

IDEOLOGY, RACISM, AND CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

TOMMIE SHELBY

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not in order that man shall bear the chain without caprice or consolation but so that he shall cast off the chain and pluck the living flower.

—Karl Marx¹

The problem of the future world is the charting, by means of intelligent reason, of a path not simply through the resistances of physical force, but through the vaster and far more intricate jungle of ideas conditioned on unconscious and subconscious reflexes of living things; on blind unreason and often irresistible urges of sensitive matter; of which the concept of race is today one of the most unyielding and threatening.

—W. E. B. Du Bois²

The critique of ideologies, or ideology-critique (*Ideologiekritik*), has long been a central component of Marxist theory and politics. And, like so many other elements of Marxism, this component has frequently been the object of severe attacks.³ There are those criticisms that challenge the theoretical foundations of ideology-critique. For example, some complain that ideology-critique is unscientific and subjective, as they claim that it relies on unfalsifiable hypotheses,

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¹ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 54.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1997) xxx.

³ See, for example, H. B. Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch: Marxism-Leninism as a Philosophical Creed* (Boston: Beacon, 1957) 172–79, 192–213; Martin Seliger, *The Marxist Conception of*

dubious functionalist reasoning, and an esoteric methodology. Others charge that the concept of ideology is incoherent or fraught with irresolvable paradoxes (e.g., it is claimed that it entails the self-refuting claim that “Marxism” is ideological). Still others contend that ideology-critique is too moralized or politically loaded to be useful for objective social science. Then there are those criticisms that have less to do with the theoretical basis and conceptual coherence of ideology-critique and more to do with the way it is sometimes practiced. The problem here, it is claimed, is that Marxists are often less than methodical in their would-be “critiques” of putative ideologies. Indeed some would maintain that they are sometimes quite arbitrary, obscure, or reckless in their attempts to unmask the inner workings of bourgeois thought and modern commercial culture, even using “ideology” equivocally or as a mere epithet. In light of these and other criticisms, ideology-critique has fallen into serious disrepute, even among some who are otherwise sympathetic to Marx’s ideas.⁴

Despite these criticisms—not all of which are unfounded—and notwithstanding the fact that Marxism is now widely regarded as either obsolete or passé, I contend that ideology-critique is indispensable for understanding and resisting the forms of oppression that are characteristic of the modern world. In an effort to defend the continuing relevance of ideology-critique, I shall offer a systematic reconstruction of the concept of ideology. This will entail three things: (a) providing a clear and cogent definition of “ideology,” (b) locating the concept within the ongoing development of critical social theory, and (3) explaining the political significance of the practice of ideology-critique.

Philosophical reconstruction is required here, not only to defend ideology-critique against its detractors, but also because Marx does not offer us anything close to a precise definition of “ideology.” In early works, especially the collaborative writings with Engels, his general conception of ideology must be gleaned from the few examples and remarks he offers in the context of broader discus-

Ideology: A Critical Essay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁴ For example, Elster contends that “the Marxist theory of ideologies has had its full share of obscurantist and pretentious expositions. In addition to the usual pervasiveness of ill-founded functional explanations, this domain also offers great scope for arbitrary explanations in terms of “similarities” or “homologies” between thought and society. With some notable exceptions [here he cites G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) ch. 5; and Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*], the practitioners in this area have engaged in frictionless speculations that have brought it into deserved ill-repute.” Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 460.

sions of historical materialism. But these examples and brief comments do not provide us with an unequivocal general conception of ideology, much less a *theory* of the phenomenon. In later writings, Marx, again without explicitly defining the notion, proceeds to analyze particular forms of ideological thought—demystifying their illusions, disclosing their distinctive social functions, and explaining their relation to the material conditions that he claims causes them to be produced and widely accepted. It is partly on the basis of these various examples, remarks, and particular analyses of Marx and Engels that I will reconstruct the concept of ideology, but where appropriate I will also make liberal use of insights taken from other sources (Marxist and non-Marxist).

The “Eleventh Thesis” notwithstanding, this attempt at analytic rehabilitation is not a philosophical exercise without practical import. Ideologies are menacing forces that are capable of having an enormous impact on social relations and the prospects for progressive social change. In clarifying the meaning of “ideology,” then, it is important that we not lose sight of the social reality that we wish to understand *and* change by engaging in overly abstract theorizing. Thus because of its continuing social significance and for purposes of illustration, I will discuss the ideological dimensions of that familiar—though not necessarily well-understood—phenomenon *racism*, and for concreteness and historical specificity, I will be concerned primarily with the ideology of antiblack racism as it has existed historically and as it exists today in the United States.

Now many who have given serious thought to the matter would agree that racism is (at least in part) an ideology, and, accordingly, the ideological nature of racism has been investigated from a variety of theoretical and (inter)disciplinary perspectives.⁵ But there is much that is in dispute among those who focus on the ideological features of racism. These disagreements primarily concern (1) what

⁵ See, for example, Pierre L. van den Berghe, *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley, 1978); John Gabriel and Gideon Ben-Tovim, “Marxism and the Concept of Racism,” *Economy and Society* 7 (1978) 118–54; Leo Kuper, *Race, Class, and Power: Ideology and Revolutionary Change in Plural Societies* (London: Aldine, 1975); John Rex, *Race Relations in Sociological Theory* (New York: Schocken, 1970); Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980) 305–45; Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989); Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review* 181 (1990) 95–118; Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Racisms,” *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 3–17; Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1995); Lawrence Bobo, James R. Klugel, and Ryan A. Smith, “Laissez-Faire Racism: The Crystallization of a Kinder, Gentler, Antiblack Ideology,” *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s*, ed. Steven A. Tuch and Jack K. Martin (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997) 15–41; Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); and George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

precisely does it mean to say that racism is “ideological”; (2) what makes an ideology specifically “racist” in character; (3) what are the origins of racist ideology; (4) what is the current content and function(s) of the ideology; (5) through what mechanism(s) is it inculcated and reproduced; (6) to what extent can “racial” antagonism be reduced to this ideology and its effects; and (7) to what extent can the ideology be explained in terms of economic factors. This essay is intended to be primarily a contribution to the first of these debates; however, the answer we give to question 1 will have implications for how the others should be answered. I begin with some necessary preliminaries.

FORMS OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

There is considerable disagreement over how best to understand the concept of ideology. In its relatively short history, the term “ideology” and its cognates have been used in a variety of ways, not all of them compatible.⁶ I begin by distinguishing two fundamental types of use, one evaluative and the other nonevaluative, taking these up in reverse order.

The *nonevaluative* use of “ideology” is epistemically and morally neutral: it does not take a stand on whether one should accept or oppose a given ideology.⁷ One uses “ideology” in its nonevaluative sense primarily for purposes of description and explanation. For example, it is used nonevaluatively by some social scientists and historians to refer to the worldview or belief system of a particular social group, society, or historical era. “Ideology” is also sometimes used nonevaluatively to refer to certain comprehensive political doctrines (e.g., conservatism, liberalism, communism, and nationalism) and to programs for political action (e.g., “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” or “Black Power”). These nonevaluative senses of ideology are sometimes invoked by Marxists but are not distinctively Marxist in conception.

While it is certainly used for descriptive and explanatory purposes, the Marxist concept of ideology is an *evaluative* notion. In particular, use of the concept always suggests some form of criticism.⁸ The exact nature of this criticism is the subject

⁶ For useful discussions of the history of this usage, see Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1936); Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1979); and Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁷ See, for example, Clifford Geertz, “Ideology As a Cultural System,” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973) 193–233.

⁸ There is logical space left open for an evaluative conception of ideology that expresses *approval*. In the hands of its originator, Antoine Destutt de Tracy, the term “ideology” did have a positive sense, as opposed to a negative or merely neutral one. See David McLellan, *Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 5; and Christopher L. Pines, *Ideology and False Consciousness*:

of some controversy, however. I would suggest the following starting point: To claim that a particular belief system is ideological, in the evaluative sense, is to impute to the system of belief some negative characteristic(s) that provides a reason to reject it (or at least some significant part of it) in its present form. I will refer to such an evaluative conception of ideology as a *critical* conception.⁹

There are strong and weak critical conceptions of ideology. On a strong conception, the fact that a system of thought is ideological is a *sufficient* reason to reject it (or some significant part of it). Whereas on a weak conception, the fact that a belief system is ideological is, in some sense, an unfortunate fact about it, but it is not a sufficient reason to reject it as such. In the sections below, I develop a *strong* critical conception of ideology. I will treat that conception as my general account and will understand weak senses in terms of how they are related to, but deviate from, that account.

Next we must specify the primary unit of analysis. The charge of ideology is most often leveled at widely accepted beliefs. “Beliefs” are to be understood here as mental representations within the consciousness of individual social actors; and, as we shall see, ideologies cannot have their peculiar and profound social impact without being received into the consciousness of human beings. These mental representations express or imply validity claims, that is, knowledge claims about the way the world is or about what has value.

Sometimes, however, the charge of ideology—like the charge of racism—has been directed toward social practices or institutions. For example, one might think that both a Ku Klux Klan demonstration and a Jim Crow ordinance are, in some sense, “ideological.” This usage is not strictly speaking improper or without merit. But since we can think of the ideological character of a practice in terms of its role in disseminating and buttressing ideological beliefs (as with the Klan rally) or its being reinforced through and legitimated in terms of such beliefs (as with forced segregation and exclusion), I will consider ideological beliefs to be the primary object of ideology-critique, treating talk of “ideological practices” as a derivative usage.¹⁰ This also has the advantage of not over-inflating the

Marx and His Historical Progenitors (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 36. But since this position on ideology is not one taken by Marxists—or anyone else these days—I leave it aside.

⁹ Against the current “post-Marxist” tendency to adopt a neutral conception of ideology (which also happens to be the received view among mainstream social scientists and historians), Jorge Larraín has argued forcefully for the need to retain the critical sense of ideology. See, for example, his “Stuart Hall and the Marxist Concept of Ideology,” *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996) 47–70.

