

Marx and the missing theory of ideology

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Received: 04/03/2025

Accepted: 15/06/2025

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ABSTRACT Karl Marx is often and typically seen as one of the main theorists of ideology. However, a closer look shows that Marx does not offer anything like a developed theory of ideology. Rather, as I argue here, there are elements for 3 quite different accounts of ideology to be found in his work: ideology as (1) a superstructure, (2) as the rulers' ruling ideas, and (3) as false consciousness. This is a new reconstruction of Marx' ideas about ideology. None of the above 3 ideas has been developed in any greater detail by Marx, and there is even the open question whether they are mutually compatible. There might be a means to combine the second and the third idea but, I argue that, anyone interested in a theory of ideology should rather look into more recent developments; I am giving nothing more than some suggestions at them at the end. It turns out that such a theory is still very much in its "infancy".

KEYWORDS Karl Marx; ideology; superstructure; ruling ideas; false consciousness.

RESUMO Karl Marx é frequentemente visto como um dos principais teóricos da ideologia. No entanto, uma análise mais atenta revela que Marx não oferece propriamente uma teoria desenvolvida da ideologia. Em vez disso, como argumento aqui, podem encontrar-se na sua obra elementos para três concepções bastante distintas de ideologia: ideologia como (1) superestrutura, (2) como as ideias dominantes dos dominadores, e (3) como falsa consciência. Trata-se de uma nova reconstrução das ideias de Marx sobre a ideologia. Nenhuma destas três concepções foi desenvolvida em grande detalhe por Marx, e permanece em aberto a questão de saber se são sequer compatíveis entre si. Pode haver forma de combinar a segunda e a terceira concepção mas, sustento, qualquer pessoa interessada numa teoria da ideologia deverá antes procurar nas abordagens mais recentes; no final, limito-me a indicar algumas sugestões nesse sentido. Verifica-se, afinal, que tal teoria ainda se encontra numa fase bastante "embrionária".

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Karl Marx; ideologia; superestrutura; ideias dominantes; falsa consciência.

As is well known, history didn't quite turn out the way Marx expected. Even though he was reluctant to make any very specific predictions about the future of industrialized, capitalist societies, it is fair to say that he would have been surprised by the actual course of events. There hasn't been (so far) any post-capitalist transformation¹, not to

1 The Russian Revolution and some others have been claimed by many to be à la Marx but this claim should pale also when held next to a well-known remark by Marx and En-

speak of the working classes of developed capitalist societies taking control and revolutionizing society; they failed to qualify as Lukacs' "subject-object of history" (see Lukacs, 1970). The 140 years after Marx' death have seen a significant increase in the ability of advanced capitalist societies to disarm and integrate potentially revolutionary forces (a phenomenon which has produced a lot of theorizing amongst the first generation of the Frankfurt School; see, e.g., the chapter on "culture industry" ["Kulturindustrie"] in Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969). While Marx expected that the internal tensions of capitalism would produce socialist class consciousness amongst the working class, the times when this might have been true are long gone (in addition, the importance of the traditional industrial labor force has decreased drastically over the last decades).

All of this, however, does not mean that there is no serious *explanandum* here. Industrial capitalism (the only form of an industrial economy we know of for now, counting officially "socialist" economies as really state-capitalist or heavily state regulated capitalist economies) is facing enormous problems some of which go beyond the scale Marx imagined, like the threats of climate change, for instance. There are also new forms of inequality and poverty, discrimination and violence, just to name a few. Advanced industrial societies still contain a huge amount of potential for basic conflicts between its members and between constituent social groups and classes. That there isn't much manifest conflict about basic issues does not mean that there isn't much latent conflict. Not only those who are committed to a broadly Marxian way of thinking about things but everyone else, too should wonder how modern capitalist societies or societies more generally manage to disarm the potential of basic social conflict. The *explanandum* is clear but what could be the explanans?

