

On What Ideology Is

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We cannot believe just what we please just when we please; however, there is no doubt that it is sometimes the desires, fears and convenience of persons and groups, rather than the relevant evidence, which determines what they believe about things. I want to say something on this topic, before directly discussing ideology.

Anthony Trollope's novel *The Warden* is a story about an elderly and inconspicuous Anglican clergyman named Harding, who has for many years enjoyed a comfortable stipend as warden of a hospice for paupers. During the time when the hospice and the wardenship have existed, the sum allotted to the paupers has remained the same; but the overall income has considerably increased, and this has been entirely for the benefit of the warden. A young reformer named Bold has drawn attention to the anomaly, and intends to go to law about the matter. The archdeacon of the diocese, a domineering and self-opinionated man who is the very antithesis of the warden in character, regards Bold's interference as an affront to the Church, and an attack on the very fabric of society. In fact legal advice is taken, and a skilful lawyer is hired by the ecclesiastical establishment, who makes it clear that Bold cannot win his case. But Mr. Harding is unable, now the injustice of his position has been pointed out, to retain the wardenship; there now seems to him to be a kind of intrinsic inequity about his station in life, which no assurances about his legal position can allay. The archdeacon reproaches and upbraids him, and Mr. Harding is just the kind of man to be deeply shaken and hurt by this kind of treatment; furthermore, he is distressed by the knowledge that his daughter's comfort and prospects are bound to suffer from what he is about to do. But he is resolved to resign the wardenship, and finally does so.

The central contrast of the novel is between the characters of the warden and the archdeacon. The latter is the sort of man who could never in any circumstances be brought to suspect that there might be any incompatibility between what was true and right on the one hand, and the maintenance of his own privileged social and economic position on the other. Mr. Harding is by no means like John Bold, a man who makes it his business to seek out injustice and try to remedy it; but once it has been pointed out to him that he personally is deriving advantage from an injustice, he cannot bring himself to turn a blind eye, or to twist the evidence in his own favour, however painful to himself it is to acknowledge the truth.

Ideology is usually associated with what is called 'false consciousness', and with the viewpoint of privileged classes; and I think it would be agreed that the archdeacon is in the grip of both to a degree that the warden is not. The warden is a bit like the classical economists or the British factory inspectors as envisaged by Marx¹; on some matters at least he can apprehend the truth, in spite of his class position. How can one describe this 'false consciousness'? I think it may best be seen as failure to apply one or more of three basic mental capacities which have to be exercised by us in coming to know the truth. These are, attentiveness to evidence available to the senses; intelligence in thinking out ways in which such evidence might be accounted for; and reasonableness in selecting at least provisionally as true the hypothesis which best fits the evidence². These capacities, when thoroughly and persistently exercised, give rise to the sciences; but may also be applied more or less to ordinary living. Few people are capable of acting deliberately and clear-sightedly in a way that is very selfish, unjust, or cruel, at least for very long; most of us have to appear other than we are, not only to others but to ourselves. For example, if I am a member of a colonial power exploiting the labour of a people in another part of the world, I am likely to be rather ready to accept the view that the arrangement is for the people's own good, and will not be disposed to attend too carefully to evidence which might tend to support another view of the matter. Similarly, if I am a tyrannical husband or father, I may put it to myself that my behaviour to my wife or child is as much for their benefit as for my convenience; to examine other possibilities too closely might prove too subversive of my way of life.

These examples are meant to bring out the way in which what we believe may be affected by motives arising from our position in life and relations with other people. What relation does this have to ideology? The term is a notoriously ambiguous one; I shall distinguish three senses in which it is often understood:-

- (i) any set of ideas and assumptions affecting action;
- (ii) any set of ideas and assumptions affecting action which is due to corrupt motives, these springing largely from membership of a group or class;
- (iii) a set of ideas which is not scientific or which is unscientific.

