

*For Stuart
and
Catherine Hall*

The Politics of Truth
From Marx to Foucault

Michèle Barrett

Polity Press

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Preface

The main preoccupation of this book is the concept of 'ideology'. I do not take ideology to mean ideas, or even values, but have addressed the more powerful meaning that it has in critical social theory. A consensual definition of ideology, in Marxist and broader circles, would be something like 'mystification that serves class interests'. Originally, I intended to review the criticisms of this concept, which have come from a variety of different directions, and reflect upon the ways in which a Marxist theory of ideology could be adapted to a world where class is not the only social division of interest. My own investment in this was that I had previously argued that one could not explain the oppression of women without taking very seriously indeed the role of ideology and culture in the creation, as well as reproduction, of that inequality. Yet, as critics asked, can one do this within the framework of a theory that had been developed in relation to social class?

My presumption was that in the course of a thorough treatment of these questions, I would emerge with a reformulation of the theory of ideology that enabled me to use it (rather as John Thompson has suggested) in the critical sense characteristic of Marxism, but applying it to any form of social domination or exploitation rather than restricting it to mystifications related to social class. But maybe Foucault was right when he said: 'to work is to try to think something other than what one thought before'. In any event, I became considerably more sceptical as to whether one can, with any success, retain much force or resonance in the concept once its explanatory associations with class and its economic determinism have been stripped away, and for this reason I conclude on a fairly lukewarm note as to the value of the concept of ideology itself for contemporary social analysis.

Not that the questions to which a theory of ideology addresses itself are ones about which one might feel lukewarm. On the contrary, they are among the most interesting and, indeed, the most

politically important issues that we have to deal with. But to think about them we need to move away from the Marxist conception of ideology, and partly because of what is constraining and narrowing in that tradition. Later in the book I discuss some of the more general weaknesses of Marxism, in particular its 'universalism', and propose some rethinking of the issue of 'relativism'. Another major problem with the Marxist tradition, in terms of what a modern theory of what 'ideology' deals with, is that we look in vain there for a theory of subjectivity. Later in the book, too, I take up these themes, particularly in relation to the psychoanalytic project to contribute such a theory.

The title of this book, as many readers will recognise, is borrowed from Foucault. In a stylishly epigrammatic moment he contrasted 'the economics of untruth' with 'the politics of truth': *the economics of untruth* being Marxism's account of ideology, used to show 'the relation between what goes on in people's heads and their place in the conditions of production', and *the politics of truth* being his own approach to the relationships between knowledge, discourse, truth and power. In using Foucault's preferred term rather than entitling this book 'The Economics of Untruth' I am nailing my colours to the mast of a more general post-Marxism and on this subject I will add a note to those readers who will undoubtedly interpret this 'politically'.

Classical Marxism is not the only route to socialism: to criticise Marxism, even definitively, is not a form of conservatism. E. P. Thompson has quoted William Morris advising someone that 'you ought to read Marx ... up to date he is the only completely scientific Economist on our side'. As Thompson says, Marx is on our side, not vice versa; Marx did not invent socialism, and it will not be brought about by the 'scientific' status of Marxism but by the choices, values and struggles of men and women.

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Many individuals have helped me with the book, either by reading draft sections, discussing the issues with me or (unbeknownst to them) airing relevant views in my hearing. My thanks to Peter Beilharz, Zillah Eisenstein, John Fletcher, Catherine Hall, Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, Biddy Martin, Francis Mulhern and Anne Phillips.

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Classical Marxism and Theories of Ideology

Part I

Marx: Inheriting Contradictions

Anybody looking at the substantial literature about Marx's theory of ideology will soon discover a startling variety of interpretations of what Marx actually thought on this subject. I say startling, because the range of disagreement is far wider than one normally encounters in 'secondary sources' about a major thinker and the questions around which the disputes revolve are absolutely fundamental ones. There are a number of causes of this confusion and one of them is undoubtedly the fact that the 'quotable quotes' – passages where Marx addresses ideology directly, or takes the risk of defining it – are found only in his earliest works where the position he outlines is very contentious. So some of these disputes hinge not so much on what Marx said about ideology, but about what he might have said – or really *meant* to say – on the basis of differing interpretations of his theories as a whole. Also, there are several distinct – and in some respects contradictory – uses of the concept of ideology to be found in Marx, and of course these have been taken up selectively by the various commentators. This is not simply an issue of doctrinal disputes between political disciples, nor of academic pedantry from professional Marxologists. For Marx mobilised, in some eloquent and illuminating passages scattered across his works, an approach to 'ideology' that has caught the imagination of generations of people with a critical perspective on capitalist society. But, and it is a very big but, one can plausibly lay at the door of these persuasive, yet in many ways unsatisfactory, ideas some of the fundamental weaknesses of Marxism in the contemporary western political world.

Many general criticisms can be made of Marxist theory as a guide to analysis and action in a world dramatically altered since the key ideas were formulated over a century ago. Sometimes these involve a criticism of the ideas and arguments themselves, sometimes they rest on a straightforward recognition that the social world has changed in significant ways over that period of time. Marx's ideas on ideology have in the past been taken up and used, time and time again, to

explain intractable or inconvenient aspects of political consciousness. But now it is increasingly recognised that the model does not work very well, or at least that it has been stretched too far. This is not just a matter of objecting to patronising castigations of people as suffering from brainwashing by 'capitalist ideology', although this old bogey has a lot of life in it still. It is more that the whole framework of a theory of ideology, any theory of ideology, has become a focus for some searching new work in social theory generally. The entire field of social theory is being recast in such a way as to take more seriously questions of culture and of subjectivity. The Marxist approach to ideology, conventionally understood in short-hand as something like 'mystification that serves class interest', is perhaps one of the key targets of contemporary thought in the post-structuralist vein. I shall be arguing that we need an infinitely more complex consideration of how subjectivity, particularly political subjectivity, is constituted and operates; how identifications of various kinds are formed, expressed and change over time; and how questions of agency and motivation can be addressed with the seriousness they deserve.

It is, however, essential to go back over Marx's own work on this question, because the debates surrounding his ideas genuinely constitute the 'classical tradition' of thought on ideology.¹ As we shall see, the changes of emphasis and the inconsistencies of Marx's arguments on certain key topics – such as whether ideology is necessarily an illusion, or distortion, or not, or whether it is economically determined or not – played an important part in ensuring that there was a long-running saga of debates in subsequent Marxist theory. And although the Marxist debates about ideology have since, and particularly since the inter-war period in Europe, filtered into a wider field of social and political theory, the concept of ideology cannot properly be understood without a knowledge of its historical development.

Let us begin, then, by looking at the changing definitions of ideology in Marx's writings. The first one we encounter is probably the most problematic: it is found towards the beginning of Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology*, a book originally written in 1845–6.

