PERSPECTIVES ON SELF-DECEPTION

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IDEOLOGY, FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS, AND SOCIAL ILLUSION

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The Marxian concept of ideology is not an especially clear one, and there is relatively little space in the texts of Marx and Engels devoted to explaining it. Since Marx's time, moreover, we have become accustomed to using the term "ideology" to denote important Marxian concepts for which Marx himself did not employ it, but which have retained their currency and usefulness in social theory and popular social thought, even among some of those who regard Marxian historical materialism and Marx's critique of capitalism as outmoded, unscientific, or otherwise discredited. As Freud was later to do, Marx changed our way of thinking about ourselves by making us aware of ways in which our conception of ourselves is systematically distorted by illusions, forms of deception, or motivated irrationality, whose removal is exceedingly difficult and requires practical conquest, enlightenment, and self-development as well as theoretical self-understanding.

The Marxian concept of ideology has spawned a great variety of different conceptions not found in Marx, such as Gyorgy Lukacs' concept of "reification," Louis Althusser's concept of ideology as an "imaginary lived relation between men and their world," and Jürgen Habermas' concept of ideology as distorted communication (to mention only three).[1] In this paper I will attempt no survey of such conceptions, but will restrict myself to concepts of ideology found in Marx's own theories. It would be too restrictive to consider only those concepts that Marx normally designated by the term "ideology," because this term has in the meantime come to denote important Marxian concepts for which Marx seldom employed it. But it will be well to begin by considering the concept of ideology as Marx found and adopted it.

IDEOLOGY: THE SCIENCE OF IDEAS, MENTAL LABOR, AND THE DOMINION OF THOUGHT

1. The word "ideology" (*idéologie*) was first used in 1796 by Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836). For Destutt, "ideology" was a science,

the science that studies the origin of ideas. Destutt's project was to trace all ideas to their origins in sensation, thus refuting scientifically all claims in behalf of "innate" ideas made by metaphysicians and showing these claims to be the result of mere prejudices. Despite Marx's contempt for him, Destutt anticipated the Marxian conception of ideology when he attributed many of people's prejudices to social class interests.[2] Owing to Destutt's revolutionary sympathies, he and his followers were subject to the wrath and scorn of Napoléon, who used the terms *idéologie* and *idéologue* as terms of abuse, stigmatizing *idéologues* as tedious intellectuals engaged in pointless and fruitless disputations. Marx was thinking of Napoléon's sense of the term, as some explicit references in his earliest uses of it indicate (see CW 1:244, 4:23).[3] Marx continues to use the term "ideologue" to refer to people who play a certain role in the social division of labor, namely, the performance of mental as opposed to manual labor (CW 5:59–60). This seems to be the sense in which Marx and Engels speak of priests as "the first form of ideologues" (CW 5:45), and also the sense the term carries in *The Communist Manifesto,* when Marx and Engels speak (apparently referring to themselves among others) of those "bourgeois ideologues" who have risen to a theoretical comprehension of the historical process, and have been thereby led to transfer their allegiance to the proletariat (CW 6:494).

The German Ideology, however, seems at times to be using "ideology" in a sense more closely related to its original one as referring to a proposed "science of ideas and their development." They are thinking not of Destutt's empiricist project of tracing all ideas back to their origin in sensation but rather of the German idealist project of showing how ideas evolve transcendentally out of one another a priori. Even more, they are thinking of the view of Hegel and his followers that the course of the world, and especially of human history, is determined by the development of ideas. Ideologues, they say, "agree in their belief in the dominion of thoughts [*Gedankenherrschaft*]," agree in "regarding the world as ruled by ideas, ideas and concepts as the determining principles" (MEW 3:14, CW 5:24). This usage may also hint at "ideologue" in the sense of "mental laborer," however, if the suggestion is that ideologues believe in the dominion of thoughts because they happen to be in the business of producing thoughts. (Marx often attributes to people the narrow-minded propensity to exaggerate the importance of their own social roles, or to see things only from their own distorted social perspective: see CW 5:60, 6:501–504.)

In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels are interested in the belief in dominion of thoughts chiefly because they are concerned to reject it as a theory of society and history. "It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness" (MEW 3:27, CW 5:37). "Ideology," then, becomes the name for a philosophical view (the belief in the dominion of thoughts) to which they are opposing their own newly developed materialist

conception of history. In the writings of Marx, "ideology" usually refers either to this philosophical view or to the products of mental laborers who (Marx thinks) generally share the view either tacitly or explicitly. But once the materialist conception of history is established, the term "ideology" will also occasionally be used to stand for an important theoretical concept related to the theory's account of the nature of social consciousness.

Historical Materialism

2. According to the conception of history first developed in *The German Ideology,* the basis of human history is not the development of ideas, nor even that of political institutions, but rather the development of what Hegel called "civil society," the economic sphere, the sphere of human productive capacities and, corresponding to them, of the social relationships within which people produce and appropriate, which Marx and Engels call the "form of intercourse" (*Verkehrsform*) or the "relations of production" (MEW 3:44–45, CW 5:50). The materialist theory views history as divided into epochs, each characterized by a distinct form of intercourse or set of production relations. These relations define a set of economic roles, whose most crucial feature is that the relations assign ownership (effective control) over the means, process, and fruits of production to the occupants of certain roles, while excluding the occupants of other roles.