According to one important idea it is ideologies that can provide the explanation.² There are many different theories of ideology and very

gels in DI, 34-35 according to which socialism or communism require a fuller development of the productive forces, "weil ohne sie nur der Mangel verallgemeinert, also mit der Notdurft auch der Streit um das Notwendige wieder beginnen und die ganze alte Scheiße sich herstellen müßte" ("because without it dearth would only be universalized, thus with the shortages the quarrels about necessities would start again and the whole old shit would be reestablished" [my translation]). However, see also Marx' reply (from 1881) to a letter by V.I. Sassulitsch suggesting that at least Russian agriculture can bypass capitalism and go directly to socialism or communism. It is, however, not clear whether Marx meant to extend this claim to the whole society, including the industrial sector. It is also not clear how representative this view is for earlier phases of Marx' thinking. I have to leave this question open here. On all this see Marx, 1987 [B, E].

2 Some believe that the time of ideology is over: see, e.g., Bell, 1965. See also Habermas,

diverse uses of the word. Here is what I have in mind. Social structures are created and sustained by the actions and behaviors of individuals. Here is Marx³, for instance: “Humans make their own history but not freely and not under freely chosen circumstances but under circumstances which are immediately given and inherited from the past.”⁴ The actions and behaviors of individuals that create and sustain society are based on their attitudes, their beliefs, desires, values, hopes, etc. These attitudes are, in turn, determined to a large degree by given social environments. One can call such attitudes ‘ideological’ to the degree to which they do not only have a social origin but also contribute to the sustaining and reproduction of given social structures, even if that goes against the agent’s basic interests (see, e.g., Eagleton, 1991; Rosen, 1996a; Morris, 2016, pp. 1-15).⁵ Some might want to invoke functionalist explanations here but I think that this is not needed and only creates additional problems (whether the functionalism is of a marxist or non-marxist bent, as, e.g., in Parsons, 1951; see also Cohen, 1978, chs. IX-X, and Elster, 1985, ch.1 on this kind of explanation).

Of course, Marx talks extensively about ideology. However, he did not develop anything like a theory of ideology (nor did Engels). Also, what he calls “ideology” constitutes a very mixed bag of phenomena. This is not so surprising. Given Marx’s expectations of the future, he could not see much of a need for a developed theory of ideology in the sense I sketched above. However, it is still worth the effort of looking of what one can find in Marx. This will be my first step. It will turn out that Marx has exactly three distinct and largely independent basic conceptions of ideology at play in his works (see in general also Eagleton, 1991, pp. 70-91; Brudney, 1998, pp. 197-199; Wood, 2004, pp. 118-121; Miller, 2006, pp. 72-79; Wolff and Leopold, 2021, sec.6). Since each of them is not very well developed I offer what I take to be plausible directions for further development. The reconstruction presented here is mark-

1981, vol.2, 518ff. I won’t go into the question here what exactly such authors mean by “ideology”.

3 The references section below indicates which acronyms stand for which titles.

4 My translation of: “Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen.” (Marx 1960 [18B], 115). See also Marx and Engels, 1978, e.g., 20 and 25 for their (anti-hegelian) methodological individualism and the relationalist interpretation in Marx, 1983 [G], 189. See also, amongst many: Wright, Levine and Sober, 1992, pp. 107-127.

5 I want to leave it open whether the attitudes (beliefs, desires, evaluations) have to be irrational, biased, based on misinformation or incorrect in other ways in order to count as ideological.

edly different from others presented in the literature on Marx.⁶ In a last, concluding section I will look at later proposals which took the *explanandum* much more seriously than Marx or Engels did. I will argue that we still need, but don't have, an even basically satisfying account of ideology (in the sense proposed in the last paragraph, at some distance from Marx). The aim of this article is not to present or sketch an account of ideology but the humbler aim to examine what we have got so far and argue that much more work has to be done. I will focus on Marx rather than the long tradition inspired by him; it is important to go back to Marx himself and see what he really thought. – Let us start with the first basic Marxian idea about ideology.

