CHAPTER V

Gramsci and Althusser on Ideology Compared and Contrasted
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GRAMSCI AND ALTHUSSER ON IDEOLOGY: COMPARED AND CONTRASTED

Nothing would, perhaps be more difficult than a comparison of Gramsci and Althusser, and precisely for the same reason, nothing would be more challenging. These two thinkers belong to two different schools of Marxism, who could be termed as opposed to one another.

Gramsci's conception of ideology is a historicist conception of ideology, whereas Althusser's conception of ideology is a structuralist one. 'Structuralism' goes against 'Historicism'. For Gramsci and Althusser, their polarity in their conceptions were primarily due to the contrariness in historicism and structuralism. Therefore, it becomes essential to know what structuralism is, and what historicism is. Let me briefly explain historicism and structuralism within Marxian framework.

In Marxism, the uses of the term 'historicism' is almost as protean as its original meaning in

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pre-Hegelian German social thought. This has however acquired two main senses.

First one sense of historicism can be seen in Karl Popper. Popper says that Hegel and Marx are guilty of the misguided and noxious view that history has a pattern and a meaning that, if grasped, can be used in the present to predict and fashion future. The conflation of history and philosophy involved in Popper's version of historicism might have been present in Hegel, but it is definitely not the main thrust of Marx. For Marx, history itself had no meaning beyond that which man in their varying stages of development assigned to it. But it is true that there had been subsequent versions of Marxism where allegedly superior insight to the "laws of history" helped to justify and sustain the totalitarian politics Popper associated with historicism. Equally whether Marx's own thought to be judged historicist is bound up with the question of its scientific character, with his critique of Utopianism, and with the status of his predictions.

The second sense of the term, which is currant, and is opposed to the first sense in many
ways is found in the historical relativism of the "return to Hegel" in the words of young Lucacs, Korsch, and to some extent in Gramsci. Korsch, makes a reference to Hegel and asserts that

"We must try to understand every change, development and version of Marxist theory, since its original emergence from the philosophy of German idealism, as a necessary product of its epoch". <2>

In the same sense, Gramsci, in his critique of Bukharin could refer to Marxism as an 'absolute historicism'. The main critique of this version of Marxism is Althusser, Who in the fifth chapter of 'Reading Capital' makes historicism together with humanism, the main object of his attack. It is the nature of Marx's science and the question of his relation to Hegel are what is mainly involved in this debate.

Structuralism is a method of inquiry or a more general philosophy of science which has some affinities to realism and contests the positions of
empiricism and positivism. The chief feature of structuralism is that it treats its object of investigation as a 'system'. System means reciprocal relations among a set of facts, rather than particular facts considered in isolation; its basic concepts according to Piaget are those of totality, self regulation and transformation. In Marxism, the main source of structuralism is from Althusser. According to Althusser, Marx eliminated the human subject from social theory and constructed a 'new science' of the levels of human practice (economic, political, ideological, and scientific) which are inscribed in the structure of social totality. Therefore, Marxist theory is not 'humanist' or 'historical' (in a teleological sense) but is concerned essentially with the structural analysis of social totalities (e.g.: mode of production) and the object of such analysis is to disclose the 'deep structure' which is underlying and responsible in producing the directly observable phenomena in social life. Thus Godlier, in his argument against empiricism and functionalism in anthropology says that for Levi Strauss, as for Marx,

"Structure are not directly visible or observable"
realities, but levels of reality which exist beyond man's visible relations and whose functioning constitutes the deeper logic of a social system". <4>

This has not only influenced Marxist anthropology, but also Marxist political economy, where his analysis of the Commodity in Capital is seen as an exemplary instance of structural analysis.

The relation of Marxist structuralism to historical studies has given rise to much controversy. Althusser says that

"Marx regards contemporary society (and every other past form of society) both as a 'result and society', and the problem of the result, i.e., of the historical production of a given mode of production, of a given 'social formations'". <5>

has to be posed and solved.

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However, in practice, he has paid no attention to historical change.

