

The Concept of Ideology: Some Marxist and Non-Marxist Conceptualizations

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I explicate and defend in the first two sections of this article what might be regarded as a rather traditional interpretation of Marx's conception of ideology. In the next two sections, I contrast it with some other Marxist conceptions and, in the process, defend a stress on the, if you will, traditional conception.¹ In the last two sections, I turn to an examination of some non-Marxist conceptions which are both typical and important. I also provide a rationale for Marxists taking note of such conceptions.

1

The concept of ideology is a difficult one. Raymond Williams quite rightly remarks that "there can be no question of establishing, except in polemics, a single 'correct' Marxist definition of ideology" (Williams 1977, 56). Historically speaking, as he notes, within Marxist writings three distinct conceptions have been dominant. An ideology has been described as: (1) "a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group," (2) "a system of illusory beliefs—false ideas or false consciousness—which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge," and (3) "the general process of the production of meanings and ideas" (Williams 1977, 55). Marx and Engels

introduce the term in their *German Ideology* in the context of setting out their materialist conception of history and in criticizing the historical idealism which, particularly in Germany, was the reigning mode of thought of the time. They tend there to stress the second characterization mentioned above, though they also contend, as Lenin did later, that the ideology of a society is a class-linked affair. Indeed, to put the matter truistically, though for all of that correctly, the dominant and culturally pervasive ideological ideas are the ideas of the ruling or dominant class; they are the ideal expression of and indeed the rationalization for the dominant material relations of that society. There are also, though often in one way or another muted, ideological conceptions which are characteristic of the dominated class or classes, though characteristically the dominated class will also have come to be deeply affected by the dominant ideology of the time.

The ideas expressed in ideologies tend to function to perfect the illusions that a class has about itself and typically function to mystify, for all classes in that society, their self-understanding, and their understanding of social reality. The mystification typically functions in such a way that it is protective of the society's economic structures, and with that, of the interests of the ruling class. However, its ideas appear to those held captive to that ideology to be universal and rational. The ideological beliefs of a given society at a given time are *not*, of course, seen by the overwhelming majority of all classes, dominated and dominant alike, as ideological or even typically as conventional, but as conceptions which are taken to be natural and often as almost inevitable. They are, moreover, hardly thought to require justification. They are just the things that reasonable, tolerably well-informed people believe—or so say the people captured by the ideology. But in reality they are historically specific beliefs used to “legitimate” a given social order and to help sustain and enhance the dominance of its ruling class.

Ideologies, for Marx and Engels, as my above remarks make evident, tend to foster illusions and false consciousness. Lenin, in turn, developed Marx's concept of ideology and made it a central element in his account. Like Marx he saw it as a class concept but he did not always use the term “ideology” in a

1. Some readers of earlier versions of this essay have characterized it as a traditional Marxist conception of ideology. I do not mind that in the least except that I do not think there is a traditional conception but several conceptions not *clearly* compatible with each other. Moreover, I am further puzzled that some should have thought that I characterized ideology as false consciousness. I do utilize a demythologized conception of false consciousness as a contingent feature in my elucidation of ideology, but for me *the mark* of the ideological is whether the idea, theory, or practice serves class interests. A companion account to the present essay is chapter 5 of my *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*.

negative or pejorative sense, for besides “bourgeois ideology,” expressive of ruling-class interests, he spoke of “proletarian ideology” in a nonpejorative sense, as “the ideology of the rising, revolutionary class” (Williams 1977, 41). As Douglas Kellner has nicely put it, “whereas Marx tended to see his work as theory or science, in contrast with the lies and illusions of ideology, Lenin ascribed the term ‘ideology’ to Marxism itself, and constantly talked of ideological struggle between revolutionary Marxian ideas and reactionary bourgeois ideas. Leninists have ever since used ‘ideology’ in a dual sense, ascribing positive, progressive meanings to their ideology, and negative, reactionary senses to their opponent’s ideologies” (Kellner 1977, 14). Indeed, the characterization of ideology given in a recent East German philosophical dictionary follows Lenin closely here and their characterization comes close to the first characterization of ideology given by Raymond Williams. An ideology for them is a system of social ideas which is determined by and reflects the material conditions of society, most particularly the modes of production of that society (Buhr and Kosing 1977, 73). The claim is made that, proletarian socialist ideologies apart, all class ideologies, for example, feudal ideologies or bourgeois ideologies, involve false consciousness. That is to say, these ideologies mystify and distort the way people, under the sway of that ideology, understand their social life, the workings of their society, and their historical possibilities. For people in societies such as our own at the present time, this means that we do not attain an awareness of the oppressive nature of the State or the extent of our own exploitation and alienation or the way in which our society is part of a far-flung and interconnected capitalist system. We hardly see, for example, any connection between the condition of our own lives and the condition of life and the life chances of Bolivian peasants. But there are also ideologies, on this Leninist account, namely socialist ideologies, which do not express false consciousness, do not involve giving a distorted picture of how their societies work. They can and should be seen as simply an interlocked system of beliefs and social practices characteristic of a particular social class and expressive of the interests of that social class. However, for Marx and Engels, when they spoke of ideology, they did not just mean a system of beliefs founded on a class position, though they did mean that as well, but they also meant to refer to a system of beliefs which *tend* to be illusory, which *characteristically* express false ideas or ideas expressive of false consciousness.

It is important to recognize, as Bertell Ollman has stressed, that when we speak of illusion or false consciousness, the primary stress is on the claim that “ideology does not so much falsify the details as misinterpret them so as to

reverse what actually occurs” (Ollman 1976, 228). Facts can be valued, interpreted, and situated in an indefinitely large number of ways. In an ideology there are typically a large number of statements which are true or at least approximately true. What distorts or falsifies is often not the making of false statements but the giving of a misleading or distorting perspective. What happens is that the person under the sway of the ideology is led to focus too narrowly on a certain set of facts, often quite plain and uncontroversial facts, which in this ideologically distorted understanding of the matter are not related to other facts or to their surrounding conditions. If concentrating on the facts, which leads to the distorted perspective, were relieved by a wider awareness of background matters, including other facts, a very different understanding and appreciation and a consequent different weighting of the significance of the facts would occur.

An example will help fix my meaning here. The example I have in mind is what I would call our ideological understanding of the “boat people.” When this discussion was at its height, we were repeatedly given an isolated cluster of facts, namely, that thousands of men, women, and children, typically ethnic Chinese, were fleeing Vietnam, often paying for permission to leave, and that they set to sea in rickety boats without sufficient supplies and without any assurance that they would have a safe place to land. We were also told that they were people who were sometimes set upon by pirates and were sometimes driven away by the soldiers or police of the countries in which they try to land. Indeed, if they were lucky enough not to be driven out to sea, they would be settled in crowded, unsanitary refugee camps.

