

# **On False Consciousness:**

## **A Marcuse & Lukács Analysis**

To better live, people need to be aware of themselves and the conditions in which they inhabit. People must be conscious of the values of a fulfilling life. But other people, especially the powerful, may fabricate forms of consciousness to better manipulate people and shape the world the way they want to. In short, the rich create false consciousness to easily control the poor. Throughout the history of social and political philosophy, many notable philosophers attempted to define and categorize these issues, and among them stood Herbert Marcuse, and György Lukács. I plan to iterate and compare how these philosophers exemplify false consciousness and its effects through analyzing and dissecting Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*.

To best understand the essay, an outline of what would be conveyed is most appreciated. Brief introductions to the two authors would give sufficient context to the issues they raised. Then, explanations regarding the concept of false consciousness were given to show what it was and how it evolved through history. After that came further analysis so an average could follow and comprehend arguments presented. Firstly, the distinction between true and false consciousness was drawn and explained. Secondly, a myriad of different perspectives from various societal aspects, among them were governmental, military, and economics, were introduced and discussed. The economic aspect would get the most analysis, due to the multifaceted nature of it. How advertisement shaped consumerism, how self-alignment according to materialism were some of the topics discussed. Thirdly, difficulties in escaping false consciousness were a point worth mentioning. Fourthly, what true consciousness would be and

how it would change society for the better. Lastly, how could one determine if one would be under false consciousness and the challenge in self-awareness of such realization were subsequently discussed to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Herbert Marcuse was a 20<sup>th</sup> century German-born American philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist. His 1964 book, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* argues that the capitalistic and industrial society created false needs, which integrated individuals into the existing system of production and consumption via mass media, advertising, industrial management, and contemporary modes of thought. This results in a one-dimensional universe of thought and behavior, in which the ability for critical thinking diminishes. He also criticized capitalism, modern technology, historical materialism and entertainment culture, arguing that they represent new forms of social control.

György Lukács was a 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian Marxist philosopher, aesthetician, literary historian, and critic. He was one of the founders of Western Marxism and contributed to Marxist theory with developments of Karl Marx's theory of class consciousness. His 1920 book, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, re-emphasizes Hegel's influence on Karl Marx, analyses the concept of class consciousness, and draws the distinction between actual class consciousness and "ascribed" class consciousness.

That leads to the next question. What is false consciousness? False consciousness, in general, is any belief or view that prevents a person from seeing the true nature of matter. More specifically, in philosophy, false consciousness is a Marxist theory that describes how people, especially the members of the proletariat, unwittingly fail to view inequality, exploitation, oppression, and social relations in a capitalist society, as they really are; of how they could not see their real position in society and misunderstand their interests within the social relations

under capitalism; and as the inability of the human mind to develop a sophisticated awareness of how the mind is developed and shaped by circumstances. Cocooned in a falsely comforting life, people often fail to be mindful of how they think of their lives, of how they rationalize their societal standing and positional power, and of how they choose what criteria to lay the foundation of their conquering of life challenges. In short, people comfortably live in a life promised by false consciousness.

In 1920, Lukács introduced false consciousness as a necessary concept to understand how all working class people are not socialist revolutionaries. He defined false consciousness in contrast to an imputed consciousness, a juridical term meaning what people themselves would think if they were to have sufficient information and time to reflect, what they ought to know. Lukács explained false consciousness as follows:

*"It might look as though ... we were denying consciousness any decisive role in the process of history. It is true that the conscious reflexes of the different stages of economic growth remain historical facts of great importance; it is true that while dialectical materialism is itself the product of this process, it does not deny that men perform their historical deeds themselves and that they do so consciously. But as Engels emphasizes in a letter to Mehring, this consciousness is false. However, the dialectical method does not permit us simply to proclaim the 'falseness' of this consciousness and to persist in an inflexible confrontation of true and false. On the contrary, it requires us to investigate this 'false consciousness' concretely as an aspect of the historical totality and as a stage in the historical process."*<sup>1</sup>

