

Twenty-Nine Theses on Language

- I The property that marks human beings as unique in nature is their capacity to regulate their own relationship with the material world.¹ Constitutive to this capacity is their capacity to *think*. The sense-impression that is their immediate contact with the material world is not only processed in the form of instinctual perception but is also manipulated so as to be able to form an abstract and theoretical representation of material reality in *thought*.²
- II Thought may be considered in this sense as both this *processing* of sense-impression and *processed* sense-impression: respectively, thought-as-process and thought-as-product.
- III All human sense-impressions are processed. But the immediate perception of, say, pain, of colours, of sounds, involve the processing of external stimuli to the form of *instinctual* mental responses: in these cases the processing itself is not carried out with the processor being aware of its intellectual conditions and mechanisms. If we can call the totality of processed sense-impression *knowledge*, some knowledge is then clearly reflexive, and takes the form of instinct (be this learned instinct or no). Thought-as-product is thus not only merely processed sense-impression: the theoretical nature of thought-as-product means that the sense impression which has been processed has to have been *consciously* processed, i.e. that the processor has to be able to be aware of the mental conditions under which that processing occurs.
- IV We thus need to distinguish between that part of knowledge which is merely instinctual, and that which is formed through self-conscious processing, through thought. This conscious part of knowledge will be here designated as *ideology*, which is, by this definition, that theoretical (mental) reconstruction of material reality fashioned through thought-as-process in the shape of that part of knowledge which is thought-as-product. Ideology is, therefore, conceptualised reality, imagined (*not* imaginary) reality, reality as theoretically reconstructed as thought.
- V The Kantian problematic of the inherent unknowability of the noumenal realm is a false problematic in that it opposes the realm of the noumenal ('things-in-themselves') to that of the phenomenal (sense-impressions) as a formal opposition. But phenomenal knowledge is phenomenal not because it *excludes* noumenal knowledge but in virtue of being *how* the noumenal *is* known: 'direct' (i.e. unmediated by the processing of sense-impression) knowledge of things-in-themselves is indeed impossible, but it is impossible because it conceives knowledge-in-itself as separate from the active human subject, i.e. it is not just impossible but a contradiction in terms.³ The opposition between the

¹ 'Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities within nature, and subjects the play of forces to his own sovereign power.' Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.283.

² 'A spider conducts operations which resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realises his own purpose in those materials.' *Capital*, p. 284.

³ 'The real is by necessity empirically imperceptible, concealing itself in the phenomenal categories [...] it offers spontaneously for inspection.' Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1978), p. 69.

noumenal and the phenomenal may be real, but it is a *dialectical* opposition, the content of which is given by human engagement with material reality, i.e. by practice.

- VI The degree of conformance between reality and its ideological reconstruction – which may be slight or substantial – is a question which thus cannot be resolved in thought alone.⁴ Given that ideology is a theoretical *reconstruction* of reality ideology can neither conform 100 per cent to reality nor diverge 100 per cent from it. The relation between ideology and reality is therefore *relative*, and is determined by *practice*.⁵ An ideological representation of reality can be said to conform to reality, to be ‘true’, insofar as human practice (including ideological practice) is informed by this representation, and ‘false’ insofar as it is hindered: i.e. the question of truth and falsehood is not an absolute one but a question of degree of approximation. In this way the bridge between the realms of the noumenal and the phenomenal is bridged neither by the empiricist fallacy nor by the idealist one, but by the mediation of practice.⁶
- VII Ideology is an act of *production*: in its formation raw material is worked into a product through human labour.
- VIII If the conscious, self-aware, processing of sensorial stimuli is what gives us ideology, i.e. ‘conscious knowledge’, the intellectual space necessary for self-awareness – where self-awareness ‘resides’, intellectually speaking – is delimited by that *previously-acquired knowledge* to which new knowledge is accreted. In other words, the self-aware processing of sense-impression requires previously acquired knowledge to exist: i.e. the existence of thought-as-process requires the existence of previously carried through thought-as process. To put this another way, while the raw material for ideology is sense-impression – for all human contact with material reality takes the form of sense-impression – ideology is not only not predominantly worked up directly from immediately-acquired sense-impression but needs, in order to come into existence, the existence of sense-impression already worked-up in the form of *previously* consciously processed sense impression, i.e. as *already existing* knowledge.
- IX Knowledge therefore presupposes social dialogue, i.e. dialogue between people who are ‘socially organised’.⁷
- X This is entirely consonant with the fact that the way that human beings interact with and regulate their relation with the material world is through social, not individual, practice, whether this is