Concentrating on these facts—and this is the familiar package we were given day after day—we not unnaturally, and indeed not unreasonably, will think of the Vietnam government as brutal and as uncaring about the human rights of a certain group of their citizens. We will also think of that government as mercenary and opportunist, and we will even, quite naturally, worry if they are not racist to boot since most of the boat people were ethnic Chinese. I think these reactions are, in part at least, ideological reactions and that in viewing things in this way we are in fact under the sway of an ideology. But it is not because, or at least it is not principally because, we are being told lies, and it is not because we are not cognizant of a cluster of genuine facts. The principal source of our ideological mystification is that we are given only a rather selected part of the truth. If instead we were given a wider repertoire of facts, including some facts of recent history, we would come to have a rather different understanding of what is going on than we receive from the ideologically distorted picture. This is particularly true if we keep these additional facts vividly before our minds. To the extent that

what we are given is really a wider canvassing of the facts, and a more encompassing picture arises as a result, we have a less ideological picture of what is going on.

If we relate the facts I am about to state, to the facts in the ideological message, and give the whole thing a wider perspective, we will at least partially escape our ideological understanding of the situation. (There is no need to claim, particularly in class societies, that we can ever get an understanding which is totally free of ideology. After all, accounts can be, and typically are, more or less ideological. Moreover, there is no reason to believe we are ever going to get a complete picture—or that we would even know what that comes to. But some pictures are much less complete, much more partial than others.) But, for our example above, the ideology demystifying facts are these. Only in 1975, after thirty years, did the war in Vietnam end. During that war the country had been devastated. The United States had unleashed more fire power on Vietnam than in World Wars I and II combined. Ten million peasants had either fled the bombing, mining, burning of rice paddies and the like, or they had been rounded up by the Americans and their allies to separate them from the Vietcong. During the height of the boat people problem, Vietnam was having an enormous food problem. During the war, China and the United States between them sent a million tons of rice to Vietnam every year. This came to an end with the end of the war. In this altered circumstance, Vietnam had to concern itself with the fact that heavy monsoons and droughts in 1976 and 1977 curtailed the rice crop. In 1978, floods destroyed twenty percent of the rice crop and these same floods left four million people homeless. People were still crowded into cities; their lives, in what formerly were their villages, were long ago uprooted and they suffer, where they remained in the villages, from a not unwarranted fear of unexploded land mines. There are, as a result of the American invasion, millions of unemployed still in the cities: a million troops of the defeated side, 800,000 orphans and 500,000 prostitutes, and hundreds of thousands of people who served the Thieu regime or the Americans directly or made their living from the black market. Among these is a large number of petty bourgeois ethnic Chinese who either cannot or will not integrate into a socialist society. For three years after the war they were allowed to operate on the black market as before. But in March of 1979, all black market goods were rounded up and put in state warehouses. (Again recall the desperate food situation.) There was also a currency reform during that year which made the South's currency conform to the North's. This was, in effect, a devaluation of the South's currency and it wiped out some life savings, but it also

eliminated what it is not unnatural to regard as ill-gotten, war-related wealth. In this situation, a not inconsiderable number of so-called middle-class people, who no longer had their former economic function in Vietnamese society, faced a tough choice: either go to new economic zones and help grow food or, if they were unwilling to do that, they could leave the country. There was nothing for them to do in the cities and it is unreasonable to expect Vietnam to go on feeding them indefinitely when they refuse to grow food in a country desperately short of food. Recall that there is no work for them in the cities and they are simply rotting away there. And again, given Vietnam's gigantic task of reconstruction and given the development of its productive forces, it would be neither reasonable nor just to let these people take out war-accumulated wealth. Or so, at least, it is reasonable to argue.

The lesson for ideology is this. When we get the usual cluster of "boat people facts"—indeed typically genuine facts—we naturally make one set of political and moral evaluations. When we get a wider perspective, including a wider set of facts, we often make quite different political and moral evaluations. We see, with these additional facts in a wider perspective, our situation in a new way; we gain a more perspicuous representation of the facts. Sometimes ideologies tell us direct lies, that is, more or less simple falsehoods, such as the claim that the Poles invaded Nazi Germany or that Duarte is a force standing against the right in El Salvador, but that is crude and atypical; ideological mystification usually works by giving us too narrow a selection of the facts placed in a distorting perspective. It gives us some truths but not a true picture (Richter 1979, A23). ("True picture" here can take, and should take, a demythologizing into a picture with a wide and representative range of facts, accurately and perspicuously displayed, in an inclusive manner.)

2

When we speak of ideology we speak of a concept which has both a descriptive function and a polemical one. We can hardly say "bourgeois ideology" without something like a sneer or at least a grimace. To label something "ideological" or to call someone an "ideologue" is, in many linguistic environments, to attempt to discredit it or him. We are attempting to delegitimize it or the ideologue along with his ideology. But "ideology" also functions descriptively, for it also designates a system of beliefs and practices characteristic of a particular class and reflective of its interests. But in speaking of something as ideological, as typically happens in Marx's or Engels's account, the rhetorical or normative function is also doing its work, for we are also being told, or at least given to understand, by Marx and

Engels, that ideological theories and beliefs very typically are also illusory beliefs, reflecting our own mystification about our conditions of life, situation in the world, and human possibilities. (This was particularly stressed in their *German Ideology*.)

In trying to gain a purchase on ideology, a Marxist, when speaking descriptively, can, and in my view should, start neutrally by stressing that an ideology is a system of ideas together with their associated social practices which, for a group of people, embody their conceptions of themselves, their self-images. It embodies, that is, their various forms of social self-consciousness. Marxists believe that these conceptions are fundamentally conditioned by the relations of production of that society. These relations of production typically structure the interests that can be expressed and the way they are expressed, and these relations of production (the economic structure of society) are in turn fundamentally conditioned by the forces of production of that society. This displays the descriptive side of ideology. But ideological beliefs are not just distinctive class beliefs but typically beliefs which are to be criticized, hopefully not by other ideological beliefs, but by nonideological beliefs or by beliefs which are not just ideological. They are to be criticized, perhaps exposed is the better word, for being discreditable because they are a distinctive sort of illusory belief, namely beliefs which, typically in a disguised way, work to protect the interests of the dominant class while purporting to be of universal human significance and indeed purporting to be morally appropriate beliefs to which all members of the society should subscribe as answering to their interests.

There is, as I remarked initially, no single Marxist conception of ideology. Marx engaged in critique of ideology, principally in his *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, *On the Jewish Question*, *The Holy Family*, and in his *Paris Manuscripts*, before he ever mentioned such a conception. The concept is explicitly introduced, I believe for the first time, in *The German Ideology*. There "ideology" does both descriptive and rhetorical work, but it is hardly the case that either there or elsewhere Marx, or for that matter Engels, developed a *theory* of ideology. Moreover, he does not provide us with a definition of "ideology."

