CHAPTER 5

Ideologies and Conceptions of the World

1 From Marx to Gramsci

Taking his lead from an article in Marzocco, Gramsci himself turned to ‘the origin of the concept of “ideology”’,¹ whose genesis can be traced back to sensationalism. In Gramsci’s text, the alternating use of the capitalised or lower-case versions of ‘ideology’ serves to mark a distinction between the ideologues’ conception (‘Ideology’ as the ‘science of ideas’) from the subsequent use of the term (‘ideology’ as a ‘system of ideas’). Gramsci demonstrated the vulgar-materialist imprint that distinguished the capital I ‘Ideology’ of the philosophical movement of a sensationalist stamp – not for nothing compared with Bukharin² – while emphasising its separateness from ‘historical materialism’. For Marx, Gramsci contended, the origin of ideas was not to be sought in sensation – in ‘physiology’. And it was precisely this root, subjected to critique and rejected, that led to the implicit ‘value judgment’ (a ‘negative value judgment’, the text clarifies)³ implied by this term in the works of the ‘founders of the philosophy of praxis’.

In reality, matters were more complicated than Gramsci here portrays them. Looking at the genesis of this concept, he did not note its negative branding at the hands of Napoleon I, who likewise imputed it strongly political connotations (ideologies as ideas with the pretense of directing politics), when he ‘dismissively defined Destutt de Tracy and Volney as ideologues who had sought to oppose his imperial ambitions’, letting it be understood that as intellectuals they substituted ‘abstract considerations for real politics’.⁴

In the second place, and above all, we do not know whether Gramsci was acquainted with the German Ideology. The book was written by Marx and Engels in 1845–6 but only published in 1932, with its first chapter ‘Feuerbach’

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² On the theory of ideology in Bukharin’s Popular Manual of historical materialism, see Prestipino 2000, p. 36, and Tuccari 2001, pp. 146–7. For Bukharin, ideology is a system of ideas, sentiments and behavioural norms, whose importance he reaffirmed in his polemics against deterministic conceptions.
⁴ Boudon 1991, p. 36.
having been ‘published for the first time in Russian in 1924 and subsequently (1926) in German’. Could Gramsci have read it, or a review of it? According to Francesca Izzo, he could have read some pages from it in an ‘anthology of Marx and Engels on historical materialism’ that had come out in Russia, which he mentions in a letter to Zino Zini sent from Vienna on 10 January 1924. Yet there remains the fact that there is no trace of this in his works. That is, he did not know or did not use a text that we today habitually consider the birthplace of Marx’s negatively-connoted concept of ideology. It is in this text by Marx and Engels, indeed, that we read: ‘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.’

As we can see, here, the coupure between Marx and the ideologues was not as total as it seemed to Gramsci. Certainly, Marx and Engels – reprising the term inasmuch as they, too, wanted to investigate the genesis of ideas – did shift research onto the historical-social plane. But their language still leaves room for a way of reasoning modelled on the physiological framework (with the retina metaphor) considered unacceptable by Gramsci. If Gramsci was perhaps not acquainted with the German Ideology, he did know well – and utilised – Marx’s 1859 ‘Preface’, where we read:

The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness.

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5 Luporini 1967, p. xc.
7 mecw, Vol. 5, p. 36.
8 Eagleton 1991 has argued that a different conception of ideology is implicitly present in the German Ideology: if ‘The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’, then ideology is a ‘weapon’ consciously used in service of a particular class.
9 mecw, Vol. 29, p. 263.