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# False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory<sup>1</sup>

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The article discusses the concepts of false consciousness and ideology and the relation between them as they have been used in the development of a particular aspect of Marxist theory. I trace the development from the writings of Marx and Engels to the early Frankfurt School. My aim is to underline a separation and a distinction between the use of the concepts that emerges in this movement from classical to critical Marxism. I propose no firm conclusions, but rather focus on conceptual analysis and discussion.

This article will discuss the concepts of false consciousness and ideology and their relation with reference to the movement from classical to critical Marxism. It will cover this conceptual development from the writings of Marx and Engels to the early Frankfurt School. The problem area this circumscribes is a vital one; not only for any social theory that makes claim to political relevance, but also to those more modest. The problem of false consciousness and ideology is one of the basic interests in that field of science known as the sociology of knowledge where there is currently a debate around just this issue.<sup>2</sup>

My aim will be to underline the development in Marxist theory that led to a separation and a distinction in the meaning and the application of the concepts of false consciousness and ideology. Marx and Engels focused primarily on the concept of ideology, using the term to refer to the distorted beliefs intellectuals held about society and the power of their own ideas. Those who produced ideologies suffered from false consciousness: they were deluded about their own beliefs. In the development of these concepts through the work of Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács to the early Frankfurt School, a distinction between the meaning and the application of false consciousness and ideology was maintained. False consciousness came to mean a distorted and limited form of experience in society that could be applied to all social groups and classes; ideology was applied to those explanations offered by intellectuals to legitimate such experience. In my view this distinction represents a significant development in Marxist social theory for reasons that I hope to make clear in this essay.

## Marx and Engels

In traditional Marxist theory, the relation between false consciousness and ideology is conceived in terms of the relation between social existence and social consciousness, a relation between who one is (objectively) and what one thinks (subjectively), and is applied primarily to the bourgeoisie. That is, classical Marxist theory, from Marx and Engels to Lenin, tends to equate false consciousness and ideology when referring to either the writings or the 'unconscious' actions of intellectuals and capitalists. The consciousness and the actions of the working classes are not discussed in the same way. Put in traditional terms, the problem of false consciousness and ideology is limited to the realm of the superstructure, the state and the 'cultural forms', from which the working class is, by definition, excluded. The social existence of the working class being confined to economic activities and thus to the 'base' social practices, remains outside the problematic of false consciousness and ideology.

Since the working class was formally excluded from the established political processes and from high culture, it suffered no illusions about its existence. Conceived as a group, as a socially and historically created class, workers were not given the luxury of false consciousness:

It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. . . . They (the workers) are most painfully aware of the *difference* between *being* and *thinking*, between *consciousness* and *life*. They know that property, capital, money, wage-labor and the like are no ideal figments of the brain but very practical, very objective products of their self-estrangement.

This direct knowledge of their real situation in society, which Marx and Engels attributed to the working class, was reversed for the bourgeoisie, especially for those intellectuals with whose writings they came in contact. From the critiques of Hegel through the attack on the 'critical criticism' of the young Hegelians in the *Holy Family* and *The German Ideology* to the critique of political economy in *Capital*, Marx and Engels directed their assault on false consciousness and ideology against those intellectuals who, if they themselves thought they saw clearly, produced in their work a picture of reality that was distorted. Such distortion which in part could be traced to the class background of the authors, consciously or not served the interests of the dominant classes.<sup>4</sup>

. . . the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way, i.e., to recognize it by means of different interpretation. The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly 'world-shattering' phrases, are the staunchest conservatives.<sup>5</sup>

From this quotation we can observe both the thrust of Marx and Engels' attack and

their identification of false consciousness and ideology. The false consciousness discussed is that of self-styled radical writers who think their 'world-shattering' statements will transform the consciousness of their audience, and thus reality as such. These 'ideologists', producers of ideas, are deluded not only in their political reasoning, but also about its effects. Such delusion would not be possible for a member of the working class. In the writing of Marx and Engels, then, the concepts of false consciousness and ideology are used synonymously and applied only to intellectuals, or to capitalists for whom history happens behind their backs.

