

## CRITIQUE, EMANCIPATION, IDEOLOGY: MARXIAN LOGIC OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

– Lotar Rasiński –

**Abstrakt.** The aim of this paper is an analysis of Karl Marx's account of social criticism. The paper opens with a distinction between two models of social criticism, Platonic and Socratic, present in the contemporary political philosophy. The main argument is that despite the contradictory character of the two models of criticism, they are both present in Marx's account of criticism. Through the concept of emancipation the idea of criticism in Marx is oriented to practice, which leads to the Socratic model of critique. However, through the concept of ideology, especially in the Althusserian account, the Marxian idea of critique shows a strong relation to the Platonic model. The paper concludes that the presence of both contradictory elements, those of internal and external critique, in the Marxian idea of criticism is not a contingent effect of the development of his thought, but a necessary condition of every kind of criticism.

**Słowa kluczowe:** social criticism, Karl Marx, ideology, emancipation, Louis Althusser.

### I.

To define more closely what I understand as social criticism I will use an example taken from ancient philosophy. I will contrast two models of social critique: a Platonic one and a Socratic one. Generally speaking, the Platonic model consists in a dispassionate scientific and objective evaluation of a social situation, as if "looking from outside." Such a critique can only be undertaken by a philosopher who has been able to free him- or herself from the "chains" of everyday existence and distance themselves from their own society – only looking from such a perspective enables a correct evaluation of a situation. The Socratic model is in contrast to the Platonic one. A Socratic critic is the one who takes part in social life, engages in the life of the community, knows its problems and whose evaluation of a situation results from his or her local and practical knowledge.

An example of the Platonic model of social critique is the famous allegory of the cave.<sup>1</sup> [Plato 1966, 514B-517E] None of the prisoners chained to the bottom

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<sup>1</sup> One should naturally remember that the Platonic allegory of the cave is mainly interpreted in ontological and epistemological context. It should however be observed that in the Platonic system solutions on the ontological level have considerable influence on ethical and social considerations. The imperative of "the soul's ascension to the intelligible region" (ibidem, 517B) not only shows the

of the cave are able to *correctly* appraise his own and his co-prisoners' situation. The prisoners described by Plato cannot free themselves from the delusion created by the play of lights and shadows on the wall of the cave. Plato believes that the delusion can be broken only by a person who could break the chains and escape from the subterranean world into the outer world. Only this person will *see* the forms of the deformed reflections the people in the cave see and may be able to properly evaluate the futility and senselessness of the life of his companions, wasting time on the discussions about their own delusions. Socrates asks Glaucon a few times whether he is able to conjecture a situation in which this adventurer, having seen the true nature of reality, would want to come back to the prison and tell the others about what he saw in order to "convert" them to the truth. This is, naturally, nonsensical behaviour – he would be exposed to the risk of ridicule or, even worse, death. Plato decidedly warns against returning to the co-prisoners.

A Platonic critic is, one may say, an elite critic. Talking to the members of a community does not make sense and can even be life-threatening. The discussion on the true order of things should rather be left to the narrow group of initiates who already are "on the other side." This conviction is expressed in the strictly caste social structure proposed by Plato in *Republic*, where a narrow group of philosophers endowed with insight into the true nature of justice and goodness becomes the only power and law-maker in the state.

What is interesting is that Plato treats the argument about „death at the hands of the people" entirely serious and it is not hard to find allusions to Socrates' life in this argument. The fate of Socrates becomes a warning for all those who undertake open and critical discussion on ethical and social subjects with their co-citizens. Thus Plato, willingly or not, makes Socrates a symbol of how a discussion on the most vital issues should not be conducted.

