

THE VERY IDEA OF A CRITICAL THEORY

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I

The Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas have developed critical theory but they have not been very successful in saying in general what critical theory is, in what its criticalness consists and how it differs from other comprehensive conceptions of social science and of philosophy. Raymond Geuss in his *The Idea of a Critical Theory* leaps into the breach and carefully and probingly seeks to answer these related questions.¹

Jürgen Habermas, for all his extensive departures from Marx, sees himself as a Marxian.² Marx, on Habermas's account, and on the account of not a few others, should himself be viewed as a critical theorist. There are, specific problems about Marx's account aside, not surprisingly, general problems about the very status of his account that are importantly similar to the problems that affect later more explicitly articulated critical theory. They are questions about the very nature of the enterprise. On the very first page of his book Geuss puts the problem thus:

It is widely recognized that Marx was a revolutionary figure, but the exact nature of the revolution he initiated has not, in general, been correctly understood. Of course, Marx did dramatically change many people's views about an important subject-matter, human society, but in some ways the greatest significance of his work lies in its implications for epistemology. Marx's theory of society, if properly construed, does clearly give us knowledge of society, but does not easily fit into any of the accepted categories of 'knowledge'. It obviously isn't a formal science like logic or mathematics, or a practical skill. Its supporters generally deny that it is a speculative world-view of the kind traditionally provided by religion and philosophy, yet neither would it seem to be correctly interpreted as a strictly empirical theory like those in natural science. Finally, it isn't just a confused mélange of cognitive and non-cognitive elements, an empirical economics

¹ Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Future page references to Geuss's book will be given in the text after quotations.

² Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity* (London: New Left Books, 1987).

fortuitously conjoined with a set of value judgments and moral commitments. Rather Marxism is a radically new kind of theory; to give a proper philosophic account of its salient features requires drastic revisions in traditional views about the nature of knowledge.

Not all Marxists, Marxians (including most particularly analytical Marxists) or students of Marx would be happy with this characterization. They would particularly demur at the claim that 'in some ways the greatest significance of his work lies in its implications for epistemology'. They would rather stick with Engels's general summing up of the import of Marx's work where the claim is (a) that Marx was first and foremost a revolutionary activist and (b) that he made a Copernican turn in the social sciences, giving us a science that told us about the fundamental social structure of society, explained how and why from one epoch to another societies would change and (c) how this very social science would be a 'revolutionary social science' serving as a crucial tool, though not only that, in the making and sustaining of revolutions.³ But this, analytical Marxists would stress, requires no new epistemology or epistemological reorientation, but just a good, standard, but rather comprehensive social science. The knowledge that Marx gives us is of a straightforwardly empirical kind, but, given our interests (if we are not members of the *haute bourgeoisie*) and our reflective moral beliefs, we will put that empirical knowledge to revolutionary or at least to emancipatory uses. Analytical Marxists will respond to critical theorists that this requires no special conception of knowledge or an altered epistemological stance or (for that matter) any epistemological stance at all or a realignment of the categories of knowledge. Nothing so conceptually surprising should enter in. We should not, analytical Marxists claim, think of Marxism as a *new* kind of theory or even a new kind of method but as a developing comprehensive empirical social theory working within the parameters of the established social sciences.⁴ What makes it different – the content of its particular claims aside – is that it is a theory which its practitioners

³ Friedrich Engels, 'Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx' in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 681–82.

⁴ See the various essays and particularly John Roemer's introduction to the volume he edited, *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See the various essays, but particularly the essay by Andrew Levine, in Kai Nielsen and Robert Ware (eds.), *Analyzing Marxism* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1989) and G.A. Cohen's scattered methodological remarks in his *History, Labour, and Freedom* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1988), xi, 239–40, 290–91.

can put to work in the service of the interests of the working class and finally, through the service of those interests, to humanity generally. But it neither requires nor suggests a conceptual revolution which would shake up our traditional views about the nature of knowledge. Marx, as he made clear enough in *The German Ideology*, settled his accounts with philosophy and moved to a philosophically unencumbered concern with revolutionary activity and the constructing of a comprehensive social science which would give us a true account of what the social world is like and would be useful in the class struggle for human emancipation. Geuss and the critical theorists who developed their distinctive brand of neo-Marxism think otherwise. Whatever Marx's beliefs about the nature of his own work, the work itself is not so straightforwardly empirical. Whether or not, they argue, we should speak of 'Marx's method' or of a 'distinctive Marxian method' we should recognize that critical theory is importantly different *in kind* from a strictly empirical theory such as Max Weber's or Talcott Parson's or Paul Samuelson's.

Realizing that quite a few different things are going on in *Das Kapital*, for example, than in a systematic value-free social science, both analytical Marxists and critical theorists need to face the challenge of Karl Popper that Marx's theory and Marxist theories more generally are 'a confused *mélange* of cognitive and non-cognitive elements, an empirical economics fortuitously conjoined with a set of value judgments and moral commitments'.⁵ Analytical Marxists respond to this charge by rationally reconstructing Marx and Marxian theory in such a way that the moral commitments are purged from the empirical social theory and are separately argued for as part of an independent moral account competing with the work of Rawls, Nozick, Gauthier, Walzer and Dworkin. G. A. Cohen, Jon Elster, John Roemer, Jeffrey Reiman all brilliantly exemplify this work.⁶ However, it is – whether rightly or wrongly – philosophically and conceptually conservative, giving us what in Frankfurt School terms and in Geuss's terms is a 'positivist Marx'.

