

# 1. Marxism versus Marx: what Marx's theory of ideology was not

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## 1.1 Introduction

The aim of this book is to show that it is possible to construct a coherent version of what Marx's theory of ideas could have been if he had developed it more fully, had been more self-critical, and had our advantages of hindsight. And I hope to show, too, that the result is still worth taking seriously as a theory. The construction must be based on foundations whose traces are scattered throughout his works. So the first task is to clear the site, by removing unwanted structures that generations of Marxists have erected on these same foundations for various textual, ideological and political reasons. In this chapter I identify fourteen interpretations which, originating with Marxists, have been widely read back into Marx – in my view, mistakenly. These ideas were either not necessarily Marx's, or necessarily not Marx's. They are listed at the end (1.5) and some readers may wish to start the book there, or else use the list as a menu for a selective reading of this chapter.

These interpretations have generally been presented as versions of Marx's theories of 'ideology' or 'social consciousness', so I shall consider them as such. These are indeed central categories of Marx's theory of ideas, but they do not exhaust it, as will become clear later. Also, in asserting what Marx's theory was *not*, I am obliged to anticipate to some extent my conclusions as to what it was, for which arguments will only appear later. The reader is asked to take these assertions on trust until their credentials are presented.

Marxists diverged from Marx on this subject partly because at his death in 1883 his published allusions to ideology were scanty and unsystematic. They contained no definition of 'ideology' itself. The nearest thing to a systematic exposition was the unpublished manuscript of *The German*

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*Ideology*, written in 1845–6. This was in the possession of Engels, its co-author, and was read by Bernstein, Kautsky and others but was not published in full until 1932. In his published political writings Marx used the words 'ideology', 'ideological' and 'ideologists' sparingly but suggestively, though also rather loosely. His readers might have gathered that to call an idea ideological was to claim that it was, in the words of a recent commentator, 'social in origin, illusory in content, and serving class interests', that it was unscientific, and that its validity was vitiated by its being 'relative to a particular mode of production and particular class interests'.<sup>1</sup> But the theoretical justification for most of this was lacking.

Nor was it provided in Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* of 1859 (hereafter *Preface*), which was taken to be the canonical statement of historical materialism. This made no reference to classes or a connection between ideology and class interest. But it did contain the phrase 'ideological forms', suggesting that the term 'ideology' was of theoretical importance for Marx. It also indicated that historical materialism included far-reaching theses about the economic conditioning of ideas and the social determination of consciousness: 'The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.'<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in the *Preface* the phrase 'ideological forms' appeared alongside the related phrase 'forms of social consciousness', and the dependence of social consciousness on economic relations was taken up in both the *Critique* and the first volume of *Capital*. In the section of Chapter 1 dealing with 'The Fetishism of Commodities', Marx attributed basic errors in political economy to illusions about economic life induced by a market economy, and he returned to this theme in the chapter on 'The Trinity Formula' in Volume III and in *Theories of Surplus Value*.

Thus the words 'ideology' and 'social consciousness' marked a significant gap in Marxist theory, which interpreters hurried to fill after Marx's death. Engels was the first, in his book *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1888) and in correspondence with German Marxists in the 1890s. He thereby became the founder of the orthodox theory of ideology in the Marxism of the Second International.

<sup>1</sup> Lukes 1985, 3.

<sup>2</sup> CPE, 263.

## 1.2 Engels and the Marxism of the Second International

Like Marx, Engels used what has become known as the 'negative', i.e. pejorative or critical, concept of ideology. That is, the definition of 'ideology', for Marx and Engels, contained at least these two elements: it denoted thought that (a) is not scientific, and (b) makes truth-claims of a general nature that are somehow defective, vitiated by delusions or bias. Moreover both authors explained the epistemic defectiveness of ideology by the influence of social causes, and held that ideology serves class interests. But within this framework of agreement, Engels made two influential new departures – although he did not think of them as such, and it is not always appreciated that they were. First, he defined ideology in terms of a certain kind of 'false consciousness'; secondly, he introduced the notion of an 'ideological superstructure'.