Socrates is an example of an entirely different approach to critique. Socratic thesis of his own ignorance [Plato 2005, 21B-24B] (whether sincere or not) puts him in a wholly different position towards both the members of his own community and the subject matter that can be considered in philosophical communication. Socrates always finds the truth *together* with his interlocutors, "common citizens of Athens" and the subjects on which they talk concern vital questions of communal life. One may say he boasts of being close to the people and of the fact that his actions can sow in them the seeds of uncertainty which will lead them to the revision of their own convictions. He is destined to be the one who makes the "sluggish

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right way of cognition but is also an encouragement to a virtuous life consisting in submitting the body to the soul.

body of the city” come to life over and over again by his subsequent stings. [ibidem, 30E-31B]

The Socratic model of critique, as Martha Nussbaum observes, consists in awaking self-reflection in people: „education progresses not through indoctrination from the teacher, but through a critical scrutiny of the pupil’s own beliefs.” [Nussbaum 1998, p. 21-22] The core of Socrates’s actions was pushing the Athenians out of the everyday routine which made them thoughtless and “sluggish”. Socrates’s “sting” was intended to make them think and realise other possibilities and ways of acting, encouraging a *conscious* choice. Only thus one can, according to Socrates, reach the fullness of humanity: “the unexamined life is not worth living.” [Plato 1966, 38A]

Those two models of critique represented by Plato and Socrates are still present in the tradition of social criticism. As Michael Walzer, one of modern propagators of the Socratic line of critical thinking, says, social critics can be divided into “insiders”, engaging in the life of the community and taking part in the practice they subject to criticism, and those who adopt a “critical distance”, philosophers from “mountain tops” endeavouring to look on the world with God’s eye and treating indifference and distance from their community as a necessary condition of all critique. [Walzer 2002, pp. XI-XII]

The aim of this paper is an analysis of Karl Marx’s account of social criticism as a source of contemporary confusions concerning this concept. I argue that the concept of critique is closely connected to Marx’s understanding of emancipation and ideology and it can be interpreted only in relation to them. Through the concept of emancipation, the idea of criticism is connected to practice, which leads to the Socratic model of critique. But through the concept of ideology, especially in the Althusserian account, the Marxian idea of critique shows a strong relation to the Platonic model of criticism. I argue in the conclusions that the presence of both contradictory elements – i.e. idea of internal and external critique – in the Marxian idea of criticism is not a contingent effect of the development of his thought, but it is a necessary condition of every kind of criticism.

## II.

Marx was not only a theoretician but above all an “activist” for whom theoretical writings were only a tool of the revolutionary struggle. It is enough to mention his engagement with the creation of the Communist League, his journalistic work in *Rheinische Zeitung* or his organizing the International Workingmen’s Association, which were elements of the project of the emancipation of the working class as a condition of the liberation of humanity. One of the leitmotifs of his work

was the conviction about the unity of theory and practice. Only a theory which is grounded in the “material reality” can trigger a change, i.e. become practice. Only a theory that will change into practice can become a tool of emancipation.

Marx dealt with the subject of social critique in itself rarely, if at all. For him, the idea of critique was a natural element of his concept, a theoretical grounding of which was simply superfluous. In Marx’s works, consideration over undertaking critique appears mostly in the context of reflection about emancipation and ideology. In the first case, critique as a theory supporting concrete political activities is supposed to be an element of a broader process of the liberation of humanity. In the second case, critique will be a tool of demystifying reality, the misleading picture of which is prepared for the use of the ruling by professional ideologists.

The problem of criticism in Marx is connected with the actions of the popular in those times “Left Hegelians” who accepted critique as the main tool of bringing about change in the world. It must, however, be admitted that Marx’s critique had a broader and more far-reaching character than the Young Hegelian critique. As Marx wrote in his letter to Ruge “even though the construction of the future and its completion for all times is not our task, what we have to accomplish at this time is all the more clear: *relentless criticism of all existing conditions*, relentless in the sense that the criticism is not afraid of its findings and just as little afraid of the conflict with the powers that be.” [Marx 1997, p. 212]. The critique of philosophy and religion, the main aims of the attacks of the Left Hegelians, were, for Marx, only an introductory phase of a much more important task of getting at the source of alienation and contradictions present in political institutions.

Marx recognized a close relationship between critique and emancipation since the very beginning then. The “critique” appears most often as a synonym of “theory” which has a rationale only as far as it becomes “realized” or evokes real results in the world. Critique is a kind of “a reform of consciousness” and does not consist in condemning reality or convictions – it is more about *understanding* them: “The reform of consciousness exists *merely* in the fact that make the world aware of its consciousness, that one awakens the world out of its own dream, that one *explains* to the world its own acts.” [*ibidem*, p. 214] The goal of critique, as well as of “theory” or “philosophy” is their eventual abolition which will occur along with the liberation of the proletariat. In the world of the “fullness of humanity”, critique simply ceases to be necessary.

