* within the given system of social relations, which are taken *as a fixed prius of their life*. Undoubtedly the Marxian theory of fetishism is heavily infected by the Hegelian terminology of "appearance", which refers not to mere semblance, but to a "false reality", a form of immediacy in which reality itself distortedly "expresses" and "manifests itself" ("sich darstellt", as Hegel wrote). This poses a whole series of disquieting problems, and not only highly abstract, philosophical questions concerning the feasibility of an ontological theory of truth which, *prima facie*, seems to be implied by Marx's terminology. His constant insistence that fetishistic perceptions and notions are not mere "illusions" and errors of a confused thinking, that the categories of bourgeois economy are "socially valid, and therefore objective forms of thought" for this whole historical epoch, *also* contains the completely straightforward idea that these forms of thought are not merely socially produced and determined, but are in fact *pragmatically effective*, and in this sense real, valid and "correct". Individuals caught up in these relations can successfully orient themselves within their given framework only in these terms. If they go shopping and do not want

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

to squander their money, for example, they *have* to treat the price of different commodities as if it were a property independent of the utility of these commodities: only by comparing relative prices with relative utilities can individuals make a "reasonable" choice, a "good buy". This also means that the knowledge that the price of a commodity is solely the phenomenal form of its value, and that the latter is dependent upon socially necessary labour time, and so on, is about as relevant to a "good buy" as the detailed knowledge of quantum electro-dynamics is to someone exchanging a blown fuse.²

In addition, and indeed behind this pragmatic efficacy of false consciousness, there lies hidden its *social effectivity*, its capacity to foreclose the possibility of a rational *collective transformation* of the given social conditions. Just as fetishistic ideas successfully guide isolated individuals in their effort to assert their private interests *within* these given relations, so these ideas also render the totality completely opaque, transforming it into a matter of unintelligible naturalness or technical necessity. In this sense, fetishism represents for Marx the manifestation on the level of everyday thinking of that gulf between societal and individual possibilities, the progressive widening of which is seen as one of the basic tendencies of that whole "pre-history" he designated as *alienation*. To use Marx's own examples: as long as one conceives price or value as a mystical, "natural" property of things themselves, the very idea of a society where objects of utility do not function as commodities remains inconceivable; as long as wages are understood as remuneration for labour done, one can formulate the demand for fair, equitable wages but not even imagine a society where human productive activities would be posited in some other social form than that of wage labour; and so on. The fetishistic categories which "invert" the real relations and make them "invisible" are not only expressive of thinking which unreflexively accepts the social world as given: these absurd "category mistakes" of spontaneous everyday understanding also systematically *exclude* the possibility of a totalizing reflection both upon the historical-practical constitution of this world and the social determination of this way of thinking. And since these categories constitute that natural language of imagination and thinking within the framework of which individuals form and articulate their practical intentions, expectations and motives, they thereby acquire a truly causal efficacy. False consciousness is not a passive reflex of the "surface relations" of a society which is somehow constituted and reproduced independently of this consciousness; this consciousness is a necessary factor in the creation, reproduction and unintended, socially unconscious transformation of this society. One quotation from the *Grundrisse* illustrates this point. Speaking about the early forms of mercantilism, Marx emphasizes that while money fetishism is an absurd "illusion about the nature of money and blindness toward the contradictions contained within it", it has also been "an enormous instrument in the real development of the forces of social production", precisely because "it gave money a really magic significance behind the backs of individuals".³ This is why Marx's own theory of fetishism is above all a critique of everyday consciousness—primarily of the consciousness of its own subject and addressee, the working class. By unravelling the social determinations of spon-

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS

taneous social awareness, Marx attempts to foster a theoretical impulse towards the acquisition of real self-consciousness. In the last instance, of course, this self-consciousness can be attained only in practice, since the ultimate overcoming of fetishistic thinking is not a matter of knowledge, but of the creation of collective practical alternatives, in the light of which the unintelligible naturalness and mystical immutability of present-day social institutions are dissolved.

If it is this conception of "false consciousness" which provides the foundation of Marx's answer to the question concerning how the ideas of the ruling class "normally" rule the whole of society, it is nevertheless evident that the theory of fetishism does not constitute the whole of Marx's answer. To be sure, in a negative sense capitalism as a system of social domination tends to legitimate itself. But even though a spontaneous, fetishistic mode of thinking renders radical and rational criticism impossible, it is at the same time too confused, fragmented and self-contradictory to insulate itself from practical-intellectual criticism. Moreover, when the automatic mechanisms of market production do not ensure the undisturbed reproduction of the underlying social relations, the fetishistic categories also tend to lose their pragmatic validity and effectiveness. During those periods of economic crisis, the web of "appearances" tends to dissipate and the relations of social domination manifest themselves in relatively naked form. The mere reproduction of everyday life-practices is not sufficient to legitimate capitalism—precisely because this reproduction process is itself punctuated by objective tensions and disturbances.

