From Historical Marxisms to Historical Materialism: Toward the Theory of Ideology

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I. Introduction

It may be convenient to note, for a beginning, and in a quite kulturgeschichtlich way, that the best of Marxist productions have tended to develop as a critique of theories elaborated in other domains: starting as a critique of political economy, Marxism produced its first important rupture with the young Lukács in a critique of neo-Kantianism; reached one of its summits with Gramsci in a critique of Croce’s idealism; underwent an important revision with the Frankfurt school and Marcuse in a critique of Freud; prospered shortly as the philosophy of “praxis,” discreetly flirting with Heideggerianism; and entered its own “post-” period with Habermas, critically reformulating the achievements of the analytical tradition. It may well be that the “truth” of these attempts, which, symptomatically, have never been acknowledged within the fields they took as the pre-texts of their critiques, and have always met with strong opposition from other Marxisms, lies in theoretically marginal enterprises of the same style — in Lenin’s critique of Machism, in Reich’s critical recuperation of Freud, even in Fromm’s revisionism. By virtue of their very naïveté, the latter openly demonstrate what might remain occulted in more solid projects of the former kind, i.e. a fundamental lack of its own theoretical language that might even be the defining feature of every Marxism. Since a dogmatic petrification of Marxist concepts has been a parallel and no less characteristic trait of their history, we may sharpen this point and say that a certain refusal of a specifically Marxist conceptualization is a necessary debt that every Marxism has to pay in order to
remain on a properly theoretical level. This refusal, when not thematized (as has mostly been the case), usually resulted in a symptomatic passage à l’acte, an immediatist drive to join every-day politics, so that the list of the theoretical achievements of the various Marxisms may as well be viewed as the list of their political failures.*

This is a paradoxical balance sheet for a thought that has not only always insisted upon its theoretical character, but has also conceptualized the “theorization” of politics as its own historical invention (“scientific socialism”). There are two reasons for it, the first being the effect of the second, and both having remained an object of theoretical denegation, Verneinung, within the Marxist tradition: for although they have been, in an “objective” thetical manner, present in Marxist thought since its beginnings, Marxist theory has never fully elaborated the consequences they entail as regards its own status.

The first reason pertains to the political dimension immanent to any Marxism worthy of its name. Even before drawing eventual practical implications for the political conflicts of its time, every Marxism is immanently political; its politics is, in the first place, theoretical. This means not only that the “outer” practical dimension is always already contained within the hard theoretical core of every Marxism, but, more importantly, that only that project is “Marxist” which proceeds as a theoretical representation of the class struggle within the field of theory itself. In this sense, a Marxism has no object, for it is a strategy; and it has no “proper” conceptual apparatus, for it is only a political operation performed upon concepts already given by other theories. This first reason for the absence of a distinctive conceptual inventory pertains as well to the philosophical dimension of Marxism: philosophy being, according to Althusser,¹ the representation of class struggle within the field of theory.

The second reason may be deduced from the first, for it is in fact its material cause: if class struggle is such a universal phenomenon that even explicitly universalistic projects (“theories”) can pretend to escape it only in a self-delusive attempt at “objective neutrality,” then there is no possible outer, neutral, final ground that might legitimate a wholistic

* Since this essay was written (1988), this thesis has, ironically, been tested at the expense of the theoretical context to which it belongs: although the democratic struggles in Slovenia were, atypically for “real socialism,” dominated by a politically left-oriented materialist theory, the free elections subsequent to their victory, typically, brought into power a right-wing nationalist-populist coalition. The political concern that made for the theoretical strength entailed a political weakness: it made the theory share one of the most striking features of its “object” — the foreclosure of the problematics of fascism by the ideologies of “totalitarian” socialism.
theoretical enterprise. There are histories, but no History, there are interpretations of society, effects of the social, there may even be an effect of Society, but there is no Society proper. For a science that takes historical society as its object, the consequence is dramatic: the loss of its object is the first effect of its materialist conceptualization, i.e. the first achievement of historical materialism. The second reason for the absence of a distinctive conceptual apparatus in the various Marxisms thus pertains to their scientific dimension, and results from the self-destruction of any object of knowledge that would pretend to correspond to a hypothetical real object (society, history) whose very existence is negated by the materialist scientific procedure itself.

The summing up of the prima vista negative unity of historical Marxisms thus yields a positive result. That a Marxism is necessarily a philosophy as well as a science, means that it cannot but be a self-reflexive science: the point of (philosophical) reflexivity is the place of the loss of the (scientific) object, philosophically circumscribed by Adorno's dictum “The whole is the untrue,” and until now only programatically defined in its scientific import by Althusser’s indication that historical materialism should be the science of the production of the effect of the social.²

The political dimension has thus a double and bizarre status within Marxisms: it is both their specific mode of theoretical production and eventually an alibi occulting their lack of theoretical elaboration. Some of the greatest moments in the history of Marxisms resulted from an articulation of both aspects, when the theoretical defeat was itself approached as a theoretical problem: e.g. the theoretical melancholy of Benjamin or Adorno, a strategy dictated by the Freudian “loss of the object”; or the psychotic mimicking of the dogmatic orthodox style in Althusser’s texts, a strategy necessitated by the Lacanian “foreclosure of the master-signifier.”