The rejection by Althusser and his followers of any causal influence of human agents, and the assertion of a rigorous structural determinism, has aroused criticism, particularly in the dispute between Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband where Miliband argues that this 'super determinism', with its exclusive stress on 'objective relations, disregards and obscures very important differences between forms of the Capitalistic State which range from a Democratic constitutional State to military dictatorships and Fascism. Structuralism is totally opposed to the Marxist visions of Lucacs, Gramsci and the Frankfurt school. They lay much stress on the role of human consciousness and action in social life, and base their thought upon a conception of history in which the idea of progress is implicit.

However it can be said that structuralism has given fresh expression to the long standing tension between two poles of Marxist thought, which is conceived at one extreme as a rigorous science of
society, at the other as a humanist doctrine. In this connection, it may be worth quoting Gramsci. He says that structuralism contains in itself all the elements

"needed to give life to an integral practical organisation of society, that is, to become a total integral civilization". <6>

However opposed historicism and structuralism may be, something is strikingly common in both Gramsci and Althusser. It is the 'spirit' with which they set forth an analysis of the concept of ideology.

We have seen earlier in Chapter II, how Marx and Engels treat the concept of ideology. Later, in the beginning of Chapter III, we have also seen the innovations that Lenin finds in a concept of ideology. Marx treats ideology only in its negative sense, as false consciousness. Ideology thus had been functioning in the interest of bourgeoisie only. With Lenin, the positive connotation of ideology began and started to unfold.
The negative conception of ideology in Marx has posed a problem in front of both Gramsci and Althusser. They both wanted to help Marx. It is here, that we find their spirit as strikingly common. They both were trying to help Marx in their own way, and obviously enough, their ways were different; drastically different from one another.

Gramsci wanted to 'supplement' Marxist theory of ideology, whereas in Althusser, the effort was rather to rectify Marx's negative conception of ideology.

Gramsci makes a distinction between two ideologies. One, historically organic ideologies, and two, arbitrarily created ideologies. He says that

".........distinguish between historically organic ideologies........ and ideologies that are arbitrarily, rationalistic or willed". <7>
For Gramsci, historically organic ideologies are necessary to a given structure. One may recall that he maintains a distinction between structure and superstructure. While contradiction forms the base, every other expression appears in the superstructure. However, Gramsci favours historically organic ideologies, because they are class ideologies, proletarian ideologies. They are true expressions of the real nature of reality, i.e., contradiction. Such ideologies are extremely necessary for revolution, because only they can function as a lever to social change. Masses are to be educated in such proletarian ideologies. Gramsci even feels the need of creating a revolutionary brand of intellectuals who are to educate the masses in proletarian ideology. Only such ideologies can have what he calls as 'mass adhesion'. So, historically organic ideologies are akin to Lenin's scientific ideology. They are far from being false consciousness; and on the contrary, they are full of consciousness. On the other hand, Gramsci speaks about arbitrarily 'willed' ideologies. They are artificially created, designed to conceal reality. They serve the class interest of bourgeoisie, and become instrumental in exploitation of the masses. Such arbitrarily willed or created ideologies necessarily conceals the true
nature of reality, that is contradiction. Such ideologies make man's consciousness an inverted one, representing an inverted world of reality.

Gramsci feels that Marx had not made such distinction of arbitrarily created ideologies and historically organic ideology. In Marxist analysis, he is more concerned with ideology which conceals contradiction, for his purpose of understanding reality. Marx very directly confronts with arbitrarily willed ideologies as functioning as a very powerful screen between reality and man's consciousness. So, Marx was working hard to envisage a situation, where such blocking screens would cease to exist. In the process, he does not make or maintain the distinction that Gramsci makes between two ideologies.

As a result, Marx was giving the common name "ideology" to both historically organic ideologies and arbitrarily willed ideologies. In giving the common name, Marx was much concerned with the latter version of ideology, as a result he used the term ideology in its negative connotation only.
Therefore, it can be seen that Gramsci's distinction of 'historically organic ideology' and 'arbitrarily willed ideology' is aimed at supplementing Marxist theory of ideology.

