Introduction

1. The Tangled History of Ideology Critique

In the more than 160 years since Marx and Engels penned *The German Ideology*, the existing definitions and theories of ideology have proliferated beyond any readily manageable extent, forcing the more systematically minded authors, who address this topic, to preface their discussions with complex and often mutually conflicting systems of classification.[1] What should we make of this diversity, this seemingly uncontrolled proliferation of meanings? In particular, what does it tell us about the proximate origins of the theory of ideology, that is, about the elaborations of this concept in Marx's work? Does it reveal the supreme fecundity of Marx's insights on this particular topic, or, rather, does it bespeak his confusion, his ambivalence, and his lack of conceptual rigor?[2] More importantly, how should we now approach this unwieldy proliferation? Does the historical development and proliferation of ideology display any evident logic, any marked points of rupture or decision, any particularly decisive branches in the conceptual tree that maps the range of possibilities? In other words, can we, amidst the vast array presented by the currently extant theories of ideology, identify the conceptually significant fault lines that divide them, the central divisions that raise the most salient philosophical issues?

In his helpful study, *Ideology: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton provides a basic framework for addressing these questions, roughly dividing the myriad conceptions of ideology into two dominant but divergent intellectual strands. He begins the first chapter, appropriately

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[1] For a sense of the prodigious variety of recent classificatory schemes, see Boudon, 1989, pp. 17–68; Eagleton, 1994, pp. 1–31; Geuss, 2001, pp. 4–44; Mannheim, 1995, pp. 49–94; Plamenatz, 1970, pp. 15–31; Rosen, 1996a, pp. 30–53; and Rossi-Landi, 1990, pp. 17–48.

[2] The charge of equivocation is common. See Eagleton, 1994, pp. 83–84; Rosen, 1996a, p. 168.

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entitled, "What Is Ideology," with an introductory catalogue of sixteen existing definitions, a catalogue that ranges from the predictable to the exotic, from "a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class" to "semiotic closure," from "ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power" to "that which offers a position for a subject."[3] After documenting this wide range of definitions, Eagleton then offers the following observation:

We can note that some of these formulations involve epistemological questions – questions concerned with our knowledge of the world – while others are silent on this score … This distinction, as we shall see, is an important bone of contention in the theory of ideology, and reflects a dissonance between two of the mainstream traditions we find inscribed within the term. Roughly speaking, one central lineage, from Hegel and Marx to Georg Lukács and some later Marxist thinkers, has been much preoccupied with ideas of true and false cognition, with ideology as illusion, distortion, mystification; whereas an alternative tradition of thought has been less epistemological than sociological, concerned more with the function of ideas within social life than with their reality or unreality. The Marxist heritage has itself straddled these two intellectual currents, and that both of them have something to tell us will be one of the contentions of this book.[4]

Eagleton here distinguishes between two broad "intellectual currents" or "mainstream traditions," that is, between the epistemic and the sociological or functional conceptions of ideology.[5] Though Eagleton never treats these traditions as mutually exclusive or fully incompatible, he notes their historical divergence and increasing dissonance. On the one hand, the proponents of the majority tradition, the theoreticians and practitioners of functional ideology critique, have come to consider increasing swaths of our intellectual life in largely sociological terms, focusing on the instrumental relations between thought formations and social oppression. They thus tend to reinterpret and subsume the normative concerns of traditional epistemology within the creeping boundaries of a political or partisan sociology. On the other hand, the minority tradition attempts to integrate selected domains of social

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[3] Eagleton, 1994, pp. 1–2.
[4] Eagleton, 1994, pp. 2–3.
[5] Drucker also emphasizes this distinction between the epistemic and functional conceptions of ideology. See Drucker, 1974, p. 15.

theory within the scope of its more or less radical transformation of traditional epistemology.

As alternative claimants to the same crucial terms and classical texts, these divergent traditions have generated significant conceptual confusion. Eagleton traces this equivocation and confusion back to Marx's inaugural discussions of ideology. After examining the canonical Marxist texts and considering the development of this theme through the era of the Second International, Eagleton concludes:

The situation, in short, is now thoroughly confused. Ideology would now seem to denote simultaneously false consciousness (Engels), all socially conditioned thought (Plekhanov), the political crusade of socialism (Bernstein and sometimes Lenin), and the scientific theory of socialism. It is not hard to see how these confusions come about. They stem in effect from the equivocation we noted in the work of Marx between ideology as illusion, and ideology as an intellectual armoury of a social class. Or, to put it another way, they reflect a conflict between the epistemological and political meanings of the term. In the second sense of the word, what matters is not the character of the beliefs in question, but their function and perhaps their origin; and there is no reason why these beliefs should necessarily be false.[6]

Marx variously discusses ideology as cognitively distorted thought and as the intellectual weaponry of a particular class. He alternatively treats it in epistemic and in sociological terms. In the latter case, he focuses principally on questions of "function," though sometimes also on matters of "origin." While the exact relationship between the functional and genetic questions is itself complex, we shall here follow Eagleton's usage, employing the phrase "functional-ideology critique" as shorthand for a form of criticism that principally focuses upon the effects or functions of beliefs, though it sometimes also considers the origins, associations, and distributive tendencies of these functional beliefs.

