

On Voluntary Servitude and the Theory of Ideology

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In 1996 I published *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*,¹ a book on which I had been working for a number of years. The theory of ideology, as I understood it, seemed to me to be – or, at least, to have been until recently – the dominant response to what is a puzzling but frequently observed feature of political life: namely, that those who are maltreated – oppressed, exploited, even enslaved – do not always reject that treatment. As Wilhelm Reich puts it: “What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike.”² My argument is that, although the problem identified by Reich is a genuine one, the solution offered by the theory of ideology is fundamentally unsatisfactory. In this article, I propose to present briefly what I take to be *On Voluntary Servitude*'s main theses and to respond to some of the critical reactions that I have had from readers, either personally or in the form of reviews.

Defining Ideology

The way that I think of ideology has two elements. In the first place, for me, to speak of a phenomenon as ideological is to say of it that it is, in some very broad sense, “false.” I put the term false in inverted commas and enter the rider immediately that what is false is not to be

¹ (Cambridge: Polity Press and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

² Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. V. R. Carpanano (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975)

assumed to be confined to the narrowly propositional realm. (If you are uncomfortable with extending the term “false” in this way, then another word here might be “defective.”) Leaving that issue to the side for the moment, it follows from my adherence to the idea of ideology as false consciousness that ideology for me is ineliminably a critical concept, involving a contrast between the forms of consciousness that agents actually have, and the way that the theory claims that they ought to judge, feel, or perceive. But, although ideology is always, I think, in some sense “false consciousness,” that is not the end of the story: there are all sorts of mistakes and false beliefs, but not all of them are ideological. So false consciousness is at most a necessary, but not a sufficient, part of the definition of ideology.

What further elements must enter the definition? The obvious suggestion would be that ideological consciousness is false consciousness that is in some way related to politics. But this is not precise enough to be a sufficient condition: it depends on the character of the relation. It would be wrong, for example, to think that false consciousness is ideological just because it has consequences for political life (the belief that comets presaged misfortune had substantial political consequences, but that fact alone is not enough to make the belief ideological). Nor, for that matter, is it enough for a piece of false consciousness to have political causes for it to be ideological. Perhaps the stinginess of the government means that our knowledge in certain areas of science are seriously deficient (our knowledge of the causes of BSE would be a pertinent example for the United Kingdom). But that doesn't make the false scientific beliefs we now have ideological. The thought behind the concept of ideology in my view is that ideology is false consciousness that plays a systematic role in sustaining a certain social order. The definition of ideology that this leads to and from which I work might be summed up in Adorno's admirably

succinct phrase: ideology, he says, is “*notwendig falsches Bewußtsein*” (“necessary false consciousness”).³

This definition, however, requires specification; in fact, all three of the terms require further analysis.

Necessary Ideological false consciousness cannot be simply necessary in the sense of being the result of a predictable causal process (after all, what isn't?). Ideology is necessary in the sense of being a part of a systematic social process. How this systematic character is to be understood is itself questionable, but the most natural interpretation of the idea is a functionalist one, according to which it is true not just that (i) ideology sustains a social order, but (ii) the presence of ideology is explained by the fact *that* it sustains that social order. In other words, society is viewed as a self-maintaining system – like an organism. The presence of the forms of consciousness that sustain the social system is, from the point of view of the system, not just a lucky accident.

False As indicated above, it is not just a matter of ideology failing to correspond to the way that things are. In fact, the falsehood of false consciousness might not even involve such a failure: ideological beliefs (odd though it may seem) might actually be true. Consider a belief that happens to be true but that is held for reasons that have nothing to do with what, to our knowledge, makes it true. For example, a society without a developed scientific astronomy might hold the belief that the earth goes around the sun because they identify the sun with their ruler and the earth with his subjects. In that case, their belief that the earth goes around the sun is at

³ T.W. Adorno, “Ideologie,” in *Soziologische Exkurse* (Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1974), 169.

least a candidate for being ideological, despite being true. Although the belief is true, it is held for the wrong reasons.

