

The transition point from Marx to Althusser on the issue of ideology: the example of education

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ABSTRACT

This paper will primarily attempt to broadly outline Karl Marx's theory of ideology in order to establish the theoretical framework, and, at the same time, attempt to provide a brief overview of its position within the philosophical debates of the time. Thus, French philosopher Louis Althusser's contribution to the studies of ideology will be surveyed. Elaborating on this, the relationship between education and ideology will be explored from a Marxist perspective, specifically focusing on Althusser's characterisation of the school as an Ideological State Apparatus. However, it is also necessary to stress that the purpose of this article is to pinpoint the connections between these two thinkers, with Althusser's contribution being a necessary refinement and elucidation of the concept of ideology via one of its institutional expressions, namely, education.

KEYWORDS

Ideology, education, Ideological State Apparatus, materialism, consciousness

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article va principalement tenter exposer brièvement la théorie de l'idéologie de Karl Marx afin d'établir le cadre théorique et, en même temps, tenter de donner un bref aperçu de sa position dans les débats philosophiques de l'époque. Ainsi, la contribution du philosophe Français Louis Althusser aux études de l'idéologie sera être arpentée. Élaborer là-dessus, la relation entre éducation et idéologie est examinée dans une perspective marxiste, spécifiquement axé sur la caractérisation d'Althusser de l'école comme un appareil idéologique d'État. Cependant, il faut également souligner que le but de cet article est d'identifier les liens entre ces deux théoriciens, avec la contribution d'Althusser, étant un raffinement nécessaire et l'éclaircissement de la notion d'idéologie via l'éducation, l'une de ses expressions institutionnelles.

MOTS-CLÉS

Idéologie, éducation, appareils idéologiques d'État, matérialisme, la conscience

INTRODUCTION

It was two years prior to the great, albeit ineffective, revolutionary upheavals that shook Europe in its entirety in 1848, that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels came together in order to produce the first part of *The German Ideology*. This text remains, to this day, one of the most important documents that were to influence both the philosophical and the practical aspects of

classical Western Marxism, as well as a text that has never ceased to be the object of re-examination, analyses, and debate. This particular text was chosen because it presents a painstaking exploration of issues pertinent to this paper. These issues are approached in such a way that, while not being strictly reduced within the confines of political economy or the study of philosophy, pertain to both and expose the affinities between them. Indeed, in order to exhibit the ways in which economic reality (the contradictions between the level of development of the means of production and the relations of production that facilitate them or not) shapes and is shaped by the “superstructure” (law, institutions, intellectual production), Marx makes a breakthrough by developing his theory of ideology. Naturally, this paper chooses to discuss a selection of passages from this work, especially the ones that regard materialism as opposed to idealism, a concept that is instrumental to a Marxist understanding of education.

MATERIALISM AND IDEOLOGY: A STARTING POINT

Named after the subject whose ideas would be put under scrutiny, namely the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, this first part of *The German Ideology* attempts to break with earlier currents of German philosophical thought, especially that of idealism: “In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven” (Marx & Engels, 1974, p.74). In order to achieve this ambitious goal, Marx and Engels performed a radical shift of focus; that is, instead of starting within the realm of ideas, conceptions, and narratives in order to analyse and explain human behaviour, they chose to select another point of departure. This starting point was the opposite of this idealist approach, and it concentrated on “the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life” (Marx & Engels, 1974, p. 74). However, while Marx himself went into great lengths in order to overcome the limitations he encountered among the discourses of the Left Hegelians, the influence of Hegel’s philosophical inquiries, exploring the concepts of freedom, history, and particularly Hegel’s own dialectical method became a major influence in his work (Singer, 1983). This approach is essential in our understanding of this particular text by Marx and Engels, for, as its title implies, the authors set out to produce a theory of ideology; that is, a system of institutions and concepts that presents itself as dialectically connected to the material circumstances of a society at a given time. More concretely, in one of the first concentrated expositions of historical materialism in the ‘Preface’ to his widely influential *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the German philosopher famously argues (Marx, 1981, p. 20-21): “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their social existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness... The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production... and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms”.

This enables us to comprehend that history, as Marx argues in *The German Ideology*, is presented from a new perspective, one closely connected, and intricately intertwined with social and economic circumstances, as opposed to a “collection of dead facts”, or “an imagined activity of imagined subjects” (Marx & Engels, 1974, p. 48).