If Marx's discussions of ideology variously focus on epistemic and social properties of beliefs, we face three basic interpretative possibilities. First, noting the apparent logical or relative conceptual separability of the epistemic, functional, and genetic properties of belief, we might follow Eagleton and accuse Marx of equivocation. At the very

[6] Eagleton, 1994, p. 90.

least, Eagleton's equivocation thesis adequately reflects the later devel-
opment of ideology critique. Marx's followers have frequently tended
to pursue one dimension to the relative exclusion of the other, focus-
ing upon either sociofunctional or epistemic considerations, such that
the term "ideology" has in fact acquired an ambiguous and equivo-
cal status. However, we needn't attribute this equivocation to Marx.
Adopting a second interpretative strategy, we might assume that Marx
treats certain epistemic, functional, and genetic properties as equally
necessary and only conjointly sufficient conditions for the existence
of ideology. While recognizing the conceptual disjunctions between
different types of consideration, we might conclude that a theory or
belief is ideological if and only if it is defective along all three dimen-
sions. There is yet a third alternative: We might attribute to Marx
some distinctive and essentially integrated conception of social real-
ity and epistemology. We might argue that he develops a theory of
knowledge that conceives rational inquiry and knowing as necessarily
and legitimately constituted by certain social aims and social (or class)
positions. Though Eagleton accepts the first interpretation and accuses
Marx of equivocation, he nonetheless adopts a sanguine approach to
the developments of these alternative traditions, insisting that, "both
of them have something to tell us." He maintains that, after some
appropriate disambiguation, these alternative traditions both have an
important role to play in contemporary Marxism and in other related
forms of radical political theory.

While I appreciate and accept the basic distinction that guides
Eagleton's history of ideology, my interpretation of Marx and my
assessment of these traditions differ significantly. In the present study,
I argue that although the functional tradition of ideology critique can
teach us much, that tradition derives largely from non-Marxist texts
and concerns. I further argue that this tradition undermines the cog-
nitive commitments of traditional Marxism, and that it fosters dan-
gerous forms of skepticism, political indifference, doxastic apathy,
cynicism, nihilism, and violence. I defend Marx against the charge of
irremediable equivocation, arguing that his theory and critique of ide-
ology fundamentally integrate certain types of functional and genetic
considerations within his innovative transformation of traditional
epistemology. Additionally, I argue that some strands within the epi-
stemic tradition recognize, adopt, and develop Marx's epistemological
innovations, thereby providing an important response to the numerous

epistemic and political challenges posed by the strictly functional or sociological tradition.

Before elaborating these guiding theses and sketching my basic arguments, I must first provide schematic but illustrative accounts of the respective positions advocated by the functional and the epistemic traditions of ideology critique. While these accounts present somewhat generalized or idealized types, they provide us with an initial guide to the tangled conceptual landscape formed by the extant discussions of ideology. With this distinction in place, we should then be in a better position to trace the complex histories of ideology, to ascertain their relationship to Marx's textual pronouncements, and to discern the still latent promises and unexpected dangers partially concealed within these complex currents of thought.

2. The Functional Critique of Ideology

In the functional tradition, the critique of ideology examines the social dimensions of beliefs and theories in a manner that largely brackets or bypasses their cognitive properties. It employs categories and explanatory methods drawn from the empirical study of other noncognitive entities in the social and natural world. In its treatment and criticism of beliefs, it focuses upon their social distributions, probabilistic associations, causes, modes of transmission, and functions. We might say that this sociological or functional study of ideology treats beliefs as mundane entities *in* the world, while at least temporally disregarding the sense in which beliefs also purport to be *about* the world. In other words, it assumes that beliefs can be studied and criticized without consideration of their epistemic properties, without considering their intentional relation to the world, their representational content, their truth-value, their logical consistency, and their justification.[7]

The functional critique of ideology distinguishes itself from more general sociological treatments of belief through its guiding concern with the functional role that beliefs play in the perpetuation of social

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[7] Often, this goes along with the assumption that ideological beliefs emerge from noncognitive processes. Seliger presents this point succinctly, noting that, "ideology, unlike philosophy and science, denotes a set of ideas not primarily conceived for cognitive purposes." More specifically, he goes on to say that ideological ideas are forged in and for political action. See Seliger, 1976, p. 14. See also Arendt, 1976, p. 159.

oppression. Emphasizing this point, Michael Rosen thus claims that the theory of ideology seeks "to explain the persistence of unequal (and unjust) societies."[8] According to Rosen, the theory of ideology emerges from the fundamental assumption that, in most or all societies, the people vastly outnumber the rulers, and that they can therefore command preponderant force.[9] Additionally, the theory assumes that the rulers employ their position, in large measure, to further their own personal or class interests, not to promote the interests of society as a whole. Thus, in most or all societies, the ruled majority both can and should – at least from the standpoint of self-interest, if not from some higher standpoint of justice – establish a new social and political order, one that more adequately serves their interests and perhaps also accords with the demands of justice. Despite such purported facts, revolutionary change is rare. According to Rosen's apt characterization, the (functional) theory of ideology seeks to explain and change this fact.