Lukács stated that while historical events were definitely of high importance, let us not disregard the consciousness that led to such events. The severity of false consciousness would be magnanimously larger comparing to wrong actions. And finally, with the current dialectical method, it was challenging to say the least to be self-aware of false consciousness, not to mention obtaining enough resources and means to escape it and reach true consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Lukács, György. *History and class consciousness; studies in Marxist dialectics*. (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press., 1971 [1920]), 49-50

He further clarified false consciousness with

*“On the other hand, we may see the same consciousness as something which fails subjectively to reach its self-appointed goals, while furthering and realizing the objective aims of society of which it is ignorant and which it did not choose. This twofold dialectical determination of false consciousness constitutes an analysis far removed from the naive description of what men in fact thought, felt and wanted at any moment in history and from any given point in the class structure.”*<sup>2</sup>

What Lukács meant was that while applying true consciousness would reach its goal, the common man, who was under the influence of false consciousness, would drift away from reaching an action intrinsic goal, moving towards societal and objectively constructed goals, which were untrue. Thus, under the guise of false consciousness, men would be deceived of his real objectives, of what he would truly sense and desire through societal deception using his own naivety.

Yet, it was Herbert Marcuse who revived the use of the term false consciousness in the early 1960s. He unveiled false consciousness as *“To the degree to which they correspond to the given reality, thought and behavior express a false consciousness, responding to and contributing to the preservation of a false order of facts. And this false consciousness has become embodied in the prevailing technical apparatus which in turn reproduces it.”*<sup>3</sup> To further clarify, Marcuse stated that under false consciousness, the working class would construct a reality, where what they wrongly rationalized what they thought and acted to be true according to the plethora of misguided facts they based on, which were delivered and spread by the ruling

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<sup>2</sup> Lukács, György. *History and class consciousness; studies in Marxist dialectics*. (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press., 1971 [1920]), 50-51

<sup>3</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 148-149.

class. Using the exponential growth of technology, the ruling class could perform a mass scale of social engineering and cementing the beliefs they would want the proletariat to believe.

To start understanding false consciousness better, one has to see the social setting on which it was based. Marcuse stated that democracy was not what it must have been:

*“Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way in which it is organized.”<sup>4</sup>*

Democracy, with its constituent’s elements, such as the independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition, according to Marcuse, was stripped of its critical function and replaced with a false use, the use to manipulate the working class.

He argued that what we thought of as freedom was not freedom, but rather forced outcomes presented as voluntary options. Using false consciousness, the elite control the population. He put it as *“the liberty to work or to starve”<sup>5</sup>*. And by using this false narrative, *“it spelled toil, insecurity, and fear for the vast majority of the population.”<sup>6</sup>* In addition, Marcuse also remarked: *“Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over.”<sup>7</sup>* Marcuse concluded that the current capitalist society operates rather totalitarian and authoritarian. This was evidenced by *“the apparatus imposes its economic and political requirements for defense and expansion on labor time and free time, on the*

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<sup>4</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 10.

*material and intellectual culture. By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian.*”<sup>8</sup> In the following paragraphs, he stated that a few individuals dictated societal perceptions of freedom by only allowing common people choices to buy for happiness.

Marcuse furthered this claim with the distinction between true and false needs. Marcuse dissected false needs as “*most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs*”<sup>9</sup>. False needs, or false consciousness, are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression, and serve the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice.

Marcuse strongly criticized consumerism, arguing that it is a form of social control. This meant pop culture consumption, low-intellectual, low-effort comedy, celebrity worshipping culture, etc. directly correlated with false consciousness. To better control, the elite would direct and purposefully use mass media to effectively dictate what the common man would view as desirable and worthy of his attention and devotion. By glorifying what would society view as worth exhausting and sacrificing, the rich and powerful could easily shift societal attention to what the rulers want to the mass achieve or to shift their focus away from something.