In *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction* Marx stresses that "the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism." [Marx 1972a, p. 53] In his opinion religion, "an inverted consciousness of the world," "the opium of the people," is the main tool of falsifying reality, hiding the real social conditions by transporting the essence of man into the delusional world of the supermundane life. All social and political struggles must therefore begin by revealing the role of religion in life which will allow man to see his real situation, will move him to action and throw off the fetters. Destroying the world based on religion is the first step to creating "the truth of this world." "Thus the criticism of heaven is transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics." [ibidem, p. 54]

This type of criticism has above all the function of revealing the real situation, is a tool in the "struggle" which, paradoxically, is supposed to make the world "despicable" to people and make it unbearable. This world is bearable and "normal" only as long as religion "narcotizes" the people, masking the existing oppression and conflicts present in society. Religion is, as Althusser would later say, the first and basic "ideological apparatus" of a state that serves the interests of those who benefit from the oppression. Therefore in order to get at the higher levels of the apparatus of oppression, it is necessary to attack religion first. Only then will criticism become "radical criticism":

Theory is capable of seizing the masses when it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself. What proves beyond doubt the radicalism of German theory, and thus its practical energy, is that it begins from the resolute positive abolition of religion. The criticism of religion ends with ... *categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions* in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being ... [ibidem, p. 60]

A conflict between theory and practice perceived by Marx in "German theory" concerns naturally the Hegelian theory of the state, which, in Marx's opinion, is a speculative fantasy, entirely unconnected with reality. In Hegel's works, an individual is an extension of a state, or a community (as Leszek Kołakowski says: man is "a secondary form of the existence of the state" [1978, p. 123]) whereas, in Marx's opinion, it should be the other way round – the state should be the realisation of human features. The basic question raised by the author of *Capital* is return-

ing to man that what originated in him, as it is not the state (or religion) that creates man, but man that creates the state (and religion). This, however, can be done only if a theory is able to draw people to itself; thus a “bottom-up” social movement would have to fill the entire social sphere and become identical with the state. The radical criticism proposed by Marx must then “grasp the root”, the first step of which is the liberation of man from the delusions of faith.

It must be stressed that this specific union of theory or knowledge with practice is characteristic also of Marx’s late works, *Capital* above all. The two goals set by Marx for himself are also present there, and both of them symbolise two different dimensions of his critical thinking. On the one hand he writes in the preface to the first German edition: “it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society.” [Marx 1972b, p. 297] In another place he says that he hopes to “deal a theoretical blow to the bourgeoisie from which they will never recover.” [Marx and Engels 1982, p. 4] It shows clearly that in Marx’s project the cognitive goal is identical with the practical goal which is supposed to be disposing with the bourgeois theory. Scientific cognition is here a key to success, whether meant as the emancipation of humanity in the early stage of Marx’s work or as putting a stop to the bourgeois relations of production in the later one.

How does Marx understand emancipation which should replace criticism on the higher level of social development? In the introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, he introduces a differentiation into “partial” and “radical” (or “general human”) emancipation, recognizing different emancipating possibilities of social criticism depending on a real situation. For example, currently (i.e. in 1844) the full emancipation in Germany was not possible. According to Marx, the situation allowed only for a partial revolution (emancipation) to happen which

[...] a *section of civil society* emancipates itself and attains universal domination; a determinate class undertakes, from its particular situation, a general emancipation of society. ... For a *popular revolution* and the *emancipation of a particular class* of civil society to coincide, for one class to represent the whole of society, another class must concentrate in itself all the evils of society, a particular class must embody and represent a general obstacle and limitation. A particular social sphere must be regarded as the *notorious crime* of the whole society, so that emancipation from this sphere appears as a general emancipation. [Marx 1972a, p. 63]

In partial emancipation, self-liberation of society requires a certain social class to take up the role of representing universal social aspirations and this can

happen thanks to the existence of an “oppressive class”, being the very reverse of aspirations of the whole society. Thus, partial emancipation has necessarily inscribed in it a certain “symbolic moment”, blocking the full transformation of theory into practice, as society after transformation will not constitute an absolute unity. It makes it necessary for the existence of the elements of “negotiation” and “agreement” – a direction which Gramsci will later follow. The proper emancipation, however, must be definitely more “radical” and deeper.