II. The Program

The present essay will follow this line of direct confrontation with theoretical failure, conceived as a theoretical problem, but in a Leninist style: according to which, problems of theory are immediately translated into problems of organization. Lenin has at least the merit of explicitly spelling out what most Marxists have been spontaneously doing; the logic of their reasoning has more or less been a paraphrase of Chico Marx’s pun: “If you have problems, join the party; then you’ll have more problems, but at least you’ll have the party.” The profound intuition about the nature of human institutions (the material existence of ideology, to use Althusser’s formulation) condensed in these words, has mostly escaped Marxist thinkers: that is why their politics have tended to oscillate non-dialectically between doctrinal rigorism and pragmatic oppor-

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tunism, between bolshevism and social democracy. In the history of Marxism, the crucial question of the incidence of theoretical work upon the “shaping of human relations” has been relegated to the rituals of Party discipline, instead of being approached as an internal theoretical problem, viz. that of the ideological effects of theory. A similar problem has from the very beginning been confronted and elaborated in psychoanalytic practice, and Marxists may learn something from Octave Manoni’s ironic judgment that the most conceptual contribution of the analyst to the analytic process is his silence.

If Marxisms are constitutively bound to their political dimension, then they should take serious account of Freud’s remark that politics is, together with education and psychoanalysis, an “impossible” activity, since it hinges upon the phenomenon of transference. It is in this sense that “organization” is the central theme of the present essay: any human organizing, i.e. every social phenomenon, rests upon intersubjective relations, and therefore in some measure depends upon mechanisms of transference.

No materialist theory of ideology can evade this point, and we will here try prudently to articulate a psychoanalytic conceptualization of the mechanisms of subjectivation with the Marxist legacy of the theory of ideology. Let us first sketch what might be considered a consensual “Marxist” starting point for this enterprise.

The totalizing effect of the Social, achieved through differentiated actions of one (i.e. the dominating) party to the class conflict, mediates the operation of the economy of exploitation, whose successful performance depends on its functioning as if it were a whole: this “necessary appearance” (Marx) passes through individual consciousnesses in the form of ideological illusions.\(^3\) It should be stressed that ideological illusion is not of the order of “psychological” delusion or prejudice, but has the status of, in Durkheimian terms, a social fact. A good example may be commodity fetishism: although bourgeois consciousness is typically nominalist and does not “believe in” the transubstantiation-mystique of commodity-value, it is the structure of the commodity-economy itself that is “realist,” i.e. it constitutively encompasses the “real existence” of the “name of things,” viz. the general equivalent, money. It is “objectively” that relations among men take the form of relations among things, etc. Still, in securing the effect of the social, this ideological structure necessarily passes through, and is actively supported by, the social individual. The articulation of these two domains, the individual and the social, has traditionally been a \textit{pierre d ’achoppement} of “social science” — ever since the pioneering debate between Le Tarde’s psychologism and Durkheim’s collectivism. Historical materialism has indicated a way toward the solution of this problem by conceiving of the possibility of a theory of ideology.
Thus far, however, this way has been marked by successive failures to avoid certain impasses into which it can lead. On the following pages, we will propose a prolegomena to the future elaboration of this critical conjuncture. Our method will be to apply a Marxist, i.e., critical, strategy to Marxisms themselves: in a tacit polemics with Habermas’ “post-Marxist” theory of communicative action, we hope thereby to develop the unexploited theoretical potential of Althusser’s notion of ideological interpellation. We will treat Althusser’s formulation as an intuitive and un-differentiated description of the problem and Habermas’ as a politically well-intentioned naivism, whose background notion of the Lebenswelt should be discounted as an idealist hermeneutic residuum.

Before proceeding to the task at hand, it may help us to counter the provocative question of “Whither Marxism?” as well as to bring into sharper focus our present project, if we take the opportunity explicitly to spell out the main differences separating Habermas’ theory of communicative action from our own ideas about the theory of ideology. Put in a “neutral” way, the principal difference is that we aim to cover the same field as Habermas (“universal pragmatics”) with a more ascetic conceptual inventory: with fewer and more powerful concepts. Our project of devising a stronger theory necessarily implies an overall reconceptualization of the problematic — and here the “neutrality” of the divergency ends: for the conceptual profligacy of Habermas’s theory seems to be a consequence of his basically over-rationalist approach, which, in turn, seems to be an ideological effect of a non-thematized extra-theoretic political program.

We can easily demonstrate our point with reference to Habermas’ elaborate typology of actions: strategic action, which is opposed to communicative action, is further sub-divided into overt and covert strategic action; covert strategic action has then, in turn, two sub-species: conscious deception (manipulation) and unconscious deception. In the later case, the agent is supposed wrongly to take her/himself to be engaged in a communicative action, whereas s/he is being unconsciously led by her/his egoistic interests (and thereby is in fact engaged in a strategic action). The most trivial, typical and “normal” situation, an agent’s self-delusion as to her/his “real” motives, is thus treated as a sub-species of a sub-species within a basically moralistic classificatory framework, and is then relegated to the highly suspicious category of individual “psychic pathologies.” Besides complicating the conceptual apparatus and giving rise to the typical empiricist illusion of the impotence of theory confronting the “richness of empirical material,” this line of reasoning prevents theorization of the central ideological phenomenon, viz. the self-delusion itself, and blocks any serious consideration of the productive
force of ideological illusion. In our optics, the agent is the first to be “deceived” by her/his own action, and the pertinent opposition is not between honesty and deceit, but between conscious and unconscious. Since the type of rationality supporting a paradigmatic communicative action has to be accepted by the involved parties as “neutral, universal,” and since, on the other hand, “neutrality” is precisely a constitutive effect of any successful (partial, “interested”) ideological mechanism, it can by definition never be such — “unconscious deceit” is necessarily the essential, neutral (sit venia verbo) component of any social transaction. We could almost say that it is la condition humaine itself — even so, if we want to theorize it, we should begin by giving up the moralistic vocabulary.