## Lenin

Lenin took on the views of the working class more directly. In his writings the concept of interest and its correct interpretation becomes a central issue in the determination of false consciousness and ideology. For him, the strain of working life under capitalism produced a short-range and pragmatic view in the worker: his/her concern was with getting as much as possible out of a bad situation. Lenin termed this spontaneous working class consciousness 'trade-union' consciousness, and opposed it both to the 'reformism' of social democrats and his own 'revolutionary' point of view.

In his view, reformism and vanguard revolutionary strategies were competing ideologies produced by intellectuals and brought to bear on the spontaneous working class consciousness.<sup>6</sup> The two ideologies competed not so much because workers were falsely conscious of their interests, but because, he believed, the spontaneous consciousness of the working class could never by itself develop into a revolutionary one. The revolutionary perspective represented more the difference between a recognition of short-term vs. long-term interests than a difference between true and false consciousness, at least as far as the working class was concerned. For the intellectuals involved, this was another matter.

Lenin applied the same arguments about false consciousness to the ideologies produced by intellectuals as did Marx and Engels. He used ideology to refer to the competing arguments and explanations produced by writers and speech-makers offered to the working class as explanation for their situation vis-à-vis capitalism. Each such ideology contained an intended or implied political practice, as well as a correct or distorted picture of social reality. Both the practice and the picture were interrelated of course, since part of the distortion was the underlying political implications of a theory. Such ideologies either helped the working class understand its situation or deflected its understanding. In this sense, both the 'bourgeois' and the reformist explanations of reality were equally dangerous.

Such can be seen in Lenin's attack on Kautsky's theory of imperialism, which offered an explanation of that phenomenon that in the former's view, permitted an accommodation between the working class and German capitalists. It is Kautsky and not the working class that suffers from false consciousness.

Evasion of existing contradictions, forgetting the most important of them, instead of revealing their full depth – such is Kautsky's theory – which has nothing in common

with Marxism. Naturally such a 'theory' can only serve the purpose of advocating unity with the Cunow's (the latter is cited as an 'apologist of imperialism and annexations', R.E.).<sup>7</sup>

In the light of our previous discussion we can say that reformism, looked at objectively in terms of its implications and not its author, is a political strategy that seeks to bring the working class into the superstructure of capitalist society. In advocating social change through enlightened governmental policy and through parliamentary politics, that is, through participation in the 'bourgeois state', reformism threatened, from the revolutionist perspective, to draw the working class into the illusions of the bourgeoisie.<sup>8</sup> Participation in this superstructure could only contaminate the purity of the base. On such grounds alone, reformism had to be combatted.

The concern with false consciousness and ideology here, then, is primarily with the role of intellectuals and their 'offered explanations' in strategies for social change. The two terms are applied in relation to an interpretation of interests and generally applied to the ideas and allegiance of intellectuals. The working class has more of a limited than a false view of its interests vis-à-vis capitalism. However, the idea of false consciousness is now at least open to application to that social group.

### **Gramsci**

Two 'Leninist' writers of this period in the history of Marxism and the working class movement, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, offered rather different notions about the relation between false consciousness and ideology.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because of the influence of Catholic Italy in which he wrote, Gramsci was concerned as no other previous Marxist with the effect of part of the 'superstructure', religion and culture, on the ideas and consciousness of the working class. Influenced by Hegel and Croce, the 'state' for him was not something that existed merely as an apparatus of legal and political institutions, but rather as something reflected in the social relations between all members of society. While this may strike us as common-sensical today, in the Marxist theory of the time such an idea was truly revolutionary, if not heretical. In distinguishing between forms of rule and domination, as either directly based on force or 'hegemonic', Gramsci sought to explain the hold bourgeois ideologies had over the working class, and to map out strategies for change. In societies where the bourgeoisie ruled through direct force, here he pointed to Czarist Russia as an example, where the majority of the people were opposed to the regime, the state could be directly attacked by a hard-core of revolutionaries. Under such conditions the state really was a superstructure. Once toppled, or at least exposed in its isolation and weakness, it could be chopped off like a useless appendage.<sup>10</sup> The masses then would rally round the new leaders.