These differences are the basis of class differences in society. Classes are social groups whose members are assigned by the production relations to a common situation, giving them certain common interests (CW 6:211). Marx distinguishes, however, between merely potential classes (classes *an sich*), groups assigned a common economic situation by the production relations, and actual classes (classes *für sich*), groups that have become in some manner conscious of their common plight and organized to promote their common interests, so that they are represented as a class by an identifiable political movement (CW 5:77, 6:211, 11:187). For Marx, class interests properly speaking are not simply the interests shared by members of the social groups defined by production relations but instead the political goals of the movements representing these groups (CW 11:173). In this way, class interests become "general interests" over and above the individual interests of the class's particular members, which can sometimes demand the sacrifice of individual interests (CW 5:245).

On the materialist theory, social change comes about because the social relations of production are not static, but are compelled from time to time to undergo alterations, sometimes quite sudden and drastic ones. The explanation for these alterations lies in the social powers of production, the arsenal of productive techniques and capacities, including human knowledge and

methods of cooperation and embodied in tools and other material means of production. These powers on the whole tend to grow. At any stage of their development, the employment and further growth of the productive powers of society is facilitated more by some historically viable social relations of production than by others. Eventually, any given set of social relations will become obsolete, dysfunctional in relation either to the existing productive powers or to their further expansion. A social revolution consists in the transformation of the social relations of production which is required by the growth of productive powers, either by their past growth or by their tendency to further development (CW 5:52; cf. SW 182–183).

Productive powers, however, do not make revolutions. The mechanism by which the adjustment of social relations to productive powers is effected is the class struggle. The struggle of classes, as we have seen, is really for Marx the struggle of the political movements representing them. The long-term goals of these movements, however, are not determined by the momentary consciousness of their members, neither by that of the leaders of the movement nor by that of the masses they represent. Instead, it is determined by the nature of the social changes that a movement can effect given its historical situation (CW 4:37). Marx identifies the long-term interests of a class with the establishment and defense of a certain set of production relations in society. That class tends to win out in the struggle whose long-term interests are identified with the set of production relations that, under the historical circumstances, best correspond to the state of development of the social powers of production. "The class struggle is the proximate driving force of history" (MEW 34:407). It is only the "proximate" driving force of history because its outcome is in turn determined by the tension between production relations and productive powers.

The Marxian claim that "life determines consciousness" means, in the context of this theory, that the ideas characteristic of a historical epoch reflect the interests of the epoch's most prominent classes. More specifically, these ideas are symptomatic of the state of the class struggle, and constitute the form in which people become conscious of this struggle.

> It is not men's consciousness that determines their being, but their being that determines their consciousness. . . . [Thus] in considering [an epoch of social revolution], we should always distinguish the material transformation of the economic conditions of production . . . from the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophical, in short, the ideological forms in which men become conscious of the conflict and fight it out. (MEW 13:9, SW 183)

It would not be plausible to take the term "ideological" here as a reference either to the supposed science of ideas or to those who believe in the dominion of thoughts, since there is no reason to think that this science or such believers have a monopoly on the forms of consciousness in which social revolutions

are fought out. It might indicate only that the forms of consciousness indicated are produced by mental laborers: jurists, politicians, priests, artists, and philosophers. But likelier still, the term "ideological" is being used to express something more, something which is more intimately linked to the materialist conception of history.

Because Marx and Engels hold that "social consciousness" is "determined" by "life" or "social being," they take it to be one of the tasks of a materialist science of history to explain "ideological forms" in terms of productive powers, production relations, and the class struggle.

> This conception of history depends on presenting the actual process of production, starting from the material production of life itself, conceiving the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production, i.e., by civil society in its different stages, as the foundation of all history, describing it in its action as the state, and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality, etc., etc., arise out of it, and following their formation process from this foundation . . . ; it does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice. (MEW 3:37–38, CW 5:53–54)

By providing such explanations, historical materialism will refute "ideology" in the sense of a belief in the dominion of thoughts. But the term "ideology" may also be used to characterize those ideas that are the objects of the proposed materialist explanations. This is very likely the import of the term "ideological forms" used in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph. We may call ideology in this sense "functional ideology."[4]

Functional Ideology and Its Materialist Explanation

3. If we examine their usage closely, it is striking that Marx and Engels do not more often use the term "ideology" to express the conception of functional ideology. Nearly always, their use of the term involves reference either to some form of the belief in the dominion of thoughts or else to the fact that the thoughts in question are products of a distinctive category of mental laborer. It will be apparent on brief reflection that there is no need for functional ideology to have either of these characteristics. Marx has no reason to limit his materialist explanations to ideas produced by specialized mental laborers or to expressions of a theory of history he rejects. In one prominent passage, Marx even points out that the "superstructure of different and characteristic feelings, illusions, ways of thinking, and views of life" that pertain to a given class are "created and shaped by the *whole class* from its material foundations and from the corresponding social relations" (MEW 8:139, CW 11:128, emphasis added). We will follow subsequent tradition, however,

in using the term "ideology" to designate functional ideology (what Marx here calls the "superstructure"), irrespective of who creates it or of its affiliation with idealist theories of history.[5]

