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Introduction to Michel Pêcheux's "Dare to Think and Dare to Rebel! Ideology, Resistance, Class Struggle"

Peter Schöttler

The following text has both greater and lesser history. The greater history is the project of developing a theory of ideology on the basis of and within the framework of the Historical Materialism in which Michel Pêcheux participated from the time of his first article, published under the pseudonym "Thomas Herbert" in *Cahiers pour l'analyse* (no. 2, 1966) and which explored above all in his masterwork *Language, Semantics, Ideology (Les Vérités de La Palice, 1975)*. Unfortunately, this work, initially entitled *The Münchhausen Effect (L'Effet Münchhausen)*, after the baron who pulled himself out of a swamp by his own hair, did not have an easy reception. Some readers considered it too close to the very "bourgeois social sciences" that Pêcheux sought to criticize. And did not the famous tripartition that he proposed of identification/counter-identification/disidentification, allow an analysis of ideologies and discourses that had little to do with the economic and which thus appeared theoretically and politically "dangerous"? Of course, Pêcheux sought to ground his critique in of identificatory ideology, represented above all by semantics in a revived psychoanalysis, but did he not, in spite of everything remain prisoner of a "psycho-sociology" and a theory of the imaginary incompatible with the dominant ideas of Dr. Lacan? That finally his conception of ideology and his methodology of the automatic analysis of discourse was applicable to the social sciences—seen particularly in his experimentation with a critical reading of the "Rapport Mansholt"¹—seemed to his critics (who were sometimes his personal friends) particularly revealing. Beware of theories that are too convincing !

¹ Michel Pêcheux, Claudine Haroche, Paul Henry, Jean-Pierre Poitou, «Le rapport Mansholt: un cas d'ambiguïté idéologique», *Technologies, Idéologies, Pratiques*, 2 (1979), p. 1-83. The text was in fact written entirely by Pêcheux.

Now the lesser history. I met Michel Pêcheux for the first time in 1974. At that time the works of Althusser had hardly begun to be known and discussed in (West) Germany. We quickly became friends. Michel loaned me the manuscript of *L'Effet Münchhausen* and prepared an excerpt of twenty pages which was supposed to have appeared as an article in a collection that Gerhard Plumpe and I were preparing for the publisher Suhrkamp. Although we had a contract, the book never appeared ; the retreat of the human sciences had already begun. But two years later we had our collection entitled "Positionen," with a small Left publisher "VSA" in Hamburg. The first three volumes to appear were Lecourt's *Lyssenko*, Balibar's *Dictatorship of the Proletariat* and a collection of essays by Althusser connected to the Ideological State Apparatuses. We were a small group of Doctoral students and recent PhDs at Bochum University in the Ruhr region, young philosophers, historians and literary scholars. Michel came several times to give talks either at the university or to our group. He also spoke German quite well, having been a visiting professor of French at the University of Göttingen. Moreover, he had worked on some of Husserl's most difficult texts for a *mémoire de maîtrise* in 1961 written under the direction of Georges Canguilhem. The present essay was itself written in the "German" context.

As will be seen the article offers a kind of critical assessment of the conception of ideology Michel upheld through the end of the seventies, above all the period between *Language, Semantic and Ideology (Les Vérités de La Palice)*, 1975) and *La Langue introuvable* (1981), before undertaking new projects, particularly around the notion of the "archive." Michel wrote the essay at the beginning of 1978 for a collective work that we were preparing for the collection "Positionen." The collection was intended to respond to certain German publications, namely those associated with "Merve Verlag" on the one hand and "Argument Verlag" on the other, that represented opposing positions in certain French debates, whether the ultra-left (e.g. Rancière's critique of Althusser) or that of "orthodoxy" (the work of Wolfgang Fritz Haug and his students in the journal *Das Argument*). The title we had then proposed was characterized by a disarming simplicity : *Ideologischer Klassenkampf* (ideological class struggle) and Michel's contribution originally bore the emblematic title of "Idéologie prolétarienne et théorie marxiste

