

whether they are considered as individuals or sub-groups, spontaneously create a hierarchic structure. All primate communities are hierarchic structures, otherwise they would not be communities. For this reason I believe that a hierarchy of responsible leadership, cadres and teachers will continue to function in the development and stabilizing of a grass-roots democratic communism in China (providing the USSR and the Western States do not intervene and trigger off another nuclear war).

The internal life of individual species and societies is shaped by their own needs in relation to their own ecology and time, but the expression of those needs is also determined by the dialectic of universal elements which are common to them all. For example, the permanence and universality of hierarchy in all organisations of life must be re-stated again and again, not simply to echo the universality of an abstract hierarchy, but to relate the unique and historical character of changing forms of hierarchy to the essential function of hierarchy itself. (With equal effect the concepts of morality, liberty, love and many other universals may be substituted for the word hierarchy in the context I have just given). In this way we are all the more prepared for recognising and distinguishing liberty from tyranny, the

natural from the unnatural, the healthy from the pathological, and the true from the false.

The alternative to an expanding historical classification is to regard all societies - from prehistoric to modern man - as a random series of specific cultures and histories, each pursuing its own path regardless of the dialectic procedures of primate evolution and a general history of mankind. Distinct histories and social types cannot of course be fitted tidily into systems and epochs which follow each other in chronological sequence. Systems, transitions, stages (and stages within stages) arise synchronously and diachronously, preceding and following each other in their own time and space as well as in the time-space complex of an expanding world history. The proper use of historical classification in this context will strengthen the continuity of pre-history with history, and may eventually lead to the construction of a psychogenesis of man.

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- 1 Danilova, L.V., *Pre-Capitalist Societies*, Nauka Publishing, Moscow, 1968
  - 2 Marx-Engels *Selected Works* Vol.2, Lawrence Wishart, London, 1953
  - 3 Balandier, G., *Anthropologie de Politique*, Allen Lane, London, 1970
  - 4 Sahlins, Marshall, *Stone Age Economics*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1972
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# The Theory of Ideology:

## Some Comments on Mepham

Joe McCarney

John Mepham's paper 'The Theory of Ideology in Capital'<sup>1</sup> is an important contribution to the debate over Marx's theory of ideology. It would not be too much to say that it raises that debate to a new level, at which the real difficulties of the subject can be seen. It achieves this largely through the manner in which so many persuasive errors and half-truths are identified and rejected. The views Mepham castigates are commonplace in the literature, and the treatment of them is a substantial, if negative, achievement. In the light of it the inadequacy of his positive thesis has almost a tragic quality. This is enhanced by the way it incurs a fate he has acutely described in the case of other writers on the subject, that of coming to embody, not the theory of ideology, but merely another 'ideology of ideology'. Moreover, the version it offers is particularly disappointing, at least to anyone who looked to 'radical philosophy' for intellectual support of the forces of radical change in British society.

A convenient way to start this discussion is by noting a curious discrepancy in Mepham's paper. The first paragraph speaks of a need for 'a theory of the conditions for the production of knowledge and of effective practice and, also a theory of the production of mystification' (p12). A little later he remarks that he is thinking of the problem of ideology 'in relation to the general questions "What are the conditions for the production of knowledge and what are the conditions for the production of various systems of mystificatory belief?"' (p13). With these remarks the scene is apparently being set, but the expected performance never takes place. In the last sentence of the paper we are told that:

*... just what Marx's theory of the conditions for the production of mystification can teach us about the conditions for the production of knowledge, and for the production of a non-mystifying social reality are not questions which I have attempted to answer in this paper.*

(p19)

The effect of all this is to leave the reader with the sense of a specific expectation that has been aroused but not fulfilled, the expectation that the discussion will be relevant to questions about the conditions for the production of knowledge and of revolutionary practice. This is not said here in order to make a debating point. It is rather than when taken together the remarks quoted suggest that something has gone seriously wrong with Mepham's programme. Moreover, they offer a clue as to how one might try to understand what has happened. This is that the note of incongruity may be intelligible in the light of certain general features of his position. The failure to say anything about the conditions of knowledge and of effective practice may not be a merely accidental omission that could be repaired by extending the original lines of argument. The suggestion is that Mepham cannot give a satisfactory account of these matters: the stance he adopts excludes in principle any such possibility.