### 1.2.1 Engels: false consciousness

According to Engels, 'Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives.'<sup>3</sup>

This differs in three ways from Marx. First, 'ideology' is used to refer to a process, whereas Marx used it to refer to theories, as cultural objects. This is not just a verbal point. For though it might be suggested that Engels really meant '*The production of ideology is a process ... etc.*' there are good reasons for not confusing the product with the process of its production, or reducing one to the other. For once produced, theories acquire a social existence; they are variously valued, and distributed and consumed like other products. Engels and his successors did not avoid this confusion or appreciate this difference.

Secondly, Engels implies that the distinguishing marks of ideology are psychological, whereas what made a theory 'ideological' for Marx were its epistemic and social characteristics as a theory. As a cultural artefact, ideology would not have been in the domain of psychology for Marx. Hence, although Marx too saw ideology as a *product* of defective consciousness, he observed a sharper distinction than Engels between consciousness (referring to beliefs, attitudes, mental states and mental

<sup>3</sup> Engels to Mehring 14 July 1893. *Corresp.*, 511.

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activities generally) and ideology (referring to a kind of doctrine or theory, or what we might nowadays call theoretical discourse). Engels' treatment of ideology as a psychological process had two effects. First, Marxists and their critics often regarded 'ideology' and 'false consciousness' (or just 'consciousness', once the critical concept of ideology had been abandoned) as interchangeable terms standing for the same thing, a system of collectively held beliefs and attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Or, secondly, if they were distinguished, ideology was often regarded as reducible to false consciousness. But Marx took neither of these steps.

The third difference concerns 'false consciousness' itself. This phrase, often attributed to Marx, actually made its first appearance in these sentences written by Engels after Marx's death.<sup>5</sup> We can legitimately read it back into Marx, but only with an important proviso. For Engels, 'false consciousness' meant false *self*-consciousness on the part of an agent. (In the passage quoted, the agent is a 'thinker', a producer of ideas.) His consciousness is false because he mistakes the motives of his own action. This definition presupposed a particular social psychology of motivation, also invented by Engels in his later writings. According to this theory, the 'real driving forces' of history are unconscious mass motives, especially class motives corresponding to the 'real interests' of classes. Class motives may not be truly reflected in individuals' conscious purposes, but determine the outcomes of their actions *en masse*.

Engels, therefore, wanted to use 'false consciousness' to bridge the gap in historical explanation between economic determinism and personal agency. Because conscious individual motives are short-term, changeable, and tend to nullify one another while unconscious class motives are constant and mutually reinforcing, effects of the latter prevail *en masse* and in the long run. This makes sense only if unconscious class motives are omnipresent, i.e. given Engels' theory that class interest is already the 'real motive' which 'impels' people to act as they do, whatever they imagine their motives to be. It seems unlikely that anyone would now want to defend this theory of universal unconscious class motivation, despite the resemblance to Freud's theory

<sup>4</sup> A recent survey of 85 sources found that 'ideology' was identified with beliefs and attitudes in all of them. The author concluded it is the most central of 27 definitional elements. This is striking testimony to the influence of Engels' interpretation of Marx. Hamilton 1987, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Even so excellent a critic as John Plamenatz could write 'Marx often called ideology "false consciousness"' although Marx never used this phrase and usually made, implicitly or explicitly, a distinction between consciousness (beliefs and attitudes) and ideology (theory). Plamenatz 1970, 23.

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of unconscious sexual motivation that has given it some appeal to *marxist* Freudians.<sup>6</sup>

The theory is not to be found in Marx. Whereas for Engels (in this account, at any rate) the real cause of actions is class interest, which produces the individual's conscious motive, or intention, as a by-product, or rationalization, Marx seems generally to have explained actions as the intended effects of agents' purposes, given their beliefs. He recognized, of course, that people may be deceived about their motives, but he did not claim that they are systematically deceived about them. He did not think that unless people recognize that their real motive is class interest, their motive must be different from what they believe it is. So to act with 'false consciousness' would have meant, for Marx, not that their beliefs about their own motives are false, but that their beliefs about the world are false, and in ways that can be explained by social causes. (And of course such false beliefs may help to explain their actions and motives, and their self-consciousness too.)

So if we read a notion of 'false consciousness' back into Marx, it should be in this broader cognitive sense, referring to miscognition of reality due to social causes. These causes, in Marx, were not class interests but limitations or distortions of cognitive perspective due to social position, especially (but not exclusively) class position. Ideologies, consequently, are theories that contain illusions due to such socially derived miscognition.