¹⁰ Compare Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971) 45; also see his “Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle,” *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 1990) 24.

concept by including too many different types of phenomena within its scope. It might be useful, for example, to investigate the impact of a set of beliefs on the structure and dynamics of a given practice, or vice versa. Using the same theoretical term to refer to both the beliefs and the practices would unnecessarily confuse matters.

Similarly, the charge of ideology—again, like the charge of racism—can be directed at symbolic representations that are embodied, not in the consciousness of individuals, but in discourse and cultural products, such as slogans, jokes, print media, film, theater, music, art, advertisements, television programming, web sites, and the like. For example, speech acts and cultural forms that invoke the imagery of the “black sex-machine”—such as urban vernacular expressions, comedic routines, blaxploitation films, commercials, and popular music—may properly be called “ideological.” But, again, I will focus on belief systems as the primary objects of ideology-critique, since speech acts and cultural products can be viewed as ideological insofar as they represent, transmit, or reinforce ideological beliefs. In this sense, I will treat ideological *beliefs* as more analytically fundamental than the media through which they are expressed and reproduced.¹¹

The particular beliefs we are interested in can be understood as any subset of the beliefs of the members of an historical era, geographical region, society, social strata, or social group that has the following features:¹²

- a. The beliefs in the subset are widely shared by members in the relevant group; and within the group, and sometimes outside it, the beliefs are generally known to be widely held.
- b. The beliefs form, or are derived from, a *prima facie* coherent system of thought, which can be descriptive and/or normative.
- c. The beliefs are a part of, or shape, the general outlook and self-conception of many in the relevant group.
- d. The beliefs have a significant impact on social action and social institutions.

The rationale behind feature (a) is that, while all beliefs are ultimately possessed by individuals, the theory of ideology is not concerned with the mental life of individuals *per se* but with those beliefs that are widely shared and known to be so. Thus ideologies are essentially forms of *social* thought. If, for example,

¹¹ This is not, of course, to suggest that from an explanatory, moral, or political point of view these media are any less important. For an insightful analysis of the role of mass media in the production and dissemination of ideology, see John Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹² This part of the account is largely derived from Geuss’s conception of an ideology as “world-view.” Cf. Geuss 10.

there were only two white Americans who believed that blacks are an inferior race, their common belief would no doubt be *racist*, but it wouldn't constitute a racist *ideology*.

Feature (b) is meant to emphasize two things. First, an ideology is never an isolated belief, even if widely held, but always a network of beliefs. This is not to say that a single belief cannot be ideological but that an ideological belief will be a part of a wider view of things, a component of a larger systematic outlook. Thus the view that blacks are inherently of low intelligence is part of a wide-ranging and interconnected set of beliefs that includes, on the one hand, beliefs about the laziness, aggressiveness, and unreliability of black people, and on the other, beliefs about their natural musicality, athletic talent, and sexual prowess. Such beliefs are in turn based on the view that these and other such socially significant characteristics are transmitted through biological reproduction. This black essentialism is related to assumptions about the continental origins and physical characteristics of various subpopulations of humanity, which are often treated as hierarchically ordered (according to some criteria or other) with blacks invariably on the bottom.

Second, the relevant beliefs often appear to those who embrace them to have compelling explanatory or justificatory power. The soundness of the belief system may, however, be only apparent: critical scrutiny may reveal it to be deeply inconsistent or based on ungrounded assumptions. Several theories have been offered over the years to "explain" black inferiority or to "justify" antiblack attitudes. And these theories, or rather shreds of them, have seeped into popular consciousness, often giving racist beliefs the appearance of scientific backing or moral soundness.

Feature (c) draws our attention to the fact that ideological belief systems tend to be deeply entrenched, frequently constituting a part of so-called common sense. Such beliefs influence the way agents understand their social life, and they often play a significant role in the construction of personal and social identities. Moreover, the truth or objective warrant of such beliefs is more or less taken for granted, treated as common knowledge. Thus within a society where racist ideology holds sway, nothing could be more "obvious" than that there are different races with corresponding mental traits and behavioral tendencies. The beliefs of racists, moreover, seem to them to be of immense social importance, as they define the boundaries of Self and Other, of in-group and out-group, of who deserves respect and who contempt. And these beliefs are so firmly held that they often fail to yield to criticism and counter-evidence.

Feature (d) points to the fact that ideological belief systems are intimately tied to action and social practice. Now it might be thought that any belief worthy of the name must have some implications for action; however, (d) is meant to go beyond this. The relevant beliefs play a role in *mediating* social interaction; they

are a part of the “life-world” or “common meanings” through which social actors live their lives and coordinate their actions.¹³ Racist beliefs, as we know, have engendered a complex and sometimes subtle ensemble of social symbols, codes, norms, and expectations; and these structure social conduct between and within the so-called races.

Now clearly not every set of beliefs that possesses these four features is ideological in the strong critical sense, for such belief systems are not necessarily epistemically or morally unsound. Indeed, the doctrine of liberalism as currently embraced in the United States would seem to satisfy these criteria, but this would hardly constitute a reason to reject it. Something more is needed, then, for a set of beliefs to be ideological. However, those beliefs that do have these characteristics are *possible* targets of ideology-critique. Accordingly, I will refer to a set of beliefs that has the four characteristics described above as a *form of social consciousness* (or simply *form of consciousness*) when I want to be neutral about whether it has the necessary negative characteristic(s) that constitutes ideological thought.¹⁴ The term “ideology” will be reserved for ideology in the critical sense.

There are several things to note about this account. First, it places no restrictions on the representational content of forms of social consciousness; rather, it allows that their subject matter can be almost anything. Nevertheless, we might want to classify particular *forms* of social consciousness by their “manifest content,” that is, according to what they seem to be about—for example, “racial” forms of social consciousness are about so-called races and the social relations that (should) exist between them. Though it may be useful to classify various forms of consciousness according to their content, there are two obstacles to doing so with any real precision. First, the various forms of social consciousness that exist in a given society, while ostensibly about different things, may shade into each other or overlap to form a broader picture of the world. Indeed, in some social contexts ideological forms of consciousness seem to better perform their social function(s) if they mutually support each other by forming a worldview. For example, consider the complex relationship between religious, nationalist, and racist forms of social consciousness in the legitimation of the African slave trade and European imperialism.¹⁵ Second, forms of social consciousness are *dynamic* systems; that is, their representational content often changes with

¹³ This idea is developed in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1987) 119–52; Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Geertz 208–13.

¹⁴ Cf. Geuss 12.

¹⁵ See Miles 20–40; and Fredrickson, *Racism*, chs. 1–2.

social circumstances. So, for instance, under the conditions of plantation slavery, black slaves were commonly thought to be docile, superstitious, easily satisfied, and servile; while during the present post-industrial phase of capitalist development, blacks are more often viewed as parasitic, angry, ungrateful, and dangerous. Thus the inter-relatedness and dynamic character of forms of social consciousness make it difficult to pin down the content of an ideology once and for all. Perhaps the best we can do is to describe the content of a form of consciousness for some historically specific period, and even here some idealization is unavoidable.

As the above epigraph from Du Bois suggests, it is critically important to recognize that forms of social consciousness (or at least some elements of them) may be held without full conscious awareness. Though an individual, if queried, will typically know whether he accepts a particular proposition, he may not be completely, if at all, aware that he is in the grip of a particular picture of the world. A form of social consciousness may be only implicit in the behavioral dispositions, utterances, conduct, and practices of social actors.¹⁶ The system of belief that Anthony Appiah calls *racialism*, for example, is probably almost never explicitly held or contemplated by the typical racist.¹⁷ Moreover, while such implicit beliefs can at times be coherently articulated and defended by the individuals who hold them, more often they cannot. These beliefs are quite frequently confused and may be expressed only in the form of stereotypes, clichés, and fragmented narratives. According to Marx and Engels, the function of systematizing these half-baked, diffuse, and crude ideas is typically performed, sometimes unwittingly, by professional “ideologists,” for example, politicians, theologians, philosophers, scientists, journalists, teachers, artists, writers, and other would-be intellectuals.¹⁸ And critics of ideology have often taken the representations of ideologists as their object of analysis, for example, various theoretical accounts of black inferiority.¹⁹ This convenient strategy has the advantage of providing ideology-critique with relatively clear and stable targets to criticize. What the critic is really after, though, are those messy forms of social consciousness—the “jungle of ideas”—that these more sophisticated accounts reflect, regulate, and fortify.

Finally, we should note that ideologies are based on ideas and theories that people actively construct and develop. As such, they are different from, though

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 17.

¹⁷ See Appiah, “Racisms” 4–5.

¹⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International, 1970) 65.

¹⁹ For example, Arthur de Gobineau, “Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races,” *Gobineau: Selected Political Writings*, ed. M. Biddiss (London: Cape, 1970); or, more recently, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free, 1994).

often related to, the misleading surface appearance of market-driven societies. Commercial societies have features that are opaque to the social agents who operate within them, often giving rise to the notorious phenomenon of commodity fetishism.²⁰ As Marx frequently pointed out, social theorists are often mystified by these “phenomenal forms” and confuse these forms of appearance with the material relations that produce them. To be sure, phenomenal forms are within the purview of the theory of ideology. But ideologies, as forms of social consciousness, are not identical with these forms of social appearance. The misleading surface of social life is not something to be *critiqued*, but only explained. When these phenomenal forms are converted into concrete social belief systems, perhaps with the help of ideologists, only then are they properly called “forms of social consciousness” and thus amenable to ideology-critique.