Perhaps the most striking feature of his treatment of ideology is the kind of inflation which the notion undergoes. Signs of this begin to appear early in the paper. After the passage quoted above which speaks of a concern with general questions about the conditions of knowledge and of systems of mystificatory belief, he continues: *These questions have been raised not only in relation to ideology but also, for example, in relation to the history of science and to the problem of myth in anthropology. As one aspect (but only one; there are many others) of such enquiries, progress has been achieved I think by the rediscovery, paradoxical as it may seem, of the cognitive basis of some systems of mystificatory belief.* (p13)

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1 RP2, Summer 1972. All references are to this source.

It is a central theme of the paper that 'the relation between reality and ideology ... is the cognitive relation' (p13) and that this relation is the key to the dominance of ideology (p12). We are, it seems, meant to see some analogy in this respect between ideology and systems of pre-scientific magical belief. This is ominous. The wish to treat the distinction between science and magic on a par with that between science and ideology is usually a symptom of idealism. Thus, the tendency of the literature to which Mepham refers is to encourage us to think of systems of magical belief as full-scale alternatives to scientific world-views; rival, and equally valid, frameworks for conceiving reality. They are supposed to have a cognitive basis in so far as they offer interpretations of experience that are comprehensive and autonomous. But if this is the direction in which we are being invited to look one must register a preliminary protest. To retain a link with Marx's view of what an ideology is, one must continue to regard it as falling short in crucial respects. It can hardly escape altogether the suggestion of being in important respects partial and limited. Its comparative richness in some areas of experience will contrast with incompetence or irrelevance in others. It does not normally, for instance, permeate the description and classification of everyday events in the natural order in the way that magic does for its adherents. Neither will it be self-contained in the required sort of way. Thus, for instance, bourgeois ideology and science have largely grown up together in the same historical epoch and the one is to be a considerable extent parasitic on the other. Bourgeois ideology works because up to a point it successfully parodies the procedures of genuinely scientific modes of thinking about society. We can speak, as Marx does, of 'unmasking' in connection with it because these pretensions are hollow and are exposed as such by the application of scientific method, as exemplified in *Capital*. Such talk would be out of place in connection with magic, for it is not a parody of anything. While ideology is the cuckoo in the nest of science, magic is of a different genus altogether. In the light of this one might already have misgivings about Mepham's handling of his central categories. But it is too early to press the point. We seem to have located a possible source of tension in his relationship with Marx's theory. To get any further here one has to take account of the evidence provided by the next state in the inflation of ideology.

This stage is represented by a sustained, though never precisely worked out, analogy with language: *The conditions for the production of ideology are the conditions for the production of a language, and can only be understood by reference to the structure of forms and social practices which systematically enter into the production of particular concepts and propositions in that language. Ideology is not a collection of discrete falsehoods but a matrix of thought firmly grounded in the forms of our social life and organised within a set of interdependent categories. We are not aware of these systematically generative interconnections because our awareness is organised through them.*

(p17)

There is an earlier remark which relates back to this last point:

*Ideological language does not just distract attention away from real social relations, nor does it explain them away, not even does it directly deny them. It structurally excludes*

*them from thought.* (p15)

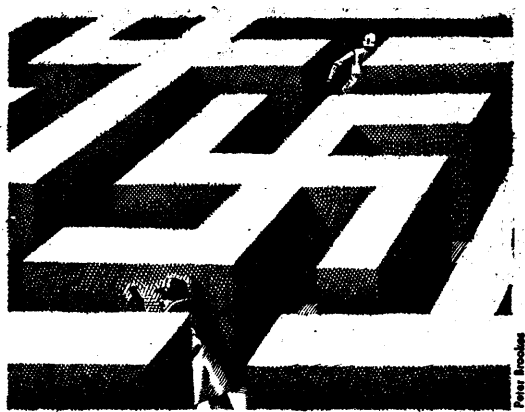
Clearly, the considerations which tell against the comparison with pre-scientific belief systems apply all the stronger in the case of language. Ideology does not have the integrity or the ramifications needed to sustain such comparisons, and their use involves a disastrous error of scale. The extent of this is apparent if one takes them seriously enough to begin considering the implications in any sort of concrete way. Is it really helpful, for instance, to think of the worker as enmeshed in bourgeois ideology in a way analogous to that in which the member of a primitive society is enmeshed in the language and culture of his tribe? Such a perspective would surely be foreign to the spirit of Marx's thinking on the subject. One could go on teasing out the anomalies here. It may be more useful however to try to uncover their source by approaching the question at a different level.