As society progresses, it gets increasingly more challenging to distinguish between the intended use of an object and the societal signaling of such usage, between the necessary evils of goods and services, and between true personal duties and socially constructed ones. As Marcuse

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<sup>8</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 7.

put: *“Can one really distinguish between the mass media as instruments of information and entertainment, and as agents of manipulation and indoctrination? Between the automobile as nuisance and as convenience? Between the horrors and the comforts of functional architecture? Between the work for national defense and the work for corporate gain? Between the private pleasure and the commercial and political utility involved in increasing the birth rate?”*<sup>10</sup>

What Marcuse was trying to say was that as society progresses, the intricacy between the use of a mean or a medium and its unintended consequences, or even manipulated consequences by the owners were getting more and more inseparable and intertwined. One could not simply utilize an automobile without considering its adverse effect on the environment. One could not escape the fact that one with such vehicle, further purchases on what type of extra protection, may it be a higher insurance premium, physical vehicle cover and wax and brushes and car washes, theft prevention, a garage to store the vehicle during bad weather time, and so on and so on. Previously, these detracted the experience of using such a convenience, but now these were compulsory of the whole experience, in a society where the ownership and usage was a necessary evil.

To best understand the scope of false consciousness, multiple point of views from different perspectives were required. Among them, governing, military, and economic views formed the basis of a government, or more generally, the ruling class.

Straying from using analysis from politicians or philosophers or analysts, a satirical poet's point of view was chosen. As the role would transform into the jesters, the jokers, and even modern comics, these poets used witty yet grim remarks formed the universally agreed

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<sup>10</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 11.

beliefs from the proletariat that would not conform to social indoctrination to let their and the people's voice be heard. From a governing perspective, Roman satirical poet Juvenal remarked that the mass would vote for anyone who promises bread and entertainment with *"Already long ago, from when we sold our vote to no man, the People have abdicated our duties; for the People who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions - everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses."*<sup>11</sup>. The common people would not have to think of their existence since they would rather drown themselves in tacky entertainment. It required lower effort to pay attention to these form of relaxation, and much more shallowly pleasant comparing to delve into the existential crisis rabbit hole. In this state, people would act irrationally by working more than they were required to, so that they could purchase needless products, fulfill actual basic needs, and aligning themselves socially through material items. And with their actions, they inadvertently ignored psychologically destructive effects, and also caused waste and environmental damages.

From a military perspective, the rulers could use recognition and awards to fraud men into obtaining their greedy ambitions. This could also be seen, as with Napoleon Bonaparte's eloquent sayings: "Give me enough medals and I'll win you any war" and "A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon." By giving the mass an easily identifiable intermediary, such as awards or in Napoleon's case, medals and ribbons, or even abusing the appeal to patriotism, the ruling class could trick people into dying for false glory, personal gains, or naïve nationalistic beliefs.

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<sup>11</sup> Juvenal. (circa A.D. 100)



From a consumption perspective, through the act of material alignment, the ruling class could categorize, sort, and divide people; and with products consumption, it barricades people from escaping the lifestyle.

Lukács concurred, stating that class consciousness of the bourgeoisie tended to familiarize itself with economic consciousness. He remarked “*from the point of view of the relation of consciousness to society this contradiction is expressed as the irreconcilable antagonism between ideology and economic base.*”<sup>12</sup> Thus, he stated that the highest form of unconsciousness, which is false consciousness, bloomed when economic consciousness was at its highest and greatest.