Furthermore, it becomes clear that, for Marx and Engels, ideology is not only a theoretical and material reflection of the ruling classes’ values, it is also a falsehood. This ‘false consciousness’, using Marxist terms, was the site of much debate, even within Marxist

intellectual circles, for many Marxist theorists within this strand of revolutionary theory had progressively adopted an economically determinist approach towards matters of class struggle and critique of capitalism. This, however, was not without cause, as Marxism, from the moment of its inception as a theory that heavily influenced and upset social and political life, had been subject to ruthless and relentless criticism from within and from without. Nevertheless, there would never cease to be conscious effort, by many theorists, in order to disengage Marxism from the strict confines of a sterile economism, and “restore to Marxist theory the centrality of culture, practice and consciousness” (Eagleton, 1994, p. 12). Prominent among these theorists, Georg Lukács would elaborate upon the ideological concept of ‘false consciousness’, so that it “means less a view of things which is false to the true situation, than a view of things which is true to a false situation” (Ibid. p. 13).

ALTHUSSER AND IDEOLOGY: THE TRANSITION

Therefore, it appears that consciousness, as connected to ideology, has been an integral part of Marxist thought. In fact, it is in *The German Ideology* that Marx and Engels that “consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process” (Marx & Engels, 1974, p. 47). The primacy of consciousness as an integral part of the discourse of ideology would be debated upon, and finally challenged by a variety of intellectuals, the most notable of them being the French philosopher Louis Althusser. Drawing from both Lacanian psychoanalysis and structuralism, Althusser tackled the concept of ideology in a way that heavily influenced Marxist theory, sparking debates relevant even today. The key role of the unconscious is stressed in numerous parts of Althusser’s *oeuvre*, but it is in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus: Notes Toward an Investigation* that its importance is explicitly emphasised. Consequently, ideology, dislodged from the locus of conscious existence, is now integrated within normative material practices through everyday participation, and enforced through the existence of institutions, known as Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses (Althusser, 1971, p. 96). However, in order to acquire a better understanding of Althusser’s approach of ideology, it is important to revisit the notion of history, as well as the philosopher’s unique engagement with Marx and Engels’ seminal text.

Truly, what is proposed is a dual examination of ideology, in terms of both its time-specific, and timeless aspects and characteristics; that is, “a theory of ideologies *in general*”, and a “theory of ideology *in general*” (Ibid. p. 107). Althusser, in an attempt to refine this important concept, firstly argues that ideology, in Marxian terms, is a mirage, a dream that is constructed by the ruling classes, which determine the ruling ideology, and which is used in order to deceive, coerce, disorientate, and ultimately oppress the subordinate classes. In that respect, Althusser’s claim that ideologies in general can have a history is comprehensible, as different kinds of ideological constructions correspond to different epochs of sociopolitical and economic circumstances. Thus, a multitude of ideologies can exist, adapting to temporal-spatial specificities, and accommodating the interests of the ruling classes of the time. Therefore, as Althusser argues, “this formulation appears in a plainly positivist context” (Ibid. p. 107). The limitations provided by this conceptual framework are apparent, signifying a deficiency of orthodox Marxism to be overcome. Marcuse has some interesting insights on the matter:

The totality of economic relations, laws, and institutions may not be treated simply as an isolated objective cluster of facts, but as making up a historical form within which men carry on their lives. Freed from the limitations of a specialised science, the economic

categories are seen to be determining factors for human existence, even if they denote objective economic facts (Marcuse, 2000).