Critical theory by contrast seeks to construct a theory which integrates into a single social theory a comprehensive social science

⁵ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol II (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945), 81–258.

⁶ G. A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*; Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985); John E. Roemer, *Free to Lose* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Jeffrey Reiman, 'Exploitation, Force and the Moral Assessment of Capitalism: Thoughts on Roemer and Cohen', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 3–41.

(where 'science' is construed non-scientistically) which integrates into a single theory the descriptive-explanatory-interpretive side of things and the normative-evaluative-emancipatory side of things. The positivist challenge is that this will, if we try to place it in an integrated single theory, remain a confused *mélange*. Geuss seeks to elucidate, and where necessary rationally to reconstruct, critical theory so as to rebut that positivist challenge and to articulate in a perspicuous and plausible manner a critical theory of society.

The account of a critical theory that Geuss elucidates, critically inspects and seeks to defend in an appropriately rationally reconstructed form, is not that of Marx but basically a Frankfurt School neo-Marxism as adumbrated most fully by Jürgen Habermas. He takes, though he doesn't argue for this, it to be an account faithful to the general thrust of Marx's work. I think this a plausible and interesting strategy and shall not challenge it here. My interest will be instead, whatever its Marxian pedigree, to see how good his case is for a distinctive critical theory with a powerful emancipatory capacity. My reason for sticking close to Geuss is that it seems to me he has raised the issue – the meta-issue if you will – of what is the very idea of a critical theory – the second-order questions about its nature – more probingly than anyone else. He has understood the force of Habermas's theory very well and has a sense of the key questions to ask about it. What is at stake is whether we have anything like a viable conception of critical theory that marks it as an important and distinctive type of theory.

II

Geuss remarks in his 'Introduction' that the Frankfurt account of critical theory yields three putatively distinguishing features which are the essential distinguishing features of critical theory:

1. Critical theories have special standing as guides for human action in that:
 - (a) they are aimed at producing enlightenment in the agents who hold them, i.e. at enabling those agents to determine what their true interests are;
 - (b) they are inherently emancipatory, i.e. they free agents from a kind of coercion which is at least partly self-imposed, from the self-frustration of conscious human action.
2. Critical theories have cognitive content, i.e. they are forms of knowledge.

3. Critical theories differ epistemologically in essential ways from theories in the natural sciences. Theories in natural science are 'objectifying'; critical theories are 'reflective'. (1-2)

There are, of course, a host of questions here. Most prominently there are questions about what kind of criteria we have for what is emancipatory and what is not, whether there are such things as 'true interests' or 'objective interests', and what this talk about 'objectifying theories' and 'reflective theories' comes to, if anything. Geuss, as we shall see, carefully examines these questions. However, before going into that, he contrasts critical theory with what critical theorists, using the term in a rather broad sense, call 'positivism'. (Popper and Quine on that account are paradigmatic positivists.) A positivist is someone who holds (a) that an empiricist account of natural science is adequate, (b) 'that all cognition must have essentially the same cognitive structure as natural science', and (c) that positivism also denies the very possibility of 'reflective knowledge' or 'reflective understanding' because all knowledge has the same structure as natural science knowledge and all natural science knowledge is objectifying knowledge. We should also note (b) and (c) are also the core of what Habermas calls *scientism*. Both scientism and positivism involve the denial of a reflective understanding, or at least any theoretical reflective understanding, because they deny that 'theories could be both reflective and cognitive'. (2) The critical question for critical theory is: is there really any knowledge or understanding of this sort and, even given some fragmentary understanding here, could it ever be a knowledge or an understanding that was embedded in a theory? A central goal of critical theory is the critique of positivism and the rehabilitation of 'reflection' as a category of valid knowledge. A central question to be asked, in turn, is whether it achieves that goal or even makes it sufficiently clear for us to have some appropriate understanding of what achievement comes to here.

Geuss, before he turns to the details of examining critical theory, has one further general remark to make. He claims that the 'very heart of the critical theory of society is its criticism of ideology'. (2-3) What keeps people from correctly perceiving their true situation and real interests is ideology. If they are to 'free themselves from social repression' they 'must rid themselves of ideological illusion'. (3) Geuss asks 'Can *'Ideologiekritik'* form the basis of a critical theory as defined by the three theses?' (3) So the

central effort is to 'explain what a critical theory is supposed to be' and to ask whether such a theory is possible, where I take that question to ask whether it is a *feasible* possibility.

III

Geuss starts his detailed examination by asking about ideology and the critique of ideology. He begins by noting that 'ideology' has been used in a number of different ways by various theorists for different purposes. He discusses in an interesting manner a number of uses of 'ideology' but in his endeavour to bring out what is most important here for critical theory about ideology, he focuses on what he calls the critical use of 'ideology', where to show something is an ideology is to show that it is something we should somehow try to eliminate. (16) This use is directly relevant to the ideology-critique of critical theory.

With the critical use of 'ideology' we have the famous (if you will infamous) conception of ideology as false consciousness. What is meant here is not, to understate it, crystal clear. Geuss in trying to specify a coherent use for 'false consciousness' asks 'In what sense or in virtue of what properties can a form of consciousness be ideologically false?' (13) Geuss considers three kinds of answers to this question. All of them are ways of answering the questions: What makes a form of consciousness an ideology: What makes a form of consciousness false?