However, I believe that Marx's intent concerning what ideology is can well be captured by regarding an ideology as an intellectual structure, a system of concepts, beliefs, and values with its associated set of social practices which, in fact, though typically in a disguised way, serves principally the interests of one class or primary social group while typically but not invariably putting itself forward as serving the interests of the whole of the society.

A system of ideology, as I construe it, typically creates illusions and sustains false consciousness and, whether in intent or otherwise, in reality it usually supports social practices and institutions which give one class or primary social group power over another. Ideological theories of the dominant class attempt to mask class conflict and sometimes even to deny the reality of classes. The falseness of such accounts enters primarily through their narrowed perspective: a perspective in which the way that material conditions of life actually affect our theories is repeatedly underplayed. The ties between the theory and class interests are not made. Indeed they are typically obfuscated. Instead, ideology, where it is working effectively, typically gives people an illusory sense of community, a mystified way of seeing their own social relations and their social world as a whole. Where the dominated class or classes are caught up in the ideology of the dominant class, their power is weakened, their capacity to act with autonomy severely circumscribed. The ideology helps to perpetuate a social structure contrary to the interests of the dominated class.

We can see from this characterization of ideology how it captures all the *leitmotive* about ideology that Williams stresses as that of the Marxist tradition. It indicates how an ideology is: (a) a general process of the production of ideas, particularly ideas which give people their own socially sanctioned self-images and a conception of their place in society; (b) how its production serves the hegemonic interests of the dominant class by “legitimizing” its authority; (c) how it is a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class and reflective of the modes of production which prevail at that time; and (d) how in the standard cases it is a system of distinctive illusory beliefs which obscure the understanding of the actual workings of society and particularly of its class nature.

3

I have not talked about *the* Marxist conception of ideology—there is no such thing—but of *a* Marxist conception of ideology. Even so, it is not unnatural to respond that my analysis in the previous sections does not do justice to the diversity and controversy concerning the concept in the Marxist tradition. I began my essay by specifying some of the divergent uses of the term in Marx’s work, but I have not examined whether there are deep tensions among the different uses of the term in his work or attended to the relations between something being ideological on the one hand and being scientific on the other. I say nothing about the latter here, having nothing new on that specific topic to say beyond what I said in *Marxism and the Moral Point of*

View. There I argued (with due respect to Louis Althusser and indeed many others as well) that there is no necessary conflict between something being ideological and something being either scientific or a justified moral claim. Ricardo's work helped sustain bourgeois ideology and indeed was a bit of bourgeois ideology, but it also—and often the same bits of work—made a contribution to economic theory just as Marx's *Capital* is both a contribution to proletarian ideology and a contribution to economic theory. Similarly Bentham's and Kant's moral theories, though in different ways, make *some* sound ethical claims and sound moral arguments and are contributions to bourgeois ideology, just as G. A. Cohen's and Andrew Levine's ethical argumentation make some sound moral claims and related moral arguments and are bits of socialist ideology as well. Ideological claims, given the way they *tend* to distort our understanding of ourselves and society, often do conflict both with sound moral claims and with bits of genuine science but they need not, for what makes something ideological is that it *answers to or serves class interests* not that it reflects false consciousness in that it is a bit of distorted discourse.² The labor theory of value *could* be a justified scientific theory and, as well, a tool serving the interests of the proletariat. Science and ideology frequently are but need not be in conflict. Here, of course, my account is in conflict with such influential accounts as those of Althusser, Jorge Larrain, and Cohen.

It was not my intention to examine the various ways that Marx speaks of something being an ideology and being ideological and possible tensions here. I think, perhaps too uncritically, that this has admirably been done by Joseph McCarney in his important but neglected *The Real World of Ideology* and I need not repeat it here. Moreover, it also seems to me that he has shown well that, among the classical Marxists from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Lukács, there has been a common conception of ideology in which the most central characteristic of something ideological is that it serves class interests. I try to elucidate that conception and to show something of how it functions in human discourse. McCarney argues, rightly I believe, that with Nicos Poulantzas and Althusser, as well as many other contemporary Marxists, there is a departure from this classical Marxist tradition and the generation of a body of theory about ideology that has been in the main unfortunate. (Antonio Gramsci stands as a watershed figure here. His work points in both directions.)

2. Note that "false consciousness" could be dropped from the above description; it is enough that it be a bit of distorted discourse.

However, since controversy over what is a proper Marxist conception of ideology is extensive, I shall say something about it in this and in the next section. My point is not to make a historical elucidation of Marx but to give an articulation of a Marxist conception of ideology that will be perspicuous and useful in Marxian theory and critique.

Some neo-Marxists and other radical thinkers (e.g., Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault) believe that an account such as mine puts too much stress on the intentions and the consciousness of agents, albeit as members of distinctive classes. An account like mine, the argument goes, sticks too much to equating ideology with an articulation of the interests imputed to a social actor and deemed to possess specifiable class interests. But this, the argument goes, is too psychologistic and subjective. What we must look to instead are the actual practices and the intersubjective system of ideas, including the technological organization of material production as systems of ideas and practices which answer to the interests of a determinate class. But this is exactly what I do. I only point out, in a way not substantially different from the way Habermas articulates things, that such practices and systems of ideas tend to give agents under the hegemony of that class—agents perfectly normally socialized into certain class societies—a distorted and thus partially false understanding of their situation and prospects. This is a straightforwardly demythologized meaning for “false consciousness.”

Williams (as we have seen) captures schematically the uses of “ideology” in Marx. In various elaborated and modified forms they have been taken up by the competing and at least *prima facie* conflicting strands of thought in contemporary Marxism. Sometimes for Marx, Williams claims, an ideology is taken to be “a system of beliefs characteristic of a certain class”; at other times it is taken to be a “system of illusory beliefs—false ideas or false consciousness—which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge” (Williams 1977, 66). Allowing for important clarifications, McCarney (1980) takes the first strand as capturing what ideology is for Marx and the Marxist tradition. By contrast, Larrain in his *The Concept of Ideology and Marxism and Ideology* takes up, though again with nuances, the second strand as does Althusser in *Lenin and Philosophy*. Both McCarney and Larrain give textually responsible and carefully argued accounts which capture genuine strands in Marx’s thought. McCarney’s account has the advantage of yielding, between Marx and Lenin, a unified account of ideology and that, if it can be done without violence to the texts, is surely an advantage. My own account is closer to McCarney’s than to Larrain’s or Althusser’s. I agree (speaking very roughly) with McCarney that “ideology is thought which serves class interests” in the context of class struggle (McCarney 1980, 127). “Sets of

ideas,” as he well puts it, “have ideological significance only in so far as they bring values to bear on the institutions and practices that are the site and instruments of that struggle” (McCarney 1980, 127). While I take answering to class interests as being definitive of something being an ideology, I catch the other strand of a Marxist articulation of what characterizes an ideology by stressing that there is a *pervasive tendency* for ideologies to distort our understanding of social reality. Where ideology is working well and is a dominant class ideology, it will mystify the understanding of the dominated class in a way that serves ruling class interests, though this need not imply that the ruling class or even a part of the ruling class or their supporters among the intelligentsia will recognize this and deliberately foist this ideology on the dominated classes. They, or at least most of them, may very well be as mystified as the dominated classes. But what I do not say is that an ideology by definition distorts our understanding or comprises thought which is systematically deflected from truth or deflected from truth at all. It may do this in conformity to the limited vision and sectional interests of a particular social class but it may, as both Lenin and Lukács argue, be a socialist ideology informed by Marxist theory which will serve proletarian class interests without distortion or deflection from truth.