Of course, with his “communicative action,” Habermas describes the way that people should preferably choose to comport themselves in their transactions with others. But the positivist tour he takes in describing it cannot be dismissed as a mere rhetorical device, since Habermas is clearly the first to be “deceived” by his own rhetoric.

Habermas’ almost hygienic over-rationalization of communication results in the counterfactual imposition of excessively strong conditions upon it: his validity-conditions are clearly too restrictive to account for most instances of actual communicative interaction. We will propose a much weaker condition (a possible-belief condition instead of validity-conditions) that can support a much stronger theory.5

Habermas’ procedure seems a final negative counterpart to the inaugural productive contradiction of Kant’s What is Enlightenment?. Kant supports his apology for enlightenment by reference to the event of the French Revolution, whose historical importance he deduces not from its mere “factualness,” but from the impression this event made on humanity (i.e. it was greeted with enthusiasm). Hence, it is what people believe about the French Revolution that makes it what it “is” — and the form of Kant’s argument, with its essential dependence upon a belief-factor, thus contradicts the enlightened thesis which it is supposed to be an argument for. But while Kant’s paradox makes his text theoretically productive, Habermas’ unwillingness to recognize the paradox of his own enlightened position (in order to rationalize human interaction, he has first to change belief into knowledge, which necessitates the introduction of a rigid typology of interaction that, in effect, cuts off the possibility of producing knowledge about it) ruins his theoretical project and undermines his political commitment. Although enlightenment may still be of some political value, it is theoretically disastrous if taken without distance and irony, i.e. without thematization.

That Habermas is taken for a champion of “post-Marxism” in present academic ideology, may well serve to warn us that this term masks
a theoretical regression to basically pre-Marxist positions. Within the same fashionable trend, the over-complicated conceptual apparatus of Habermas has an inverted counterpart in Laclau and Mouffe's simplified social semiotics, wherein everything derives from the one relation of "equivalence."6 Although Laclau and Mouffe's proposal is intellectually inferior to Habermas' theory, being basically a second-hand marketing of "post-structuralist" ideology, it is its legitimate ideological counterpart within the "post-Marxist" trend, since both projects miss, in a symetrically inverted way, the fundamental theoretical discovery of classical Marxism: viz. the over-determination and the specific tension among different social instances, especially between the ideological and economic spheres — a tension whose result is precisely the effect of a social "totality." (To the question of "Wherefore Marxism?", a first answer already presents itself: "To help us out of post-Marxism.")

III. The Trans-subjective Existence of Ideology

That ideology is a discourse not dependent on any individual instance can easily be shown if we consider utterances of the following kind:

(1) I believe in God.
(2) I believe in democracy.
(3) I believe in beauty.

(1) can be interpreted as "I believe that God exists."); (2) as "I believe that democracy has the favourable effects generally ascribed to it."); (3) may have a variety of different interpretations, according to the aesthetic doctrine the interpreter embraces. There is not even a common "propositional scheme" to (1) - (3), let alone a stricter constraint as to their interpretation. Yet utterances like these present no difficulty for understanding, although it is obvious that not only their interpretation, but also their performance demand much more than what is inherent to their immediate contents.

(4) I believe in the community of Saints.

Although transparent at the properly linguistic level, (4) does not say much to anyone who does not know what Catholics or Eastern Orthodox believe. Phenomena of this kind not only indicate that the ideological discourse is pre-existent to any particular ideological transaction, but they also show that, in order to participate in these transactions, an individual has to be already "plugged into" this preexistent discourse.

Habermas would say that, in order for communication to be successful, relevant ideologies have to be, in some way, part of both the speaker's and the interpreter's Lebenswelt; Althusser would speak about their
having to be interpellated by the same ideology. Habermas’ formulation is too weak (a whole life in predominantly Catholic surroundings may not qualify you to understand [4]); Althusser’s too strong (you do not have in fact to be a Christian to understand [4]). In order to “make sense” (while speaking or while interpreting), it is not necessary actually to believe certain things, one has only to be aware that it is possible to believe this or that. (The Orthodox contest the Catholic dogma of “filioque” precisely because they find themselves confronted with definite proof that it is possible, even though in their opinion wrong, to believe that the Holy Spirit emanates both from the Father and from the Son.)

Successful communication does not depend on the involved parties’ consent to its ideological premises, but rather on their consensus that exchanged utterances are intelligible. This purely formal and content-free operation may only ex post facto induce an individual to swallow more of the ideological contents than s/he had ever intended. In relation to Althusser’s notion of ideological interpellation, the view presented here has the advantage of putting the interpellated individual into an active position, for s/he actually demands the sense s/he acquires by responding to interpellation (having at least the theoretical possibility of refusing to respond). This view also breaks the vicious circle of Habermas’ Lebenswelt hermeneutics, according to which an individual may submit to interpellation only under the condition of having always already submitted to it. Finally, it leads to a stricter formulation of Pecheux’s “Münchausen effect” of ideology: the ability of ideology to proceed, as it were, ex nihilo, and to lay down its own foundation after the establishment of the “superstructures” (i.e. to produce the cause out of the effect).

IV. The Subject Supposed to Believe

(5) Waldheim and the Austrians are deeply hurt.