- (d) 'A form of consciousness is ideologically false in virtue of some *epistemic* properties of the beliefs which are its constituents.' (13)
- (e) 'A form of consciousness is ideologically false in virtue of its *functional* properties.' (13)
- (f) 'A form of consciousness is ideologically false in virtue of some of its *genetic* properties.' (13)

Consider (d) first. There are a number of ways in which the epistemic properties of a belief can render it ideological. The belief may not be supported by the available evidence, beliefs of different types may be confused, e.g. we may confuse factual beliefs with normative ones. Here a 'form of consciousness is an ideology if it is essentially dependent on the epistemic status of some of its apparently constituent beliefs'. (13) Geuss calls our attention to a diverse lot of significant ways beliefs can misfire here. (13–14) I will give only one very simple case but one which is politically very

central. 'A form of consciousness is ideologically false if it contains a false belief to the effect that the particular interest of some subgroup is the general interest of the group as a whole.' I shall turn to a discussion of this later. We will, that is, then look at this particular alleged epistemological misfiring.

His second general answer to what makes a form of consciousness an ideology is in virtue of some of its functional properties. (15) This functionalist approach to ideology has three versions. I shall, however, only discuss one. It maintains that 'a form of consciousness is an ideology in virtue of the function or role it plays in supporting, stabilizing, or legitimizing certain kinds of social institutions or practices.' (15) This fits well with Habermas's speaking of 'an ideology as a "world-picture" which stabilizes or legitimizes domination or hegemony.' But, of course, not all hegemony is bad. The hegemony that is objectionable is one that produces more repression than necessary for the society. There is for the society more repression than necessary where people's needs are *not* being met as optimally as the level of material development of society allows while still not undermining society's capacity to maintain and reproduce itself, albeit without its unnecessary repressive character. To the extent that this hegemony justifies or supports reprehensible social institutions, unjust social practices or relations of exploitation, a form of consciousness which just accepts such a state of affairs, without in one way or another reacting against it, is an ideological form of consciousness. To accept such domination as legitimate is to be held captive by an ideological form of consciousness. In speaking of the ideological belief resting on false consciousness, the claim is that if the people with the false consciousness came to understand how the functional properties of their ideological belief actually worked they would give up the belief and thus they would no longer suffer from false consciousness or be held captive by an ideology. Their ideological belief rests on a rationalization, for if the agents in question became aware that these beliefs had those functional properties they would abandon them.

IV

With the above elucidation of ideology before us, we can turn to an examination of ideology-critique. Traditional critical theory has formulated their conception of the critique of ideology in three different ways.

- (g) Radical criticism of society and criticism of its dominant ideology (*Ideologiekritik*) are inseparable; the ultimate goal of all social research should be the elaboration of a critical theory of society of which *Ideologiekritik* would be an integral part.
- (h) *Ideologiekritik* is not just a form of 'moralizing criticism', i.e. an ideological form of consciousness is not criticised for being nasty, immoral, unpleasant, etc. but for being false, for being a form of delusion. *Ideologiekritik* is itself a cognitive enterprise, a form of knowledge.
- (i) *Ideologiekritik* (and hence also the social theory of which it is a part) differs significantly in cognitive structure from natural science, and requires for its proper analysis basic changes in the epistemological views we have inherited from traditional empiricism (modelled as it is on the study of natural science). (26)

Of this conception or cluster of conceptions, Geuss asks two fundamental questions: (1) 'In what sense is the particular kind of *Ideologiekritik* under discussion cognitive?' and (2) 'In what sense would a proper account of the kind of *Ideologiekritik* under discussion require revisions in our inherited epistemology?' (26)

Geuss first considers critique of ideology as a form of 'criticism along the epistemic dimension'. (26) He asks whether (*pace* the Frankfurt school) this form of criticism cannot, after all, be accommodated within a traditional empiricist framework: accommodated within what the Frankfurt school calls positivism. Critical theory characterizes positivism thus: positivism identifies those statements which, analytic propositions apart, are at least potentially true or false. Those are statements which are scientifically testable and those in turn are statements with observational content. They also seek to identify statements which have cognitive content, by which they mean statements which make genuine knowledge claims. They also seek to identify statements which can be rationally assessed, i.e. which are warrantably acceptable or rejectable. (It may well be that to make genuine knowledge-claims they must be warrantably assertible.) Statements without cognitive content are cognitively meaningless. There is no sense in which they can be rationally assessed or warrantably asserted. Only those statements which have observational content – paradigmatically cognitive statements – are scientifically testable. This is what the Frankfurt school characterizes as a scientific view in which

rationality is simply and solely scientific rationality and only statements with observational content could possibly be knowledge claims which could be subject to rational discussion and criticism.⁷