CRITICAL CONCEPTIONS OF IDEOLOGY

With these distinctions and qualifications as background, we are now prepared to ask the crucial question: What is the problematic feature of a form of social consciousness that justifies the charge of ideology? Let us call the characteristic (or set of characteristics) which, when possessed by a form of social consciousness justifies the charge of ideology, an *I-property*. Here is a sample of I-properties that have been suggested by contemporary social theorists and philosophers:

- A. “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”²¹
- B. An ideology is “a social consciousness which takes certain false things to be true about matters having significance to the outcome of class-divided societies.”²²
- C. “The concept of ideology can be used to refer to the ways in which meaning serves, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical—what I shall call ‘relations of domination.’”²³

²⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1., trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1976), ch. 1. For a particularly helpful discussion of the relationship between phenomenal forms and ideology, see John Mepham, “The Theory of Ideology in ‘Capital,’” *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, vol. 3, ed. John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben (Sussex: Harvester, 1979). Also see Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees,” *Stuart Hall* 25–46.

²¹ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” 162.

²² Pines 165.

²³ Thompson 7.

- D. Ideologies are “symbol-systems” that “are mobilized to legitimate the sectional interests of hegemonic groups.”²⁴
- E. “An ideology is a set of beliefs or values that can be explained through the (non-cognitive) interest or position of some social group.”²⁵
- F. “[I]deological’ is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence—that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals ‘do not know what they are doing.’”²⁶
- G. An ideology is “a distorted consciousness . . . that conceals social contradictions . . . in the interests of the dominant class.”²⁷
- H. “An ideology . . . is a system of ideas, theories, beliefs, attitudes, norms, and social practices that (a) is characteristic of a class society or of a class or other primary social group in a class society and that (b) serves principally the interests of a class, typically a class in that society, or other primary social group while typically at least, putting itself forward as answering to the interests of the whole of the society.”²⁸
- I. An ideology “is systematically distortive and reflects reified powers of domination.”²⁹
- J. An ideology “is a prescriptive theory whose prescriptions result from illusions engendered by social barriers to knowledge.”³⁰
- K. Ideologies are “socially prevalent ideas that can be explained by showing how they either sanction the social relations determined by the existing stage of productive powers or express and promote class interests.”³¹

While the I-properties listed above differ in a number of important respects, we should note some common themes among them. First, a number of these accounts emphasize that ideologies are, in some way or other, false, illusory, distorting, or misleading. A few point to how agents fail to perceive their true motives for accepting ideological beliefs. Some emphasize the social function or

²⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 188.

²⁵ Jon Elster, “Belief, Bias and Ideology,” *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982) 123.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 21.

²⁷ Larraín, *Concept of Ideology* 48.

²⁸ Kai Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View: Morality, Ideology, and Historical Materialism* (Boulder: Westview, 1989) 98.

²⁹ Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976) 109.

³⁰ John Torrance, *Marx’s Theory of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 191.

³¹ Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge, 1981) 118.

legitimizing role of ideologies, especially within class-divided societies. Still others link ideologies to the interests or position of a given class or dominant/subordinate group. And finally some suggest that ideologies reflect or are generated by certain social relations or material conditions. Each of these five themes can be traced to remarks made by Marx or Engels, and they are frequently emphasized in accounts of ideology. One of my aims will be to show that it is possible to provide an account in which each of these ideas is systematically linked to form a coherent and defensible critical conception of ideology.

Raymond Geuss has provided us with a useful framework for discussing competing conceptions of ideology.³² He first asks the question: In what sense or in virtue of what properties can a form of social consciousness be ideological (in the relevant critical sense)? He then suggests that there are three possible types of answer. First, a form of social consciousness can be ideological in virtue of some of its *epistemic* properties. An epistemic critique of an ideology is one based on considerations relevant to rational belief formation or theory acceptance (e.g., empirical support, consistency, logical validity, conceptual clarity, etc.). Second, a *functional* critique of an ideological form of consciousness is based on the negative practical consequences its wide acceptance has for society or some social group within it—for example, the stabilization of oppressive social relations, or the promotion of the interests of a hegemonic group. And third, a *genetic* critique of an ideology focuses on the negative features that are a part of the etiology or history of the form of consciousness—for example, that it is adopted because of the influence of the class interests of the believer or the dominance of a social group, or that it has some unfavorable origin that tarnishes it in some way.

Various critical conceptions of ideology have been developed on the basis of one or more of these three types of property.³³ I want to defend a critical conception of ideology that attributes properties of all three types to ideological forms of social consciousness. So, on my account, the relevant I-property is a complex set of characteristics that has epistemic, functional, *and* genetic dimensions. In the next few sections, I will explain, defend, and illustrate this conception.

³² Geuss 13–21.

³³ Using Geuss's typology, we might classify the different conceptions of ideology described above according to the type of I-property (epistemic, functional, or genetic) they attribute to ideology. Conceptions (A) and (B) are clearly epistemic conceptions of ideology, (C) and (D) functional conceptions, and (E) and (F) genetic ones. Conceptions (G) and (H) attribute epistemic and functional I-properties to ideology, and so we might classify them as epistemic-functional conceptions. Conceptions (I) and (J) are epistemic-genetic conceptions. And finally, (K) is plausibly a functional-genetic conception.

IDEOLOGICAL ILLUSION

If by calling a form of social consciousness “ideology” we take ourselves to be advancing a sufficient reason to withhold our acceptance of it, the charge must be based, at least in part, on the *epistemic* properties of the belief system. Since forms of social consciousness are constituted by beliefs that make or imply validity claims (descriptive or normative), if we are to have adequate grounds for rejecting a given form of consciousness, we need to know that its discursive content suffers from some cognitive defect.³⁴ To be sure, the functional and genetic properties of a form of consciousness may give us good reason to be suspicious of, or skeptical about, the belief system. But ideologies purport to be forms of knowledge and thus cannot be rationally rejected or accepted without epistemic grounds for doing so. Regardless of what other troublesome features a set of beliefs may have, if we think the beliefs are nevertheless true or sufficiently warranted, then, surely we must accept them. Moreover, whatever other (negative or positive) characteristics a form of consciousness may possess, if it has a fundamental cognitive defect that calls into question its claim to knowledge, this will be sufficient grounds for *not* accepting it.

However, ideologies do not characteristically work by providing us with outright false representations, for if they did, we would not be able to coordinate our actions through them as effectively as we do. Instead, ideologies often work, as Kai Nielsen reminds us, “by presenting and inculcating a false or slanted *perspective* that arranges the facts in a misleading way, or fails to mention certain facts, or places them in an inconspicuous context.”³⁵ Rather than being simply false, then, ideologies are typically more or less distorting or biased in some way. At least part of the reason that the defective nature of these belief systems often goes unrecognized is that the casual observations of everyday life seem to regularly confirm these beliefs.³⁶

For example, racist ideology underwrites the widely held view that (most) black women who receive welfare support are poor because they are lazy, irresponsible, and promiscuous, and that they pass on—through their example and perhaps their genes—such tendencies to their children. Accordingly, poor blacks are not seen as deserving of public support but rather public contempt. Given

³⁴ There is a debate over whether Marx’s conception of ideology is epistemic. See, for example, Joe McCarney, *The Real World of Ideology* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980); Charles Mills, “‘Ideology’ in Marx and Engels,” *Philosophical Forum* 16 (1985) 327–46; and Pines. However, my concern is not so much with what Marx “really” meant by “ideology,” but with providing a reconstruction of the notion that will be useful for present theoretical and practical purposes within a broadly Marxist framework. I therefore will not pause to enter into this exegetical dispute.

³⁵ Nielsen 105. Also see Hall, “The Problem of Ideology” 33–40.

³⁶ Miles 80–82.

race-skewed media portrayals of the poor, such assumptions can appear reasonable.³⁷ But as William Julius Wilson has shown, many of the behaviors that are associated with inner-city poverty are a consequence of the historical effects of racism, continuing de facto racial segregation, failing schools, structural shifts in the economy, and high rates of joblessness.³⁸ These factors also explain why too many blacks—though fewer than most Americans think—are forced to rely on public assistance to meet their basic needs. But if one is blind to or simply ignores these structural factors, some of the conduct of the black ghetto poor can seem to confirm the stereotypes of racist ideology and thus to justify resentment toward black welfare recipients.

I am not suggesting that an ideology is never appropriately described as false *simpliciter*. Rather, a form of social consciousness may be ideological in ways that are not fully or accurately conveyed by simply calling the set of beliefs “false.” This is part of the rationale behind using the vague term “cognitive defect” to refer to the negative epistemic characteristics of ideologies. But this bit of vagueness is not a weakness in our account. There are many types of cognitive error that are typical of ideological thinking—inconsistency, oversimplification, exaggeration, half-truth, equivocation, circularity, neglect of pertinent facts, false dichotomy, obfuscation, misuse of “authoritative” sources, hasty generalization, and so forth. This means that we must engage in concrete epistemic evaluations of putative ideologies if we are to uncover their particular cognitive deficiencies. I will refer to these various cognitive defects as “ideological illusions” or simply “illusions,” as these expressions succinctly convey the sense I want to communicate, namely, that of distorted, biased, or misleading representations of reality.³⁹

This use of the term “illusion” should not be taken to imply that ideologies are somehow unreal. On the contrary, many ideological illusions are all too real in their consequences for the oppressed. To see this, we need only consider the illusion of “racial” difference, which is based on a pseudo-scientific and misleading explanation of human variety. The general uptake of this false theory of human differences, notwithstanding its lack of scientific standing, has infused lasting

³⁷ Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2001).

³⁸ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1999). Also see Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁹ The term “illusion” is also consistent with the terminology of *The German Ideology*, the most sustained discussion of ideology to appear in Marx’s writings.

social meaning into the relatively superficial phenotypic traits of skin color, hair type, and nose shape, often with disastrous effects. Ideological illusions are certainly a part of social reality, as they are often the media through which we coordinate social action and the schema through which we define our identities. But we can acknowledge this extremely important point while recognizing that the representational content of an ideological illusion, qua claim to knowledge, is not an *accurate* representation of reality.