The “proper” ideological way to interpret (5) is not to wonder about the possible homonymy of the predicate (“hurt in one’s feelings”/“hurt in one’s international interests”), but to take it at face value: to start from the supposition that it may make sense as offered. Just as the speaker of (5) supposes that s/he means it, so the interpreter supposes that it is possible to believe that (5) has an interpretation which is accessible in a relatively uncomplicated way. The communicational solidarity rests upon the identification of the two agents with the instance of this supposed belief, the subject supposed to believe, which mediates their communicational “reciprocity.” The introduction of this simple concept enables us to do without “communicational principles” and conversational para-rules.
of theories à la Grice, as well as without Habermas’ burdensome apparatus of strategic and communicative actions. Both of the latter conceptualizations may be deduced from it, although their introduction does not in fact seem necessary at all: since the most important advantage of this concept is that it covers the most frequent and “normal” cases of a mixed nature, and, above all, that it provides for the cases wherein the eventual “manipulator” (the speaker) is the first “dupe” of his/her own ideology.8

In the case of (5), this identification, which is a formal necessity in every act of communication, has the effect of producing a new semantic trait: “being hurt in an Austro-Waldheimian way.” The production of specific ideological contents thus follows directly from a formal-universal communicational constraint. The newly produced semantic feature, “describing” a specific affective state (precisely the state that provided the material basis of the outcome of the last presidential election in Austria), functions as the Freudian einziger Zug of mass psychology: the trait by which members of the same imaginary community recognize each other, identify with each other, because, by the same token, every one of them identifies her/himself with the “Leader.”9 This whole complex and specific ideological mechanism, which assembles a certain community and produces the specific hegemonic effect of Society, derives from the purely formal communicational constraint that requires interpreters to assume the same interpretational “point of view.”10 An individual’s “being interpellated” by (5) results from his/her “spontaneous” submission to the abstract formal principles (constraints) of everyday (trivial) conversational economy. However, the conditions of an individual’s positive response to ideological interpellation are usually more complex.

V. The Phantasy

(6) You have missed the boat for Eureka.

There are two possible interpretations of (6) and, for each of them, the interpreter is able to offer a justification. Typically, such a justification will take the form of a minimal description of the intersubjective structure that supports her/his understanding. We may call this “description” a principle of interpretation. (6), then, either may be decoded according to the principle “the speaker is addressing me as a tourist travelling to Eureka,” or to the principle “the speaker is addressing me as a Yugoslav worried about the course followed by his country in the international division of scientific research.” The principle of interpretation indicates how the interpreter construes her/his identification with the subject supposed to believe; it indicates “under what angle” s/he takes this identification. But, although the principle of interpretation
may be a valid post festum justification on the interpreter's part, it does not clarify how the interpreter has arrived at his/her interpretation. The interpreter can decipher the meaning of an utterance if s/he is able to produce a suitable definition of the intersubjective situation; but since the only available evidence of this structure is its cause, i.e. the utterance under interpretation, the interpreter seems to be trapped in as vicious circle: the key to the meaning of an utterance is the definition of the intersubjective structure and this structure is defined by the meaning of the utterance. (It would be of no help here to bring in "the context," for the context simply means more utterances.) How then does a certain principle of interpretation "impose itself" on the interpreter — or, better said, how does it happen that the communicating parties find themselves always already "trapped into" a certain intersubjective situation, even though they are, in a certain sense, producing and reproducing it by their very communicational activity?

(7) I won't be the first President to lose a war.

There are two possible interpretations of this utterance of Lyndon Baines Johnson,

(7-a) L.B.J. has a particular interpretation of U.S. history.
(7-b) The U.S. has never lost a war.

According to our prima vista criterion that the principle of interpretation should be a proposition referring both to the utterance and to its situational context, (7-a) has a much better chance of imposing itself than (7-b); nonetheless, it seems to us (and history has in fact demonstrated) that (7-b) is the ideologically privileged interpretation. To say that (7-b) is being imposed by the dominant ideology is not an answer, it only sharpens the question: what makes for the force of the dominant ideology?

It would be tempting to say that the advantage of the dominant ideology over others comes from its being a mediation of the dominant relations of production. But this is no solution, for it makes the dominant ideology depend upon the dominant relations of production which, in turn, depend upon the dominant ideology. For the modest purpose of this present essay, it is therefore wiser to limit ourselves to the realm of ideology, and to investigate in concreto the implications of our last example.

The advantage of (7-b) over (7-a) seems to reside in its being universal and void, i.e. in its inviting an intuitive agreement and its precluding an analytical approach. On the other hand, (7-a) already implicitly refers to (7-b) as to a "universally accepted truth" that can only be challenged with the aid of specific justification: this is precisely the relation between a dominant and a non-hegemonic ideology, in which the dominant ideolo-
gy defines the field of argument in advance, while the burden of justification falls upon the subordinated ideology.

In cases like (7-b), we come across the tenacity of commonplaces, and may find a clue toward the resolution of our problem in what seems to be their most confusing feature: viz. their utter irrationality. The extreme cases of racial prejudice, nationalistic hatred or sexual chauvinism demonstrate that such stereotypes cannot possibly be accepted except in the modality of sheer belief. To the interpreter, they pose a radical dilemma: is this pure nonsense or ... is it to be believed? If the interpreter adopts a spontaneous (i.e. ideological) attitude, her/his desire is to save the meaningfulness of the utterance which, regardless of the choice taken as to the radical dilemma, forces her/him into the position: credo quia absurdum.

We are now in the position to distinguish two elements within the ad hoc concept of the principle of interpretation: one is the definition a speaker or an interpreter her/himself gives of the communicational situation (this component has all the characteristics of a “rationalization”); the other is its belief-nucleus, the element that comprises the formal necessity that the situation so defined be an object of belief. This character of the second component makes of it a point at which desire (that an utterance be meaningful) and constraint (the compulsion to believe) coincide. It has, then, the structure of the Freudian phantasy.