Geuss asks whether such a scientific positivism (a pleonasm) could accommodate *Ideologiekritik*. Faced with an ideological form of consciousness it could make two forms of criticism. It could in straightforward empiricist fashion reject those ideological beliefs which are empirically false or not well supported. (27) It could also in that same vein of argument clearly distinguish cognitive from non-cognitive beliefs and reject all second-order beliefs which attribute to non-cognitive beliefs cognitive standing. (That is a familiar positivist critique of religious belief or, if you will, religious ideology.)⁸ The various objectifying beliefs which are a prominent form of ideology are subject, from within their empiricist epistemological parameters, to positivistically oriented ideology critique. Similarly a positivist oriented critique of ideology can handle the critique of self-fulfilling beliefs where the evidence is tainted. But what it cannot accommodate, Geuss claims, are those familiar ideological beliefs which rest on the 'confusion of a particular for a general interest'. (27) Those ideological beliefs, Geuss maintains, are 'quite beyond the scope of positivist criticism'. (27) This claim baffles me. The ideological belief in question 'contains a false belief to the effect that the particular interest of some subgroup is the general interest of the group as a whole.' (14) But that seems to me plainly a factual, empirical belief whose truth or falsity is determined in a standard empirical way. It is in the interest of the capitalist class that there be little labor strife (strikes and the like). Suppose it is also asserted that it is in the interest of workers as well that this particular interest be satisfied, i.e. that there be little labor strife. What is to be said on such matters may not always be obvious but this is typically true of complex empirical matters. But at least in principle what is the case can be determined in the same way it is determined whether people should have lots of fibre in their diet or have automobile insurance. There is nothing here which is not in the purview of positivist critique.

Geuss has not given us a sound argument for believing that in such domains positivists cannot make effective ideology-critique.

⁷ Carl Hempel, 'Scientific Rationality: Analytic vs. Pragmatic Perspectives' in Theodore E. Geracts (ed.), *Rationality Today* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), 46–66.

⁸ I explicitly carry this out for religious claims in my 'On Speaking of God', *Theoria* 28 (1962): 110–137. Reprinted in Mostafa Faghfoury (ed.), *Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), 75–96.

‘Positivists’, as he remarks himself, ‘can *count* on people giving up beliefs which have been shown not to be cognitive, but to be expressions of preference which cannot be acknowledged publicly as grounds for acting.’ (27) But, that notwithstanding, Geuss claims in defense of critical theory that positivists cannot give an account of why it is that they make the right judgement here. Geuss remarks the ‘motivation of the program must be to free agents from irrational belief and action by causing them to give up beliefs based on preferences those agents could not acknowledge: but the positivists can’t admit that the motivation of the program is rational (since there aren’t any ‘rational motivations’) or that the effect is to make the agents more rational. So positivists can’t justify their own activity of criticising ideologies except as a personal preference or arbitrary decision.’ (29–30)

Geuss in turn gives the positivist a powerful reply. We should ask ourselves, reflecting as well on the argument of the previous two paragraphs, whether it does not give us all that we need by way of a critical conception without going on a complicated detour through the special epistemological claims of critical theory. I shall quote it in full.

To this the positivist may reply that the fact that people do change their beliefs as described in the last paragraph is no grounds for saying that they have thereby become more rational, acquired a more ‘justified’ or ‘truer’ or more ‘warranted’ set of beliefs. What they have done is to bring their beliefs, preferences, and value judgments into closer agreement with the rest of their non-cognitive beliefs, e.g. beliefs about which preferences they ‘ought’ to allow themselves to express or by which they ‘ought’ to allow themselves to be moved. From the fact that the resulting set of beliefs, preferences, etc. is more coherent and consistent, it doesn’t follow that it is ‘knowledge’, or ‘true’. Furthermore, it is sheer defamation to claim that positivists need consider their own activity a mere ‘arbitrary’ decision; to say that an activity is not grounded on some ‘substantial concept of human rationality’ (whatever that might mean) is not to say that it is based on some *arbitrary* decision. It isn’t ‘arbitrary’ if it is motivated by deep-seated human needs, an expression of concern for human suffering, etc. But that doesn’t make this decision one ‘motivated by reason itself’ – it is motivated by perfectly understandable and unexceptionable human desires. The decision to eat when one is very hungry is not arbitrary – I couldn’t equally well have

decided to go swimming – but that doesn't make eating a form of knowledge. (30)

While acknowledging the force of the above, still, given their theoretical assumptions, there is only a rather constrained sense – or so Geuss argues – in which positivists can argue about norms. Geuss wonders if it is sufficient to provide an adequate ideology-critique. Attitudes, preferences, value judgements and normative beliefs cannot, or so positivists claim, have any cognitive content or be true or false. This being so there are, as Geuss puts it, 'strong limits to rational discussion of them, and ultimately one can have no warrant for adopting or acting on them; any consistent set of preferences, attitudes, etc. is as good, as "rational" as any other'. (31) This, Geuss believes, shows that the positivist conception of rationality is impoverished and rests on a mistake. Habermas, Geuss remarks, is perfectly justified in making the obvious counter that 'clearly not any consistent set of preferences, attitudes, and normative beliefs is as "rational" as any other. This sense of "rational" may be unclear and difficult to analyze but that doesn't mean that it is illicit or doesn't exist, and if positivism can't give an account of it, so much the worse for positivism.'⁹ Still, recognizing this we need not – and indeed should not – go on in a fine rationalist fiddle; we need not, and indeed should not, that is, go on to claim 'that there is a single, "true", uniquely rational set of preferences, attitudes and normative beliefs.' (31) In rejecting the positivist attitude because it is too circumscribed, we need not claim that there is a distinct something that could be called 'normative knowledge', or claim that it even makes sense to say that some preferences are true and others false or even that some norms are true and others false. But while a factual or mathematical proposition is true or false, it does not make sense to speak of such propositions as being more or less true or (more generally) to speak of truth as admitting of degrees. But, as Geuss observes, 'rationality is not like that'. (31) It admits of degrees. 'Decisions, preferences, attitudes, etc. can be more or less rational; agents can have stronger or weaker warrant for their actions, can be more or less aware of

