

DISCUSSION

Ranci re and Ideology

The article by Jacques Ranci re, 'On the Theory of Ideology' (*Radical Philosophy* 7) is one of the most powerful critiques of Althusser's work so far to have been produced from the left. Given the wide reception that Althusser's work is now receiving in Britain it is vital that the issues which Ranci re raises are thoroughly discussed. I offer the following in no sense as a clearly worked-out critique of Ranci re, but as a set of notes which at least indicate potential discussion points.

I

Ranci re argues that for Althusser there are two 'levels' of ideological 'disguise' in class societies: (a) resulting from the necessary opacity of the social formation and its agents - ideology being conceived as regulating the relation of individuals to their tasks (this level of disguise is common to all social formations), and (b) ideological distortion arising from the requirements of class domination. For Althusser (b) may overdetermine (a). Ranci re attacks these positions of Althusser by a series of arguments, together with attempts to represent them as effects of the articulation of non-Marxist problematics in Althusser's work with the Marxist problematic, and, in turn, as effects of Althusser's own class-position.

One of Ranci re's arguments rests on a claim that Althusser is generalising Marx's 2-level analysis of production (labour-process/production-process) to apply to the ideological level also. The absurdity of this is 'demonstrated' by supposing the generalisation extended to demonstrate the universal/necessary function of the political level and hence the necessity of the state. Clearly orthodox Marxism has always theorised the state as an effect of class struggle and predicted its demise with the cessation of classes and class struggle. This argument has 2 weaknesses - (i) the identity 'political level'/'state', which it presupposes is unargued-for (absence of political relations e.g., in 'primitive' societies without a state?); (ii) but even if it were the case that the 2-level analysis of the political level were absurd, it would not follow that such an analysis of the ideological level would be.

Another objection which Ranci re puts forward has to do with Althusser's supposed derivation of his general theory of ideology from a theory of the 'social totality in general'. The cohesion of the latter is supposed by Althusser to be ensured by the function of ideology - supplying the system of representations which allow the agents of the social totality to accomplish the tasks determined by this structure'. Ranci re's claim is that such a 'theory of the social totality in general' is no part of Marxism, and in Althusser represents an importation of the problematic of classical sociology (Comte, Durkheim). Now, there may be something in this criticism, but Ranci re doesn't fully demonstrate his point - (i) You don't need a 'theory of the social totality in general' (irrespective of whether Althusser tries to develop one) in order to argue that there is an ideological level in all modes of production and that this level has certain universal characteristics. Such a conception of the ideological level would be extremely abstract and contain few 'determinations', but, in the words of the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, could still be a 'rational abstraction' (Marx certainly thought that a concept of 'production in general' had a place in Marxist theory, and

many of the concepts of the 1859 *Preface* are clearly intended to be trans-historical in this sense. Indeed it is a condition of Marxism's being a theory of history (as distinct from a theory of a particular mode of production) that some of its concepts do have this generality). (ii) Ranci re seems to imply that simply to talk of 'social cohesion' is to enter the terrain of the bourgeois sociologists. This, I think, is incorrect. That all social formations have some type of unity - produced by the various mechanisms for the reproduction of the social relations which constitute them - is a Marxist thesis; but at least in the case of class societies this unity is 'contradictory unity'. It is here that Althusser's error lies. In class societies it is not 'ideology as such' but the dominant ideology (= the ideology of the ruling class) which provides agents with representations which allow them to perform the 'tasks allocated to them by the structures'. Althusser identifies 'ideology' with 'dominant ideology' and so (Ranci re is quite correct in his identification of the political effects of this) denies the capacity of the dominated class(es) to produce its (their) own ideology and so denies it (them) the right to independent class initiatives. But Ranci re is too modest here - he is attacking the whole orthodox tradition of reading Lenin on this, based on the reading of *What is to be Done?* (a tradition which is uncritical of that text itself, and 'forgets' that Lenin's thought on the question of 'spontaneity' was not somehow ossified in 1903).

(iii) On the question of the persistence of ideology under communism, it certainly seems to me that Althusser is correct in his choice of target - the ideologies of 'de-alienation' and 'transparency' - and also that Ranci re produces no more than a gesture by way of countering these positions: the analogy with the 'withering away of the state'. But the trouble with this is that certain functions of the state - central coordination/supervision/administration - are held by orthodox Marxists to be retained under communism. The state 'witheres away' strictly in the sense that the aspect of its functioning as a 'machine of class domination' can no longer, by definition, be performed in a classless society. Here, I think, we can return to Ranci re's point about the 2-level analysis of ideology in Althusser. From what I just said about the functions of the state, a 2-level analysis of the state could be derived - (i) universal/general function - coordination/administration etc. (ii) in class societies, overdetermined by function of class domination.

The way out of this is precisely through the point made by Ranci re about the distinction between the technical and the social division of labour. These are aspects of one and the same division of labour. Similarly, in so far as the state in class society administers, coordinates, supervises production it is simultaneously and *ipso facto* operating as a means of class domination. Similarly with the dominant ideology: as it - through its variant forms - provides 'agents with representations necessary... etc, it *ipso facto* serves class rule by distorting/denying class relations. On this basis it can be argued that under communism 'systems of representations' will still relate agents to their 'real conditions of existence' though it is a tendentious question whether or not such representations are correctly described as 'ideology'. As to the cognitive aspect of these 'presentations', they clearly would not constitute scientific knowledge (though they might incorporate elements of such), neither would they be reflections of a 'transparent' social reality. Equally, however, they would not suffer

from the various forms of distortion/concealment present in dominant ideologies of class societies. In this respect, Rancière is quite correct in rejecting his own earlier analysis of fetishism: the ideological forms analysed by Marx here 'arise from' market relations and 'conceal' specifically capitalist production relation.