According to Marx, the logic of the development of capitalism assumes gradual proletarianisation of the middle class and peasantry until the moment when the proletariat compared to the bourgeoisie will constitute an incomparably greater social force. This will lead to a proletarian revolution as a result of which the proletariat itself will take over the functions of the state and thus become identical with it. When this occurs, a state as a separate institution will become superfluous as the proletariat will directly express the interests of the whole society and the very essence of humanity. In this way “communistic society” will emerge, in which politics will vanish and all representation and mediation along with it. The necessary condition of general human emancipation is, then, the emerging of the proletariat, a class with

[...] *radical chains*, a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong which is done to it is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*. [ibidem, p. 64]

The proletariat, then, does not belong to „this society,“ is something inherently universal and emerged as a result of the “disintegration of society.” It is not an effect of the natural “arising” of poverty, but something artificially created. “When the proletariat announces the *dissolution of the existing social order*, it only declares the secret of its own existence, for it is the *effective* dissolution of this order.” [ibidem, p. 65]

The historical process of the creation of this subject of emancipation is more closely described by Marx and Engels in *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), which is the cornerstone of the so called scientific socialism. Already at the beginning of *Manifesto* appears a sentence pointing at the Hegelian origin of Marx’s thinking: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” [Marx 1972c, p. 473] In the dialectic movement of the political progress of humanity, from slavery, through feudalism, to capitalism, two estates or social

spheres always appear whose interests are mutually exclusive because of the exploitative relationship that exists between them. In every epoch this conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed is the main element organizing social life and preceding all other divisions in society.

What is striking in this text is, above others, an important and positive („revolutionary”) role that Marx and Engels ascribe to the bourgeoisie on the way to the emancipation of the proletariat. Thanks to the rapid development of industry and trade and the brutal replacement of interpersonal relationships that were still characteristic of feudalism with the pure play of interests, the bourgeoisie brought on a huge social transformation and contributed to the emergence of modern national states, into which gradually, for the sake of its cosmopolitanism, it introduced capitalist relations. “In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.” [ibidem, p. 475] However, it simultaneously created something which will bring about its annihilation: “the modern working class – the proletarians.”

Laborers in a capitalist state are treated as everything else – as an article of commerce. Their life is reduced to “the reproduction of labor power” and their work in the conditions of oppression leads to dehumanization and alienation. This, together with the “inner contradictions of capitalism” (such as the problem of overproduction), must consequently gradually lead the proletariat to mass rebellion against the bourgeoisie. The process is complemented by the “proletarianisation” of other classes, e.g. peasantry, small traders or craftsmen, who pushed by the bourgeoisie to the margin of society must join the general movement against exploitation, led by the proletariat.

There comes a moment when „proletarians have . . . nothing to lose but their chains.” The last step is a transformation of a social movement into a political movement which will be able to bring about a real change. The proletariat must become a class conscious of its interests, and the class must become “a party.” The party will be led by “communists” who better understand the situation of laborers and can give sense to the struggles for taking over the power from the bourgeoisie.

Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organize itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes



generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class. [ibidem, pp. 490-491]

The effect of gaining supremacy by proletariat is the end of the era of private property and thus there are no conditions for exploitation. The new society, "communist society" is classless, democratic and free of the relations of domination. Only in such a society man, thanks to the wide possibilities of choice, would be able to realize fully his or her desires and cultivate his or her humanity. The proletariat becomes a state and criticism changes into emancipation, completing the transformation of theory into practice. A critical moment then is in Marx's thought something temporary, momentary, something which will finally be made superfluous. Obviously social criticism is not a goal in itself for him, but one of the stages of realizing the overruling goal of emancipation.

Binding criticism to emancipation, however, produced a number of problems in Marx's project that he was not able to solve. First, there is the problem of the "subject of emancipation." In *Manifesto* it remains uncertain who is really supposed to conduct emancipation – the proletariat itself, communists or the party. And maybe it is still differently: there is a historical law of the development of societies, and contradictions of subsequent systems based on exploitation necessarily and spontaneously lead to the fall of capitalism and a proletarian revolution. So what is this specific "midwifery" undertaken by communists or the party for? Following Marx's death, many theoreticians of Marxism endeavored to answer this question by shifting accents in the mosaic created by Marx. This is the problem that appears in the Marxian literature under the name of "hegemony."