Marx I Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as

much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.²

This one passage has probably caused more confusion, and generated more fruitless attempts at exegesis, than any other in Marx, and I do not propose to add to it here. The metaphor of the reversed image has proved very powerful – perhaps more so than it is useful. It has given rise to a literal sense of ideology as pure illusion (like an optical illusion) and to an associated notion that somehow ideology is the reverse or opposite of material reality. It is within this framework of inference that the whole vexed idea of 'false consciousness' has gained ground. To put it crudely, the train of thought goes that material conditions can specify real or true interests, for example of the working class, and that in ideology these are then mystified by simple reversal – so people see their interests as the opposite of what they really are. False consciousness is thus the mirror-image of what political consciousness should be.

Let it be said immediately that whatever the merits or demerits of the notion of 'false consciousness', they have little to do with Karl Marx. This is one reason why John Plamenatz's book on ideology should be consigned to the archives section of libraries rather than inflicted on more generations of hapless political science students. In Plamenatz are to be found apparently authoritative statements such as 'Marx often called ideology "false consciousness"', or 'Bourgeois ideas about the state are, so Marx believed, an example of false consciousness'; or even 'Marx did not trouble to distinguish between the elements that go to make up an ideology, and therefore did not enquire whether all of them can properly be subsumed under "false consciousness"'.³

In fact, it seems that Marx *never* used the expression 'false consciousness' at all, according to Marxologists. David McLellan, for instance, probably the most authoritative of such experts at present, writes recently that Marx never used the term 'false consciousness', that it was originated by Engels and that its *locus classicus* is Engels's letter to Franz Mehring in 1893. This, of course, was long after Marx's death and the project of separating Marx's own ideas from those of Engels's later presentation has now advanced considerably, giving us a greater awareness of the dangers of eliding the two.⁴ Furthermore, the current translation of the crucial letter has now been revised to read 'the wrong kind of consciousness'.⁵ These niceties of Marxist scholarship are perhaps of restricted interest, but the general point that 'false consciousness' is a post-Marx concept is surely a very significant one.

'False consciousness' encapsulates a version of Marxist theories of ideology that both supporters and critics have at times found useful as a crude shorthand. Martin Seliger, for example, in his account of 'orthodox Marxist doctrine' on ideology recognises Plamenatz's mistake (as do various commentators on this topic) but quickly argues that even if Marx did not use the term false consciousness itself, none the less it does accurately reflect his position. Seliger unerringly pounces on the camera obscura metaphor as the weakest point of Marx's thought on ideology, seeing it as the source of recurring confusion in the works of Marx and Engels in general.⁶ On this point he is no doubt correct, but there are obvious arguments for looking elsewhere in Marx's writings for other, and perhaps more satisfactory, formulations on the concept of ideology. The next argument of Marx's that I want to examine, suggesting a somewhat different interpretation of ideology from the one just discussed, follows directly on from the previous passage of *The German Ideology*.

Marx II In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. ... We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life.⁷

This must be the most celebrated expression of what has come to be understood as the 'materialist' position on ideology – the belief that ideological phenomena are determined by material causes. In this passage the form of words is quite uncompromising – determination is a one-way process. Note Marx's (subsequently faithful) opposition between 'real' on the one hand and 'ideological' on the other. In the reference to religion, morality and metaphysics, Marx and Engels here set out the basic element of the view that ideology is necessarily a distorted or inadequate view of the world.

Religion is a central issue because Marx believed that the demystification of religion held the key to a more general interpretation of society. This was so central to his overall philosophy that he maintained that 'the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all

criticism'.⁸ A number of writers have rightly pointed to the critique of religion developed within left-Hegelian philosophy – notably by Ludwig Feuerbach – as the forerunner of the arguments developed by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. Jorge Larraín, for instance, says of Marx's critique of religion that 'Here Marx anticipates one of the crucial elements of his concept of ideology, namely that religion compensates in the mind for a deficient reality; it reconstitutes in the imagination a coherent solution which goes beyond the real world in an attempt to resolve the contradictions of the real world'.⁹ Larraín points out that this process of 'anticipation' involves Marx developing a theoretical position on what we would now call 'ideology', without using the term itself, and that this is also true of Marx's later work on commodity fetishism as ideology in *Capital*.¹⁰ Leaving this aside for the moment, let us focus on the substantive point of Marx's critique of religion and other 'phantoms formed in the human brain'. Jorge Larraín has articulated, in considerable detail and with great persuasiveness, a thesis that is in general terms widely accepted among writers on Marx and ideology: that Marx's concept of ideology is one with an irreducible 'critical' core. The critique of religion can serve here as an example of the insistently critical approach that in general Marx took to the belief systems and ideational structures through which people apprehend their social worlds.

This interpretation of Marx's views has not gone unchallenged. Joe McCartney's book *The Real World of Ideology* seeks to present an alternative account of Marx's approach to ideology on this central question of whether or not it is being used as a necessarily critical category. In order to do this McCartney suggests that there has been a 'whole climate of misunderstanding that has come to envelop Marxist and non-Marxist commentators alike'.¹¹ The 'critical' view of ideology raises the question of what is known as the 'epistemological' definition of ideology. McCartney notes that those who see Marx's concept of ideology as necessarily critical in character presuppose that ideology is an epistemological category with a bearing on the truth or falsity of the propositions in question – that ideology is a category constituted in opposition to knowledge. Naturally the notion of false consciousness, with its direct attribution to ideology of positive error, is the strongest form of the 'epistemological' definition of ideology. (McCartney refers to the 'cognitive defect' theory of ideology.) McCartney argues that the concept of ideology as used by Marx was not an epistemological category of any kind, but a strictly descriptive term.¹² First, McCartney notes that Marx uses the term

ideology, usually, with an adjective – thus the ‘German’ ideology or ‘bourgeois’ ideology – rather than as a concept on its own. In this context he puts forward the theory that one crucial mistranslation has had a significantly misleading effect. The passage in question is the notorious camera obscura one: McCarney argues that ‘in all ideology’, from *in der ganzen Ideologie* (literally ‘in the whole ideology’), refers not to ideology in general but specifically to the German philosophy under discussion. Hence, in McCarney’s view, the theoretical pretensions of the passage, and notably the optical metaphor, have been completely overstated.¹³ Secondly, McCarney stresses, as have others, that false consciousness was not a notion that Marx employed.¹⁴ Thirdly, McCarney puts forward an alternative interpretation of Marx’s approach, and one that ties Marx much more closely to arguments developed later in the Marxist tradition, particularly by Lenin and Lukács.

