

Ideology and Immanent Critique On Mannheim, Althusser, and Adorno

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to distinguish between two approaches to the notion of ideology. (i) Firstly, the all-encompassing notion of ideology, which stems from a view of society as total and without exterior. The two positions we subsume under this header, regardless of their substantial differences, are the sociology of knowledge as put forward by Mannheim and the Spinozist Marxism of Althusser. We argue that both positions ultimately fail to adequately address the problems of relativism and justified social critique. (ii) In the second part of our paper, we claim that Adorno offers a convincing alternative to the all-encompassing notion of ideology, stressing the fragility and openness of both society and ideology. Adorno's critical approach is twofold, emphasizing two aspects of ideology and, concomitantly, as we demonstrate throughout the paper, immanent critique. On the one hand, Adorno points to the promise inherent to ideological notions. It is in the rupture between a postulated ideal and its insufficient realization that immanent critique – as conventionally conceived of – takes hold. On the other hand, Adorno presents us with the possibility of supplementing this conventional form of immanent critique with a second aspect, as ideology increasingly forfeits its justificatory function and retreats to the mere assertion that the fundamental structures of society cannot be changed. Ultimately, we claim that this second aspect can be conceived of as critique of social naturalization, which poses a necessary addition to the conventional concept of immanent critique.

Keywords: Althusser; Adorno; Ideology; Immanent Critique; Social Naturalization.

1. In his analysis of what he called *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher stated that “it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”¹. What this sentence, rather drastically, entails is a systematic misrepresentation of the conditions of our existence: Institutions and practices, even though historically contingent and in principle open to change, are imagined as natural. The fact that these institutions and practices are to a large degree inefficient – even measured by their own standards – and cause great hardship does not alter the insistence on their inevitability.

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¹ Fisher (2009, 1).

This is where the notion of ideology comes to shine. Even though its history is rather fragmented indeed, almost every “conceptual strand”² dwells on some kind of misrepresentation of societal processes. Its standard-definition, that of *false consciousness*, i.e.: a comprehensive distortion of our intellectual access to the world, lends itself to a well-known objection: In order to identify a certain consciousness as false, one would need to have an exterior point of view, an *undistorted access to the world* – a presumption that is difficult to justify.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on three ways of dealing with this problem, which in its most abstract form can be reframed as the question of the relation of ideology and truth.

(I) The first position that we will be discussing reacts to the problem posed above by dropping every exteriority and instead embracing ideology as total. We want to call this notion of ideology *all-encompassing*. This conception can be found in the *sociology of knowledge*. Mannheim as its main proponent argues that ideologies are fundamental to any society: Social practice per se is not truth-apt, the notion of ideology makes practice intelligible to social science. Ideology is taken to be identical with representation within society and thus to be an indispensable feature of society and subjectivity. The obvious problems of this conception, relativism, and the impossibility of justified social critique, remain intransparent to Mannheim who ultimately aims at drafting a methodological approach to value-neutral social science and has no further interest in questions of social critique.

(II) A much more fruitful contribution to this problem can be found in the philosophy of Althusser. By addressing the Marxist problematic with the means of Spinozism, Althusser steers clear of an understanding of ideology as mere illusion, being able to account for its material existence. However, Althusser’s attempt to limit the realm of ideology by appealing to science ultimately fails, a clear-cut distinction between science and ideology cannot be maintained. Althusser confuses the totality of a social formation with the totality of substance, which gives his notion of ideology the tendency to become all-encompassing.

It ultimately is the opposition of society as a closed totality on the one hand and an imagined external position on the other that these two approaches share and of which the *all-encompassing notion of ideology* is a mere symptom. The two approaches to the problem of *false consciousness* coincide in their totalization of the notion of ideology.

² Eagleton (1991, 1).

(III) To avoid the presumption of an external position as well as the danger of relativism, it is necessary to develop a position that conceives of ideology and society not as closed and absolute, but rather stresses their openness and fragility. We claim that such a position can be found in Adorno's writings on the subject – contrary to the widespread belief, which stems from Habermas's misguided elaborations that take Adorno to be a paradigmatic proponent of an all-encompassing notion of ideology³. We argue that Adorno's conception of ideology escapes the problem of relativism by linking ideology to truth: Ideological notions contain the yet unfulfilled promise of their realization. While this encapsulated promise informing Adorno's understanding of ideology is well known and endorsed as *immanent critique*, we want to emphasize a different aspect of his use of the term. Adorno claims that ideology increasingly fails to justify the existing society, finally reducing itself to the assertion *that it is as it is and that it cannot be otherwise*⁴. The task of critique is for him thus twofold. On the one hand, a project of immanent critique in the conventional sense: to demonstrate where society fails to live up to its own promises. On the other hand, to deconstruct false or ideological claims of necessity, that is, *naturalizations of the social*, which conceal the possibility to freely decide how we want to live our lives⁵.

(IV) The last part of the paper will return to the link of ideology and second nature. We want to outline the critique of social naturalizations as a different type of immanent critique and, doing so, argue that we can conceive of Adorno's notion of ideology as capable of tackling the problems which arise out of an all-encompassing notion of ideology.

2. The all-encompassing notion of ideology: the sociology of knowledge

The first notion of ideology we want to discuss, the one proposed by the sociology of knowledge, takes ideology to be total and all-encompassing. It argues that, since every form of knowledge is socially mediated, every form of knowledge is ideological.

³ Cf. Habermas (1988, 130-157). Interestingly, we can find elements in Adorno's thinking from his early writings on forward, which explicitly state that it is not possible to reduce the truth of philosophical problems to societal mechanisms. Adorno's philosophy does not operate in a reductive manner, contrary to what the critics of his use of concepts like *Verblendungszusammenhang* sometimes suggest (cf. GS 1, 337).

⁴ GS 8, 447.

⁵ Cf. Hindrichs (2020, 192f.).

In his 1935 book *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim discriminates between a *particular* and a *total conception of ideology*. The particular notion takes ideology to be a more or less conscious mindset in which an agent willingly distorts the representation of the world for her personal gain⁶. The personal motivation of an agent is thus taken to be the main factor of ideological distortion and is by that of no further interest for the scientific inquiry. The scientific examination of ideology begins, following Mannheim, only if we ask what the social determinants of the agent's knowledge are.