### III.

Generally speaking, hegemony means interference into „the iron necessity“ conditioned in Marx's thought by the relations of production, a factor which cannot be reduced to purely economic relations. Hegemonic thinking in Marxism was started by Gramsci, but its beginnings go back as far as the first attempts at reforming Marxism, the goal of which was to "adapt" theory to practice, with which it was increasingly more discordant.

The first sign of the crisis of Marxism showed at the turn of the twentieth century when visible economic growth in Europe proved that capitalism is not only far from the risk of an imminent fall but also can reform itself in such a way as to avoid the „pauperization“ and „polarization“ of the society predicted by Marx, which were supposed to result in revolution and a change of system. It became clear that evoking the change requires an external interference, a "contingent" factor, which is not conditioned by the structural frame of capitalism and

escapes the logic of history. According to Kautsky, a representative of the orthodox version of Marxism, the power integrating anti-capitalist struggles should be the intellectuals, carriers of „the consciousness of necessity.“ For Bernstein, the founder of revisionism, this factor should be social-democratic party, and for Sorel the “myth of general strike.” According to Lenin, hegemonic struggle was connected to wide inter-class alliance, gathering under the banner of working class peasantry, farming workers and soldiers, i.e. groups for whom participating in the process of production was not of primary importance. The uniting factor was something else: struggle against a common enemy, the tsarist regime. This subject is perfectly elucidated by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and socialist strategy*. [1985]

The original structure of Marxian criticism was in this way increasingly blurred and the search for the possibility of leading to a change unconditioned by the production relations naturally drew theoreticians’ attention to the question of the role and functioning in society of the worldview, social, cultural, legal, or – speaking strictly – ideological factors. It allowed for the renaissance of the question of social criticism in Marxism but in a slightly different form – the criticism of ideology.

Commentators point to at least several different understandings of ideology occurring in Marx’s works. [Barrett 1991, chapter 1] In my opinion, it is possible to show three basic definitions of the term, one of which contains the critical component which is interesting for us. The first understanding of “ideology” refers to the notion of “false consciousness,” created by Engels but often ascribed to Marx, who in fact never used the term. It is the approach to ideology in which the critical aspect of Marx’s thought shows the most but is also the most controversial. Its best known wording can be found in *The German ideology*:

Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. [Marx and Engels 1972b, p. 154]

This way of elucidating the term of ideology in Marx is also called „epistemological” [Lovell 1980, pp. 51-52] or „critical” [Barrett 1991, chapter 2]. It is “epistemological” in the sense that deformed or manipulated ideological knowledge

serving class interests is contrasted with knowledge which is “true,” i.e. science, presenting the real state of things and offering the opportunity of liberation (knowledge showing a non-deformed picture as opposed to that from “*camera obscura*”). The “critical” aspect of this knowledge is obvious: only critical, i.e. not subservient to the existing social order, approach to the state of current social awareness can reveal its deformities and reach the material basis and real interests of a given class. Ideology is therefore a specific reversal of real economic and social situation of working class, which serves the dominant class.

Two other understandings of ideology, in which the critical dimension is less important, are a „neutral” approach to ideology as „class awareness” and the Gramscian concept of ideology as a struggle for hegemony. Interpretations of ideology as “class awareness” consist in reading Marx in the spirit of his followers, especially Lenin and Lukács, who consider it simply a number of convictions and opinions produced for a given social class by professional ideologists and having nothing in common with delusion and mystification (e.g. McCarney [1980]). In this meaning, all knowledge is ideological, in Lenin’s words “either bourgeois or socialist” and there are no exceptions to this rule while interpretations of the fragments concerning *camera obscura* are the result of translation mistakes and misunderstanding of Marx’s intentions, who always had in mind a concrete ideology, not ideology in general.

Similarly, the third understanding of the term ideology underlines its „neutral” character and refers to Gramsci’s idea of hegemony. In this approach, ideology is devoid of necessarily class nature. In the struggle for hegemony different political forces have to “agree” about the common formulation of their goals and interests, which makes ideology a field for negotiation and political actions, not necessarily resulting from economic conditions. Ideology then takes on a clearly symbolic character which guarantees a class struggling for hegemony while possibly gathering the most numerous forces under its banner. Marx clearly marks this dimension of ideology in *The German ideology* when he writes about the need to present one’s own ideas in the most possibly abstract and attractive form so that everybody thinks that it reflects his or her own interests.