How does historical materialism propose to explain ideology in this sense? Marx's repeated statements that people's social consciousness is determined by their social being, together with his utter rejection of the "ideological" notion that ideas make history, has led many to read him as holding that human consciousness is purely epiphenomenal in relation to the economic sphere, that ideas never exercise any real influence at all on what goes on in the economic sphere. On such an interpretation, of course, it is impossible to understand how Marx himself could have regarded his theoretical work as a practical help to the working-class movement. The interpretation also conflicts with many casual statements by both Marx and Engels to the effect that of course the economic, political, and ideal spheres all exert an influence on one another, which it is the task of historical materialism to trace (CW 5:53, SC 460, G 88). Such an interpretation is best suited to the purposes of those who want to show after a cursory reading that Marx's theory of history is not worth serious study.

Marx's theory becomes intelligible, however, if we recognize that the "determination" of social consciousness by the class struggle, like the "determination" of relations of production by productive powers, involves a species of teleological or functional explanation, rather than a causal determination.[6] The theory holds that production relations change in such a way as to *facilitate* the employment and growth of productive powers, and it proposes to explain ideological forms through the way they *further* the interests of classes. These explanatory goals are not only compatible with the assumption that production relations exert causal influence on productive powers and that ideology exerts an influence on the class struggle; they positively *require* that there should be such an influence.

The explanations are based on the existence of *tendencies*: a tendency for productive powers to be employed efficiently and to expand, and a tendency for class interests to get themselves satisfied through the thoughts and behavior of social agents. Marx thinks that such tendencies are real, empirically verifiable features of the social world. The existence of such tendencies presumably also requires the existence of causal mechanisms through which people's ideas are adjusted to the needs of class movements, just as the existence of the tendency for a warm-blooded animal to maintain a constant body temperature requires mechanisms for generating and losing body heat and for the adjustment of heat production to heat loss. But just as it is easier to perceive the tendency to maintain constant body temperature than to trace the mechanisms through which it operates, so it is easier to perceive the tendency for ideas to serve class interests than to comprehend the complex mechanisms by which that tendency operates. Historical materialism is a

theoretical program cast in terms of the more readily observable tendencies and in terms of functional or teleological explanations which may be based on them.

The program does, however, explicitly include on its agenda a study of the mechanisms by which these tendencies are fulfilled, and the detailed history of the process by which ideologies are actually generated. As we saw above, Marx and Engels propose to "explain how different theoretical products and forms of consciousness arise out of the material mode of production and to follow their formation process from this foundation" (MEW 3:37–38, CW 5:53–54). But this is an exceedingly ambitious aim, and it cannot be said that Marx or Engels ever did more than provide programmatic suggestions as to how it might be fulfilled. In effect, to fulfill it completely would be to provide a detailed and empirically verified theory telling us why certain ideas become current, fashionable, or trendy. It is not surprising that Marx did not succeed in doing this. No one else has ever been able to do it either.[7]

False Consciousness and Social Illusion

4. If "ideology" refers to functional ideology, then there is no reason why the beliefs included in "ideology" must be false, unscientific, or in any other way epistemically defective. There is no reason in principle why class interests may not be served by the dissemination of scientific knowledge. Marx in fact appears to believe that the dissemination of scientific knowledge about the origins, laws of motion, and future tendencies of capitalism will serve the needs of the proletarian class, and he seems ready to apply his materialist theory of history in this way to a social explanation of its own genesis: historical materialism was discovered and became current when and where it was because its discovery and currency promote the interests of the revolutionary proletariat. If Marx seems reluctant to call his own theory "ideology" and uses the term "ideology" in such a way that it suggests views that are false or unscientific, then that is probably a sign that "ideology" for him refers not to functional ideology but to belief in the dominion of thoughts. For later Marxists, however, who tend to use "ideology" in the sense of functional ideology, the explanation will have to be different.

It is a commonplace in Marxist thinking that ideology involves "false consciousness." But the term "false consciousness" is seldom if ever used by Marx, and plays no role in his own account of ideology.[8] The one text in which this term does play such a role occurs in a well-known letter of Engels' to Franz Mehring, written some ten years after Marx's death: "Ideology is a process carried out by the so-called thinker with consciousness, but with a false consciousness. The real driving forces that move him remain unknown

to him; otherwise, it would not be an ideological process. Thus he imagines to himself false or apparent driving forces" (MEW 39:97, SC 459). In this passage, Engels makes it a necessary condition for something to be ideology that it involve "false consciousness." "False consciousness," however, here refers to the falsity or illusory character of the supposed "driving forces" to which the ideological thinker attributes his own ideas. "False consciousness" here is thus the ignorance of, or the possession of false beliefs about, what explains the form of social consciousness one has.