Under hegemonic rule, however, where the existing social order enjoyed the support or at least the usually unquestioned acceptance of the majority of a

population, a different set of tactics was required. Here the state acted only as a symbol for a thoroughly ingrained and legitimate form of domination; attacking it directly would only bring failure and the wrath of the masses onto those who should be so bold. In addition, should such a state fall, it could only be replaced by one of similar constitution, so strong was its power. As in his own Italian society, Gramsci stressed the role of religion in legitimating the power of the state. Any movement for progressive social change under such conditions must work to re-educate and transform the false consciousness that makes hegemonic rule possible. Such consciousness was false not so much because it identified its own particular interests with those of the ruling classes, but rather because it blended an understanding of the origins of its oppression with myth and folklore. It was the Catholic religion which provided the framework for such understanding; the Church taught that dignity and poverty were identical concepts, and that poverty and political domination were part of a God-given natural order.

The role of the revolutionary party in Gramsci's analysis was to provide the mechanism for re-education, and the transformation of this natural consciousness into ideological class consciousness. In expanding Lenin's notion of the party Gramsci also transformed the former's definition of intellectuals. For Gramsci ideas, even ideas about socialism, were not the sole property of bourgeois intellectuals, that is, of a group socially distinct from workers or peasants. Each social group developed its own 'organic' intellectuals and its own conceptions and beliefs about its place in society. In his view, the party must work *within* this world-view in order to transform it, not bring class consciousness *to* the working and rural classes.

All men are intellectuals . . . but do not have in society the function of intellectuals. . . . Every social group . . . creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which gives it homogeneity and an awareness of its function not only in economic but also in social and political fields.<sup>11</sup>

Gramsci agreed with Lenin, however, in viewing Marxism as an ideology counter to both the dominant bourgeois world-view, including its ideological legitimations, and to the reformist politics within the workers' movement. The meaning of reformism was a point of divergence, however. For Lenin it was a sign of poor strategy when workers joined reformist parties and movements, for Gramsci it was a sign of working class integration into the dominant social order. Gramsci brought the question of false consciousness down from the superstructure to the working class.<sup>12</sup>

Through the mass-based party, as opposed to Lenin's cadre party, Marxism was to act as an educating force to transform the spontaneous forms of working class and rural opposition to capitalism into a revolutionary movement. The aims of such a movement, however, were already contained in the process of transformation: the creation of the foundations of a socialist society through social and cultural change *within* the larger shell of the existing capitalist order. With its

hegemonic basis eroded from within, the state would fall by its own weight rather than by direct attack. The spontaneous culture or world-view of the oppressed social groups was thus a mixture of true insight into their oppression and erratic forms of rebellion against it, and a false consciousness about both the origins and the proper means to alter that oppression. Ideology, on the other side, referred both to those socially constituted systems of explanations that would legitimate that oppression and to those that would transform it into revolutionary consciousness and activity.

... this contrast between thought and action ... cannot but be the expression of profounder contrasts of a social historical order. It signifies that the relevant social group (the working classes) has its own conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally, by fits and starts – when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group.<sup>13</sup>

In this separation of false consciousness and ideology, applying the former to forms of experience and action and the latter to ‘offered’ explanations for experience and action, and in applying false consciousness to the ideas of the working class, Gramsci adds a new dimension to Marxist analysis. He is very careful, however, to show that such working class false consciousness is not illusory in the same sense as that of the bourgeoisie. Working class false consciousness is never delusion in a total sense, being part of the oppressed means feeling oppression and being forced to deal with it. These are the ‘fits and starts’ of insight or rationalization referred to in the above quotation. This is what Marxism and the mass party works to develop. In this sense, neither Marxism as offered explanation for oppression to counter that of religion, nor the revolutionary political party which counters both conservative and reformist parties, act as arbitrators of truth and falsity over a passive and submissive working class. The process of developing revolutionary class consciousness is one of drawing-out and building on fragmentary insight, rather than one of leading and directing mindless ‘forces of history’.