What is then the Marxian understanding of ideology in the spirit of criticism about? In the famous fragment of *The German ideology*, Marx and Engels make the term of ideology more precise, describing the process of its formation in a more detailed way:

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. ... We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideologi-

cal reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. ... Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. [Marx and Engels 1972b, pp. 154-155]

Metaphysics, religion and morality – emblematic symptoms of ideology – were not created as a result of a free activity of human „spirit“ but are a result of a „real life-process.“ Consequently, they reflect the existing economic and social system, based on exploitation and interested in sustaining the *status quo*. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” [ibidem, p. 172] – the „regulation“ and „distribution“ of ideas in a given time belongs to the ruling class. Each ruling class, Marx says, must make certain that it presents their ideas as general, abstract and attractive for everyone, at least at the moment when it tries to gain power (it was so, e.g. in the case of bourgeoisie when they were taking over the power from the aristocrats). A revolutionary class must present itself as the class representing the whole society until the moment when it becomes the ruling class – then it ceases to speak of class interests and starts to get blurred in general slogans and abstracts, deforming gradually social consciousness so as to obscure the real interests which undermine its role as the ruling class. A class undertaking the critique of the ruling class must then call upon a broader social basis than its predecessor and consequently its struggle must be more radical and go further than the struggle of all its predecessors. It is naturally necessary to remember that the real struggle for ideology does not take place on the level of confrontation of true and false ideas about reality. The real struggle takes place where the shape of material conditions of social life is decided. As Terry Eagleton rightly puts it:

Paradoxically, then, ideas are practically related to real life; but that relation takes the mystifying form of non-relation, in the shape of the idealist fantasy that consciousness is grandly independent of all material determinants. To put the point another way: there is an apparent non-correspondence between ideas and reality in class society, but this non-correspondence is structural to that form of life, and fulfils an important function within it. [Eagleton 1994, p. 6]

Therefore a certain ambiguity concerning understanding ideology as false consciousness appears in *The German ideology*. This ambiguity refers to the role ascribed to ideology in the historical process. On the one hand, ideology is something decidedly negative – a mystification steered from above whose goal is to

hide real interests of the power. Such ideology should be dispensed with as quickly as possible. On the other hand, Marx seems to notice a certain “positive” role of ideology. Ideology is an indispensable element of political struggle, independently of the question of who uses it. Also the proletariat must create some ideology for its use if it is to become the *only* political force in society. Will proletarian ideology also be false consciousness? Marx does not clearly answer the question whether the disappearance of exploitation is equal to the disappearance of ideology. One could guess that the completion of revolutionary work would in a sense mean the transformation of ideology into a transparent model of social relations, at the construction of which nobody manipulates anybody. Would that mean the end of ideology?

#### IV.

The term of ideology had a long and rich history in Marxism so it is worth stopping for a moment for the problems it generates. Richard Bernstein [1995] claims that in discussions concerning the understanding of “ideology” three trends are dominant: “liberal”, “epiphenomenal” and “critical.”<sup>2</sup> According to Bernstein, the liberal understanding treats ideology as “any set of moral, social, or political beliefs and attitudes that informs and shapes an individual’s (or a class’s) interpretation of the world and his behavior.” [Bernstein 1995, p. 107] Bernstein accuses this approach of relativism and nihilism, as in its frame it is assumed that all systems of convictions have the same “unjustifiable” epistemological status. In this approach, if we criticize a theory, we adopt another ideological stance which is not subjected to questioning; consequently the criticism of ideology loses its meaning. The problem is however, he claims, that such an interpretation ignores the fact that ideologies are based on convictions which “purport to be true or valid.” [ibidem, p. 108]

Bernstein also rejects the „epiphenomenal” approach, which treats ideology as a „mechanical response” to processes occurring on a material level. This approach ignores above all the fact that the content of ideology is shaped during various social-historical processes, which could not be reduced to the simple relation of reflection, and also the fact that ideology has its vital role in shaping the understanding of the world by individuals. The most important problem with the “epiphenomenal” approach is, however, that this understanding of ideology completely undermines the possibility of criticism.