My account plainly cannot be summarized as a “conception of ideology as false consciousness.” Rather it could be summarized as a conception of ideology as thought and practices serving class interests. This means that I do not conceive ideology as something which is necessarily a bad thing. Using the term ideology is not *necessarily* pejorative and it is not *necessarily* a negative and critical conception; we can, in some circumstances, speak of ideology in a positive way. Ideology is good or bad according to (a) which class interests it serves *and* (b) according to whether it does so by means of mystifying people. When we think of a proletarian ideology here, we need to remember that the proletariat is a class which will bring an end to class rule. Its interests are the interests of humanity and an ideology which serves those interests need not be ethically untoward or mystifying because it need not con a large class of people into being a dominated class. So an ideology is not by definition a bad thing or a mystifying thing, though when we look at the role of ideologies in class struggles, where a class embodying the interests of a minority tries to dominate a class whose membership is very large indeed, these ideologies will function to distort in important ways the understanding of a very extensively membered class in the interests (whether clearly articulated or not) of the minority ruling class.

In speaking of ideology as answering to class interests, to note an ambiguity in such a phrase, I do *not* intend to be saying anything about the social determination of thought. I am not trying to show how all ideas or even certain ideas arise. I am not interested in giving a genetic account of the origin of our beliefs including our officially sanctioned beliefs about man and society. I am concerned with the function of certain beliefs, discourses, and practices in class struggle. I beg the question of whether Cohen (1982) and David Schweickart (1989) are right, against Jon Elster (1982), that functional explanations which are also causal are appropriate to Marxism. Ideology for me, as it is for McCarney, is “the medium through which class struggle is conducted in theory” (McCarney 1980, 22). The claim is that “the ideology of a class is the set of representations that serve its particular interests” (McCarney 1980, 113). Ideology—to sloganize it—serves class interests. This is to make a functionalist claim. If functionalist analyses are mistaken, then such a conception of ideology is mistaken. But Cohen and Schweickart have successfully argued, I believe, though in different ways, that functional analyses can have a place and are indispensable for Marxism.

Althusser in *For Marx, Reading Capital*, and most forcefully in *Lenin and Philosophy* develops an alternative Marxist conception of ideology that has been very influential. I think McCarney has shown that it is so great a departure from the way Marx and Lenin have argued that it should hardly be regarded as Marxist at all (McCarney 1980, 60-69). But, genuinely Marxist or not, it is distinctive, powerfully conceived, and has been influential in Marxist circles. So I shall briefly consider it and critically contrast it with the account given here. Althusser takes ideology to be something inescapable. He takes it as something that goes with the very existence of society and will obtain even in classless societies (if such ever come to be) as much as in societies which are class societies. Thus ideology will not come to an end even with the advent of full communism.

When we consider, Althusser contends, very generally what ideology is, we should consider, as I do, what its function is, but Althusser would claim that I have misidentified its function. Ideology, he would have it, anywhere and anytime functions to secure cohesion in society. This is what the *general* theory of ideology ascertains. But when we develop a theory of *particular* ideologies and consider the particular ideologies of class societies, we discover that this general function, though of course real for those societies as well as for all others, is undetermined for class societies. In class societies we discover that ideology has the additional function of securing the domination of one class by another by making, as Althusser puts it, “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of

existence" (1971, 153). So while generally ideologies provide the social cement of society, *class* ideologies (a conception which for me, but not for Althusser, is pleonastic) still have the two poles identified by Williams: (a) they are a system of beliefs characteristic of a certain class and (b) they are a system of illusory beliefs serving class interests. As such, Althusser argues, they are to be contrasted with scientific knowledge in that they cannot be true representations of the world.

Here the sharp contrast between Althusser's and my account comes out. I take it, as I argued earlier, that this second feature—being mystifications in the service of class interests—is not a *necessary* feature of all class ideologies. It need not be the case, and indeed should not be the case, for a socialist ideology of a revolutionary transitional period. Moreover, this socialist ideology, as I have shown earlier and as McCarney shows, need not be in conflict with or even in contrast to true scientific beliefs.³ Althusser confuses a feature which is pervasive in some class ideologies with a necessary feature, a conceptually necessary feature, of class ideologies. However, their general function, a function that any ideology must have (i.e., securing cohesion in society), is a feature that could be usefully incorporated in my general characterization of ideologies. Ideologies, as I would have it, function (a) to secure cohesion in society or some class in a society and (b) to serve the interests of a class. Moreover, in achieving cohesion, this particular cohesion serves class interests. The dominated class, where the ideology is functioning well, feels loyalty to the society and its institutions or at least in one way or another accepts them, though in some instances grudgingly.

It is an important thing to recognize and to stress, as Althusser does, that every society requires a set of representations which provides the cohesion necessary for a society to survive and perpetuate itself. Without it individuals could not be socialized into the society. That is to say, they could not become recognizably human individuals. This function is something which Althusser takes to be common to and distinctive of ideologies, while for me, and I believe for Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Lukács as well, it is only common to ideologies but not distinctive of them. What is common to and distinctive of ideologies is that they serve class interests. There can be in my account, but

3. This is surely an idealization on my part. In actual socialist revolutions there has been, both before and during the fighting and during the consolidation of the revolution, a not inconsiderable amount of sloganeering, propaganda, and the like. Perhaps this is inescapable, though the results have not been encouraging to socialists. Perhaps it is too utopian, but I hope that we could have a socialist revolution where during at least the consolidation we could have ideology without distortion.

not in Althusser's, world-views and systems of beliefs, including scientific systems of belief, which function to secure cohesion in the society but for all that are nonideological. This is indeed a terminological dispute but not just a terminological dispute, for, as Althusser himself came to see in his later *Essays in Self-Criticism*, allowing beliefs to be characterized as ideological simply because they function to secure cohesion in society misses the key role Marx assigned to ideological critique in class struggle, namely that beliefs have ideological significance only insofar as they are intellectual weapons in class struggle. The crucial thing about ideology is the role it plays in class struggle. For Althusser one can have ideologies which play no such role at all. Ideology, in my view, and in McCarney's rational reconstruction of Marx, is "the medium through which the class struggle is conducted in theory" (McCarney 1980, 22). Althusser's classic and distinctive account, prior to his extensive reversal in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, entirely ignores, as do non-Marxist conceptions of ideology, that vital role in Marxist and Marxian analyses. But this loses the key link between theory and practice, a link which is essential to Marxism.

