

Marx: idealism vs. materialism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Karl Marx's infamous statement that, "I am not a Marxist" holds a profound truth deeply connected with his philosophy. It could be understood to mean that he disdained the hundreds of interpretations of his work following their publication. However, the statement resounds with a more important idea "that a person cannot follow a philosophy at all. Or perhaps even that there is no such thing as philosophy, at least not as men normally understand the term. For when philosophy is understood to be independent of the philosopher, or the reader, or any conditions of the material world in which they live, it has fallen into the garbage heap of idealism. Marx insists that, "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life... When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence. (155) When one treats Marxism as an idea separate from their consciousness of the material world, they have lofted it into the cloudy realm of ideology, which contains the very shackles of oppression Marx attempts to fight. Indeed, this is merely the most extreme example, since the philosophy of Marx is entirely materialist. For Marx, every other ideology, philosophy, or religion is inherently idealist both because of their ideological nature and because of what they preach "that there is some truth separate from the material world, and that ideas can be the motor of history. For Marx, though, if one questions how philosophy or religion transforms history or politics, they are asking the question backwards. Marx illustrates that no ideologies move history but all are created by history, or more specifically, the current state of and relation to the productive forces in society. Marx's attack on ideology isn't only about whether or not specific philosophies/religions are right or wrong

(though that is part of the battle), it is the very approach men take to ideology in the first place that is the problem. The concept that ideologies can transform history neglects the origins from which ideology springs: history. He states that, “The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Ideas are not phantoms that men diligently try to capture through logic or any other means. They are birthed from the material world, including physical surroundings and the relations men have to each other and the productive forces of their society. Marx’s statements contradict an objective (i. e., timeless) reality, or an objective truth towards which ideologies strive. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. (154) This concept, that ideas have no history, is emblematic of Marx’s philosophy: if history is nothing but the succession of productive forces handed down through generations, there is no room for ideology to transform history. This is not to say ideas don’t exist “indeed, it is ideas that change and alter the productive forces from one generation to the next. It is just that every idea is grounded only in the present state of those forces and cannot be found anywhere else. For Marx, then, philosophy is grounded in its ability to describe and reflect society, not drive it anywhere past its own limitations. It can be retorted, however, that even a quick glance at history reveals guiding ideologies that

have real, material effects on the social world. The Crusades weren't a fiction imagined by a bored philosopher. Marx responds, though, that, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i. e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force." (172) The ideas that guide society, then, guide them retroactively "that is, to keep the rulers in power and attempt to slow the historical forces that would heave them from it. The rulers are not in power because they are the paradigm of the universal idea of an epoch, but the ideas of an epoch are universal because of the rulers in power. If an ideology is espoused by rulers, or is a leading ideology at a given point in time (except in a revolutionary time), it is because it is useful for the rulers' own power. So ideologies that are 'transforming' history really aren't: material forces of production are transforming society and rulers form ideas to embrace their own place within that structure. "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance." (173) In a revolutionary time period, the guiding ideas are not those of the rulers. They are ideas of a different class that wants to take power. However, to believe that they want to take power due to their ideas is again to view history backwards. They create ideas to justify their material needs in taking power, and in doing so, must create broader (and more universal) ideas than the rulers in power. "For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled... to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones." (174)

What we find, then, is that ideas mirror the productive forces of society, and both are controlled by the ruling class. Indeed, the production of ideas is just another niche in the division of labor, and like all other divisions, the profits flow to the top. Marx effectively dismantles idealism and the concept of ideas as the motor of history. After explaining how Hegelians and other idealists view ideas in history (Äç ¶ one must separate the ideas of those ruling for empirical reasons, under empirical conditions and as empirical individuals, from these actual rulers, and thus recognize the rule of ideas or illusions in historyÄç ¶ ?), Marx spends the rest of Äç ¶ The German IdeologyÄç ¶ ? writing a factual history of productive forces. (78) The commentary is implicit Äç ¶ " his factual history is the real basis of ideology. Going back to our original problem, we can see that Marx himself is grounded in the productive forces of his time. His ideology, however, avoids the pitfalls of every other philosophy by viewing history from an entirely non-ideological standpoint. Still, the irony that Marx, who proves that ideas donÄç ¶ ¶t move history, is probably one of the single most cited authors people use and have used to change society is blatant. Marx would respond, however, that the material conditions of society have brought people to change it, and they are merely using his ideology as the justification behind it.