⁹ Kai Nielsen, 'True Needs, Rationality and Emancipation' in R. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Human Needs and Politics* (Melbourne, Australia: Pergamon Press, 1977); Kai Nielsen, 'Principles of Rationality', *Philosophical Papers* III, no. 2 (October 1974); Kai Nielsen, 'Can There be an Emancipatory Rationality?' *Critica* III, no. 24 (December 1976), 70–102; Kai Nielsen, 'Distrusting Reason', *Ethics* 87, no. 1 (October 1976); and Kai Nielsen, 'Reason and Sentiment' in Theodore Geraets (ed.), *Rationality Today* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), 249–79.

their own motives, can be more or less enlightened in their normative beliefs'. (31) Moreover, suppose we have two sets of moral beliefs and attitudes A and B and the persons holding A and the persons holding B both seek to have these beliefs form a consistent set. More than that, they both seek to get these beliefs and attitudes into agreement with their other beliefs and with what is understood about the world, including what we know about human nature and the social world. Doing these things will be seen by reflective agents as a reasonable thing to do.

The doer of A and the doer of B both act reasonably in doing this. Now, if the doer of A is more successful in this than the doer of B, then the doer of A has a more reasonable account of the world and of how to act than the doer of B. The greater the coherency here the more rational the account, i.e. the more plausible the whole set of beliefs (normative and non-normative), attitudes, preferences, theories and the like. They are not, in that eventuality, just a jumble. Instead, they fit together into at least a partially coherent whole: indeed some clusters of belief more so than others. What both achieve, if they are reasonably successful in their activity (the doer of A more so than the doer of B), is to have a rather coherent cluster of beliefs, attitudes, etc. It is always a matter of more or less here. Some accounts have fewer loose ends than others: are more coherent than others and those accounts are the accounts that it is the more reasonable to hold. But we hardly have any conception of 'perfect coherency' here; that, like 'perfect clarity', is something we have little understanding of. (Wittgenstein was very much on the mark here.) Yet some accounts have more warrant than others, things fit together on those accounts more adequately than on others. We are not in a place where we should speak of arbitrariness or say that decision is king.

V

Geuss turns now to an examination of functionalist accounts of ideology, that is to the functional properties of forms of consciousness. Here an 'ideology is a world-picture which stabilizes or legitimizes domination'. (31) Geuss asks of such an account 'what is the relation between the "falsity" of the form of consciousness and its functioning to support or legitimize oppression?' (32) He then, in an acute but inconclusive discussion, examines four possibilities. (32-36) I shall only discuss one. It is, however, one of crucial importance. It is this: 'the world-picture is false - we

assume from the start that we have whatever grounds are necessary for asserting that – and the judgment that the world-picture functions oppressively is parasitic on our judgment that it is false'. (32) A crucial case is this. We have a world-picture that is false, whereby what is meant is that no rationally warranted world-picture could yield a sound argument for the *de jure* legitimacy of the set of institutions and practices of that society. Some of the normative beliefs, some key factual beliefs and, as well, the merely factual *sounding* beliefs embedded in these institutions and practices are unwarranted and there are no rational reconstructions of them (or at least none are plausibly in sight) which would render them warrantable (justifiable, rationally acceptable to people with clear heads and accurate factual information). No world-picture, acceptable and accessible to agents, where they are accurately informed and reasoning correctly (making no invalid inferences), could yield sound arguments for the *de jure* legitimacy of their social institutions. Yet, though the institutions continue to function oppressively (they cause unnecessary suffering and deprivation, and impede human flourishing), the agents continue to accept them and believe in their legitimacy. People who stand free of the ideology in question, know or reasonably believe the institutions to be oppressive (repressive beyond what could be rationally justified). They know or reasonably believe, that is, that there are no justified or justifiable norms or warrantably assertible norms which would justify those repressive institutions. Here the judgement that the world-picture functions oppressively is parasitic on the judgment that the world-picture is false. In saying it is false, what is meant is that it is constituted by a set of factual beliefs and factual *sounding* beliefs where some of the crucial ones are false or incoherent and where that world-picture as well has a set of normative beliefs which cannot be warrantably asserted. There is in that society the deprivation of human wants and needs, and there is human suffering and lack of self-fulfilment. Moreover, these maladies cannot be shown to be unfortunate necessities to be born with, for the norms used to justify the institutions requiring these ills could not have a rational warrant, given the development of the productive forces and their potential for further development in our time and some quite unproblematic facts about human nature (e.g. that people have certain identifiable needs and in most circumstances do not want them frustrated). The functional picture is that we have an ideology which is a world-picture which stabilizes or legitimizes domination. That is its principal function on such a conception. In the situation described

here – a typical situation – our judgment that the beliefs so function depends on our judgment that the world-picture is false *in the way* specified above. The soundness of such an argument, as Geuss stresses in another context, depends crucially on our being able to give an objective (intersubjectively rationally warranted) account of what our wants, desires and needs are and, in relation to them, what are the requirements of the economy. (35) He goes on to remark, correctly I believe, that these conceptualizations are not unproblematic.

