

Historical tradition and ideological thought in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

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Abstract. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx explores historical tradition and ideology in the context of the turbulent political landscape of 19th-century France. He provides a detailed analysis of how these elements shaped the mentality of the peasant class and facilitated Louis Bonaparte's coup d'état. At the same time, Marx reveals how the bourgeoisie, through historical imitation, deceived themselves and others to preserve their own interests. The illusory effect of historical tradition and ideology reflects the inheritability of ideology, indicating the need to establish a proletarian ideology to break the negative influences brought about by backward ideas.

Keywords: Marx, the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, historical tradition and ideology

1. Introduction

The political landscape of 19th-century Europe was turbulent, with immense revolutionary waves challenging the traditional social order. After the February Revolution of 1848, the Second French Republic was established. People hoped that this new republic would bring freedom and equality to society and advance historical progress. However, history's course was fraught with setbacks. The bourgeois provisional government implemented policies hostile to the proletariat, which sparked the June Uprising, brutally suppressed by the ruling class. Amid this chaotic class struggle, the small peasants, driven by a strong "Napoleonist ideology" and dissatisfaction with the republic, caused the bourgeois republican faction to fail in elections. Louis Bonaparte, nephew of former French Emperor Napoleon and a political charlatan, won the overwhelming majority of peasant votes and was elected President of the French Republic. He subsequently established the Second French Empire, crowned himself emperor, and restored imperial rule to France—pushing history into regression. Living through this era, Marx, with keen insight and profound thought, wrote *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, which meticulously analyzes the economic interests and political demands of different strata of the French bourgeoisie and the contradictions and conflicts between them that led to political turmoil and change. His work not only provides an in-depth examination of Louis Bonaparte's coup and France's socio-historical conditions but also contains scientific conclusions grounded in historical materialism.

Historical tradition and ideology have always been among Marx's concerns. "It is precisely Marx's theory of historical materialism that attaches the greatest importance to tradition, because according to this theory, history is a continuous struggle of ideas—or in Marx's words, a struggle of ideology, i.e., a persistent class struggle conducted through ideas (views, arguments, theses, and their opposites); within these ideas, each class becomes aware of its conflicts. New ideas always reflect, ideologically, the changed relations of production in a section of the population affected by this change. These new ideas strive in public life to realize themselves by overcoming old traditions, negating the old, only to be in turn negated in the ongoing development, and dissolve in new, higher insights." In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx provides a scientific answer to how we should understand historical tradition and ideology. Today, in the 21st century—especially at the critical juncture of advancing Chinese-style modernization—facing complex social ideological trends, how to integrate Marxist theory with China's reality, follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strengthen ideological construction remains a major issue for contemporary society.

2. The formation and prevalence of the “Napoleonist ideology” — the peasant class's illusion

History is not determined by individual heroes or accidental events but is propelled by the mode of material production and class struggle within society. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx profoundly asks: “Why is it that a nation of 36 million people could

be taken captive without resistance by three swindlers dressed in fine clothes?” From an unknown nobody to a man who could seize power in one stroke and establish an empire, Louis Bonaparte’s coup was the outcome of intensifying contradictions in French society, as well as a manifestation of historical development. Behind this farce lies deep social causation.

Following the logic of historical materialism, from an ideological perspective, the personal dictatorship imposed by this political clown who reversed history under the guise of his uncle represents the victory of a backward ideology. This possibility of historical regression exists because the people are influenced by tradition, developing a cognitive inertia that leads them to choose indirect, roundabout paths. Such inertia makes it difficult for them to rapidly change their mindset in response to emerging Enlightenment ideas during revolutionary times. Louis Bonaparte skillfully exploited the peasant class’s nostalgia for Napoleon I and their dissatisfaction with the present, using the “Napoleonist ideology” to win the peasants’ votes, thereby laying the foundation for his coup and establishment of an empire. The formation and prevalence of this so-called “Napoleonist ideology” have a unique historical dimension.

2.1. Deep-rooted superstitious beliefs among the French people

Napoleon Bonaparte was a pivotal figure in French history who profoundly influenced the course of both French and European history. Through the Brumaire coup, he seized power and built an efficient centralized regime, advancing educational reform, cultivating talent, and reforming the administrative system, thereby ending the chaos of the late French Revolution. The Napoleonic Code he championed legally established principles of liberty, equality, and the inviolability of private property, laying the foundation for the development of French capitalism and promoting economic recovery. At the same time, Napoleon’s military genius allowed him to defeat anti-French coalitions with smaller forces in multiple campaigns, expanding French territory and spreading revolutionary ideals that challenged feudal order and established continental hegemony in Europe. Although Napoleon was eventually defeated and the Bourbon monarchy restored, he remained a sacred figure in the hearts of the French people. His charismatic authority was extraordinarily resilient; his historical achievements and personal charisma had brought the people enormous benefits and shock, lingering in their minds as an irreplaceable presence. This captivated the majority, breeding a superstition toward the authoritarian government of the Napoleonic era. Harboring the belief that “Louis Bonaparte, who shares similar blood with Napoleon Bonaparte, must be our savior and defender of Napoleon’s past policies,” the French populace—especially the peasant class—uncritically revered Louis Bonaparte and supported his election as President of the French Republic without fully understanding the implications.