On the other hand, Althusser was trying to 'rectify' Marx. He finds Marx to be using the term ideology in negative sense, and felt that Marx was wrong. In tracing this 'mistake' of Marx, Althusser finds a difference between young Marx and later Marx. Here, Althusser comes forward with his theory of 'epistemological break' or division. Althusser's effort too is of freeing Marx from his concept of ideology as 'false consciousness. He says that

"There is an unequivocal 'epistemological break in Marx's work......". /8\
of young Marx is ambiguous and of no value. Marx has not yet come of age. Only works of later Marx, which he calls as scientific Marx is of value and importance. Marx's theory of ideology was written before the period of the break; and therefore, it is not of any value. Before epistemological break, Marx was ambiguous.

This is how Althusser rectifies Marx. He gives the theory of epistemological division and discards everything before as useless. Before epistemological break, Marx was committing mistakes, and therefore his theory of ideology too is nothing more than a mistake. After asserting this, Althusser goes on to give his own theory of ideology.

Althusser attacks historicism and humanism together. This has given rise to various debates such as whether Marx was a humanist or revolutionary.
However, such disputes are trivial to my mind. In the early works, Marx was seen highly emotional and as a hard-liner humanist. Like Buddha himself Marx was pained and concerned with human sufferings. Buddha left behind everything and went on searching for a solution to suffering. He went on searching until he became enlightened, and then came to the society with his philosophy of practising detachment etc. Analogically Marx too was, pained, bewildered at the sight of human suffering. Unlike Buddha, Marx set forth finding a solution for man's problems concretely. Marx was trying to find a situation where man's suffering would end. In other words, he was trying to find a situation where complete human emancipation is concretely done. Siddhartha was a humanist and later became Buddha. He became the one who attained 'Nirvana' and 'Thadhagatha'. In the same Althusserian spirit, one can say that there was an 'epistemological break' in Buddha too. And, maintaining the spirit, can any one say that the humanist Buddha was 'of no value'? Such expressions would be most jarring to human ears. What made Siddhartha into Buddha is precisely his love for mankind. Similarly, what made Marx revolutionary is the precise reason of Marxian humanism. To treat

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Marx into water tight compartments of epistemological division will be wrong.

Althusser's treatment of Marx into ideological and scientific Marx is against the spirit of Marx himself. Althusser does not give any proper scope for "intellectual evolution" in Marx. Even if we allow him to maintain the idea of an 'epistemological break', it can't be neglected that he fails to perceive the nexus between young Marx and scientific Marx, the connecting link.

Thus Althusser's effort of freeing Marx from his negative conception of ideology has done grave injustice to Marx and resulted in a mistake unlike Gramsci. Gramsci has really succeeded in supplementing Marx.

The prime objective of analysis in Gramsci can be seen as his urge towards bringing forth a revolution. As against bourgeois ideology, Gramsci talks of a proletarian ideology. While bourgeois ideology conceals the true nature of reality, proletarian ideology does the opposite, it reveals contradiction and make people aware of the true
nature of reality. For Gramsci, such brand of ideology becomes revolutionary brand of ideology. Towards revolution, he feels the need of organising both working classes and peasants. He contemplates of linking peasantry with the workers. So in mobilising the masses, he feels the tremendous requirement of a revolutionary ideology. Such revolutionary ideology ought to be spread among the masses, and here he feels the requirements of intellectuals. A revolutionary brand of intellectuals who would educate the masses in proletarian ideology.

Gramsci is a man of praxis and a revolutionary. His entire theory has just one objective, that of finding ways and means of bringing revolution. But in Althusser, this is lacking. Althusser's analysis and theory remains only at intellectual level, which has a pure academic nature. His theory does not go outside the flexibility of the framework of academic interest.

For this precise reason, Antonio Gramsci has become most popular among revolutionaries, particularly, in India, among the radical leftists. The Marxist–Leninist brand of radicals in India depend much on Gramsci in their various attempts
towards social change. What fascinates this people are Gramsci's attempt to bring peasantry and the factory workers together. In an agrarian country like India, Gramsci and Mao thus became particularly significant. Althusser, for his lack of revolutionary explanations, could not become popular among men of action, at practical level.