The above to the contrary notwithstanding, Althusser does characterize how it is that ideologies tend to mystify and how in that way they contrast with adequate scientific accounts of social reality. Ideologies, Althusser points out, (a) are unconscious of their theoretical presuppositions and (b) prejudge the problems they range over. This, for him, contrasts rather insidiously with science. To believe that there is such a sharp contrast, as work in the sociology of science has shown, is to take at face value an idealization of the actual practice of science. Still, it perhaps has value as an idealization. We see what would be the ideal to be achieved by science (a heuristic for it to aim at). What would be achieved there provides a clear contrast with the cognitive defects that frequently plague ideology though they are not a necessary part of it. Here, I think, Althusser makes a reasonably valuable contribution to specifying how ideologies in class societies tend to work and how they do demystifying work which keeps the dominated class or classes in line as well as at least some members of the dominant class. But this shows nothing about how anything, just to be an ideology, must have such cognitive defects such that ideology must conflict with science and must misrepresent social reality.

This is particularly unfortunate if we do not keep as quite separate on the one hand, the distinction between the "social cement function" that Althusser takes as a feature of *all* ideologies, a feature which makes it inescapable that all human beings will be socialized into the world-view of some ideology or other, so neutrally conceived, with, on the other hand, ideology having the

cognitive defects specified by Althusser. A set of beliefs which provides human beings in a society with a cohesive view of themselves need have no such cognitive defects, or for that matter any cognitive defects at all, and such a set of beliefs need not be in conflict with science. So one could agree with Althusser "that ideology (as a system of mass representations) is indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence" without believing that there *need* be anything untoward at all about such a system of mass representations (Althusser 1979, 235). That is to say, it need not (with due respect to Althusser) be unscientific, myth-making, or mystifying. Althusser has established no link, either logical or causal, between his claim that every society needs a set of beliefs and practices to socialize individuals and to sustain the cohesion of society and his further and utterly distinct claim that all ideology involves distorted, imaginary relationships in which "human beings are necessarily condemned to live in this capacity...cut off from an awareness of the real conditions of their existence" (McCarney 1980, 68).⁴

I want now to turn briefly to a consideration of Jorge Larrain's Marxist conception of ideology. Larrain stresses a side of Marx which contends that ideology is an "inverted" form of consciousness which, when expressed in language, contains conceptualizations expressive of distorted thought stemming from and in turn concealing the social contradictions present in the mode of production of some class society. This gives ideology "a clear-cut negative and critical connotation" in Marx's thought (Larrain 1986, 218). Moreover, "because of their limited material mode of activity," people in class societies, "unable to solve these contradictions in practice," tend to project these contradictions into "purely mental or discursive solutions which effectively conceal or misrepresent the existence of these contradictions" (Larrain 1987, 220). These, Larrain maintains, are "ideological forms of consciousness" which find expression in some characteristic forms of discourse of a class society, discourse which hides these social contradictions, thereby contributing to their reproduction and with that serving the interests of the ruling class of that society. Ideology, in its very essence, for Larrain, is distortion and misrepresentation of social contradictions and thus, as for Althusser, an ideology inescapably involves some cognitive defects. But ideology, in Larrain's reading of Marx, is not just any kind of cognitive

4. For a penetrating critique of Althusser see McCarney (1980, 67-79). For Althusser's own new reconceptualization, see Althusser (1976, 37-58, 130-77). For McCarney's assessment of this later account see McCarney (1980, 77-79, 98-100).

defect or distortion but only those distortions “which are connected with the concealment of a contradictory and inverted reality” (Larrain 1987, 220). Larrain would take McCarney’s point that *sometimes*, though very infrequently, Marx did *not* negatively conceptualize ideology. But that notwithstanding, he would add, ideology was, overwhelmingly, negatively conceptualized by Marx. It was only later with Lenin, Lukács, and Gramsci that we get any extensive employment of the positive conceptualization that McCarney describes and I have reproduced.

I have tried to give reasons for preferring McCarney’s analysis which sees a continuity from Marx through Lenin and Lukács. The continuity consists in a common conception of ideology where ideology is taken to be essentially representations and practices which serve class interests: representations and practices which may or may not distort our understanding of society and may or may not conflict with science. Here, as a Marxological point, McCarney’s (1980, 95) reading of *The German Ideology* is central. If that is correct, there is no ground (with due respect to Larrain) for saddling Marx with an essentially negative conception of ideology in conflict with Lenin’s positive conceptualization. This, however, is fully compatible with Larrain’s astute point about the ways in which ideologies do characteristically distort in class societies up to socialist societies, that is, in class societies where the dominant class is a minority class.

My interests are less in the Marxological point and more in the possibility of constructing a sound Marxist or Marxian conceptualization of ideology. Larrain’s analysis, unlike my own, does not keep distinct contingent and necessary features of ideology, of what makes something an ideology and things that ideologies often do. Ideologies must, to be ideologies, serve class interests but they do not necessarily distort. But, and paradigmatically in capitalist societies, ideologies do, as a matter of fact, distort. The strength of Larrain’s analysis is to bring out crucial ways in which ideology distorts. He represents this incisively without relying on a problematic psychologistic conception of false consciousness which does not adequately capture what ideological distortion is. Larrain locates it in such a way that it nicely meshes with and clarifies what I take to be a reasonably traditional Marxist conception of ideology: a conception articulated and defended in this essay. (I should add, however, that there is nothing in the demythologized conception of false consciousness used here that conflicts with Larrain’s account.)

4

The alternative Marxist views in the previous section avoid the conceptual and epistemological difficulties inherent in the false consciousness approach. I have argued that nonetheless, while containing some important insights that need to be incorporated into a fully articulated Marxist or Marxian theory of ideology, they also suffer from other defects not present in my own account or in McCarney's rational reconstruction of Marx's account of ideology, an account which he (with due respect to Larrain) takes to be an account faithfully developed by Lenin and Lukács.

I want in this section to turn to another putatively Marxian account which, if correct, would in some important respects undermine my own account.⁵ In what seems to me to be a rather historicist and indeed even relativist way, that account discusses ideology without reference to false consciousness at all. Indeed, it goes further than that, for it avoids in the characterizing of ideology the true/false, correct/distorted dichotomies altogether. This is not taken to be some poststructuralist, non-Marxian conception of ideology but a Marxist or at least a Marxian conception which is an attempt to articulate, in what is thought to be a more perspicuous way, what Marx and Engels were trying to articulate in referring to ideology. The claim is that we interpret Marx and Engels as giving an account of the notion of ideology in which an ideological remark is taken to be (a) an epitaph directed at one theory or science from the perspective of another (without thereby invoking the epistemological privilege of the latter over the former) and (b) as a name given to those theories/sciences which invoke a knowing subject as the guarantee of knowledge, or some other such nonessentialist idea. The thing is to avoid reproducing the truth/falsity dichotomy of traditional epistemologies.