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<sup>2</sup> My own terms.

Bernstein rightly observes that the proper understanding of ideology can be found in Marx himself, in whose opinion ideology should be “deciphered” and “critically understood”. That means that ideology both *reflects* and *deforms* historical material life conditions and the critique of ideology consists in *understanding* the functioning of this process. The goal of such critique will be to reveal material and psychological factors which contribute to sustaining ideology and separating convictions and interpretations lying at its base to show their falsehood. Bernstein sums up this question perfectly:

I do not think that there are any fixed criteria by which we can, once and for all, distinguish “false consciousness” from “true consciousness.” The *achievement* of “true consciousness” is a regulative ideal of the critique of ideology, and the relation between “false consciousness” and “true consciousness” is asymmetrical. This does not mean that we must remain intellectually agnostic, that we are never in a position to evaluate and judge the ways in which an ideology is systematically distortive and reflects reified powers of domination. On the contrary, since every ideology is based on beliefs and interpretations that make the claim to validity, we can examine these claims to validity and show their falsity. We can show the falsity of an ideology without claiming that we have achieved a final, absolute, “true” understanding of social and political reality. [ibidem, p. 109]

Problems of the critique of ideology pointed out by Bernstein take on the most sophisticated form in Louis Althusser’s works. The tension between “true” and “false consciousness” appears in Althusser as a conflict between science and ideology. In my opinion, Althusser maintains two basic elements of Marxian understanding of ideology from the period of *The German ideology*. First, ideology is an indispensable element of political reality which must exist independently of whether communistic ideals will be realized. As Eagleton points out, with Althusser in postrevolutionary societies, ideology will still have an important role of “adapting men and women to the exigencies of social life.” [Eagleton 1994, p. 220] Also, according to Althusser, assuming that after the victory of revolution, the social world will constitute a transparent and obvious picture for human consciousness is a mere humanistic delusion – we will never be able in everyday life to get through the inevitable “opaqueness” and “complexity” of social processes.

Secondly, although ideology is something inevitable, there is however a position from which one can see and confront the falsity of ideology. For Marx, this position is the proletariat, privileged because of its site in the capitalist system – the site of the “final victim” – or else, more precisely speaking, remaining in a position which is outside the capitalist framework. If the role of the laborers’ allies in

the process of emancipation is supposed to be revealing the falsity of ideology, it should be assumed that there is a space from which ideology can be seen in its real form. According to Althusser, this space is science.

In the classical text on ideology *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser presents ideology as a general instrument of forming historical subjects towards fulfilling a certain task in society. This is an element of a crucial, according to Althusser, problem connected with the “reproduction of the means of production” which is the condition of the survival of a social formation.

According to Althusser, in *The German ideology*, Marx presents ideology as “pure dream,” “delusion,” “something that does not exist.” Therefore it can be said that “ideology has no history” which means that “the peculiarity of ideology is that it is endowed with a structure and a functioning such as to make it a non-historical reality, i.e. an *omni-historical* reality, in the sense in which that structure and functioning are immutable, present in the same for throughout what we can call history.” [Althusser 1994, p. 122] In this context, Althusser says, it becomes justified to juxtapose ideology with the Freudian unconscious.

Ideology then presents an imaginary attitude of individuals towards their living conditions. That assumes that ideology is not a simple reflection of the world (a description of reality) but a certain “wishful” idea of people about their relation to the world. It does not mean that individuals present to themselves an imaginary vision of reality as a result of the manipulation of a “clique” or their own alienation. Individuals present to themselves their imaginary *relation* to actual existing living conditions. Althusser stresses that ideology is not simply some thoughts in our heads, something spiritual or ideal, but is something material existing only and solely in the “actions” of subjects, i.e. thanks to *practice*.

The most important function of ideology, according to Althusser, is constituting the subjects: „ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects.” [ibidem, p. 132] It is clearly visible here that Marxian ideas are filtered through some kind of a “structuralist prism” which clears them of traces of Marx’s “younger” period under the slogans of reducing to ashes “the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man.” [Althusser 2005, p. 229] Essentially, “interpellation” or hailing the subject to submit to ideology, consists in the subject’s voluntary acceptance of his or her own subordination. From the moment of interpellation an individual becomes a subject or in fact has always been a subject because it is impossible to live outside ideology (Althusser assumes that outside ideology there is only science, so, in a sense, a process without a subject). Since that moment individuals “march on their own” and thus treat what ideology forces on them as their own free choice.