Having introduced the concept of phantasy, we can and must refine our notion of the interpretational principle: insofar as it is the justification that the interpreter can provide for her/his interpretation of an utterance, a principle of interpretation depends on the interpreter’s identification with the subject supposed to believe; this is ideology in the familiar sense (systematization, rationalization, self-delusion, etc.). But since it depends specifically upon a mechanism of transference (identification), the principle of interpretation necessarily comprises an articulation of social demand (the basic relation of a subject to the other) with individual desire (the basic relation of a subject to her/himself, i.e., the level of the constitution of the subject). The locus of this articulation is the second component of the interpretational principle: its belief-nucleus or, in Freudian terms, the phantasy. As a formal matrix of the sense/nonsense alternative that both imposes the constraint of belief on the subject and responds to her/his desire, the phantasy is the material basis of the identification process — for it is a subject-constitutive phantasy. To the formal criterion for the success of ideological interpellation (that it should open into the sense/nonsense alternative), we must therefore add yet another: if a phantasy is to be socially (i.e. ideologically) operative, it must be capable of mobilizing the always idiosyncratic unconscious.
phantasies of the individual. It must be able to function as cloaca maxima draining individual phantasies into a social dimension.

Much has been said about the relationship between ideology and reality, and, symptomatically, no attempt to define this relationship can avoid some degree of contradiction. Such necessary contradiction derives from the contradictory nature of ideology itself—from its being a part of the very reality upon which it "operates." Apart from Engel's model of Wiederspiegeln and Althusser's concept of représentation imaginaire, there is a much better way to think this paradoxical "relation," a way which not only embraces both these formulations but also has the advantage of not presupposing a difference in nature between ideology and the material upon which it operates: this is to think ideology through the Freudian concept of sekundäre Bearbeitung. (Sekundäre Bearbeitung is usually translated as "secondary revision": although this translation underscores an important dimension of the concept, we prefer the more literal translation—"secondary elaboration").

VI. Ideology as Secondary Elaboration

Secondary elaboration is a dream mechanism that unifies the dream material. Freud describes it, almost in a Marxist style, as a "tendentious revision," and has some trouble situating it. This difficulty derives from the nature of secondary elaboration:

1. On the one hand, it is already an interpretation: it interprets the results of the dream-work, and is therefore no part of it.
2. On the other hand, it is a tendentious or a deformed interpretation; the character of distortion thus assimilating it to the dream-work itself.

Secondary elaboration thus presents a certain sense of the dream—but it is a false sense. Without it, the dream is a heap of disconnected fragments—with it, the dream has a sense, but not the true one. Through secondary elaboration, we get a sense, but this is not the sense of the dream—indeed it makes us lose the sense. The only motive for secondary elaboration is the claim of intelligibility of the dream material; and its only achievement is a falsification of what is there to be understood. The fascinating result of secondary elaboration is that intelligibility blocks understanding.

Freud stresses that "before we start upon the analysis of a dream, we have to clear the ground of this attempt at an interpretation," and explains this paradox by way of an analogy:
It [the secondary elaboration] behaves towards the dream-content lying before it just as our normal psychic activity behaves in general towards any perceptual content that may be presented to it. It understands that content on the basis of certain anticipatory ideas, and arranges it, even in the moment of perceiving it, on the presupposition of its being intelligible; in so doing, it runs a risk of falsifying it, and in fact, if it cannot bring it into line with anything familiar, is prey to the strangest misunderstandings. As is well known, we are incapable of seeing a series of unfamiliar signs or of hearing a succession of unknown words, without at once falsifying the perception from considerations of intelligibility, on the basis of something already known to us.17

This is Freud the materialist at work: the whole is the untrue. The analogy with the Marxian problem of the illusion of totality resulting from ideological totalization, is in fact more than an analogy. The illusion of totality is a "lie," but this "lie" is a part of the non-totalizable material itself. Dreams, dictated by sexual desire, are as non-totalizable as society, torn and constituted by class struggle. "Structure" is not a whole precisely because the illusion of its wholeness is a part of it.

This is, of course, only the leftist element in Freud; to stop here would be to yield to the infantile disorder of materialism. Freud's genius was to carry the analysis further, and to do so, he was obliged to introduce a new concept: the concept of Phantasie, wishful phantasy.

The interpretation presented by the secondary elaboration is a false interpretation; insofar as as it is false, it is no interpretation, it is a part of the dream-work; and insofar as it is a part of the dream-work, it is a part of the truth of the dream: therefore, the result of the secondary elaboration is "true" precisely (and only) inasmuch as it is "false." Although this may be an excessively logicist deduction, it nevertheless exactly reproduces Freud's point: what is false in the distorting operation is not the distortion itself, but its interpretational character. It is the "consideration of intelligibility," the claim of a "sense," that is "false."

According to Freud, the secondary elaboration builds up a façade of coherence for the dream: this façade has to be broken in order to get at the latent dream-content. Nonetheless, this does not mean the façade should be discounted; for its framework is not accidental, but rather represents a certain sort of appropriation of already prepared dream material:

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that these dream-facades are nothing other than mistaken and somewhat arbitrary revisions of the dream-content by the conscious agency of our mental life. In the erection of a dream-façade, use is not infrequently made of wishful phantasies which are present in the dream-thoughts in a pre-constructed form, and are of the same character as the appropriately named 'day dreams' familiar to us in waking life. The wishful phantasies revealed by analysis in night-dreams often turn out to be repetitions or modified versions of scenes from infancy; thus, in some cases,
the façade of the dream directly reveals the dream's actual nucleus, distorted by an admixture of other material.\(^{18}\)

Now there is one case in which it is to a great extent spared the labour of, as it were, building up a façade of the dream — the case, namely, in which a formation of that kind already exists, available for use in the material of the dream-thoughts. I am in the habit of describing the element in the dream-thoughts which I have in mind as a “phantasy” [“Phantasie”].\(^{19}\)

The phantasy is thus what Lacan calls the *point de capiton*, the quilting (or “anchoring”) point, an element common both to the façade and to what it conceals.