Modern commentators do not, on the whole, attribute Engels' theory of false consciousness to Marx. Jon Elster, for example, distinguishes

<sup>6</sup> *LF*, 387–90. This is, I believe, the most coherent interpretation of Engels' account. But Engels' use of 'motive' and 'driving force', etc. is not unambiguous. There might just be a sustainable argument that these terms include conscious cognitive phenomena (false assumptions and beliefs about society) and that his theory is therefore closer to Marx's. Moreover Engels did not distinguish his theses on false consciousness and ideology from two other theses that he shared with Marx. These are: (a) that, since ideological producers work with and upon ideas, they tend to believe, wrongly, that ideas develop independently of social influences. This is a case of socially (occupationally) induced illusion (see 6.3). (Engels' theory is assimilated closely to this by Kolakowski, who however still attributes to Marx Engels' view that "'Ideology" in this sense is a false consciousness or an obfuscated mental process in which men do not understand the forces that actually guide their thinking.' Kolakowski 1978, I, 154.) And (b) that religious and political movements and conflicts cannot be explained solely by ideological goals proclaimed by their spokesmen, but only by taking account also of the economic interests of their supporters and sympathizers. The sense in which these mass motives might supply the 'real driving force' of such movements is not the psychological sense distinguished above. Engels made lively use of this approach in his account of the Reformation in *The Peasant War in Germany*, as Marx did in his political writings. See 7.1.

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between 'hot' (motivational) and 'cold' (cognitive) explanations of attitudinal bias, corresponding respectively to interest-explanations and social-position-explanations, and thinks both can be found in Marx. His example of the first is Marx's idea that a class tends to represent its class interest as the general interest of society. I have more to say about this idea later. For now, the point to notice is that Elster does not cite Engels' theory of unconscious class interest as the source of Marx's 'hot' explanation, which he thinks can be accounted for by wishful thinking.<sup>7</sup>

Engels' theory could also be read as a clumsy approach to a more plausible Marxist theory of false *self*-consciousness, which might run as follows: (a) Individuals generally act from perceived self-interest; (b) the 'self' whose interest individuals try to promote (or which individuals try to express) is a social construct which includes a class dimension; (c) individuals are unaware of this, and identify naively with their 'self' as something personal and individual, as 'themselves'; (d) therefore, in acting from self-interest (or expressing themselves) individuals also unwittingly promote their class interest (or express their class standpoint); and (e) the class dimensions of their activity have mutually reinforcing social effects in a way that the more personal dimensions do not.

This does not imply that people have motivations that they do not know they have, but that they use a mistaken cognitive model of what it is that has the interests that motivate them. This, in Elster's terms, would be a 'cold' explanation. Self-consciousness is vitiated by miscognition of what a 'self' is, for lack of a theory that explains it as a socio-historical product. This is not a theory that can be found in Marx, but it is perfectly consistent, and indeed continuous, with the theory of false consciousness that is in Marx. It suggests a possible convergence between Marx's thought and theories stemming from Nietzsche, Durkheim and Mead that emphasize the social construction of the self.

To sum up so far, in Engels' usage 'false consciousness' implies that the personal motives that enter into people's conscious intentions are secondary to unconscious class motives that do not. In Marx's (non-existent, but imputable) usage, 'false consciousness' would imply that conscious intentions may be based on false assumptions or beliefs explicable by the social positions of those who hold them. Since Marx (implicitly) and Engels (explicitly) defined ideology in terms of false consciousness, their differences on this point carried over into their treatment of

<sup>7</sup> Elster 1985, 465–7, 482–6. See 7.1.2.

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ideology. Engels, unlike Marx, preferred to explain ideology by class interest rather than class position, and in this was followed by Second International Marxists. But the practical difference at this level was not great.