1 Ideology as superstructure

In Marx's preface to his *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1859) he gives this very concise characterization of historical materialism:

*In the social production of their life, humans enter certain necessary relations which are independent from their will, - relations of production which correspond to a certain stage of the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis upon which arises a juridical and political superstructure and to which correspond certain social forms of consciousness. The mode of production of the material life conditions the social, political and intellectual process of life in general. It is not the consciousness of human beings which determines their existence but rather their social existence which determines their consciousness.*⁷

6 I am mainly interested here in focusing on the original texts by Marx (and Engels) themselves and not so much in discussing different interpretations in the recent literature on Marx.

7 My translation of: "In der gesellschaftlichen Produktion ihres Lebens gehen die Menschen bestimmte, notwendige, von ihrem Willen unabhängige Verhältnisse ein, Produktionsverhältnisse, die einer bestimmten Entwicklungsstufe ihrer materiellen Produktivkräfte entsprechen. Die Gesamtheit dieser Produktionsverhältnisse bildet die ökonomische Struktur der Gesellschaft, die reale Basis, worauf sich ein juristischer und politischer Überbau erhebt, und welcher bestimmte gesellschaftliche Bewußtseinsformen entsprechen. Die Produktionsweise des materiellen Lebens bedingt den sozialen, politischen und geistigen Lebensprozeß überhaupt. Es ist nicht das Bewußtsein der Menschen, das ihr Sein, sondern umgekehrt ihr gesellschaftliches Sein, das ihr Bewußtsein bestimmt." (Marx, 1961 [KPÖ], pp. 8-9; see also similar remarks in Marx and Engels, 1978 [DI], pp. 26-27).

Consider the last sentence which is particularly important here. It contains two claims: (i) consciousness of social facts does not determine social facts, and (ii) social facts determine consciousness of social facts.

Taken at face value these two claims seem somewhat overdrawn, even to Marx. A reasonable, historical materialism (in contrast to some simplistic deformation of it) would not deny that there is causal interaction between basis and superstructure. We shouldn't read (i) too strictly. As W.I. Thomas said: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas, 1970, p. 572). I think Marx agrees with this because, according to him, the ideas people have also feed back into the basis of the superstructure. Claims (i) and (ii) should rather be interpreted along the following lines: Social facts determine consciousness more than the latter influence the former.

Now, what does it mean to say that social facts determine (in the sense just indicated) consciousness of those facts? It is interesting that the famous passage quoted above does not offer much of a clue at all. As it stands, the passage is compatible with two very different possibilities: that social facts cause true beliefs about these facts, and that social facts cause false beliefs about these facts. One could add: that social facts cause the absence of beliefs about them, or, finally, that they cause utter confusion about those facts. Here is a useful indirect hint:

we don't start with what human beings say, imagine, believe, and also not with human beings as they are talked about, thought, imagined, conceived in order to then arrive at the real human beings; rather, we start with the real, active human beings and from their real process of life we also derive the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of these life processes.⁸

The obvious and plausible reason for proceeding this way is that humans often have false beliefs about things. What seems crucial then for ideology as superstructure is the importance of "false consciousness". (I am using this term to describe Marx's descriptive view of ideology as superstructure, not in order to attribute use of such a term to him; but see also Lukacs, 1970 here)

8 My translation of: 'es wird nicht ausgegangen von dem, was die Menschen sagen, sich einbilden, sich vorstellen, auch nicht von den gesagten, gedachten, eingebildeten, vorgestellten Menschen, um davon aus bei den leibhaftigen Menschen anzukommen; es wird von den wirklich tätigen Menschen ausgegangen und aus ihrem wirklichen Lebensprozeß auch die Entwicklung der ideologischen Reflexe und Echos dieses Lebensprozesses dargestellt.' (DI, 26).

For the sake of minimal plausibility, we have to assume that Marx doesn't want to claim that all consciousness is false; this would not only be a self-defeating claim but also quite implausible. Why on earth should one believe that all or almost all beliefs about society are false? Using the principle of charity for interpretation here we should rather read Marx as claiming that important parts of (many) people's views about society (at least up to now) have been false.