We arrive at this level when we no longer make individuals personally responsible for the deceptions which we detect in their utterances, and when we no longer attribute the evil that they do to their malicious cunning. It is only when we more or less consciously seek to discover the source of their untruthfulness in a social factor, that we are properly making an ideological interpretation. [...] The particular conception of ideology therefore signifies a phenomenon intermediate between a simple lie at one pole, and an error, which is the result of a distorted and faulty conceptual apparatus, at the other. It refers to a sphere of errors, psychological in nature, which, unlike deliberate deception, are not intentional, but follow inevitably and unwittingly from certain causal determinants⁷.

Consequently, the *total conception of ideology* conceives of ideology not as personally motivated, but as of societal origin – “it is the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group”⁸. Mannheim is heavily committed to methodological collectivism or holism – and thus opposed to methodological individualism. The discussion between these positions is as old as sociology itself, since the two main proponents of each mode of thought are sociology's founding fathers Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. While Weber maintained individual actions be the starting point for sociological explanations⁹, Durkheim argued that *social facts* should be understood as

⁶ “The particular conception of ideology is implied when the term denotes that we are sceptical of the ideas and representations advanced by our opponent. They are regarded as more or less conscious disguises of the real nature of a situation, the true recognition of which would not be in accord with his interests. These distortions range all the way from conscious lies to halfconscious and unwitting disguises” (Mannheim 1935, 49).

⁷ Mannheim (1935, 54).

⁸ Ivi, 50.

⁹ “Soziologie [...] soll heißen: eine Wissenschaft, welche soziales Handeln deutend verstehen und dadurch in seinem Ablauf und seinen Wirkungen ursächlich erklären will. ‘Handeln’ soll dabei ein menschliches Verhalten [...] heißen, wenn und insofern als der oder die Handelnden mit ihm einen subjektiven Sinn verbinden. ‘Soziales Handeln’ aber soll ein solches Handeln heißen, welches seinem von dem oder den Handlungen gemeinten Sinn nach auf das Verhalten anderer bezogen wird und daran in seinem Ablauf orientiert ist.” (Weber 1968, 542).

*existing outside of the individual mind*¹⁰. Clearly, neither Durkheim nor Mannheim are committed to any ontological thesis about group-minds¹¹, Mannheim even feels obliged to clarify that “[i]t is indeed true, that only the individual is capable of thinking”. The “principal thesis” of his sociology is merely “that there are modes of thought, which cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscured”¹². *Total ideology* thus describes individual knowledge in light of its social origins, while claiming that all forms of individual knowledge in which sociology could be possibly interested are of societal origin. Consequently, Mannheim gives up the differentiation between *group and individual* within sociological explanation; understood that way, Mannheim takes sociological explanation to be superior to both psychological and epistemological explanations of knowledge, which only grasp the individual side of things¹³.

Ironically, Mannheim’s critique of Marx consists in claiming that the latter was not radical enough: While Mannheim credits Marx for being the first to understand the link between the societal process and individual formation¹⁴, he accuses him of maintaining elements of the *particular conception of ideology*, namely the idea of personal interest. This is why, according to Mannheim, Marx mistakenly interprets ideology as linked to certain social positions and groups and fails to identify it with knowledge in general. Mannheim evidently misses the point of Marx’ critical theory: Marx’ famous notion *Charaktermaske* is designed to exactly rebut the type of critique put forward by Mannheim, since his theory *treats of persons only*

¹⁰ “Wir finden also besondere Arten des Handelns, Denkens und Fühlens, deren wesentliche Eigentümlichkeit darin besteht, daß sie außerhalb des individuellen Bewußtseins existieren. Diese Typen des Verhaltens und Denkens stehen nicht nur außerhalb des Individuums, sie sind auch mit einer gebieterischen Macht ausgestattet, kraft deren sie sich einem jeden aufdrängen, er mag es wollen oder nicht.” (Durkheim 2014, 106)

¹¹ According to Horkheimer’s critique of Mannheim’s work, sociology of knowledge does not live up to this claim. He argues that Mannheim’s theory contains metaphysical remainders within its conception of human essence and the unity of consciousness (Horkheimer 1987). A more detailed account of Horkheimer’s critique can be found in Dubiel (1975). Adorno’s critique of Mannheim, especially of his *Mensch und Gesellschaft im Zeitalter des Umbaus* (Mannheim 1940) can be found mainly in his paper *Das Bewußtsein der Wissenssoziologie* (GS 10.1, 31ff.).

¹² Mannheim (1935, 2).

¹³ Ivi, 25.

¹⁴ Mannheim attributes this insight also to Hegel and the Romantics, but in a metaphysically distorted way. Sadly, he takes Hegel’s concept of spirit to be metaphysically overloaded, which today is deemed false. Even though it is quite interesting, we cannot elaborate further on this (Mannheim 1935, 24 and 59).

as personifications of economical categories¹⁵. The notion of personal interest is of societal nature at its core.

Set aside Mannheim's flawed reading of Marx, we now see that Mannheim understands every form of knowledge as socially caused. Society as a whole cannot be transcended by knowledge in any way, which confronts the sociology of knowledge with the dire prospect of relativism. Even though Mannheim stresses that his conception is rather a *relationism* than a *relativism*, it remains the fact that ultimately every form of knowledge is contingent and relative to the society which produces it.

This first non-evaluative insight into history does not inevitably lead to relativism, but rather to relationism. Knowledge, as seen in the light of the total conception of ideology, is by no means an illusory experience, for ideology in its relational concept is not at all identical with illusion. Knowledge arising out of our experience in actual life situations, though not absolute, is knowledge none the less. The norms arising out of such actual life situations do not exist in a social vacuum, but are effective as real sanctions for conduct. Relationism signifies merely that all of the elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelationship in a given frame of thought. Such a system of meanings is possible and valid only in a given type of historical existence, to which, for a time, it furnishes appropriate expression. When the social situation changes, the system of norms to which it had previously given birth ceases to be in harmony with it¹⁶.