This superstition and blind obedience do not refer to cultural ideas in general but to traditional ownership concepts compatible with the peasants’ private smallholdings economic base. Their residual existence reflects social relations that have not yet developed into sharp class antagonisms. It was this that gave rise to the formation of the “Napoleonist ideology” and enabled Louis Bonaparte’s successful ascendance to the historical stage.

2.2. Limitations of social classes

The disorder and turmoil within French social classes were the primary reasons for the prevalence of the “Napoleonist ideology.” Especially the peasant class, which constituted the main voting force, harbored a persistent “filter” toward the symbol of “Napoleon,” harboring illusions that Louis Napoleon Bonaparte could lead them to glory. They suffered deeply under the oppression and exploitation of both feudal remnants and the bourgeoisie, yearning to gain land and freedom and improve their harsh living conditions. However, due to their own dispersion and conservatism, they lacked independent political consciousness and organizational capacity, making them vulnerable to manipulation by other classes. Traditional ideas and the ghosts of language continually haunted this new historical period, transforming into mental shackles and fetters that eroded their inner world and shook their openness to new things.

Specifically, first, during the Napoleonic era, the peasant class transformed from serfs into small landowners, which was entirely positive news for them. But this reality conflicted with the essence of capitalist large-scale production. With the further development of capitalism, their situation would inevitably become unsustainable, and life would grow increasingly difficult and barren. The Napoleonic Code of the past had already become insufficient to protect peasant rights, yet they remained unaware of this fact.

Second, due to limitations in production conditions, the internal connections among peasants were neither very united nor tightly bound, making it difficult to form nationwide cohesion. Marx pointed out: “Their mode of production does not bring them into interaction but rather isolates them from each other. This state of isolation is further reinforced by France’s poor transportation and the poverty of the peasants.” The vast masses of France “are composed of some mere sum of individuals with the same name, much like a sack of potatoes is made up of individual potatoes,” “they cannot represent themselves and must have others represent them,” needing “an authority standing high above them, an unrestricted governmental power, which protects them from other classes and bestows rain and sunshine upon them from above.” When the majority peasant class transformed the dead Napoleon into a vain illusion in their minds and sought to resurrect him in his nephew Louis Bonaparte—

supporting the ruler in their hearts—Louis Bonaparte’s political position was effectively established. The “Napoleonist ideology,” upholding historical tradition and ideas, thus became one of the mainstream social ideologies.

3. The disguise of the “dead” — the bourgeoisie’s illusion

Historical tradition and ideology are tools reshaped by living social contradictions. They are selectively edited and encoded, influencing not only the peasants but also shaping the bourgeoisie’s mindset, becoming ideological resources that uphold capitalist logic. As Marx analyzed, “All the traditions of dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” The bourgeoisie’s invocation of history during revolution and rule essentially reflects a response to their current predicaments. People often find it difficult to break free from previous modes of thinking, imitating historical traditions and treating them as solutions to contemporary problems. They “tremblingly summon the ghosts to do their bidding, borrowing their names, battle cries, and costumes, so as to dress themselves in these venerable garments and, with this borrowed language, act out a new scene in world history.” The bourgeoisie thus fall into the trap of historical imitation. This is not merely out of reverence for tradition but more so because, at critical moments of transition and structural change, they lack a genuine foundation for creating their own legitimacy and justification, and must resort to historical symbols and traditional authority to transcend reality, masking present anxieties and emptiness by reenacting history.

However, the resurrection of historical tradition cannot truly solve these problems. “In the highly rigorous traditions of the Roman Republic, the bourgeois fighters found ideals and artistic forms, as well as the necessary self-deception to keep from seeing the narrow bourgeois content of their struggles and to maintain their passion at the height of a great historical tragedy.” The bourgeoisie enhance the historical inevitability of their expansionist interests by adopting the forms and language of the Roman Republic, heroic narratives, laws, and constitutional frameworks. They disguise their class-specific demands as the “will of the entire people,” wrapping contemporary capitalist realities in pre-capitalist historical traditions, and through appeals to “historical tradition” and “national spirit,” portray themselves as the “natural continuation of historical tradition.” Their aim is to convince the proletariat, petty bourgeoisie, and other groups that their struggle is a “common cause of all people,” and that their actions are not based on narrow class interests but the pursuit of “eternal justice” and “universal freedom.” This ideological universalization is a key link in capitalism’s reproduction of its own legitimacy.

Yet, as Marx quoted Hegel at the beginning and added, “All great world-historic facts and personages appear twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” History does not simply repeat itself but advances through tragedy and farce. The so-called natural continuation is a constructed illusion. From slavery to feudalism to capitalism, different historical stages are dominated by different modes of production, and “tradition” is merely a selective memory chosen by ruling classes according to contemporary needs. Capitalism always has its limitations. The ultimate goal of the bourgeois revolution is to establish capitalist relations of production, centering on maintaining private ownership and wage labor to amplify class interests. Although this essence is concealed within the universal narrative of “liberty, equality, fraternity” during revolutionary discourse, this illusion of universality ultimately shatters after revolutionary victory. When the bourgeoisie seize power, their rule no longer requires the mobilizing force of universal narratives but rather systematically consolidates class structures through rule of law, constitutional governance, and market regulations. The narrow class content is fully exposed, and they will ultimately fail because they cannot confront their own class limitations.

