

# History, Culture and the Communist Manifesto—Part 3 - On ideology and historical ideas

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*“What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes in character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”*

AT THE UNIVERSITY of Chicago, where Economics is taught according to Milton Friedman, students used to wear t-shirts declaring “Markets work, it’s people who screw up”—a compelling example of “deology” in Marx’s sense, at a time when the fetish of market efficiency dominates public discourse.

Yet Marx’s materialist history of ideas has long been called reductionist. Denying the autonomy of intellectual life, Marx considered ideas “epiphenomenal,” critics say, as if ideas convey merely the economic interests of rulers, cloaked in illusions calculated to mislead the masses.

True, movements claiming Marx’s mantle (particularly Stalin’s thought police) have often adopted such crude notions, assuming an absolute breach between the scientific “truth” of Marxism and the “lies” of bourgeois culture in toto—judging the value of art or validity of scientific theories by political standards, and treating controversies within the revolutionary movement as signs of “alien class” influences.

But Marx’s conception of the historical role of ideas bears little responsibility for this. Highly compressed in the Manifesto, that conception was subtler than its critics claim. Marx offered not a reductive materialism, but a critique of both philosophic materialism and idealism; he treated thought and action not as distinct realms but conjoint elements of human practice.

Ideas expressed the aims and limits of human activity in definite social situations; it is not that ideas were insignificant in behavior, but only that the ideas people held were their ideas, rooted in their time, place and purposes. That ideas have appeared otherwise—as forces free from historical specificity, governing reality or reigning as eternal truth—stemmed from the division of mental and manual labor at the basis of class-riven societies. Given a class freed from the labor it demands of others, “consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice . . . [can] emancipate itself from the world and . . . proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.”

Or “pure economics.” Marx’s critique of market economics, or the “fetishism of commodities,” offered a refined understanding of ideology (and no simple notion of “false consciousness”).

The value-relation of commodities realized in their prices of exchange, Marx wrote, “is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things;” but, he added, “the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are,

material relations between persons and social relations between things.”

Exchange value encodes the practical relations between people which are fashioned in history, but it assumes the form of “relations between things” and acts as if it were a natural force beyond human control (especially in times of crisis, which resemble bewildering storms or earthquakes).

The bizarre “natural” character of market processes makes Economics the archetypal ideology, portraying social arrangements as universal and necessary, rather than as historically specific terms of practice perpetuated by that class of people which benefits from them.

Thus the ideologist says: Freed of human interference, markets work effectively, following laws of nature; social problems, however, are accidents, due to human error. (“Markets work, it’s people who screw up.”)

### **Ideology and Historical Ideas**

Granted the potency and subtlety of this analysis, however, a tension remains between the relatively static (sociological) dimension of Marx’s approach to ideas and its more dynamic, historical dimension.

We may be tempted to view “ideology” (or “the ruling ideas of the ruling class”) as a particular, coherent body of ideas fitting a certain social structure—the characteristic “bourgeois ideology” of capitalist society, for instance. Such generalizations are legitimate at a high level of abstraction; but if taken too literally, they might obscure the historical sense Marx had of ideas as expressions that are integrally tied to human action.

As such, ideas are bound up in the flux of conflict and change, and thus are likely to appear in ad hoc, unfinished and even self-contradictory forms, rather than as settled, systematic doctrines “reflecting” a given social structure.

Moreover, ideas that achieve high repute cannot always be identified simply with “ruling ideas” or “ideology.” Modern intellectual life has produced trends in thought and culture—romantic anticapitalism, pragmatism, surrealism, and existentialism, for instance—which self-consciously aimed to challenge that ideology.

While sometimes marginal, such currents indicate the complexity of modern intellectual production, where an intelligentsia possesses a degree of caste consciousness and functional autonomy from the bourgeoisie, and where “critical” (though not proletarian) doctrines evolve in awkward relation to both the dominant ideology and disruptive social movements.

Attention to class relations helps clarify this phenomenon. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some representatives of a new middle class, frightened and emboldened by labor’s growth, offered a mildly anticapitalist, “social” criticism as part of a reform program supposed to harmonize the fractured society of industrial capitalism.

Trotsky noted, for instance, that reformist social democracy emerged from an alliance of labor bureaucracy and the new middle class. In the early 1920s, Georg Lukacs described a new ideology combining an apologia for social stability with a program of “planning.” While the history of the Cold War welfare state showed that these quasi-independent “social” currents could flourish under, and combine with, anti-revolutionary and pro-imperialist imperatives, it would be mistaken to label them merely “ruling-class ideology.”

Amidst modern class conflict, a “social” current, though biased toward stability, was also a kind of

seedbed for new generations of intellectual critics, and for radicals who might bring their talents (and perhaps the energies of a disaffected middle class) to a revolutionary proletarian movement. And this would be a significant gain, since proletarian struggles must join the contest in modern mass politics over the ideas that influence popular sentiment and action.

Given the nature of thought in the history of class-divided societies, there will always be elements of “tradition” as well as ad hoc combinations and contradictions in intellectual production.

The element of tradition makes it useful, at times, to employ “internalist” methods of intellectual history, which examine historical chains of ideas wholly in their own terms, aside from social context; the ad hoc element, which often fosters syncretistic or disjointed combinations of ideas, is open to analysis by the very different “poststructuralist” methods of reading texts.

Yet while these, among others, may be contributing methods, historical materialism will remain the overriding framework for any effort that is intended to assist revolutionary practice, and which aims to account for the character and power of prevailing ideas.

These ideas must be set in a complex context composed of historically specific strains in social structure, contention among classes and class fractions, political problems in forging coalitions (among oppressors and oppressed), and the balance of forces in the particular moments when they arose—factors which historical materialism best comprehends.

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