But since the theoretical problem of relativism is one of the evaluation of knowledge rather than its constitution, this change of words fails to solve it. Apparently, Mannheim was aware of this, as he added a brief discussion of an evaluative criterion, which he saw in the adjustability and adaptability of modes of thinking to change in the world.

The moral interpretation of one's own action is invalid, when, through the force of traditional modes of thought and conceptions of life, it does not allow for the accommodation of action and thought to a new and changed situation and in the end actually obscures and prevents this adjustment and transformation of man. A theory then is wrong if in a given practical situation it uses concepts and categories which, if taken seriously, would prevent man from adjusting himself at that historical stage¹⁷.

¹⁵ "Aber es handelt sich hier um die Personen nur, soweit sie die Personifikationen ökonomischer Kategorien sind, Träger von bestimmten Klassenverhältnissen und Interessen. Weniger als jeder andere Standpunkt kann mein Standpunkt, der die Entwicklung der ökonomischen Gesellschaftsformation als einen naturgeschichtlichen Prozeß auffasst, den einzelnen verantwortlich machen für Verhältnisse, deren Geschöpf er sozial bleibt, sosehr er sich auch subjektiv über sie erheben mag." (Marx [1867] 1962, 16) For further elaborations in the concept of *Charaktermaske* see: Haug (1995).

¹⁶ Mannheim (1935, 76).

¹⁷ Ivi, 85.

This, quite evidently, cannot be a satisfying answer since it does not allow for any possibility of criticizing society and its norms from within – the falsehood of societal practice and its corresponding theories can only be demonstrated by the judgement of history on the one hand and, on the other hand, the sheer clash with existing norms¹⁸.

3. A “very equivocal – and thus misleading notion”¹⁹ – Althusser on ideology

As we have seen, the sociology of knowledge falls into an all-encompassing notion of ideology, thereby eliminating any prospect of social critique. One might be quick to ascribe the problem to the uncritical stance of the sociology of knowledge. This, however, would fail to recognize the persistence of the problem in Marxist discourse. The philosophy of Louis Althusser allows us to sharpen the contours of the problem – and might already point to aspects of a possible solution. In order to clarify the relation between Althusser’s philosophy and the problem of an all-encompassing notion of ideology, it might prove helpful to not directly delve into the well-known essay on *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, but to follow one of Althusser’s famous detours: via Spinoza.

References to Spinoza are scattered throughout Althusser’s work; what comes closest to a systematic discussion is the chapter on Spinoza in the 1974 essay *Elements of Self-criticism*, where Althusser repudiates the charge of structuralism by finding himself “guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion: *we were Spinozists*.”²⁰ In this essay, Althusser praises Spinoza for “what is undoubtedly the first theory of ideology ever

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt’s critique of Mannheim argues similarly, insofar as she criticizes the totalization of the sociological mode of explanation as pure societal immanence. Even though she leans quite heavily on the vague concept of transcendence, taken from the negative theology of her time (i.e. Rudolf Bultmann), her critique would be worthy of further elaboration. Since it culminates in the Heideggerian call for an inquiry in the “existential situation”, which only legitimates historical and sociological inquiries, it is not possible to further pursue this strand in this paper (Arendt 1994, 42).

¹⁹ ESC, 119.

²⁰ ESC, 132. For a critical take on this apology, see Elliot (2006, 163f.), for a critique of Althusser’s Spinozism see Anderson (1979: 64-66), a convincing response to Anderson can be found in Thomas (2002). It goes without saying that Althusser’s Spinozism extends far beyond his theory of ideology. On the notions of structure and structural causality see Resch (1992, 42-52, 57-60) and Montag (2013, 73-100); on Althusser’s concept of reading and the Spinozist influence on it, see Montag (1993).

thought out”²¹. It is obvious that Spinoza did not use the term ‘ideology’ and much less developed an explicit theory of ideology; Althusser himself acknowledges that it is an “abstract theory of ideology”²² Spinoza offers – not without deploring that even Marx had quite little to offer on the subject. Althusser’s reading of Spinoza now leads him to identify Spinoza’s first kind of knowledge (*cognitio*), *imaginatio*, with ideology (an identification already present in Althusser’s earlier work²³, we will get to that). What does it mean that Spinoza offers a theory of ideology with his concept of *imaginatio*? Spinoza distinguished three kinds of knowledge: the *imaginatio*, the *ratio*, the second kind of knowledge, and finally the third kind of knowledge, the rather enigmatic *scientia intuitiva*. For now, we will focus on the *imaginatio*.

What is the epistemic status of the first kind of knowledge? The *imaginatio* only supplies us with confused and inadequate notions as it can never give us the things as they really are: It consists of ideas of the way our body is affected by other things. This has several consequences that are central to Althusser’s theory of ideology. The *imaginatio* provides us with a whole world: our sensual world, which, again, is not made up of the things in themselves, but of our subjectively mediated ideas of these things. This sensual world contains illusions that persist despite better knowledge: Spinoza’s most famous example is the persistent impression that the distance of the sun amounts only to two hundred feet, even when one knows that it is much larger than that²⁴. Our knowledge about the true distance of the sun does not keep the sun from affecting our bodies – insofar as we have a body that is affected by other things, we will produce ideas of the first kind. Furthermore, the *imaginatio* gives rise to a decisive illusion: the illusion of final causality. Spinoza demonstrates in the *Ethics* that the world is reigned by effective causality only – nonetheless, human beings constantly misconstrue themselves as free agents endowed with final causality²⁵.

²¹ ESC, 135.

²² ESC, 135f.

²³ See FM, 78n.

²⁴ See *Ethics*, part II, prop. 35, scholium: “It is not because we do not know its true distance that we imagine the sun to be so near, but because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as the body itself is affected by it” (Spinoza 2018, 74).

²⁵ See the Appendix of Part I of the *Ethics*: “Now all the prejudices that I undertake to expose here depend upon a single one: that human beings commonly suppose that, like themselves, all natural things act for a purpose. In fact they take it as certain that God directs all things for some specific purpose” (Spinoza 2018, 35).