Recognition of the cognitive basis of mystificatory belief would seem to involve the characteristic risk that the differences between what is and what is not mystification will get blurred. It leads easily to the 'insight' expressed in a remark of Henri Lefebvre's which Mepham associates with his 'three theses' on ideology: 'Appearances have reality and reality involves appearances' (p14). This is, from one point of view, just a way of recognising that the distinction between appearance and reality has become problematic. For someone like Mepham who thinks of ideology as something like a total structuring of experience, the problem may take a particularly awkward form. This becomes clear if, for instance, one asks how to assess the cognitive achievement of ideology as compared to other 'systems' or 'languages'. The difficulties involved in such comparisons have been widely canvassed and, indeed, form a large part of the stock in trade of contemporary idealism. Mepham's account invites them directly. If, as he says, our awareness of reality is structured through the systematically connected categories of a matrix of thought, there can be no access to it independently of such systems, and direct comparison of them in terms of accordance with an external reality is impossible. Whatever criteria of truth and objectivity are employed will, it seems, have to be internal to some particular system or other and so cannot help begging the fundamental question at issue. There seems to remain no point in conceptual space from which an 'objective' verdict on the merits of alternative systems could be delivered. One cannot, for instance, legitimately contrast the vision of reality revealed by one with the structure of appearances embodied in another. The distinction between reality and appearance can at best have application only within systems and not across them.

In this way the picture of competing matrices gives rise, and in its standard uses is intended to give rise, to the problem of conceptual relativism. Mepham thinks of ideology as providing such another matrix, and so it too presumably qualifies under the general requirement of tolerance. Now the possibility of a Marxist critique and unveiling of ideological illusions begins to seem mysterious. The objective basis of the distinction between ideological and non-ideological modes of thought is eroded and Marxism is left as an arbitrary preference in favour of a particular language. It is precisely this note of arbitrariness that one finds in Mepham's discussion on the rare occasions it touches on these epistemological tangles. For instance, there is a foot-note which refers to the issue of comparisons between languages:

The difference between the one 'language' and the other is one which can be explained in terms of appearance and reality, or in terms of the aspect of reality which is its appearance and that which is its hidden substratum. Thus the difference is explained by reference to properties of the object and not solely of the subject and his idiosyncrasies. No doubt these considerations would form the basis for an explanation of the way in which Marx's epistemology escapes the problems of idealism and relativism with which I do not deal in this essay.

(pl5fn)



Here, as elsewhere, the disclaimers about the scope of the essay should not be taken at face value, for the issues left over cannot be satisfactorily dealt with in the terms of the original discussion. Marx's epistemology escapes the problems of idealism and relativism, but Mepham's does not. It involves them immediately. The inflation of ideology into a matrix for structuring awareness puts conceptual relativism inescapably on the agenda, and with it traditional idealist puzzles about the proper application of the concepts of truth, objectivity and reality. A Marxist analysis would tackle the problems at their source and prevent them arising in the way they do from Mepham's discussion. It would involve a basic shift of perspective on the notion of ideology so as to restore it to its proper scale again. In this way one could draw the poison of mystification about its power to structure reality for us. But Mepham shows no signs of awareness of the need for such a shift which would in any case strike at the heart of his conception of the problem. On the other hand he is committed to the claim to be explicating, rather than improving, Marx's theory. The mixture of evasiveness and blank assertion in the passage quoted above may be seen as a natural response to the pressures of this situation.

It may help here to consider another passage which sheds some light on the part played by language in Mepham's thinking. His 'first thesis' on ideology states that 'ideology is structured discourse'. In the course of amplifying it he writes: *We cannot understand ideological concepts or ideological propositions as standing in some such one-to-one relation with non-ideological, non-distorted, factual or scientific concepts, propositions or facts. The translation of ideology (or manifest text) into the true, underlying (latent) text cannot be performed on a word to word or proposition to proposition basis. The 'true text' is reconstructed not by a process of piecemeal decoding but by the identification of the generative set of ideological categories and its replacement by a different set. This different set will be differently constituted in its*

internal relations. And we must discover the transformational mechanism whereby the distorted matrix is, in the historical life process, substituted for the undistorted one.