This last point is particularly significant, because McCarney seeks to reconcile what is usually perceived as a major difference of emphasis within Marxist thought. McCarney concludes that Marx shared the view, primarily associated with Lenin, that ideology was the thought and consciousness of a particular class; hence ideology was for Marx and Engels objective, predicated upon the historical existence of social classes. McCarney defines ideology as ‘thought which serves class interests’;¹⁵ this is not emphasised in terms of mystification or illusion, but in terms of the objective existence of specific historical social classes. There is a similarity between this view of ideology and that of Georg Lukács, who also saw ideologies as appertaining to classes and to be understood as progressive or reactionary according to the objective historical position of the social class to which they belonged. (Hence his analysis of the historical novel, where novels written in the period of the political ascendancy of the bourgeoisie – roughly until 1848 – are construed as more progressive than those dating from the decline of the class.)¹⁶ This relationship between Marx, Lenin and Lukács is not contingent in McCarney’s view. He argues that there is thus a ‘single, evolving tradition’ of Marxist thought on ideology and one which ‘in view of its membership, may reasonably be accorded a classic status within Marxist treatments of the subject’.¹⁷

McCarney’s argument is directed principally at showing that the difference usually perceived between Marx’s critical concept of ideology and the more descriptive, class-consciousness approaches of Lenin and Lukács is based on an error. McCarney’s Marx uses a concept of ideology that has been stripped of the ‘critical’ and ‘epi-

temological’ overtones that traditionally differentiate Marx’s use from those of many other writers in the Marxist tradition – certainly Lenin and Lukács, but also, and most significantly, Gramsci. As we shall see later, this dispute is fundamental in debates about ideology and its relentless recurrence is troubling to those who seek consistency within the Marxist tradition.

I am not myself convinced by McCarney’s argument. He is right to emphasise the degree to which a ‘false consciousness’ position on ideology has been projected on to Marx. It is also true that many of Marx’s references to ideology are merely to ‘ideologues’ – professional philosophers, often of idealist tendencies – that he was polemicalising against. On the other hand, the overwhelming weight of evidence suggests that the general spirit of Marx’s thought on this topic was critical. Although it is relatively easy to accuse writers such as Plamenatz or Seliger of lack of sympathy for their subject, it is more difficult to refute the conclusions of serious and sympathetic scholars such as Allen Wood or Bhikhu Parekh, both of whom construe Marx’s concept of ideology as one with varying, but consistently ‘critical’, meanings.¹⁸ And as well as the metaphors of distortion and illusion throughout Marx’s treatment of the topic of ideology, the substantial arguments developed within Marx’s work as a whole in this area are undeniably ‘epistemological’. From the theory of alienation in the early Marx to the theory of commodity fetishism in *Capital* Marx’s analysis of consciousness and ideology is grounded in the belief that mystification is susceptible to being unmasked by knowledge. Finally, it seems likely that the desire to line Marx up at the head of a ‘classic’ (that is, Marxist-Leninist) tradition, with an agreed position on ideology to hand down, is one that can only be realised at the expense of occluding fundamental disagreement and argument within Marxist theory.

Marx III The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships.¹⁹

This passage, also from *The German Ideology*, approaches ideology from a different perspective, making two separate points about the relationship of ideology to social class. Marx begins with the rather grand assertion that ruling class ideas are also ruling ideas, but when

he goes on to argue why this should be so the explanation he gives is a very simple one – the ruling class control the means of ideological production. So this is a general point about the ideological power that inheres in ownership, or control, over the means by which opinion and consciousness are constructed. Taking this at face value, it is completely uncontroversial, and most socialists will not need to be convinced that the level of political culture in Britain, for example, is affected by the fact that the press is owned and controlled by a small group of extremely politicised ideologues of whom Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell are merely prominent examples.

There are, however, two extremely contentious dimensions of this apparently straightforward point. To say that those who lack the means of ideological production are generally speaking thereby 'subject' to the ruling class is to invoke a whole series of difficult issues around popular consciousness and popular culture. These have been raised in their most striking form by feminist work on cultural phenomena such as soap opera, royalty or romantic fiction, where the traditional notion of ideological 'subjection' endorsed by Marx in the passage does scant justice to the passionate enthusiasm of many women for the products of which they are alleged to be victims.²⁰ It is now widely recognised that, at the very least, we need a more sophisticated analysis of the ways in which such processes of 'subjection' work, including a consideration of participation in the construction of ideology that goes beyond the notion of collusion in what is ultimately not in one's interests. Although this problem has been most strongly raised by feminists, it is one with obvious general application, and indeed many people now argue that it strikes at a vulnerable element in the Marxist theory of ideology in general. That is, it challenges an assumption, apparently inherent in the concept, that we can specify more or less progressive levels or aspects of consciousness. This will be taken up in more detail later.

Recognition of a second problem with Marx's point might also be indirectly attributed to feminism. Dale Spender's thesis is that men control the language, control the media, control the gatekeeping institutions of publishing and criticism: they control what Marx would call the 'means of mental production', but the interests they represent are those of men rather than those of capital. The titles of Dale Spender's books – *Man Made Language*, *Women of Ideas* – and *What Men Have Done to Them* and *For the Record*, for example²¹ – are indicative of the theory underlying this version of feminist critique of patriarchal culture. The theoretical position of Spender's work has been extensively criticised²² and I do not need to dwell on this here.

Spender's extended application of Marx's point to a different ruling group – based on gender rather than class – illustrates the frailty of Marx's argument here. Is it axiomatic that the ideology of the ruling class rules, or does this occur by virtue of class control over the means of mental production? Clearly Marx's point requires considerable rethinking if it is to take cognisance not only of gender but also of racism and the associated structural inequalities of ethnicity. There is now a growing literature analysing the racist character of the British media and cultural practices²³ and the exclusion of blacks from participation, let alone control, in these areas. These anti-racist arguments also operate within the same framework of a notion of control over the means of mental production: how does this affect the argument about 'ruling class' ideas? The significance of these points lies in the challenge they pose to the assumption that Marx's theory of ideology is necessarily related to social class. It is not merely that Marx's insight can be *applied* to some other social division – such as those of gender or race – but that recognition of the importance of these other social divisions forces us to rethink what is meant by the term ruling class.

Underlying the overt meaning of the passage quoted is a far more subtle argument Marx is making about the class-generated character of ideology. He expands upon another dimension of the assertion that ruling class ideas are ruling ideas, by arguing that certain characteristic ideas of a period are not contingently but essentially connected to the relations of production of the society in question. The examples Marx gives are the aristocratic notions of honour and loyalty and the bourgeois ideas of freedom and equality.²⁴ Marx argues that these ideas do not just happen to coincide with modes of production to which they are neatly suited (feudalism being based on bonded labour and capitalism on formally free labour), although this is what is generally assumed. He believes such ideas to be 'the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas', hence they are part and parcel of the production relations and inseparable analytically from this material base.