The first sense is morally neutral, and is such that ideology is universal; since everyone has beliefs which are not 'merely' fact-

¹ Cf. D. McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx*, London, 1971, p. 154

² Cf. B. J. F. Lonergan, *Insight. A Study of Human Understanding*, London, 1957; *Method in Theology*, London 1971, Chapter I. To deny the existence of these basic mental operations, or their significance in coming to know the truth, would be self-destructive. Suppose one denies, for example, the operation of reasonableness. Is the denial reasonable? If not, there is no reason to take it seriously. If it is, then the operation of reasonableness is instantiated.

ual, whatever that would be, but which determine how they act. In this sense, a Marxist can talk of Marxist or socialist as well as, for example, bourgeois or capitalist ideology. The second sense is pejorative; a set of ideas is an ideology only so far as it is due in the last resort to a corrupt motive. When using the term in this sense, a Marxist could not admit that there was a Marxist or socialist ideology; since according to Marxists the intellectually articulate proletariat sees the world rightly in a way that the bourgeois, whether intellectually articulate or not, does not and cannot. This brings us to the third sense. In the Marxist view, the intellectually articulate proletariat can see the world, and in particular the social relations which form a part of it, as they really are, scientifically; whereas the bourgeois can only see them in a distorted manner, through ideological blinkers.³

It may be asked what it is to see things as they are, what it is that prevents some people from seeing things as they are, and how it is that it does so. It might be suggested that to see things as they are is nothing other than to see things as the proletariat sees them, and that it is by comparison with this way of seeing things that the bourgeois view is distorted.⁴ But this suggestion does seem seriously to relativise and trivialise the issue; since at this rate the proletariat will be just as wrong from the point of view of the bourgeois as the bourgeois is from the point of view of the proletariat. Short of some really and independently existing state of affairs of which the proletariat account is the correct one, and the bourgeois incorrect, it is difficult to see how this conclusion can be avoided. More is surely involved, for the Marxist, in claiming that his view of society is scientific, than claiming that it is proletarian.

By what token does the bourgeois view of reality distort it, according to the Marxist, apart from the mere fact that it is bourgeois and not proletarian? In a very perceptive and intelligent article,⁵ John Mepham has distinguished two views of ideology and its distortions attributable to Marx, one early and comparatively crude, exemplified in the *German Ideology*, the other mature and sophisticated, to be found in *Capital*. According to the earlier view, to be free of ideology is to grasp facts which are in principle open to anyone's inspection, while to be the victim of ideology is to be shielded from these by a fog of 'ideas' and theories. But by

3 On the whole, Marx himself seems to use the term ideology pejoratively. On the other hand, Lenin can speak of 'socialist ideology' *What is to be Done?*, Moscow 1969, p. 42; and Maurice Cornforth can contrast 'scientific' with 'illusory ideology' *Dialectical Materialism*, Volume III, London 1963, p. 77ff.

4 This seems to be the view of Peter Binns, *The Marxist Theory of Truth (Radical Philosophy, 4, 1973)*. For a criticism, in my view justified, of such an account, cf. Andrew Collier, *Truth and Practice (Radical Philosophy 5, 1973)*.

5 John Mepham, *The Theory of Ideology in Capital (Radical Philosophy 2, 1972)*. Subsequent numbers in brackets in the text refer to this article.

the time he wrote *Capital*, Marx had a very different and by no means so simple a notion of the nature of ideology, and of how it was to be avoided. To have scientific knowledge of the social situation was to be in possession of a theory which somehow got behind 'the facts' in the sense of what was to be directly observed. But this evidently gives rise to a difficulty. Once the naive realism of the *German Ideology* is abandoned, by what token are Marx's theories, which are supposed to reflect the reality behind the appearances, more liable to do so than the bourgeois accounts which they superseded? There may seem no consistent third position other than naive realism, or the desperate conclusion which I have already mentioned, that the greater 'objectivity' of Marxist notions consists solely in the fact of their being proletarian as opposed to bourgeois, socialist as opposed to capitalist.

II

As expounded by Mepham, Marx in *Capital* gives an account of ideology which is close to the third one which I distinguished above. Ideology does not derive fundamentally from self-deception or the intention to deceive others, or from 'the cognitive function being overwhelmed by non-cognitive functions such as emotions, feelings or passions', though of course it does have all these among its effects. Rather it arises from the 'opacity of reality', the fact that reality presents itself in a form which conceals the true nature of things and their relations. Such pre-scientific and ideological systems as alchemy and natural magic are not so much *distortions* of what should be immediately perceivable, as one might infer from the *German Ideology*, as too firmly based upon it. Marx's mature theory is to the effect that 'the origin of ideological illusions is in the phenomenal forms of reality itself'. Marx does indeed say that the bourgeois economist 'shuts his eyes' to facts, for instance, that capital does not exist always and everywhere.⁶ But he does not envisage this shutting of the eyes simply as wilful refusal to acknowledge a fact which should be obvious; for him it is rather a matter of being 'unable to separate the form of appearance from the thing that appears'. (13 - 14, 18)