Despite Althusser's negative attitude to Marx's early works, where the critical dimension of Marx's thought plays the leading role, as I already mentioned, in his concept can also be found some elements of the approach to ideology which I earlier called "critical" or "epistemological." Although even communistic society cannot dispense with ideology and it constitutes "an organic part of every social totality," [ibidem, p. 232] according to Althusser one should decisively distinguish ideology from science. It means that Althusser is convinced of a possibility of breaking through the mistaken ideas about the world and revealing the functioning of the planned interpellation. This task should consist in changing ideology in to "an instrument of deliberate action on history." [ibidem] "Deliberate," as in everyday life ideology constituting a permanent element of human existence imposes itself on subjects in a way which "steers clear of" their conscious cognition and locates in their unconscious, "becoming their world". Science, on the other hand, is always "aware of its assumptions" and its only interest - in opposition to ideology realizing the needs connected with a given social class - is a cognitive interest.

It is worth noticing that Althusser in a way falls into the trap of his own radicalism, stressing the fundamental difference between science and ideology. Marx seems to have been more subtle here, leaving some questions unspoken and being aware of the contradictions they generate. Althusser, insisting on a sharp demarcation between ideology and science, cannot save himself from making contradictory statements. On the one hand, he claims that ideology is omnipresent and the world without it is impossible, on the other hand he assumes that there is a scientist who is not "interpellated" like other subjects. A scientist must therefore exist "outside ideology" to be able to perceive the totality of social relations, but how this is possible, Althusser does not say.

We arrive here at the classical dilemma of criticism - must one be free of what is the object of criticism to criticize something? The very logic of criticism assumes the existence of a "normal" situation to which the critique relates pointing out the "abnormality" of the criticized situation. This normal situation has usually regulative character and should set a goal which corrective actions should strive to reach (the normal situation is then a future postulated state). That is why a critic must inherently be „split" - he or she is a part of an abnormal situation, being at the same time aware of its "abnormality." This duality is, however, at the same time a strength and a weakness of criticism. A question immediately appears, which could be detected in the analyses of critique and ideology in Marx and Althusser: how one can live in the world of mistaken convictions and at the same time be aware that they are mistaken? As I observed earlier, there are two



possible answers (two ways of justifying criticism): either we think that there are some universal and objective standards set by human rationality, which cannot be blurred even by the most nagging ideology, or we relate to a certain social context and time-sanctioned practice which shows us the norms of behavior. In Althusser, on the one hand we have a situation of a Platonic critic who is aware that there must be some model-world (science), undeformed by current class interests, and on the other hand he rightly observes that such a world does not exist as even the ideal situation of the world without oppression must assume the production of everyday knowledge (i.e. ideology) facilitating everyday functioning for people. In this case, the source of criticism must be, however, some everyday, contextual knowledge, which in a Socratic manner will take its strength more from a negative evaluation of the existing relations than from a reference to objective or universal norms.

The analysis of the notion of critique both in Marx and in Althusser shows that a consistent social criticism must be based both on the Socratic and Platonic models; therefore a contradiction is inscribed in the very logic of social criticism. On the one hand, it is hard to rely entirely on a normative ideal proposed by a social theoretician (e.g. an ideal communicative situation or a model of justice) which is grounded in human rationality itself, taking into account the deep criticism of rationality and universality conducted by philosophers of the twentieth century. On the other hand, it is hard to resist doubts whether basing criticism on a local practice or tradition, or, in another approach, a purely negative critique of our practices based on awakening us to self-reflection, could be sufficient for us.

A theoretic strength of the Platonic model is establishing the position and place from which we speak – a location free from the particularity and contextuality of the world subjected to criticism. On the other hand, an important advantage of the Socratic approach is caution towards holistic and universal projects of reforming humanity which we experienced so often in the previous century. It is hard to resist the impression that social criticism needs both those dimensions and the logic of criticism consists in just this primary game between them.

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