Chapter Three

The Concept of Ideology from the Second International to ‘Marxism-Leninism’

3.1. The repression of a critical concept of ideology

It was remarkable that both the ‘official Marxism’ of the Second International and the ‘Marxism-Leninism’ of the Third International carried out a ‘neutralisation’ of the concept of ideology that all but eliminated Marx and Engels’s ideology-critique in its different varieties – be it as a critique of ‘inverted consciousness’ based on the division of mental and manual labour, a critique of fetishism, or a critique of ‘ideological powers’ linked to the state. This was due, at least in part, to an increased orientation towards state-power, which manifested itself historically either in a reformist paradigm that envisaged a piecemeal transition to socialism based on a combination of electoral politics and trade-unionism, or in a Leninist paradigm as a strategy of the revolutionary conquest of the state, and later, after the failure of a ‘permanent revolution’ (Trotsky) on an international scale, as the project of building ‘socialism in one country’.

It is obvious that the Stalinist combination of authoritarian state-rule and party-dogmatism in the name of a ‘correct’ class-standpoint was incompatible with Marx’s fundamental critique of the state and its authorised ideologues. It rather marked a fundamental turnabout comparable with the historical transition from the oppositional movements of early Christianity to the hierarchical state-church during and after the
Roman Emperor Constantine. But there was a broader subterranean shift that was by no means restricted to Stalinism, but rather underpinned political positions that were far apart from each other. It can be seen already in the fact that the 1891 Erfurt Programme of the (still predominantly 'Marxist') German Social Democratic Party no longer mentioned the Marxian perspective of the ‘withering away of the state.’

The paradigm-shift from a critical to a ‘neutral’ notion of ideology was facilitated by the fact that The German Ideology, published first in 1926 in an abridged form and then in its entirety only in 1932, was unknown to the first generation of Marxists. Only a few theorists took account of the fact that, for Marx and Engels, the Communist Manifesto’s goal of ‘an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ implied a society not only without antagonistic classes but also without submission to ‘superior’ ideological powers connected to state-domination. Apart from Lukács, whose contribution will be discussed in Section 4.1., it was Antonio Labriola in particular who, in 1896, described what he called ‘critical communism’ as being critical of any ‘ideology’, including a communist one. According to Labriola, Marxist theory is opposed to ‘ideologies of any sort’ [di fronte alle ideologie di ogni maniera]. It is ‘the clear and definite negation of all ideology’ [è la negazione recisa e definitiva di ogni ideologia]. I will discuss some traces of Labriola’s fundamental ideology-critique in the chapter on Gramsci, who also adopted the concept ‘philosophy of praxis’ from Labriola (see Section 5.2.). Labriola was also one of the few Marxist theorists who perspicuously anticipated the danger that ‘our doctrine’ would become again a ‘new inverted ideology’, in particular when people ‘unfamiliar with the difficulties of historic research’ transformed it into ‘a new philosophy of systematic history’, ‘history conceived as schemes or tendencies or designs’.

However, these usages of a critical concept of ideology were only rare exceptions. Franz Mehring still spoke critically of the ‘Hegelian ideology’, but at the founding conference of the Second International in 1889, the young Russian delegate Georgi Plekhanov invoked ‘our revolutionary ideologues’. Kautsky too employed a ‘neutral’ concept, when he used ‘intellectual’ [geistig] and