(pl3)

It is the prohibition of 'piecemeal decoding', the uncovering of one-to-one relationship, that needs to be looked at here. This will be done in connection with the sketch of Marx's analysis of the wage-form. This is the nearest we get in the paper to an extended treatment of actual examples of ideological distortion. It seems fair to ask how far the way in which ideology is overcome in this case follows the lines suggested by the general thesis. The lesson of the wage-form example is quite general in scope, for, as Mepham remarks, 'Marx's treatment follows exactly the same form in relation to all the categories' (pl5). The question to be asked here is how well this treatment can be accommodated by Mepham's premises.

The analysis consists essentially, as Mepham makes clear, in showing how the phenomenal form of 'wages' is connected with the real relation, 'the value of labour power'. The general point involved is, he remarks, that 'the transformations from real-relations to phenomenal forms is a transformation in which a complex relation (or a relation of relations, as in the complex wages-money-value-commodities, etc) is presented as a simple relation or is presented as a thing or the property of a thing' (pl6). There seems to be nothing about this exercise so far that would rule out talk of 'piecemeal decoding' in principle. Clearly, the fact that the entities involved are sometimes complex is not enough to do so, still less to justify an alternative description in terms of the substitutions of one matrix of thought for another. Let us go on to look at Mepham's treatment of the kind of 'ideological discourse' associated with the example. 'In this familiar case,' he writes, 'we can see some of the connections between the wage-form and the ideological concept of a fair wage' (pl6). Here again the description we are given scarcely heralds a radical break with the uncovering of one-to-one relationships. Nor are matters greatly altered when he comes to deal with discourse about the various practices of wage-bargaining in which the ideological concept of a fair wage plays a part (incomes policy, courts of inquiry, etc). He is entirely successful in showing that when a Marxist analysis in terms of the categories, real relation ('the value of labour power'), phenomenal form ('wages'), and ideological concept ('fair wage') is applied in this situation the whole ideological house of cards collapses at once. This elementary exercise in the use of scientific method dispels the clouds of mystification, enabling us to see a particular area of social reality as it is. But, on Mepham's own showing, the exercise is not at all like matrix-substitution or the giving of a translation from one language into another. It is much more like the replacement of correct for incorrect views using the resources of a common language. What the example shows is that 'ideological discourse' does not constitute an independent system. It does, of course, have a characteristically heavy reliance on such ideological concepts as 'a fair wage'. But it must make use of many non-ideological elements as well, elements it shares with any discourse that seeks to make social reality intelligible to us. It is the existence of these common elements that makes the scientific exposure of ideological distortion possible. A frank recognition of the necessarily piecemeal nature of much of this scientific work would be more helpful in our present situation than the announcement of elaborate

programmes that cannot be carried out. This simply encourages the sort of contemplative attitude that must postpone indefinitely the task of breaking the grip of bourgeois ideology.

Of course Mepham's 'practice' in dealing with ideological distortion is better than his 'theory'. Indeed the essential judgement on the 'theory' is that it cannot yield a coherent account of the 'practice'. This is, as we have seen, a faithful survey of ground already covered by Marx. To note this is to be reminded of a presence lurking in the background throughout this discussion which must now be brought right to the centre of our attention. Mepham has provided an admirable sketch of Marx's working method, without seeming to realise how embarrassing its implications are for his thesis. Equally embarrassing, and to this point he is more sensitive, is Marx's choice of language in speaking of ideology. The use of the camera *obscura* model, whatever its difficulties, at least suggests that it is the uncovering of one-to-one relationships that is in question. There is moreover the constant use of metaphors of 'unmasking', 'unveiling' and 'penetration' which points in the same direction. It is worth making the simple point that this kind of consistency deserves to be taken seriously. The constant and unequivocal pressure it exerts must surely tell in the end on anyone who regards himself as a Marxist. But we do not have to rely on hints and guesses to establish the gap between Marx and Mepham on the subject of ideology.