This argument, too, is problematic when examined in relation to the project of developing a general theory of ideology. As we shall see later, a decisive change in Marxist theory on political ideology was made when Ernesto Laclau demonstrated that the 'class-belonging' character of political ideologies could not be taken for granted as had previously been done by many people.²⁵ Certainly it is now clear that there is, at the very least, a range of constructs ('patriotism' would be a well-trodden example) which it has proved possible to align with a variety of class ideologies and which therefore

cannot be said to have a necessary 'class-belonging' character. The debates about whether or in what sense ideology is tied to class have been extremely significant in recent years. If we look back over the interpretations of Marx's thought on ideology we can see that on this central issue his views are problematic and a variety of readings are on offer.

Bhikhu Parekh, for example, writes that for 'Marx, an ideology is systematically biased towards a social group, be it a class, a nation, a profession or a race. It is therefore wrong to *define* it as a body of ideas biased towards a class.'²⁶ Goran Therborn, in line with a majority of interpreters of Marx on this question, refers on the other hand to 'the classical Marxist problematic centred on the material, class determination of ideologies'.²⁷ So we can see that in the ambiguities of Marx's own writing and in the varying interpretations within the Marxist tradition there is already the basis for considerable debate, and indeed confusion, about the relationship of ideology to social class. Yet, as we shall see later, the moment at which that link was completely broken was decisive for the viability of Marxist political theory as traditionally understood.

Marx IV [Then begins an epoch of social revolution.] With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life.²⁸

By 1859 Marx had moved on from the formulations that he and Engels had drafted in the 1845–6 work *The German Ideology*. This passage is notable for the brevity with which three major theses on ideology are introduced: the famous 'base-and-superstructure' metaphor, the idea of ideological 'struggle' and the distinction between ideology and knowledge (or science). We do not need to dwell here on what has been called the 'topographical' metaphor in Marx's theory of ideology – he describes this elsewhere in the same text in the following terms: 'The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which corre-

spond definite forms of social consciousness.'²⁹ Although this is a classic statement of an image of ideology that has acquired enormous force, it is worth noting that even here the formulation is ambiguous in that the relationship of 'social consciousness' to the superstructure, presented in terms of the state, is somewhat unclear. As Stuart Hall has commented in relation to a comparable passage from *The German Ideology*, there appear to be *three* rather than two levels in this embryonic base/superstructure model – first, the 'base' of material production, secondly, the level of civil society and the state, and thirdly, the area of consciousness, philosophy, religion and so on.³⁰ Marx's unwillingness to aggregate ideology proper with the level of civil society and the state – society as the polity – is the source of one of several ambiguities in the so-called classic determinist position on ideology. Certainly the base-and-superstructure metaphor, symbolising for many an inflexible conception of ideology as the reflection of economically given 'reality', has been subjected to considerable critical attention. This will be referred to in the more general discussion of the problem of determination in the classical debates about ideology.

A second feature of the passage under discussion is Marx's reference to men (perhaps here for once we could say people) becoming conscious and 'fighting out' class struggle at the level of ideology. This half-sentence, scarcely more than a phrase really, is the most solid evidence available for the interpretation of Marx as a Gramscian *manqué*. To elevate it to a general reading of Marx's position of ideology is to project on to Marx a more recent concern with cultural politics that, sadly, his writings as a whole do not justify.

I quote the final sentence of the passage simply to illustrate a general point about Marx's methodological position that has considerable relevance to the debate on the so-called science/ideology distinction. What clearer statement could he make to indicate that he is an epistemological realist? Marx does not accept the validity of a society's discourse about itself, he sees this as a phenomenon to be explained rather than as a source of knowledge. None the less, this, too, is less clear-cut an issue than it might be with, on the one hand, the inevitable variations of interpretation of Marx on the specific question of science and ideology, and more general disagreement about whether or to what degree the traditions of epistemological realism are incompatible with the position of, for example, Foucault.

The last two versions of 'Marx' that I want to mention are ones where recent commentators have extrapolated distinctive positions from Marx's writings. When discussing Marx's 1851–2 text, 'The

Eighteenth Brumaire', Stuart Hall emphasises the significance of the break, in the few short years between it and *The German Ideology*, in Marx's thought about ideology.

Marx V Stuart Hall writes of 'The Eighteenth Brumaire': Louis-Napoleon's regime – which appears in the form of a single despotism – in fact is seated on the back of a particular class interest: that of the 'most numerous' class in France at that moment, though one destined to decline – the small-holding peasantry. This class fraction cannot rule in its own name: it rules *through* Napoleon and through his ideas. It is this class which temporarily gives content to the expanding State – for the State is not 'suspended in mid-air'; but Louis-Napoleon, reviving spirits, names, battle cries and costumes from the past (the past of another and greater Napoleon), is the *conductor* of the power of this class to the political level. Capital settles for a 'postponement'. 'Bonapartism' is its name and form. Without examining this argument in any further detail, it should be sufficient to see from this and the related essays of the period, that the domain of the political/judicial superstructures and the forms of the State are no longer thought by Marx as in any simple reflexive or expressive sense corresponding to their base. In the development of a Marxist theory of the superstructures, this essay must occupy a *pivotal position*.³¹

Under consideration here is the specific operation of what Louis Althusser was later to call the political 'level': a section of the social formation with its own effectivity.³² The effect of Hall's argument is to trace back to Marx himself the flourishing tradition of work in twentieth-century Marxist theory that has analysed the operations of the state in ideological terms and attempted to relate this analysis to other aspects of the social totality in a non-mechanistic way. It is to indicate, as it were, the reference point in Marx for the contributions not only of Gramsci, but of Althusser, Poulantzas and (early) Lacan, as well as to disabuse people of the assumption that Marx himself worked with an unmediated relationship between the economy and ideology. As Stuart Hall stresses, the political level – in which for the moment we can include both state and 'civil society' – provides one such important mediation in Marx's approach to the general question of determination within social relations as a whole.