Cases like these are much simpler to construct if one sticks to the realm of beliefs, but philosophers addressing real-world issues should always, I think, remember that the most striking philosophical examples do not always correspond to the most important problems for an empirically plausible theory. Certainly, for the theory of ideology, it seems very unlikely that ideology is primarily a matter of practically relevant, factual (or would-be factual) belief. It is much more likely that ideology is a matter of value beliefs, forms of cultural expression, or even (as Althusser and others have claimed) structures of selfhood. In that case, then, the question arises in what sense such things can be described as “false consciousness.” If we say that such forms of consciousness are defective, then where does the standard come from against which they are compared? It seems to me that the key notion here is that of “interests.” If values, cultural forms, or selves are to be said to be false or defective, then this must be with respect to the way in which we think that it would be *good*, *right*, or *proper*, for the agents to think, feel or be; in other words, their actual consciousness goes against their interests.

Consciousness I choose this term because it leaves open what areas of human existence ideology applies to. “Consciousness” refers to all levels of thought, from basic attitudes and values to reflectively held beliefs and well-articulated theories. (Even the term “consciousness” may be thought to be too restrictive. Althusser objects that ideology is not a matter of consciousness but of the unconscious. I have no difficulty with the idea of accepting that unconscious beliefs – if there are such things – would be potential cases of “false consciousness.”) *On Voluntary Servitude* is, generally speaking, highly critical of the theory of ideology, and so my strategy was

to try to be as inclusive as possible in my definition of it. Some authors have restricted ideology, for instance, to legitimating narratives which claim to be true. It follows from such a definition that art, for example, could not be ideological from the sheer fact that it lacks an explanatory narrative structure. I think that this is the sort of question that should be settled as a matter of substantive argument, not closed off by the definition of ideology itself.

There are, of course, many other definitions of ideology, but I would claim that my definition has the virtue of clarity – clarity, I mean, not in the sense that it is especially easy to grasp and to apply, but in the more profound sense that it captures, I believe, a clear point for the concept of ideology. A looser definition of ideology as, say, a systematic body of thought related to politics, or even (as seemed to be many people’s tacit definition of ideology thirty or forty years ago) as a systematic body of thought related to politics of which the writer strongly disapproves, is, of course, possible. But, so far as the construction of social theory with real explanatory power goes, I think it is obvious that such definitions are useless. My definition not only shows the concept of ideology to have an explanatory point, but it does so – and this, I think, is its second virtue – in a way that corresponds to the historical career of the concept – specifically (although I shall not argue the matter here) to the role it plays in the thought of Karl Marx and in those influenced by Marxism.

That explanatory point, as I take it, is to offer a certain kind of explanation of an obvious and puzzling fact about political life, namely, that apparently illegitimate, unjust and oppressive regimes manage to remain stable. What is puzzling is that such regimes are, typically, operated by and in the interests of a very few people, such that the oppressed majority could, one would think, easily overthrow the rulers. And yet they very frequently do not. The reason, the theory of

ideology says, is because the ruled accept the legitimacy of the rulers, even though it is against their own interests to do so. (That is the “false consciousness” part of the explanation.) What is more, according to the theory of ideology, the ruled accept this legitimacy not because they have been tricked or duped by conscious effort or propaganda on the part of the rulers, but because there is something about the structure of society that leads to the production of the “false consciousness” that the society “needs” for its survival (that is the “necessary” part of the explanation.)

As I said above, I do not want to assume that the theory of ideology is committed to any particular method by which this acceptance takes place, so when I say that an oppressive or unjust society is seen as legitimate, I do not mean that there is some positive, accepted account of its legitimation. On the contrary, it seems to me that, if there is ideology, then it is much more plausible to suppose that it takes a fragmented, negative form: that it reflects the *absence* of a common consciousness of shared interests on the part of the oppressed rather than their adherence to a “dominant ideology.”

Epistemological Criticisms

In general, I am not convinced that the epistemological criticisms of the theory of ideology, so far as I understand them, present insuperable difficulties. I might mention first the objection that the idea of “false consciousness” presupposes a realist epistemology of the sort that in our brave (or is it exhausted?) new postmodern world is simply untenable. I don’t accept that objection. For one thing, I do not think that the arguments against realism in epistemology have been made conclusively. But, however that may be, I think that the realism/anti-realism issue in epistemology is beside the point when it comes to the theory of ideology. Certainly, if the theory

of ideology as I construe it is valid, then there has to be a contrast between “true” and “false” consciousness, so it might seem that a postmodernist approach that calls the concept of truth into question would have destructive implications for the theory. But, in my view, the postmodernist criticism of truth is less corrosive than it seems, for anti-realists do not deny that we are entitled to discriminate between propositions, and that is all the commitment to the notion of truth that the theory of ideology needs.