The response to an ideological interpellation is also made in the name of a claim of sense: it is this “presupposition of intelligibility” that pushes the interpellated individual towards an identification with the subject supposed to believe. The active part played by the interpellated individual consists precisely in her/his helping to establish a “façade” — an ideological effect of coherence. The interpellated individual does indeed interpret “on the basis of certain anticipatory ideas”: but s/he ascribes them to the subject supposed to believe, and thus confers upon them an a priori social status. Misunderstanding and falsification are, of course, always possible, but this possibility has a positive theoretical significance: it demonstrates that every interpretation, be it adequate to the “original” speaker’s intention or not, is socially, i.e. ideologically, motivated, and, in this sense (and on this level), the interpreting individual is always already a subject, that is, has always already been interpellated by an ideology. This level (of the Lebenswelt, of the background beliefs ascribed to the subject supposed to believe) presupposes the interpellation as already “consummated,” and its contents are in part trivial and abstract\(^{20}\) and in part ideologically specific. In (5), the trivial and abstract (ideologically non-specific) part of the background beliefs would, among others, comprise the belief in the existence of certain kinds of mental events or states (emotions), the postulation of a causal relation between certain events in the “outer” world (like the banning of Waldheim from the U.S.A.) and certain types of unpleasant emotions, etc.; the ideologically specific belief-background would consist of an intimatist notion of political life (a typical example of “reified consciousness” à la Goldmann) and, of course, the newly produced semantic feature. The individual act of identification with the social instance of the subject supposed to believe (the Althusserian Subject of ideology) makes the individual accede to the social dimension of ideological beliefs (Habermas’ Lebenswelt) and assume them for her/his account. But the act of identification is impossible if it cannot find an anchor for the individual’s
idiosyncratic “wishful phantasies” within the socially “pre-existent” belief-background — if the utterance offered for interpretation does not touch upon the individual’s (unconscious) subjectivating phantasy. The general, abstract and socially-oriented demand for sense must find a way of translating itself into the individual’s unconscious and particular desire, catalyzed by her/his phantasy. This is an absolute condition for the success of an ideological interpellation. The phantasy (which is a “petrified” string of signifiers, open to different interpretations that depend on different successive libidinal organizations in the history of the subject) is thus an element that has a double status: it figures in the “façade” of coherence (our principle of interpretation), in the conscious belief-network that “rationalizes” the identification-process, as well as in the individual’s unconscious desire. The phantasy is the point at which the conscious demand for sense translates itself into the subject’s unconscious desire which supports the act of identification. We can represent the interpellation-process by way of a reversal of Lacan’s scheme of the analytic process:

In Lacan’s scheme, the subject’s message returns to her/himself in an inverted form, because the vector of the (conscious) demand “turns around” the point of transference (the subject supposed to know) and comes back to the subject as her/his (unconscious) desire. The interpellation-process runs in the opposite direction: the subject’s (conscious) demand hits upon the point of phantasy, there translates itself into the (unconscious) desire which supports the identification with the subject supposed to believe (the Subject of ideology), and returns to the individual subject as this Subject’s interpellation. We could say that in the ideological process, the individual’s demand “bounces off” the Subject of ideology and returns to the individual subject in a non-inverted form — the
unconscious trajectory “phantasy → desire → identification,” which is the mechanism of subjectivation, being the material “basis” of this process.

Ideology as an effort to build up a “facade” of coherence, as a totalizing enterprise guided by “considerations of intelligibility,” does not then work directly upon social “reality”: it “works upon” the phantasy, and its effort aims at incorporating the phantasy. Within the coherence-façade of ideology, the phantasy represents the non-totalizable nature of the social structure (without going into details, let us just remark that our theory entails an ironic reformulation of Engels’ and Althusser’s formulae). The element of phantasy is typically void of any explicit class-content or tendency and presents the same confusing mixture of universal pretension and singular idiocy as the Freudian Phantasie. (An analysis of (5) would probably point to the phantasy of the “humiliated father”; in (7), we referred to the phantasy of Western empire. We could put on the same list the phantasy of the decline of the West, or the phantasy of Oriental despotism, and any number of racist stereotypes.) Being a quilting point, the phantasy punctually connects the ideological façade with the specific exterior: the so-called social reality. It is typically an inert string of signifiers, capable of being inserted into different façade interpretations; behind this set of signifiers, there is “nothing” — nothing but the hiatus that makes the social structure unwhole, the hiatus of the class-struggle.

Being a cover that covers a hole in the whole, the phantasy is what is “the most real” in an ideology. The “test of reality” for an ideology consists in its capacity to incorporate this obturator into a convincing (coherent, unifying) ideological façade: therefore, many conflicting ideologies may compete around the same phantasy — offering diverse class-interested interpretations of this non-sensical marker of the class struggle. It is their incorporation of the phantasy that guarantees them the “appropriate” intermediary distance from “reality”: ideologies do not situate themselves en face to social reality, they construe it around the absence of the social “real” (in the Lacanian sense), the class struggle, marked in their discourse by a stereotype, the phantasy.