Marx VI John Mepham writes of *Capital*, volume I: [Marx's distinction between phenomenal form and real relation] contains a substantial epistemological theory about the relation between thought and reality and about the origins of illusions about reality. This theory is that the origin of ideological illusions is in the phenomenal form of reality itself. . . . Ideological language does not just distract attention away from real social relations, nor does it explain them away, nor even does it directly deny them. It structurally excludes them from thought.³³

John Mepham makes an extended argument on a point recognised by several writers on Marx and the concept of ideology – that although the word ideology is largely dropped by the time Marx came to write *Capital*, it is this work that contains his most elaborate and sophisticated theoretical arguments about ideology.³⁴ Traditionally it has been long recognised that the theory of 'commodity fetishism' in *Capital* is a theory of ideology in capitalist society, explaining as it does the way in which relations constituted by human labour come to appear as relations between things.³⁵ ('Commodity fetishism' is not a description of consumerism in capitalism, as is sometimes wrongly assumed, it is an analysis of *reification*.) John Mepham notes the thesis in *Capital* linking the concepts of 'phenomenal form' and 'real relation': it is simply that the former renders the latter opaque, or invisible. Thus the form of the wage, for instance, appearing as it does to be a payment for something, masks the fact that it is really part of a contract in which what is bought is labour time rather than a product. Mepham argues that Marx's celebrated distinction between on the one hand phenomenal form or appearance, and on the other real relation or essence – a distinction on which his entire analysis of the operation of capitalism rests – has a much greater epistemological content than some notion of superficial and underlying processes. This is because, Mepham believes, the distinction is systematically invoked in relation to ideology and, specifically, where a question of *mystification* arises. Marx's analysis of the fetishism of commodities is thus only one example of a general theory that 'the origin of ideological illusions is in the phenomenal forms of reality itself'.³⁶

Mepham explicitly disputes the view that Marx saw ideology as 'some sort of defective perception of clearly perceptible facts', stressing that for Marx 'it is the forms of social relations with which one is apparently directly acquainted in experience (value, wages, money, commodities, etc.) that are deceptive'.³⁷ It is this that is referred to in the latter part of the passage quoted, where Mepham argues that ideology operates through the systematic and mystificatory exclusion of certain perceptions from discourse. In Marx's own words: 'The characters that stamp products as commodities, and whose establishment is a necessary preliminary to the circulation of commodities, have already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life before man seeks to decipher . . . their meaning'.³⁸

I have set out six different treatments of the concept of ideology to be found in Marx. They do not form a seamless web of 'the Marxist theory of ideology' and to regard Marx as having produced 'a theory'

of ideology is unjustified. Some of Marx's propositions have enormous force and eloquence. The problem is that individual arguments made by Marx at different times, or extracted from his works by commentators, do not add up to a position on the issues that have become contentious in subsequent debates. There is enough in Marx to please those who like good old-fashioned economic determinism when they have to think about ideology, but there is enough, too, for those who support a more Gramscian engagement with the ideological and cultural struggle. Indeed, as is also true of Gramsci, Marx has become something of a rorschach blot, offering the raw material for a surprisingly diverse range of possible 'readings'.

Marx's propositions on ideology have become discrete sets of influences on subsequent writers and thinkers: some people opt for the 'camera obscura', others for the precursor of Gramsci, others again for commodity fetishism. All of these positions emerge, with due textual support, from the writings of Marx. In some senses, it is important to ascertain which of the varying interpretations of Marx's views on key issues is the most plausible. In another sense, it does not really matter: Marx has spawned such a range of metaphors for thinking about ideology that we each have to pick our own way through the bewildering range of images and models that have been generated. Perhaps the most significant point is that the very 'openness' or internally contradictory nature (depending on your view) of Marx's own writings has opened up a vast area of debate and dispute within the Marxist tradition. In recent years, the whole paradigm within which the debate has occurred has been extensively and tellingly criticised. Before looking at these more fundamental objections to the Marxist project, I want to try to draw out the issues that have generated the most debate within that tradition, and this will form the basis of the chapters immediately following.

As Larrain has argued,³⁹ perhaps the most abiding point of discussion in the Marxist tradition on ideology is the question of whether we necessarily take a 'critical' position – conceptualising ideology as illusion, mystification, distortion or apologia, for example. This 'epistemological' definition (so called because it speaks from a position of knowledge superior to that which is being categorised as ideological) is usually counterposed to writers – such as Lukács or Lenin – who have taken a more neutral view and seen ideology as the world-views of historical social classes. This issue has always been a highly politicised one within Marxism, but has now taken on a much broader and more topical political significance. In contemporary radical politics the personal voice of experienced

oppression has recently acquired a new authority and the Marxist theory of ideology has some new and telling challenges to face.

Related to this is the more philosophical issue of epistemology, often discussed under the heading of the 'ideology and science' debate. Opinion varies as to how far Marx might be construed as a realist or a relativist in epistemological terms, and this is a general issue around which many local disputes have circulated. It, too, has taken on a completely new lease of life in terms of contemporary theory: Foucault's rejection of 'truth' in favour of the operation of 'regimes of truth' is but one instance of a wholesale rethinking of epistemology. As Foucault has made crisply clear, the category of ideology itself does not emerge unscathed from such a major rethinking.

Thirdly, we can identify the question of 'determinism' as a defining characteristic of debates about ideology in the Marxist tradition, whether in the form of the 'base/superstructure' metaphor or in more recent discussions of 'articulation' or 'relative autonomy'. And here again, we see a major transformation of the question itself, and not merely the answers people have given to it, in the work of contemporary social theorists. To explain this properly we will have to go into each of these three issues in turn, starting with the question of whether ideology is necessarily a critical or pejorative term and the thorny issues that this raises.

Ideology: Critique or Description?

The term 'ideologue' has an inescapably critical connotation; when we speak of ideologues we imply quite deliberately that such people are more than representatives or spokespersons for certain points of view – they are skilled in the arts of persuasion and rhetoric and they may well seek to occlude uncongenial facts and mystify contradictory information. But the term ideologue is not necessarily a critical one: in the Soviet Union the various posts of party 'ideologues' were at one time respected political positions that formed an important part of political strategy. In the western capitalist democracies a government post of Minister for Ideology would be regarded with suspicion since, except in wartime when a propaganda function of government is explicitly allowed, the convention is that political beliefs and behaviour are based on rational argument about the facts rather than on overt mechanisms of persuasion. In the Soviet Union, of course, it is openly accepted that ideology is a matter for political strategy: there is no pretence of 'common sense' and no denial that political positions are always already *politicised*.

This difference in the connotations of the term 'ideologue' has its roots in two different traditions about the meaning of ideology to be found in the Marxist tradition. The 'western' view is based loosely on what I suggested in the previous chapter was Marx's position; the Soviet view based loosely on Lenin's understanding of ideology as the perspective of a particular class. Jorge Larraín, whose two recent books on ideology have rightly had considerable impact,¹ should be credited with having clarified this fundamental contradiction in Marxist thought in this area. In a summarising essay on the concept, he concludes that 'The existence of two major conceptions of ideology within the Marxist tradition is the source of many debates. Some authors of the present day believe that only one of these versions is the truly Marxist one, whereas others, unable to accept a difference between Marx and Lenin, try to reconcile both versions.'² Larraín centres many debates on ideology around these opposing conceptions

– the 'negative' or critical theory of ideology in Marx and the 'positive' or descriptive definition of general world-views and perspectives tied to historical social classes found in Lenin as well as in Lukács and Gramsci. There certainly is a case for seeing this as one, if not the, fundamental divide in Marxist theories of ideology. However, it could be argued that Larraín overplays this difference in his overall conception of the subject; the concept of ideology has generated several other debates of major significance, some of which have a bearing on wider debates in present-day theory.