Marcuse shared the same consensus with the self-aligning view, stating that “*The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.*”<sup>13</sup> People self-classify themselves through goods purchased. The higher the price of the goods, the higher the class of the people, using method of association. This explains the rise of Veblen goods, which are types of luxury goods for which the quantity demanded increases as the price increases. This is an apparent contradiction of the law of demand. A Rolex and a Casio watch both tell time, with the Casio telling more accurate time, but one costs \$8500, the other costs \$20. Taken into the account of material, manufacturing cost, marketing cost, and inflation, the projected cost of a Rolex, without the annual markup is expected to be \$1500. The reason for the

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<sup>12</sup> Lukács, György. *History and class consciousness; studies in Marxist dialectics*. (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press., 1971 [1920]), 64

<sup>13</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 11.

unfathomable price is because people are willing to spend more to show that they can spend more on goods that they want to buy, signaling that they have more wealth, thus signaling they have a higher class than other people. In short, the purchase of the watch signifies that social class.

With the creation of new products, the calling for the disposal of old products, fuels the economy and encourages the need to work more to buy more. Planned obsolescence is rampant in the automotive, electronics, and technology industry. By creating an artificially limited useful life, such as Apple's iOS upgrades, the rich could shorten the replacement cycles, thus bringing more profit. This comes at the cost of environmental damages as fossil fuels are non-renewable, chemicals used to make these products harm the environment, unnecessary trash and pollution are introduced everyday into the earth.

So, an individual loses himself and becomes a tool in the capitalistic machine and a cog of consumerism, which Marcuse concurred with "*Mass production and mass distribution claim the entire individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the factory,*"<sup>14</sup> further cementing its effect on society. Marcuse agreed and amplified with "*I have just suggested that the concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction. This identification is not illusion but reality. However, the reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation*"<sup>15</sup> People live closer to each other more than ever, yet people are identifying as being alienated and depressed more than ever. This went

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<sup>14</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 13.

against the original goal of technology, which was to bring people closer to each other, physically, socially, mentally, and verbally.

To make matters worse, despite being increasingly lonely, private space is also brutally sacrificed. Marcuse shared this idea, saying that “*Today this private space has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality.*”<sup>16</sup> Advertisements are everywhere, even on platforms that promised not to allow them. YouTube was originally the solution for people to watch what they want and escape scheduled television programs and advertisements, but it now has non-skippable advertisements. Product placements are in music videos, films, even in educational videos. So people grow up in advertisements. Marcuse shared the same idea, insisting that “*The manifold processes of introjection seem to be ossified in almost mechanical reactions. The result is, not adjustment but mimesis: an immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with the society as a whole.*”<sup>17</sup> As it worsened, one wondered whether advertisement served the goal of promoting the sales of products, or the sales of products supported the image built by advertisement. Products not only served their utilitarian goals, but they solidified a specific image the end user would like to build. The purchase of such products on their own were insufficient of such self-branding. Only with international marketing strategy that society in general shared the consensus of such image.

Lastly, as advertising and consumerism are inseparable, marketing disintegrates social manners, delivering the appeal that happiness can be procured through monetary means. Marcuse said that “*there is a great deal of “Worship together this week,” “Why not try God,” Zen,*

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<sup>16</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 12.

*existentialism, and beat ways of life, etc. But such modes of protest and transcendence are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative*<sup>18</sup> since *“The reign of such a one-dimensional reality does not mean that materialism rules, and that the spiritual, metaphysical, and bohemian occupations are petering out”*<sup>19</sup> With everything is a purchasable commodity, even life values or enlightening journeys are just an acquisition away. More dangerously, such one-dimensional, materialistic thinking equates that even spiritual, metaphysical, self-discovering experience can be bought, given enough money.

Thus, to wrap up the consumerism perspective, as the American society is currently living in a time of peace, the effect of consumption is much clearer cut comparing to the wartime example, yet, regardless of views, false consciousness leads to all of these issues. Marcuse said *“technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe.”*<sup>20</sup> He concluded this perspective with a pessimistic acceptance that material products indoctrinated and manipulated users by promoting a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. As these get more and more available and inseparable to more people spreading all social classes, their brainwashing instructions they inhibit ceases to be known, it turns into a way of life.

