

# KARL MARX

2nd Edition

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seems quite likely that if Marx is a determinist he is also a compatibilist, that is, he believes that causal determinism with regard to human actions does not imply that people are unable to choose freely. When Engels endorses the Hegelian doctrine that 'freedom is necessity comprehended', he probably intends (among other things) to subscribe to some form of compatibilism.<sup>5</sup> Frankly, I doubt Marx and Engels ever gave much thought to the metaphysical issue of free will and determinism. Why should they? Nothing in their theory of history turns on this issue.

There is another charge sometimes brought against Marx which really has nothing to do with free will and determinism, but tends to be closely associated with the free will issue in people's minds and probably contributes to the idea that Marx holds some scandalous doctrine in this area. This is the charge that historical materialism fails to comprehend individuals in their unique individuality, that Marx 'minimizes the individual and his significance' in history, and 'drowns the individual in the class and the movement of history'.<sup>6</sup> There is quite a bit of truth in these claims, though not, I think, in the idea that they locate a defect in historical materialism. Materialist explanations are teleological explanations. Teleological explanations generally focus attention on the contribution made by elements of an organized system to its global tendencies. Accordingly, they tend to ignore the properties of these elements which are not relevant to their function in the system. Historical materialism proposes a teleological theory about the careers of social forms, political movements and prevalent or influential ideas. Its aims and methods require historical materialism to view individuals from the perspective of their relation to these social forms, and thus deliberately to ignore their 'unique individuality'. Historical materialism is not (and was never meant to be) a good guide to the writing of personal biography or the history of some individual's inner spiritual development.

## 2 Three senses of 'ideology'

'Ideology', like 'alienation', has become one of the most fashionable concepts in Marxian thinking, despite (or rather perhaps because of) the fact that Marx is conspicuously unclear as to what he means by 'ideology' and what he does say is beset with dangers of confusion and inconsistency. I think we can discern three basic uses of 'ideology' and its cognates in the writings of Marx and Engels, and we can acquire a basic grasp of what Marx thought about ideology if we

understand how these three uses are related to each other and to historical materialism.

Marx derived the term 'ideology' from Destutt de Tracy, though it had also been used by other writers. Marx's first use of it apparently occurs in *The German Ideology* of 1845–6. In that manuscript, the term refers primarily to a certain sort of philosophical belief, the belief in the 'dominion of thought' (*Gedankenherrschaft*), the thesis that 'the world is ruled by ideas, that ideas and concepts are the determining principles.'<sup>7</sup> 'Ideologists' are philosophers who hold and teach this doctrine. In this use, 'ideology' means the same as 'idealism' (in one of the many senses given the term by Marx and Engels). For the sake of a convenient terminology, I will call 'ideology' in this sense 'historical idealism'.

Needless to say, 'ideology' or 'historical idealism' is taken by Marx and Engels to be a *false* doctrine. But it is not immediately evident what views they count as 'belief in *Gedankenherrschaft*'. One view they appear to include is any metaphysics which, like Hegel's, regards ultimate reality as a cosmic mind or spirit, and this spirit's 'determinate thoughts as the mystery of the world accessible to philosophers'.<sup>8</sup> But Marx and Engels also identify 'ideology' with a thesis about how progressive social change is to be brought about. Ideologists, they say, 'agree in the faith that their acts of critical thought must bring about the downfall of the existing order'.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, they have in mind Bauer, Stirner, Feuerbach and the other young Hegelians who believe that alienation consists in or is caused by false consciousness, and that the cure for it lies in the acquisition of a truer or more 'critical' world-view. But it is misleading of Marx and Engels to imply that the young Hegelians' diagnosis of alienation and their strategies for social change are founded on the metaphysical thesis that ultimate reality is mental, or even the thesis that the course of history is determined in Hegelian fashion by the conceptual dialectic of the world spirit. There is no need for 'idealistic' views about the strategy of social reform to be based on metaphysical idealism.<sup>10</sup>

*The German Ideology*'s attack on historical idealism seems to be aimed chiefly at two points: first, the idealists' repudiation of any materialist account of their own philosophical ideas (a repudiation Marx and Engels take to be implicit in the young Hegelians' contemptuous aloofness from political struggles); and second, the idealists' belief that progressive social change can be brought about merely by a conversion of people's consciousness, irrespective of the material conditions of production. If we make these two points the identifying

features of 'ideology' in the sense of 'historical idealism', then it is clear that the object of Marx's attack is by no means a straw man. For a good part of liberal and reformist thinking even today is 'ideological' in this sense.