1.2.2 *Engels: ideological superstructure*

From Engels too came the image of a three-tiered social universe consisting of economic base, political and legal superstructure (which he once called 'the first ideological power over man') and, thirdly, 'realms of ideology that soar still higher in the air, religion, philosophy, etc.'<sup>8</sup> Hence the metaphor, laboured by Second International Marxists, of an economic base supporting a 'complex ideological superstructure' consisting of all non-economic institutions and all non-scientific ideas. Hence also the view of superstructures as more distantly determined by the base, the higher, so to speak, they are raised above it, and of their reacting back upon it with correspondingly diminishing strength.<sup>9</sup>

This image is often read back into Marx's words in the *Preface*, where the metaphor of base and superstructure comes from, but it is not really there. I believe that G. A. Cohen, in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, is right to regard the superstructure of the *Preface* as containing institutions but not ideas.<sup>10</sup> (I return to this point in 4.1.) Once or twice, however, Marx did use the metaphor of base and superstructure for the connection between a class and its class consciousness. I shall come back to this later, too: properly understood, it is consistent with excluding ideology from the base/superstructure model of institutions (see 4.2.).

This has recently been denied by Mills and Goldstick, who argue that

<sup>8</sup> *LF*, 392; Engels to Schmidt 27 October 1890. *Corresp.*, 482.

<sup>9</sup> It might be objected that Marx wrote in *The German Ideology* that the 'political illusion' of the French and English 'is after all closer to reality' than the 'religious illusion' of the Germans. This certainly implies that politics is more 'real' than religion (because its illusions are not other-worldly) but says nothing about 'superstructure'. *GI*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen 1978, 216. Cf. 'What Marx contrasts, boldly but not clearly, with social existence, he calls "consciousness" and not "ideology". And though he also contrasts an ideological superstructure with a material substructure, he leaves it uncertain how far, in his opinion, this superstructure is coextensive with consciousness.' Plamenatz 1970, 32. Here the inference that consciousness (partly) belongs in the superstructure follows from two mistakes: that Marx defined ideology as part of consciousness, and that he contrasted an 'ideological superstructure' with the 'substructure' of the *Preface*. (There is also the mistake, universal until rectified by Cohen, of calling this substructure 'material', overlooking Marx's distinction between the 'economic structure of society, the real basis' – i.e. the social form of production – and the 'mode of production of material life' – i.e. the material process, its content.)

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Engels' conception of an ideological superstructure was implicit in Marx.<sup>11</sup> (Readers with no taste for the minutiae of Marxological controversy may wish to skip to 1.2.3. at this point.) They cite, among other texts, Marx to the effect that 'the contradictions in material production make necessary a superstructure of ideological strata'.<sup>12</sup> And they also make the bold claim that for Marx and Engels 'ideology/ideological' meant 'superstructure/superstructural'. 'Ideology', they maintain, had no more specific connection with 'ideas' than is implied by the materialist theses (a) that ideas are part of the superstructure, i.e. explained by the economic base; and (b) that what they call 'superstructural workers' are liable to hold 'superstructuralist' (i.e. idealist) views about society.

The main objection to this is that it would make Marx and Engels guilty of gross pleonasm. If true, it would imply that Marx, in the passage just cited, was referring to the necessity of a 'superstructure of superstructural strata'; or that when Engels spoke of an 'ideological superstructure' he meant 'superstructural superstructure'. There is no reason to convict them of such obvious redundancy. Moreover the proposal fails to account for passages where the restricted reference of 'ideology' to ideational products is quite explicit.

Mills and Goldstick point out that Marx used 'ideologists' and 'ideological classes' for what they call 'superstructural workers' – i.e. priests, politicians, judges, academics, journalists, etc. But they have to admit that 'these references are interpretable in the contemporary intellectual/ideational senses' of ideology, and may merely denote their intellectual role. So they cite, as a clincher, a reference by Marx to 'the "ideological" classes, such as government officials, priests, lawyers, soldiers, etc.'<sup>13</sup> The inclusion of officials, and especially soldiers, certainly makes this look a strong case. But this passage is unusual, and perhaps unique, in that Marx put 'ideological' in inverted commas, perhaps to indicate that he was using it in a stretched or approximate sense while hurrying through a catalogue of the various sorts of unproductive labour. The case would have been much stronger if, for example, the parasitic bureaucracy of the Second Empire had been called 'ideological' in *The Civil War in France*. But here Marx referred only to 'the superstructure of the modern state edifice raised under the First Empire'.<sup>14</sup>

The real point, however, is that Mills and Goldstick fail to ask why, if 'ideological' meant 'superstructural', Marx and Engels never used 'super-

<sup>11</sup> Mills and Goldstick 1989, 417–32.

<sup>12</sup> TSV, II, 184.

<sup>13</sup> *Capital*, I, 446.