In a similar attempt to transcend the same theoretical constraints, Althusser would proceed to take a much more radical approach: on the one hand, he formulates his claim that the concept of ideology in Marx and Engels' work is only ahistorical in terms of a coherent, quasi-spatial distinction, namely that ideology and the historical material circumstances that create it exist separately, each residing in the superstructure and the base respectively. On the other hand, he uses this "negative" thesis in order to dialectically produce an alternative, "positive" formulation, one that accepts that ideology has no history, insofar as it is viewed as "a non-historical reality, i.e. an *omni-historical* reality, in the sense in which that structure and functioning are immutable, present in the same form throughout what we call history" (Althusser, 1971, p. 108)

At this point, it would be useful to relocate these two discourses around the concept of ideology within their sociopolitical and cultural context: from the prologue to the series of failed revolutions that swept through Europe in 1848, to the theoretical aporia that characterised the global Left after not only the resounding but ineffective May 1968 general strike in France, but also the loss of momentum of the American civil rights and anti-war movements that led to their stagnation, a narrative unfolds; that is, an effort to explore, interpret, and constantly reevaluate the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and an irrational civil society, through the prism of ideology. Thus, Althusser's reformulation of a theory of ideology *in general* is seen under a new light. Pecheux (1994, p. 146) writes: "*Ideology in general*, which as we have seen, is *not* realised in the ideological state apparatuses - so it cannot coincide with a historical concrete *ideological formation* -is also not the same thing as the *dominant ideology*, as the overall result, the historically concrete form resulting from the relationships of unevenness-contradiction-subordination characterising in a historically given social formation the 'complex whole in dominance' of the ideological formations operating in it".

EDUCATION AND IDEOLOGY: ALTHUSSER'S CONTRIBUTION

After establishing a basis for a materialist analysis of ideology and examining French philosopher Louis Althusser's contributions to that field, this paper will briefly explore, through these perspectives, the implications that the above might have on the field of education. Truly, it appears that in Althusser's seminal text *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation* there is explicit mention that schools can be characterised as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). The main distinction to be made, however, is of great importance for the dialogue around education: as this paper has cited before, Althusser claims that the qualitative difference between Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses is in fact the use of ideology. The school, according to the philosopher, mainly works in order to disseminate and reinforce the dominant ideology (Althusser, 2014, p. 243). In order for the ideas of the ruling class to be challenged, there has to be a struggle in that field - something that Althusser pinpoints by referencing Lenin's attitude towards the education system; namely, "Lenin's anguished concern to revolutionise the educational Ideological State Apparatus (among others), simply to make it possible for the Soviet proletariat, who had seized state power, to secure the future of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the transition to socialism" (Ibid. p. 245).

Nevertheless, throughout the years there have been various forms of questioning the Althusserian model, which find it at times over-simplifying and lacking in nuance. Accordingly, his insights on education have also been subject to criticism: Michael Erben and

Dennis Gleeson boldly claim that “Althusser's attempted delineation of the position of the School is a gross typification of caricature of the genuine situation” (1975, p. 122). Indeed, there appear to be certain objections to that model in terms of its rigour as well as its formulation. According to Erben and Gleeson (1975, p. 122), Althusser primarily “fails to examine how men acquire a sense of social structure within production relations and therefore inadequately considers how knowledge is produced and that he over-emphasizes the consumption of knowledge at the expense of the production of knowledge; (secondarily) that Althusser's notion of reproduction tends to advance a passive model of socialization and assumes a reified model of a system tightly policed by a 'conspiracy' of apparatuses in dominance; (finally) that Althusser fails to explain how radicals emerge from, escape from and engage with the 'crushing' influences of state apparatuses”.

It appears, therefore, that both Althusser's formulations of a theory of Ideological State Apparatuses and its applications to education, as well as the criticisms that it has been subject to have contributed positively in the elaboration of the discourses around education. However, the approaches to this subject through Marxism, as well as providing a critique of established institutions, uncover the progressive and emancipatory potential of human activity.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted a materialist approach of the closely interrelated fields of ideology and education, tracing similarities and illuminating the connection between the theoretical elaborations of Marx and Althusser, specifically concerning the subject of education as, in fact, an explicitly ideological institution. In order to do so, it set the materialist conception of history as a conceptual framework as well as its influences in virtually every discipline, including the studies around education. Subsequently, the paper engaged with one of the main theoretical formulations around education and ideology, as formulated by Althusser, but also highlighted the criticism it has been subject to. In order to remain within the materialist tradition, however, it is worth noting that the conversation around education is one whose relevance is continually reiterated and reformulated; the methodological changes in approaching the subject follow and are determined by the changes in the material conditions of specific societal situations. Nevertheless, these changes also dialectically shape the material conditions themselves. Therefore, this paper stresses that the continuation of these conversations is vital in ensuring that education is current and corresponding to the material circumstances of society.

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