

Marx, Ideology and the Unconscious

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Abstract. *This paper addresses the question of why the current ruling ideology is more potent and dangerous than simply being a set of ideas. It will engage this topic through an investigation of the evolution of ideology within late capitalism. It will suggest that the difference between ideology and a “belief system” has actually shifted since the late 1960’s as capital has refined its ability to mine the unconscious, stripping it for resources. Through a reading of Marx, an argument is made that we must rethink the relationship of the conscious and unconscious minds. A proposal is made for the deployment of libidinal revolutionary desire as a way to challenge late stage capitalist ideology on its own terms.*

Keywords: Marxism, Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Schizoanalysis, Ideology, Capitalism.

The question of ideology under late stage capitalism or what Hardt and Negri (2000) have called Empire is a vexing one. It raises the specter of Spinoza’s (2007) question as to why we fight for our servitude as though it were a form of liberation. Our lives and actions both personally and politically seem increasingly saturated with the faux common sense of capitalist logic. In spite of extensive interventions, over generations, by Marxists and communists to challenge false consciousness and assist the people in understanding the true and actual nature of the conditions of their own oppression, billions seek nothing more than to become successful capitalists large and small. Even the most wretched seek to obtain micro-loans so that they might employ their neighbors and engage in the most oppressive of capitalist relations; that of becoming the boss.

Of course, there are counter movements and a constancy of revolt that has thrown capitalism into a seemingly endless cycle of crises. Despite this, the regimes of capitalist control continue to appropriate and turn revolutionary struggle into market opportunities under the guise of democratic aspiration and political reform. With the facility of a magician, capital displaces the realities of the suffering of an ever-increasing segment of the population onto a field of political discourse and empty sloganeering.

Pignarre and Stengers (2011) refer to this as the sorcery of capitalism. They argue that capitalism as a

social form casts a certain spell of capture over its subjects. A form of domination that imbues its subjects with a certain sense of historical fatalism where “you can’t turn back the clocks ... the liberalization of the world [is] inscribed in history as inevitably as gravity in nature.” A sense that “the party is over, we have to be pragmatic now, accept the hard reality ... finally accepted after an orgy of ideological dreams” (p. 43).

This invocation of a kind of spell cast by the sorcery of capitalism is, like all black magic, an appropriation and reversal of its subject’s most profound desire. In this case, the enchantment is founded in the materialism and historical determinism of Marx himself. The twist is that, rather than actually engaging the material struggles of living beings and turning their creative force towards an opening of history as the infinite creation of modes of immanent sovereignty, the sorcery here opens the signifier to an abstract outside of domination and control; a field in which all creative force is appropriated to the abstract code of capital itself. The functional mechanism by which such a spell is cast is, of course, ideology.

In the classic iteration ideology is “the means by which relations of power, control and dominance are maintained and preserved within any society” (Augustinos, 1999, p. 295). In any given society there are common sets of linguistic signifiers that reify the existing sets of power relations. Because language is by

definition what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as a system that inherently orders the world, in a certain sense all beliefs are ideological. They are ideological, because they are derived out of the system of language and definition common to the system of rule and domination of that historical period. Such definitions, of course, lead to hegemonic discourses that prescribe practices and actions. The inculcation of the complex of definition, discourse, practices and beliefs is not one that is consciously assembled. Rather, one is born into it and operates within it as the proverbial fish in water. All forms of social belief that support the existing system of rule are neither inevitable nor the only possible way to organize the social world. As Augustinos (1999) points out, this has been “one of the long standing strengths of Marx’s critique of capitalism: its capacity to demystify the phenomenal and objectified forms of the market and to reveal the historically and socially specific relations” (p. 306).

Ideology, if it is simply one way to describe the world, should reasonably respond to a conscious form of critique that reveals its shortcomings and false assertions. In short, it should be responsive to the light of reason and rational critique. However, as any psychologist who has worked in clinical practice knows, a deeply rooted psychotic complex does not easily lend itself to the incisive insights of the reality-based practitioner. I use the term psychotic with some degree of intentionality. I would argue that capitalism is a rather specific case of psychotic process. Psychotic, not in the sense of primary process, *per se*, although that case might well be made, but psychosis in the sense of a belief system composed out of actual elements of material actuality composed in an entirely disconnected and self-contained system of abstraction. Put simply, capitalism is a mad parasitic system that is immanent to its own effects irrespective of its impact on its host. Without question, such a system, fundamentally composed out of abstract signifiers must constantly adapt its vernacular in keeping with the material struggles, innovations and strategies of its host: living beings.