Linked with this, but translating into the concrete, it could be pointed out that I, like Bertell Ollman, speak of ideology as typically falsifying by giving too narrow and too selected a representation of the facts. But in so speaking, have I not in effect presupposed a very non-Marxist scientific, rationalist, perhaps even scientistic, conception of things in which science is seen as having a firm and full grasp of the facts—perhaps even all the facts—while an ideology has only a very partial grasp of the facts?

A more historicist and more adequately Marxist conception of things, it is claimed, would not be so rationalistic or scientistic but would argue instead

5. Here I refer to an account—or something having some family resemblance to that account—by D. F. Ruccio, a referee for this journal, though I do not know whether the view he clearly stated is a view he would wish to endorse.

that each and every theory, including scientific theories, sees/selects/produces some facts and not others, that each theory or science is as partial/incomplete/biased as every other theory or science, that each will produce different understandings of things as a result, and that where the theorist is self-consciously aware of this he will not claim that some theories, including some scientific theories, will admit more facts than others.

On this alternative account my boat people example will be differently understood than the way in which I understood it. The conventional bourgeois account would, on this alternative meta-account, be seen as picking out one cluster of facts and I would be seen as picking out another. Other accounts, this meta-account shows, would pick out still different clusters of facts with different effects on what the people who advert to these alternative facts would see and at least attempt to do about the boat people, without there being any claim about one account being a more adequate account—being a truer account—of what their situation was or what their story is really like.

Such a line of argumentation can have a related turn that will in another way significantly contrast with my argument. It would start by accepting the point that I make concerning what must obtain for the very conception of ideology or the ideological to be intelligible, namely, that there must be a nonvacuous contrast between what is ideological and what is not. If everything cannot but be ideological then nothing can be ideological. Such talk is plainly incoherent. There must be some standard whereby one can argue that some conceptions are ideological while others are not. But, the argument will continue, the standard (contrary to what understand) need not be that of truth or falsity.

Instead, the nonvacuous contrast with its appropriate standard of what is ideological and what is not is given as follows: modes of thought which are ideological are grounded in humanist epistemologies of the origin of knowledge in knowing subjects, while nonideological modes of thought require no such singular and complete origin of knowledge. A striking advantage of this way of contrasting the ideological with the nonideological, it is claimed, is that this conception need not invoke or assume or in any way presuppose some true conception of reality to which the ideological can be compared and declared false.

It is one thing to characterize ideology without a reference to false consciousness. Both McCarney and Larrain do this with considerable success and my continuing to speak of “false consciousness” is demythologized to such an extent that in this respect there is no substantial difference between their views and mine. But to dispense with a true/false, correct/distorted conceptual dichotomy altogether is certainly another kettle of clams.

That aside, the first problem I have with such an account is complete bafflement about how it could in any way be thought to be Marxist or even Marxian. It sounds more Mannheim-ish or Feyerabend-ish or post-structuralist French rather than Marxian. Marx, as I read him, while rejecting the atomism of traditional empiricism was, as is particularly clear in *The German Ideology*, concerned to work from empirical premises and to give a realistic account of the world. Facts were hardly taken to be our creation. His economic theories and his theory of epochal social change (historical materialism) were at least intended to be scientific, causal theories which made claims which he took to be approximately true in a perfectly unproblematic epistemologically and otherwise philosophically unencumbered sense of "true." This is Marx rationally reconstructed by such differently oriented analytical Marxists as Cohen (1978), William Shaw (1978), Daniel Little (1985), Richard Miller (1984), and Levine (1984). And this is Marx as he presented himself, and this is how Engels and Lenin read him as well. Perhaps this belief about what he was about is radically mistaken. Theorists can be mistaken about the logical status of their own beliefs. Perhaps Marx's Enlightenment conception of his own work is confused and we should have instead the utterly relativistic Marxism without truth of the above account (Nielsen 1988, 59-75). However, if we take that turn we should recognize that it is a great distance from anything which even appears to be Marxian.

Even a much more Hegelianized Marxism than the Marxism defended by analytical Marxists would be very different from the above. Hegel might well be called a historicist but he was not a relativist. He did not think we could ever have a perspective-free position, foundationalist or otherwise. No man could leap over history, could jump out of his cultural context, but not all perspectives are equally adequate, not all perspectives have the same coherent pattern of true or approximately true claims. Some perspectives are more developed than others and give a truer or more adequate account of reality than others. These more developed accounts give a more perspicuous representation than the earlier accounts and explain everything the earlier accounts did, including the rationale of the earlier accounts and more as well. On these grounds the more developed, more ramified perspectives are more adequate perspectives, truer perspectives (if you will), than the earlier, less-developed ones.

This does not mean, however, that there is any claim at all to know what "the true account of reality" means, let alone which account is that account or whether anyone can ever presume even to approximate that account. Similar

things apply for “the true conception of reality,” or even for “a true account of reality.” Such notions, like *the* truth, are not even remotely scientific. Indeed, we do not even have any tolerably clear sense of what we are talking about when we use such phrases. But this is not to say that we do not, in many circumstances, know perfectly well that a given statement is true or approximately true and that a given set of true or approximately true statements fit together coherently into a tolerably systematic account of some portion of social reality, for example, how at a given time and place the economy works, what family relations are, what the religious attitudes of a given society are, what class configurations and conflicts there are, and the like. *The* truth is wanton but there is no reason to think *truth* is wanton, though surely some *philosophical* doctrines about what truth is are indeed very problematic.

Even if my Marxological point is accepted, it could be argued that both traditional Marxism and the reconstructions of analytical Marxism are too scientific, too remote from what we can actually understand about human beings and human society. Althusser sought to put the Hegelianized Marxism of the tradition on a sounder structuralist basis and so those willing to rethink Marxism might seek to set it on a more adequate poststructuralist, post-modernist basis. My hunch here is that this would undermine the scientific claims of Marxism and deprive it of any critical and emancipatory practice. But it might be said in turn that it would yield for Marxism a chastened scientific account more in accord with the actual nature of the human sciences and a political practice that would square better with what our actual social situation is, with what our world is actually like.

So let us turn to examining such an account. Vagueness apart, I am stopped right at the beginning, for, given its unqualified relativism, there is no sense to be attached to getting things right or getting them wrong or even to start conceiving what the world is actually like.

There are some red herrings to be located and set aside first. This account seeks to avoid the true/false dichotomies of traditional epistemologies. But one can think, as Cohen (1989, 239) does, of ideology as “thinking which is systematically deflected from truth because of its conformity to the limited vision and sectional interests of a particular class” without invoking traditional epistemologies—say, foundationalist ones—or any epistemology at all. Indeed, one could have said “goodbye” to epistemology, as Richard Rorty, Donald Davidson, and Charles Taylor do, while continuing to think that the true and the false are useful distinctions, that we can have good grounds for some of our beliefs, that science and common sense can make true or

approximately true claims about the world, and that such distinctions are useful in spelling out the ways ideologies often work.