This is the point where the explanatory-functional concept of ideology enters into the architecture of Marx's social theory. Institutionally disseminated systems of ruling ideas are seen by Marx to systematize the confused and chaotic conceptions of everyday thinking, to lend a degree of logical coherence to their fragmented structure, to explain away (and thereby apologize for) the most widely encountered experiences that contradict the seeming self-evidence of fetishistic categories. The Church, the Church-dominated school system, and various political and juridical institutions are the social organisations which Marx most frequently connects with the fulfilment of this task. Thus, in his later writings, Marx sometimes applies the term ideology to analyze the functioning of these institutions, whose personnel are described in turn as "the ideological strata of the ruling class".⁴ These institutions are nevertheless conceived by him as mere transmitters and propagators of ideas which are elaborated elsewhere—in the sphere of cultural production, of high culture conceived as an internally differentiated branch of the overall social division of labour. In general it is these cultural-"spiritual" objectivations belonging to the spheres of religion, philosophy, social theory, political economy and art—but not natural science, it should be noted—which Marx regularly designates by the common name of ideology. These are the forms, as Marx states in the *Preface*, in which men become conscious of their social conflicts and fight them out.

Despite the fact that Marx extends the concept of ideology to all these activities and their social function in general, his attitude towards this wide range of cultural creations is in fact markedly differentiated. In the most elaborated and

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

best-known case of his critiques of ideologies, that of the critique of bourgeois economy, this differentiation is unambiguously stated and of serious importance for Marx's own economic theory. While Marx repeatedly and emphatically states that bourgeois economy as a whole is a form of ideology, he at the same time directly counterposes the "scientific" economy of the classics (above all, the Physiocrats, Adam Smith and Ricardo) to the apologetic pseudo-science of "vulgar" economy. (This fact also clearly indicates that, for Marx, being scientific and being ideological in a given context are not mutually exclusive enterprises.) The same type of distinction can be observed if one compares Marx's critique of the young Hegelians with his repeated criticisms of Hegel: not only is the tone of these criticisms strikingly different but, more importantly, so also is the whole method of criticism itself, and in ways which definitely parallel Marx's different attitudes toward, say, Smith and Malthus. Even in Marx's sparse remarks about art—compare his treatment of Eugene Sue and Balzac—one can find a similarly drawn practical distinction.

At the risk of overinterpretation, I would suggest that Marx consistently distinguishes between what can be called "ideologies of the historical moment" and ideologies that represent epochal cultural values.⁵ Concerning the first (e.g., vulgar economy), the situation is rather clear. These are cultural "products" which directly provide the intellectual material for those (aforementioned) institutions which disseminate ideas that serve immediately apologetic purposes. The claim to (scientific, philosophical or artistic) truth of these ideologies is a mere veneer that conceals their defence and articulation of specific, narrow, particularistic interests which are tied to the immediate, practical realities of the present.⁶ It is in relation to these ideologies that Marx adopts the type of criticism earlier characterised as "unmasking": the reduction of the content of views to a specific configuration of interests. If one merely glances at Marx's truly voluminous criticisms of Hegel or Ricardo from this viewpoint, it is immediately striking how little Marx applies to them this method of "explanation through interests". Certainly, he characterises them as theoreticians of *bourgeois society*, as representing its standpoint. Yet Marx refers to the specific, concrete situation and interests of, say, the German bourgeoisie in the early nineteenth century only in cases where he intends to indicate and explain some internal inconsistency of the Hegelian theory of the state and *not* the theoretical kernel and significance of Hegel's philosophy.

At this point two questions arise. On the one hand, how, and on the basis of what criteria, does Marx draw this distinction between two types of ideology? And, on the other hand, what is the social significance of these cultural creations here described as "epochal cultural values"? In a sense, these two questions are closely interrelated. True, the distinction which Marx draws between, say, vulgar and classical economy is to a considerable degree based on accepted and "trivial" cultural criteria. In his critique of Malthus or Smith, Marx spends an enormous (one is inclined to say, disproportionate) amount of space to prove their lack of originality or even outright plagiarism, the presence of eclectic confusions or logical contradictions, the missing explanatory power in regard to elementary

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS

observations concerning regularities of economic life, and so on—a fact worth mentioning if only because it suggests that he treats as self-evidently valid these inherited criteria of evaluation specific to, and accepted within, a given sphere of cultural activities. But such considerations certainly do not exhaust his criticisms. For it is actually the way Marx criticizes those works which in fact meet these elementary criteria that best demonstrates what constitutes for him their significance, what makes them ultimately a “cultural value”.