How does Althusser take up and develop Spinoza's abstract theory of ideology? Althusser conceives of ideology as an imaginary, lived relation. "Men 'live' their ideology as the Cartesian 'saw' or did not see – if he was not looking at it – the moon two hundred paces away: *not at all as a form of consciousness, but as an object of their 'world' – as their 'world' itself*"²⁶. Althusser considers ideology to be a necessary element of every social formation. And while conceding that its particular form or function might change with the advent of communism²⁷, regarding ideology in general he nonetheless asserts: "*ideology is eternal, exactly like the unconscious*"²⁸. This is linked to Althusser's claim – analogous to Spinoza's critique of final causality – that it is only in ideology that we experience us as subjects, qua result of a fundamental distortion²⁹.

Most important for us, however, is the way in which Althusser conceives of ideology as all-encompassing. Just as the *imaginatio* constitutes a complete, self-sufficient world, "*ideology has no outside (for itself)*"³⁰. A change of terrain is necessary to name ideology as such: According to Spinoza, the second (and third) kind of knowledge offer the theoretical means to reflect on the *imaginatio*, assess its status and, most importantly for Spinoza's project, develop a practical stance towards it. Althusser adopts this Spinozist solution:

It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology. [...] [I]deology has *no outside* (for itself), but at the same time [...] *it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality)³¹.

It is thus by the notion of science that Althusser – quite similar to Spinoza – tries to account for the status of ideology as well as limit its scope. Yet, he offers two solutions to the problem of an all-encompassing ideology which differ in quite substantial aspects; the first is to be found in his early writings, the second in the later writings of his self-critique.

²⁶ FM, 233.

²⁷ FM, 232.

²⁸ IISA, 255. The reasons behind this assertion lead back to Althusser's peculiar reading of Lacan, which drew much criticism (see Barrett 1991, 81-119; Rehmann 2013, 155-172).

²⁹ Althusser's account of interpellation (see IISA: 261-270) – much more detailed than what we find in Spinoza – and his anti-humanism in general can be left aside for the purposes of this text.

³⁰ IISA, 265.

³¹ IISA, 265.

In his earlier work, most notably *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, the notion of science offers a firm standpoint from which to judge ideology. Science constitutes a self-sufficient discourse by separating itself from the ideology preceding it through an epistemological break: a change of the underlying problematic, a reconfiguring and reworking of ideological notions. As is well-known, Althusser develops his theory of the epistemological break around the relation of Marx's earlier and later works: Marx breaks with the Young-Hegelian, humanist framework of his youth, radically shifting the problematic of his work and thereby constituting a new science – historical materialism, the science of history. Althusser explicitly draws the parallel between ideology and science as the Spinozist first and second kind of knowledge, respectively – stressing the fundamental discontinuity between them³².

The status of the sciences is secured by philosophy, that is: philosophy proper, non-ideological philosophy, which for Althusser can only be: Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism. Althusser defines philosophy as Theory (with capital-T), the theory of – theoretical and practical – practice³³. Philosophy is thus awarded a scientific meta-status, warranting the scientificity of the individual sciences, among them historical materialism, the science Marx established. The practical repercussions of science, however, seem to be purely instrumental:

[W]hat distinguishes Marxist working-class organizations is the fact that they base their socialist objectives, their means of action and forms of organization, their revolutionary strategy and tactics, on the principles of a *scientific* theory – that of Marx – and not on this or that anarchist, utopian, reformist, or other ideological theory³⁴.

Marxist science and philosophy do not warrant practical truth, they merely provide the means to achieve given goals, pertaining to, as one might say with Horkheimer, subjective reason.³⁵ This will become even clearer examining Althusser's self-critique.

Althusser himself took, as the notion of self-critique already indicates, umbrage at his first solution of the problem of ideology. Without delving to deeply into the discussion concerning the relation of the early Althusser and his later self-critique, we will limit ourselves to sketching the shifts relevant to the notion of ideology, shifts revolving around the notions of *theoreticism* and *class struggle*.

³² See FM, 78n. This discontinuity is also at play in the ideological production of subjects vs. subject-less science.

³³ See FM, 170-173.

³⁴ TTPTF, 22.

³⁵ See Horkheimer (2004 [1947], 3-5).

The charge of theoreticism primarily pertains to the status of philosophy: Althusser rejects his earlier definition of Marxist philosophy as Theory, the theory of theoretical practice, accusing himself of neglecting practice and attributing theory too high a status. This entails a rearrangement of the relations of philosophy, science, and ideology: Philosophy is no longer seen as a science of sciences, able to secure the status of the sciences³⁶. It instead *post festum* draws a “line of demarcation that separates, in each case, the scientific from the ideological”³⁷ (thus reacting to the problem that science cannot account for its own foundations and its own notions) – but it is not of scientific character itself. Yet the charge of theoreticism pertains not only to Althusser’s former conception of the relation between philosophy and science, but also to his discussion of ideology in his earlier works. Althusser criticizes his former attempts for conceiving of ideology as a mere illusion, thus remaining within a rationalist opposition between truth and error³⁸. This should not be taken to mean that ideological notions and ideas suddenly became true between 1965 and 1967. Althusser instead claims that one is mistaken not only in focusing on the truth-value of ideology, but more generally in conceptualizing ideology as consisting of ideas in the first place. As the notion of an “ideological state apparatus” already indicates, Althusser now emphasizes the materiality of ideology, the ensemble of rituals and practices that give rise to ideological beliefs³⁹.

The significance of these shifts only appears in light of the second central notion connected to Althusser’s self-critique: class struggle. This changes the position of both philosophy and ideology. The distinction a given philosophy draws between science and ideology is based not anymore on a scientific status ascribed to this philosophy, but on the way it is implicated in class struggle:

In philosophy we are dealing with tendencies which confront each other on the existing theoretical ‘battlefield’. These tendencies group themselves in the last instance around the antagonism between idealism and materialism, and they ‘exist’ in the form of ‘philosophies’ which realize the tendencies, their variations and their combinations, as a function of class theoretical positions, in which it is *the social practices* (political ideological, scientific, etc.) *which are at stake*⁴⁰.

³⁶ Cf. LP, 48.

³⁷ PSPS, 106, for a comprehensive reconstruction see Lewis (2005).

³⁸ Cf. ESC, 119f., 155.

³⁹ For a convincing argument showing the objection that Althusser thereby fell into a crude materialism to be based in turn on the “ideology of ideology”, the belief that ideology was to consist primarily of ideas, see Charim (2002, 67-87).