dans la lutte idéologique des classes" (proletarian ideology and Marxist theory in the ideological class struggle). But while a related issue of the journal *Alternative* appeared in 1978², the book already announced as forthcoming was never published. Why? I must admit that I don't remember the exact details, but I believe that it was the publisher who was hesitant about it and who had postponed its publication several times, even as the German participants themselves (us) were increasingly unsure about the validity of the project as such. . . . Although nearly all the texts (with the exception of the present essay by Pecheux) were later published. Even an abbreviated version of the introduction written by Christiane Kammler, Gerhard Plumpe and me was published (together with an excerpt from *Languge, Sematics and Ideology* in the issue of *Alternative* mentioned above. Similarly, my chapter on "The Worker's Movement and juridical ideology," a part of which I presented at a seminar conducted by Pêcheux, Michel Plon et Paul Henry at the EHESS in 1976³, appeared in a Dutch journal and later in German and other languages.⁴ Only, the remarkable text by Christiane Kammler and Gerhard Plumpe on Brecht's *Three Penny Lawsuit : a Sociological Experiment* examining the relation between literature, cinema and juridical ideology remains unpublished.

At the beginning of 1984, following Pêcheux's suicide in December 1983, it seemed to us that publishing his text on ideological struggle, which best represented his personal approach and even more his perpetual attempt to combine Marxism, psychoanalysis and discourse theory. With the agreement of his widow, we produced a German translation that appeared in two parts in February and June 1984 in the journal *KultuRRRevolution* (Cultural Revo-

² *Münchhausen-Effekt. Von der Materialität der Ideologie* [Effet Münchhausen. De la matérialité de l'idéologie], *Alternative*, no. 118 (1978).

³ Cf. Mالدیدیر 1990, p. 47.

⁴ Cf. The English version: "Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky as Critics of 'Legal Socialism'", *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, 14 (1986), p. 1-32.

lution) founded and edited by the Marxist Germanist Jürgen Link.⁵ As its subtitle indicates (*Zeitschrift für angewandte Diskurstheorie*, Journal for Applied Discourse Theory), this was a journal (which still exists) devoted to critique, analysis and discourse theory, and at a time when the term "discourse" in the French sense of the word was not yet current (and therefore banalized) in German. Not to mention the fact that at that time the concept of ideology was still used either in the sense accorded it by Orthodox Stalinist Marxism (like that of East Germany) or in the Hegelian sense of the young Lukács, the Frankfurt School, etc. The 1978 article published here attempted precisely to develop a conception of the "ideological class struggle" that, by refusing the false alternatives of functionalism and historicism, insisted emphatically on the contradictions and dissymetries characteristic of the ideological terrain as such. It is for this precise reason that, according to Pêcheux, the "traits" of the dominant ideology are always found in the dominated ideology, just as the dominant ideology is never itself free from contradictions. In fact the greatest difficulty that faces revolutionary struggle is how to take advantage of these contradictions without developing in symmetry with them. In this struggle it is not enough to "throw the ball back" against or "to reverse" the existing practices and institutions and use them against the forces of domination—which is what Pêcheux meant by the term "counter-identification"; it is necessary each time to change terrain, and therefore to find or even create dissymetry or asymetry, that is, what Pêcheux called "disidentification." While examples to support this thesis can be found in the history of the revolutionary movements, there can be little doubt that in most cases the dominant classes have succeeded in "dominating" revolt not only through repression but also through ideological "recuperation."⁶

⁵ See the site: <http://zeitschrift-kulturrevolution.de/>. Note that the same review would publish an issue in honor of Althusser's seventieth birthday: <http://zeitschrift-kulturrevolution.de/product/ein-denken-an-den-grenzen-louis-althusser-zum-70-geburtstag> (no. 20, décembre 1988).

⁶ In 1977-78, at the very moment we were discussing these problems with Michel Pêcheux, I was finishing a PhD dissertation in history, in which I sought, based on the example of the French "Bourses du travail," to demonstrate the difficulties trade unions encountered when they agreed to act as employment agencies as part of the "social policy" of the Third Republic. Naturally, I cited Michel's text and would dedicate my book to him when it appeared. See Peter Schöttler, *Naissance des Bourses du travail. Un appareil idéologique d'État à la fin du XIXe siècle*, Paris, PUF, 1985.

The photos of Michel Pêcheux accompanying this essay were taken in 1977 by Doris Schöttler-Boll (1945-2015).