This is why ideological conflict is even possible at all: it is a struggle for the interpretation of something that finally resists any interpretation, and thus opens the field of ideological warfare. And this is why theory may be of some assistance in the ideological class struggle. In its enlightened moment, theory can “demystify” mystifications, and isolate the kernel of nonsense they contain. In its materialist moment, it analyzes the logic of mystification, and opens the breach of intervention: an intervention carried out through the alleys of signifiers, resisting the temptation to reduce the phantasy, but confronting it and, with some luck, getting
over it — retracing the mechanisms of subjectivation and alleviating the burden of history that is our common lot, the lot of its “subjects.”

NOTES


3. For an elaboration of the “productive force” of illusions, especially in connection with the formation of national languages, the aesthetic problem of literary production, etc., see R. Močnik, “Towards a Materialist Concept of Literature,” Cultural Critique, no. 4 (Fall 1986).

4. The list of failures is impressive: Plekhanov’s “psychology of the social individual,” situated somewhere between the social base and the superstructure (an echo of Plekhanov’s desperate attempt may be detected in Lévi-Strauss’ localization of the sphere of mythology in La Pensee sauvage); Lukács “imputed consciousness”; a variety of psychologizations from Reich to Fromm to Marcuse; the philosophy of “praxis.” Even Gramsci’s “civil society” may be added to the list, especially in view of its recent re-elaborations. (And, while the political importance of these latter is undeniable, it was precisely the theoretical impotence of “Eastern Marxism” that necessitated the re-introduction of a relatively disinvested traditional notion in order to interpret new political phenomena with old theoretical tools.)

5. Habermas’ notion of the Lebenswelt (or “lifeworld”) is, in effect, an escape-hatch to help him out of the impasses of his hyper-rationalist conception of communication. It is therefore hereditarily marked by this initial bias: 1. The background of communication that we conceptualize as a network of possible beliefs (beliefs that the communicating parties need not consider as necessary, and certainly not as true, but merely have to admit as possible to entertain), is supposed to be “a background knowledge” (Hintergrundwissen). Such an “intellectualist” position either presupposes a very loose conception of knowledge (and thereby undermines its own enlightened foundation) or it imposes too heavy a condition of possibility upon communication (and thereby deprives itself of any explanatory value). 2. The inner articulation of the Lebenswelt is overly rigid: the notion of Lebensweltlichen Verweisungszusammenhangen (or “lifeworld referential contexts”) is clearly a mystificatory hypostasis of the analytical “principle of charity,” which, while it may well be “empiricist,” is nevertheless quite operative and gives a much more adequate account of interpretive activity (i.e. since it operates locally and without universalistic pretension). According to Habermas, Verweisungszusammenhangen are supposed to derive from “grammatically ordered [sic!] relations among elements of a linguistically organized fund of knowledge” (Jürgen Habermas, Theorie des Kommunikativen Händelns, band II [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981], p. 189). Now, either this background-knowledge grammar is parasitic upon the language in question, and Habermas believes that there is only one ideology to each linguistic community; or — since the reduplication lan-
language/ideology seems redundant under this unitarian hypothesis — a natural language is the ideology of the linguistic community, and we are landed back in romantic notions of the 19th century. 3. This line of reasoning forces Habermas to have recourse to a very traditional and obsolete notion of language as a depository of local ideological traditions. ("Natural languages conserve contents of traditions that exist only in symbolic form and mostly in linguistic incarnation....," etc. Idem., p. 191.) In philosophy, this position was successfully refuted by Donald Davidson (cf. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in: D. Davidson, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* [Oxford: 1984]); it is also in direct contradiction to the basic orientation of modern linguistics, which views any given language as a formal system whose particularities may be systematically derived from the "universals of language" as such. The most interesting contemporary linguistic research tries to reduce the semantic information contained in the lexicon as much as possible, and to formulate syntactically the little that then remains of semantics. (Cf. Joseph E. Emonds, "The Syntactic Basis of Semantics and the Non-Existence of Theta-Grids," paper read at the 1985 Winter LSA Symposium.) In "A Theory of Metaphor" (*The Subject in Democracy* [Ljubljana: 1988]), we have tried to show that most of the so-called "semantic" features of lexical items do not belong to the rules of language, but rather derive from the background belief-utterances assumed as "possible" by communicating speaker-hearers (and can therefore be "violated," as, for instance, in metaphor).


8. The "subject supposed to believe" would play a similar role in the ideological process as the Lacanian "subject supposed to know" (on the model of which it is forged) plays in the psychoanalytic process. We can illustrate this function with the example of the self-fulfilling character of collective delusions. If, in an appropriately unstable social situation, a rumour starts that "the oil (or sugar, etc.) is going to run out," it may be that this rumour is not true at the moment when it is launched (the stocks of oil being sufficient for normal consumption); but if people start acting upon this (originally "false") rumour, it may well become true. How do people act upon such a rumour? Suppose I am enlightened enough not to believe the rumour; I may even positively know it to be false. But *non obstante* my rationalism and/or my knowledge, I will reason in the following manner: "I knew the rumour is false, but other people may believe it. Acting upon their (false) belief, they will rush to the store and pile up private stocks; and the oil is likely then to run out. So I better rush to the store myself and get some oil." Even under the supposition that everybody in the population reasons in this way, the implicit consensus as to the falsity of the prediction will not prevent its finally coming true; the general recognition that *it is possible to believe* the rumour, i.e. the identification of every member of the population with the subject supposed to believe will do the trick.
9. The classic description of this mechanism is given by Freud in "Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse". The elegance of Freud's solution — that the identificational link binding together members of "die Masse" is nothing other than their common identification with the Leader — is connected to the exemplificatory, and therefore to a certain extent exceptional, nature of his "case." The Waldheim-case has the same purity. But the majority of ideological phenomena are more complicated and demand a richer conceptual apparatus, as we will see in a moment.