The concepts of false consciousness and ideology are held clearly distinct for the first time in Gramsci’s thought. For the first time also, false consciousness is applied to the world-view of the working and rural classes. False consciousness refers not simply to an ‘internalization’ of ideologies like that of religion, but to the life-practices and culture of social groups. The complexity of the origins and the creative processes of individuals prevent such a mechanistic interpretation of the beliefs and practices of human beings. Marxism is viewed as an ideology, an offered explanation for the causes of human exploitation and misery, and as a strategy for social change. Marxism is offered as a counter to the dominant ideology of the bourgeoisie and to reformism within the workers’ movement. For the working class to support reformism is a sign of its false consciousness, its integration into a capitalist world-view, and not merely a sign of bad leadership or poor tactics as for Lenin.



## Lukács

Also greatly influenced by Hegel as well as by Lenin, Lukács offers a slightly different approach to false consciousness and ideology than Gramsci. His conceptualization of the problem and of the relation between the concepts falls more within the model of traditional epistemology than directly within the strategies and tactics of the workers' movement. This should not be taken to mean that the latter were not influential. On the contrary, in the text most relevant to our discussion here, *History and Class Consciousness*, the importance of political and tactical problems is acute. Nevertheless, Lukács' concerns are more directly theoretical than those of either Gramsci or Lenin. In the aforementioned collection of essays, Lukács develops his concept of reification out of Marx's notion of the fetishism of commodities in *Capital* into a theory of working class false consciousness. In so doing, he distances himself from the traditional Marxist identification of false consciousness and ideology which, as previously argued, identified the terms with each other and with the bourgeoisie. In this he is similar to Gramsci. Where he differs from the latter is in his viewing the problem of false consciousness as primarily one of perception and one that could be countered by a new theoretical orientation. The concern with theory is the prime one for Lukács.

In his view, false consciousness, no matter what the class position of the subject, is a problem of perception and knowledge. Ideology, on the other hand, as with Lenin and Gramsci, is an offered solution to that problem. Following Marx's discussion in *Capital*, Lukács argues that the irrational structure of capitalist society produces the need for theories to explain and justify the confusion and madness that appears on its surface. One need only think of the visibly striking differences between rich and poor to understand the necessity for this 'contradiction' to be satisfactorily contained in a unified theory of society. Such ideologies or cognitive restructuring of reality, either added to the confusion and thus helped – consciously or not to support it – as the seemingly harmless writings of the German expressionists. Or they produced a coherent vision of the social totality and its interconnections, to oppose it. Such was Marxism.

False consciousness, on the other hand, was not a systematized form of explanation produced by 'intellectuals' and offered to the working class, but rather, was a form of consciousness produced in the very life practices of capitalist society. As Marx had written in *Capital*, exchange relations and thus commodity fetishism come to dominate and define more and more of the human interaction within capitalist society.<sup>14</sup> Such a process which mediates in the classical epistemological sense the relations between the subject and the object of knowledge, produces a false consciousness in the working class as well as in the bourgeoisie. Human beings come to see their relations with other people and people as such, as instruments to ends which become harder and harder to identify. In addition, the sources of knowledge, as well as the reasons and causes of activities become mystified behind a veil of thing-like 'objective forces'. Because such commodity relations permeate all spheres of society, false consciousness affects everyone's



perception and construction of reality in capitalist society. The difference between the working class and the bourgeoisie, in this regard, is that the latter benefits from this mystification and the former suffers from it. As Lukács puts it, the working class has an interest in finding out the truth about its situation in capitalist society, through an understanding of the social totality that makes it up, and the bourgeoisie has an interest in hiding it. The difference between the working class and the bourgeoisie here is partly the difference between an 'interest' in truth and an interest in illusion.

More than this though, a capitalist is incapable, structurally speaking, of achieving a real understanding of either himself or of capitalism as a social system: his class position demands a class-based blindness. Such a condition for the ruling class in capitalist society is thus quite different from the ruling groups in feudal society, for example. In feudal society, rule was carried out directly and consciously, being legitimated by religious, social and 'natural' principles, while economic factors remained hidden and secondary. In capitalism domination is achieved through the false consciousness of both ruling bourgeoisie and working class, through the mediation of commodities and a market process which mystifies real social and political power through the medium of economic relations.

