

It's (Almost) All In Your Head: The Materiality of Ideas in Marxist Social Analysis

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Abstract

This article is an exegesis of the works of Karl Marx and other Marxist theoreticians concerning how ideological constructions play a role in the formation of social relations of production and the reproduction of these relations. It conceptualises how this understanding of the functioning of ideology fits theoretically into the historical materialist methodology.

The question of the role of ideas in shaping social relations is an old one for political theory; it has been fiercely debated throughout the history of Western thought stretching back to Plato and Aristotle. Since its inception in the nineteenth century, it has also been a question of great significance to the Marxist theoretical tradition: how is a Marxist, “by definition a fighting materialist” (Zizek, 2001: 1), to address the way in which ideas very clearly shape and influence human social relations, particularly the way they are produced and reproduced? This is not a trivial point: as Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser notes on the outset of his study of ideology, “every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year.” (2008: 1) Understanding how social relations are not only formed but also how they reproduce themselves is at the heart of the entire Marxist project. Fortunately, both Marx’s own writings and the writings of subsequent theoreticians on the subject offer clues as to how to conceptualise the dialectical relationship between human ideas and human practices in the production (and reproduction) of social relations.

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx writes that “circumstances make men as much as men make circumstances.” (2000: 189) Although its meaning within Marxist canon is the subject of dispute, this statement not only serves as a concise maxim for a materialist conception of history, but it also expresses in so many words the kernel of political analysis in the Marxist tradition: the notion of an integral, dialectical and dynamic relationship between the “base” (i.e. the economic relations of individuals which produce their [social] circumstances) and the “superstructure” (i.e. the [social] circumstances which condition the economic relations of individuals).

The quote in question closes a paragraph in which Marx outlines the nature of historical materialism and how it differs from the (then dominant) ‘idealist’ conception of history¹. In the paragraph that precedes it, Marx writes:

[A]t each stage [of history] there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, a historically created relation of individuals to nature and one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by a new generation, but also, on the other, prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. (2000: 189)

While individuals, through their relations of production, produce their social “circumstances,” they are also born into, and work under, already existing social

“circumstances” (i.e. legal and political institutions, class structures, ideologies, etc.) which in turn condition the relations of production they have.

Despite being an ardent materialist, Marx is keenly aware of the importance of pre-existing ideological constructs in the material lives of individuals; he references the power that already existing 'circumstances' have on the development of the material lives of individuals in the opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The traditions of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living. (2000: 329)

Before more discussion as to what Marx means here can take place, it must be further outlined what exactly these “circumstances” are and how individuals produce them, and vice versa. Fortunately, Marx provides a very succinct summary of historical materialism, and this relationship between individuals and their circumstances, in the 1859 *Preface to A Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite [...] relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (2000: 425)

Considering all of the above, there are a few key points that can be teased out of Marx's writings on this subject:

1. It is how individuals organise the production of goods and services to satisfy their material needs – that is, their “relations of production” – that is the foundation (the “base” or “structure”) of all human society.
2. The ideologies - whether philosophical, religious, legal, political, artistic, etc. - which emerge, categorise and dominate human societies grow out of the existing social and productive relations of individuals (i.e. they are “super-structural”) between one another and nature.
3. Individuals, whose thoughts and understanding of the world now occur within the horizons of the ideologies that dominate their society, in turn have their relations of production and social existence shaped within those horizons.
4. Individuals are born and live in already existing superstructures; their own social relations are reproduced and conditioned from past individuals' relations of production - “the traditions of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

Having now established Marx's argument, it is now necessary to determine whether or not it can withstand a critical analysis of its implications.

According to Marx, while the sum total of all social relations can be divided into the economic relations of production and their corresponding forms of ideological consciousness, these two components are integrally connected: dominant social ideas will not change or disappear without confronting the social relations of production underlying them, but these ideas only exist effectively as actual social practice. Marx makes this point in various places, including *The German Ideology*:

[I]t comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism [...] but only by the practical overthrow of the social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug; that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other types of theory. (2000: 188-9)

Marx also reiterates this point in the Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* when he writes that “[w]ith the change of the economic foundations the whole immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.” (2000: 425)

All of this raises two serious questions:

1. If all forms of ideological consciousness are determined by social relations of production, to what degree do an individual's ideas influence what they physically do? And,
2. If in fact ideas do actually determine social relations of production and the reproduction of these relations, does this not undermine Marx's whole methodology of historical materialism?