Anti-realists are often faced with objections such as the following: “So, then, you don’t believe that there’s a difference between obviously true propositions – say, ‘Paris is south of London’ – and obviously false ones – say, ‘Paris is south of Rome.’” To which the anti-realist – Rorty is a very good example of this – responds: “Certainly not! I don’t deny that there’s a difference between such propositions; what I deny is that the *reason* why the two propositions differ is because one corresponds to the one true world while the other doesn’t.” In other words, the anti-realist is not taking issue with our right to call this or that proposition true, but with the account that we give of what it is that we are doing *when* we say of something that it is true or not. Now if this is what anti-realists are concerned about, then it does not present any particular threat to the theory of ideology. What is at stake in the theory of ideology is not a certain view about the status of truth or falsehood, but, quite simply, that certain views are to be counted as true or false. The fact that anti-realists question our adherence to an emphatic notion of truth does not mean that, for practical purposes, they give up the discrimination of beliefs into true and false and, for the theory of ideology, that is all that is needed.

A second epistemological criticism is rather older. It runs as follows. Granted that we might, in principle, make some sort of distinction between true and false consciousness; what entitles the theorist of ideology to assume that he or she stands on the vantage-point of truth and

enlightenment so that they know better than the individual agent in question what consciousness that agent *ought* to have? In other words, doesn't the theory of ideology assume some kind of privileged access to truth on the part of the ideology-theorist? This position is frequently associated with what one might call a framework epistemology. In outline, those who hold to a framework epistemology argue as follows:

- (1) Our engagement with the world is never direct, but always mediated through a framework of concepts – to that extent, Kant was, broadly speaking, right.
- (2) These concepts are not, however, as Kant thought, timeless or culturally invariable. They are, in fact, the product of collective interests.
- (3) Thus the search for objectivity (and hence the transcendence of ideology) requires a disinterested standpoint, not in the sense of our standing outside the framework of concepts altogether (this would be impossible) but in the sense of overcoming the limitations caused by concepts which embody partial or sectional interests.

Something like this position can be found in many twentieth-century neo-Marxist writings, most notably, perhaps, in Lukács's *History and Class-Consciousness* and Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interests*. For Lukács, it is the mark of Marxist theory that it can claim just such an epistemological privilege, privilege that comes from occupying the standpoint of the proletariat – the universal class that stands for the abolition of classes, the true subject-object of history, and so on. Yet, if one gives up those industrial-strength Marxist claims, how can the theorist of ideology be sure that he or she is right and those to whom he or she ascribes false consciousness wrong?

The first part of my response to that difficulty is simply to reject the framework epistemology that motivates it. This is not to endorse some kind of naive realism instead or to

deny that interests can distort our engagement with the world. But what I am not persuaded by is the image of our concepts as if they were like a set of transcendental spectacles, inaccessible to us but nevertheless distorting our cognitive activity. This seems to me to be simply a philosophical myth (or, as Wittgenstein would call it, a “picture”).

If I am right about this, then objectivity does not *require* a particular, privileged vantage-point. But in the absence of such a vantage-point it has to be admitted that there is no guarantee of objectivity either. The claims made by the theory of ideology are potentially very bold: they involve saying of those whom the theorist studies that he or she knows better than they do in some respect. That is not distinctive of the theory of ideology, however. In fact, it is characteristic of the whole range of what the Frankfurt School call “critical” theories, not just Marxist or neo-Marxist ones. So, to take the most obvious example, Freudianism presupposes a similar distinction between what the agent thinks and what he or she ought to think. It seems to me that, however cautious one ought to be in practice, there is no reason in principle not to allow this sort of claim and the best argument in its favor is that we make such distinctions in relation to our own selves naturally and inevitably: we take up an attitude towards ourselves according to which we judge that we were right to think (or feel) so-and-so, wrong to think such-and-such. Of course, if we make such judgements about ourselves, and even more so if we make them about others, we are under an obligation to justify the judgement. But it does not seem to me to be impossible for the theory of ideology (or psychoanalysis, or any other critical theory) to do just that.