4. The illusory effect of historical tradition and ideology and methods to overcome it

As an important component of social ideology, historical tradition and ideology not only reflect past social realities but also, to a certain extent, shape the developmental trajectory of contemporary society. They often influence people’s thoughts and actions in an illusory form, becoming a significant force in both the continuation and transformation of social order. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze in depth the generative mechanisms behind the illusory effect of historical tradition and ideology, and to explore methodologies for breaking their constraints and achieving ideological renewal.

4.1. Generation and realization of the illusory effect

The illusory effect of historical tradition and ideology arises from the continuity and lag of ideology, manifested in its ability to effectively enhance mass political identification, regulate public behavior, and maintain social order, ultimately serving the purpose of consolidating dominance. This effect is realized due to the practical dimension and real-world orientation of ideology.

Although social consciousness is determined by social existence, it possesses its own unique developmental logic and does not immediately disappear or reconstruct itself in response to changes in social existence. “The philosophy of each era, as a specific field of division of labor, has specific ideological materials passed down by its predecessors, from which it takes its point of departure.” Ideology does not arise out of thin air; it requires certain social foundations and bases. Similarly, real conditions and circumstances cannot be created overnight but must be sought within historical contexts for resources and prerequisites. In

reality, as economic and social development proceeds, some ideologies gradually fade away due to their inability to adapt. However, some may persist or reemerge when societal development encounters situations similar to the past, producing illusory effects. Through individuals' subjective initiative transforming the objective world, these effects influence the current era in pursuit of a dialectical unity between the subjective and objective worlds.

4.2. Methodology for approaching historical tradition and ideology

"Traditional ideas, as products of traditional ownership relations, do not immediately disappear with the abolition of these ownership relations; on the contrary, traditional ideas possess a more tenacious vitality than the traditional ownership relations themselves. The tremendous historical inertia of traditional ideas exerts profound influence during periods of transition between old and new societies, significantly affecting the speed and form of historical development." Marx affirmed the profound influence of historical tradition and ideology, pointing out that they should neither be outright rejected nor wholly accepted. Tradition is a product of historical development, encompassing both positive factors aligned with social progress and negative elements that hinder social advancement. Some political ideas and institutions formed since the French Revolution—such as concepts of democracy and equality—have, to a certain extent, propelled French society forward and played a positive role; however, the backward political system and outdated ideology inherited from the old regime have become shackles obstructing social progress in the new historical period.

To successfully create history that belongs to the present era, one must inherit the excellent products of history, including both material aspects—such as organizational forms, distribution relations, and productive practices—and spiritual aspects—such as various forms of ideology. "People make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." Humans cannot create history detached from historical conditions, but within those conditions, through subjective initiative, they can influence historical development.

Marx recognized the widespread and lasting influence of social ideological trends. Regarding reactionary social trends that impede revolution, Marx wrote: "To revive the dead is to praise the new struggle, not to clumsily imitate the old struggle; it is to exaggerate a certain task in imagination, not to evade solving this task in reality; it is to rediscover the revolutionary spirit, not to let the specters of revolution haunt the world again." "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw from the past but only from the future for its poetic inspiration. It cannot begin to fulfill its mission until it has broken with all superstitions about the past." One cannot rely on backward traditional ideas to correct the direction of social development; only by absorbing the excellent elements of history and generating advanced revolutionary theories of one's own era can society be guided toward progress. This marks both the critique and rejection of backward traditional thought and the beginning of constructing a new ideology.

The formation and development of historical tradition and ideology require continual progress through a positive interaction with social realities. This progress depends not only on the tradition itself but also on which class controls and utilizes it. The interpretation of tradition is not merely for conceptual clarification or theoretical explanation but, more importantly, to leverage the spiritual power it generates for transformative and progressive reform of current social realities. From Marx's perspective, as the most advanced and revolutionary class, the proletariat must engage in self-criticism, gradually establish and perfect its own ideology based on its material foundation, and thoroughly break with ideas that contradict the laws of contemporary development. The proletarian revolution must criticize and transcend the bourgeoisie's historical appropriation; it need not disguise itself under the "ghosts" of history but can face the contradictions of capitalist production relations directly. Their goal—the overthrow of all exploitative systems and the realization of comprehensive human freedom—is the only truly universal aspiration.

From a practical standpoint, "Marxism and China's excellent traditional culture have different origins but possess a high degree of compatibility." In the contemporary Chinese context, it is essential to deeply explore the core unity between Marxism and China's outstanding traditional culture. While integrating the two organically, efforts must be made to build a modern civilization of the Chinese nation that "meets the growing spiritual and cultural needs of the people and consolidates the common ideological foundation for the united struggle of the entire Party and all ethnic groups across the country." This is vital to seize the ideological high ground.

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