There is a definite methodological parallelism (to which della Volpe has already drawn attention) between the Marxian critiques of Hegelian philosophy, on the one side, and that of the classics of English economy, on the other. First, in all these cases Marx actually departs from the criticism of a *method of thinking*. This is rather self-evidently so in the case of Hegel, but one should remember that his whole analysis of Smith's system is also embedded in an unravelling of the contradictions between his dual, esoteric and exoteric modes of explanation, while the discussion of the Ricardian economy departs from a dissection of the analytic method of the latter.⁷ And in all these cases he actually attempts to demonstrate how a definite way of thinking results in the exclusion of a definite problematic, in the failure even to state questions of a definite type. So Marx argues that the seemingly innocent, common sense empiricism of Ricardo prevents him from raising theoretical questions about the socio-historical genesis of the value-form itself; Ricardo is logically forced to accept (as self-evident) the value- and commodity-character of objects of utility, as if they were the inevitable, “natural” characteristics of any economy based on a developed system of division of labour.⁸ Similarly, the idealist hypostatization of self-consciousness in Hegel is treated by Marx as necessarily leading to an identification of alienation with the materially objective character of human activities and, in the final analysis, with human finitude as such—and thereby inevitably excluding the very ability to imagine its practical overcoming.

What makes the work of Ricardo or Hegel epochally significant, what makes these thinkers theoretical representatives of a *type of society*, and not merely ideologues of a definite social group in a given country at a given moment, can be summed up in the following three points:

1. Their unthematized, taken-for-granted assertions and premises appear not as arbitrary assumptions, but as necessities of thinking, as outcomes of a *method*, of a definite type of “logical constraint”.
2. At the same time, the “unconscious” presuppositions of their systems actually express, fix in thought, some fundamental characteristics of capitalist society; these presuppositions are related not to some momentary constellation of particular interests within this society, but to its essential life-conditions. It is these latter which they elevate—through their methodically unfolded logic—into universally binding norms or, alternatively, into untranscendable natural necessity.
3. These thinkers not only consistently (“cynically”) follow through their own consequences, but also attempt to solve intellectually—from their fixed point of departure—a whole range of problems and contradictions which are

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

manifested in the everyday life of this society. The "creativity" of such works of culture is not to be found merely in their individual originality, but primarily in their strenuous effort to overcome in thinking those conflicts of real life which challenge and potentially undermine the universal validity of their silently adopted principles. In this sense they do not simply parade interests as universal ones; rather, they attempt to *universalise* those interests which dominate the given form of social life. Insofar as they succeed in this attempt, they make explicit and manifest the definite *limits* of a thinking which takes for granted and posits as unalterable the basic conditions of existence of a given type of society. These works of culture are not only intellectual, but also *historical-paradigmatic closures of thought*. They must therefore be unravelled or critically overcome if thinking about *another* future is to be freed, if this future can be claimed not only as a desirable utopia, but also as rational possibility.

In these senses, the Marxian conception of ideology is not merely a form of social explanation; it also represents a definite type of hermeneutics, a "hermeneutics with emancipatory intent" (to borrow an expression suggested by S. Benhabib). The essence of this emancipatory hermeneutics cannot be reduced to the search for some "sociological equivalent" to the point of view presented in any text. The critique of ideology as hermeneutics of course insists on the insufficiency of a merely "immanent reading" of the text, for it demands a comprehension and interpretation of the transmitted cultural tradition which situates this text in its own social-historical context. But it does so with the aim of discovering in the "classical" texts themselves those "unconscious presuppositions", those unreflected "prejudices" which both structure and set a limit to the possibility of rational discourse within them. Marx offers a hermeneutics which posits the constraint of concepts as a consequence of the constraint of circumstances, a hermeneutics which is guided by the intention of contributing to the removal of the second through the removal of the first. According to him, only this type of reading can, in one and the same act, capture the original *meaning* and the real historical *significance* of a text, and thereby realize the classical hermeneutical postulate of Enlightenment: to understand a work better than its own author did.

III

I have tentatively indicated two types of contexts in which the concept of ideology occurs in Marx and, corresponding to them, the two meanings this term acquires in his writings. But there is also a third one which—in contrast to the polemical-unmasking and explanatory-functional uses of this concept—I will designate as the *critical-philosophical* sense of ideology. When discussing the overall results and consequences of the divorce between manual and mental labour underlying the whole course of historical civilisations, Marx sometimes

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS

employs or implies a concept of ideology which seems to refer not to specifiable works (which are either unmasked and criticized or interpreted through historical explanation) but, rather, to a *definite type of culture in general*, and to a definite way of understanding cultural objectivations which is, according to him, both deceptive and at the same time "adequate" to this type of culture. "[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."⁹ The critical edge of this implied conception of ideology is directed primarily against any comprehension of cultural creations which perceives them as *representations* which "correspond" to reality (or embodiments of equally transcendent values), which thereby acquire an allegedly timeless validity. To this conception Marx counterposes a view of cultural objectivations, which are analysed as *expressions* of the active-practical life-situation of definite (actual or potential) social agents who may acquire through these life-forms a consciousness of their historically situated needs and potentialities. In this sense culture never constitutes an autonomous realm of values *over* practical and social life. In the final analysis, it is an articulation of the conflicts of this social life, whose ultimate function consists in making the solution of these conflicts possible.