II

The attempt to show the adverse political effects of the science/ideology couple in the article 'Problèmes Etudiants'. The argument here is that the science/ideology couple (science as universally revolutionary; ideology = *ruling ideology*) combines with the revisionist treatment of the technical/social division of labour distinction to yield the line of class-division in education as between transmission of knowledge (science) and transmission of ideology, and not to locate it in the teacher/taught relation itself, this latter relation being a *technical* division of Labour in the case of the transmission of scientific knowledge. Thus it's the 'spontaneous discourse of meta-physics' (Althusser's science/ideology distinction) which enables Althusser to 'recognise his own class position' (defence of 'academic authority') in that expressed by revisionism (the class position of the labour aristocracy and 'the cadres'). (i) Rancière's argument concerning the revisionist treatment of the technical/social division of labour distinction is, I think, entirely correct: i.e. these are two 'aspects' of one and the same division of labour. (ii) On the science/ideology distinction the situation is far more complex. Certainly Rancière is correct to assert the existence of the class-struggle in ideology and the capacity of dominated class(es) to produce their own ideologies. He is also correct to argue against Althusser that the ideology of a class is not 'simply ... expressed in such or such a content of knowledge' - but is to be found 'in the division between disciplines, the examination system, the organisation of departments - everything which embodies the bourgeois hierarchy of knowledge.' (Althusser himself recognises this later on, in 'Ideology and the State Apparatuses').

But Rancière is incorrect in reducing science to the status of one element within a system of ideological dominance: 'Knowledge is a system in which the 'contents' cannot be conceived outside their forms of appropriation (acquisition, transmission, control, utilisation). The system is that of the ideological domination of a class'. The political implication which Rancière draws from this reduction is: 'The task of revolutionaries is not to confront them [i.e. disciplines which spread bourgeois ideology] with the requirements of scientificity, nor to appeal from these pseudo-sciences to the ideal scientificity of mathematics or physics. It is to oppose bourgeois ideologies with the proletarian ideology of Marxism-Leninism' [my parenthesis].

This reduction of Marxism-Leninism to an ideology in opposition to 'bourgeois ideology', together with the refusal to apply epistemological criteria to the 'knowledge' of the bourgeoisie is a concession to relativism and therefore a-rationalism. There is no need to insist on the appeal to maths or physics, but Marxism-Leninism has always proclaimed its cognitive superiority over bourgeois forms of social knowledge. In my view this claim is well founded and its truth is politically indispensable for the success of the workers' movement (cf Lenin's 'Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary movement').

It is absolutely necessary that revolutionaries do confront bourgeois ideology with 'criteria of scientificity' both as an instrument of general ideological struggle inside and outside the educational system and in theoretical debate *within* the revolutionary movement (witness the current popu-

larity of left-glosses of interpretive sociology among sections of the left). This *doesn't* necessarily imply 'opposing a bourgeois academic discourse with a Marxist academic discourse'. Rancière is, I'm arguing, correct to speak of proletarian ideology, and to claim that the ideology of a class is not essentially 'contained' in, or 'transmitted by' a set of theoretical 'contents'. It follows that ideological struggle cannot be *limited* to the question of 'contents' or 'epistemological status' but it *doesn't* follow that this will not be a necessary aspect of ideological struggle. This will also include, of course, challenges to established disciplinary divisions, the authority relations of the school or college, the assessment system, teaching methods etc. The struggle for a recognised B.A. (Hons.) degree in Marxism-Leninism is absurd, but a struggle for more 'progressive' and 'enlightened' ways of teaching bourgeois 'contents' is positively politically dangerous, precisely because its absurdity is not so patent as that of a B.A. in Leninism.

Rancière even seems to go back on his own relativist and reductionist treatment of 'science' later in his essay: 'But if science itself at the level of its proofs cannot be bourgeois or proletarian ...' What can this mean other than that 'contents' can be 'conceived outside their forms of appropriation'?

That such a separation can be achieved is a presupposition of any adequate history of the sciences - consider, for instance, the different ideological currents and social relationships with which Darwin's theory of evolution has been articulated: the classical 'laissez-faire' liberalism of late Victorian England, the petit-bourgeois radicalism of sections of the German intelligentsia (Haeckel), the reformist socialism of Wallace in England and the Leninism of Lenin himself [*What the Friends of the People are...*].

On the question of proletarian ideology I could not improve upon Rancière's own remarks towards the end of the 1973 *Foreword*, but what he says about the effects of revisionism in that passage are not grounds for denying the role of the *scientific theory* of Marxism-Leninism. Proletarian ideology is not equivalent to Marxism-Leninism. Marxism-Leninism is a scientific theory articulated within proletarian ideology (concepts, attitudes, relationships, partial conquests, etc.).

It's also the case that various elements within proletarian ideology form raw-materials in the production of scientific knowledge, but by no means all of the elements in the production of Marxism have been drawn from this source (cf. Lenin's *3 Sources and 3 Component Parts of Marxism*).

Finally, on the question of the 'revolutionary' character of all science. There is *something* in this. All new sciences are founded on the basis of a rupture with previous ideologies. In so far as this rupture is with elements of a ruling ideology, then the foundation of a new science always represents a *political* threat to a ruling class. Its response may be to incorporate elements of the new science with articulation of its own ideology, or suppress it (or both). All major theoretical innovations in the sciences have met with one or other of these responses on the part of existing ruling classes. Equally, new sciences have tended to become articulated with, or form the sources of, revolutionary ideologies.

There are other things in Rancière's paper that ought to be taken up (e.g. the *assumption* of the 'restoration of capitalism' thesis in the discussion of humanism, and the implication that the 'labour aristocracy and cadres' constitute a class!) but perhaps some other time....

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