Marxist scholar Michael Löwy deals with this first question of the relationship between the material actions of individuals and their ideological consciousness in the introduction of his essay *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*; in his analysis of the relationship between the ideas of individuals and their material existence, he discusses the necessity of factoring into any historical materialist analysis the “*partial autonomy* [emphasis in the original] of the sphere of ideas,” noting that:

This concept of partial autonomy allows us to transcend the eternal polemic between the idealist history of thought, in which systems of ideas are completely detached from historical “contingencies” and float freely in the clear sky of the absolute, and the mechanical “economism” which reduces the entire world of thought to a direct reflection of the economic and social base.ⁱⁱ (2005: 5)

Löwy here finds a companion in Althusser, who adds:

[The superstructure's] index of effectivity (or determination), as determined by the determination in the last instance of the base, is thought by the Marxist tradition in two ways: (1) there is a 'relative autonomy' of the superstructure with respect to the base; (2) there is a 'reciprocal action' of the superstructure on the base. (2008: 9)

Löwy further argues that the concept of partial or relative autonomy serves another purpose; namely,

[It] also enables us to deepen our analysis of the dialectical character of the relation between settings and ideas. This relationship is dialectical because ideologies react upon social conditions, creating a reciprocal relation in which, as Engels remarked, the notions of 'cause' and 'effect' are no longer meaningful. (2005: 5)

The writings of Antonio Gramsci also serve to reinforce this dialectical interpretation of Marx's statement on historical materialism. The relationship between the base and superstructure (“men and their circumstances”) preoccupied the Italian theoretician, who vehemently rejected the notions of “economic determinism” in Marxism as “un-dialectical.” For Gramsci, it was meaningless to differentiate the ideologies of the superstructure as “immaterial,” distinct and subordinate to the material base.

As Gramsci pointed out in his *Prison Notebooks*, ideologies in the superstructure are “real” and “material” in their capacity to inspire people to action; “to the extent that ideologies

are historically necessary they have a validity that is 'psychological'; they 'organise' human masses, they form the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.”ⁱⁱⁱ (2000: 199) Gramsci further illustrated his point by providing an analogy:

The economy is to society what anatomy is to biological sciences. [...] In the human body it certainly cannot be said that the skin [is a] mere illusion and that the skeleton [...] [is] the only reality. [...] Going on with the same metaphor one can say that it is not the skeleton [...] which makes one fall in love with a woman, but that one nevertheless realises how much the skeleton contributes to the grace of her movements, etc. (2000: 197)

The problems arising from a cursory reading of Marx's statement of “circumstances produce men as much as men produce circumstances” promptly vanish once the dialectical nature of historical materialism is considered. Dialectical thinking eschews a strictly causal understanding of the complex web of social relations, opening space for conceptualizing a political subject who is both more than a puppet manipulated by the machinations of Capital and less than a quasi-omniscient consumer constrained only by his or her rational choice - that is, a subject closer to the actual human condition.

Here, Marx is fundamentally correct in his statement, and it is theoretically consistent with the rest of his body of work. Though obviously materialistic, it has been shown - both with Marx's own writings and the works of subsequent theoreticians such as Gramsci and Althusser - that economistic interpretations of Marx are fundamentally “un-dialectical” and not at all what Marx was attempting to convey. While Marx is most certainly leading a “revolt against the rule of thoughts” in *The German Ideology* and his other theoretical works, his declaration that “circumstances make men as much as men make circumstances” is definitely an accurate and thoroughly materialist aphorism.

ⁱ By ‘idealist’ Marx meant particularly Hegel’s notion that it is Ideas (specifically, Hegel’s Absolute Knowledge) which determine the course and evolution of history, although it is worth mentioning that the notion of history being teleologically driven by and towards the realization of some Ideal (the Kingdom of God, liberal democracy, the free market, classless socialist utopia, etc.) is not necessarily exclusive to Hegelianism and its derivatives.

ⁱⁱ Löwy also notes that “the extent of this autonomy varies, of course, from the total (or almost total) independence of the natural sciences to the closer dependence of political doctrines.”

ⁱⁱⁱ There is even justification for this interpretation in Marx's own works; in the *Preface to A Critique of Political Economy* he notes that “In considering such transformations [of the base and superstructure] a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of [class struggle] and fight it out.”

References

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