THE 'CRITICAL' DEFINITION OF IDEOLOGY

Let us look at the debate by first considering the 'Marx' pole of the continuum. As I suggested in the previous chapter, Marx's various definitions of ideology all have a critical core. Whether he speaks of illusion and mystification, the critique of religion or the theory of commodity fetishism and other forms of reification in capitalism, Marx's uses of the idea of ideology are unquestionably based on a 'critical' conception. In Larraín's terms it is a 'negative' use in that it conceives ideology as some kind of distortion of thought. It is also an 'epistemological' usage in that Marx clearly proposes a distinction between knowledge or science on the one hand and ideology on the other: he makes claims about the inadequate knowledge status of ideology.

There is no difficulty in finding subsequent treatments of ideology in harmony with Marx's usage and I will give one or two examples of this cluster of usages. Let us take a recent one, notable for its crispness. Terry Lovell writes that 'Ideology, then, may be defined as the production and dissemination of erroneous beliefs whose inadequacies are socially motivated. This definition recognises two other categories: erroneous beliefs which are not so motivated, and valid beliefs which are, but places them both outside the category of ideology.'³ Lovell argues that this very precise definition avoids many of the pitfalls from which a definition of ideology as either distorted knowledge or class-related ideas will suffer. Noting that Marx himself, but not all Marxist writers on the topic, follows an admirable method of argument, Lovell insists that 'To establish that a given body of ideas or theory serves class interests is always insufficient to justify the label of ideology. It is always necessary *first* to apply epistemological criteria to evaluate the work. Only when the ideas in question have had their inadequacy to their object amply

demonstrated, and when the respects in which they are inadequate are also shown to touch upon class interest in a systematic way, is the critique of ideology completed.⁴ Terry Lovell's definition is a model of clarity in the 'critical' and 'epistemological' tradition of Marx's own thought. She ties her argument to a class analysis of ideology and she casts ideology exclusively at the level of conscious beliefs rather than in the wider terms of what Raymond Williams has called 'structures of feeling': both of these tend to go along with the 'critical' position, as we shall see later.

The second example of the 'Marx pole' I want to look at might be more contentious as I propose to take out of its general context Althusser's discussion of the operation of the school as an 'ideological apparatus' of the capitalist state. Louis Althusser's well-known essay contains a passage running along the following lines:

- 1 'The school is the dominant ideological apparatus of the state.'
- 2 'It takes children from every [social] class at infant-school age, and then for years ... it drums into them ... a certain amount of "know-how" wrapped in the ruling ideology (... natural history ... literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy).'
- 3 'Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children are ejected [workers and peasants] ... Another portion of schoolastically adapted youth ... goes somewhat further [technicians, clerks, lower executives] ... A last portion reaches the summit [intellectuals, managers, police, politicians, administrators, ideologists].'
- 4 'Each mass ejected *en route* is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfil in class society'. (The exploited workers have a consciousness that is 'national' and 'a-political'; managers have 'human relations'; agents of repression can enforce obedience; ideologists can manipulate consciousness.)
- 5 'The mechanisms which produce this vital result [reproduction of relations between exploiters and the exploited] ... are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology ... which represents the school as a neutral environment purged of ideology.'⁵

This passage might be regarded as a text-book example of the 'critical' position on ideology. Althusser shows how certain forms of consciousness and inadequate apprehension of the world are systema-

tically related to class interest, in this instance the need for the capitalist system to reproduce appropriate relations between its various agents. There is a clear insistence on the epistemological character of ideology (in line with Althusser's general defence of the ideology/science distinction), and a very direct attribution of specific ideological forms of consciousness to the requirements of the class system.

It is worth noting at this point two problems with Althusser's proposition. A central thrust of the argument is the explanation of the 'apolitical' consciousness of the mass of workers and peasants and, of course, this is the crucial political function of 'critical' theories of ideology. These theories must seek to explain how and why workers do not develop forms of consciousness that express their exploitation and develop possibilities for change. In Althusser's case many people have commented on the extreme position he takes up on this issue and what little room he leaves for contestation and the consciousness of resistance.⁶ In dealing with workers' consciousness Althusser refers to popular common sense and most of his description is distanced by quotation marks: 'a "highly-developed" "professional", "ethical", "civic", "national" and a-political consciousness'. The only element that he is prepared to assert directly is the idea that workers have an 'a-political' consciousness. Yet there is considerable room for doubt about the empirical evidence on which Althusser's assertions might be founded. Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan Turner, in their critical study of the widespread Marxist notion that there is a 'dominant ideology' to which the consciousness of workers is subjected, argue forcefully that 'The Dominant Ideology Thesis' is empirically false.⁷ They analyse, *inter alia*, many sociological studies of the consciousness of workers in late capitalist society and conclude that far from being a-political such workers have a clearly formulated apprehension of the injustice and exploitation of the world they inhabit and one which might be summarised in the expression 'a law for the rich and another for the poor'.⁸ According to Abercrombie et al., the reasons why workers accept such inequality may have more to do with the tangible economic benefits of reformism than with a notion of a 'value consensus' or 'dominant ideology' operating within the working class. They argue, on the contrary, that significant value *dissensus* exists within the working class – although the dominant class may be bound together by value consensus or 'dominant ideology'.⁹ This argument clearly poses a challenge not merely to Althusser's thesis, but to many of the arguments associated with the 'critical' position and its

attempt to theorize the insufficiently radical consciousness of the working class.

A second problem, more local to Althusser, is the discrepancy between the approach to ideology taken in the passage I have discussed and his approach elsewhere. For the 'other' Althusser on ideology – whose work on the role of ideological interpellation in the constitution of subjectivity will be discussed later – is hard to reconcile with this one.

THE 'CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS' DEFINITION

At the opposite, sometimes called 'positive', 'neutral' or descriptive pole of the continuum the most significant figures are Lukács and Lenin. The sharp contrast between this view and the 'critical' one can be seen in a quotation from Lenin: 'Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology being developed by the masses of the workers in the process of their movement *the only choice* is either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for humanity has not created a "third" ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or above-class ideology).' In a footnote to this passage Lenin adds that workers can, of course, contribute to the development of socialist ideology – but they do so 'not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians . . . ; in other words, they take part only to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and advance that knowledge'.¹⁰ From this passage we can note that Lenin is constructing ideology not so much as the world-view of a particular epoch or class but as a systematised and elaborated body of thought appropriate to such a class: he is regarding ideology as the knowledge that is produced by intellectuals and professional ideologues. Of equal importance is his insistence that no non-class ideology can exist in class society; this is so much true that the terms 'ideology' and 'class consciousness' become almost interchangeable in this tradition.