Ontological Objections

I think that ontology (the question of what sorts of entities a theory takes to be basic) is a matter of fundamental importance – and great difficulty – for social theory in general and for the theory of ideology in particular. The problem appears in the form of that old philosophers’ bugbear: individualism versus holism. The issue affects the way that one interprets the theory of ideology’s claim that certain forms of consciousness are systematically necessary in relation to a given society.

G.A. Cohen makes a remark in his *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense* that seems to me to be of exceptional significance. He writes:

The background against which consequence explanation is offered in biology or anthropology or economics is a conception of species or societies or economic units as self-maintaining and self-advancing...⁴

By “consequence explanation,” Cohen means to refer to those functional explanations in which we explain something as having come about because of the consequences that it has (so, in the theory of ideology, we say that a certain kind of false consciousness exists *because* it tends to the preservation of the social order). Now, as Cohen says, we have no difficulty attributing such explanations to biological organisms (the owl eats the mouse because eating it is good for the owl’s survival) because biological organisms are, we are agreed, basic, self-maintaining entities. On the other hand, we also use such explanations in relation to species (the giraffe has a long neck because long necks are good for the giraffe’s survival in enabling it to get at otherwise inaccessible leaves). Yet a species is, at best, a pseudo-entity, a hypostatized collective identity attributed to the myriad individual giraffes. How on earth could such a thing be said to be “self-

maintaining”? But there is, of course, no problem here. As Cohen explains, what makes the functional claim about the species “giraffe” true is an explanatory story about the way in which individual giraffes breed selectively, subject to environmental pressures. Cohen calls this justificatory underpinning for the idea of species as self-maintaining an “elaborating explanation.”

The dilemma for the theory of ideology is this: is society to be thought of as self-maintaining directly, in the way that a single biological organism is? In that case there is no need for a further elaborating explanation to justify our attributing functional explanations to it. On the other hand, if society is more like a species, then any attribution of functional explanations to it must be underpinned by an explanation framed in terms of facts about the individuals who compose it, just as the explanation of the form taken by the species “giraffe” was underpinned by facts about individual giraffes.

Cohen takes this latter, individualist, position. What troubled me first is that there seems to be no obvious, independent way to decide the issue. Does one just have to sign up with one side or the other? What would count as an argument one way or the other? To this question I do have an answer, although it is rather complex. Unlike Cohen and the other “analytical Marxists,” I do not think that one should reject holism automatically as somehow “unscientific.” But nor do I think that theories can be allowed to “write their own ticket” when it comes to what entities they invoke as basic. What should determine things, I believe, is whether a “generous” or “rich” ontology allows good explanations that would not be possible with a more parsimonious account of reality.

⁴ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 264.

So I think that the philosophical issue – what should figure in the ontology of social explanation? – has an empirical or, if you will, evidential basis: does it lead to good explanations that other theories could not match? It is here, I think, that the real weakness of the theory of ideology is apparent. For it simply is not clear that societies *do*, as a rule, produce the consciousness required for their preservation. Nor has the Marxist got an elaborating explanation to point to analogous to the Darwinian/Mendelian account of genetic variation and natural selection that sustains our account of the evolution of species.

Of course, it is always open to the Marxist to argue along the following lines:

(1) Contemporary societies are capitalist; hence exploitative; hence oppressive.

(2) But they are accepted by their members.

(3) Therefore those members must suffer from false consciousness,
and it is reasonable to assume that

(4) that false consciousness is not accidental, but is a product of the societies in question.

Yet the *a priori* character of this argument begs an immense number of questions. Even if we grant premise (1), the move from the conjunction of propositions (1) and (2) to (3) is highly dubious, and so too is the move from (3) to (4).

To sum up, then, I started by dividing the theory of ideology into two parts: the claim that oppressive societies are pervaded by false consciousness, and the claim that such false consciousness is “necessary” in the sense that societies are such as to produce the consciousness that they, as systems, “need.” In my view, the problems for the theory of ideology do not lie in the notion of false consciousness as such, but in the other part of its central claim: the claim that consciousness is systematically determined by society in such a way as to correspond to society’s

need for self-preservation. To put it bluntly, I do not think that there is any good evidence for thinking that this claim is true.

