

Attack of the Trolls: Occupy, Ideology and Social Media

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What does the term 'ideology' mean?

It is often taken to signify something like 'worldview', i.e., a set of core beliefs that lead people to interpret the world in a certain manner. Using the term in this way, one could point to various ideological biases that might shape one's perspective: Christian ideology, democratic ideology, free-market ideology, communist ideology, etc.

Instead of employing 'ideology' in this broad sense, I want to consider Karl Marx's narrower use of this term.

Ideology, for Marx, concerns not just any set of biases that might shape one's perspective but rather one deeply entrenched set of inter-connected biases that shapes society's perspective as a whole. While this ideology certainly causes confusion about oneself and one's world, this is not its primary function. It is a deceptive discourse that, by keeping people confused about themselves and about the real circumstances determining and structuring their lives, serves the interests of a ruling class: it is an instrument for exploiting the bulk of society. Using the term ideology in this Marxist sense, one might argue, for instance, that the discourse of trickle-down economics is not merely a confused interpretation of reality but, more importantly, a tool employed by the 1% to keep the majority from effectively challenging their exploited lot in life.

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of ideology in Marx; but I would like to discuss – and complicate – this notion a bit in order to show how it might still be pertinent for us today. Specifically, I want to suggest that acknowledging certain, often overlooked aspects of ideology can help us better respond to some of the obstacles facing the Occupy Movement, one of the most puzzling of which concerns social media.

1. Marx's Conception of Ideology

I may have given the impression that, since ideology is primarily a deception, a false story about reality, escaping it would involve correcting the falsehood, such that we finally get the story straight and begin to make well-informed decisions about the world and our place in it. Unfortunately, matters are not so simple. While ideology certainly concerns a set of false beliefs, it is not reducible to this; and 'escaping ideology' is not just a matter of correcting a bias.

Consider this hypothetical example: a young man committed to addressing social justice issues is convinced that social democracy is the only viable political option. However, upon graduation from university, the only job he can obtain in his field is in a major city in the Southern U.S. Gradually, as he gets to know his co-workers and neighbours, as he begins to grasp, concretely, what most of them believe, what they watch regularly on TV, etc., he begins to realize how vast a gap separates his own convictions from the narrow, unreflective conservatism that dominates his community. He can't resist getting pulled into heated debates with his co-workers and becomes embarrassed that, in defending his views, he often sounds nearly as aggressive and self-certain as they do. He finds himself occasionally watching bits of FOX News in despair, incredulous that, for a huge proportion of the population around him, such nonsense is the lens through which they interpret the world. His feelings of impotence and cynicism increase daily, as he realizes how naïve his earlier hope for real political change was. He retreats, more and more, into his own private world, isolating himself from others.

Another example: a young woman opts to participate in the Occupy Movement. At a certain point, she becomes the primary administrator of her local Occupy Facebook page. She has high hopes that, finally, a substantial part of the North American population is waking up to the ugly economic and political reality shaping the world; she is optimistic that real, grass-roots political transformation is about to take place and that Facebook and other social media will help achieve this. Gradually, however, she becomes distressed as participation dwindles and the tone of online discussion shifts. Her disappointment grows, eventually turning into bitterness and cynicism, as the Occupy Facebook page becomes dominated by 'trolls', i.e., aggressive critics of Occupy who flood online threads with hyperbolic and inflammatory comments. Feeling humiliated by these trolls and betrayed by those who have abandoned the cause, she withdraws from the movement, convinced that change is not possible. In the future, she will refer to this as the 'naïve, idealistic phase' in her life.

While these are examples of individuals who have managed, by and large, to correct the falsehood that most people buy into, this has not helped them escape from ideological forces; indeed, this very 'correction' serves an ideological function that complements the deception. As I've said, the key function of ideology, for Marx, is to sustain the status quo, i.e., to keep in place the economic and social structures enabling a privileged class of people to exploit the majority. The dissemination of false beliefs is certainly one way ideology achieves this, but it is not the only way. Consider the first example again: however much the young man's beliefs may differ from those of his neighbours and colleagues, however clearly he may have assessed the situation, his silent frustration and cynical inaction contribute to maintaining the status quo nearly as much as do their conservative convictions. Indeed, his retreat into isolation and inaction, a direct consequence of his encounter with ideological forces, forms the perfect symbiotic complement to the aggressive neo-conservative affirmations that surround him.