⁴ ‘[...] [T]he examination of knowledge can only be carried out by an act of knowledge. [...] But to seek to know before we can know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim.’ G W F Hegel, ‘Introduction’, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sl/slintro.htm>> [27 June, 2007]

⁵ It is here that the Althusserian project breaks down. By defining ideology as ‘a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.’ (Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)’, in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 162), Althusser implies that ideology is *delusional*, that our ideological conceptualisation of the real is false, and not the least problematic aspect of such a notion of ‘false consciousness’ is that it implies the possibility of a *non*-false one (demarcated off in the Althusserian system as ‘science’). Yet this opposition between false (as opposed to true) representations of reality is mistaken, which is why Althusser is unable to provide objective criteria for distinguishing between the two realms. The fact is that all human consciousness of reality is mediated by theoretical conceptualisation (i.e. is ‘ideological’ in my use of the word) by definition. The irony is that the possibility of there being some unequivocally ‘correct’ way of contemplating the world is precisely the very empiricist trap that Althusser’s intervention is ostensibly aimed at discrediting.

⁶ ‘The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. [...] The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.’ Karl Marx, ‘On Feuerbach’, in *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 422.

⁷ V N Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 12.

perceived as such or not.⁸ To put this another way, the existence of human practice implies not only the existence of human engagement with material reality but human engagement with the material reality through *social practice*.⁹ Human production is necessarily *social* production, even if it is carried out by individuals.

- XI Therefore the ideological element of knowledge – the product of thought-as-process – insofar as it is founded on the existence of already-acquired thought-as-product is by the same token founded on the existence of *social practice* – the interaction of people with other people within a given social structure and in given material conditions.
- XII Thought is an act of social production as any other act of human production is in that it is carried out by individuals in human engagement with material reality through social practice,¹⁰ and in the production of thought the relations between people – ‘relations of thought-production’ – are *communicative* relations. But the ideological representation of material reality in thought – thought-as-product – is *constitutive* of human practice overall: ‘communicative relations of production’ do not form an autonomous ‘level’ of practice *within* human practice in general but enter constitutively *into* human social practice. Therefore, human practice in general is not only social practice, it must be *communicative* social practice too.
- XIII This social communicative practice is carried out through *language*, here defined as verbal communication between people.
- XIV What is communicated by language is meaning; but what is communicated in communication – i.e. social communicative practice – is already worked-up thought-as-product, i.e. ideological knowledge. Therefore, meaning is thought-as-product realising itself *as* language.¹¹
- XV Not only can we say that language cannot occur without meaning, i.e. without there being thought to be communicated, but also that meaning itself has no existence outside of language. Language therefore does not *convey* meaning: language *is* meaning.
- XVI Language – i.e. meaning – is not given, it is made. Meaning, as any other product of human labour, is therefore, as much with respect to its content as to its form, not fixed, but in function of the conditions of its production both in theory and in practice potentially infinitely malleable
- XVII Language and thought-as-product are mutually preconditional: without thought-as-product there is no language and without language there is no thought-as-product. This apparent paradox is resolved when we see thought and language as *different expressions of the same substance*. Language is thought-as-

⁸ ‘Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of connections, relations in which these individuals stand with respect to each other.’ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 265.

⁹ ‘In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.’ Karl Marx, ‘Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, in *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 425.

¹⁰ ‘The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. [...] Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process.’ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 47.

¹¹ ‘Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness [...]; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.’ *The German Ideology*, p. 51.

product-in-communicative-self-realisation; thought-as-product is accreted-communicative-social-practice: thought and language are thus no more than two forms of existence of a single entity – *consciousness*.