The apparent autonomy of high culture from social life is, in one sense, *the* ideological illusion, the illusion of a culture which in its totality functions as ideology. For the ultimate and hidden preconceptions, and the fundamental problem-content of any work of culture, always remain determined and circumscribed by those practical possibilities and attitudes that are open to the typical social actors—its potential addressees—under the given conditions of their existence. So when Marx is engaged in the age-old practice of all philosophers—explicating the "true meaning" of the philosophical tradition in his own language—he invariably insists upon a translation of even the most abstract and timeless problems and categories into the *practico-historical*. In his view, the speculative question concerning the relationship between matter and spirit ultimately refers to the practical problem concerning the relation of physical and mental labour; the philosophical phrases about "substance" should be deciphered as attempts and proposals to clarify the possible relationship between human activities and that system of inherited objectivations which for every generation constitutes the ready-found *praxis* of its life.

The ideological illusion that high culture is autonomous is in another sense stark reality: the reality of a society in which high culture has become a sphere divorced from the life of the majority, where both its creation and enjoyment is the privilege of a few. Cultural elitism is not merely a problem of education and the dissemination of learning: its overcoming demands a dismantling of its ideological transposition, which in turn requires a new culture which directly and openly addresses itself to the problem of real-historical life, a culture which adjudicates mundane conflicts not from the vantage-point of an eternal truth bestowed by an impartial judge, but from the point of view of a committed

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

participant. The realisation of philosophy is possible only through its overcoming *as* philosophy. And it is characteristic that Marx—always at great pains to avoid designating the natural sciences as “ideology”—seems at some points to implicate them, insofar as their *cultural form* is concerned, in the same type of criticism. “Science [he writes concerning the development of the machine production that compels the inanimate limbs of machinery, by its very construction, to act as a purposeful automaton] does not exist in the consciousness of the worker, but acts upon him through the machine as an alien power, as the power of the machine itself. . . . The accumulation of knowledge and skills, of the general productive forces of the social brain, is thus absorbed into capital, as opposed to labour, and therefore appears as an attribute of capital. . . .”¹⁰

In this broadest, critico-philosophical sense, ideology is the culture of an alienated society where goal-realisation and goal-positing—the criticism of previously transmitted meanings, the performance of socially codified, meaningful tasks, and the creation of new social meanings—become radically divorced from each other. Humans therefore do not have—either individually or collectively—control over the general results of their own activities and the ensuing direction of their own development. Ideology is an alienated form of social self-consciousness, since it brings historical conflicts to awareness only by transposing them into what appears to be a sphere of mere imagination and thought. Social tasks and possibilities which can be *solved and realised* only in practical collective activity therefore assume the form of eternal questions to which some religious, philosophical or artistic *answer* is sought. Critique of ideology in this sense is a critique of cultural objectivations which confronts them with their real life-basis, against which they assert their autonomy and which therefore remains for them hidden and unreflected, an externally imposed barrier to imagination and thought. Conversely, this critique of ideology also—and perhaps primarily—assumes the form of a critique of this life-basis by confronting it with its paradigmatic cultural objectivations. Critique of ideology is a critique of a form of social existence in which the awareness of social needs and possibilities can be achieved only in a sphere divorced from, and contrasted to, life, a sphere that has to remain a mere “culture”, a value and ideal which is both unattainable and irrelevant for the overwhelming majority.

IV

This very cursory overview perhaps succeeds in indicating that the three meanings of ideology which seem to be equally present in Marx's *oeuvre* are not completely independent and isolated from each other, but are at least vaguely unified both in their practical intent and in the theoretical framework they all ultimately presuppose. However, no discussion of Marx's views on ideology is adequate, even in a minimal sense, if it fails to mention at least those “gaps” in his conceptions to which in some measure and on some occasions he himself

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS

draws attention. Two problematic gaps seem to be of paramount importance in this respect.