Now, given that Marxists maintain that certain *normative* belief systems—religious, moral, political, aesthetic, and so on—can be ideological, we need to know in what sense such beliefs can be “illusory.”⁴⁰ Here I suggest that we take as little for granted as possible. So, for example, we should not simply assume that *anti-realism* holds with respect to normative beliefs; that is, we should not assume that normative beliefs are not literally true or false (nonscognitivism) or that all normative beliefs must be false because they are based on a false ontology (error theory). Of course, normative antirealism may be true; however, this should not be a presupposition of ideology-critique but rather something it may set out to prove. Moreover, by leaving open the question of whether we can have knowledge of “normative facts,” we allow that there may be ideological illusions that depend on a failure to appreciate some normative truth—for example, that capitalist property relations are unjust. Thus, whether particular normative beliefs or normative beliefs in general are ideological illusions must be treated as a substantive question for concrete ideology-critique.⁴¹

The requirement of an epistemic dimension to ideology-critique, as understood here, entails rather modest epistemological presuppositions. It does not assume, for instance, that some group—not the working class, the ruling elite, organic

⁴⁰ There is no doubt that Marx believed that many normative belief systems are ideological. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels repeatedly refer to moral, political, legal, religious, aesthetic, and philosophical ideas as “ideological” or “illusions.” Of course, this does not mean that they must think all such ideas in each of these categories are ideological, but it is clear that they believe that at least some ideas from each are. See Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 47, 60, 67–68, 80.

⁴¹ There have, of course, been several attempts by Marxists to show that *moral* or *political* beliefs are inherently ideological. For *weak* versions of this view, see Nielsen, chs. 5–6; and Charles Mills, “Marxism, ‘Ideology’ and Moral Objectivism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1994) 373–94; For *strong* versions, see Donald Clark Hodges, “Historical Materialism in Ethics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23 (1962) 1–22; Anthony Skillen, “Marxism and Morality,” *Radical Philosophy* 8 (1974) 11–15; Andrew Collier, “The Production of Moral Ideology,” *Radical Philosophy* 9 (1974) 5–15; and Richard Miller, *Analyzing Marx* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), ch. 1. Moreover, some have thought that *aesthetic* beliefs and theories can be ideological. For a compelling statement and defense of this view, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

intellectuals, or any other group—has privileged access to the truth about our social world or that there is some Archimedean standpoint outside of all modes of discourse from which to judge them. It does not rely on esoteric methodological principles or obscure forms of reasoning, just ordinary standards of epistemic evaluation, which of course are themselves open to critical scrutiny and refinement. Epistemic critique does not depend on an ideology/science dichotomy, since scientific claims are themselves amenable to ideology-critique, and there may be ideological beliefs that scientific reasoning alone cannot fully assess (e.g., moral beliefs). This critical component does not make the critique of ideology epistemically presumptuous or self-righteous. Indeed, if this charge had any merit, then any social analysis that diverged from common sense would be vulnerable to it, undermining the entire enterprise of seeking sound and systematic knowledge of social phenomena. Rather, the epistemic aspect of ideology-critique simply assumes that some claims are true or well-grounded and others false or ill-founded and that we are sometimes, using our best methods of inquiry, in a position to reliably and rationally adjudicate between competing validity claims. It does, however, entail a rejection of global relativism and subjectivism about knowledge claims, as any useful critical conception of ideology must. This form of ideology-critique may therefore appear to those with a more postmodern or poststructuralist orientation to be a hopeless and perhaps suspicious enterprise, and thus those who would defend critical theory must be prepared to answer the objections of these skeptics, though that won't be my task here.⁴²

Returning to the case of racist ideology, many of its illusions have been diagnosed and submitted to ideology-critique many times over. Its most fundamental illusion, the linchpin of the whole system of thought, is arguably the belief that “races” exist at all. Indeed, in an effort to dismantle the theoretical foundation of racism, some have set out to demonstrate that systems of racial classification have no legitimate scientific basis.⁴³ But even if this critical project ultimately fails, the epistemic critique of racist ideology will still be important, since racist illusions obviously go far beyond a mere belief in the reality of races. So-called “classic” racist ideology, now generally thought to be scientifically discredited, attributes certain cultural and psychological traits to various social populations and then

⁴² There have been important Marxist responses to postmodernism. See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Norman Geras, *Discourses of Extremity: Radical Ethics and Post-Marxist Extravagances* (London: Verso, 1990); and Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

⁴³ See, for example, Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); K. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, K. Anthony

claims that these traits are causally determined by the respective biological “essences” of these groupings.⁴⁴ Antiblack ideology wrongly claims that blacks are by their very nature inferior and thereby incapable of being the equal to whites in intellect and moral character; that blacks are inherently disposed to be lazy, uncontrollably emotional, and sexually promiscuous; and that whites must avoid producing “mixed” offspring with them, for this will only weaken their superior racial stock. This ideology has often represented blacks as less than fully human, as either animal-like, demonic, or as mere “things” to be manipulated, discarded, or exchanged like ordinary commodities.⁴⁵ On the normative side, classic racist ideology fallaciously concluded that whites, in light of their alleged inherent superiority, should have a higher social and political status than that of blacks; that so-called “white culture” is the highest level of creative attainment so far achieved, while black cultural expression has lesser, or no, aesthetic worth; and that Blacks are themselves, objectively speaking, physically unattractive, even repulsive. Through racist ideology, these and other vicious stereotypes about racialized groups have spread widely, and, due to the cumulative impact of practices of systematic exclusion, exploitation, and underdevelopment, these stereotypes have the appearance of truth, as impoverished and degraded black populations have actually been created.⁴⁶ It is the task of the specifically *epistemic* dimension of ideology-critique to unmask or reveal the illusory character of racist and other ideologies. And since the content of ideologies is constantly shifting in response to changes in social circumstances and contestation, the task of epistemic critique is never quite finished; new variants of old ideologies inevitably emerge—for example, the “new” racism, which emphasizes the ineradicable cultural pathology of blacks rather than their biogenetic inferiority. Here, the philosopher, scientist, and social critic have an important role to play in diagnosing and undermining the various illusions of ideological consciousness.

Appiah and Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Naomi Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the core of the “classic” racist belief system, see Rex 2–3; and van den Berghe 11. For a historical perspective with a focus on antiblack ideology, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); and George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1971).

⁴⁵ Kuper 11–15. Also see Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) 53–62.

⁴⁶ In speaking of “racialized groups,” I follow Lawrence Blum’s definition of racialization: “the treating of groups as if there were inherent and immutable differences between them; as if certain somatic characteristics marked the presence of significant characteristics of mind, emotion, and character; and as if some were of greater worth than others.” See his *“I’m Not a Racist, But . . .”*: *The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002) 147.

FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

Many theorists of ideology rightly claim that ideology centrally involves *false consciousness*.⁴⁷ We should be careful, though, not to confuse the idea of false consciousness with that of ideological illusion. Since Marx never uses the term “false consciousness,” which of course is not to say he does not invoke the idea expressed by it, the *locus classicus* of the notion is to be found in Engels’s famous letter to Franz Mehring:

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces.⁴⁸

What this passage suggests is that false consciousness has to do with the way in which agents hold their beliefs, and not with the cognitive status of the discursive content of these beliefs, as the “false” in “false consciousness” might misleadingly suggest. To hold a belief with a false consciousness is to hold it while being ignorant of, or self-deceived about, the real motives for why one holds it: the individual who suffers from a false consciousness would like to believe that she accepts a given belief system (solely) because of the epistemic considerations in favor of it, but, as a matter of fact, she accepts it (primarily) because of the influence of noncognitive motives that operate, as Marx was fond of saying, “behind her back,” that is, without her conscious awareness.⁴⁹ Thus, a form of social consciousness can be both *held with a false consciousness* and *false*.

Now if a belief is held with a false consciousness—because of the unconscious influence of noncognitive motives—then it is held *irrationally*.⁵⁰ Those with a false consciousness cling to a system of belief, not because of its epistemic warrant, but because it serves some noncognitive interest. However, it does not follow from the fact that a system of belief is held with a false consciousness that the beliefs in question are illusions, since both true and false beliefs can be held with a false consciousness. So while agents with a false consciousness do irrationally adhere to a system of belief, they can do so even when there are sound epistemic grounds available for accepting these beliefs—though they themselves

⁴⁷ See, for example, Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, ch. 8; Zizek; Pines; and David Weberman, “Liberal Democracy, Autonomy, and Ideology Critique,” *Social Theory and Practice* 33 (1997) 205–33.

⁴⁸ Friedrich Engels, “To Franz Mehring, 14 July, 1893,” *The Marx-Engels Reader* 765–67.

⁴⁹ Exactly how these psychological processes work is a question best left to empirical psychologists. But I take it that there is little doubt about their existence or about their profound influence on human behavior and mental functioning.

⁵⁰ Cf. Elster, “Belief, Bias and Ideology” 147; and Roger S. Gottlieb, “A Marxian Concept of Ideology,” *Philosophical Forum* 6 (1975): 391–92.

may not be properly informed about or appropriately moved by these grounds. Hence, if we want to defend a *strong* critical conception of ideology—one that provides a *sufficient* reason for rejecting a form of social consciousness—we cannot do so by relying solely on an account of false consciousness. We will also need to appeal to the illusory content of a form of consciousness.