10. In Gricean terms, the assumption of this "point of view" as to (5) would follow from a direct application of the "maxim of quantity," a simple principle of everyday conversation.

11. That is, if we take it as a "commisive"; if taken as a simple constative, as John Rosenthal reminds me, a third possible interpretation would follow from the principle of interpretation that can be formulated, e.g., "L.B.J. knows he is going to lose the war, but he draws some solace from the fact that other U.S. presidents have already lost wars in the past." The background ideology would, in this case, be something like "the statement's wisdom"; and the relevant "phantasy," some adequate topos from the stoicist tradition. Cicero somewhere suggests the appropriate strategy to manipulate this kind of topoi referring to the "great ancestors' tradition": "if you can find an analogy in the past for what you want to propose, tell your audience to follow the great ancestors' example; if you can't find such an analogy, exhort them to do something nobody has ever dared before." — A further elaboration of the concept of "phantasy," proposed infra in this essay, could reformulate the Aristotelian doctrine of endoxa (generally accepted beliefs that serve as "premises" to rhetorical enthymemes), verifying their compulsiveness as well as their inconclusiveness (opposite "conclusions" can be drawn from the same endoxon), and situating them within the context of a materialist theory of the "trans-subjective," "pseudo-objective" status of ideology.

12. Belief is the privileged (and maybe the only) self-fulfilling modality of desire: any form of renunciation is supported by the belief that it gives someone else pleasure — and is gratified by this mere supposition. The libidinal economy of belief makes "the subject supposed to enjoy" a necessary complement to "the subject supposed to believe." (On the mechanisms of renunciation and the complementary supposed pleasure, cf. A Grosrichard, La Structure du serail [Paris: Seuil, 1979]).

13. Here is a recent example, coming — significantly — from an historian who takes ideology seriously: "Ideology, as we know, is not a reflection of reality, but a way to act upon it. For this action to have at least some effect, there should not be too large a gap between the illusionary representation and the 'reality' of life" (from G. Duby, L'imaginaire du féodalisme [Paris: Gallimard, 1978]). Ideology is thus placed both outside social reality (as an instrument to act upon it) and inside that reality (its importance for an historian deriving from its status as a social fact among others). The solution of situating ideology at an intermediate distance — not too close, not too far — from reality, is symptomatic for its utopian indeterminacy.
14. "The thing that distinguishes and at the same time reveals this part of the dream-work is its purpose. This function behaves in the manner which the poet maliciously ascribes to philosophers: it fills up the gaps in the dream-structure with shreds and patches [Heine, "Die Heimkehr"]. As a result of its efforts, the dream loses its appearance of absurdity and disconnectedness and approximates to the model of an intelligible experience. ... Dreams ... appear to have a meaning, but that meaning is as far removed as possible from their true significance." (S. Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, ed. James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud [London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74] [hereafter cited as "SE"], vol. V, p. 490.)

15. Ibid., p. 490.

16. In The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) and in On Dreams (1901), secondary elaboration is supposed to be a part of the dream-work, though a less important part, which is not even necessarily present in every dream. In An Evidential Dream (Ein Traum als Beweismittel, 1913), Freud already doubts whether the secondary elaboration comprises a part of the dream-work, and finds a Solomonic solution to get rid of the problem: "Secondary revision by the conscious agency is here reckoned as part of the dream-work. Even if one were to separate it, this would not involve any alteration in our conception. We should then have to say: dreams in the analytic sense comprise the dream-work proper together with the secondary revision of its products" (SE, vol. XII, pp. 274-275). In his article on "Psycho-Analysis," contributed to Marcuse's Handwörterbuch, Freud states that, "strictly speaking," secondary elaboration "does not form a part of the dream-work" (idem., p. 241). Freud's hesitation can be most clearly displayed by juxtaposing the following two passages: "Are we to suppose that what happens is that in the first instance the dream constructing factors ... put together a provisional dream-content out of the material provided, and that this content is subsequently re-cast so as to conform so far as possible to the demands of a second agency? This is scarcely probable. We must assume rather that from the very first the demands of this second factor constitute one of the conditions which the dream must satisfy and that this condition ... operates simultaneously in a conductive and selective sense upon the mass of material present in the dream-thoughts" (SE, vol. V, p. 499). "I shall not deal exhaustively with this part of the dream-work, and will therefore merely remark that the easiest way of forming an idea of its nature is to suppose -- though the supposition probably does not meet the facts -- that it only comes into operation AFTER the dream-content has already been constructed" (idem., p. 666).


19. Later in this text (The Interpretation of Dreams, SE, vol. V, p. 491), we come across this important statement: "Hysterical symptoms are not attached to actual memories, but to phantasies erected on the basis of memories." In an addendum to his letter to Fließ of May 2, 1897, Freud had already specified this idea: "Phantasies are psychical façades constructed in order to bar the way to these memories [of primal scenes]."
20. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Davidson persuasively demonstrates that most of the background beliefs necessary for any communication are *shared and true*; they are also trivial (belief in the existence of macro-physical objects, time-space coordinates, certain causal relations, etc.). Analytical philosophy reduces all ideology to this “spontaneous” anthropological “metaphysics”; the choice of its examples betrays well its ideological bias: intended to be “neutral,” they are such as could only exceptionally figure in any “real” everyday conversation.


23. Analyzing the Belgrade trial against the six dissident intellectuals (1984-85), we discovered this element in the popular phantasy of a football (soccer) match “à la Yougoslave” (*Problemi*, no. 257, 1985).

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