Still, it can be argued that ideology is not really so mysterious. Rulers, after all, quite naturally form ideas that are in their own interests. What is more, they also control the central organs by which ideas are disseminated in any given society. So it is not surprising, surely, that ideas that are in the rulers' interests should come to dominate.

I think that this is an interesting and quite revealing position often taken by Marxists (and not without foundation in Marx's own texts, *The German Ideology* in particular). I say "revealing" because it draws attention, I think, to a duality in Marxist thinking that is often missed. On the one hand, Marxism adheres to what one might call a broadly pragmatic account of the formation of ideas: in general, ideas are the product of interests. It is this that explains how the ruling class comes to hold ideas that incorporate its interests. Yet, when it comes to the classes over whom rule is exercised, this claim appears to have been suspended or at least overridden in favor of the claim that "the ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas" – that, as Marx claims:

the class which is the ruling *material* force of a society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.⁵

In other words, the members of the ruling class are pictured as independently producing ideas that are in their own interests, whereas those over whom rule is exercised are supposed to take their ideas passively from organs and social institutions ("the means of mental production") that

are outside their own control. Certainly, if this were true, it would undercut a central part of the problem of ideology. It does not seem to me to be either theoretically problematic or empirically implausible to think that those who benefit from a social system should spontaneously come to form ideas that embody their interest in that system's continuation; the real problem is why on earth those ideas should then be accepted by those who lose out.

The Use of History

All of this conceptual argument may seem to be somewhat at odds with my approach in *On Voluntary Servitude*, where I spend a great deal of space digging into the background of the idea of false consciousness and of the idea of society as a system – what one might call the pre-history of the concept of ideology. Those excursions were not intended merely to satisfy historical curiosity or to form an entertaining backdrop to theoretical argument. Rather, it seems to me that in philosophy, even when all the rigorous arguments are in – the analytical distinctions have been made, the logical incompatibilities have been eliminated, the necessary and sufficient conditions identified, and so on – we often end up without a single, determinate conclusion. On the contrary, we may find ourselves left with more than one position, clearly distinct and logically incompatible, each of which is coherent and compatible with the facts as we know them. It is here, I think, that history can play a role.

For philosophical argument is not just, I think, “hard” proving or refuting in the manner of logic or mathematics. There is also argument in the sense of the search for (as Mill marvellously puts it when he discusses the proof of the principle of utility) “considerations

⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970) 64.

capable of determining the intellect to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine.”⁶ How can history help to further this process? In the first place, it can do so simply by de-naturalizing a presupposition or way of thinking that had become taken for granted. If philosophy (as philosophers from Plato to Wittgenstein have thought) requires a recalling to mind of something known but not reflected upon, how better to encourage that than by setting ourselves the task of coming to terms with the thought of those in whose mental make-up it plays no part? Of course, that does not prove that we are wrong to accept whatever it is that we now take for granted. But in making our presuppositions salient in this way, we take at least a first step towards calling them into question.

The role of history does not end there, however. For history can explore not just when an idea came to be held but also, to some extent, why. And if it is the case that we can show that a certain idea forms part of a way of seeing the world that appeals not purely on cognitive grounds but because it is in some other way attractive or consoling, then that is a reason at the least to treat the idea in question with mistrust. People may object that this involves the “genetic fallacy” – a confusion of the issue of the origins of an idea with that of its validity – but I do not think that this is so. Certainly, it would be fallacious to suppose that the motives for holding an idea, however dubious, could ever be sufficient to disprove it. But that is not what is at stake here. It seems to me entirely reasonable to regard the reasons for someone holding an idea to be relevant in assessing that idea when neither logic nor empirical evidence provide independently compelling grounds for or against it. If the only reason that you have for believing something is that it cheers you up to believe it, then you should, I think, distrust your belief.

⁶ J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Fontana, 1971), 255.

What I was trying to do by means of the historical account I gave in *On Voluntary Servitude* was not entirely dissimilar (though, no doubt, far less original or convincing) to what Nietzsche undertook in *The Birth of Tragedy* or Hans Blumenberg in a whole range of writings but especially in his famous *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*; namely, to try to show that certain notions that seem on the face of it entirely secular and rational play a role within a structure of thought which renders the world acceptable by making it (apparently) rationally intelligible.