⁴⁰ ESC, 142, see also LP, 52-56. That the structure of the battlefield itself is not clear, that there are multiple fronts and that a given philosophy is usually overdetermined, showing multiple tendencies – this complicates the situation, is however of no further relevance for our argumentation.

There is no neutral position outside the battlefield from which philosophy could calmly judge the world; philosophy, as the later Althusser conceives of it, is always partisan in class struggle – either as bourgeois or as proletarian philosophy. Succinctly, Althusser calls philosophy the “*class struggle in theory*”⁴¹, thereby stressing the “*primacy of the practical function over the theoretical function in philosophy itself*”⁴². Philosophy is judged by the *correctness of its tendency*, its position in class struggle.

Also the concept of Ideology is reworked through the lens of class struggle⁴³: Althusser suggests that his reading of Spinoza was the reason that “the question of the class struggle in ideology did not appear”⁴⁴ in his earlier writings. Instead of focusing on the error present in the statements put forward by ideology, it is, again, about the tendency of a given ideology, how it is situated on the battlefield of class struggle: Althusser now stresses the “difference between the regions of ideology and the antagonistic class tendencies which run through them, divide them, regroup them and bring them into opposition”⁴⁵, thus pointing to the “class struggle in the ISAs”⁴⁶.

The emphasis on class struggle and tendency accounts for the problem in an unsatisfying way, insofar as it leaves a justificatory deficit. Even when one accounts for a relative autonomy of science⁴⁷ (which is already questionable, given that science is delineated from ideology by a partisan philosophy): Practical questions are fully remitted to the domain of philosophy and ideology, turning any claims to practical validity into a matter of class struggle. Practical truth thus becomes relative to politics; truth claims outside the realm of scientific theory are dissolved into a mere play of power, the constant struggle of bourgeois and proletarian forces, which has no outside. With Althusser in the ISA essay ascribing to ideology all positive functions that do not belong to science⁴⁸, it seems legitimate to speak of ideology as all-encompassing when it comes to practice.

⁴¹ R JL, 58, see PRW, 18.

⁴² ESC, 143.

⁴³ This idea is already present in a manuscript of 1965, unpublished at the time: “Within ideology in general, we thus observe the existence of *different ideological tendencies* that express the ‘representations’ of the different social classes” TTPTE, 30.

⁴⁴ ESC, 141.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ IISA, 246.

⁴⁷ See for example Resch (1992: 2005).

⁴⁸ Cf. Ricœur (1986, 143).

The emphasis on class struggle leads Althusser so far as to question the view of Marx' thought as a science⁴⁹. But even when one rejects Althusser's inauguration of class struggle as central both to philosophy and ideology, the clear demarcation of ideology remains threatened. This becomes visible regarding Althusser's conception of the break in Marx' work. Not only does Althusser's assessment of the exact position of the break change⁵⁰, it becomes clearer and clearer that the break of science with ideology can only be conceived of as a precarious process: Even the late Marx is still immersed in ideological concepts⁵¹. Paul Ricœur has convincingly argued that the same is true of Althusser's own philosophy: Despite his ardent zeal against humanism, Althusser's philosophy repeatedly winds up using humanist concepts⁵². Ideology is all-encompassing in a practical sense – and even in theory the clear-cut distinction of science and ideology is insecure.

We want to argue that the fundamental problem lies deeper – which leads us back to Spinoza. Althusser's allegiance to Spinoza produces a confusion of two notions of totality: A social formation is not total in the same way the Spinozist substance is: "A social totality is necessarily incomplete, subject to further development and transformation by the human practices which comprise it"⁵³. Althusser, however, thinks society according to the model of Spinoza's substance, which is an absolute reality with no room for any virtuality – as having no outside. Which then leads to a notion of ideology without outside, an all-encompassing notion of ideology – at best poorly checked by a science that is, whereas relatively autonomous, impotent when it comes to practical matters.

⁴⁹ "Upon this notion [of 'critique'] - charged with delivering the true from the false, or denouncing the false in the name of the true, by the rationalist tradition - Marx was imposing an entirely different mission, founded on *the class struggle*" (MT, 270). Elliot (2006, 293) states succinctly that Althusser thereby "relinquished Althusserianism".

⁵⁰ See Smith (1989, 505).

⁵¹ See PC, 93, where Althusser considers the "Preface of 1859 [...] still profoundly Hegelian-evolutionist" – that is to say, not yet scientific – and even diagnoses that in the first volume of *Capital* "traces of the Hegelian influence still remained". See also ESC, 114: "Every recognized science not only has emerged from its own prehistory, but continues endlessly to do so (its prehistory remains always contemporary: something like its *Alter Ego*) by *rejecting* what it considers to be *error*, according to the process which Bachelard called 'the epistemological *break* [*rupture*]'".

⁵² "The point about Althusser's expressions is that they belong to the vocabulary of humanism. [...] It seems as if we cannot speak of ideology in another language than its own." (Ricœur 1986, 139f.) Ricœur goes further to question the concept of a clear-cut break: "We can make no sense of the sudden outburst of truth in the midst of obscurity and darkness if it is not the emergence of something which was distorted in ideology but now finds its truth" (*ivi*, 157).

⁵³ Thomas 2002, 109.

A sufficient theory of ideology has to account for the openness of social formations: It would thereby allow to consider the *fragile structure* of ideology, replacing the postulate of a clear-cut distinction between truth-apt scientific theory and ideological practice by a dialectically mediated approach to these terms. We claim that such a theory of ideology can be found in the work of Adorno.

4. Adorno and social naturalization

Critics of Adorno's philosophy who take it to be an instance of the *all-encompassing notion of ideology* par excellence fail to understand Adorno's twofold approach regarding the problem of ideology. Firstly, Adorno uses the notion of ideology within the nexus of *immanent critique*. Invoking concepts like freedom and equality is not untrue or ideological per se, as long as one accounts for the fact that these concepts are not yet realized within our society. They become ideological when we act as if they were realized; and it is the task of immanent critique to point to the discrepancy between their inherent social ideal and their insufficient realization. The second meaning of ideology in Adorno could be summarized this way: Ideology duplicates the world we live in, suggesting that it cannot be changed - an *advertisement for the world through its duplication*, as Adorno aptly calls it⁵⁴. The distinction of these modes of ideology is most apparent in Adorno's essays *Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre* and *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, which we will now discuss.