<sup>14</sup> CWF, 328.



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structural' *instead* of 'ideological' in any of these cases (i.e. 'ideological classes', etc.) where it would seem to be so appropriate. The answer is that the usage was not available. It became current only after Engels' death, when Marxists developed the idea, suggested by his later writings, that 'the superstructure' was a descriptive term denoting the non-economic domain of social life. Once the noun began to be used descriptively in this way, the adjective 'superstructural' could be coined to refer to non-economic phenomena. (Bukharin may have been the first to use it in this way, though semi-apologetically, in inverted commas.)<sup>15</sup>

Marx's own rare uses of 'superstructure', on the other hand, are relational, not descriptive, and refer explicitly to some 'base' or other. In his usage, in fact, it was a methodological, not a theoretical term. To call Y a superstructure of X meant that Y could be explained by a function it performs for X. Examples of this, including the celebrated one in the *Preface*, are examined later. But this sufficiently explains why 'ideology' and 'superstructure' could not possibly have *meant* the same for Marx, even if the 'ideological classes' mentioned above could be, for him, an *instance* of a superstructure. On the other hand, since members of non-economic institutions – i.e. Mills' and Goldstick's 'superstructural workers' – were much engaged in producing and distributing ideology, it was not inappropriate for Marx to dub them all 'ideologists'.

1.2.3 *Engels' successors: towards a neutral concept of ideology*

Engels' innovations tended to support each other. Unconscious class motives could be seen as part of 'the base', and false consciousness or ideology as part of 'the superstructure'. This suggested a causal account, in terms of unconscious class interest, of how base determines superstructure. This in turn fitted well with the mechanistic view of science, and of historical materialism as the science of history, preferred by Second International Marxists. Moreover, Engels' successors sometimes treated Marx's methodological metaphor of base and superstructure as an exhaustive dichotomous description of social reality. So everything had to fit into it somewhere, as material base or ideological superstructure, which gave rise to endless confusions.

But the indiscriminate use of the comprehensive phrase 'ideological superstructure' by Second International Marxists eventually undermined the critical concept of ideology. It was difficult to hold that ideology

<sup>15</sup> Bukharin 1969, 218–28.

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differed from other ideas by being defective if all non-scientific ideas were part of the ideological superstructure. Surely not *all* non-scientific ideas in bourgeois society were defective? What about socialism itself?

Karl Kautsky, the arbiter of German Marxist orthodoxy, maintained that Marxism was not an ideology because it was 'scientific socialism', and science was not part of the superstructure. But besides the 'science' of historical materialism, socialism also contained a moral critique of capitalism. So Kautsky tried to preserve the critical concept of ideology by distinguishing 'bourgeois ideology' from 'socialist ideals' on the ground that historical materialism shows that only the latter now correspond with the needs of humanity. Bourgeois morality is ideological, therefore, because it no longer promotes productive development.

This implies that at an earlier stage, when bourgeois ideals were themselves progressive, they were not ideological. Marx certainly acknowledged that capitalism had a progressive stage, and he also held that the social consciousness of early capitalism was in some ways less false than that of developed capitalism. But he did not make economic unprogressiveness the criterion of 'ideology'. Early bourgeois ideology was still ideology, even if its identification of the bourgeoisie's interest with the general interest was, as Marx allowed, historically justified. This last-ditch attempt by Kautsky to sustain the critical concept of ideology did not survive the doctrinal controversies that split the Second International.

Eduard Bernstein, the right-wing revisionist, had already declared that, if all non-scientific ideas were ideological, Marxism must be an ideology since it was based on a moral ideal. He criticized the claims of 'scientific socialism' on grounds of a Kantian distinction between values and science, and championed socialism as the moral and political ideology of the working-class, which would triumph precisely because it was morally superior to the ideologies of other classes. This would be possible because 'the point of economic development attained today leaves the ideological, and especially the ethical, factors, greater space for independent activity than was formerly the case'.<sup>16</sup>

Here Marx's critical concept of ideology was superseded by what is generally called a 'neutral' or 'positive' one. One of the two elements in Marx's and Engels' definition had been dropped: 'ideology' now denoted simply non-scientific general ideas, without the requirement that they are defective. At the same time the image of an ideological superstructure

<sup>16</sup> Bernstein 1961, 15. See also Larrain 1983, 62–3.