It seems very likely that Engels is thinking here of "ideology" in the sense of the belief in the dominion of thoughts. That would explain why an "ideologist" is necessarily ignorant of the material "driving forces" of his own thinking. For to believe in the dominion of thoughts is to believe that thoughts and conceptions rule the world and have their own proper course of development, which is independent of the development of productive forces, production relations, and the struggles of social classes; hence it is to deny on principle the existence of the "driving forces" to which historical materialism attributes one's own thinking. This is a much narrower meaning of "false consciousness" than the one that is current in more recent Marxist discourse. No doubt Marxists regard the belief in the dominion of thoughts and other false theories about the explanation of one's social consciousness as a form of false consciousness, but they do not restrict false consciousness to this, as Engels does. Instead, they apply the term to a wide variety of false, mystified, or distorted beliefs people have about themselves, the world, and social relationships whose social prominence is to be explained by the economic or class function these beliefs serve.

Although Marx and Engels do not use "false consciousness" in this sense, they plainly do hold that the forms of social consciousness whose prominence is to be explained by their class function do typically distort or falsify reality in systematic ways. The dominant ideology in any epoch of class society is a dominant "illusion" (*Illusion, Schein*) (MEW 3:46–47, 48, 49; CW 5:55, 59–60, 62). Historical materialism even takes upon itself the task of explaining the fact of this illusion: "If in all ideology human beings and their relations appear to be standing on their head as in a *camera obscura,* this phenomenon is produced by their historical life-process, just as the inversion of an object on the retina is produced by their immediate physical life-process" (MEW 3:26, CW 5:36). Marx sees his materialist science of history as the theoretical weapon of the proletariat, whose historical mission is the liberation of humanity from class society. Part of this liberation, however, is the liberation of people from socially created illusions about themselves and their condition, so that as social beings they may also be autonomous beings acting with rational understanding of the true meaning of what they do.

These illusions exist, in Marx's view, because societies and classes need them. People are subject to them because social relations of production require for their survival and smooth functioning that the people who are

subject to them be unable to see them for what they are. For Marx this is especially true of class societies, whose relations of production involve the oppression of one class by another. Oppression is one reason why societies need illusions, because oppression works best when it is hidden—not only from the oppressed but also from the oppressors, who would not be as effective in maintaining the relations from which they benefit if they saw them as oppressive.

Not all social illusions are conservative for Marx. Some serve the interests of revolutionary classes by serving as justifications for their revolutionary activity and representing their social aspirations in a favorable light. For example, bourgeois ideologies that represented the interest of the bourgeois class as the universal interest of all society helped the rising bourgeoisie destroy feudal aristocratic and guild privileges (CW 5:60–61). In a similar way, the interests of particular classes, in Marx's view, tend in class ideology to represent themselves as the universal interests of all society (CW 11:130–131). As long as class society persists, however, phrases such as "the general interest," "the common interest," and "the universal interest of all society" have no referent. All interests in class society are particular interests. Phrases like "the general interest" in class society always serve an exclusively ideological purpose, namely that of representing the particular interest of one class as general for the purpose of persuading people to accept the rule of a particular class (CW 5:61).

Unlike previous classes, in Marx's view, the proletariat is capable of advancing its interests without the need for the illusion that its interests are universal ones; not, however, because it is the truly "universal class," but because it is the class whose historic mission it is to abolish class society. Only when class society has been abolished altogether will the interests of the (erstwhile) proletariat cease to be particular class interests asserted against the interest of a ruling class (CW 5:77).[9] It is notable that Marx also credits the bourgeoisie with playing a role in ridding humanity of the need for illusions by reducing all exploitation to its fundamental—that is, purely economic—form, thus enabling people finally "to regard their life situation and mutual relations with sober eyes" (CW 6:487).

A second (if overlapping) reason why class society, and especially bourgeois society, needs illusions is *alienation*—the fact that social relations of production impose on people a mode of life that is crippled, stunted, unfree, a life that prevents the development and exercise of their essential human capacities. If the social relations are to be maintained, people must be prevented from coming to recognize this fact, or if they do recognize it, they must be given a suitably mystifying interpretation of their experience of it. This latter function is accomplished not only by illusions about the workings of society but also by illusions about human nature itself and the human condition—for instance, by certain religious illusions.

People whose lives are alienated—impoverished and empty—often tend to

sense this fact, to experience themselves as worthless and their lives as devoid of dignity. Certain religious illusions serve the psychological function of interpreting this alienation so as to make it bearable and of offering supposed remedies for it—very much as magic and religion in societies with primitive science and technology both interpret people's powerlessness over against the natural world and provide them with imaginary remedies for it, such as entreaties and sacrifices to the gods and the ritual deeds of witch doctors. Both in "primitive" and in "civilized" religion, the illusion of having some sort of access to the mysterious powers that govern our fate and of having achieved "salvation" from our alienated condition can often be quite effective on the psychological level, even though it leaves the real state of powerlessness or alienation entirely untouched.