Lenin's conception of ideology is integrally linked to class struggle. Georg Lukács, in the appraisal written just after Lenin's death in 1923, stressed that Lenin was the first to see through the 'mechanistic application of Marxism' that saw proletarian class consciousness as automatically given. This error – which Lukács describes as thinking that *the proletariat could gradually evolve ideologically into the revolutionary vocation appropriate to its class*¹¹ – was

one that Lenin tried to combat with his developing theories of party organisation and the importance of the vanguard party in raising consciousness. So Lenin's conception of ideology, although closely tied to class consciousness, does not reduce to a 'reflectionist' position on ideology where consciousness is seen as a simple mirror image of historical economic relations. Lenin's conception thus goes back to the distinction Marx made between a class 'in itself' and a class whose consciousness had been raised to the point where one can speak of a class 'for itself'. The notion of 'illusion' is quite irrelevant to this conception of ideology: consciousness is appropriate to a particular class at a specific period of history and the strengths and weaknesses of ideologies are given by this historical reality, not by the supposed relation of ideology to absolute non-historical knowledge.

It is no coincidence that it should be Lukács making this point. For underlying Lenin's understanding of ideology is the whole tradition of German thought that sees ideology and consciousness in a reflectionist mode. The Hegelian *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the epoch, gives way to an idea of *Weltanschauung*, or general world-view, analysed by Lukács himself as appertaining to specific social classes. Lukács does not see class ideology and class consciousness as *determined* by economic relations as occurs in Marx's base-and-superstructure metaphor, he sees instead a (Hegelian) *totality* in which ideology and consciousness are analytically inseparable from these other features of a mode of production. It is this emphasis on society as a 'totality' that allows Lukács to develop some of the more striking of his literary theories: he binds together the historical organisation of production in a society with a generalised view of the world characteristic of a particular class in that society and then meshes into this the cultural and ideological expression of that class. This complex totality is all integrally connected, and it is this that leads to some of Lukács's more notorious pronouncements on culture. For example, he argues that the bourgeois realist novel could only be a progressive art-form whilst the bourgeoisie was historically a progressive class, and that modernism, as the art-form of a declining class, was a necessarily decadent style.¹² Formulations of this type are only possible if society is thought of as an 'expressive totality', and this view has proved increasingly difficult to sustain. Indeed, in the work of some contemporary theorists it is argued that society should not be thought of as a 'totality' at all, let alone one as awesomely integrated as the 'expressive' model suggests.

We can see how far Lukács's approach differs from the 'Marx pole' of the continuum by looking at a passage where he refers to

Engels's use of the term 'false consciousness' – symptomatic of the strongest 'critical' position on ideology, *pace* the likely ambiguities of translation. Lukács writes: 'as Engels emphasises in a letter to Mehring, this consciousness is false. However, the dialectical method does not allow us simply to proclaim the "falseness" of this consciousness and to persist in an inflexible confrontation of true and false. On the contrary, it requires us to investigate this "false consciousness" concretely as an aspect of the historical totality and as a stage in the historical process.'¹³ Lukács here distances himself – in a paradoxically 'modern' fashion – from the problematic notion of false consciousness but not for the reasons that have in more recent times made the term so unpopular. Lukács's critique is based on his belief that all forms of consciousness can be analysed in terms of historical reality and hence the 'falseness' can be correctly attributed not to the consciousness but to the society of which such consciousness forms a part.

Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* is the text that shows most clearly the philosophical background that Lenin was to transform in his reconceptualisation of class consciousness as a matter for party organisation and struggle. It has been much analysed, mainly because it is a text that reveals the weaknesses of the 'class consciousness' conception of ideology. Hence we can examine the arguments about it to see some of the general difficulties with the 'descriptive' approach. Perhaps the best known of these is the charge of 'historicism'. Underlying Lukács's arguments is the belief that knowledge, including historical materialism, is a product of history just as much as is class consciousness: indeed both are included in this usage of the term ideology. This, of course, constitutes a radical denial of the distinction between ideology and science, since *both* are seen as products of the totality of a society in a particular epoch. This is called historicism for the simple reason that it casts history – rather than science – as the basis of objective knowledge. It is clearly a 'charge' that can be laid against many other exponents of the roughly 'positive' or 'historical class consciousness' school of thought on ideology. It must be said, however, that it is a charge that can only be made *from* an explicit position, namely one that rests on the validity of the ideology/science distinction. Hence, although it is a widely used critical term in debates about ideology, it finds its strongest arguments only in the work of those who are themselves committed to the objective epistemological status of science. As we shall see later, the most notable crusader for the 'scientific' status of Marxism, and critic of the errors of 'historicism', is Louis Althusser.

Gareth Stedman-Jones, in a wide-ranging critique of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, draws out the more general anti-scientific undertones of Lukács's stance.¹⁴ He points to the anti-scientific tradition of German philosophy in which Lukács was immersed and the rejection of causal analysis in the German human sciences, describing *History and Class Consciousness* as 'the first major irruption of the romantic anti-scientific tradition of bourgeois thought into Marxist theory'.¹⁵ Stedman-Jones shows how Lukács arrives at an extraordinary reversal of the usual ways of thinking about science and consciousness: science, as part of bourgeois ideology, is denoted to being merely the expression of a particular class viewpoint, whereas the consciousness of the proletariat – as the consciousness of the truly universal class – acquires an objective status.¹⁶ This leads, as Stedman-Jones points out, to a highly relativist conception of knowledge as well as to the strange attribution of universal, objective status to the subjectivity of the working class.

Lukács, particularly in his earlier work, is a most vulnerable target for the charge of historicism. It has, however, been brought against many others who see ideology in terms of consciousness within a historical totality. Hence Lenin, Karl Korsch and sometimes Gramsci have all been regarded as 'historicist' in their orientation. None of them, however, operates with such a mechanical conception of class consciousness as does Lukács, none has the anti-scientific streak identified by Stedman-Jones in Lukács, and all pay attention (in Gramsci's case it is a major focus of his work) to ideological struggle. In this sense it is reasonable to see Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* as the extreme 'pole' of the 'historical class consciousness' position on ideology – and one whose arguments were significantly affected by Lenin's emphasis on the role of the party in changing political consciousness. Agnes Heller has commented on the fact that Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* 'continues to be regarded as the paradigmatic expression of his theoretical activity',¹⁷ although it was decisively repudiated by him in later life. I am leaving in suspension the vexed issues surrounding the place of this particular book in Lukács's work as a whole, and merely using it here as an illustration of the position.

I have discussed Lukács so far principally in relation to the question of a critical, versus a descriptive, use of the term ideology. Under the heading of 'historicism' I have touched on the ideology/science distinction, which will be discussed more directly in the next chapter. We can note, though, that a number of other much debated points arise over Lukács's position – notably the question of whether

ideology is necessarily a 'class-belonging' concept, and the issue of 'humanism'. Both of these will be pursued in later chapters.