The idea of false consciousness might, however, help explain two other peculiar facts about ideological phenomena. First, given that ideologies suffer from fundamental cognitive defects and yet are widely held, it might seem that ideology-critique assumes that most humans are quite credulous and perhaps even stupid. But if ideologies are held with a false consciousness, then this unflattering and elitist view of ordinary people need not be assumed. It is a mundane fact about human beings that we are sometimes prompted to accept beliefs by motives that have little to do with a concern for truth or justification. Though presumably we do not do so consciously, we sometimes believe things because to do so would, say, bolster our self-esteem, give us consolation, lessen anxiety, reduce cognitive dissonance, increase our self-confidence, provide cathartic relief, give us hope, or silence a guilty conscience. When these and other noncognitive motives are psychologically operative, we easily fall into epistemic error. Moreover, as Allen Wood has pointed out, if people are unaware of the fact that their beliefs have social currency *because* they are widely held with a false consciousness, then they may be led to think that their beliefs are so prevalent because they are *justified*, for example, that they are “self-evident or authenticated by the experience of humanity through the ages.”⁵¹ For example, racial scapegoating is a familiar response to economic powerlessness and desperation. The white working-class racist attacks blacks in a similar subordinate economic position and blames them for problems whose real causes lie elsewhere. But he blames blacks, not because he has good evidence for thinking that they are the source of his difficulties, but because, for example, he cannot bear to face the real causes of his misery, for this might, given his powerlessness, undermine his hope of overcoming it, or it might threaten his self-conception or his most cherished ideals.

Second, if ideological illusions are held with a false consciousness, this may help to account for the fact that people often stubbornly resist giving them up. It is a salient fact about certain illusory forms of consciousness that those who hold them often continue to be under their spell even after they have been subjected to a number of telling, sometimes devastating, criticisms. This is perhaps no more evident than in the case of racist beliefs. Many wonder how anyone could still believe in the “natural” intellectual and moral superiority of whites, given that these views have been shown repeatedly to be without merit. But if such beliefs

⁵¹ Wood 119.

are widely held with a false consciousness, then we can see why they are so often not responsive to rational criticism. The relevant individuals are motivated to accept these and other illusions because of the unconscious influence of non-cognitive motives, and therefore we should not expect that criticism alone, however forceful, will typically lead to their repudiation.

Now it is obvious that an *individual* can accept an illusory belief system without suffering from a false consciousness, if, that is, she accepts it while being ignorant of or mistaken about its cognitive deficiencies. This would simply be a case of being wrong about the soundness of one's epistemic grounds for belief.⁵² Moreover, on the assumptions that rational individuals strive to have true beliefs and that most normal, adult human beings are in this narrow sense rational, it is reasonable to suppose that individuals who are under the dominion of illusory modes of thought are typically unaware of their cognitive failings, whether or not they hold them with a false consciousness.⁵³ But it would be incredible if the kinds of ideological illusions that Marxists are concerned with—for example, racism, sexism, nationalism, religious fanaticism—could enjoy the social currency that they do were this not due in part to the unconscious influence of noncognitive motives. Thus, while acknowledging that an individual can hold to a set of illusions without a false consciousness, Marxists often contend that, as a matter of empirical fact, ideological forms of social consciousness are generally held with a false consciousness. Relying on this substantive thesis (which of course would need to be demonstrated through the appropriate forms of empirical evidence), we might say, as a first approximation, that ideologies are forms of social consciousness that suffer from distorting illusions and are widely held with a false consciousness.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION(S) OF IDEOLOGY

Though cognitive deficiency and false consciousness are clearly core characteristics of ideologies, they provide us with a conception of ideology that is too broad. There is nothing distinctively Marxist about a critique of false or misleading social beliefs, even when these beliefs are held with a false consciousness. Both Nietzsche and Freud, for example, engage in a kind of debunking critique of religion and morality that focuses on these two dimensions of

⁵² This is a different point from the observation that some individuals, while recognizing that a particular ideology is epistemically defective, nevertheless seek to exploit the fact that it has a hold over *others* to further their own ends. They *use* the ideology, but they do not accept it themselves. One might think that something like this is true, for example, of certain politicians, evangelists, lawyers, and advertisers. See Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* 465.

⁵³ Žižek 29.

social consciousness.⁵⁴ Of course, Marxist critiques of religious and moral ideologies have things in common with their genealogical and psychoanalytic counterparts, but they also differ from these in important respects. Later in this essay I will specify how Marxist ideology-critique differs with regard to both its theoretical foundations and its practical implications. What I want to focus on presently, though, is the distinctive social *functions* that Marxists attribute to ideologies.

Critical conceptions of ideology that focus on the functional characteristics of belief systems are ubiquitous. Marxists generally claim that part of what makes a form of social consciousness ideological is the role it plays in establishing or reinforcing relations of oppression, such as labor exploitation, land and resource expropriation, imperial conquest and annexation, political disenfranchisement and marginalization, social repression and exclusion, expulsion and genocide. Some even claim that *the* defining feature of an ideology is that it helps to establish and/or stabilize such relations of subordination.

However, as a strong critical conception of ideology, the functional approach cannot stand alone, for such an account would have the following fatal shortcoming. Even in those cases where a form of social consciousness clearly serves to bring about or reinforce structures of oppression, we cannot rationally reject the form of consciousness itself if it is not cognitively defective, that is, if it accurately represents reality or provides a genuine justification. Consider the following example. During the Jim Crow era, it was a widely held belief among blacks that the military and policing power of the government would crush any violent black revolt.⁵⁵ No doubt, this common belief had the effect of reinforcing domination by engendering political passivity and resignation in some Blacks. But now if their belief about the power and resolve of the political regime was true—as it certainly was—it surely would have been (epistemically) irrational—and pure folly—for them to reject it on the grounds that its wide acceptance has this unfortunate social consequence, distressing as it may have been.⁵⁶ This case further illustrates why it is essential to develop a critical conception of ideology that treats forms of consciousness as ideological only if they possess some cognitive defect

⁵⁴ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” in *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo* trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967) 15–166; and Sigmund Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).

⁵⁵ See, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Community or Chaos?* (Boston: Beacon, 1967) 27.

⁵⁶ Now, of course, if the state had such power only because blacks believed it to, and consequently they submitted to its dictates only out of unfounded fear, this would be a different matter. The belief in the overwhelming power of the state could then be criticized on the ground that those who accept it fail to see that it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, that their belief makes it so.

that undermines their claim to knowledge. Notice also that this is not a matter of an uncritical valorization of truth or reason, but a serious practical issue. We cannot adequately resist structures of power without a sober and accurate view of the nature of hegemonic regimes, which of course includes a thorough critical examination of their characteristic forms of social consciousness. This point should be obvious by now, but some functional accounts of ideology seem not to adequately appreciate it.⁵⁷

Though a purely functional conception of ideology would lack this essential epistemic dimension, the focus on the functional characteristics of ideological forms of social consciousness does emphasize something absolutely crucial: We should oppose and seek to subvert ideologies, not simply because they are rooted in illusions and irrationally held, but because of the oppressive social consequences of their wide acceptance. Indeed, the stabilizing impact of ideologies on relations of exploitation and domination has been a focal point of much Marxist theorizing.⁵⁸ What we need, then, is a critical conception of ideology that has both epistemic and functional dimensions, one that maintains that ideologies are to be rejected because they are illusory *and* because of their tendency to foster social oppression.

What is more, and this is essential, we need to see that the illusory character and the oppressive function of an ideology are related: it is the former that makes the latter possible. That is, an ideological form of social consciousness contributes to establishing or stabilizing relations of oppression *in virtue of* its cognitive defect(s). In a word, ideologies perform their social operations by way of illusion and misrepresentation. What this means practically is that were the cognitive failings of an ideology to become widely recognized and acknowledged, the relations of domination and exploitation that it serves to reinforce would, other things being equal, subsequently become less stable and perhaps even amenable to reform.

How much less stable? That of course will depend on a number of factors, such as (a) the prevailing economic conditions; (b) whether there are other structures that could be mobilized to reinforce the oppressive relations (e.g., dominant class control over state machinery and mass communication networks); (c) whether there are other functionally equivalent ideologies that could quickly fill the void; (d) whether the damaged form of consciousness performs functions

⁵⁷ Habermas makes this point forcefully against Foucault's account of the relationship between power and knowledge. See his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* 273–76.

⁵⁸ In fact, to focus exclusively on the epistemic inadequacies of a form of social consciousness while ignoring its oppressive practical consequences would be to turn the critique of ideology into the mere criticism of ideas—something that would be very un-Marxian indeed. See Charles W. Mills and Danny Goldstick, “A New Old Meaning of ‘Ideology,’” *Dialogue* 28 (1989) 417–32; Larrain, *Concept of Ideology* 47; and Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” 132–33.

other than ideological ones (e.g., meeting some unacknowledged psychological “need” that is unrelated to social power); (e) the extent to which the material and social incentive structures present insuperable obstacles to collective action for social change (e.g., prisoner’s dilemma and free-rider problems); (f) the level of solidarity, militancy, and social organization of the relevant subordinate groups; and surely other factors. The point of the condition, however, is to emphasize this important relationship between ideological illusions and their oppressive social function. Exactly when the counterfactual condition is met will often be difficult to determine. But the condition is necessary if ideology-critique is to serve an emancipatory function, and not a purely intellectual one. Now few, if any, proponents of critical theory would maintain that getting people to recognize the ideological chains that bind them would be sufficient to get these persons to fundamentally change their social relations. However, if the critique of ideological illusions did not have at least *some* potential to contribute to the subversion of structures of hegemonic power, then it is hard to see why progressives should be engaging in it.

Returning to the case of antiblack racial ideology, there is no doubt that these racist social illusions have served to bring about and stabilize relations of oppression. Because of growing abolitionist opposition, the continued reproduction of slave-systems in the New World depended on the wide acceptance of beliefs about the inherent inferiority of people of African descent. To justify the brutality of slave conditions and the systematic coercive exploitation of human labor, slaves were viewed as less than fully autonomous agents—lacking in ordinary human cognitive and moral capacities, naturally indolent and deceitful, inherently child-like and incorrigible. This, in a now familiar rationalization, allowed the slaveholding classes to maintain that Africans and their descendants did not deserve to be accorded the same respect and rights due (some) “white” human beings and, therefore, that plantation slavery did not run afoul of liberal principles of equality and autonomy. In the aftermath of slavery, legally sanctioned segregation of and discrimination against blacks were supported by the ideological belief that white contact with blacks, especially sexual contact, would contaminate or pollute the purity of the white race, giving rise to the notorious doctrine of “separate but equal.”