In light of the superior numbers and strength of the oppressed, the tradition of functional ideology critique seeks to reveal how certain widespread beliefs serve to perpetuate social oppression, the dominance of the inherently weak over the innately strong. Since open conflict and direct force favor the oppressed, the oppressors must maintain their dominance through subtle or indirect forms of power. We might therefore describe the functional critique of ideology as an attempt to unmask various soft, deceptive, and frequently internalized forms of power. The functional theory of ideology treats ideas as weapons or instruments of struggle. However, unlike fists and guns, ideological beliefs conceal their hostile purpose. Ideological beliefs thus represent a form of soft or covert power.

Conceived as the critique of subtle or internalized forms of power, functional treatments of ideology naturally and rightly extend the scope of their study beyond the domain of ideas, beliefs, and theories, focusing upon the sociopolitical implications of a broad range of non-cognitive phenomena, including desires, ceremonies, habits, forms of address, fashions, etc. If we ignore or bracket the distinctly epistemic properties of beliefs and theories, focusing solely upon their causal efficacy vis-à-vis oppression and social conflict, then it becomes

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[8] Rosen, 1996a, p. 30.
[9] Rosen, 1996b, p. 209.

natural to extend our study to include this broad range of largely noncognitive but socially significant phenomena. Much like ideological beliefs, we find that various desires, habits, and fashions spread through populations and tend to serve as subtle instruments of social conflict. Therefore, if we are principally concerned with the more subtle or nonevident instruments of oppression and social conflict, then it seems both natural and right to extend the domain of ideology beyond the relatively truncated sphere of ideas, beliefs, and theories. Indeed, in Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony; in Herbert Marcuse's critiques of technology, mass media, and consumption; and in Michel Foucault's analyses of power, we observe exactly this form of apparently warranted extension.

If ideology critique deals with covert or internalized forms of power, then ideology involves a kind of deception. We might thus stipulate that ideological forms of control do not announce themselves as instruments of coercive power, and they only attain their effect through a process of acceptance and internalization. For instance, if the authorities shape public, penal, or industrial space in such a way as to preclude the gathering and mingling of large groups of people, this may well serve as a form of soft or nonviolent power. However, this spatial organization would not count as a form of ideological control, given that its efficacy does not depend upon any kind of deception. Even if the populace, the prisoners, or the workers understand the true aims of those that order the space they occupy, this recognition itself does not automatically thwart those aims. By contrast, the oppressive effects of ideological beliefs and desires depend largely upon their innocuous appearance. They must hide their relation to oppression, and they must thereby find access into the psyche of those they would control. They thus generate a kind of "voluntary servitude," where people become the unwitting agents of their own oppression.

This emphasis upon deception introduces an epistemic dimension into the functional critique of ideology, though this dimension remains circumscribed. Here we might borrow Tommie Shelby's helpful distinction between the characterizations of ideology as an "illusion" and as a form of "false-consciousness." According to Shelby, when we call some belief an ideological illusion, we designate "some cognitive defect" in its "discursive content."[10] As an illusion, the representational

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[10] Shelby, 2003, p. 165.

content of an ideological belief distorts the true nature of the world. By
contrast, Shelby takes the term "false-consciousness" to describe the
relationship between the believer and the belief. False-consciousness
"has to do with the way in which the agents hold their belief, not
with the cognitive status of the discursive content of these beliefs."[11]
Borrowing these distinctions, we might say that, as characterized here,
the functional critique of ideology uncovers the deception of false con-
sciousness, not the more basic cognitive deception or error involved
in illusions. The functional critique of ideology seeks to uncover con-
fusion about the source or effect of some belief. This circumscribed
epistemic focus does not directly consider the epistemic merits of the
belief or theory, but rather it considers confusions or distortions in the
believer's beliefs about the belief. The basic belief itself thus remains
an entity to be explained in social terms, not a claim to be directly
engaged in epistemic discussion.