What we need to know now is: which parts? And more importantly: How does this work? How do social facts bring about false representations of them? There isn't much to be found in the passages quoted so far (see also Rosen, 1996a, ch. 6, sec. V on this point). We have to use what we can get from remarks here and there. There is this famous remark in *The German Ideology*: "in the whole ideology, humans and their relations appear as turned on their head, like in a camera obscura".⁹

This idea of an inversion reminds one of Feuerbach's critique of Christianity and religion in general: It is humans who create the idea of God yet they imagine God as their creator. The falsehood (and also: the alienation!) lies in the mistaken view about the priorities (see Feuerbach, 1973). Similarly, one could extrapolate that (some) people imagine that their social life is the result of their ideas about it and not the other way around. Now, this claim about ideology is really one against idealism and does not explain or even imply that those ideas are false. So, the idea of inversion is not helpful when trying to explain false consciousness about specific social facts.

Much later, long after his break with his young-Hegelian past, Marx returned to the idea of inversion, namely when talking about commodity fetishism and reification ("Verdinglichung"). In the first volume of *Das Kapital* ("Der Fetischcharakter der Ware und sein Geheimnis" ("The Fetishism of Commodities and their Secret") in Marx, 1962 [K], pp. 85-98), commodities are not seen as products of social relations of production but rather as independent objects which exert some power over the very humans that produced them. Again, there is the illusion of inversion but this won't help explain how false beliefs about social facts can come into being. Nor (remember) how those beliefs stabilize social structures even if that works against the interests of those who hold these beliefs. Finally, Marx' view of ideology seems overly focused on the cognitive: on beliefs and ideas, thus neglecting desires, evalu-

9 My translation of: "in der ganzen Ideologie die Menschen und ihre Verhältnisse wie in einer Camera obscura auf den Kopf gestellt erscheinen" (DI, 26).

ative attitudes and so on (for an example of a much broader view see Rosen 1996a, ch. 2, sec. II; but see also Lukacs, 1970 here). This is not to deny that Marx does acknowledge the great variety of elements and aspects of the superstructure like political or juridical institutions, aesthetic attitudes of the time, and much more (the views of Althusser are relevant here; see already Althusser, 1969). It is rather that his view of ideology in particular and of ideology as something that stabilizes the socio-economic structures from which they originate (see above) does have a strong focus on the cognitive.

2 Ideology as rulers' ruling ideas

If social position determines social consciousness and if different people in a given society have essentially different social positions in it, then one should expect there to be in this society a plurality of views about society. Since every society so far, according to Marx and Engels, has been a class society (see Marx and Engels, 1977 [M], p. 462), such a pluralism of views should be the rule, at least so far. However, Marx and Engels also hold that in every society (at least so far) there is a ruling ideology; ideology is perhaps even identified with the set of ruling ideas in a given society. I think there is a tension here between the view of ideology as superstructure and the view of ideology as ruling ideas but I won't go further into this conflict and rather look at the latter idea for its own merits.

In *The German Ideology* (DI), Marx and Engels make these interesting remarks:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, that is, the class which is the ruling material force in society is also its ruling intellectual force. The class which controls the means of material production thereby also disposes over the means of intellectual production so that they thereby on average also dominate the ideas of those who lack the means of intellectual production. The ruling ideas are nothing but the intellectual expression of the ruling material relations, - the ruling material relations (which make one class the ruling one) conceived as thoughts, hence the ideas of their dominance. The individuals who constitute the ruling class also have a consciousness and therefore think; insofar as they rule as a class and dominate the whole range of

*a historical epoch, it stands to reason that they do this across the board, hence that they rule also as thinkers and producers of ideas who regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age; hence that their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.*¹⁰