Religious illusions in alienated bourgeois society simultaneously serve a socially integrative function by reconciling people to the social relations that are responsible for their alienation. For example, religion explains people's sense of spiritual frustration and unfulfillment as due to their "self-will" and their "sinful" desires (such as those for autonomy, material well-being, and earthly happiness, which are frustrated in existing society); it represents a blind adherence to archaic religious laws (interpreted, of course, so as to buttress the prevailing social relations) as the path to liberation and superstitious faith in the supernatural as the means to achieve spiritual fulfillment.

Illusions of this kind are a particularly effective way to protect alienating social relations from the instability threatened by alienation, since they put people's efforts at ending alienation in the service of precisely those social relations that cause it. Such illusions, of course, not only distort people's perceptions of the alienation to which they are subject but also themselves constitute a significant part of that alienation, since to be subject to them is by itself to be spiritually degraded, crippled both in one's understanding of one's condition and in one's practical orientation to it, and thus deprived of important aspects of the fulfillment of one's human nature. Individual members of an alienated society may reject religious beliefs as illusions, but in Marx's view such illusions will continue to be socially prominent because as long as society is alienated in real life the illusions fulfill a psychological need on the part of alienated individuals and a structurally defensive need on the part of the society.

Ideology and Objective Social Illusion

5. Some social illusions for Marx take the form of direct factual misinformation, false theories, mystifying philosophical interpretations, and aesthetic imaginings. When these are conservative, they have the effect of diverting attention from the facts of oppression and alienation, and of either defusing

social discontent or directing people's energies to the defense of the prevailing social forms. When they are revolutionary, they correspondingly focus on the defects and irrationalities of the status quo, portray the aspirations of the revolutionary class in a uniformly favorable light, and divert attention from the inevitable costs of revolutionary change. The term "illusion" must also be understood broadly here, and not interpreted in too narrowly cognitive a sense. Since the function of ideology is to affect people's practice, it may be doubted whether all these ideological distortions can be reduced to or adequately portrayed simply in terms of false beliefs. Marx refers to the ideological "superstructure" as consisting not only of beliefs but also of "feelings" and "ways of thinking" (CW 11:128). Ideology operates not only by supplying people with false beliefs but also by affording them a systematically biased selection of correct information, by distorting ways of processing the information they have, and by encouraging associations between perceived reality and certain sentiments or affectively colored images.

These forms of illusion, however, all consist simply in people's having certain mental contents or processes, and they are all produced by human thought, often by a specialized class of ideologues (mental laborers). There is another species of social illusion discussed in Marx's writings, however, which is not in this same sense merely subjective in nature or simply a product of human thinking. In Marx's view, social reality can sometimes present *itself* in a false or illusory form, so that the illusion exists prior to all theorizing, and even persists for someone who is in possession of a correct theory.[10]

The best known example of such an illusion is the "fetishism of commodities." Religious fetishes, Marx says, are "products of the human brain" that

> appear as independently living beings, entering into relations both with one another and with human beings. In the world of commodities it is the same with the products of the human hand. This I call the 'fetishism' which adheres to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities and which is therefore inseparable from commodity production. (MEW 23:86–87, C 1:72)

Commodities are useful objects (use-values) produced by human labor for exchange. In a society based on commodity production (a market economy), the social relations between cooperative human producers are made a function of the exchange relation (the exchange-value) of their products. It is no illusion that in a commodity-producing society, the social relations between producers are governed by the exchange relations between their products: "the relations connecting the labor of one individual with that of the rest appear not as direct social relations between laboring individuals, but as *what they are,* thinglike relations between persons and social relations between things" (MEW 23:87, C 1:73). The illusion is that this capacity of people's

products to regulate their social relations belongs to the products simply as use-values, as objects capable of satisfying human wants. Thus in a commodity-producing society, my social relation to others—my capacity to command their labor and my susceptibility to having my labor commanded by them—appears by nature to be a function of the utility of the objects I have to offer for sale.

This is an illusion because commodities have the power to regulate social relations between persons not in virtue of their natural or useful properties but only in virtue of their social character as commodities, as objects produced for exchange. In a feudal society, as Marx points out, products of labor do not have that power, despite their use-value; social relations here appear directly as relations of personal dependence and subjection, not as a consequence of relations between things. The products of labor will once again lack the power to determine social relations when society becomes a "community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labor power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined social labor power" (MEW 23:91–93, C 1:77–78, T 3:484). As long as people's production is dominated by the exchange relation, the social relations between them will inevitably appear to arise out of the natural properties of the commodities they have to sell. "What is mysterious about a commodity is simply that in it the social character of men's labor is reflected back to them as an objective character of its product, as a social-natural property" (MEW 23:86, C 1:72).

The distinctively "objective" features of this illusion are, first, that the illusion is not due to people's adoption of false economic or social theories, but simply to the commodity form that products take, and second, that even intellectual comprehension of the illusion through a correct theory does not do away with the false appearance.