I wanted to call into question two notions in particular that inform the theory of ideology in its classical form. The first is the role played by what I call the “rationalist” conception of the self in informing traditional ways of thinking about false consciousness, Marx’s own included; the second is the idea of society as an organism or self-maintaining system. Both of these are instances of “background beliefs” – historically embedded conceptions that came to be taken for granted at a deep level and over a long period of time for reasons that were not purely rational or scientific.

This approach may seem to lead to a certain irony. For while I am deeply critical of the prejudices that inform the theory of ideology, my own criticisms are aimed not just at their theoretical content but at their social and perhaps even emotional roots. Is this not to apply a theory of ideology in criticism of the theory of ideology? Obviously, to adopt a theory and then use it in criticism of itself would be circular. But that is not (I hope) what I was doing in *On Voluntary Servitude*. The theory of ideology, on the definition that I have given, claims that false consciousness is necessary in the sense of being the product of a self-maintaining system. If we are prepared to describe all consoling world-views as “ideology,” we are using the term in a broader, less focused way. I would prefer to keep the use of the term “ideology” narrow.

Twentieth-century Variations

By limiting ideology to the belief in necessary false consciousness and associating the latter with the view of society as a self-maintaining system, it may seem that I restrict myself to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theorists of ideology. It is true that I discuss rather few twentieth-century authors in *On Voluntary Servitude*. Partly, that is explained by considerations of space. But there are more substantive reasons. I think that many of the twentieth-century authors who figure most prominently in the discussion of ideology do indeed – superficial appearances to the contrary – draw on the traditional view of society as a self-maintaining system. But they do this not by arguing explicitly for the claim so much as by starting from it as an unquestioned assumption. Let me give two examples. Here is a (longish) quotation from Althusser:

I can now answer the central question which I have left in suspense for many long pages: *how is the reproduction of the relations of production secured?*...

The role of the repressive State apparatus, in so far as it is a repressive apparatus, consists essentially in securing by force (physical or otherwise) the political conditions of the reproduction of relations of production which are in the last resort *relations of exploitation*. Not only does the State apparatus contribute generously to its own reproduction (the capitalist State contains political dynasties, military dynasties, etc.), but also and above all, the State apparatus secures by repression (from the most brutal physical force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship) the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses.

In fact, it is the latter which largely secure the reproduction specifically of the relations of production, behind a ‘shield’ provided by the repressive State apparatus. It is here that the role of the ruling ideology is heavily concentrated, the ideology of the ruling class, which holds State power. It is the intermediation of the ruling ideology that ensures a (sometimes teeth-gritting)

‘harmony’ between the repressive State apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses, and between the different State Ideological Apparatuses.⁷

Here now is another quotation, this time from Jürgen Habermas:

According to Marx, the critique of political economy was the theory of bourgeois society only as critique of *ideology*. If, however, the ideology of just exchange disintegrates, then the power structure can no longer be criticized *immediately* at the level of the relations of production.

With the collapse of this ideology, political power requires a new legitimation. Now since the power indirectly exercised over the exchange process is itself operating under political control and state regulation, legitimation can no longer be derived from the unpolitical order constituted by the relations of production. To this extent, the requirement for direct legitimation, which exists in precapitalist societies, reappears. On the other hand, the resuscitation of immediate political domination (in the traditional form of legitimation on the basis of cosmological world views) has become impossible... Hence the ideology of free exchange is replaced by a substitute programme.⁸

Now it seems to me that both of these quotations show evidence of what I would describe as a *tacit* commitment to the idea of society as a self-reproducing system. Note that Althusser asks the question: “How is the reproduction of the relations of production secured?” That is to say, he assumes (big assumption!) *that* the reproduction of the relations of production is, as a matter of fact, secured. The only question that he deigns to ask is: “How?” What role do different institutions play in this process? Althusser’s discussion thus takes place entirely *within* the assumptions of the theory of ideology as traditionally conceived, to my mind, rather than offering critical reflection on them or a rethinking of the theory’s foundations and so, for me, its interest is very limited. Likewise – from a wholly different philosophical background – Habermas. Habermas speaks of political power “requiring” a legitimation; and he goes on to claim that it is

