

What is Ideology?

Excerpts

Jason McQuinn

There certainly can be genuine confusions over the meaning of the word ideology since the word has been used for many purposes entailing quite different meanings. However, when I (and other anti-ideological anarchists) criticize ideology, it is *always* from a specifically critical, anarchist perspective rooted in both the skeptical individualist-anarchist philosophy of Max Stirner (especially his master work, translated into English as *The Ego and Its Own*) and the Marxist conception of ideology, especially as it was developed by members of the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and others) in their version of critical theory.

Although Stirner did not use the word “ideology”, he developed a fundamentally important critique of alienation which crucially encompasses a critique of alienated and alienating theory. For Stirner theory can either be employed to express the subjective aims of its creator or it can be allowed to subordinate and control the person employing it. In the first instance theory facilitates the fulfillment of one’s most important desires, assisting people in analyzing and clarifying their aims, the relative importance of particular aims and desires, and the best means for achieving the overall configuration of projects that is one’s life in the world. The alternative (what has now most often come to be called “ideological”) use of theory involves the adoption of theories constructed around abstract, externally-conceived subjectivities (god, state, capital, anarchism, primitivism, etc.) to which one feels in some way obliged to subordinate her or his own aims, desires and life.

I won’t go into the complexities of the development of the critical Marxist conceptions of ideology. Suffice it to say that they emphasize an important, but incomplete conception of ideology in the service of institutional social formations, which programmatically forgets the central importance of individual subjectivity to any unalienated theory. The most important aspect of this critical theory of ideology is that the ideas of an alienated populace will tend to both explicitly and implicitly reflect in theory their actual subordination to alienating institutions — especially capital, state and religion — in practice. In other words, when one is enslaved one is forced to view the world to some degree from the perspective of the slaveholder (whether the slaveholder is a person or an institution or a set of institutions) in order to avoid punishment and accomplish any tasks demanded. And the more complex and pervasive the slaveholders demands, the more it becomes necessary to look at one’s world from the slaveholder’s perspective, until most people

can and have lost sight of the very possibility of maintaining their own unalienated perspectives in opposition to their enslavement.

“The good” is the touchstone, the criterion. The good, returning under a thousand names and forms, remained always the presupposition, remained the dogmatic fixed point for this criticism, remained the — fixed idea.

By my use of the name “critical theory” here I do not mean to indicate only — or even primarily — the ideas of the Frankfurt School, which have unfortunately become overly identified in some people’s thinking with the idea of critical theory per se.

Anyone who sets out to change the world soon finds that she or he can’t accomplish much in isolation. The basic structures of our world that need to be changed are *social* — the organized *relations* of people to each other, as well as their material foundation (anchoring) in socially produced personality and character structure. The only way they can be changed radically is through movements of common communication and committed, yet autonomous participation in the project of collective self-transformation and self-realization (or, in other words, through social revolution). For the critical theorist this is the only worthwhile meaning of that a “political” orientation toward life can have. It is a realization that one can have. It is a realization that one can only change one’s life radically by changing the nature of social life itself through the transformation of the world as a whole, which requires collective efforts. And one can only change the world as a whole beginning with one’s own life, as well.

The fetishization of analytic method always functions to conceal a dualistic metaphysic. The mere act of conceptually breaking down (analyzing) specific processes and subjects is not in itself a major problem here. It is the treatment of specific one-sidedly analytic methods *as if* they (and their hidden metaphysical assumptions) are the *only* or *most true* methods of examining the *fundamental nature of things* that coincides with the demands of ideological theory. For example, a rigid belief in the absolute truth of some type of mechanical, atomistic philosophy will usually accompany (no matter how much it may be denied) the fetishization of an analytic method focusing on the breaking down of objects into discrete parts which are then conceptually re-united by solely cause-effect relations. Another example might be the fixation on an analytic method based upon a “systems” orientation”. In this case, the mechanism becomes somewhat more subtle, but a dualistic metaphysic based upon the concepts of systems, feedback, and homeostasis (or levels of stability) takes the place of the atoms and cause-effect model with very similar end results. What happens in each case is that the *conceptual metaphors* used for analyses are reified — the metaphors come to be seen as the-way-things-really-are, rather than as finite metaphors for describing our world which both reveal certain partial truths about it and at the same time impose certain partial falsifications. The structures of different languages shape the range of possibilities for certain types of thought. English and the other Indo-European languages encourage “cause-effect” and “actor-action-receiver” thought patterns as a result of their “subject-verb-object” or “subject-object-verb” sentence patterns. In the same way, the types of analytical methods (in fact, based on analytical metaphors) that we choose shape the range of possibilities we are able to use for understanding the world. Once we become fixated on one method as the *only correct method* we lose the ability to distinguish what that method can reveal to us from what that particular method at the same time conceals from us. We end up directly confusing the metaphor for the structure of our world with predictably bizarre results in practice.

Ontological dualism is the *conception* that existence is fundamentally dual, or split in two, in nature. It is the archetypal metaphysical conception that “Being” is fundamentally divided into

two ultimate parts which can never be resolved into one. It is the necessary basis for all dogmatism and ideological theory. Unfortunately, most of the self-proclaimed “monistic” systems of thought which claim to have “overcome” dualism actually only transpose their metaphysical dualities into a hidden level of theory. For example, *every* “monistic” religion conceals a duality of *spirit* (or its equivalent) and *matter* (or its equivalent) – usually by attempting to completely suppress the material side of this duality (by proclaiming its complete non-existence or its “illusory” nature!), or by awkwardly attempting to marry the concepts of spirit and matter by subsuming them both under some other extremely abstract and artificial super-concept.

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