In a footnote to *Capital*, Marx makes the following remark: "In fact it is much easier to discover through analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than, in the opposite way, to develop from the actual relations of life in question the form in which they have been apotheosized. This latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore scientific one."¹¹ This passage again makes abundantly clear that Marx's own idea of a critique of ideologies is in no way identical with a reductionist, sociological explanation of the *content* of certain cultural creations. But this remark also brings sharply into relief a requirement whose fulfilment in Marx's own theoretical practice seems to be rather problematic: the need for an historical explanation of *cultural forms* themselves, of *genres* like religion, art, philosophy, science and their various subdivisions. That the internal division of culture into various types of practices is a changing historical phenomenon which at the same time, and in each historical moment, presents a number of normatively fixed possibilities and criteria for creative activities, is undoubtedly a major problem which a theory of ideology (especially in its broadest, critico-philosophical sense) cannot by-pass. One can enumerate a number of Marxian observations that may be related to the question so posed. These observations include his discussion of the origin and general character of speculative philosophy in *The German Ideology*; his note in the *Grundrisse* (one that hardly goes beyond Hegel, admittedly) about the animosity of bourgeois society toward definite forms of art such as epic poetry; his highly interesting, though dispersed and unsystematic, remarks in his various economic manuscripts about the social preconditions of the emergence of political economy as science; and so on. However, all these observations have not only a highly schematic, but also a rather accidental character. They certainly do not indicate how the problem, so energetically stated by Marx, can and should be approached in general terms. This absence of an answer to the problem of cultural genres is all the more significant, because in his own critical practice—as I indicated above—Marx does seem to accept as self-evidently valid those criteria of evaluation which (in the nineteenth century) were inherent and tied to the predominant cultural forms. In a sense it would be true to say that—especially in his later writings—Marx seems to take inherited cultural genres for granted, and that this makes his "philosophical" concept of ideology as the culture of an alienated society rather (and at least) indeterminate. It was only a much later generation of Marxists—one which included Lukács and Goldmann, Benjamin and Adorno—who directly faced the problem of cultural genres, though predominantly with reference to the arts alone.

The second problem is not completely unrelated to the first, and can again be introduced with a quotation from Marx. At the end of his somewhat enigmatic and abruptly terminating methodological discussion in the *Grundrisse*, he states the following: "The difficulty lies not in the understanding that Greek art and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and in a certain respect they count as a norm

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

and as an unattainable model."¹² It is again clear that this "difficulty" is much broader and more profound than the given example. For the "functional" concept of ideology in Marx sometimes rests upon an account of the paradigmatic character or *epochal significance* of cultural creations. These paradigmatic creations are seen to articulate the limits of imagination and thought which are bound up not with momentary, passing group interests, but with the essential, structural characteristics of a whole stage of social development. But this conception advanced by Marx has its limits—it remains strictly historical. As it stands, it does not account directly for the fact that, at least in some cultural genres like the arts or philosophy, some of the cultural heritage of past epochs (the social conditions of which we may even have difficulty reconstructing) preserves its significance for the present cultural practices of creation and reception alike. This problem—that culture may exert a living relevance far beyond its original epoch—certainly cannot be solved by merely referring to the now elementary observation that the list of "classical" works itself undergoes deep changes in the history of cultural transmission and reception: this fact certainly indicates that a theory of cultural tradition ought to be an *historical* one, but it does not render such a theory superfluous.

Marx's own short answer to this "difficulty" seems to be contradicted by this now elementary observation. However, this is not the only and the most disconcerting feature of his reply. In general, he answers the question about the persisting artistic significance of some ancient Greek works by referring to the specific place Greek antiquity occupies in the history of human development as such. This antiquity is seen to represent the "normal childhood" of humankind, "its most beautiful unfolding"; its manifestations—as childhood memories in general—therefore exercise upon us an "eternal charm". Leaving aside Marx's (indubitable) Europocentrism, this reply, if taken literally, is suggestive of a most disturbing application of the biologic imagery of "maturation and growth" to history. Clearly, this would lend an openly teleological character to the whole Marxian conception of social progress. Perhaps one should interpret this statement much more liberally, above all by connecting it with an Hegelian, hermeneutical concept of memory as "*Er-innerung*". This was actually Lukács' project: He in his late *Aesthetics*, developed a conception of art as the collective memory of humankind by drawing upon this formulation of Marx. But even granting this most liberal and imaginative interpretation, the difficulty indicated by Marx seems to be much broader and more general than any answer along the lines proposed by him is able to solve. Marx does not account at all for the different role tradition plays (and the different form it takes) within different cultural genres; that is, he ignores the specific form of historicity immanent within, and characteristic of, distinct cultural forms. Since the function of inherited tradition is an important aspect and component of the often-discussed problem of the "relative independence" of ideology, the question essentially left open by Marx becomes of paramount theoretical significance.

It is certainly justified to indicate at this point that Marx never intended nor claimed to create a *systematic theory* of ideology. The heterogeneous and mostly critical uses he made of this concept can be seen in retrospect to have enclosed a definite field of investigation and to have suggested/outlined an essentially unified theoretical approach to this field. No doubt, to speak about "gaps in Marx's theory of ideology" implies a critical judgment according to a criterion—comprehensiveness—which is in this case certainly inappropriate. It is, however, justified to ask whether the failure of this theoretical approach to account adequately for some of the most comprehensive and striking characteristics of the domain it encloses indicates more than a mere lack of (perhaps never intended) comprehensiveness. Are not the "gaps" I have mentioned more than mere *lacunae*? Are they not expressions of internal strains within the conception itself?