However, what Marx says about wages, as Mepham expounds it, does seem to illustrate very clearly the way in which the interests of powerful groups are liable to affect the way in which the world, and particularly social institutions, are conceived within a society. And this influence spreads to what is called 'ordinary language', the conceptions and assumptions implicit within which will consequently reflect these sectional interests. Thus, as Mepham says, rather than regarding conformity with such ordinary language as the touchstone of truth, as so many contemporary philos-

⁶ *Capital*, I Moscow 19 569.

ophers would have us do, we ought to regard it as deeply suspect.⁽¹⁵⁾ 'Theoretical discourse', as he says, 'corrects ordinary language, tells us what we *should* say. Ordinary language, and the philosophy which makes a fetish of it, has, as Marx says, things standing on their heads'.⁽¹⁶⁾

A good example of what is wrong with 'ordinary language' under capitalism, and of the function of theory in correcting it, is provided by the notion of a 'fair wage'. On Marx's analysis, the very notion of a 'fair wage' is absurd, since the very essence and point of the system of wages is the extraction of unpaid labour; part of the worker's time is spent producing value equivalent to his own means of subsistence, the rest producing value handed over *gratis* to the capitalist. Thus 'wages are unfair as such ... what appears as a fair and free exchange (ensured by contract) is in reality a relation of exploitation and domination'.^(15 - 16)

Mystifications of the kind which have just been described, which tend to be sanctified by ordinary language, present a special kind of problem and challenge to the revolutionary. As Lenin says, there can be no revolutionary movement without revolutionary theory; but unfortunately the spontaneous development of the working class movement is characterised by subordination to bourgeois ideology. This because bourgeois ideology is far older than socialist ideology, is more fully developed, and has at its disposal much more abundant means of dissemination.⁷

III

Mepham's method is to expound the earlier and the mature views of Marx on ideology; and to suggest that the former at worst are erroneous and at best need careful interpretation, and that the latter bring us very near the truth of the matter, for all that difficulties and ambiguities which remain to be resolved and clarified. I shall proceed somewhat differently, by presenting briefly (there is no space for detailed justification⁸) what I believe to be the truth about the matter, and then asking how closely this corresponds with Marx's views,

What is it in general to advance in knowledge of the truth about things? In a typical detective story, the evidence available at first to the reader tends to incriminate one character, who finally turns out to be innocent. By the end of the story, when more evidence is available and confirmed, not only does the new evidence converge as showing that another character is guilty, but the old evidence is seen also to be quite consistent with this. It is just the same in principle with coming to the truth on more abstruse matters of history or of natural and social science. The results of observation and experiment seem at one stage of inquiry to favour

⁷ 12; citing Lenin, *What is to be done?* 25, 41-2.

⁸ Compare note 2 above.

one hypothesis against all its rivals—say, that the stars are equidistant from the earth and fixed in a hollow crystal sphere, or that the works of ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’ were written in the first century of our era; at a later stage, when more observations are available and more tests have been made, quite different hypotheses are reasonably preferred—as accounting not only for the newly-acquired evidence, but for that which was known earlier as well. In all fields of inquiry, it seems that the three basic mental faculties which I mentioned above have to be exercised if one is to get at the truth; *attention* to the full range of relevant evidence in experience; *intelligence* in envisaging a range of theories which might account for the evidence; and *reasonableness* in preferring the theory which does in fact appear best to explain the evidence. The requirement that intelligence and reasonableness, the faculties of constructing theories and testing them, are needed as well as attentiveness to sensible data if we are to get to know the truth, is equivalent to the mature Marx’s insistence that one has to ‘penetrate’ or get behind the forms of reality that appear in order to know things for what they are. The account can also meet Marx’s requirement of ‘inclusion’ —that the contents of earlier and mistaken theories must in some sense be included or assimilated in later ones which have a better claim to truth. A more wide-ranging and less selective survey of relevant data, together with a larger number of theories having been propounded and tested, will result in an account which is not only more liable to be true in itself, but from the point of view of which it will be evident why people in earlier times, on the basis of a narrower range of experience and theory, propounded the factual and moral judgments which they did.