The accusation about scientific rationalism and holistic perspectivism is also a red herring. There is no need or indeed even any possibility of talking about having a grasp of *all* the facts. We do not even know what that would be like so we have no clear sense of what it means. But some accounts can more perspicuously, more accurately, display facts, can have a wider, more inclusive, more systematic display of them than other accounts and thus *prima facie* at least can be more adequate accounts of the facts than the other accounts.

There is no good reason at all to think, as that “postmodernist Marxian” account avers, that all these accounts from these various perspectives, cognitively or otherwise, are all on a par. That we do not have the absolute truth or the uniquely true, all-embracing perspective does not mean that some perspectives do not yield more truth, give a more adequate account, than others. No reason at all has been given for believing *Alles ist Relativ*.

This postmodernist Marxism without truth notes that each theory, reflecting different perspectives, takes note of different facts. That idea, just left like that, is a commonplace, but that the selection of facts is completely different or that they have no facts in common hardly follows from that and on its own is, to put it minimally, hardly plausible. Moreover, some may note too few facts, or may not arrange them perspicuously, or may not draw plausible inferences from them or construct plausible hypotheses in the light of them. Moreover, while there are indeed some rules which are constitutive rules and there are some facts which are constitutive facts—say, facts about chess or baseball—not all facts would be thought to be such that it is at all plausible to say that they are produced. Some are just there to be discovered, such as the demographic facts in Quebec, facts about speed-ups on the assembly line, facts about unemployment, facts about class conflict, and the like. There are some things which are just there to be discovered in the world, and some accounts may fail to note facts, including such facts, which are very crucial. There may indeed be no theory-neutral descriptions or (more cautiously) very significant theory-neutral descriptions, but it does not follow from this that facts are produced or created or are the “creatures” of theory. Moreover, that any description or theory is incomplete or partial does not mean, as we have already seen, that some are not more complete than others. From the fact that a theory is incomplete it does not follow that the theory is in any way biased, prejudiced, or ideologically skewed, though, of course, it might be. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to ask what the

principle or the rationale of the selection is. But the bare fact that it is incomplete—something inescapable in any event—does not connote that it is biased. Indeed, if it did, it would deprive “ideology” of a nonvacuous contrast, but that is something which the very theory I am contrasting with my own requires.⁶ “An incomplete but unbiased account” is not a contradiction. A biased account is a prejudiced account where the selection, wittingly or unwittingly, is made in some *parti-pris* spirit serving certain interests in a way that could not be impartially justified. Not all incomplete accounts have these characteristics. No logical link has been forged between being incomplete and being biased.

This putatively new Marxian account is so deeply relativistic that it would undermine any critical thrust that a Marxian theory might have. But that is one of the distinguishing marks of a Marxian theory. Indeed it is the very *raison d'être* of such a theory. But if different accounts of the boat people (or whatever) select different facts and arrange them differently, and these different accounts would have different effects on people, there surely would sometimes be, in human terms at least, differences between them which are not unimportant. If, in looking at these different accounts, we are constrained to make the relativistic claim of this “Marxian” account, namely, the claim that no account is truer or more adequate than any other, the “Marxian account” has lost anything even approaching a critical cutting edge. Moreover, such an extreme relativism or indeed any relativism is problematic. We would need here some very careful argumentation on the part of such an account for making such a radical paradigm shift to provide Marxism with such radically different new foundations.

Finally, this account tries to spell out the ideological genetically. Ideological theories, it claims, concern themselves with the origin of knowledge in knowing subjects and nonideological accounts do not. But the thing in spotting ideological theories or practices is not to try to trace their class origins or anything like that, but to see what class interests they serve. This is to be ascertained by discovering their rationale—the role or roles they play in social life—why societies have these theories or practices, and, most particularly, the role they play in class struggles including, of course, rather disguised class struggles. (These are the struggles characteristic of present-day Western capitalist societies.)

6. My account, too, requires it.

My account is functionalist.⁷ It need have no concern with origins at all. An interest in the class origins of ideas would be of value for Marxian practice only if it were useful in identifying how various ideas, theories, and practices serve class interests. But that linkage between the origins of ideologies and their functional role is a very difficult thing to discern. What should be done instead is to go directly to ascertaining (and that is difficult enough) how various ideologies and ideological claims work—the jobs they do—to meet class interests: how they shore up the established order or how they work to emancipate new challenging classes and the like. When we say that ideologies answer to class interests, that is what we should have in mind and not anything about the origins of such ideologies.

5

The conception of ideology developed in sections 1 and 2 is a Marxist conception of ideology, which I contrasted in the previous two sections with some other, less traditional Marxist or putatively Marxist conceptions of ideology. Now I want to relate briefly my Marxist conception to and contrast it with some plainly non-Marxist conceptions of ideology which are very pervasive in Western societies. There is a latitudinarian sense of “ideology” in which an ideology, in John Plamenatz’s words, is simply taken to be “any set of closely related beliefs or ideas, or even attitudes characteristic of a group or community,” or as any “cluster of closely interconnected ideas, beliefs, and attitudes which function both to interpret experience and as guides to action” (Plamenatz 1970, 5). Rather more specifically (but still very generally, but perhaps more usefully), we could say that to set forth an ideology is to set out a general outlook which incorporates certain values—certain conceptions about how to live and how to order society—and which aims at either an alteration of human life and society or a sanctification and justification of the established order in such a way as to promote or at least protect group solidarity (Gellner 1974, 113-50). Since “ideology” is a term of art, one might stop short, as many would, with only the first part of the above characterization. On that reading, an “ideology” would become roughly equivalent to a “world-view.” Such a truncated conception would not, however, make contact with while maintaining its distinction from

7. Though it is fair enough to say that it is functionalist in a rather latitudinarian sense. I am here not making any general claims about the structure and sense of functionalist explanations. Cohen’s account, however, seems very plausible to me.

Marxist conceptions and particularly the Marxist conception which I articulated. It would not be as effective in capturing the phenomena that we want to characterize with the term "ideology" as the more ramified conception. If, however, from the more ramified account, we drop the part about "altering human life and society," the part about "protecting group solidarity," and the part about "sanctifying and justifying the established order," we would have in kernel a very general conception of ideology which is now widely accepted by non-Marxists. It is characterized well by Bernard Williams (1967) as follows:

In its broadest sense, I take the term "ideology" to stand for a system of political and social beliefs that does two things. First, it embodies some set of values or ideals, and, consequently, some principles of action: though such principles will be of necessity very general, and in some cases mainly negative, being concerned more with limitations on political action, for instance, rather than with an overall aim of it. Secondly, an ideology connects with its values and principles of action some set of very general theoretical beliefs which give the values and principles some sort of backing or justification. The generality of these beliefs must, moreover, be of a special kind, if we are to speak of "an ideology": they must, I think, be general beliefs about man, society, and the state, and not merely about some aspect of man in society. For instance, a belief in Free Trade or federalism, even though supported by general economic or political reasons, could not by itself constitute an ideology. The distinguishing mark of an ideology is that its general beliefs concern man and society as such, and hence concern things that are presupposed in any political or social situation whatsoever (162-63).