A short essay certainly cannot answer this question. But since no one, whose interest in Marx is not solely antiquarian, can simply neglect it, I would in conclusion like to suggest some considerations that may be relevant to such an answer. Without further explanation, I will take up one problem, in respect of which the internal consistency of the Marxian conception of ideology has been very often queried, and to which the earlier exposition has also referred. This is the question of the relationship between ideology and the natural sciences.

As has already been indicated, Marx had rigorously avoided applying the term "ideology" to the *content* of the theories of natural science, even though his criticism clearly implicated both the cultural-institutional form of their development and the character of the social application of their results in contemporary capitalist society. In fact, though he was completely aware of the historical connection between the emergence of the natural sciences and the capitalist mode of production,¹³ he consistently chose to characterise natural scientific *knowledge* in explicitly *universalistic*—rather than historico-socially specific—terms. He described it, for example, as "the general cultural" [*geistige*] product of social development"; as "the product of the general historical development in its abstract quintessence"; as (in contradistinction to co-operative labour) "universal labour"; as "the general productive force of social brain"; and as "the most solid form of wealth, . . . both ideal and at the same time practical wealth".¹⁴ Now it certainly can be argued that the use of such universalistic metaphors indicates a serious inconsistency within a theory which, insisting that consciousness never can be anything else but the consciousness of an existing historical practice, underlines the social determination and historical embeddedness and limitation of every system of ideas. According to this argument, the treatment of natural sciences as "non-ideological" must be regarded as one of the signs of mere evasiveness, as a specific instance of a flight from the untenable or undesirable relativistic consequences of a thoroughgoing historicism which renders the whole conception of ideology in Marx beset by internal contradictions.

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

As it stands, this criticism seems to me invalid, for it falsely constructs the problem to which the Marxian theory of ideology addresses itself. This problem is not that of the historicity of all thinking in general. Rather, the Marxian theory is concerned with those specific social-historical conditions which make it impossible for thinking to recognise self-reflectively its own historical constitution and which thereby lock this thinking into a system of categories or images that both justifies and attempts to perpetuate its very historical limitations. Marx takes it for granted that there is no thinking "without preconditions", that all systems of ideas—natural scientific as well as "ideological"—are historically situated and therefore also limited. It is equally evident to him that the mere form of scientificity, understood as the satisfaction of a set of purely epistemological or methodological criteria, is never able to ensure by itself the exclusion of the possibility of an "ideological closure". He distinguishes theories of natural sciences from forms of ideology not because he ascribes an ahistoric validity to the former, but because he wants to distinguish two different—and by virtue of their different *social* constitution and functions—opposed processes of historical change in the broad field of culture. On the one hand, natural sciences are historical, in the sense that they exist as an uninterrupted process of critical inquiry in which earlier theories become constantly replaced by more abstract-general and more exact ones on the basis of an ever-expanding experimentation and observation that is both constantly spurred on and at the same time controlled by the experiences and requirements of productive material practice. It is this organic link of the natural sciences with the everyday practical results and experiences of the process of production that ultimately ensures that their historical change takes the form of an intellectual progress, *viz.*, the *accumulation and growth of knowledge*. The concept of ideology, on the other hand, explains why such progress cannot be observed in other fields of cultural creativity. The concept of ideology indicates that, in antagonistic societies, individuals can reach the level of social *self*-consciousness (as distinct from the social consciousness of their relation to nature) only by making deliberate choices between cultural objectivations and world-views whose struggle and dispute cannot be resolved by purely intellectual means, and whose historical alteration therefore cannot be conceived according to a model of accumulation and growth.

Marx's distinction between natural science and ideology is therefore not only internally coherent, but also in complete accordance with some of the most fundamental and pervasive conceptual distinctions that belong to the basic framework of his theory of history: the distinction between material content and social form; between the productive forces and the relations of production; and, in general, between the practical relations of humans to nature and the relations of social intercourse between humans, a distinction which he at the same time identifies with the axes of continuity and discontinuity in history. The contrast between the natural sciences and ideologies can thus be seen as the consistent application of these principal dichotomies to the field of cultural production proper.