In the post-civil-rights era, racist ideology has come to perform its oppressive social function in more subtle ways. Consider the case of racial profiling. Based on arrests, convictions, and victimization surveys, it would appear that black men do disproportionately commit certain violent crimes—for example, murder, robbery, and rape.⁵⁹ Therefore using the category of “race” to target suspects of

⁵⁹ Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine, 1992) 184–206.

violent offences does not appear to rely on racist illusions about blacks being “naturally” disposed to violence but on simple statistical calculations based on reliable empirical data.⁶⁰ But racist ideology is nevertheless implicated here; indeed, this ideology has made the practice of racial profiling possible. The groups that we call “races” in America are not biological natural kinds but rather social groupings constituted by the social meanings that have come to be associated with certain phenotypic traits (e.g., hair texture, nose shape, and skin color) and continental origins (Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas); not only is this system of social classification deeply embedded in common sense but it also has official state backing.⁶¹ The practice of targeting “blacks” for increased surveillance, then, is partly constituted by racist ideology, as “race” itself is not simply a social construct, but an ideological one. The operation of racist ideology does not stop here, however. Racial profiling, by tapping into longstanding stereotypes, revives and reinforces ideological beliefs about the inherent tendencies of blacks toward violence and sexual aggression. Those who defend the practice implicitly rely on these prejudices to legitimate it. Though explicit racist claims are not socially tolerated in the way they once were, racist assumptions continue to be a part of the unspoken “background knowledge” of everyday life; thus, the statistical data of black crime rates, especially when exaggerated and sensationalized through the media as they typically are, are thereby given the appearance of being self-explanatory—“just what we suspected all along.”⁶² Racial profiling, as a means of social control, is therefore tacitly legitimated in terms of racist ideology, adding to the burden that blacks, as a racialized group, must carry in a society that is already hostile to their presence.

Before leaving this discussion of the function of ideology, we should point out that as there are many different kinds of ideological illusion, ideologies are capable of performing their oppressive social function in a variety of ways. It is sometimes mistakenly thought that the only way an ideology can bring about or stabilize oppressive social relations is by making these relations appear *legitimate*—by creating the social illusion that they are justified. *Moral* ideologies usually perform their function through legitimation: They lead people to

⁶⁰ Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multicultural Society* (New York: Free, 1995) 245–87.

⁶¹ Guillaumin 61–98; Barbara J. Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 143–77; Anthony W. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁶² Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Mendelberg, esp. ch. 4.

accept that the relations of power that enable some to dominate and exploit others are not unjust and, thus, that the prevailing distribution of power should be respected or at least not interfered with. Racist ideology, too, makes racial domination and exclusion appear legitimate by, for example, representing blacks as morally and intellectually inferior and, therefore, suggesting that blacks do not merit the same opportunities and treatment as nonblacks.

Legitimation is perhaps the most common way that ideologies perform their hegemonic social function, but they can also do this through *reification*. Reifying ideologies stabilize oppressive social relations by creating the illusion that these relations (or their causes), which are actually the product of historically contingent human action or convention, are “natural” and, thus, ineradicable, unavoidable, and unalterable. Reification is part of what makes the idea of “race” such a powerful tool of oppression. By attributing to the oppressed group a biogenetic “racial essence” that all individuals within the group supposedly inherit through biological reproduction, the stigma of inferiority cannot be removed by anything the oppressed—or anybody else—can do. Blacks cannot escape their subordinate social status by converting to the dominant religion, by taking on prototypical “white” cultural characteristics, by intellectual achievement, or by moral virtue, for they are “naturally” inferior (even if there are a few exceptions), and thus there is nothing that can be done to remedy this. Moreover, once the impoverished condition of many blacks (brought about by a history of racial subjugation, class exploitation, and colonial domination) has been reified, it is easy for those in better circumstances to ignore their plight, for ameliorating their condition will appear to be practically impossible.

Then there are those ideologies that function through what we might call, for lack of a better term, *metaphysical mystification*. Here the subordinate position of the oppressed or the dominance of their oppressors is taken to have a *supernatural* explanation. The relations of domination are believed to be a consequence of some mysterious act of fate, God’s will, or the forces of the underworld. Those who embrace such ideologies insist that their beliefs cannot be refuted by ordinary empirical evidence or reasoned argument, since the apprehension of their truth is allegedly beyond the reach of science, logic, or rational disputation. In a familiar historical example, some claimed, relying on the *Bible* (though perhaps with considerable distortion), that blacks are the descendants of Noah’s son Ham and thus are cursed by God to toil for the benefit of whites. Here we see the intersection of religious and racial ideologies, where the former protects the latter from easy disproof by relying on the idea of divine revelation.

In whatever manner ideologies do their dirty work—legitimation, reification, or metaphysical mystification—it is clear that all ideologies have this in common: through their illusions they lead people to fail to recognize or properly appreciate the fact that they are implicated in social relations of oppression. In this way

they conceal the oppressive features of society. It is, at least in part, because these relations are not seen for what they really are, namely, structures of oppression, that many feel no duty to work to change them.

With this much of the account in place, we can now respond to two common objections to the Marxist concept of ideology. First, it is often said that Marxists treat ideologies, and thus phenomena like racism, as *merely* superstructural or “epiphenomenal.” But if the thought here is that, on the Marxist account, ideologies do not have a significant impact on social relations or material processes but instead are a negligible reflection or mere “shadow” of more basic socioeconomic factors, then the criticism is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Marxist theory. There can be no doubt that ideologies play a significant role in structuring social relations, any more than there could be that ideologies are structured by such relations. It would be absurd to think that there could be unidirectional causal influence here. By distorting our perception of social reality, ideologies influence our cognitive and affective relations to our social world, and through these, our individual conduct and social practices. Marxists maintain, for example, that antiblack ideology structures patterns of social interaction by creating and perpetuating myths about “racial” differences. This ideology has contributed to the creation and intractability of social inequality between racialized groups—in income, wealth, political power, occupational status, access to health care, educational opportunities, levels of employment, and home ownership—by making these inequalities seem justified, natural, or preordained. Racist ideology has also played a crucial role in marking off a segment of the working class for superexploitation, giving their relegation to the most menial, degrading, and low-paying jobs the appearance of fairness. Furthermore, racist ideology provides an apparent justification for apathy, resentment, and outright hostility toward those blacks who are unemployed. These are real social effects of a powerful ideology, which not even so-called “vulgar” Marxists would want to deny.

But perhaps the “epiphenomenon” criticism is better understood as claiming that Marxism fails to appreciate the ways in which certain socially prevalent ideas and discourses are not reducible to their role in institutionalizing oppression but instead have a social “life” and internal “logic” of their own.⁶³ Marxists have usually replied to this criticism by conceding that ideologies have a “relative autonomy” from socioeconomic processes. This vague idea needs more theoretical development and clarification than I can give it here, but it might help in mit-

⁶³ Cornel West, “Race and Social Theory,” *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 265–67; also see his “Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression,” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

igating the force of this criticism to keep the following in mind. First, ideologies are not created in a cultural vacuum but emerge in a particular sociohistorical discursive context, against the background of a given life-world. Thus ideologists inevitably construct their theories out of the intellectual and other symbolic resources that are available at the time (e.g., theology, folklore, popular culture, literature, historical treatises, visual arts, the sciences, commercial advertisements, etc.). Consequently, ideologies inherit ideas, concepts, tropes, and other characteristics from these preexisting cultural elements, and thus the cultural roots of an ideology will affect how it can be deployed and the specificity of its future development, even after these roots are forgotten. Second, once an ideology becomes dominant and the system of oppression that it reinforces comes to have a socially accepted normative structure, the representational content of that ideology becomes part of the cultural heritage, passed down to subsequent generations through processes of socialization, whether via the family, educational and religious institutions, or the mass media. But in the process of transmitting and disseminating this ideological content, these various socializing institutions, as well as individual social actors, may make their mark on the ideology, altering its content somewhat or at times perhaps using it for nonideological purposes. And third, ideologies are almost never universally accepted within a given social context; they sometimes compete with rival belief systems for social dominance; and various subordinate groups and their allies almost always contest their validity. All forms of social consciousness, then, whether they be ideological or not, bear the imprint of the dominant culture and its intellectual traditions; they are susceptible to modification and contestation; and they are capable of performing multiple social and psychological functions. In this sense, then, the content, history, and social effects of ideologies clearly cannot be *fully* explained in terms of their role in establishing and stabilizing social oppression.

However, Marxism concedes little by acknowledging this fact. The relative autonomy of ideologies does not undermine the fundamental Marxist claim that there are illusory forms of social consciousness that, despite their dynamic character and in addition to whatever other subordinate functions they may perform, function primarily to sustain various forms oppression. Obviously, this dispute cannot be fully resolved at this high level of theoretical abstraction; it will take concrete historical studies and social analyses to show the explanatory power of the Marxist approach. Happily, many such studies and analyses have been produced, including *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Capital*.