... in capitalism ... economic factors are not concealed 'behind' consciousness but are present *in* consciousness itself (albeit unconsciously or repressed). ... Bourgeois thought observes economic life consistently and necessarily from the standpoint of the individual capitalist. ... This leads to an antagonism between individual and class interests in the event of conflict ... and also to the logical impossibility of discovering theoretical and practical solutions to the problems created by the capitalist system of production.<sup>15</sup>

To the extent that commodity fetishism permeates class-related consciousness, according to Lukács, false consciousness becomes the normal way of perceiving and acting within capitalist society. The social totality disappears behind a veil of commodity and individual relations. Tendencies within the basic economic process of capital accumulation, however, prevent such false consciousness from remaining permanent and secure. Economic crisis sharpens class awareness and class struggle and sparks the extraordinary activities that lead to the growth and development of class consciousness.

As in Gramsci's thought, the movement from false consciousness to class consciousness is one of mediated development along the model provided in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Besides the already mentioned economic crisis, other mediating factors that guide the development of class consciousness in the working class are Marxist theory, whose role it is to offer a clear picture and explanation of the totality of social and economic relations in capitalist society, that is, in terms of their underlying connections and rationality. And, the revolutionary party which argues for the necessity of total social transformation;

thus opposing both bourgeois and working class reformism. Without the aid of these mediating factors and their interaction, working class false consciousness would continue, Lukács argued, as would the tendency to economic crisis within capitalism as a whole. The bourgeoisie could only passively disintegrate, having been reduced to helplessness by its class induced blindness.

*Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism. As long as this consciousness is lacking, the crisis remains permanent, it goes back to its starting point, repeats the cycle until after infinite sufferings and terrible detours the school of history completes the education of the proletariat and confers upon it the leadership of mankind.<sup>16</sup>*

The development of working class consciousness is thus the decisive factor in Lukács' ideas. Without class consciousness mankind as a whole is doomed to repeat its mistakes over again. Theory plays the central role in this development. In times of relative economic stability its aim is to explain false consciousness through re-constructing the social and economic totality that is capitalist society. In times of economic crisis and mass mobilization, its role is to aid the party in the development of revolutionary consciousness. By way of summarizing Lukács' position we can offer the following.

Actual life practices within capitalist society produce a cognition of that society that is distorted. Not only do interconnected social practices appear to be unconnected, political and economic power appears to be non-personal and guided by natural, that is, non-human laws, and by equal exchange and opportunity. It is a society where market and commodity relations appear to determine outcomes; where social reality appears to be objective, thing-like and hierarchical: where machines seem to produce value, money appears to make money, and commodities seem to be hierarchically related to one another. Acting in such a world, be it in base or superstructure, is no guarantee of truly knowing it. On the contrary, acting in such a world produces false consciousness. Tensions rooted in the central structure and social relations of this society produce continual crisis and thus the need for new or re-affirming legitimations. The bourgeoisie produces an ideological framework, an intellectual culture from economics to art, that seeks to support and shore-up the existing set of social relations. Oppositional groups must create or turn to already existing transformative ideologies, such as Marxism, to counter this dominant culture. Thus, false consciousness is produced by life practices within capitalist society, cracked by structurally based crisis and re-affirmed or transformed by competing ideological systems.

What makes Marxism a better form of explanation for the situation of the working class, and a better guide to action than reformism, is that through its framework the working class can use its position at the core of capitalist society to truly understand and transform it to a more rational social formation. The working class is the only social group capable of insight and informed revolutionary action, because its life is lived everyday, at the core of the irrationality and central contradiction in capitalist society: the workplace where surplus value is extracted.

It is this unique position that gives the working class its power and its ability to pierce the false consciousness of daily life. As opposed to the capitalist, the working class *must* act as a class, its subordinate position in capitalist society demands it. Its suffering at the core of capitalist society also demands that it know the truth, which includes the necessity of social revolution.