So the problem indicated by certain critics hardly proves Marx guilty of any

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS

direct inconsistency. Nevertheless, a simple outline of his (largely implicit) "solution" to this problem raises a number of rather disquieting questions. First, such an outline makes clear that at least some of the particular presuppositions of the Marxian concept of ideology are rather immediately tied to a nineteenth century view of scientific progress which is nowadays difficult to defend. One must not necessarily accept the viewpoints of Feyerabend or even Kuhn to apprehend that the conception of scientific development as a unilinear, cumulative growth neither fits the historical facts, nor is defensible in view of the complex interrelationship between observation and theory in the natural sciences. From a contemporary perspective, Marx seems in particular to have missed the point that the natural sciences' explicitly empirical basis does not render their historical situatedness transparent, primarily because the fundamental underlying paradigms in terms of which their empirical data are constructed can be clearly recognized as such only after some alternative and competing ways of interpretation have been offered. Secondly, a reconsideration of the Marxian conception of ideology indicates the extent to which it is embedded in a theory of historical progress which sustains itself upon a key dichotomy between the continuous growth in human mastery over nature and the discontinuous transformations in the relations of broadly conceived social intercourse—a theory of progress which today can be addressed with many questions.

But the problem under discussion here not only indicates difficulties concerning the relationship between the particular details and the most abstract-general presuppositions of the Marxian view. It also makes comprehensible 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. There is no doubt that, at least in his late *oeuvre*, Marx conceived his own theory in conformity with the cultural model of the natural sciences emancipated from the domination of capital. Directly connected with the everyday life-experiences of its social addressees, theory makes these experiences comprehensible in their historical specificity and necessity, and thereby, at one and the same time, is converted into "true science" capable of unlimited progress (since it makes its own historical presuppositions transparent as "empirically observable and verifiable states of affairs") and a "popular force".

Not only Marx's uncritical attitude toward the cultural form of the natural sciences makes his program of a consistent "scientisation" of the cognitive content of the cultural heritage theoretically suspect. This weakness appears also to have its reverse side, namely, the Marxian theory's essentially "negativistic" conception of everyday consciousness. It seems to be more than accidental that the Marxian theory of everyday consciousness, at least as far as its systematic achievements are concerned, lays all the emphasis on the necessarily fetishistic character of everyday thinking in capitalist society in general. 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 or, more

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

usually, in that of "objective interests". It thereby by-passes the problem that even "spontaneous" resistance to capitalist society finds its expression in definite cultural forms. (It was Gramsci who first faced the problems involved in this phenomenon.) The Marxian theory of ideology therefore in fact assimilates the relationship of critical theory and its addressees into the model of "learning a science". This in turn seems to revoke the radical conception of the critical theory itself. Marx's near-contemptuous attitude to everything that today would be labelled as "working class culture"—consider his dispute with Weitling—rather dramatically illustrates this point.

But, above all, the problems associated with this program of overcoming the "illusions of ideology" through a simultaneous "scientisation and popularisation" of theory and culture in general are of a practical nature. If the shibboleth so often heard today—"the crisis of Marxism"—has any meaning at all, it should designate a whole historical process whose end result we are now facing. This process is one in which, in a situation of deep and generally recognised social crisis, 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. In a sense, the history of Marxism has turned full circle. In these times, Marxian theory has reproduced that initial situation which it so confidently set out to change—the complete divorce between theory and practice. If one is inclined, however, to trace back (at least partially) this failure to the original self-interpretation of the theory—to its lack of critical reflection upon itself as a specific cultural form—one should also remember that the historical experience of radical attempts to challenge directly the autonomy of high culture in the name of social emancipation have proved to be equally negative, and often even much more disastrous. These challenges to autonomous high culture have been assimilated into the dominant institutional forms of cultural production and reception with conspicuous ease (as in the case of many artistic experiments and movements: Brecht, surrealism, etc.); or (as the case of the Bolshevik program of the "politicization" of culture indicates) they have resulted in the transformation of high culture into ideology in the crudest sense—into sheer apologies for the existing relations of dominance and oppression, which as a consequence become culturally desolate. To understand this history, to "apply" the theory of ideology to the theory of ideology itself, today seems to be a necessary and unavoidable task.

General Philosophy
University of Sydney
Australia

Notes

1. *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin, 1958), vol. 3, p. 49 (hereafter cited as *MEW*).
2. I should indicate at this point that fetishism—the historically specific form of everyday con-

GYÖRGY MÁRKUS

sciousness under capitalism—does not for Marx represent the sole type of socially induced distortions of experience and interpretation of the world in which individuals immediately live. In relation to pre-capitalist societies, he makes at least fleeting references to the "idolatry of nature" as an historical phenomenon analogous to fetishism. As the third volume of *Capital* makes clear, this idolatry involves both the personification of natural forces and things upon which human activities are still dependent *and* the corresponding naturalisation of social roles, in which relations of personal dependence and bondage manifest themselves.