As with any truly paranoid system premised in lack and negation, capitalism operates through a mechanism of blank signification. Just as the paranoid schizophrenic has an astonishing capacity to integrate new and disparate challenges to his/her closed and homogenous system, so capitalism appears to have a similar capacity to integrate and modify scientific and rational critique to its own ends. Certainly, we can see this in current political discourse in the “debates” on climate change, the invasive force of pharmaceutical assaults on consciousness and affect, as well as in the contestation over genetically based

crops. The ability to take the massive and potentially genocidal effect of global warming and make it an issue that demands more nuclear plants, hydro-dams and hydrofracking is clear evidence of an abstract system that operates with no regard for living things, whose only purpose is its own expansion and continued existence. As Marx (1987) has noted, capitalism is just such a parasitic system and this is indeed the logic of a parasite, who will kill its host even though it is a suicidal course of action. Of course, from the perspective of sentient beings this is irrational and psychotic behavior and yet it persists and proliferates in the face of rationale discourse and reasoned objection. Perhaps this is partially because as Pignarre and Stengers (2011) point out,

For the most part, the words available to us trap and are trapped. Most often they turn around the notion of “ideology,” which means that they affirm the possibility of distinguishing between (false) “ideas” and what those ideas bear on ... But the minions [of capitalism] ... are not blinded by ideology. It would be better to say, borrowing from the vocabulary of sorcery, that they have been “eaten up,” that is to say that it is their very capacity to think and feel that has been prey to the operation of capture. To be blinded implies that one sees “badly” – something that can be corrected. But to be captured implies that it is the capacity to see itself that has been affected. (pp. 42-43)

This distinction between being blinded, with the possibility of coming to see, and being captured, with one’s very capacity for sight being compromised, is critical. It is akin to what we might describe as the addict’s dilemma. To become sober, one must quit using the substance, but the use of the substance impairs the capacity to become sober. It isn’t that the addict is not capable of processing the information being shared with them about the ill effects of their substance usage. A professional addict can rehearse these arguments and in fact incorporate them into their system of denial in ways that allow their continued usage of the substance in question. However, the addict does not use on the basis of rational reflection; the addict is functioning within a constellation of lack. Their motivations are premised in the belief that the substance will fulfill its promise to flatten and homogenize life’s stresses and difficulties. The substance is not capable of fulfilling this promise, but in the face of repeated failures, the addict persists. Their capacity to see outside the system of addiction has been seriously compromised as the addiction steadily and stealthily incorporates all aspects of the addict’s life into the logic of addiction.

Similarly, capitalism operates as a system that compromises the very capacity to critique its operations. It does this, not by denying the critique, but by incorporating it within its logic and homogenizing it into the smooth operations of its appropriation and exploitation of human consciousness. Like most complex adaptive systems, capitalism has a significant degree of contingent evolutionary force. Indeed, its modes of symbiotic enmeshment with living consciousness have shifted over time since its inception. The open signifier of the money sign continually expands its scope of capture and appropriation to include an ever increasingly complex of linguistic code. As Guattari (2010) notes:

The “miracle” of capitalism is that it has succeeded to direct language, such that it is spoken, taught, televised, dreamt etc. in a way that ensures it remains perfectly adapted to its own evolution. Thus, this operation always appears to be self evident: the syntagms of power, its presuppositions, its threats, its methods of intimidation, seduction, and submission are conveyed at an unconscious level, a little like those “subliminal” images. (p. 38)

Jameson (1991) among others has described our contemporary moment as a new stage in capitalism’s development. He tells us that the consumption of commodities has been superseded by the production and consumption of signs and symbols. Capitalism is dominated no longer by the exchange value of products, but by their symbolic or sign value. While this is undoubtedly a polemical over statement, there is little doubt that the emerging global economy is increasingly dependent on a new mode of production, domination and control. Indeed, Jameson (1991) notes that within contemporary consumer capitalism, people are increasingly dominated by signs and media images.

The proliferation of signification as a mode of social control is, of course, not new. As we have noted, ideology in all historical period works within this domain. However, I would argue that what has shifted is the both the centrality and force of both signification and code within what Hardt and Negri (2000) have referred to as Empire. This production of the socius through the production of beliefs that enslave and discipline sentient beings has always been the force operating more or less visibly. However, until advent of a fully global and digitally connected and driven mode of control and production, signification and belief were placed largely in support of the management of bodies and their deployment. For example, Deleuze (1997) points out in his essay *Postscript on the Society of Control* that the ideological controls

of industrial capitalism functioned largely to contain and discipline bodies utilized in factories in various ways. Consciousness and belief were a means to an end, both politically and economically. In our contemporary moment, capitalism emerges fully into visibility as a system that is only peripherally interested in laboring bodies. Such bodies are only of interest to capital, as a ruling system, to the degree that they serve its primary function, which is the proliferation of itself in its fully immanent form as abstract code.