Evidently, this resulted in a euphoria in unhappiness.

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<sup>18</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 16.

<sup>19</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 20.

Conversely, Marcuse insisted that with true consciousness, one could achieve political freedom, and political freedom in his definition was the liberation of the individual from politics over which they have no effective control. Consequently, as one obtained true consciousness, one would eliminate the modern freedom of enterprise, and “*as a free economic subject, the disappearance of this kind of freedom would be one of the greatest achievements of civilization.*”<sup>21</sup> He concluded that it was the goal to be aware and rid oneself of false consciousness in order to truly live an enlightened life, as:

*“The technological processes of mechanization and standardization might release individual energy into a yet uncharted realm of freedom beyond necessity. The very structure of human existence would be altered; the individual would be liberated from the work world's imposing upon him alien needs and alien possibilities. The individual would be free to exert autonomy over a life that would be his own.”*<sup>22</sup>

This simply signified that as one escaped the mechanized and standardized society, one entered a world few, or even none has ever been. The physical realm would stay the same, but the mindset one obtained during the enlightening journey opened another realm. One would be unhindered by the chains of consumerism, materialism, technocratism, and elitism. It was then that would be truly free, the freedom not being defined and confined by the ruling class.

Another question raised, how could one be in the position to determine whether one's framework of thought aligned with either true or false consciousness? The short answer was that the question must be answered by the individuals themselves if and when they are free to give their own answer. This lead to the problem that if people were misled, their answer may not be theirs, but rather a results of wrongful indoctrination. As Marcuse stated: “*As long as they are*

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<sup>21</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 5.

kept incapable of being autonomous, as long as they are indoctrinated and manipulated (down to their very instincts), their answer to this question cannot be taken as their own.”<sup>23</sup> To further the difficulty in achieving true needs, Marcuse said that: “*The more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more unimaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation*”<sup>24</sup> Lukács said that there were many forms of false consciousness in the past, such as “*varied ideologies, religious, moral and other forms of false consciousness*”<sup>25</sup>, it was the proletariat false class consciousness that become the most potent weapon. Thus, the ruling class used it as “*an instrument of war*”<sup>26</sup>, which creates an unparalleled incentive to make false consciousness difficult to be found and eliminated.

Therefore, how could people even put themselves in the framework that ascribed to true consciousness in the beginning? As Marcuse put: “*The distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation— liberation also from that which is tolerable and rewarding and comfortable—while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society.*”<sup>27</sup> The first thing to do was to be aware that one is having the consciousness of servitude, and being bombarded with an overwhelming dominance of fabricated needs and wants and satisfactions which, to an extent,

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<sup>23</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Lukács, György. *History and class consciousness; studies in Marxist dialectics*. (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press., 1971 [1920]), 224.

<sup>26</sup> Lukács, György. *History and class consciousness; studies in Marxist dialectics*. (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press., 1971 [1920]), 224.

<sup>27</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 9.

through constant exposure, have become one's own. One has to understand that throughout history, to rule the proletariat, the rulers have always replaced one system of preconditioning by another, so only the method of indoctrination was different, but people were still manipulated. Therefore, the optimal goal was the abandonment of repressive satisfaction.

In a nutshell, Lukács and Marcuse share the same view regarding false consciousness. The goal to clarify false consciousness, analyze its detrimental effects on society, and provide sub-discussion on various related topics pertaining to the subject matter were achieved using quotations drawn from the two authors' works and secondary sources to a successfully degree.

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Nguyen.

This paper is excellent. You nicely elaborate on the nature of false consciousness through reference to some very difficult writers. What works in this paper works very well.

Things to improve on: Your thesis could be more forceful, try arguing for something more original. Also, this paper -- though much, much, much better -- than your mid-term could use more of your own words.

You are an excellent writer, a dedicated researcher, and a superlative thinker. Keep up the excellent work. It was a great pleasure to teach you this term.

Score: 50/50