3. *Grundrisse* (Berlin, 1953), pp. 136-137.
4. See, for example, *MEW*, Vol. 26, 1, pp. 145-146, 256-259.
5. This abbreviated terminology is certainly quite alien to Marx. The only place (to my knowledge) where he explicitly formulates a contrast resembling the one drawn here is in his criticism of Storch (*MEW*, vol. 26, 1, p. 257; see also p. 377), where he distinguishes the "ideological components of the ruling class" from its "free cultural-spiritual (*geistige*) production". From the standpoint of his whole theory, this latter (and certainly accidental) designation is rather questionable, and is therefore not used here.
6. See, for example, Marx's general characterization of vulgar economy in *MEW*, vol. 26, 3, pp. 430-494.
7. Cf. *ibid.*, vol. 26, 1, pp. 40-48, 60-69; vol. 26, 2, pp. 100, 161-166, 214-217; vol. 26, 3, pp. 491-494, 504.
8. The following formulation is rather typical of this train of thought in Marx: "Classical economics pear as bearers of the latter, the various fixed and mutually alien forms of wealth to their inner unity and to strip them of that character due to which they stand side by side, indifferent toward each other; it seeks to comprehend the internal interconnection apart from the multiplicity of forms of appearance. . . In this analysis, classical economics now and again falls into contradictions; it often attempts to accomplish this reduction and to demonstrate the identity of the source of the various forms directly, without mediating links. However, this necessarily follows from its analytic method, with which the critique and comprehension inevitably begins. It has no interest in genetically developing the various forms, only an interest in their analytic reduction and unification, because it departs from these forms as given premises. . . Classical economics ultimately fails, and is deficient because it conceives the *ground-form of capital*, production directed towards the appropriation of alien labour, not as a *social form*, but as the *natural form of social production*—a mode of comprehension for the discarding of which it itself clears the way" (*ibid.*, vol. 26, 3, pp. 490-491).
9. *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 432-433; see also *Grundrisse*, pp. 82-83.
10. *Grundrisse*, pp. 584, 586.
11. *MEW*, vol. 23, p. 393.
12. *Grundrisse*, p. 31.
13. See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 313: "Just as production founded on capital creates, on the one hand, universal industriousness—i.e., surplus-labour, value-creating labour—so it creates, on the other hand, a system of general exploitation of the natural and human qualities, a system of general utility. Both science itself and all the physical and mental qualities appear as bearers of the latter, while there appears to be nothing *higher-in-itself*, nothing legitimate-for-itself outside this circle of social production and exchange. . . Hence the great civilising influence of capital. . . For the first time, nature becomes a mere object for humanity, a mere matter of utility; it ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical knowledge of its autonomous laws itself appears merely as a ruse to subjugate it under human needs, either as an object of consumption, or as a means of production."

CONCEPTS OF IDEOLOGY

14. The first of two quotations appear in *Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses*, Marx-Engels Archiv (Moscow, 1933), vol. 2, vii, pp. 156 and 160; the reference to "universal labour" is found in *MEW*, vol. 25, p. 114; the last two sentences are taken respectively from *Grundrisse*, pp. 586 and 439.

The Monist

Founded 1888 by Edward C. Hegeler

*An International Quarterly Journal
of General Philosophical Inquiry*

Editor, Eugene FREEMAN

Editorial Board: William P. Alston, Monroe C. Beardsley, Lewis White Beck, William A. Earle, Dagfinn Føllesdal, William Frankena, Maurice Mandelbaum, R. Barcan Marcus, Richard Martin, Mary Mothersill, Joseph Owens, Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, Wilfrid Sellars, John E. Smith, Richard Wasserstrom.

Managing Editor: Sherwood J. B. SUGDEN

EACH ISSUE IS LIMITED TO ARTICLES ON A SINGLE GENERAL TOPIC. Communicate in advance with the Editor for special instructions. Two nonreturnable copies (one copy outside the U.S. and Canada) should be submitted NINE MONTHS PRIOR to the announced publication date. Papers should be prepared for anonymous submission to readers, and should be from 10 to 20 double-spaced typewritten pages in length, including notes.

SCHEDULED PUBLICATION DATES:

- Vol. 66, No. 1 Jan., 1983 Right Reason in Western Ethics
Vol. 66, No. 2 Apr., 1983 Integrity and Purity in Art and Morals
Vol. 66, No. 3 July, 1983 Categories
Vol. 66, No. 4 Oct., 1983 The Basis of Political Authority
Vol. 67, No. 1 Jan., 1984 The Philosophy of Mathematics
Vol. 67, No. 2 Apr., 1984 Philosophy and Sociobiology
Vol. 67, No. 3 July, 1984 Is Relativism Defensible?
Vol. 67, No. 4 Oct., 1984 Ethics in the Modern World
Vol. 68, No. 1 Jan., 1985 Knowledge, Justification, and Reliability

Editorial Office: Box 1908, Los Gatos, California 95031

Business Office: Box 600, La Salle, Illinois 61301

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: United States: Annual (4 issues): Institutions, \$24.00; Individuals, \$15.00. Single copies: \$6.00. Foreign postage: Add 50 cents to single copy rate or \$1.00 to subscription.