Capitalism, in this sense, is less a system of acts per se (i.e. getting people to do things) than a system of ontological fantasy. Working at the level of the unconscious, capitalism inducts its subjects into a state of infinitely deferred belonging. Of course, one cannot belong to an abstract system of code, but as Deleuze (1997) points out in *Postscript on the Society of Control*, late stage capitalism operates by promising social inclusion for anyone who is a successful capitalist, an entrepreneur, a hard worker, a competent functionary, and so on. The codes and instructions for how to belong to society are perpetuated and disseminated across the social through the mass media, the schools, the family and the political systems as simply normative modes of living. This means that subjects under capitalism do not consciously know that they are carrying out instructions, since as R.D. Laing (1971) has pointed out, “one instruction is not to think that one is instructed” (p. 79). We might note that this is a classic technique in hypnosis.

As a clinical hypnotist, I am aware that a suggestion can be given that instructs someone to experience an event, memory or sensation and simultaneously to forget they have been told to have the experience. The person under hypnosis has the experience, but does not know where it came from or that it was an instruction. Indeed, often the hypnotist will offer suggestions indirectly in such a way as to avoid any possible resistance. This is accomplished by offering multiple suggested experiences. The choice between experiences appears to give control to the hypnotized person. However whatever choice is made is still within the selection chosen by the hypnotist. One can even offer the possibility of resisting the instruction of the hypnotist, but in resisting, the hypnotized person is inadvertently following instructions without realizing it.

The parallels with the faux choices provided to consumers, in terms of commodities, lifestyles and political systems under late stage capital are extensive. Capitalism in this sense functions as system of trance. It instructs its subjects in how to behave, while simultaneously successfully suggesting to them that

such behavior is their idea. It follows the same logic of the hypnotist in offering a proliferating array of options premised in the subject's own libidinal desire. In this sense, capitalism inducts or captures its subjects through holding open and infinitely deferring libidinal investment. It codes all materialist desire into its own abstract code. It functions seamlessly as a state of trance equivalent to Pignarre and Stengers' (2011) sorcery, that is the "name for something that manages to produce a coincidence between enslavement, the putting into service, and subjection, the production of those who do freely what they are meant to do" (p. 45). In this sense, capitalism, like hypnosis, operates on the border between conscious and unconscious desire. In short, capitalism functions as a social preconscious filtering all desire into a singular abstract code, mining the unconscious as it emerges into consciousness.

This is facilitated by the nature of the unconscious, which in the work of the clinical hypnotist is a rich field of resource to be turned towards any struggle or limit to the creative force of the subject. For capitalism, it is a similarly rich field, but a field to be psychically stripped and codified to its own ends. In our current age, the advent of what Baudrillard (1981) calls "homo cyberneticus" (p. 100) engages what Marx (1978a) presciently described as human consciousness embedded as a node of connection in a network of global machinery. The world of cyborg form places us deep within a literal machinic unconscious that holds all of the revolutionary force of the unconscious and all the amplified possibilities of capitalist sorcery. It is not a battle that can be engaged at a fully conscious level. The struggle is, as it always was, centered on the battle for the libidinal force of the uncoded; the not yet of what could become. To beat the sorcerer one must have a strong sense of a countervailing state of trance, one powerful enough to awaken the imagination and to oppose any flattening, homogenizing or foreclosing of the heterogeneous creative force of the unconscious.

Building a Counter-Trance

How might we engage such a struggle? We might begin by remembering Marx's (1978b) contention that, "for the communist, it is a question of revolutionizing the existing world, of practically attacking

and changing existing things" (p. 169). Such existing things are not composed of idealistic or universal elements but are the productions of an ever changing and shifting field of composition and production. Consciousness and, so I would argue, the production of the unconscious, are composed precisely in this way.³ Marx (1978b) tells us in the *German Ideology* that "we find that man has consciousness but ... not inherent, not 'pure' consciousness." There is no consciousness for Marx that stands outside the realm of production. Consciousness is founded in the mode of production in any given historical period and holds a close relation with language, both of which, Marx (1978b) notes, "arise from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other[s]" (p.158). Consciousness is "therefore, from the very beginning, a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all" (p. 158). Consciousness as social production, then, also experiences the same contradictions and antagonisms as other elements of material production when subjected to capitalist divisions of labor and the imposition of the regimens of private property.