I believe that the epistemological account which I have sketched, and which is worked out in detail in Lonergan’s writings, shows the way in which one should look for a solution of what Mepham calls ‘the epistemological problem of the origin of incorrect ideas’. Some ‘ideas’ are ‘incorrect’ simply because the gathering of data and the putting of questions has not gone far enough; one may say that this applies to the view of water which generally prevailed till the nineteenth century, that it was a chemical element and not a compound. Others are incorrect because the process of gathering data and putting questions has been warped by the self-interest of groups or the desires and fears of people at large; these are cases which are ‘ideological’ in the second of the senses which I distinguished above. Some are a mixture of the two; for example, the geocentric system of cosmology once prevailed because it seemed natural and obvious, because little or no evidence which seemed to tell against it was known, and because alternative accounts were not available; but it was accepted as long as it was largely because of its association with religious beliefs,

and because its abandonment seemed to disturb people's feelings of their own importance and significance in relation to the cosmos as a whole. Those who have not reached a theoretical apprehension of things at all, either because inquiry simply has not had the opportunity to advance far enough, or because it has been discouraged or misdirected owing to 'ideological' influences of the kind just described, would be victims of 'ideology' in the third sense which I distinguished.

Marx's mature theories, if one believes they are true in their general outline, are a crucial part of the ideology of the working class in the first of our senses of ideology—i.e. they indicate the historical role of the working class, and outline its course and point to its objectives. However, they escape ideology in both the second and the third senses, in both seeing through illusions generated by economic privilege and class interest, and replacing mere description with theoretical explanation. Engel's comparison of Marx with Lavoisier (17) is illuminating from this point of view; rather as the combination of oxygen with other substances brings under an explanatory principle such diverse phenomena as burning and rusting, so does Marx's conception of labour power bring out what is identical, in spite of all superficial differences, in the situation of the wage-labourer under capitalism and that of the slave in earlier times. Under capitalism, there is the fiction of a contract, so that the worker may appear free in a way that he is really not; whereas 'in the system of slavery ... frankly, and *openly*, without *any circumlocution*, labour-power itself is sold'.⁹

By virtue of what, if at all, does or could the 'ideology of the working class' consist in 'correct ideas', at least as compared with the ideology of the bourgeoisie? If the view which I have sketched is right, 'correct ideas' are those in terms of which one may form true judgments about the world and society, and true judgments are to be come by as the term of unrestricted attentiveness, intelligence, and reasonableness as above described. The proletariat, or the vast majority of people, will no longer have the motives which the bourgeois had, in the maintenance of their own privileged position, for restricting or frustrating these mental operations; and thus, given time, would be able to construct the theories necessary for adequate representation of matters which had not previously been systematically investigated. As Lenin explains, in the passage cited by Mepham, it is not possible for such theories to spring into existence all at once.

Mepham's distinction between two conceptions of ideology leads straight to a cardinal thesis of Lonergan's epistemology; that is, that there are two sorts of realism, which one may label the naive and the critical, between which idealism represents a half-

9 (17); citing *Capital, I*, 539-542.

way house.¹⁰ According to the first, apparently represented by Marx in *The German Ideology*, reality is more or less what is directly present to the senses. Idealism sees what is wrong with this, that the real can only be represented by and in terms of mental constructions; but it wrongly infers from this that there is no reality prior to or independent of these mental constructions. (Something similar applies to the sociological relativism fashionable at the present day, and conceptions of science and its development like those of Thomas Kuhn.¹¹ The second kind of realism, set out systematically by Lonergan and apparently at least adumbrated by Marx in *Capital*, is to the effect that a real world which exists *independently of* and *prior to* theories about it is *to be known* by theories which are verified by appeal to what may be the object of sensation or observation. To demythologise Marx's injunction to stand Hegel on his head, on this view, is to deny that the world is an ideal construction, but to insist that it is nothing other than what is to be known by means and in terms of a verified ideal construction. And to achieve such knowing will involve *attentiveness* to the data in which the construction is to be verified, *intelligence* in setting up possible constructions, and *reasonableness* in preferring as at least provisionally true the construction which best fits the observed data. In a sense, this would represent a synthesis between Marx's earlier and later accounts; to know the truth, one must *both* look at what is out there to be looked at, *and* propound a theoretical explanation which 'penetrates' or goes beyond it while explaining it.¹²