> The recent scientific discovery that products of labor, insofar as they are values, are merely expressions in real material form of the human labor expended in their production, is epoch-making in the history of humanity's development. But it by no means chases away the objective illusion [*gegenständlichen Schein*] concerning the social character of labor. (MEW 23:88, C 1:74)

A normal perceiver is still subject to the illusion even when in possession of the truth of the matter and of a correct theoretical explanation of it. For Marx, the social world, like the physical world, is capable of generating false appearances (similar to optical illusions). Marx compares the illusion involved in commodity fetishism to the appearance that air is composed of a single gas and that the sun revolves around the earth (C 1:74, 316). The difference is that objective physical illusions depend only on the constitution of the physical world and of our senses; objective social illusions, however, depend

on historically transitory features of society. In Marx's view it is both possible and desirable for people to create a society in which their relations are transparent, immediately perceived for what they are and not encumbered with objective social illusions.

The fetishism of commodities is the best-known example of objective social illusion, but it is far from being the only example presented in Marx's writings. Others include the illusion that laborers are paid for the whole time that they labor (C 1:539–540), that machinery and raw materials are capital (C 3:815), that labor-intensive industries produce no more surplus value than others (C 3:168), and that land has value and enters as capital into the costs of production (C 3:623, 810). All these illusions follow a single pattern: they all represent social forms as identical with the material economic contents they organize. Capitalism is especially prolific in generating such illusions because in capitalism social relations of production appear in a directly economic form, as opposed to the personal or political form they assume in slave society or feudalism. This means that people's social roles appear to coincide directly with people's roles in the productive process, and thus to be inseparably bound to the material constituents and activities that form that process.

Marx never applies the term "ideology" to objective social illusion. But this is completely understandable when we recall the restrictive sense in which Marx uses the term. Objective social illusions are clearly ideology in the sense of socially prevalent illusion or false consciousness, and they certainly do seem to be, or to involve, functional ideologies, that is, forms of social consciousness that may be explained by the way they contribute to the stability of the mode of production and promote (ruling) class interests. Marx does not call them "ideology," however, simply because they neither are products of a class of mental laborers nor involve any belief in the dominion of thoughts.

Ideology and Self-Deception

6. In this paper I have tried to expound Marx's theory of ideology in the broad sense of social consciousness and social illusion, but it is well beyond the scope of the paper to assess (let alone to defend) the many controversial claims involved in the theory. The materialist conception of history is a challenging programmatic hypothesis, but still not a widely accepted view, and Marx's class analysis of modern society, at least in the form he presented it, seems in certain respects quite outdated in the late twentieth century. In any case, a theory that holds that many socially prevalent ideas, beliefs, and perceptions are pernicious illusions could hardly expect to escape controversy, and Marx himself often calls attention to the fact that his theoretical consequences are paradoxical and offensive to common sense and prevailing beliefs.

One central, striking, even paradoxical idea in Marx's theory, however, has proven impossible to dislodge: the idea that our social life and practice is not transparent or immediately intelligible but opaque and systematically distorted by social forces, that social life subjects people to systematic illusions serviceable to the interests of certain social groups. This idea, as I said earlier, like the idea of the Freudian unconscious, forces itself on us as a troubling inevitability with which any modern self-understanding must reckon. Both ideas, moreover, are associated in people's minds with the notion of self-deception. The final question, therefore, which I want to address is: What is the relation between ideology and self-deception?

This question unfortunately requires us to come to some understanding of what we mean by "self-deception." I will understand "self-deception" as a certain species of motivated irrationality, thus as belonging to the same genus as *akrasia,* or weakness of will. Self-deception may be distinguished from *akrasia,* however, by the fact that in self-deception we are forced to account for the irrationality by supposing that the subject's mind is in some way "divided," so that the motives and the mechanism producing the irrationality are excluded from the subject's conscious awareness.[11] This exclusion is motivated, as when I have good grounds for believing *p* but believe not-*p* instead because I wish not-*p* to be true or find it comforting or consoling to believe not-*p*. Sometimes, however, people (religious believers, for example) hold on to a belief in the teeth of the evidence because they find the belief consoling, and yet seem to remain all the while quite conscious of what they are doing. This may be a case of motivated irrationality, but it is not a case of self-deception except insofar as the maintenance of the belief requires that the believers distort their reading of the evidence or exclude some of it from consciousness in ways they do not admit to themselves. The fact that the distortion or exclusion is something that occurs under the pressure of need indicates that it is an *accomplishment* of the mind in a way that acts done out of *akrasia* are not, and that it requires some significant effort and the expenditure of psychic energy.

Ideology, as we have developed the conception above, is any form of consciousness that distorts or falsifies people's perception of reality, and whose social prominence is explained by its functionality for the prevailing mode of production or for the promotion of the interests of a social class. To the extent that ideology distorts reality, and especially to the extent that it tends to hide its own distorting influence, ideology may be regarded as a form of *deception*. Some cases of ideology, however, look like cases in which self-deception is very much in place. Ruling-class ideologies typically represent members of the ruling class in a favorable light, making them feel good about the privileges they enjoy and representing the sufferings of the "less fortunate" either as inevitable or as something deserved. It is easy to see how such beliefs could answer to the wishes of ruling-class mem-

bers, and how such people could hold them in the way we have described as self-deception.