'Ideology' in the sense of 'historical idealism' is not a useful concept for social analysis. Even in *The German Ideology*, however, and almost exclusively elsewhere in the Marxian writings, 'ideology' is used to propose a materialist explanation of widely held or influential beliefs and forms of social consciousness. The *Critique* describes jurisprudence, politics, religion, art and philosophy (other accounts add morality to the list) as 'ideological forms in which men become conscious of conflicts [between productive powers and production relations] and fight them out'. *The German Ideology* says that historical science must 'present the development of ideological reflexes and echoes from the actual life process of men. Even the foggy images in men's brains are necessary, empirically confirmable sublimates of their life process, and are bound up with material presuppositions.'<sup>11</sup>

In these passages, the term 'ideology' is used to express the materialist thesis that socially prevalent or influential ideas can be explained by showing how they either sanction the social relations determined by the existing stage of productive powers or express and promote class interests. An 'ideology' is any belief, theory or form of consciousness whose prevalence can be explained materialistically by the way it contributes to basic social and historical tendencies. Let us call ideology in this second sense 'functional ideology'. When Marx describes jurisprudence, politics, religion, art, philosophy or morality in general as 'ideological', he means that most of the socially prevalent and influential thoughts that occupy people's heads and fall under these rubrics can be so explained.

Many passages in Marx's writings, however, suggest that ideology must not only be materialistically explainable, but must also involve some sort of false consciousness or illusion. Engels even asserts flatly that in order to be ideology, a belief or form of consciousness must be unaccompanied by any awareness of its own economic basis. Ideology following these passages is consciousness which is ignorant of its own real social and historical significance.<sup>12</sup> Let us call ideology in this third sense 'ideological illusion'.

This term, however, may be misleading. For we normally apply the term 'illusion' only to positive errors, and not merely to gaps of ignorance, even self-ignorance. It is perfectly possible for a justified belief, and even a piece of full-fledged knowledge, to be an

'ideological illusion' in the sense just specified, if it has a materialist explanation and if this explanation remains unknown to those who have the belief or knowledge. But Marx obviously thinks that this ideological self-ignorance is often supportive of many 'illusions' in a more straightforward sense. As long as they are ignorant of the fact that their beliefs are socially prevalent on account of the social function the beliefs fulfill, people are likely to think that these beliefs are so widespread because they are justified (that they are either self-evident or authenticated by the experience of humanity through the ages). Ignorance of the material basis for beliefs can lend credibility to a great many commonly held moral, religious and philosophical ideas which would otherwise be recognized for the plain rubbish they are. These beliefs, if Marx is right, do count as illusions in an unproblematic sense.

Between 'ideology' in these three senses (historical idealism, functional ideology and ideological illusion) there are some clear affinities and relationships. Historical idealists, as Marx conceives of them, repudiate a materialist explanation of their own consciousness. Hence if that consciousness can be explained as functional ideology, then it is also ideological illusion. Marx and Engels apparently believe that historical idealism is a form of functional ideology, which serves the interests of ruling classes by diverting people's attention from the real causes of their alienation. If so, then historical idealism is also a pervasive, even paradigmatic form of ideological illusion, since in effect it promotes ideological illusion to a general principle.

The three senses of 'ideology', however, still refer to three distinct things. Historical idealism is not *eo ipso* either a form of functional ideology or ideological illusion. If it is either of these, that must be established empirically. Ideological illusions, moreover, need not involve historical idealism in any of its forms. We can be ignorant of the economic basis of our consciousness, and even have illusions about its social significance, without holding any philosophical view to the effect that it lacks an economic basis. Ideological illusion is always functional ideology, but functional ideology need not be ideological illusion. In principle at least, it seems that historical self-knowledge, even the doctrine of historical materialism itself, might be functional ideology, that is, it might become influential or socially prevalent because it serves the interest of a class. Marx in fact apparently thinks just this about historical materialism in relation to the interest of the proletariat.

### 3 Ideology and science

Marx and Engels rarely describe their own views as 'ideology'.<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps evidence that they do not really intend to use 'ideology' in the sense of functional ideology, but always mean it in the pejorative senses of historical idealism and ideological illusion. Yet of the three senses of 'ideology' it is functional ideology which captures the most important concept for materialist social analysis. The fact that there is a materialist explanation for a widely held belief is of more theoretical significance than the fact that this explanation is unknown to or denied on principle by those who hold the belief. This would serve to justify the usage of more recent Marxists (including Lenin) who do not hesitate to speak of 'proletarian ideology' and even apply this term to Marxism itself.