3. The Epistemic Critique of Ideology

We can identify at least three distinctive subvariations within the tradi-
tion of epistemic ideology critique. We might respectively refer to these
as the propaedeutical, the neo-Kantian, and the neo-Hegelian varia-
tions. On the first variation, the epistemic critique of ideology merely
provides a useful propaedeutic to epistemology proper. According to
this variation, the critique of ideology seeks to reveal the epistemic
errors that arise from social, political, or psychological interferences
in the cognitive process. It thus helps us to identify, understand, and
avoid some common errors, and it thereby clears the way for the
proper acquisition and justification of knowledge. In this sense, social
theory does not become an inherent dimension of epistemology itself,
but it does serve an important preparatory function, clearing away
possible sources of error. A classic statement of this variation can be
found in Jon Elster's *Sour Grapes*, a book aptly subtitled, "Studies in
the Subversion of Rationality." In accordance with this subtitle, Elster
defines ideology as "a set of beliefs or values that can be explained
through the position or (noncognitive) interest of some social group."
Elster makes it plain that these "explanations" are not justifications.
On the contrary, these explanations reveal the absence of proper

[11] Shelby, 2003, p. 170.

justification. They reveal the ultimately noncognitive sources of certain beliefs, "the ways in which mental processes can be undermined by irrelevant causal influence."[12]

Obviously, the difference between this variation of epistemic ideology critique and the functional critique of ideology is primarily a matter of emphasis. Both conceptions study the noncognitive relations between beliefs and the social world, though they do so with somewhat different intents, and these distinct interests guide their partially divergent emphasis. Given its principle focus upon the epistemic status of belief, Elster's treatment of ideology focuses upon the social and psychological *causes* of beliefs, not upon their *functions* or *effects*. Even if revelations concerning the cause or source of a belief can never establish the falsity of that belief, they *can* undermine our mistaken sense of justification. They can show that some beliefs rest upon cognitively irrelevant grounds, upon some psychological interest or dubious source of authority, not upon well-formed reasons or justified epistemic trust. By contrast, a study of the social effects or functions of a belief has an even more indirect relation to epistemic questions. If a belief has dubious social effects, this may lead us to reconsider our reasons for accepting it, but it does not automatically vitiate these reasons. In contrast to Elster's emphasis upon questions of origin, the functional critique of ideology places a principle emphasis upon effect or function, since it seeks to explain and eradicate various forms of social oppression. With regard to oppression, the effects and functions of beliefs are more important than their causes, though these might still be relevant and related in significant ways. Despite these moderate differences, however, these two types of ideology critique are very similar, and they might readily comingle.

The stronger variations of epistemic ideology critique, those respectively indebted to the Kantian and Hegelian traditions, construe ideology critique as a necessary and inherent dimension of epistemology itself. Raymond Geuss aptly describes the assumption that guides these variations of epistemic ideology in the "Introduction" to *The Idea of a Critical Theory*. For the tradition advocated by Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School, Geuss rightly suggests that "the greatest significance of his [Marx's] work lies in its implications for epistemology." This tradition insists that Marx's critique of ideology "requires drastic

[12] Elster, 1987, p. 141.

revisions in traditional views about the nature of knowledge."[13] In some very general sense, the strong versions of epistemic ideology critique approach at least certain types of cognition as inherently and appropriately constituted by social interests and/or the social position of the knower. These variations reject any rigid division between social theory and epistemology, emphasizing the sociological dimensions of epistemology and (sometimes) the normative-epistemic dimensions of sociology. Like merely functional theories of ideology, they examine the social origins and functions of belief. Unlike functional theories, they claim these concerns have a direct and ineradicable bearing upon epistemology.

In his discussion of Habermas and Critical Theory, Geuss highlights the now familiar dimensions – i.e., the causal-genetic, the functional, and the epistemic – that intermingle within the theory of ideology, and he distinguishes Critical Theory for its attempt to synthesize these dimensions, to conceive them in their inherent interrelations:

It is extremely important to determine which of these three modes of criticism is basic to a theory of ideology – does the theory start with an epistemology, with a theory of the proper functioning of society and of which forms of social organization are reprehensible, or with a theory of which "origins" of forms of consciousness are acceptable and which unacceptable. Still, although one or another of these three modes of criticism may be basic, interesting theories of ideology will be ones which assert some connection between two or more of the three modes. One of the senses in which the Critical Theory is said by its proponents to be "dialectical" (and hence superior to its rivals) is just in that it explicitly connects questions about the "inherent" truth or falsity of a form of consciousness with questions about its history, origin, and function in society.[14]

Geuss highlights the central perplexity and potential source of confusion that often mar the theory of ideology. Moreover, he helpfully characterizes certain contributions to Critical Theory in terms of their distinctive attempt to resolve this perplexity through a fundamental synthesis of certain sociological and epistemic issues.

As noted by Eagleton, Marx's occasional comments on ideology intermingle a perplexing array of genetic, functional, and epistemic

[13] Geuss, 1981, p. 1.
[14] Geuss, 1981, pp. 21–22.