Marx often calls attention to ideologies that are taught to an oppressed class by the paid representatives of a ruling class (priests, journalists, academics, pedagogues), and serve the ruling class by deceiving the oppressed about their condition. In such cases the oppressed do not appear to be victims of *self*-deception, since the distortion is imposed on them from without, and there seems to be no motive (such as wish fulfillment) which would induce the oppressed to adopt beliefs that it is directly against their interest for them to have. This kind of ideology looks more like straightforward lying than like self-deception. This ignores, however, the fact that those who are oppressed may derive a kind of comfort from believing that their sufferings are unavoidable or deserved, and that it may prove very distressing to them to realize that their condition is both unjustifiable and alterable, especially if altering it is seen as difficult, costly, and risky. Ideology, even ideologies that deceive the oppressed, often prove functional because they provide comfort and consolation, and are the sorts of things people wish were true. They are illusions to which people are subject, Marx says, because they are subject to a condition that needs illusions (CW 3:176). Illusions people need often operate through self-deception.

Despite these considerations, I doubt that self-deception plays a role in most ideology. For although self-deception provides a mechanism that might be serviceable to ideology, it is doubtful whether ideology often stands in need of this mechanism. Cases of self-deception are cases in which the psychically upsetting awareness is dangerously close at hand, and fairly drastic steps must be taken by the individual's psyche if the danger is to be averted. A social order whose functional ideology depended on mechanisms of self-deception in its individual members would be far less secure than one which found other ways of inducing the necessary illusions in them. When the observance of a society's norms of conduct is made to depend largely on mechanisms of individual self-deception or repression, the norms will be observed only very imperfectly. (Restrictive norms of sexual behavior provide a good illustration of this.) A mode of production that is forced to entrust its chief functional ideologies to such mechanisms must be either one without serious inner conflicts or else one tottering on the brink of destruction.

That societies do not need to depend on self-deception is easy enough to see when we reflect on the following considerations. Social orders and their prospects for change, and the needs, interests, aspirations, and capacities of human individuals are all complex matters. The truth about them is not easy to discover, and not easy to confirm once it is discovered. Social orders that are changing, moreover, represent a moving target in this respect; the truth about them, even if once discovered and verified, is not likely to last for long. Where this is the case, it is easy to see that there would very likely be

differences of opinion about how people are to understand themselves and their societies, even among inquirers whose views were not distorted by such things as personal vanity, interest, or partisanship. Various sets of ideas favorable to social stability or to the interests of a given class are bound to be available, and they will tend to be socially prominent if the social mechanisms regulating the production and dissemination of ideas tend to favor them.

Every society requires some mechanisms to select which ideas are to form part of the pedagogical and scientific orthodoxy of the society, and which subjects, theories, and hypotheses are to receive the most resources for research.[12] Such mechanisms typically (almost inevitably) involve choices between rival theories, made by people who do not themselves possess as much expertise as do those who produce the rival theories between which they choose (such people as politicians, bureaucrats, editors, those who fund research and publication, or just plain consumers). It is natural for such people's choices to be influenced by convictions, held honestly and without self-deception, which harmonize with their class interests or prejudices. The theories that they tend to prefer will be those harmonizing with these convictions. Their preference for these scientific theories gives respectability to the theories, while the fact that these theories are generally preferred lends support to the convictions that harmonize with class interests. Self-deception, of course, may often be involved in the production of theories, or in the selection made by those to whom the social order leaves such choices to be made, or in both at once. But it is not difficult to understand how prevalent ideas would tend to harmonize with class interests and the needs of the mode of production even if self-deception were not a factor at all.

The notion that ideology operates through self-deception leads naturally to the presumption that where people are "honest," where they do not experience the psychic tension and do not need to invest the psychic energy characteristic of self-deception, ideology cannot be operating. This presumption, however, is one of the errors that give ideology the cloak of invisibility which it needs in order to do its work. The notion that ideology operates through self-deception is itself a piece of ideology.

NOTES

In citing works of Marx and Engels, I will use the following abbreviations, normally citing both the German text and a standard English translation in the case of a direct translation, and otherwise the English version only. All translations of quotations, however, are my own.

MEW *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin, 1961–1966), cited by volume and page number.

CW *Marx Engels Collected Works* (New York, 1975-), cited by volume and page number.

C *Capital* (New York, 1967), cited by volume and page number.

G *Grundrisse* (Moscow, 1939); English translation by Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1973), cited by page number in the English translation.

SC *Selected Correspondence 1846–1895* (New York, 1965), cited by page number.

SW *Selected Works* (in one volume) (New York, 1968), cited by page number.

T *Theories of Surplus Value* (Moscow, 1971), cited by volume and page number.