Geuss remarks that ‘associated with every human society there will be a set of “accepted” wants, “needs”, and desires and a traditional level of expected satisfactions of these wants and desires.’ (35) But here ideological considerations return like the repressed. We see this in Geuss’s remark that, ‘the set of “accepted” wants, needs and desires, and the traditional level of consumption may themselves be part of the “ideology” we wish to criticize’. (36) What we seem at least to need, but it appears at least that we do not have, and perhaps cannot have, is ‘a standpoint *outside* the given social interpretation of the agents’ needs, from which to criticize the ideological picture of needs and wants and their proper scheduling. Any appeal that would claim our only real needs are those which must be satisfied to ensure minimal biological survival would, though it might break out of the ideological circle, not be adequate for a critical normative perspective. Even very oppressive social orders do not threaten biological survival *generally*. Some individuals might go under – predictably would go under – but most would not and the species would survive. Intellectually to combat such a society we need (a) a justified conception of social justice, (b) a rationally warranted picture of what our genuine wants and needs are along with an account of which are the more basic, (c) a scheduling of their relative importance when they conflict, and finally (d) we need an accurate picture of the level of material development in the world: a good understanding of the capacity of the productive forces to continue to develop and some reasonable understanding of the mechanisms for their development. Is it plausible to believe that we can get an adequate account of these things? It indeed asks for a lot but what it asks for does not seem at least to be a conceptual impossibility.

VI

An ideology is (at least) a form of consciousness which answers to

certain class interests, most typically the interests of the dominant class in the society, where the ideology has intellectual and moral hegemony. Where we speak of an ideology as a world-picture we can speak of the world-picture as answering to such class interests. A simple way, following this consideration out, of stating what *Ideologiekritik* would characteristically come to is to say that those who 'suffer from ideologically false consciousness are deluded about their own true interests'. (45) A central – perhaps the principal – task of *Ideologiekritik* is to enlighten people so deluded, or prone to such delusion or at risk of coming to be so deluded, about their true interests. (45) The thing is to help people to come to see what their true interests are. Understanding class interests and understanding how deeply antagonistic they are is of vital importance here.

As attractive as it is, this, as is widely recognized, gives rise to a whole hornet's nest of problems. What is a human interest? How, if at all, does it differ from what people want or desire? And what are their true, genuine, objective or real interests? Is it just that a bunch of *persuasive* definitions are being surreptitiously introduced or do these adjectives actually qualify interests and if so how? These are just some of the problems, though they are the key ones, that well up. Geuss identifies the key problems thus: what might it 'mean to distinguish the "true" or "real" or "objective" interests of agents from their "merely apparent" or "merely phenomenal" or "perceived" interests, and what might be meant by the claim that a group of agents is deceived or deluded about its true interests?' (45)

It is crucial in considering the legitimacy of talk about 'true interests' to distinguish between desires, interests and needs. Geuss writes:

Up to now I have spoken of wants, interests, needs, desires, and preferences of a group of agents as if they were all more or less the same thing. We attribute a set of wants, preferences, and desires to a group of agents on the basis of their explicit avowals – that is, on the basis of what they *say* they want – and on the basis of their actual overt behavior. But the avowals may be confused, fragmentary, and contradictory, and may stand in a most tenuous relation to a body of equally confused and conflict-ridden behavior. We neither wish to take what they *say* strictly at face-value despite overwhelming evidence that they *never* act on their avowed 'desires', nor will we want to ignore completely the fact of human weakness and assume that their sincere assertions

are hypocritical, if they don't *always* act on them. So the set of desires and preferences we attribute to the group is a theoretical construct which fills out the fragmentary evidence, removes some of the contradictions between avowals and behavior, wants and desires of which no individual member is aware. It will be quite difficult in making this theoretical construct not to impose on the group too determinate and coherent a set of desires; when should apparent contradictions be allowed to stand and what kind of rationality assumptions should be made when smoothing them out? Individuals and groups, then, may be unaware of some of their own desires and preferences, i.e. on the basis of their manifest behavior we may have reason to attribute to them preferences and desires which they not only themselves never articulate, but which they would verbally disavow. (45–46)

Needs, by contrast, are defined and identified by reference to the successful functioning of individuals, and (according to Geuss) to societies as well. People can determine whether or not they need food, rest, sex, security, work, friendship, companionship, recognition, community, social identity or religion by determining whether these things are necessary for their successful functioning. Sometimes it is fairly obvious, as in the cases of rest and food, companionship and recognition; at other times it is less obvious. It is also the case that 'successful functioning' is a rather flexible and indeterminate conception and that in some cases we cannot determine (at least at the present) with any assurance what it would come to. It is even more difficult with respect to society. What is it, Geuss asks rhetorically, for a society to be 'healthy' or 'pathological'? Surely these are not unproblematical notions. But it does not at all follow from that that nothing can be made of them. However, even where we are speaking of individuals in *some* cases we cannot, or cannot clearly, determine what is necessary for successful functioning, but in other cases we can determine it quite unproblematically. If, for example, I want to function at all successfully I had better not try to get along on two hours sleep per night for a fortnight. Because sometimes we do not know what to say we should not have a fit of skepticism. Sometimes what we need to function (successfully) is quite unproblematic.