In his 1954 essay *Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre*, Adorno argues mainly historically. He traces the emergence of the discussion about ideology in the French enlightenment (especially Destutt de Tracy, who coined the concept) and in Francis Bacon's theory of the *idols of the mind*. Adorno claims that in both theoretical frameworks, ideology is treated as an anthropological constant, subsequently subsuming both strains as theories of *innate dazzlement* ("angeborene Verblendung")⁵⁵. Let us retrace Adorno's discussion of Bacon and de Tracy. The four types of idols Bacon describes are the idols of "tribe", "cave", "marketplace" and "theatre"⁵⁶. While those of the tribe are "founded in human nature itself"⁵⁷, those of the cave could be understood as idiosyncratic and individualistic in the broadest sense.

⁵⁴ "Reklame für die Welt durch deren Verdopplung" (GS 10.1, 29).

⁵⁵ GS 8, 459.

⁵⁶ Bacon ([1620] 2000, 40).

⁵⁷ Ivi, 41.

The idols of the marketplace and those of the theatre are societal, they are distortions existing only through the interaction of human beings. While Bacon states that the aim of his philosophy is “to banish idols and get rid of them” through “[f]ormation of notions and axioms by means of true induction,”⁵⁸ Adorno criticizes that Bacon ultimately aims at a mere sharpening of the concepts we already use, resulting in a type of critique that anticipates the critique of language within positivistic semantics⁵⁹. Idols which are not directly grounded in human nature are grounded in language itself as a necessary condition for humans to interact and are thereby, as Adorno points out, awarded a quasi-natural status. This leads to two distortions within the notion of ideology:

[I]ndem man das falsche Bewußtsein einer Grundbeschaffenheit der Menschen oder ihrer Vergesellschaftung überhaupt zuschreibt, werden nicht nur ihre konkreten Bedingungen ignoriert, sondern überdies wird auch die Verblendung gleichsam als Naturgesetz gerechtfertigt und die Herrschaft über die Verblendeten daraus gerechtfertigt, so wie es Bacons Schüler Hobbes tatsächlich später unternahm⁶⁰.

Within the theory of Destutt de Tracy, who was the first to use the term *ideology*, this tendency is further radicalized. In his work, ideology appears as a “general grammar, or analysis of the understanding”⁶¹. Due to this definition, ideology becomes a content of science – which for de Tracy means that the notion of ideology revolves essentially around the notion of necessity.

Er knüpft an die empiristische Philosophie an, welche den menschlichen Geist zergliederte, um den Mechanismus der Erkenntnis bloßzulegen [...]. Aber seine Absicht war nicht erkenntnistheoretisch und nicht formal. Er will nicht im Geiste die bloßen Bedingungen von Urteilen aufsuchen, sondern statt dessen, die Bewußtseinsinhalte selbst, die geistigen Phänomene beobachten, auseinandernehmen und beschreiben wie einen Naturgegenstand, ein Mineral oder eine Pflanze⁶².

This way of conceiving of ideology means thinking of it as an inescapable property of the human mind. De Tracy vivisects ideology in order to show that bourgeois conceptions of liberty and equality are necessary by human nature, which had – at his time – the progressive effect of the

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ “Seine Formulierungen klingen zuweilen wie Antezipationen von Gedanken der modernen positivistischen Sprachkritik, der Semantik” (GS 8, 458).

⁶⁰ GS 8, 459.

⁶¹ de Tracy ([1801] 2012: 1).

⁶² GS 8, 461.

further delegitimization of feudal remains. Within the bourgeois society however, those ideas ultimately became *justifications* of this type of society. As justifications, they are essentially split into two contradictory aspects. The constant repetition that bourgeois society is founded on the ideas of freedom and equality cannot conceal the fact that these ideas quite simply are not applied to everyone.⁶³ In that sense, ideology is firstly justification of the status quo. Secondly, Adorno seems to think that within the ideas of freedom and equality, however untrue in relation to the present, lies something promising. The promising aspect exists in the evident contradiction between the present society and its own ideal of itself: “Unwahr werden eigentliche Ideologien erst durch ihr Verhältnis zu der bestehenden Wirklichkeit. Sie können “an sich” wahr sein, so wie die Ideen Freiheit, Menschlichkeit, Gerechtigkeit es sind, aber sie gebärden sich, als wären sie bereits realisiert”⁶⁴. This is where *immanent critique* takes hold. As critics, we can confront society with its own ideals and reveal the ways in which it fails to live up to them. These ideals contain, as Adorno frequently puts it, a certain *truth*, which immanent critique can point to. The upside of this form of critique is that it is grounded in established normative concepts and thus does not fall prey to the problem of exteriority of critique⁶⁵.

Dagegen sträubt sich das immanente Verfahren als das wesentlicher dialektische. Es nimmt das Prinzip ernst, nicht die Ideologie an sich sei unwahr, sondern ihre Präntention, mit der Wirklichkeit übereinzustimmen. Immanente Kritik geistiger Gebilde heißt, in der Analyse ihrer Gestalt und ihres Sinnes den Widerspruch zwischen ihrer objektiven Idee und jener Präntention zu begreifen, und zu benennen, was die Konsistenz und Inkonsistenz der Gebilde an sich von der Verfassung des Daseins ausdrückt⁶⁶.

The first aspect of ideology in Adorno can thus be summarized in the following way: Ideology operates as justification, although not in the sense of consciously told lies, but as a certain narrative society tells about itself. In this narrative society claims to be something – liberal, equal, and free – it quite evidently is not. Within this rupture between societal ideal and societal reality critique gains grip.

The second aspect of ideology in Adorno is that of *social naturalization*. This conception seems to explain why the rupture between societal ideal and its real form is not generally perceived as inherently problematic –

⁶³ Luhmann, in his ironical but fitting fashion, thus speaks of “bourgeois universalism” as a “highly selective idea” (Luhmann 1986, 139).

⁶⁴ Ivi, 473.