1. Gyorgy Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness,* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 83–222; Louis Althusser, *For Marx,* trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 1970), pp. 231–236; Juergen Habermas, "Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz," in *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie?* ed. J. Habermas and Niklas Luhmann (Frankfurt, 1971), pp. 101–141.

2. "Destutt de Tracy, the fishblooded bourgeois doctrinaire. . . . " (MEW 23:677, C 1:648). For Destutt's anticipation of the Marxian conception of ideology, see Emmet Kennedy, *A Philosophe in the Age of Revolution: Destutt de Tracy and the Origins of "Ideology"* (Philadelphia, 1978), p. 206.

3. These passages are discussed by Louis Dupre, *Marx's Social Critique of Culture* (New Haven, 1983), pp. 219–220.

4. Compare my *Karl Marx* (London, 1981), pp. 117–122. In that very brief discussion of ideology, I distinguished (1) "functional ideology" from two other senses of the term: (2) "historical idealism"—belief in the dominion of thoughts—and (3) "ideological illusion"—the incomprehension by a form of social consciousness of its own material (economic and class) foundations. I did not mention there the two other senses of "ideology" and its cognates that we have noted in this paper: ideology as (4) the science (or pseudoscience) of ideas, and (5) the products of a class of mental laborers. My treatment of ideological illusion was also rather simplified, and oriented especially to the prominent text of Engels (to be discussed below) in which the term "false consciousness" is used.

5. Marx's use of "superstructure" in this passage is apparently at odds with his use of it in the famous 1859 "Preface," where it designates the system of legal and political institutions, explicitly distinguished from the corresponding "forms of social consciousness" (SW 182).

6. See my *Karl Marx,* chap. 7, and G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Princeton, 1978), chaps. 9 and 10.

7. There thus need be no disagreement between Marx and Jon Elster on two points that Elster uses to criticize Marx: (1) that the kinds of historical materialist explanations that appeal to tendencies are a "temporary necessity," used only because more detailed explanations of the mechanisms behind these tendencies are not available, and (2) that wherever such explanations are employed, it is presupposed as a condition of their validity that there are such mechanisms at work, even if we are unable to identify them. See Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 6–7. Elster, however, appears not to be entirely consistent. He sometimes grants that a functional explanation is permissible "if one insists on the necessary existence of some underlying mechanism" (p. 7), and he admits that one can provide reasons for thinking that there is a mechanism without being able to specify one (p. 28). Yet at other points he insists that "to explain is to provide a *mechanism*" (p. 5), which entails that functional explanations in terms of tendencies do not explain at all, even if we insist that they operate through some underlying mechanism. This, of course, is not consistent with Marx, and it seems unduly restrictive besides.

8. John Plamenatz, in his book *Ideology* (London, 1970), states repeatedly (pp. 23, 79, 89, 124) that Marx called ideology "false consciousness," but cites not one text in support of this claim.

9. There is, of course, one text (CW 3:186) in which Marx does refer to the proletariat as the "universal class"; it is often cited as providing unique insight into Marx's conception of the proletariat. The text *is* unique in Marx's writings, because it was produced in 1843 and thus predates Marx's historical materialist account of class ideology, which brings with it the repudiation of this whole universalistic and moralistic conception of the proletariat. See my article "Justice and Class Interests," *Philosophica* 33 (1984):9–22.

10. My account of the concept of objective social illusion and its exemplification in the fetishism of commodities follows closely that of G. A. Cohen in *Karl Marx's Theory of History,* chap. 5 and appendix 1, although my discussion of these matters contains some minor points of divergence from his (for example, I believe his accounts of religious fetishism and of the illusion involved in commodity fetishism are not quite accurate to the text of *Capital*). I will also have no occasion here to discuss the central thesis Cohen attributes to Marx, that science requires that there be a discrepancy between reality and appearance.

11. See David Pears, "Motivated Irrationality, Freudian Theory and Cognitive Dissonance," in *Philosophical Essays on Freud,* ed. Richard Wollheim and James Hopkins (Cambridge, England, 1982), pp. 264–270.

12. Some such mechanisms will be more restrictive than others on what opinions people are permitted to express. But some sort of relative selection between opinions is a necessity, even in the most liberal and open-minded society, if the work of scientists and educators is to go on at all. Further, societies without formal press censorship can often be just as effective at suppressing information about the misdeeds of their governments as societies in which there is repressive state management of information. In the U.S., news media and academic scholarship are often self-censoring. The conceptions of "fairness" and "objectivity" prevailing in the media have nothing to do with standards of epistemic appraisal, but consist rather in accu-

rately reflecting the balance of power between the institutions and groups powerful enough to demand an effective hearing for their ideological distortions of the truth. The ideologies of these institutions and groups count as "respectable" however little intellectual merit they have, and views falling outside them are normally available only in publications with a very tiny circulation. These claims are well-documented regarding U.S. involvement in third-world fascism, terrorism, and genocide. See Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Boston, 1979), especially pp. 71–79. There are many good reasons for favoring a society in which there is freedom of expression, but the idea that in such a society the truth must prevail is not one of them.