⁷ L. Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” reprinted in T. Eagleton, ed., *Ideology* (London: Longman, 1994), 93-4.

just in consequence of this requirement that, with the demise of capitalist ideology in its classic form, a new form of legitimation appears on the scene (“Hence the ideology of free exchange is replaced by a substitute programme.”) In other words, the capitalist system is tacitly assumed to be such as to have the power to generate the consciousness that its survival needs. Once again, I think, it is clear that Habermas, like Althusser, is taking over – without anything so useful as a supporting argument – the dogmatic claims of Marxism. It would have struck readers as unconstructive, I think, to give a large section of my book over to pointing out this kind of intellectual inadequacy. Better, surely, to look at those authors who have at least tried to give a supporting account for the theory of ideology’s ontology, rather than documenting the absence of argument in those celebrated figures who have simply helped themselves to its doctrines.

Nor is this true only of neo-Marxists. While it may appear reasonable to look for the renewal of the theory of ideology from outside the Marxist tradition, for example among structuralists and post-structuralists who might be expected to reject the image of society as some kind of organism or collective agent, I have found this generally not to be the case. It is true, of course, that Foucault, for example, rejects the official doctrines of Marxist orthodoxy – the progressive replacement of one mode of production by another in response to the continuous expansion of productive forces. Although it is very difficult to criticize Foucault, given the cavalier and haphazard way in which he introduces concepts and asserts theses without making precise their scope or logical consequences, I think it is apparent, nevertheless, that some of his fundamental assumptions fall very much within the ambit of the theory of ideology as traditionally conceived. Take the following programmatic statement:

⁸ J. Habermas, *Technology and Science as Ideology*, in Eagleton, *Ideology*, 192.

My problem is...this: what rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth? Or alternatively, what type of power is susceptible of producing discourses of truth that in a society such as ours are endowed with such potent effects? What I mean is this: in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. This is the case for every society, but I believe that in ours the relationship between power, right and truth is organised in a highly specific fashion. If I were to characterise, not its mechanism itself, but its intensity and constancy, I would say that we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function: we *must* speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or to discover the truth. Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit. In the last analysis, we must produce truth as we must produce wealth, indeed we must produce truth in order to produce wealth in the first place. In another way, we are also subjected to truth in the sense in which it is truth that makes the laws, that produces the true discourse which, at least partially, decides, transmits and itself extends upon the effects of power. In the end, we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of specific effects of power.⁹

Clearly Foucault has substituted his idea of the “relations of power” for the relations of production as the underlying social reality in the Marxist schema (not, I should say, gaining in precision thereby – Foucault is simply equivocal as to whether power is, like Nietzsche’s *Wille zur Macht*, some kind of free-floating seminal impulse or whether it is something subsidiary to agents, that they themselves can be said to “exercise”). Yet alongside this there is, once again, a glib assertion of an extreme form of functionalism (“we are *forced to produce* the truth of power

⁹ M. Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in C. Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 78-108, 93-4.

that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function”). Of course, Foucault has, equally casually, thrown away the classical notion of truth – there are only “discourses of truth,” not true discourses – so it follows that he cannot have a theory of false consciousness. But he does have an extremely strong (and typically unargued-for) account of the social determination of consciousness. In my view, he has thereby retained the worst parts of the theory of ideology: combining a thoroughly anti-individualistic account of the nature of thought – a vision of thinkers as transcendently constrained by discursive structures that they cannot hope to reflect on critically or to escape – with a sociology of knowledge according to which those structures are functionally determined in relation to an entity – “power” – for which not the slightest empirical specification is given. To top it off, there is the blithe assumption that (skepticism about truth notwithstanding) he, Foucault, occupies an epistemologically privileged external vantage-point from which these “discourses of truth” become no more than so many empirical facts to be unproblematically observed and analyzed. I find it difficult to see this as much of an intellectual advance.

Does the Theory of Ideology have a Future?

In conclusion, we might ask whether the theory of ideology has (that is to say, ought to have) a future. If we mean by this the theory of ideology in the classic form discussed in this article, my answer is simply “no.” But it is possible, I think, to be more constructive by distinguishing between, on the one hand, the question of compliance and, on the other, that of false consciousness or political irrationality.