⁶⁵ Cf. Jaeggi (2009).

⁶⁶ GS 10.1, 27.

contrary to what one might expect, given that society constantly reneges on its promises. The basic form of social naturalization can be found in more or less any liberal account of capitalism: Even though this societal system has obvious problems to it, ‘it is the only possible society, the only one that works’. The explanations for why that might be the case then range from references to the Soviet Union (as if anyone would seriously consider this system to be an alternative) as the failed alternative – tacitly insinuating that other alternatives do not exist –, to sentences which are more or less structured like this: ‘Only capitalism works, because it is human nature to need incentives to work’. Or: ‘Only capitalism works, because any form of societal planning is economically impossible’⁶⁷. Structurally, both sentences refer to something, arguably made by humans, as if it would be an external force, inscribed by some god in the way the universe has to operate. *Social naturalization* on a basic level describes exactly this confusion over what is necessary and what is contingent, over what is made by humans, given by nature, changeable by humans, unchangeable by nature⁶⁸. To describe the genesis of social naturalization Adorno often times refers to Marx’ fetishism of commodity, which for Adorno is at the core of what he calls *Naturgeschichte*. In Adorno’s reading, the *impetus* of Marx’s description of laws of nature governing society does not imply that we found any eternal laws, but that those laws only appear to be given by nature as long as the individuals are subject to the fetishism of commodity.

Daß die Annahme von Naturgesetzen nicht à la lettre zu nehmen, am wenigsten im Sinn eines wie immer gearteten Entwurfs vom sogenannten Menschen zu ontologisieren sei, dafür spricht das stärkste Motiv der Marxschen Theorie überhaupt, das der Abschaffbarkeit jener Gesetze⁶⁹.

⁶⁷ This idea was firstly articulated within Ludwig von Mises’ critique of socialism (1920) and was followed by a long-spanning debate on that topic. Especially Hayek (1944) supported this view, while, a less known example within philosophy, Otto Neurath (1925), usually conceived as positivistic thinker of the Vienna Circle, argued in favor of planning. A great account of how that debate might possibly be reframed in front of the technological background today is given in Phillips and Rozworski (2019).

⁶⁸ It will not be possible here to give the full account of this context, which necessarily would include the contemporary debate on the notion of *second nature*. Even though the concept witnessed a revival in recent years, especially due to the work of John McDowell (1996), it is important to see that the current notion of second nature argues mainly within the context of Aristotelian *phronesis*, reacting to problems posed by the philosophy of Kant (Bertram 2020). Thus, it does not include the critical strain ranging from Hegel over Marx and Lukács to Adorno, which Christoph Menke took to be paramount to understand the complexity of this notion (Menke 2018, 135f.).

⁶⁹ GS 6, 348. Cornelius Castoriadis argues in a similar fashion that Marx’s theory is marked by a fundamental ambiguity regarding the concept of natural laws. According to Castoriadis, Marx’s project of a scientific theory of history is reliant on the intro-

What role does this complex play in Adorno's notion of ideology? Ideology as social naturalization is the declaration that it is completely impossible, even unimaginable, for society to be otherwise.

Nichts bleibt als Ideologie zurück denn die Anerkennung des Bestehenden selber, Modelle eines Verhaltens, das der Übermacht der Verhältnisse sich fügt. [...] Dem entspricht weiterhin der Zustand in den Köpfen der Menschen. Sie nehmen die aberwitzige Situation, die angesichts der offenen Möglichkeit von Glück jeden Tag mit der vermeintlichen Katastrophe droht, zwar nicht länger als Ausdruck einer Idee hin, so wie sie noch das bürgerliche System der Nationalstaaten empfinden mochten, aber sie finden sich mit dem Gegebenen ab im Namen von Realismus. [...] *Seitdem aber Ideologie kaum mehr besagt, als daß es so ist, wie es ist, schrumpft auch ihre eigene Unwahrheit zusammen auf das dünne Axiom, es könne nicht anders sein als es ist*⁷⁰.

According to Adorno, ideology becomes self-referential: Ideological content no more refers to any yet unfulfilled notions as a promise to the individuals living in it, but completely limits itself to the claim that there is no alternative. Historically, Adorno takes this development to be relatively recent compared to the above-discussed first aspect, which was dominant throughout the bourgeois 19th century – *Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre* was written in 1954. We probably do not overburden Adorno's argument, if we say that his analysis became only more fitting after 1989, when liberalism postulated that the promised land had now arrived⁷¹. One may also turn to Margaret Thatcher's revealing statement that *there is no alternative*, which might be the best encapsulation of the topics being discussed here.

But it is not only the case, like Adorno suggests in the *Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre*, that those two aspects can be understood as differently emphasized throughout different historical periods. It seems to be quite clear that they cannot be fully reconciled with each other. The second aspect of social naturalization lacks the structure which allows for immanent critique in the conventional sense, namely the rupture between a certain societal ideal and its realization. If ideology only justifies the status quo by claiming its inescapability, it does not contain a promise, however implicit. Adorno characterizes the relation of ideology and society thus as an *open-space*

duction of quasi-natural laws governing society. At the same time, Marx emphasizes the potential of human practice which transcends any lawlike structure (cf. Castoriadis 1986, 74f.). Castoriadis highlights a similar ambiguity in the notion of "besoin" (Castoriadis 1978, 400f.).

⁷⁰ GS 8, 477, our emphasis.

⁷¹ The most iconic account of this can be found in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

prison in which ideology *does not want to be believed anymore, but only demands silence*⁷².

Immanent critique is thus *dragged into the abyss by its content*⁷³, as Adorno phrases it in his 1951 essay *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. Since ideology and society tend to converge⁷⁴, without at least trying to justify society in relation to some shared ideals, which, however insufficiently realized, immanent critique can be grounded in, the possibility of critique seems to vanish once more. As grim as this perspective might be, Adorno's closing remarks in *Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre* point in another direction: "Weil Ideologie und Realität sich derart aufeinander zubewegen; weil die Realität mangels jeder anderen überzeugenden Ideologie zu der ihrer selbst wird, bedürfte es nur einer geringen Anstrengung des Geistes, den zugleich allmächtigen und nichtigen Schein von sich zu werfen"⁷⁵.