In short, the most important consequence of ideology, for Marx, is its impact not on what we believe, individually, but on what we *do*, collectively. Granted, ideology is a discursive phenomenon, i.e., it concerns what we think, say and write to one another. However, the discourse that situates us does not merely represent the world; it does things, actively: just as the command ‘shut the door!’ doesn’t merely represent the door but helps bring about a change in its status, ideology *acts*. Specifically, it acts aggressively by stifling – paralyzing – any collective gestures that threaten the status quo. In the complex ways individuals, groups and institutions are dynamically interconnected, ideology is always labouring to preserve the overall stasis. This is why, however much we ourselves, as individuals, might disbelieve the content of ideological discourse, we can still find ourselves pressured to behave in complicity with it, as ideological conduits.¹ A perfect example of this is the young man’s response to FOX News and his spats with co-workers:

1. While he accurately dismisses FOX as reactionary nonsense, watching it nevertheless *paralyzes* him, causing him to lose hope that a society embracing such pro-corporate rhetoric is capable of political change.
2. While he vocally challenges his co-workers’ views, he finds himself, in the heat of the moment, sounding more like them, pulled into their way of speaking: slow, thoughtful discussion, precise use of terms and supporting argumentation give way to quick-paced ad hominem attacks, ridicule, and aggressive affirmations of positions, lacking justification. In short, while he doesn’t end up sharing their beliefs, he adopts the habit of treating *beliefs in general* the way they do: instead of trying to defend his stance with reasoned evidence, he just affirms it loudly and repeatedly, Bill O’Reilly style. When discussion collapses into such superficial polemics, no one makes any headway. The status quo is ensured, on all sides.

This should help clarify why, for Marx, ideology is not simply a ‘set of biases’ that we ought to correct. Indeed, it is the complex web of discursive structures and practices that, in a variety of intricate ways, prevent us, as a whole, from acting together in solidarity. Moreover, it is not static: as contexts and circumstances shift historically and vary geographically, ideology adapts to these shifts and variations, both broadly and locally, such that the status quo is preserved. Finally, ideology is nothing like a conspiracy theory, for there is no one at the helm, no one who has planned the deception as a whole, no one who sees the scope of things clearly.

Granted, this seems absurd: how could such an intricate and adaptive set of exploitative mechanisms have arisen if no one envisioned them consciously in advance, planning them out?

¹ It might even be the case that certain pockets of society (e.g., the university community) are encouraged ‘to think critically and challenge ideological deception’ – but only because there are structures in place ensuring that such pockets remain isolated and innocuous. Such pockets may even perform the ideological function of reassuring people that our society’s collective activity is guided by free-thinking critical reflection, when in fact this is hardly the case.

This is an important question to which, unfortunately, I can offer only a sketchy response here. For Marx, consciousness is itself a *social product*, something that we make and are constantly remaking. He argues that, at root, we are not thinking beings; rather we are productive beings who actively shape both the world around us and our very selves. Contrary to our entrenched assumptions, what we typically call our ‘consciousness’ does not precede and shape our productive practices; rather, it is but a reflection of an underlying productive activity that has already been going on. Consciousness and its discursive activity are the product of layered social interactions and co-operative projects that already bind us to others, historically. Moreover, it is a product the primary function of which is to maintain the stability of the social order that we have already produced, collectively; and it is this whether we, as individuals, believe it or not.

Given this, it should be clear that, for Marx, since the real ideological structures that shape society rest not in ‘conscious thought’ but at an underlying practical-social register, the only real transformation – the only *movement* – that could challenge these structures must first arise and take shape at this underlying practical level as well: any attempt to achieve self-conscious awareness first, such that this awareness then shapes our plans and actions, will only ever be a reflection of underlying ideological forces.² One can expect a change in society’s conscious awareness of itself only if there is first a change in our underlying practices.

2. Occupy and Social Media

Occupy seems to have emerged, spontaneously, as just such a movement: it did not commence with a coherent and thought-out plan, laid out by a leader through some political model or set of principles; it was not initiated via a theoretical recipe that was to be followed. Rather, it was out of a social activity already taking place — diverse, frustrated people coming together, uncertain, acting co-operatively in response to concrete circumstances — that the movement began to take determinate shape. Only after it was already doing something did Occupy begin trying to comprehend, discursively, what it itself had begun to do.