It is in the encounter with the historical contradictions and social antagonisms of capitalism that European theorists develop their unique and peculiar configuration of the unconscious. Specifically, in the creation of the unconscious as a space of thwarted desire, repressed memory or frustrated drives; a space of lack.⁴ However, none of these projects, in their attempts to account for the unconscious as a space of social production, meet the criterion laid by Marx for a communist accounting of consciousness.

Consciousness, in my reading of Marx (1978) in *The German Ideology*, is not bifurcated. Consciousness only becomes bifurcated as result of social contradictions and antagonisms. Consciousness in all its forms is socially produced and actually existing. The division between the conscious and unconscious in European thought is essentially a division of labor produced under particular historical conditions. Such division is initiated in the first division of labor between material and mental labor. This initial division Marx tells us leads to the severing of consciousness from existing practice and opens its capacity to be fully representational and symbolic. In another term, consciousness is opened to the realm of the transcendent. This is a complicated moment in Marx, because

³ See Marx (1978b, p. 158, footnote 4): "Men have history because they must *produce* their life, and because they must produce it moreover in a certain way: this is determined by their physical organization: their consciousness is determined in just the same way."

⁴ Of course, Freud (1963) did mark the unconscious as a space of infinite resource and production. Both Lacan (2007) and Jung (1996) made valiant efforts to create the unconscious as a collectivity or productive common.

as we have noted, he has suggested earlier that language and consciousness are not one and the same:

Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language *like* consciousness only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men. (p. 158, emphasis added)

It is clear that while language and consciousness are related, they are not the same. Language has a functional relation in carrying out the tasks of consciousness, but while it is *like* consciousness, it is not consciousness. What is at stake in distinguishing consciousness from language is whether or not consciousness, in all its forms, is representational or symbolic, or if language, representation and the symbolic hold a functional but separate relation. This is important for us in challenging the sorcery of capitalism, which functions thoroughly in the realm of representation, symbolism and code. If we can go beyond the traditional psychoanalytic construction of the unconscious as founded in code, representation or the symbolic, then we might be able to conceive of the unconscious (and consciousness generally) as having a surplus that functions beyond the reach of capitalist coding and appropriation.

To propose a logic of surplus is to step aside from dialectical constructions of both history and consciousness. Instead, we engage the immanentist politics of force where that which capital would appropriate to its own ends constantly overflows any attempt to contain it. It is the moment in Hardt and Negri (2003) where they rewrite Foucault to suggest that resistance precedes domination, because the act of domination is one of attempting to contain and control creative force. Resistance arises simultaneously with domination in the same way water resists being dammed. To call such a moment resistance, is perhaps to give forces of domination too much credit. It is not life that pushes back against capitalism, but as Hardt and Negri (2003) point out, capitalism that must constantly reconfigure itself to contain the infinite productions of life. It is, in this sense, capitalism that is resisting life, not the other way around.

The implication of this is that there is an important distinction to be made between the mode of production and the forces of domination that operate within any given historical period. Too often, we conflate the two when we conceive of modes of liberation, rebellion or revolt. There is of course, a perverse productive relation between what is produced and

modes of appropriation and exploitation. Just as the prisoner is infinitely creative in exploring physical, emotional and psychological modes of escape and flight in response to being incarcerated, so the prison in all its modes constantly finds new innovations responsive to the prisoner's efforts. When we frame the question of liberation in these terms, we inadvertently draw the field of production into a binary relation of mutual causality that, at times, may appear to be a homeostatic relation.

While some portion of the social field is precisely founded in this binary relation, I would argue there is a much richer and complex field of production that operates irrespective of the mode of domination. It is this field that we might term the proper mode of production. If we are to explore the question of surplus outside the axiomatics of capitalism, this aspect of the social needs to be radically scissioned from the mode of domination.

To be clear, the rich multiplicity of micro-activities that produces any given mode of production precedes any mode of rule that will seek to dominate, appropriate and control it. The rich common of creative life force will continue to produce itself in every historical period. While some portion of this activity will be responsive to the threats of the mode of domination, this is a small part of the infinite contingent and aleatory field of living production.