A second and related objection to the account of ideology outlined above is that it is too narrow, for it doesn't include the forms of social consciousness that are characteristic of subordinate groups who are actively and self-consciously resisting their oppression. To take one example, it might be thought that certain forms of Black nationalism are properly called "ideologies." The approach to

these phenomena taken here, however, rests on distinguishing between forms of social consciousness that perform ideological functions and those that do not. These latter forms of thought may have epistemic flaws and be widely held with a false consciousness, but when they don't function to establish or reinforce forms of social oppression, they are not strictly speaking ideologies, at least not in the strong critical sense. Nevertheless, since some of these nonhegemonic forms of consciousness will possess salient ideological characteristics and may even draw on the discursive elements of existing bona fide ideologies, such belief systems might usefully be thought of as "ideological" in a weaker or derivative sense. As we know, sometimes subordinate groups will appropriate the discursive content of a full-fledged ideology (such as racist ideology) and then attempt to deploy it for their own purposes—for example, for identity-construction, political resistance, cultural expression, or material advantage. Some of these uses will inevitably be reactionary, in that they fail to advocate transforming societal oppression into nonoppressive social relations, but instead urge replacing existing forms of oppression with new (or old) ones—though of course not under this tendentious description. Arguably, though I will not try to make the case here, the programs of black capitalism (i.e., where blacks self-consciously engage in racially particularistic commercial activity in an effort to promote the material well-being of blacks) and patriarchal black nationalism (e.g., the doctrines of the Nation of Islam) are reactionary forms of consciousness built out of existing ideologies—racist, nationalist, liberal, patriarchal, and religious ideologies. Relying on the analytic framework developed thus far, such forms of social consciousness may still properly be called ideological, that is, insofar as they are illusory and, through these illusions, reinforce existing patterns of oppression or contribute to the establishment of new ones. However, sometimes a subordinate group will embrace aspects of an existing ideology, discard many of its illusory elements, and then use it for emancipatory purposes, by, for example, calling for an end to exploitation and domination in all its forms. Such forms of consciousness are *not* appropriately thought of as ideology, despite their ideological origins.⁶⁴

IDEOLOGY AND CLASS

Theorists of ideology often make claims about the relation(s) between ideologies and social classes, and analyzing the interplay between ideological thought

⁶⁴ For example, I have shown elsewhere that there is a version of black nationalism that draws on nationalist ideology without itself being ideological. See my "Two Conceptions of Black Nationalism: Martin Delany on the Meaning of Black Political Solidarity," *Political Theory* (forthcoming).

and class dynamics has been a continuing theme in contemporary critical theory. While there are obviously many relations that can exist between ideology and class, there are two that Marxists have been particularly concerned to emphasize.

First, there is the familiar claim that ideologies serve the interests of the dominant class(es). This claim is, unfortunately, often carelessly exploited by Marxists and mocked and mischaracterized by critics of Marxism. The main problem with this idea is that, with a little ingenuity, almost any set of beliefs, insofar as it supports the status quo, can be said to serve the interests of the dominant classes and, thus, to be ideological. And the use of this maneuver has led many to complain that ideology-critique is little more than anticapitalist rhetoric passing itself off as serious social analysis. But this charge can be rebutted if we interpret the claim that ideologies serve dominant class interests within the framework developed here. For according to our account, we should reject a form of social consciousness, not simply because it supports the interests of the dominant classes, but because it serves their interests by means of social illusions. Ideology-critique should target those forms of consciousness that distort or misrepresent the reality of social oppression. It should not mindlessly dismiss all ideas that favor preserving elements of the prevailing social order. However, the function of ideological illusions is to institutionalize or reinforce social relations of domination and exploitation; and ruling classes tend to have a stake in the preservation of these oppressive relations as they often gain material and other advantages from them. Thus insofar as an ideology protects established relations of domination and exploitation by concealing their oppressive character, it will also tend thereby to serve the interests of elites.⁶⁵

In asserting this, though, I do not mean to suggest that every expression of an ideological belief will promote social oppression or ruling class interests. These social consequences are the *overall* effect of the presence of ideological beliefs within a given social context. Thus it would be absurd to claim that every time a white person calls a black person “nigger” or “lazy” that this serves to benefit the ruling elite. Under certain circumstances, expressions of racism might create social unrest and political protest, which are often contrary to the interests of the dominant classes. But, as was argued above, antiblack racist ideology does largely serve to legitimize black subordination and, through that, to reinforce class exploitation.

The second relation between ideology and class that I want to discuss has to do with how an individual’s class position can unconsciously and irrationally lead

⁶⁵ The exact mechanisms through which ideologies come to perform this function will of course have to be uncovered through empirical investigation. For an important sociological study of the contemporary function of antiblack ideology, see Bobo, Klugel, and Smith.

one to accept an ideology (which may or may not serve one's class interests).⁶⁶ As discussed above, beliefs that are held with a false consciousness are held because of the unconscious influence of noncognitive motives, such as the desire to maintain a positive self-conception or dominant social position. Many (though not all) of these rationality-distorting motives spring from the fact that social agents are positioned within a particular class location—for example, the desire to make a return on one's financial investment or to find a suitable employer for one's labor-power—and it is these class-based motivations and their impact on belief-formation that are of particular concern to Marxists. Relying on the idea of false consciousness as defined earlier, we can now reformulate another important Marxist thesis: ideologies tend to be accepted by agents because of their false consciousness about the influence of their class position on the formation of their beliefs. The slaveholding aristocracy of the American South, for example, had an interest in maintaining their right to own and exploit the labor of African slaves and their descendants. Thus, it is not surprising that many from that class were irrationally led to believe that blacks were less than fully human and hence incapable of benefiting from the full range of rights that (some) whites themselves enjoyed. While clearly a matter of wishful thinking, induced by the desire to promote their material and other interests, such a belief was firmly entrenched among the ruling class. But the oppressed, too, are susceptible to this kind of class-based false consciousness, though often with different consequences for their material interests. Some white members of the working class use racism to console themselves in their subordinate social position, feeling blessed that they were born with the “natural” virtue that “whiteness” bestows. And it is also clear that in the aftermath of slavery many working class whites embraced racist ideology when faced with the threat of lower wages and fewer jobs due to the influx of blacks into an already competitive labor market.⁶⁷ Moreover, blacks themselves have been susceptible to the influence of racist ideology. Long periods of subjugation can induce feelings of inferiority, helplessness, and resignation in the oppressed. Oppressed groups under these social and psychological conditions more readily accept ideological explanations and justifications.

⁶⁶ Marx and Engels illustrate this connection when they attempt to explain why members of the petite bourgeoisie tend to accept romantic ideas and reactionary political ideologies by calling attention to their interest in bringing back social conditions that were characteristic of feudal society (“The Manifesto of the Communist Party” 492–93).

⁶⁷ See Edna Bonacich, “A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market,” *American Sociological Review* 37 (1972) 547–59; and “Abolition, the Extension of Slavery, and the Position of Free Blacks: A Study of Split Labor Markets in the United States, 1830–1863,” *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1975) 601–28. Also see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian, 1964) 17–31; and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1999).

The claim that ideologies are accepted because of class-based false consciousness constitutes the *genetic* component of our conception of ideology. It is this feature of ideologies that underwrites the Marxian idea that ideologies have socioeconomic *causes* in addition to their oppressive social effects.⁶⁸ However, we should be careful to distinguish this genetic approach from a different one that is sometimes confused with it. On this alternative approach, ideology-critique proceeds by constructing a quasi-historical narrative about the origin of an ideology. This “genealogical” narrative emphasizes those historical conditions that are thought to have given rise to the peculiar discursive content of that ideology. Sometimes it even stresses *who*—that is, which social or status group—in particular produced it or *how* it came to be produced—for example, through the disciplining and surveillance of human bodies.⁶⁹ By contrast, the Marxian critique of false consciousness focuses primarily on the material conditions under which an ideology comes to be widely *accepted*, rather than on the sociohistorical conditions that engendered its specific discursive content. By making use of available intellectual resources and their own creativity, ideologists can conjure up all sorts of ideas, stories, and theories. The Marxist theory of ideology does not claim to be able to always explain how they come up with these views—though it has a lot to say about why they might be *motivated* to do so. Nor does it deny that ideologists have some autonomy of thought when it comes to devising them. What it does claim to be able to explain is why certain views, and not others, gain social currency among the various social classes. This it does through an account of false consciousness that emphasizes the impact of class-specific, noncognitive motives on belief-formation.

IDEOLOGY-CRITIQUE AND MATERIALIST SOCIAL THEORY

Drawing on the epistemic, functional, and genetic characteristics of certain forms of social consciousness, I have been describing an I-property that I believe is constitutive of ideology. The conception of ideology might be summarized this way: A form of social consciousness is an ideology if and only if (i) its discursive content is epistemically defective, that is, distorted by illusions; (ii) through these illusions it functions to establish or reinforce social relations of oppression;

⁶⁸ This is only a partial account of the material bases of ideology. As was briefly touched on earlier, there are social illusions that are induced by the surface appearance of class-structured commercial societies. But as many ideological illusions (for instance, racist, sexist, and religious ones) clearly lack this genesis, it should not be seen as an essential characteristic of ideology.

⁶⁹ Nietzsche often engages in this form of critique. See, for example, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Foucault is perhaps the most influential contemporary proponent of this approach. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995); and *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

and (iii) its wide acceptance can be (largely) explained by the class-structured false consciousness of most who embrace it.

This account would be of little theoretical or practical significance if we were unable to point to forms of social consciousness with this complex interrelated set of characteristics. I think it safe to say, however, that racial forms of social consciousness do sometimes possess these features. Such forms of consciousness are (i) distorted and misleading systems of belief that make (explicit and implicit) claims about the biogenetic (and sometimes cultural) attributes of certain collectivities and about the consequences these so-called racial characteristics have for the social relations that (should) exist between different status groups and classes; (ii) through these illusions, these forms of consciousness have functioned to bring about and continue to sustain the oppression of both those they mark off as inferior races and other subordinate groups who might find solidarity with them; and (iii) their tenets are widely accepted with a false consciousness about their basis in material relations of inequality and class antagonism. Accordingly, I would recommend that we call a racial form of social consciousness “racist” when—though perhaps not only when—it is ideological in this critical Marxist sense.⁷⁰

Assuming, then, that ideologies in the sense I have defined do in fact exist, I want to turn briefly to a different issue in order to elucidate the social-theoretic underpinnings of ideology-critique. Given their troubling epistemic, functional, and genetic properties, some find it puzzling that ideologies, especially racist ones, continue to persist even in the most advanced modern societies. What explains this odd social fact?