Here "ideology" comes to mean "world-view about the place of people in society." It is compatible with, though it does not require, the conception of ideology of the pluralist "end of ideology" advocates who identify an ideology with a set of political "isms" and with those who regard ideologies as social myths. What such conceptions do not make evident, and what Bernard Williams's characterization also does not make evident, is the way in which ideologies (things which flourish in class-divided societies) help generate hegemonic, ruling-class ideas which will make people come to accept a social order which sustains the interests of that dominant class. Ideology, to put the matter crudely, typically functions, Marxists claim, to con us into accepting that class-dominated order as legitimate. A state rules unstably which must rule by overt coercion. Ideology serves to create the illusion of legitimacy.

In fine, Marxists who stick close to Marx, and who stick close to the way I characterized ideology, will insist on adding to the non-Marxist conception of ideology that ideologies are social and intellectual constructions which exist in class societies principally to protect class interests and that they

typically do this by social mystification. Our understanding of social reality is not infrequently distorted by ideology and false consciousness is generated in the service of class interests. This is a crucial underlying function of ideology, though I do not take this to be the mark of the ideological. What makes something an ideology or an ideological belief or practice is that it answers to class interests. But ideologies typically and pervasively distort our understanding of ourselves and of our society.

Why this is so, if indeed it is, can hardly be established apart from establishing the approximate truth of a not inconsiderable amount of Marxist social theory. If the historicizing of social theories, traceable in recent times back to Karl Mannheim (himself a kind of socialist), is very near to the mark, then we should look on Marxist social theory as, *in its very own terms* and not just in Bernard Williams's neutral characterization, an ideology. However, if the historicist, sociology of knowledge critique cuts too deep, then the very notion of ideology as mystified consciousness becomes a Holmes-less Watson, for if the claim is that all overall views of man and society *must* be ideological, then the reality is that none can be. There must be at least the possibility of some nonideological understanding of man and society for us to be able even to identify another conception as ideological. But that conceptual point aside, whether Marxism should be viewed as an ideology, even on its own characterization of "ideology," is one of the fundamental issues of contemporary social theory. It is not a part of my intent to claim that Marxism is, on its own terms, an ideology. Rather, my intent was to bring out the distinctive features and import of a Marxist conception of ideology and to contrast it both with some at least putatively distinct Marxist conceptions of ideology and with some typical and important non-Marxist conceptions. I have elsewhere argued that Marxism is both a social science and a revolutionary *praxis* which is indeed ideological in that it answers to proletarian class interests but not that it *must* be distorting of social reality or come in conflict with well-warranted scientific conceptions, including, of course, those of Marxist social science (Nielsen 1989, 98-135).

6

Why should a Marxist or a Marxian bother to contrast a Marxian conception of ideology with non-Marxian conceptions? One reason is purely pedagogical. There is, in the social and human sciences, an extensive array of conceptions of ideology. Sorting out the different ones and becoming clear about their respective claims will help us to be clearer at least about some of

the things that set these social theories apart. At least arguably, and more importantly, it will also help us to be clearer about the condition of our lives and about the nature of our social structures. Moreover, these conceptions, or so I shall argue in this section, are in reality noncompeting conceptions such that the Marxist can, and in my view should, make the core claims embedded in these non-Marxist conceptions; he can and should make, as well, distinctive claims that (a) *conceptually* tie ideological beliefs and practices to what answers to class interests and (b) *empirically* tie (as something which tends rather pervasively to be the case) such beliefs and practices to beliefs and practices which distort the beliefs and practices of people under the sway of that ideology such that their having such distorted beliefs and practices tends to further the interests of some class or other. Typically the class whose interests are furthered by the ideology is the dominant class in the society which claims those ideological beliefs and practices as its own.

In bringing out something of what is at issue here, let me begin by pointing to some crucial underlying notions in the non-Marxist conceptions that Marxists should take on board. It is important to recognize that ideological beliefs come in clusters, that they are the closely related beliefs and practices about how to live one's life, about what is the thing done, about what is valuable, and about what attitudes are appropriate in a given community or family of communities. Marxists would add that the beliefs and practices in question will be those closely linked to the public self-images of the society: the official currency about what is appropriate, particularly in the way of general beliefs about human nature and society. So Marxists, given the importance they attach to class and class struggle, stress the class interests and official currency side of ideology. But they should also realize that ideologies so construed are also a cluster of interrelated ideas and practices which express widely held attitudes in a community or a related cluster of communities and interpret experience and guide action in those communities in a way that sets out a pervasively normative general outlook. The ideology provides some, at least moderately theoretical, general beliefs which rationalize that general outlook, typically in a way that provides "the social cement" (social cohesion) for the society, but which sometimes, when the ideology is that of a challenging class, aims at an alteration of society.

The crucial thing to see here is that both the Marxist and non-Marxist conceptions of ideology teach us something important about social life and our lives in it, but that they also teach us noncompeting things. A Marxist conception can and should incorporate all those features of the non-Marxist conception, but it will add something distinctive of its own which shows how central class and class struggle are, and how pervasively ideologies function

to distort our understanding of ourselves and our society in the service of the interests of the dominant class of a given historical epoch.

Some (both Marxists and non-Marxists) have taken it as definitive of an ideology that it be a prescriptive doctrine that is not supported by rational argument and indeed is inimical to rational argument (Raphel 1976, 17). But this is a contingent feature of some ideologies and not something which must obtain for something to be ideology. When Lenin and Lukács spoke of and defended the use of socialist ideology, they were not urging that a vanguard try to con workers into socialism by a systematic distortion of knowledge and a manipulation of belief to gain what the vanguard took to be in the interest of the proletariat. An ideology for them, as for Marx, was a systematic cluster of beliefs and practices which present, interpret, and evaluate the world in the interest of a determinate class or sometimes of several temporarily allied classes. In the service of those interests, the ideology would “shape, mobilize, direct, organize and justify certain modes or courses of action” (Ketter 1987, 235). But the ideology would do this in the service of certain class interests and, in doing so, it *need* not be lacking in realism or distorting of social reality or anything else pejorative or negative. A socialist ideology is partisan in that it serves working-class interests, but it need not be partisan in the sense that it distorts our understanding of the world and makes unscientific, rationally ungrounded claims in the service of those interests. There is no suggestion in such usage by Lenin and Lukács that an ideology must be something without validity or rational cogency, though in most circumstances that is just what ideologies are.

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