When we theorize our politics as holding a primary relation to the antagonisms and contradictions inherent in our relation with the mode of domination we run the risk of losing sight of the actual conditions of production. This is not to say that we can ignore the brutal effects of capitalism on our lives and on the lives of all things on earth. It is to say, instead, that it is important to remember that capitalism is not life, but gives life orders.⁵ We, on the other hand, are life and stand in common with all living things. The function of capitalist axiomatics, like those of the church and the monarchy before them, is to convince us that our world is comprised outside of ourselves in hierarchical realms of Gods, Kings and money. Perhaps we might read Deleuze's (1997) assertion that our belief in the world has been taken from us in precisely this way. To believe in the world is to act upon the productions of life, as thought and act. Deleuze goes on to say, "If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume" (p. 176).

⁵ With apologies to Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

To precipitate an onslaught of events and micro-events, in a mode of consciousness powerful enough to elude capture by the axiomatics of capitalist sorcery, may well require that we recover all elements of our consciousness as components of our common force together. For this to become a possibility we might well make an effort to think the modes of our consciousness in terms of their actuality. Deleuze and Guattari, following Foucault (1991), define the actual as “not what we are but, rather, what we become, what we are in the process of becoming” (p. 112). The force of our actual consciousness, then, is not primarily in its ability to factually comprehend the world. It is in its ability to *produce* the world; that is, consciousness as pure production. Such a becoming consciousness is not subject to the historical bifurcation into conscious and unconscious, nor is it limited to the sphere of the symbolic. It cannot be contained within the limited sphere of the individual or self, those historical artifacts that are already passing into the long and dead history of dominant axiomatics.

Our consciousness is determined, as Marx (1987b) noted, by the way in which we produce our life. In this, we are life itself and cannot reasonably be separated from it, except through dominant definitions of a transcendent outside. Indeed, we might well restate Marx by saying that our consciousness is determined by the way that life produces life. That is to say, as a thoroughly immanent system of production that, as we have noted, both precedes and overflows any attempt to contain it.

In another vernacular we might well describe this as libidinal force, which Deleuze and Guattari (1983) tell us is fundamental to bringing revolutionary potential to fruition. It is specifically “the efficacy of a libidinal break at a precise moment” (p. 378). Such a break opens a field whose sole “cause is desire” (p. 378). In this moment, history is rewritten “on a level with the real” (p. 378), opening infinite possibilities of action and multitudinous enunciations. Deleuze and Guattari tell us that it is specifically uncoded, or one might even say pre-coded desire, that undermines capitalism. To access such libidinal force and “the new irruption of desire” (p. 378), we need to produce far more permeable boundaries between what we have come to know as the conscious and unconscious.

This, of course, is not news to the minoritarian multitude comprised of all the bodies that are constitutively at odds with the ideological force of dominant consciousness, such as aboriginal healers, shamans, witches, sages, artists, dreamers, musicians, and poets. Those bodies whose revolutionary vision and

wisdom was cast aside in the rush to modernity by psychology and Marxism.

This is not to valorize such alternate modes of knowledge over reason, rationality or science. It is to suggest that any hegemonic force that precludes the production of desire through a savage clearing of the landscape of possible consciousness is fascistic at its core. To engage the possibility of living counter to fascism, according to Foucault (1983), it is necessary to “withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna) which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality” (p. xiii). If, as we have noted, capitalist ideology is premised in the “old categories of the Negative,” precisely as they construct the relation between the constructs of the conscious and unconscious, then an alternative spell that breaks the sorcery of capital would hold all modes of knowing to the same standard. Such an incantation would reconfigure science through opening reason and rationality on a plane of immanent desire. In fact, Spinoza has already sketched the diagram for us here. While other minoritarian forms already breach the divide between forms of consciousness, their revolutionary force lies in their capacity to step aside from forms of the Negative as well. The breach is founded in desire not lack. As Deleuze and Guattari (1983) remind us, “revolutionaries often forget, or do not like to recognize, that one wants and makes revolution out of desire, not duty” (p. 344).

One cannot challenge sorcery as a matter of duty. Such a stance merely trades one sorcerer for another. Instead, to break the spell one must come to understand that our desire is not derived from the realm of the social or economic. The social and economic are derived from our desire. Our desire is not composed of codes, symbols and representation, but is the ground out of which their very nature is derived. Our conscious and unconscious are not binary formations but mutually productive machinic sites of infinite production driven by libidinal force and creative desire. To break the spell we must turn ideology on its feet and cease to produce it as an outside. Like the shaman we must willingly engage the trance from the inside and through the force of our desire open it back onto the realm of life itself.

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