More crucial and of great importance is another lapse of Althusser. He does not take note of a very fundamental point in Marxism, that is the role of contradiction shaping society, history and even future. This is a very important lapse from Althusser. His structuralism has or could not have any place for such a fundamental concept in Marxian world of thinking and doing.

True to the Marxian spirit, Gramsci talks of freedom and necessity. Speaking about freedom and necessity, Maurice Cornforth says,

"On the contrary, with Communism this will have taken place, as Engels expressed it, 'humanities leap from necessity to the realm of freedom' and
that means that elemental conflict characteristic of the realm of necessity will give place to changes controlled and planned". <9>

For Gramsci too, revolution is the first step towards freedom from necessity. He says,

"In the reign of "freedom" thought and ideas can no longer be born on the terrain of contradictions and necessity of struggle". <10>

Ideology cannot be existing in the reign of freedom, according to Gramsci. It has to disappear, it can no longer be born. Ideology will wither away. This happens not only to ideology, but also to every forms of expressions in the superstructure. Superstructure in Gramsci is the expression of the base, which is contradiction. In a classless society, contradictions will not exist, it will cease to be. As a result, all expressions in the superstructure also will cease to exist;
they all are bound to disappear. For Gramsci, even Marxism is an expression in the superstructure, because it is the theory of contradiction. But Marxism, though is an expression in the superstructure, it is not like other expressions. Marxism is far more superior to other superstructural expressions. It is far more superior, because, he says that, it is the most conscious expression. Nonetheless, Marxism is also is bound to disappear, as it is also an expression of contradiction. He says,

".........the whole of philosophy of praxis may fall away in a unified world...........".<11>

On the other hand, what Althusser presents is structural determinism. Ideology is an integral part of every society. It is a part of the social system. For Althusser, society could have not functioned without ideology at all. Treatment of society as a system implies it. In any system, unless all systems are OK, it can not function. Ideology, Politics and economics are structural
aspect of society. As a result, there was ideology in every societies, and there will be ideology in every societies. Even after class societies have ceased to exist, and even if, there is only society, there will still be ideology. For Althusser, it is logically inconsistent to think of a society without ideology. He says only societies with ideology could have made that Utopian imagination of a society without it possible.

Althusser can be seen of borrowing the expression of "cement" from Gramsci. Gramsci speaks of ideology as a cement that unites proletariats and the intellectuals. Althusser borrowing the 'cement function' idea from Gramsci say that ideology functions as cement in unifying different aspect of social building.

However, when Gramsci says that not only ideology, but also Marxism will cease to exist in a world which is classless, Althusser says the opposite, that ideology is an integral part of the society and will always continue to exist.
Althusser is also found of speaking of two types of ideologies, but much different from the distinction that Gramsci makes. For Althusser, there is a general theory of ideology and a particular one. General ideology is present in every society, whereas particular ideologies are ideologies found in class societies with an additional function, that of dominating. Althusser's theory of particular ideology can be seen as a 'near concept' to Gramsci's idea of hegemony, but in a much different way. For Althusser, even the particular ideology is related in a way of reciprocity to general ideology.

Both Gramsci and Althusser attempts to make their own understandings of history. For Gramsci

"The philosophy of an age is a process of combination of philosophies, intellectual groups, the masses etc. It culminates in an overall trend, which becomes a norm of collective action and becomes concrete, complete history".

(12)
And further he says that history and philosophy joins to form a historical bloc. So for Gramsci, history is containing everything and is full of life.

Althusser on the other hand says the following.

"Subjects of history are human societies. Historical complexities can be reduced to three. Economy, politics and ideology". <13>

and

".....ideology is not an aberration or contingent excrescence of history | it is a structure essential to the historical life of societies". <14>

Thus, for him, even the historical 'complexities' as he calls, is structural. They are economy, politics and ideology. Further, as a result, ideology has no history, it has nothing to do with history. It is a structure in the social system and history has no say in it.