As in Gramsci's thought, Lukács clearly distinguishes the concepts ideology and false consciousness. He uses the latter to refer to the distorted perception and beliefs an individual or a social class acquires through their life activities in capitalist society. Ideology refers, on the other hand, to offered explanations that would resolve the tension produced within these very social relations and by the general process of capital accumulation. Marxism, as a theory of the social totality of capitalist society, is an ideology that seeks to direct understanding and social action to the core contradictions of capitalism, and to the necessity for its revolutionary transformation.

Lukács' use of the concept of false consciousness is broader than Gramsci's in that he applies it both to capitalists and to the working class. As Marcuse was to write, in a very different context, false consciousness permeates all social classes in capitalist society as exchange relations come to dominate all forms of human interaction. It is economic crisis and the mediation of Marxist theory, however, that provide the difference between 'one-dimensional society' and revolutionary class consciousness.

### **The early Frankfurt School**

From the 1930's to the present what has come to be known as the 'Frankfurt School' has, to a large extent, worked within the framework outlined by Lukács. Especially in their earlier writings, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm directed a great deal of their interest to the problem of reification and the mechanisms for the production of false consciousness.<sup>17</sup> And, more recently, Habermas and Offe have concerned themselves with the problem of legitimation, which can also be traced back to Lukács, as well as to Max Weber.

The early Frankfurt School under the leadership of Max Horkheimer directly took up the problematic of the formation of working class consciousness and the necessity of theory as a counter to the reified perception produced by daily-life activities in capitalist society. That is, they inherited the framework of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*. In light of different social and political contexts, however – Germany in 1930 was not the Germany of 1919 – a more empirically oriented stance was adopted onto the shared philosophical foundations. What provided this change to a more empirical and less speculative outlook was not a different view of scientific activity as such, but the experience of failure and defeat in the German revolutionary workers' movement and a growing suspicion that the success on the Russian side was quickly turning into its opposite.

The failure of Marxist theory to understand the actual practice of the German proletariat pointed to the need for a more empirically oriented understanding of the

daily-life experience of the 'real' working class, and not a dogmatic reassertion of its revolutionary character. After the catastrophe of failed civil war and in the face of the Nazi threat, the test of a theory could no longer be its success in party debates or in social movement alone. This earlier Marxist method of verification had proven too costly. Politically, then, the difference between Lukács and the Frankfurt School in this early period is the difference between a pre- and a post-Fascism view of the working class. Scientifically, one effect of this difference was to draw the problem of false consciousness closer to the confines of academic sociology.

The most important empirical studies for our discussion here were those carried out under the direction of Erich Fromm at the beginning of the 1930's.<sup>18</sup> Two things make these studies significant: first, they were among the earliest to take the beliefs of the working class as its object of investigation and, second, they represented one phase of a theoretical and methodological integration of Marxist and Freudian theory. In discussing an attempted synthesis of Marxist and psychological theory from the point of view of ideology and false consciousness the aim becomes quite clear: to provide an explanatory framework for understanding the absence of working class revolutionary opposition to Fascism. Looked at from the point of view of a 'failure' in Marxist theory, the necessity for psychological explanation stems from the appearance of a 'sudden' gap between the social being and the social consciousness of the German working class. How could the bearer of the socialist future remain passive in the face of such a clear-cut threat as Fascism? Where was its class consciousness when the capitalist system was clearly in crisis?

What the earlier Marxist accounts of the development of political consciousness had given little attention to, and what is unique of these early studies by the Frankfurt School, is the addition and the importance of the 'subjective' dimension in the study of false consciousness. The Frankfurt studies took up the discussion of false consciousness on a psychological level, which also turned attention to activities outside the labour process. With the possible exception of Gramsci's discussion of religion and the role of culture in the formation of 'common-sense', Marxist formulations stressed the *movement* from a 'false' consciousness to a 'correct' one. Such formulations interpreted Marx's statements about the material activities of men being the producer of their conceptions and ideas to mean that working in a factory would produce a form of consciousness that lent itself to revolutionary organization and activity. Although a 'superstructure' of religion and law, or as for Lukács commodity production in general, may produce a distorted consciousness, the basic activity of labour and the necessary mediations of theory and political party would draw the revolutionary potential from an actual working class. Even in Lukács' theory, then, the subjective dimension on which the account moved was that of a social actor in relation to veiled social experience, i.e. a mystified working class becoming aware of its revolutionary potential through theoretical and political struggle.