In fact, if to be 'materialist' is to exclude ideology in the second and third of the senses we distinguished, there would appear to be two kinds of 'materialism' corresponding to the two kinds of ideology envisaged respectively by Marx in *The German Ideology* and *Capital*. But I have avoided the term 'materialism' up to now,

10 Cf. *Insight*, xxviii.

11 Cf. *the Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago, 1962. Also Hugo Meynell, *Science, the Truth, and Thomas Kuhn (Mind)*, January 1975).

12 So far as I can judge, Lonergan is the first philosopher to show clearly and distinctly how in matters of epistemology and metaphysics, one should apply Marx's injunction to stand Hegel on his head. This is why his theory of knowledge ought to be of interest to contemporary Marxists, who, (cf. the articles by Binns and Collier cited above) are especially exercised by epistemological problems. Of Louis Althusser, I would suggest that while he has adverted to the basic problem, his solution quite fails to meet it; and this may be attributed to his failure to learn the positive lessons which are to be had from the early Marx. Althusser rules out as ideological any attempt to find guarantees external to a theory for the scientific status of that theory (cf. A. Callincos, *Althusser's Marxism*, London 1976, 58.) But short of recourse to such justification, as Marx trenchantly remarks of religion in one of his early articles (Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, Moscow n. d. 21, 25-6.), by what right does the proponent of any position claim that his views are any more in accordance with reality than those opposed to his? Althusser's objections to verification of theories by appeal to what is exterior to themselves (cf. *Reading Capital*, London 1970, p. 58) are curiously similar to Kuhn's, and can be answered in the same sort of way. Cf. Meynell, art. cit.

for the following reason. As the term is generally understood, to be a materialist is to disbelieve in the existence of a God. Now according to the first sort of realism, according to which the criterion of existence is sense-perception, God certainly does not exist, but neither do positrons, black holes, or the contents of other people's consciousness. The second sort of realism would appear to accommodate positrons and black holes and other minds, but does not by any means so obviously exclude the existence of God.²³ And in what sense would a materialism remain a materialism if it were found to be quite consistent with belief in God?

The Last Laugh of a Humane Faith:

Dr. Alexander Geddes 1737–1801

Bernard Aspinwall

“This unaccountable, heterodox, bad priest” was the accepted verdict of Catholic scholarship on Alexander Geddes almost seventy years ago.¹ Amid the modernist crisis that view was understandable particularly in the British Catholic Church which had struggled for respectability and acceptance during the previous half century. Geddes seemed a disturbing unmannerly radical. But today in a Church more concerned with social justice and freedom, with ecumenism and scholarly integrity, we can come to a more charitable balanced conclusion. For Geddes was undoubtedly a talented scholarly priest of liberal imagination and provocative manner. Persistent ill health especially some severe form of

²³ The way in which a ‘materialist’ argument for the existence of God might well be developed is suggested in effect by Barry Hindess’s recent and brilliant book on *Philosophy and Methodology in the Social Sciences* (Harvester Press, 1976). Hindess rejects the correspondence theory of truth, on the grounds that it involves a ‘pre-established harmony’ between the nature of the human mind and the structure of reality; and that this leads straight to theism. But the correspondence theory of truth—that there is a world prior to and independent of our theorising, by virtue of correct description and explanation of which our theories are true—does seem more or less inseparable from the ‘objectivism’ characteristic of most forms of Marxism (cf. Collier, art. cit. p. 9). In fact, if the denial of this is not idealism—implying as it does that pulsars and alpha particles are products of the human mind, rather than existing prior to and independently of it—it is difficult to see what idealism would be. Thus if one accepted Hindess’s argument, but found oneself unable to reject the correspondence theory of truth, one would be driven to belief in God.

¹ Bernard Ward, *The Dawn of the Catholic Revival in England, 1781-1803*, 2 vols. London, 1909, ii. 247. On Geddes see John Mason Good, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Alexander Geddes, LL.D.*, London, 1803; A. Geddes to Miss Howard, 12 Oct. 1792, *National Library of Scotland, Mss. 10999* in which he writes of “deluging my poor stomach with laudanum.”