There is a lot going on here, and it is worth taking a closer look at this passage. It starts with the main claim that the ideas of the ruling are the ruling ideas. And: Material domination goes hand in hand with intellectual domination. The evidence offered is that control over the means of material production comes with control over the means of intellectual production (we can call this “the combination claim”). One needs to pause a bit here. What are the means of intellectual production? Not just a brain and a central nervous system because everyone has got that. Education, free time, protection from censorship, encouragement by others? It is not clear what Marx and Engels have in mind here. I am not saying that all this is hopeless but just that much more theory is needed here (for stronger doubts on this see Elster, 1983, pp. 164-166). So far, there is also no argument for the claim that control over the means of material production comes with control over the means of intellectual production. Finally, even if one group controls the means of intellectual production, this in itself does not entail that they can also establish intellectual domination (we can call this “the domination claim”): This would require a process of distribution (which Marx and Engels only briefly mention here) and “selling” of ideas to those who don’t rule, perhaps even some kind of “forcing” of the ruling ideas into the heads of the ruled. How does this work? Does it? The division of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow cultures seems to speak against this, for instance (see also Bourdieu’s distinction between economic, social and cultural capital in Bourdieu, 1984). Later in the DI, Marx and

10 My translation of: "Die Gedanken der herrschenden Klasse sind in jeder Epoche die herrschenden Gedanken, d.h. die Klasse, welche die herrschende materielle Macht der Gesellschaft ist, ist zugleich ihre herrschende geistige Macht. Die Klasse, die die Mittel zur materiellen Produktion zu ihrer Verfügung hat, disponiert damit zugleich über die Mittel zur geistigen Produktion, so daß ihr damit zugleich im Durchschnitt die Gedanken derer, denen die Mittel zur geistigen Produktion abgehen, unterworfen sind. Die herrschenden Gedanken sind weiter Nichts als der ideelle Ausdruck der herrschenden materiellen Verhältnisse, die als Gedanken gefaßten herrschenden materiellen Verhältnisse; also der Verhältnisse, die eben die eine Klasse zur herrschenden machen, also die Gedanken ihrer Herrschaft. Die Individuen, welche die herrschende Klasse ausmachen, haben unter Andern auch Bewußtsein und denken daher; insofern sie also als Klasse herrschen und den ganzen Umfang einer Geschichtsepoche bestimmen, versteht es sich von selbst, daß sie dies in ihrer ganzen Ausdehnung tun, also unter Andern auch als Denkende, als Produzenten von Gedanken herrschen, die Produktion und Distribution der Gedanken ihrer Zeit regeln; daß also ihre Gedanken die herrschenden Gedanken der Epoche sind." (DI, 26).

Engels mention revolutionary times (see DI, 47) in which there is also revolutionary consciousness. This seems to be a case where neither the combination claim nor the domination claim seem to hold. But even for the case of non-revolutionary times, one still needs an argument for both of these claims. What Marx and Engels are saying (almost as an aside) a bit further down the quoted passage is not very helpful: the dominating ideas of the ruling class are ideas of their domination. Taken literally, this doesn't make much sense. Which ruling class would like to spread the news around that they are dominating everyone? Finally, that the ruling individuals also do some thinking does not entail or even make it self-evident that they also rule as thinkers (An absolutist ruler might have power over his court musicians but typically does not also rule them musically).

As such, the view of ideology as the ruling ideas of the ruling class (see also Rosen, 1996a, ch. 6, sec. IV) doesn't explain why or how these ideas are false, mistaken or biased. As such, they don't say anything about the content of those ideas and thus also not about how they can stabilize a given society even against the interests of a majority of people. For this we need to turn to a third view on ideology.