Perhaps most intriguing about Occupy is that it managed not only to pull masses of people out of their entrenched stasis, into action, but also to undermine the way ideology is typically transmitted and reinforced in our society: the rejection of corporate media, the use of social media for organization and news distribution, the general assemblies and other de-centralized, direct-democratic practices are just some of the ways Occupy has resisted the paralysis typically brought about by ideological forces.

² This is one of the primary points of Marx’s *German Ideology*.

And yet, as impressive as this is, we would do well to be vigilant: as I've suggested, ideology is no simple, monolithic adversary. It is multi-faceted and highly adaptable to opposition; and it is adept at insinuating itself into the actions even of those who consciously oppose it.

Consider, for instance, the social media that have helped Occupy resist ideological forces. The flooding of Occupy threads with troll postings (as mentioned in my second example, above) shows just how quickly and effectively ideology can adapt to and infect opposition to it. I've been quite intrigued by this troll-phenomenon and have consequently gotten into online discussions with several trolls. From what I've seen, if you ignore trolls, they get bored and go away. If you refuse to get pulled into their polemic and respectfully request that they clarify and justify what they're saying, they either get intimidated and go away, or they shift the way they address you and cease to behave like trolls. But if you get pulled into their polemic game and respond in kind (and this is very difficult to resist), they are encouraged, and more join in. This third path is, unfortunately, what is most common on Occupy threads; and the consequences are usually devastating. This is not simply a matter of an 'external force' attacking the movement from the outside. The normal pattern:

1. A few trolls appear on Occupy threads, voicing outrageous and quite often personal attacks.
2. Rather than ignore the trolls, a few occupiers engage them aggressively.
3. The discussion grows more heated and the number of trolls increases such that threads become increasingly overwhelmed by them;
4. More and more occupiers go on the defensive, investing much time and energy into responding to and refuting the trolls; as they become exhausted and frustrated, they find themselves sounding more and more like the trolls, pulled into superficial polemics and tangents.
5. Other occupiers – and those curious about Occupy – become irritated by the gradual decay of discussion on the threads and disappointed in the occupiers who've gotten pulled into the polemic.
6. Frustration increases, exponentially. People abandon the threads.
7. Eventually, the remaining occupiers disperse – bitter, cynical, and inactive. But inactive in an ideologically *active* way: though they feel that they have withdrawn because they simply see how hopeless things really are, they miss the fact that they are not just 'seeing'; they are very much *doing* something: the arc of their engagement is such that they themselves are complicit in the paralysis brought about by ideological forces.

Here we see that, though the core political convictions of the occupiers remain secure, the encounter with trolls gradually alters what occupiers themselves *do*, how they *act* in response to their own convictions: what began as effective collective resistance to the status quo is undermined and fragmented in a way that eventually reinforces the status quo. In short: trolls infect Occupy with a set of ideological practices and structures that

become entrenched within it, that weaken it from within in complex and progressive ways – and this is no more consciously planned out by the trolls than the actions of the young man's neighbours and co-workers were, in the first example. This is just one example of how pernicious and adaptive ideological mechanisms are, in ways that aren't reducible to a set of explicit beliefs.

Karl Marx was hardly opposed to theory; but he was opposed to any theory failing to respond directly to and shape itself on the basis of the actual, concrete practices out of which it emerges. This is why Marx's theoretical claims are not typically sweeping and self-certain but rather tentative and local, grounded in specific historical and social circumstances. We would do well to follow his lead, here, where ideology is concerned; for, as I've suggested, too narrow and rigid a conception of ideology (e.g., as 'a set of false beliefs') can result in a simplistic and ineffective practical response to it. Perhaps being vigilant about ideology means, at the very least, allowing whatever entrenched, abstract conception we have of it – along with all of our theory – to be shaped by the practical engagements in which we find ourselves, allowing what we're already doing, in our political resistance, to shape what we think.

Of course, this vigilance and flexibility are just a starting point, a tool for helping us better understand and respond to the cynicism and frustration that almost inevitably plague concrete political activism. But maybe this is why it is invaluable.

Ideology adapts. Perhaps we can too.