

On the Question of Ideology: Criticism of the Enlightenment Approach and Theory of Ideology as Objective Force in Gramsci and Althusser

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Abstract : Studying the Marxist intellectual tradition, it is possible to verify that there were numerous cases of philosophical regression, in which the important achievements of detailed studies have been replaced by naïve ideas and previous misunderstandings: one of most important example of this tendency is related to the question of ideology. According to a common Enlightenment approach, the ideology is essentially not a reality, i.e., a factor capable of having an effect on the reality itself; in other words, the ideology is a mere error without specific historical meaning, which is only due to ignorance or inability of subjects to understand the truth. From this point of view, the consequent and immediate practice against every form of ideology are the rational dialogue, the reasoning based on common sense, in order to dispel the obscurity of ignorance through the light of pure reason. The limits of this philosophical orientation are however both theoretical and practical: on the one hand, the Enlightenment criticism of ideology is not an historicistic thought, since it cannot grasp the inner connection that ties an historical context and its peculiar ideology together; moreover, on the other hand, when the Enlightenment approach fails to release people from their illusions (e.g., when the ideology persists, despite the explanation of its illusoriness), it usually becomes a racist or elitarian thought. Unlike this first conception of ideology, Gramsci attempts to recover Marx's original thought and to valorize its dialectical methodology with respect to the reality of ideology. As Marx suggests, the ideology - in negative meaning - is surely an error, a misleading knowledge, which aims to defense the current state of things and to conceal social, political or moral contradictions; but, that is precisely why the ideological error is not casual: every ideology mediately roots in a particular material context, from which it takes its reason being. Gramsci avoids, however, any mechanistic interpretation of Marx and, for this reason, he underlines the dialectic relation that exists between material base and ideological superstructure; in this way, a specific ideology is not only a passive product of base but also an active factor that reacts on the base itself and modifies it. Therefore, there is a considerable revaluation of ideology's role in maintenance of status quo and the consequent thematization of both ideology as objective force, active in history, and ideology as cultural hegemony of ruling class on subordinate groups. Among the Marxists, the French philosopher Louis Althusser also gives his contribution to this crucial question; as follower of Gramsci's thought, he develops the idea of ideology as an objective force through the notions of Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). In addition to this, his philosophy is characterized by the presence of structuralist elements, which must be studied, since they deeply change the theoretical foundation of his Marxist thought.

Keywords : Althusser, enlightenment, Gramsci, ideology

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