3 Ideology as false consciousness

There is another interesting and important element for a theory of ideology to be found in *The German Ideology*: "Every new class which replaces a formerly ruling class, must - in order to reach its goals - represent its own interest as the common interest of all members of society, that is, to express it at the level of ideas: must give its ideas the form of universality and represent them as the uniquely rational and universally valid ones."¹¹

So far, according to Marx and Engels, all social classes have pursued particular interests which conflicted with those of other classes. It seems harder to pursue one's special interests if others see these interests as such. For that reason, one has to convince others that one is

11 My translation of: "Jede neue Klasse nämlich, die sich an die Stelle einer vor ihr herrschenden setzt, ist genötigt, schon um ihren Zweck durchzuführen, ihr Interesse als das gemeinschaftliche Interesse aller Mitglieder der Gesellschaft darzustellen, d. h. ideell ausgedrückt: ihren Gedanken die Form der Allgemeinheit zu geben, sie als die einzig vernünftigen, allgemein gültigen darzustellen." (DI, 47). One should add that, according to Marx and Engels, this is typically but not always the case (for instance not for short transition periods when a rising class overthrows the old ruling class).

only pursuing interests shared by all (I take “common interest” to be the interest shared by all and not some Rousseauian “*volonté générale*” in contrast to a “*volonté de tous*”). In order to do this efficiently, one has to convince oneself in turn that one is pursuing common interests. Marx and Engels saw this clearly: they talk about “the illusion of this class about itself” (my translation of: “*Illusion dieser [herrschenden] Klasse über sich selbst*” [DI, 46]). Class domination can only be stable if there is this widespread false consciousness (see above).

That a certain kind of social structure requires, for its stable existence, that there are certain widespread views held by the members of that society doesn’t yet establish that all this will be in place (against functionalist social theories and ideas of functionalist explanation). Apart from this, one also needs to know, again, how all this works. How does the illusion of commonality arise, and how is it being sustained? Perhaps contemporary psychology can help here. Isn’t it the case that practical interests often systematically bias our views of social reality, and do so in our own favor? Perhaps an updated and empirically based psychological account can explain how the false consciousness of the ruling class develops.¹² As such, it doesn’t explain how these incorrect representations stabilize social structures even against the interests of a majority of other people (see also Elster, 1983, pp. 143-148, 156 for the claim that beliefs originating in bias on the basis of interest need not function to support that interest). In order to accomplish this, one would have to combine (1) the idea of ideology of false consciousness with (2) the idea of ideology as the rulers’ ruling ideas. However, much more would have to be said about both accounts, especially the latter.

Finally, it seems worth emphasizing here that Marx view of ideology is very much, if not exclusively, focused on the cognitive: on beliefs, false consciousness, etc. There isn’t much at all here about the incorrectness of desires or values. A more comprehensive theory of ideology should also include these aspects (see, e.g., Rosen, 1996a, 1996b, 2000; for a discussion of Rosen see, e.g., Wolff, 1996; Leiter, 2004, pp. 84-87).

Recapitulating one can say that there is no developed theory of ideology in Marx, certainly not in the sense I sketched at the beginning. There are different elements, some of which are pretty undeveloped.

12 If the proletariat has no special interest different from the common interest (as Marx and Engels claim, e.g., in M), then this class – and everyone in post-capitalist society – should have reached an ideal epistemological position with respect at least to views about society. This is interesting but also hard to believe (and gets us back in a different way to the ‘subject-object’ of history).

Perhaps one can develop the second and the third element much more and combine them into one coherent theory. But until that really happens, one should remain skeptical.

4 After Marx

I would like to end this paper on Marx with some very brief remarks on some accounts developed after Marx which aim to explain to analyze and explain the very general phenomenon of ideology (in the sense explained at the beginning); this might be useful here, despite the brevity.

Antonio Gramsci was one of the very first, main thinkers within a broadly understood Marxist tradition who realized that one has to take further steps towards a theory of ideology and develop it beyond Marx and Engels. His famous theory of hegemony (see Gramsci, 1971 and 1967, 1983, 1986) has not been fully developed (which is very much understandable given his imprisonment and personal circumstances). It can be interpreted as an account of “ideal domination” (see Gramsci, 1971, 5ff., 12, 57ff., and 1986, 277ff.) and of ideology (see Gramsci, 1967, 168ff.). The idea here is that the ruling rule because they have cultural dominance over other classes and parts of society. Subsequently, this hegemony expresses itself in voluntary, spontaneous agreement with the activities of the ruling by the ruled (see Gramsci, 1971, 5ff.). As bases for hegemony, Gramsci mentions prestige, being trusted by others, and also a dominant role in the process of production (see Gramsci, 1971, 5ff.). He also mentions, in passing, factors like the role of the press, the style of architecture, the choice of street names, etc. (see Gramsci, 1983, p. 96).