Fromm's account moves to a deeper subjectivity. In attempting to link uncon-

scious impulses and needs to an understanding of working class action, Fromm argues that more than ideas are involved in false consciousness. From the point of view of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as well as Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, Fromm argues that 'consciousness' is more than a form of thought that can easily be transcended by a more rational form. Rather, consciousness in its full meaning involves a form of life, a being in the world, that has an emotional as well as cognitive dimension. As such, it is not so easily 'demystified' or transcended. A full explanation of working class behaviour, then, must take into account these unconscious and sometimes 'irrational' impulses and emotions in order to understand that action may be a product not only of false perception, but also alienated being.

What Fromm and the early Frankfurt approach in general attempted to do was to explain how a worker's experience of capitalist society not only produced a false perception of interests defined economically, but also how this experience produced a 'false' sense of self.<sup>19</sup> Such an explanatory framework makes it necessary not only to distinguish false consciousness from ideology but also to distinguish between false consciousness as an epistemological problem, as it was for Lukács, and false consciousness as a problem of distorted experience and being. False consciousness then refers to something experienced, cognitively and emotionally. Ideology to a *distorted* conceptualization produced by other sources than the experience of the individual or social group to which it is offered as explanation and justification of experience. In other words, the use of ideology conforms to that of the earlier Marxist version; with the important exception that ideology always refers to distorted and thus false offered explanations.

Fromm gives the concept of the family as it is used in psychoanalytic theory as an example of an ideological explanatory tool.<sup>20</sup> It is ideological because it ignores the basic economic processes in society that shape a central part of the social practices that comprise an individual's *experience* of the family. In as much as psychoanalytic theory pretends to be an explanation of these experiences, and leaves out this economic aspect, it distorts an understanding of the functioning of the family in capitalist society. In this sense it is ideological. False consciousness in this context refers to the individual's experience of the family in capitalist society. Fromm notes, for example, that the family as a social institution or a pattern of social interaction determined by an economic structure, 'stamps its specific structure on the child'.<sup>21</sup> The lived experience of the child and his/her parents is 'false' to the extent that they remain unaware of this economic determination, and view their life activity as freely created and/or natural. A Marxist explanation of the economic processes that underlie capitalist society and an understanding of their determining effect on family practice is thus essential in the undermining of such false consciousness. The traditional Marxist understanding of economic relationships is not sufficient, however, because such a Marxism does not account for or understand an individual's emotional attachment to family life and, thus, to his 'false' consciousness. Such a Marxism is ideological in that it remains a system of abstract ideas and as such distorts the individual's real life experience.

## Concluding remarks

In the above I have given an overview of one particular line of development in the Marxist use of the concepts of false consciousness and ideology. I have left out another, the 'structuralist' Marxism of Louis Althusser and his followers. This was done for lack of sufficient space. Instead, we have covered the development of the relation between these concepts from their use as identical notions in Marx and Engels, where they were applied primarily to the 'superstructure' of capitalism and those who operated therein, to members of the early Frankfurt School. In the latter, the notions of false consciousness and ideology were related concepts but held distinct; in addition, the concepts were applied to all categories of social activity and to all social classes.

Inheriting the Hegelian-Marxist framework from Lukács, the early Frankfurt School used false consciousness and ideology as concepts towards understanding the distorted beliefs and activities of the German working class. They used false consciousness to refer not only to cognition but also to a distorted sense of being, of feeling and emotion, that gripped an individual in his/her false beliefs. The concept of ideology, on the other hand, was used in a more general way to refer to distorted explanatory systems. Distorted because they served to keep an individual mired in false consciousness while pretending to free him. Such a concept of ideology could be applied in a negative way to both psychoanalysis and Marxism. Thus, false consciousness refers to an *experience* in society, ideology to a proposed or offered *explanation* of that experience. One, however, that only further distorted real understanding. As these questions developed within the Frankfurt School during the years of emigration and exile, the problem of how real understanding was at all possible became the central one.