- XVIII** Consciousness, whether in the form of thought (language-at-social-rest) or language (thought-in-social-movement) is the mental product of the socially active human subject, i.e. *both* thought and language are acts of production. Consciousness thus derives not from passive contemplation of reality but through human engagement of that reality *through* social practice.¹²
- XIX** Consciousness therefore presupposes its own existence. But consciousness enters into every aspect of human behaviour: consciousness – language and thought – is not just uniquely and intrinsically human, it is *constitutively* human.¹³ The question of the *origins* of consciousness is therefore not a question of human practice but rather one of human evolution.
- XX** If the essential *content* of language is ideological, meaning as thought-as-product realising itself as language, the *form* taken by language is verbal, i.e. it is composed of those entities formed through speech, or entities derived from speech (in which definition ‘speech’ refers to those acts of human vocalisation which are intended, either potentially or actually, at communication, at the conveyance of thought, of consciously processed sense-impression; and ‘speech-derived’ as referring to those acts in which speech entities are represented in non-vocalised ways, be this graphically (e.g. writing), physically (e.g. signing), electro-mechanically (e.g. Morse), etc.).
- XXI** These verbal entities which are combined in language (which we can, without committing ourselves to the term’s conventional use, designate as ‘signs’) have both a *formal* existence, and a *referential* one. The formal manifestation of the sign is material, physical, and consists in the particular combination of phonemes of which it is made, whether as such or as graphically or otherwise, directly or indirectly, represented; while its referential manifestation consists in a *concept*, i.e. an ideological representation of non-conceptual reality fashioned through and in thought.
- XXII** This referential content of the sign is its ‘meaning’, and its meaning is given by how it represents what it purports to refer to. But meaning, insofar as it is composed of the reconstruction by and in thought of non-verbal reality, is ideological. Thus the referential – ideological – content of the sign and that aspect of reality it purports to depict are *independent* entities. There is no necessary correlation between this verbal ideology and any one or other part of non-verbal reality other than that wrought by convention, but convention in the realm of the human is itself not given but itself wrought from and through social practice. Signs are, in this sense, outside of practice, *undefinable* – words are, naturally, only defined by other words, and language by just more language. Just as the truth of thought is determined by practice-in-general, meaning is truly manifested only in communicative practice, i.e. language-in-use. The relation between the sign and its non-verbal referent is a social product, mediated by practice.
- XXIII** This means that the relation between the form of a sign and its referential properties is arbitrary in the sense that there can be no necessary correlation between certain material formal features and certain referential content (which is not to say that this relation is necessarily always the product of contingency). But it also means that the relation between form and referentiality is *not* arbitrary in the

¹² ‘The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. [...] Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. [...] Feuerbach, not satisfied with abstract thinking, wants contemplation; but he does not conceive sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity.’ ‘On Feuerbach’, pp. 421-2.

¹³ Which is to say that while social being does indeed determine social consciousness without social consciousness there can be no social being.

conventional (saussurian) sense: given that the sign is not a given entity but the product of social human practice, in function of the conditions of its production it is, in all its aspects, therefore both mutable and in constant socially-determined flux.

- XXIV** The sign, although manifestationally simultaneously both material and ideological, i.e. social, is *essentially* social: although the physical manifestation of the sign is a necessary part of its existence this physical manifestation, the sign's form, is the physical manifestation of a sign not in virtue of its materiality but in virtue of the sign's socially-constructed ideological content realising itself in and as language.
- XXV** While language-in-general is the inter-human verbal communication of consciousness in the form of thought-as-product effected through the deployment of signs, a single given language assumes a set of semantic and syntactic rules which function to govern the way in which signs may be deployed such that this communication may be effected. A single, given, language, then, is that self-manifestation of the specific and existing set of rules that govern the configuration of a specific and existing system of signs through the arrangement of signs at a concrete moment and place, a self-manifestation which differentiates it both diachronically and synchronically from other ones (including itself).
- XXVI** A single, given language is thus none other than a local, concrete and practical instance of language-in-general.
- XXVII** The rules that govern a language do not pre-exist verbal communication but rather are made and remade *in* and *by* verbal communication. Languages, as products of human labour, are not only potentially infinitely malleable but permanently in transformation: the whole of the set of rules that govern a language will never be exactly the same even between individual instances of language (just as one material object is never exactly identical with another object or even itself). The only identity a set of language rules can have is with itself *outside of time and use*: i.e. a language is unchanging – fixed and given - only outside of communicative practice.
- XXVIII** If the property common to all given languages is that given by being local instances of language-in-general, for any linguistics to succeed as a linguistics it needs to be an epistemo-ontology as well.¹⁴ [14] It is precisely because it failed to appreciate *this* fact that the Chomskian project of linguistic 'deep structure' failed: i.e. the problem is not that there is no deep structure but that such a structure can never be a simple linguistic phenomenon distinct from human thought-in-general.
- XXIX** Language has no independent existence outside the realm of verbal communication itself: the representation *through* language *of* language (including the representation effected here) bears the same relation to its object as that between ideology-in-general and reality-in-general, and is therefore not nor ever could be equivalent to language itself. A linguistics considered conceptually divorced from socially-mediated human practice will thus remain the chimera it always has been.

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¹⁴ 'A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world.' Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 21.