One explanation, what some have called the *idealist* view, claims that ideologies continue to be widely held largely because of widespread ignorance, faulty reasoning, and failures to appreciate relevant evidence. The idealist contends that if people would only come to think more logically, rigorously, and scientifically, they would be much less susceptible to ideological illusions. Their short-term solution is to encourage critical discussion of all existing ideological illusions, and their long-term remedy is to provide more and better education. This has been the traditional liberal reform-oriented response to racism, to view “race prejudice” as simply a problem of individual irrationality and ignorance, which is best combated by, say, a multicultural educational curriculum and perhaps a course or two in critical thinking.

I suggest that the appropriate response to the idealist approach should be the same as Marx and Engels’s critique of the liberatory strategy of the Young Hegelians. Marx and Engels criticized these thinkers for attacking the illusory products of consciousness while ignoring the material conditions that give rise

⁷⁰ For further argument in favor of this view of racism, see my “Is Racism in the ‘Heart’?” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002) 411–20.

to them—a sort of “free your mind and everything else will follow” approach to radical criticism. They point out that it has not occurred to any of these “radical” critics to investigate the connection between social consciousness and social practice, and it is partly due to this failure that Marx and Engels call them the “staunchest conservatives.”⁷¹ The idealist, I submit, is guilty of the same error. She fails to investigate the underlying socioeconomic function of ideological thinking and ignores how class position can create false consciousness in those who engage in this type of thought. She assumes that all mistaken beliefs can be effectively combated through criticism and intellectual training alone. Of course, such a program is a good, indeed necessary, first step. But given the persistence of racist, sexist, nationalist, political, and religious ideologies, a purely idealist approach to these phenomena can no longer be seriously thought to be sufficient.

In contrast to the idealist paradigm, the Marxist explanatory approach to ideological phenomena aims to provide a *materialist* explanation of their presence and persistence. That is, unlike the idealist who remains at the level of consciousness, Marxist theory attempts to account for the wide acceptance of ideologies in terms of the material conditions of social life. Material factors, as understood here, are those productive resources and social relations that are directly related to the production of goods and services for a given social population or for the market.⁷² According to Marx, the material processes of production and the social structures within which they operate best explain the illusions of social consciousness. For Marx, then, a proper understanding of ideologies must appreciate how they depend on the actual material conditions of those in their grip. This general, and I think still valuable, approach to critical social theory can take a number of specific forms. I cannot begin to discuss all of them here, but it might be useful to briefly distinguish two important variants.

The *functionalist* version of materialist social theory operates at a fairly high level of theoretical abstraction. It analyzes ideologies by uncovering their role in the reproduction of social systems. According to this account, the material conditions that are characteristic of class-structured societies, *by their very nature*, engender ideologies. Societies that engage in material reproduction under economic relations of extreme class stratification are inherently unstable, for the distribution of power that forms the basic structure of these societies gives rise to deep and ultimately irreconcilable conflicts between dominant and subordinate classes. Ideological illusions contribute to social stability and integration by misleading social actors about the social structure within which they live and work.

⁷¹ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 41.

⁷² See *Capital*, vol. 1., 677; and Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 47. Also see, Cohen, *Marx's Theory of History* 330–31; and Larrain, *Concept of Ideology* 39.

These illusions perform their ideological function primarily by concealing the hegemonic and exploitative nature of these societies. But the illusory character of ideological forms of consciousness is not simply the result of faulty reasoning or a failure to properly attend to the available evidence. Rather, it is the social structure within which material production takes place, a class-based structure, that leads agents to accept illusions about themselves and their social life, though they typically accept them with a false consciousness about their material basis. By stabilizing relations of economic domination and exploitation, ideologies contribute to the reproduction of these structures of social power. But, as we have said, these same structures have the effect of producing ideological illusions. Hence, through a kind of self-perpetuating feedback loop, ideologies are reproduced by the relations of domination and exploitation that they function to sustain.⁷³

Inspired by the writings of Antonio Gramsci, defenders of the *processualist* version of materialist social theory reject what they perceive to be the “reductionism” and “economic determinism” of the functionalist approach.⁷⁴ They also insist that a functional interpretation of Marx’s materialism obscures the significance of collective action in both sustaining and resisting oppression. Accordingly, the processualist emphasizes the active role of class actors in the production, transmission, and perpetuation of ideologies. In the struggle for societal hegemony, competing classes exploit and reconstruct ideological systems of belief in an effort to secure the dominance of their group and to promote their common interests. The basic thought behind this account is that the classes that largely control economic resources and the institutions of civil society use their superior position to get others to accept their dominion as legitimate, unavoidable, or ordained by God.⁷⁵ Thus, a white ruling aristocracy in the South could convince itself and others that plantation slavery was really a “paternalistic” institution that would benefit the childlike and lazy Negro race.⁷⁶ They could argue, and were only too ready to believe, that blacks were happy being slaves and that education and political rights would be lost on them, given their inferior cognitive abilities and weak moral characters. Many nonslaveholding white workers also eagerly accepted this ideology, provided that their labor was not displaced

⁷³ For a (somewhat abstract) discussion of some of the ways in which structures of oppression are socially reproduced, see my “Parasites, Pimps, and Capitalists: A Naturalistic Conception of Exploitation,” *Social Theory and Practice* 28 (2002) 381–418.

⁷⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971).

⁷⁵ Indeed, Marx and Engels sometimes suggest this explanation themselves. See Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 64–65.

⁷⁶ van den Berghe 27–29.

by cheaper slave labor (and sometimes because it was) and blacks were maintained in a low castelike position within the society.⁷⁷

However, this emphasis on *agency* does not reduce to a “conspiratorial” account of ideology, for class actors are often unaware of the ideological function of the beliefs they embrace. While Marxists acknowledge the significance and prevalence of subterfuge, propagandizing, and demagoguery carried out by the dominant classes and their spokespersons, they do not believe that dominant class conspiracy is the whole story, or even the most important part of it. A critical theory that explains the wide acceptance of ideologies in terms of ruling class conspiracy must be inadequate, if only because such a theory must be based on the view that the class that does the deceiving has an accurate understanding of the nature of society, as one cannot effectively deceive others without knowing the truth oneself. But the view that some social class can have this kind of privileged knowledge of social relations while all others are trapped in illusions is hardly plausible. Though class position might provide some with more of a motive to preserve the social structure and, thus, a greater disposition to accept forms of thought that stabilize it, it does not provide anyone with an advantage in understanding its true nature.⁷⁸ Moreover, given the power of false consciousness, the dominant classes tend to be just as, if not more, vulnerable to being taken in by ideological illusions as the subordinate classes. As O. C. Cox says of racist ideology, “race prejudice, from its inception, became part of the social heritage, and as such both exploiters and exploited for the most part are born heirs to it. It is possible that most of those who propagate and defend race prejudice are not conscious of its fundamental motivation.”⁷⁹

I will not try to decide here between these two accounts—indeed, I am not convinced that they are really, in the end, incompatible.⁸⁰ Suffice to say that at present these seem to be the most promising materialist approaches to ideological phenomena. What is clear, however, is that both the functionalist and the processualist accounts support a fundamental Marxian *practical* thesis: without a change in the social relations of power that give rise to them, the mere criticism of ideologies, no matter how relentless or devastating from a purely intellectual point of view, will not be sufficient to eliminate ideological social consciousness. As long as these social structures retain their oppressive form, new or recycled

⁷⁷ Bonacich, “Abolition, the Extension of Slavery, and the Position of Free Blacks” 606–08.

⁷⁸ Elster, “Belief, Bias and Ideology.”

⁷⁹ Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review, 1959) 333 n.

⁸⁰ See G. A. Cohen, “Forces and Relations of Production,” *Analytical Marxism*, ed. John Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

ideologies will arise. Moreover, these social illusions will also be supported by a false consciousness that limits the effectiveness of our attempts to undermine them through ideology-critique. Only the transformation of these social structures themselves can eliminate the need for the illusions of ideology and the irrational false consciousness that accompanies them.⁸¹

Given this, we can see why Marxists have maintained that an adequate account of ideology must not be limited to the claim that ideologies are illusions.⁸² This is not because they are not illusions but because if we are to successfully undermine the hegemonic influence of ideological forms of consciousness, then it will not be sufficient to convince people that they are illusory.⁸³ It is equally important to show how the wide acceptance of ideological illusions is a consequence of living within a deeply stratified and fundamentally oppressive society. Ideology-critique aims to expose how ideologies function to conceal the forms of oppression from which they emanate. Thus a proper analysis of how an ideology leads agents astray should reveal important facts about the nonideational aspects of the society in question, and may even provide some insight into how we might overcome their most undesirable features. The critique of ideology, then, should be *diagnostic* rather than exclusively concerned with whether an ideology accurately portrays reality, for ideologies are symptoms of an oppressive social order.⁸⁴ As the above epigraph from Marx suggests, the point of ideology-critique is not merely to expel social illusions but to empower those in their grip to change the oppressive conditions that make ideologies necessary. The critic of ideology aims to reveal the illusory nature of ideologies so that the structures of domination and exploitation that they conceal and reinforce can be seen for what they are and that, thereby, the oppressed can more clearly see what direction their political efforts should take as they struggle collectively to overcome these obstacles to freedom, equality, and human flourishing.

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

⁸¹ Giddens 167; and Larrain, *Concept of Ideology* 47.

⁸² See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1971) 280.

⁸³ Larrain, *Concept of Ideology*, p. 47.

⁸⁴ I take it that this is one of the insights that Habermas intends to convey when he suggests that the methodology of critical social theory should be modeled after psychoanalysis. See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*. See also, Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" 162; and Giddens 166.