Adorno suggests that we can think of immanent critique in another way: Even though ideology has become self-referential and merely claims its inescapability, this is exactly the point where thinking could fathom the ideological semblance with *little effort*. Immanent critique therefore becomes critical not in confronting society with its obvious flaws regarding the justificatory ideals it claims to have realized, but as critique of *social naturalizations*, claims of inevitability⁷⁶.

⁷² "In dem Freiluftgefängnis, zu dem die Welt wird, kommt es schon gar nicht mehr darauf an, was wovon abhängt, so sehr ist alles eins. Alle Phänomene starren wie Hoheitszeichen absoluter Herrschaft dessen was ist. [...] [E]s [...] gibt [...] bloß noch die Reklame für die Welt durch deren Verdopplung" (GS 10.1, 29).

⁷³ "Allerdings wird davon am Ende auch die immanente Methode ereilt. Sie wird von ihrem Gegenstand in den Abgrund gerissen" (GS 10.1, 29).

⁷⁴ This convergence was analyzed in similar fashion in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Debord treats of 'materialized ideology' in the last chapter of his work and tries to grasp the change in ideology between the classical-bourgeois era and the West post World War II by stating: "Society has become what ideology already was" (Debord 2002, § 217).

⁷⁵ GS 8, 477.

⁷⁶ Adorno also uses the notion of ideology in order to attack what he calls *Unmittelbarkeitsphilosophie*, meaning the *Lebensphilosophie* and Heidegger. Since this is a usage in polemical manner, it is not central to our argument. Adorno refutes the mentioned strands as ideological insofar as they make claim to some truth immediate and primal, by means of a perspective outside the societal process. "Philosophie ist selbst ein Stück Kultur [...] und wenn sie sich so benimmt, als wäre sie unmittelbar, durch angebliche Urfragen, ein der Kultur Enthobenes, dann macht sie sich blind für ihre eigene Bedingung und verfällt damit ihrer Kulturbedingtheit nur erst recht, mit anderen Worten: wird erst recht Ideologie" (ANS IV.14, 201).

5. Ideology and second nature: Towards a new conception of immanent critique

Before we summarize our claims, let us rule out a misconception that might have arisen by now: Rejecting Althusser's conception of society and the notion of ideology concomitant with it as total cannot mean falling back into naïve humanism. It is by means of our detour via Althusser that we could come to a reading stressing the materialist thrust of Adorno's philosophy. It is thus clear that Adorno's discussion of truth in ideology cannot denote any unmediated recourse to human subjectivity, any restoration of transcendental idealism as little as it is to be understood as any kind of positivism. Rejecting the presumption of any kind of immediacy – be it that of a subject or of intuitive knowledge – might well be considered the core element of negative dialectics⁷⁷. And it goes without saying that Adorno is wary of the perils of separating ideological ideas of their societal origin, of ignoring the material existence of ideology to which Althusser has pointed us.

We have argued that a concept of society as a closed totality goes hand-in-hand with an all-encompassing notion of ideology. This became clear regarding the sociology of knowledge as well as the Marxism of Althusser. Against the pretension of an external standpoint characteristic for the former and the postulate of a clear-cut distinction between science and ideology emblematic for the latter we emphasized the notion of immanent critique: Immanent critique is neither to be understood as science nor as a mere move in the game of power that is ideology – instead, it aims at overcoming the rigid irrationality of the given by setting its internal rationality in motion. Besides the conventional, well-known type of immanent critique that takes up the unfulfilled promises encapsulated in ideological notions such as freedom or democracy, we have pointed to a second type of immanent critique by delineating a different aspect of ideology in Adorno's thought: When ideology forfeits its justificatory function and retreats to merely declaring the given to be given and naturally so, immanent critique in the conventional sense loses its foothold. A different kind of immanent critique can step in, *a critique of naturalizations of the social*⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ That is to say: Adorno remains unaffected by the enticements of the epistemology Althusser terms 'empiricism' (see RC, 37-43). That Adorno's negative dialectics have a certain affinity to Althusser's thought has casually been noted by Callinicos (1993, 43, see also 2007).

⁷⁸ Here as well, we can draw a parallel between Adorno and Althusser: It seems that the vocabulary of *Reading Capital*, the idea of a reading without guarantees (for a reading

Risking overgeneralization, let us nonetheless try to widen the scope. The two notions of ideology put forward by Adorno become apparent if one compares the justifications of capitalism in the early liberal era and today. While during the advent of capitalism (disregarding all its horrors from economical disasters to colonialism) its proponents seemingly thought that – at some point – this system would in fact bring prosperity and freedom to all mankind (while obviously operating with a rather narrow conception of mankind), those voices seem to have perished today. It is as if no one seriously believed anymore that capitalism would have the capacities to satisfyingly resolve problems like an enormous (and growing) wealth disparity, climate change, semi-forced labor in the global south, to name just a few. Spoken in very general terms, proponents of the status quo today have ceased to argue that the world will become a better place due to their system but rather maintain that everything else would be worse. We believe that this shift is grasped by Adorno's notion of ideology. Ideology today tends to forfeit every element of emphatic promise it might have had during the early liberal era or maybe even – in some parts of the world – throughout the social-corporatist era of new deal politics and the welfare state: Today, ideology increasingly proclaims its own inevitability by narrating itself to be the only rational reaction to 'natural' causes. Immanent critique thus has to *denaturalize these social naturalizations*, i.e.: showing those causes to be in fact not natural but societal – and, by that, itself malleable along with our institutions. This leads us back to the beginning: Immanent critique could make it possible to imagine an end of capitalism – rather than the end of the world.

Table of abbreviations

Adorno T. W.

(1997-2003) *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt a.M.

GS 1 *Philosophische Frühschriften*

GS 6 *Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*

GS 8 *Soziologische Schriften I*

GS 10.1 *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I. Prismen. Ohne Leitbild.*

(1998ff.) *Nachgelassene Schriften*, ed. by Adorno-Archiv

ANS IV.14 *Metaphysik. Begriff und Probleme*

of Althusser revolving around this point see Rooney (1995) as well as the notion of a "closed circle" (RC, 57) of ideology are akin to the second form of immanent critique.

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