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## Notes and References

- 1 The argument in this article in many ways presupposes and builds upon those made in an earlier one published in this journal: M. Bertilsson and R. Eyerman, 'Interest as a Problematic Concept in Marxist Social Science', *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1979), pp. 361–375. I would also like to thank Margareta Bertilsson for her extensive criticism of this present article. The argument presented here is elaborated in much greater detail in a book to be published this year, *False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm 1981).
- 2 See, for example, N. Abercrombie, *Class, Structure and Knowledge* (B. Blackwell, Oxford 1980) and K. Dixon, *The Sociology of Belief* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1980), among many others.
- 3 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (Progress Publishers, Moscow 1975), pp. 37 and 53, respectively. These quotations are drawn from 'The Holy Family' and thus from the earlier writings, from what R. Johnson has called the 'Manifesto' approach to class and class consciousness. See his article 'Three Problematics' in Clarke, Critcher and Johnson (eds.), *Working Class Culture* (Hutchinson, London 1979). The question of any



- 'break' in Marx's thoughts on these matters will not be taken up here, nor will the question of the potential use of the 'theory of fetishism' in *Capital* as a theory of false consciousness, except in relation to later Marxists and not to Marx himself. Such arguments are treated in my book mentioned above.
- 4 Besides the original texts, see also A. Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* (Seabury Press, New York 1976), esp. pp. 18 ff.; G. Therborn, *Science, Class and Society* (New Left Books, London 1975); Carol Johnson 'The Problems of Reformism and Commodity Fetishism', *New Left Review* 119 (1980); and A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Macmillan Press, London 1979).
  - 5 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, op. cit., Vol. 5, p. 30.
  - 6 See G. Olofsson, *Mellan Klass och Stat* (Arkiv, Lund 1979).
  - 7 V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Progress Publishers, Moscow 1977), pp. 703–704. During this period Communists, especially in the KPD were careful to distinguish between the working class as such, and 'those who would mislead them', i.e. the leaders of the SPD, for example.
  - 8 I am not unaware of Lenin's often conflicting advice on participation in 'bourgeois' politics, but since this advice is so often of a very specific nature, it doesn't contradict the argument here.
  - 9 Leninist because both recognized Lenin and the success of the Russian Revolution as proof of the need for a political party of workers and intellectuals in the making of social revolution.
  - 10 See P. Anderson's discussion in 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review* 100 (1977), pp. 5–78.
  - 11 A. Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks* (Lawrence & Wishart, London 1971), p. 5.
  - 12 See the discussion in J. Femia 'Hegemony and Consciousness in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci', *Political Studies*, Vol. 23 (1975), pp. 29–48.
  - 13 Gramsci, quoted in Femia, op. cit., p. 33.
  - 14 The question of whether or not Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities in *Capital* offers grounds for arguing that Marx did have a theory of *working class* false consciousness is one of controversy. We have already mentioned this in a previous note, but sought to remind the reader again of it here. There can be no doubt that Marx offers his thoughts on the matter, but whether this constitutes the grounds of a 'theory' is another question. In any case, it is here that Lukács most assuredly received his inspiration.
  - 15 G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (MIT Press, Cambridge 1972), pp. 58 and 63, respectively.
  - 16 Ibid., p. 76.
  - 17 There exists some controversy, however, if by reification Lukács and the members of the Frankfurt School meant the same thing. For a discussion, see G. Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor Adorno* (Macmillan Press, London 1978), esp. Ch. 3.
  - 18 See the discussion on M. Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Heinemann, London 1973), esp. Chs. 3–4, and H. Dubiel, *Wissenschaftsorganisation und politische Erfahrung* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1978).
  - 19 In these early years of the Frankfurt School 'false consciousness' and alienated being were still thought of as being penetrable by both critical theory and political praxis.
  - 20 See E. Fromm, 'The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology' (1932), reprinted in Arato and Gebhardt (eds.), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (B. Blackwell, Oxford 1978).
  - 21 Ibid., p. 483.