In most cases we are aware of our own desires but in a not inconsiderable number of cases we will not be aware of our own needs. What we clearheadedly avow we *want* seems to settle it for when we avow it at least, but what we clearheadedly avow that we

need does not settle it. We may honestly avow that we need something when we do not and similarly deny that we need something when we really do. But, very unusual circumstances aside, if I honestly say I am tired and want to go to bed that settles it in a way my claim that I need more sleep than I have been getting lately does not. Someone might correctly assert that I sleep too much anyway and do not need any more sleep and their assertion might very well be true, my avowals to the contrary notwithstanding.

The concept of interest is tricky. Geuss, rightly I believe, carefully distinguishes between desires and interests. People may not take an interest in satisfying their own desires and wishes. And they may (though Geuss doesn't note that) take no interest in what is in their own interest. Crucially, they may desire things that are not in their own interests or not at all desire or want what it is in their own interests to have. Evidence that the difference here is not just that between first-order and second-order desires is brought out by the following example. 'Unregenerate alcoholics assert that they have a strong desire for drink and deny that they have any desire not to drink, and their behavior bears them out. Still, the unregenerate alcoholic has an interest in not drinking (and in developing the appropriate second-order desire).' (47) He has this interest though he may take no interest in what is in his interest. This shows that, given our common employment of concepts, desires and interests (and needs as well) are importantly different.

For the sake of discussion at least, one could accept, though not at all for Churchlandian reasons, that interest is a suspect concept, a concept that we should perhaps set aside as we do the concept of sin. For, as Geuss asks, going back to the above case of the unregenerate alcoholic: '... what does it mean to say that alcoholics have an interest, but no desire to restrict their drinking other than *we*, the outside observers, think that it would be *better* for them not to have the desire for drink?' (Emphasis mine, 47) I think it does mean more than that. To try to sort this out consider Geuss's remark that to 'speak of an agent's "interests" is to speak of the way that agent's particular desires could be rationally integrated into a coherent "good life".' (47-8) We can specify clearly enough what that would come to in some specific cases as Geuss does: 'Alcoholics can be said to have an "interest" in giving up drink, even if they don't recognize it, because we know that health (and, in extreme life cases, life itself) is central to their conception of the "good life" and that excessive drinking *cannot* be

integrated into such a life.’ (48) That is a useful and successful example and we no doubt could extensively provide other and similar examples. Still, I think it is not a very satisfactory way of proceeding. We do not come to understand, on this account, what is good from coming to understand what our interests are but we come to understand what our interests are from knowing what is good or at least from understanding what we believe to be good. One of the at least seeming advantages of talking about interests – think of its role in a theory like that of Ralph Barton Perry’s or Paul Ziff’s – is that we would have, if those theories are on the mark, in talking about interests, a purely naturalistic and empirical concept that we could appeal to without appealing to any prior moral or normative notions and which, in turn, we could use in giving content to our conceptions of the good. But if we have to specify what our interests are by way of a conception of a coherent good life we have lost that naturalistic advantage and, moreover, and independently, we have taken to specifying something which is not very clear in terms of something which is still less clear, namely a conception of ‘a coherent good life’ where ‘good life’, to add insult to injury, is put in scare quotes by Geuss.

VII

Be that as it may, we have a sufficient specification of desires, needs and interests here to be able correctly to say that people can rightly be said to be mistaken about what they desire, need and what is in their interests. And this leaves conceptual space for the very possibility of *Ideologiekritik*.

Geuss puts the point well:

Just as I may have wants and desires of which I am unaware – wants and desires I evince in my behavior, but which I do not recognize and avow – and needs of which I am unaware, I can also have interests of which I am unaware. From the fact that I have a certain need, it does not follow that I have a desire to satisfy that need. If I am unaware of the need I may not act in any way which could be construed as trying to satisfy the need. However I do wish to say that I have an ‘interest’ in the satisfaction of anything which can reasonably be termed a ‘need’.

There is no mystery, then, to the claim that agents are deceived or mistaken about their wants and desires or their

interests. I may sincerely avow a desire which my behavior belies, or vehemently repudiate a desire, which, as my behavior shows, I clearly have. If the agents are unaware of some of their needs, they may have formed a set of interests which is incompatible with the satisfaction of those needs, or they may have formed a set of interests which is inconsistent or self-defeating, or I may have perfectly good 'empirical' grounds for thinking that the pursuit of their present set of interests will lead them not, as they suppose, to happiness, tranquillity, and contentment, but to pain, misery, and frustration. If agents are deceived or mistaken about their interests, we will say that they are pursuing 'merely apparent' interests, and not their 'real' or 'true' interests. (48)

This *via-negativa* may be enough. Still theoreticians who have engaged in *Ideologiekritik* have, not unreasonably, wanted something more robust. They have wanted to speak in some reasonably determinate way of 'real', 'true' or 'objective' interests *sans* scare quotes. They have wanted to say what they are and how we could come to know them. Geuss takes the problem here to be that of defining 'true interests' and he considers two attempts to do so, the '*perfect-knowledge approach*' and the '*optimal conditions approach*'.