The point is more easily made in connection with another aspect of the process of inflation, as revealed in a passage such as this:

*... my view is that the bourgeois class is the producer of ideas only in the sense that sleep is the producer of dreams. To say that the bourgeoisie produces ideas is to ignore that which determines which ideas are thus produced, and to conceal the real nature and origins of ideology. It is not the bourgeois class that produces ideas but bourgeois society.*

(p12)

The demotion of the concept of social class foreshadowed here is fully worked out in the rest of the discussion. It has no important part to play at any stage. Most significantly, perhaps, it does not figure in the 'new model' of ideology which is supposed to replace the *camera obscura*. Indeed it seems to have dropped so far out of the writer's consciousness that class is not listed among the institutions which mediate the experience of the individual worker, though they include the family, the school, the Union, the army, the football club and the Church. (p19)

Thus, the essay offers us a truly spectacular example of omission. To note this is to be brought close to the fundamental misconception in its approach to its subject. If one supposes that bourgeois ideology is produced by bourgeois society and not by the bourgeois class a vital restraint on the flight into mysticism has been removed. When bourgeois ideology comes to be seen as an effusion from society as a whole it begins to be plausible to attribute to it the massiveness of scale that the essay does. The way is opened for the grandiose analogies it deals in, with all their attendant epistemological difficulties. Marx, as Mepham says, escapes these problems. He does so because by keeping its anchorage in the reality of social class his theory of ideology avoids the first fatal step that leads to them. For Marx ideology always remains a class-based collection of distortions whose deficiencies are to be explained in terms of the class's historical role. This is, of course, not a perspicu-

ous formula and indeed every element in it stands in need of explication. But the explication of the theory as opposed to the further elaboration of ideologies must have some such starting point. Mepham's major difficulties stem from the fact that the link between ideology and class is more intimate than he can allow. One could now reconstruct much of the foregoing discussion in the light of this point. It helps, for instance, to explain the nervousness he occasionally shows about the implications of his position and especially about its relationships to Marx. Thus, for instance, in discussing the 'new model' he writes:

*The problem would be to spell out the properties of the new model in such a way as to preserve certain of Marx's central tenets; in particular the interpretation would have to be compatible with some notion of historical materialism and with the doctrine of the determination in the last instance by the 'economic.*

(p18)

This problem is insoluble in view of the absence of the notion of class from the model. If classes drop out of the picture an essential ingredient in the explanatory scheme of historical materialism and economic determinism has been lost. It is futile to suppose that anything coherent or distinctive can then be retained from these theories. Here, as elsewhere, Mepham seems to be gesturing in the direction of objectives that in reality have been abandoned long before.

We can pursue this line of thought a bit further by looking again at an issue raised at the beginning, the hiatus between the expectations the paper arouses and the author's final verdict on its scale. It is now clear why, in principle, he can have nothing to say about the conditions of knowledge and of effective practice. The essential points may be made quite simply. The notion of class has no significant place in his scheme, and classes are the essential instruments of historical change. Without them there can be no theory of revolutionary practice, and without such a theory one cannot form a coherent view of the conditions which make possible knowledge as opposed to mystification. The specific form which Mepham's contribution to ideology takes is also intelligible in the light of these facts. The concept of ideology itself, once cut off from its material base, begins a new career. It comes to represent a free-floating system of thought, on a par with all the other disembodied systems so dear to idealists. By this stage the theory of ideology has become an instance of what it originally set out to analyse.

It would be unfair to leave the discussion here without acknowledging once more the significance of Mepham's achievement. This consists at one level in the way it brings out what are the crucial issues for further investigation. It reminds us that central to Marx's thinking about ideology is the idea of its peculiarly intimate connection with class. There is undeniably an excessive reliance on metaphor in his presentation of it. The task for Marxist theory in this area is to spell out the precise nature of the link in a literal way. In doing this it will have to take account of the pitfalls so clearly mapped by Mepham; the reliance on crude notions of the creation of ideology out of class interest on the one hand, and the vacuities of existentialist interpretations on the other. The fact that his own thesis avoids these dangers only to generate a set of empty scholastic puzzles points up to the difficulty of the task. It also suggests that the ingenious foolishness of academic British philosophizing will prove a more difficult legacy to shake off than radical philosophers sometimes suppose.