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When Gramsci attempts find a historical base for ideology, Althusser, on the other hand gives a definite expression of material base for ideology. He says that ideology are materially existing in Ideological State Apparatus. Speaking about the material existence of ideology, he says,

"...an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material". <15>

So, when Gramsci gives the superstructural expression of ideology, Althusser says that it has a material existence. When Gramsci says that proletarian ideology is the most conscious expression of reality like philosophy of praxis itself, Althusser calls ideology as profundity unconscious. To quote him,

"It is profoundly unconscious even when it presents itself in a reflected form as in pre Marxist philosophy". <16>
For Gramsci the capital society is characterised by an acute, overt or covert class struggle. Each class uses ideas as a means to promote its interest. The pursuit of truth, therefore, comes to be replaced by the battle of ideologies. It is only when the class disappear and mankind is unified that truth and objectivity are possible. As he puts it, 'the struggle for objectivity........ is the same as the struggle for the cultural unification of human race'. This raises the question as to how we are to choose between the competing class ideologies. Gramsci is vague on this crucial question. He seems to give the impression that an ideology which meets the needs of the masses accelerates the movement towards a classless society, and provides the basis of a 'more homogenous, more coherent, more efficient practice' which is more 'rational'. He says that mass adhesion or non adhesion is a critical test of the rationality and historicity of the modes of thinking. The proletarian ideology satisfies this criteria much better than the bourgeois's ideology. Therefore, proletarian ideology is superior. In his view, Marx's thought is basically a definition and articulation of the ways of satisfying the fundamental interests of the
masses. It is not entirely clear whether he sees Marx's idea merely as a progressive ideology or as offering a true scientific account of the capitalist society.

For Lenin and Althusser, capitalism can only be grasped from a particular class position. Capitalism as such consists in the reality of exploitation of wage labour power. The bourgeois point of view covers up the reality, whereas the proletarian point of view faces up to it. As he puts it, it is the only viewpoint that renders visible the reality of exploitation, which constitute the whole of capitalism. Marx has adopted proletarian point of view as he knew it. For Althusser, it was by moving over to absolutely unprecedented proletarian theoretical class positions that Marx achieved the effectiveness of the theoretical conjunction from which emerge the science of history. Marxism is the theoretical exploration of the social reality visible from the standpoint of the proletariat. Since this is so, Althusser says that Marx's work can not be understood until and unless one assumes the proletarian class position.

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When Lenin's scientific ideology had to face difficulties with spontaneous consciousness, Gramsci's philosophy of praxis expresses a historical spontaneous direction. For him education does not suppress but it purifies.

However, his identification of 'subjectivity', 'superstructure', and 'necessity' also differs from that of Marx's position. Gramsci locates freedom in superstructure, which is a subjective sphere which surpasses all necessities. In his conception of civil societies too, there is a difference. In Marx, it is located in the economic base, and in Gramsci it assumes only a superstructure character.

Althusser tries to reconcile the general function which structural functionalism gives to the 'value system' of every society and the function which Marx assigns to ideology. The compromise between the necessity of social cohesion in general and class domination in particular. Instead of proposing the question of social cohesion, he proposes the question of reproduction of relations of production.
In Althusser, just as his theory of ideology in general looses its historical character, science also is alienated of its connection to social contradictions. In his Leninist formulation, science came from without to rescue the spontaneous ideological consciousness of the working class. In the theoretical formulation of Althusser, science constitutes itself by breaking with ideological knowledge at the moment of its inception. In both cases science is located above class struggle. In Leninist formula, spontaneous consciousness appeared as ideological as the result of the domination of the bourgeois ideology. IN his second formula ideology is just the material basis for science to emerge; the opposition between science and ideology becomes an abstract one.

Though Gramsci is a historicist and Althusser a structuralist, and though structuralism and historicism are opposed to one another, they both have a common starting point with reference to the concept of ideology. It is Marx's usage of ideology in the negative sense; only that had made them to philosophize on the concept of ideology. The both felt that ideology is not only negative, it is positive also. They both wanted to correct Marx; Gramsci by supplementing and Althusser by
rectifying. But their theories happen to be poles apart; and as a result much differences are seen in these thinkers. Althusser's mistake became more conspicuous, and stand in need of clarity.
NOTES


11. Ibid. p.407.

12. Ibid. p.345.


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