As far as the question of compliance goes, I would want to make the point that it does not have to be true that the oppressed actually *accept* the legitimacy of the existing social order not to

rebel against it. It may be that they are like a group of hostages held by a lone gunman. Each hostage may know that, if all of the hostages were to pool their resources, they could overcome the gunman, but they cannot find a way to do so. In other words, their compliance is the result of a co-ordination problem, not an irrational acceptance of oppression.

Having said that, it would be wrong to dismiss the significance of false consciousness or what one can call, very broadly, the irrational in politics. On the contrary. It seems to me that one of the principal weaknesses of contemporary liberal political theory is the way in which it has gone along with the meliorist assumptions of the nineteenth century: the idea that human beings are becoming increasingly rational and moderate and are capable of being governed by appeals to self-interest alone rather than requiring the control of potentially destructive passions. This shows up, for example, in the way in which liberal political thought concentrates so heavily on establishing a framework of just institutions, to the exclusion of questions regarding the character and personalities of those who live within them. Early liberal thinkers, like Mill, did not neglect the issue of character, but they assumed that the establishment of just and free institutions would be sufficient to produce healthy and sociable individuals. In consequence, the study of socially significant irrationality was hived off to the anthropologists and the cultural historians – assumed to be part of primitive, mythical world-views, now superseded. It seems to me that one of the sad lessons of the twentieth century is that the connection between liberal institutions and civilized character is not as easy or automatic as the meliorist liberals thought.

A plausible successor to the theory of ideology should, in my opinion, develop itself in the space between two alternative views. Let me call these respectively “pathology” and “pay-off.” By pathology I mean the idea that human beings are just ineliminably, in consequence of their nature, irrational. To some degree (and on some understanding of that slippery term

“irrational”) that may well be true: we do not always reason – much less act – in an ideal way. But simply to see political irrationality as an innate pathology of the human psyche is to neglect how wildly irrationality has varied, both in form and degree, in human societies.

The alternative has commonly been to see irrationality as something that pays off, a form of false consciousness that is adopted for reasons of self-interest (Freud is the great pioneer here); in other words, irrationality is the product of a fundamental conflict between rationality and self-interest in which the latter wins out at the former’s expense. The trouble with this is that, in most cases one can think of, rationality and self-interest coincide, at least in the long term. It may make me feel better to believe that the roulette wheel will come to rest on whatever number I choose, but it would be wildly imprudent to rely on that as a prediction. This is a point, of course, that the theory of ideology has always appreciated: if illusions are to be widespread enough to have a substantial and durable effect on society, then they have to work well enough at least to be able to survive. Both pathology and pay-off must play an important part in the explanation of political irrationality, in my opinion, but they do not tell the whole story, and it is in the space left between them that the successor to the theory of ideology should, in my view, be developed.

To reject the idea that political irrationality has been eliminated, once and for all, by liberal democratic capitalism, does not mean that we should identify the modern world as the continuation of a form of *pensée sauvage*. The authors I find most fruitful – Nietzsche and Blumenberg, as I mentioned earlier; Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*; Paul Tillich’s *The Socialist Decision* (a most undeservedly neglected work); my own teacher, Charles Taylor – all have in common that they want to explore modern forms of consciousness as something distinctive. One could say that all of these authors give an account of false consciousness as part of a historically specific attempt on the part of individuals to make sense of

their situation. The work that I hope to do myself in the future falls within the same kind of enterprise. I intend to develop the account that I gave in *On Voluntary Servitude* of the way in which Western conceptions of selfhood have been dominated by what I call “rationalism” – the idea that, for the self to be fulfilled, mature and happy, the rational aspect of the self must be in control of its sensuous nature and desires. I take it that rationalism is a fact not just about the way in which the self has been analyzed by philosophers, but, more importantly, about the way in which people understand themselves and hence (for, as Taylor very properly reminds us, humans are self-interpreting beings) about the way they are. To explore this issue is not, I think, to engage in the theory of ideology as traditionally understood, but it certainly amounts to an exercise in critical theory in the Frankfurt School’s sense: to criticize the rationalist account of the self is to describe how the self is from the vantage-point of how it could be.

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