The perfect-knowledge approach can most easily be illustrated if we turn again to the unregenerate alcoholic example. Suppose Matti is such an alcoholic. He has a strong first-order desire to drink, no second-order desire to stop or even moderate his drinking and he does not see that it is in his interests to stop drinking. But, as Geuss points out, we can still correctly say he does not know his true interests. He takes no interest in and does not see that it is in his own interest to stop drinking because he is ignorant and has false views about what is in his own interests. He has never heard of cirrhosis and he thinks that drinking is good for his circulation. 'In that case we say that he is mistaken about his interests, and what we mean by that is that if he knew more than he does – if, for instance, he had correct views about the effects of drinking on his health – he would recognize that it is not in his interest to drink.' (49) As we gain the appropriate knowledge we will gain an even clearer and more correct view about what our interests actually are. Extrapolating from that we should say that if we were to have perfect knowledge then we would finally know what our true interests are.

This account has at least the following difficulty. If Matti, let us

say, gains perfect knowledge about his excessive drinking: knowledge, that is, about alcohol's effect on his liver, his brain, his ability to control his life, keep his job and the like – that is, if he is clear about how much it will harm him, and he reflectively and in a cool hour takes all this to heart, and still doesn't judge that it is not in his interests to drink then his continuing to drink does not, on the perfect-knowledge approach, after all, run athwart his genuine interests. What is in Matti's interests (by definition on this account) is what Matti takes to be in his interest when he has perfect knowledge reflectively entertained in a cool hour. But, if the result of such an entertainment by Matti is that of the above, it is not impossible to think that this is a *reductio* of such a definition of 'true interests'. Such a definition of 'interests' is just too subjective. We moved from talk of desires to talk of interests, in the first place, to avoid such subjectivism. Now we are back in the stew again.

To this response in return it might be replied: people *as a matter of fact* just do not so judge of their interests. It is only by dragging in irrelevant desert-island examples – things which are little more than mere logical possibilities – that it can come to seem that what would be in Matti's true interests in such a circumstance is at all problematic. It just is not in a person's interests, if their circumstances are at all normal, to drink themselves to death. If the person in question would judge otherwise even under conditions of perfect knowledge that does not change matters. But that, if correct, certainly reveals a weakness in the *perfect-knowledge approach*. We cannot determine in all cases what are in our true interests by ascertaining what we would desire or what we would choose under conditions of perfect knowledge.

Geuss next considers the '*optimal conditions approach*' to ascertain what our true interests are. It starts, Geuss points out, 'from the observation that the desires and hence the interests of human agents have been extremely variable, and that what desires and interests the agents will form will depend to a large extent on the circumstances in which they find themselves'. (49) In horrifying circumstances – circumstances of great deprivation and suffering – people, as the Ik, will behave in horrendous ways. Where these behavior patterns get stamped in, people will tend to act in these ways for a time even if it no longer answers to their interests to do so. To look for people's real interests, the optimal conditions approach argues, we need to ascertain what interests would be formed under optimal (i.e. beneficent) conditions. (50) It is, as Geuss notes, difficult to say what these optimal conditions for

forming interests are. And he does not say, or even hint at, what they are, though he does say what they aren't, namely 'positive hindrances to the formation of "true" interests'. (50) What impedes the formation of true interests are extreme deprivation, circumstances where people are maltreated or unduly coerced, pressured or influenced, or in conditions of considerable ignorance or where they have many false beliefs. Where those conditions or conditions like them do not obtain, we approach optimal conditions. Interests formed under those optimal conditions are our true interests. Interests formed under conditions approximating those optimal conditions are approximations of our true interests.

Interests, we should also note, are not only related to *effective desire* but also to *judgment*. As we saw in the alcoholic case, it is possible for an alcoholic to have no effective desire, second-order or otherwise, to stop drinking and still judge that it is not in his true interests to drink so much and mean by that that if he had been born and had grown up in more optimal circumstances the interests he would have formed would include an interest in not drinking to excess. And, if he had grown up in those circumstances, he would at the very least have formed a second-order desire not to drink so excessively and he would, as well, judge that it is not in his true interests to so drink. Moreover, this is also a judgment he would realize, if he were in such circumstances, he would have made if he had perfect knowledge and that he would have perfect knowledge in such circumstances. 'If the agents have the requisite "perfect knowledge" the interests they will acknowledge as their "real interests" will be those they know they would form under optimal conditions of non-deprivation and non-coercion.' (53).

Geuss thinks that this claim is at least roughly correct and that it is a claim that Habermas and the Frankfurt school would accept, though for slightly different reasons. But they would also stress the double bind that we are in here. They would stress, as more orthodox Marxists do as well, that a society, all of whose members live under conditions of great deprivation, is not going to gain even anything like (even remotely approximating) perfect knowledge. We can approach that only as the development of the productive forces advances very far and there is a considerable amount of social wealth widely distributed. Moreover, the knowledge we need to gain of our wants, needs, motives, of what kind of life we would find acceptable and satisfying and the like is only something we will attain, if we attain it at all, in a society where there is 'extensive room for free discussion and the unrestrained play of the

imagination with alternative ways of living'. (54) Our real or true interests are the interests we would form or come to have in conditions of perfect knowledge and freedom. But we are not in such a circumstance and thus are in no condition to recognize what our true interests are, but in the favored conditions of the wealthier and more democratic countries of the world we 'may be free enough to recognize how we might act to abolish some of the coercion from which we suffer and move closer to "optimal conditions" of freedom and knowledge'. (54) It is a central task of critical theory to articulate this for us.

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