Perhaps someone might try to justify Marx's usage against that of the more recent Marxists by arguing that all functional ideology must in fact be ideological illusion. One such argument might be this: In order to be functional ideology, a belief or form of consciousness must not only serve an economic system or class interest, but its existence must be explained by the fact that it does so. Now someone may say that it makes no sense to explain knowledge or a rationally justified belief in such a way, since in such a case the rational grounds for the belief always suffice to explain why we hold it, and render a materialist explanation superfluous. For functional ideology not to be ideological illusion, it would have to be the case that knowledge or justified belief could rest not on the objective grounds for thinking the belief true, but on the fact that our holding this belief serves a certain economic or class purpose. It would also have to be the case that we could know of our own beliefs that they serve such a purpose, and yet consciously hold them not on objective grounds but because of the class interests they serve. We would in effect have to place a higher priority on serving class interests than we do on objective truth, and be justified in so doing. Someone might think this is good bolshevism, but it is such flagrant intellectual dishonesty that it does Marx no credit to associate him with it.

If Marx's usage is based on arguments like this one, however, then it is based on a mistake. For the argument confuses the grounds on which an individual may hold a true belief, and which may render the belief knowledge for that individual, with the explanation which a historical materialist might give for the fact that a certain truth has come to be widely known. The historical materialist might explain the

fact that some true doctrine (such as historical materialism) has come to be widely known by the way in which its coming to be known serves the class interests of the proletariat. His explanation might (in effect) take the form of showing how the development of proletarian class consciousness involves their coming to attend to this truth for the first time, and the removal of ideological obstacles to their clear and objective perception of it (obstacles such as the cultural indoctrination of the masses by religion, historical idealism, and other superstitions.) Historical materialists who did explain the social prevalence of historical materialism in this way might, without the least intellectual dishonesty, be explicitly aware of all the following things: (1) that their own acceptance of historical materialism is justified on purely objective grounds; (2) that the acceptance of historical materialism by people like themselves serves the class interest of the proletariat; and (3) that (2) explains the widespread acceptance of historical materialism, even (4) that without the proletarian movement they themselves would probably never have come to know that historical materialism is true. For such historical materialists, historical materialism would be functional ideology, but also objective historical science, and not ideological illusion. It is, moreover, quite reasonable to think that Marx regards himself as just such a historical materialist.

Many writers lay stress on the alleged fact that for Marx ideology and science are mutually exclusive, and they make this thesis axiomatic for their interpretation of Marx's concept of ideology. As we have just seen, these writers may be largely justified by the actual usage of Marx and Engels, but their view is belied on a deeper level by the role which the concept of ideology has to play in historical materialism. A few of these writers have even gone so far as to conclude that for Marx 'science' (as a general department of social life) must be treated simply as a 'productive power', apparently on the ground that there is no other place where it can be consistently fit into Marx's scheme.<sup>14</sup> Of course science can be considered as a productive power insofar as scientific knowledge contributes to society's capacity to produce. But this does not prevent science from also being a form of social consciousness, and even an ideology. I see no adequate textual basis for saying that for Marx 'it is a defining property of ideology that it is unscientific.'<sup>15</sup>

Historical idealism, of course, cannot be science, for the simple reason that Marxian historical science knows it to be a false doctrine. But there is no reason why science cannot serve class interests (as

Marx obviously supposes a materialist science of history serves the interests of the proletariat).<sup>16</sup> Hence there is no reason why science may not be functional ideology. But there is also no reason why science may not be ideological illusion, or at least contain significant elements of ideological illusion.

Darwin's theory of natural selection is obviously regarded by both Marx and Engels as an epoch-making contribution to natural science. Yet they also see in it some clear evidence of bourgeois ideological illusions: 'It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes again among beasts and plants his own English society with its division of labor, competition, opening up of new markets, "inventions" and the Malthusian "struggle for existence".'<sup>17</sup> Perhaps no ideological illusion, *qua* illusion, is science. But genuine science for Marx may be closely allied to and intertwined with ideological illusion (as Darwinian biology is with detestable Malthusian superstitions). In any case, there is obviously nothing to prevent science, in any usual sense of the term, from being ignorant of its own historical materialist foundations. From this point of view, there is no basis for any distinction between ideology and science which precludes one and the same intellectual contribution from being simultaneously a genuine part of a living scientific theory and also a functioning ideological illusion.