One wonders how the voluntary agreement of the ruled comes into existence. The bases of hegemonic domination that Gramsci mentions don't seem to form a systematic pattern. The question how they can lead to voluntary submission (or even voluntary servitude? See Boétie, 1978) is still wide open. But even if Gramsci did not develop a veritable theory of ideology, he clearly saw the need for one. He had a clear sense of the relevant phenomena even if one cannot find much of an explanation in his writings.

The first generation of the Frankfurt School lost its more traditional Marxist profile to the degree to which its members noticed sev-

eral unexpected historical turns: Fascism, Stalinism, as well as the rise non-totalitarian but still highly “integrative” societies like their exile, the United States of the 1930s and 1940s. One might want to look at the very pessimistic *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*) by Horkheimer and Adorno, especially its chapter on “culture industry” (“Kulturindustrie”). However, one major problem with this book is the lack of clarity and argument (see, e.g., Scholz, 2018). This contrasts, for example, with Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, which includes some interesting ideas about “false needs” amongst others. One crucial question unaddressed though, by him or other members of the old Frankfurt School, concerns the justification of the normative criteria underlying the critique. Combining a more theoretical work like this and connecting it with empirical work (as was the initial program of the Frankfurt School) like *The Authoritarian Personality* could lead to something promising (see also the classic Willis, 1977 who makes connections with Gramsci). Unfortunately, there is reason to doubt that younger Frankfurters are very much interested in such a kind of theory of ideology.

The most useful account of ideology in the sense sketched above (something that contributes to the sustaining and reproduction of given social structures, even if that goes against the many people’s basic interests) is due to Steven Lukes in his *Power: A Radical View* (Lukes, 1974 and Lukes, 2005). Lukes’ approach has the advantage of avoiding the cognitive bias of Marx and of focusing on different kinds of attitudes. Here is a programmatic statement of what he is trying to explain:

A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires? (Lukes, 2005, p. 27).

A bit later he adds this:

... is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative

to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (Lukes, 2005, 28).

One would like to know how the shaping of wants and desires is related to the shaping of beliefs and cognitions more generally. Moreover, one would also like to know how this works and how it can be done. What are the bases and resources of this “ideological” power? Lukes does, unfortunately, not have much to say here.

In order to draw the crucial distinction between wants and desires which have been shaped by processes of power and other wants and desires, Lukes invokes the idea of “real interests”: “people’s wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests, and, in such cases, relates the latter to what they would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice.” (Lukes, 2005, p. 28). But what determines the real interests of people? What counts as being able to make the choice? What exactly is the “relevant counterfactual” here? A bit later, Lukes says that people make a “real” choice when they find themselves “under conditions of relative autonomy and, in particular, independently of A’s power.” (Lukes, 2005, p. 37; see also pp. 48-52). The obvious circularity is not helpful. It also doesn’t help much to refer to extraordinary circumstances (see Lukes, 2005, pp. 49-51) under which can “escape from subordinate positions in hierarchical systems” (Lukes, 2005, p. 50). A criterion of absence of power and real interest is already presupposed here. To recapitulate, Lukes has the right theoretical goals and takes good steps. But in the end, one has to do the job differently. I won’t try this here.

5 Conclusion

It turns out that Marx does not have a conception of ideology in a sense relevant to this debate. I presented a new reconstruction of different elements or building blocks for a more developed Marxian theory of ideology. More recent authors have made moves in the right direction but, so far, their accounts have remained unsatisfying. We will have to use them but also look elsewhere, outside the Marxian tradition.¹³

13 It is certainly easier to criticize others’ views than to present one oneself. But before one can do that, one has to check what theoretical tools are available and what one can do with them. This paper is dedicated to this more modest task of making such a first step.

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