SOME 'CLASSICAL' MEDIATIONS

A number of writers in the classical tradition have proposed ways of looking at ideology that fall into neither of the two categorical extremes discussed above. Although the resolution of this problem has proved a central theme for many Marxist theorists, I propose to look – mainly just to illustrate the possibilities – at only one or two. In 1923, the same year as Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, Karl Korsch wrote an essay in which he dealt with the question of ideology in such a way as to carve out a position equally distanced from the two poles of the critical/descriptive debate. Korsch flatly rejects what he calls the 'vulgar-Marxism' of the Second International. He describes the 'ideology as illusion' position, with an admitted element of caricature, in the following terms: 'for vulgar-Marxism there are three degrees of reality: (1) the economy, which in the last instance is the only objective and totally non-ideological reality (2) Law and the State, which are already somewhat less real because clad in ideology, and (3) pure ideology which is objectless and totally unreal'.¹⁸

Korsch himself insists that ideologies must be grasped as 'real' and engaged with from a historical materialist theoretical position and in revolutionary struggle. He quotes approvingly the Marx of the 1985 Preface (Marx IV in chapter 1 of this book), for whom, Korsch says, under specific conditions certain mental representations can be thought of as ideological. He argues that Marx and Engels did not fall into the error of seeing either political consciousness or political philosophies as mere ideology, and in general seeks to distance Marx from the extremes of the 'critical' viewpoint. On the other hand, Korsch attacks with vigour the mechanistic 'reflection' model, suggesting that the approach that regards consciousness as an abstract reflection of material development is wholly dualistic and even 'metaphysical' rather than materialist or Marxist. Korsch proposes instead that intellectual life be understood 'in union' with consciousness as a 'real yet also ideal (or "ideological") component of the historical process in general'.¹⁹ As such, it is a field of struggle rather than illusion that can be ignored or the inevitable manifestation of historically given class consciousness.

Korsch's resolution – if such it be – of the two varying conceptions of ideology leads us to the major contribution to these debates of the

Italian political thinker Antonio Gramsci. Larraín has argued that Gramsci's work is a decisive advance for the 'positive' conception of ideology.²⁰ Gramsci formulates a way of looking at ideology that suffers from neither the problems attendant upon seeing ideology as illusion nor those that follow from the 'historicism' of seeing ideology as part of a mechanically related historical social totality. Larraín also points out that Gramsci's rejection of the strongly 'critical' sense of ideology in Marx occurred (as was also the case with Lukács) before the text of *The German Ideology* was available to him: so the 'positive' conception of ideology does not develop in reaction to, but in ignorance of, the strongest statement of the 'negative' model.²¹

Gramsci's work is by no means restricted to the positive/negative debate about ideology, and his distinctive contribution will be discussed under various other headings too; he is today by far the most popular theorist of ideology within the 'classical' Marxist tradition. Marx's 1859 formulation about ideology, in which he refers briefly to the idea that ideology is where men become conscious of class conflict and 'fight it out', finds a profound and elaborated exposition and development in Gramsci's work. Above all, Gramsci conceives of ideology as a matter for struggle – a struggle in which intellectuals and ideologues play a part in the long-term battles for popular support in the socialist project. It is this centring of the theory of ideology around the political salience of ideological and cultural struggle that has contributed to Gramsci's popularity among the left intelligentsia and that caused his work to be taken up afresh in recent years. Gramsci's insistence on human political agency – and it is a matter for dispute whether he ties this to class agency or not – differentiates his position sharply from the 'reflectionist' position on ideology and the view that society is an 'expressive totality'. His insistence on the necessity for ideological struggle as part of a broad socialist political project distances him equally from the prioritising of struggle at the point of economic production that traditionally goes hand in hand with the 'critical' view of ideology as an illusory representation of the material base. In this sense, given the power of the alternative that Gramsci puts forward in his writings, his work constitutes the most important resolution of this debate.

Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as a struggle for 'consent' leads him to propose a theory of the role of intellectuals that has generated considerable interest. Gramsci argues that 'intellectuals' play an important part in the general field in which class conflict is played out: they are not restricted to the function of individual ideologues but have a broader political significance. Most notably,

Gramsci suggested that we can distinguish between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals – the former being the voices of the ruling bloc and the latter those that come to speak for progressive class forces in their struggle against hegemonic domination.²² Intellectuals are certainly important in the 'war of position' in which classes move to better vantage points in the hegemonic contest; less so in the subsequent 'war of manoeuvre' or seizing of state power. But Gramsci, in a marked political contrast to Lenin's view, sees the winning of hegemony as something that must take place as a *precondition* to a revolutionary seizure of power.

Gramsci sees what is now generally called 'ideological struggle' as politically effective and significant in its own right: in this sense it is a theory of intellectual work that is far removed from the usual 'historicist' assumptions. Gramsci's position is quite different from the 'class consciousness' position on ideology – and his emphasis on struggle for hegemony is far removed from the 'immanentist' and 'spontaneist' tendencies usually associated with that position. On the other hand, the use of the term 'organic' to refer to the intellectuals of the working class has a Lukácsian ring to it, and this is only one example of what might be thought of as 'historicist' residues in Gramsci's arguments.²³

The question as to whether Gramsci should be regarded as 'historicist' or not is indexical of where he is to be placed on the spectrum of critical/class consciousness definitions of ideology with which we are concerned here. In my view Gramsci does strike some kind of balance, or resolution, between the two extremes; no one could suggest he espouses the 'critical' definition and his emphasis on the struggle for hegemony brings him sharply back from the Lukácsian view of an 'expressive totality'. However, it must be said that there are substantial, indeed fundamental definitional difficulties with Gramsci's work and any thorough general statement on ideology from a Gramscian viewpoint would need to resolve them. They include: what is the relationship, or intellectual division of labour, between the concepts of ideology and hegemony? Is ideology a specifically political concept, and hegemony a broader cultural one (as suggested by Hall et al.)? How does either concept relate to an emphasis on coercion or on non-coercive aspects of consent? (for example, how do these twin concepts compare with Althusser's distinction between ideological and repressive state apparatuses?) Does Gramsci's definition of organic ideologies as 'necessary superstructures' contradict the notion of ideology as a terrain of struggle? What implications does this ambiguity have for the question of the deter-

mination of ideology? Is either ideology or hegemony explicitly tied to class analysis, or also relevant to other political conflicts and movements? Although Gramsci's insights and formulations have proved immensely fertile – particularly in the post-Leninist political discussions of the left in Western Europe – there is an urgent need to try and resolve some of the theoretical ambiguities left in the body of his writings.

SOME CURRENT PERSPECTIVES

I want to conclude this chapter by discussing briefly the extent to which this key difference in the classical tradition, on whether ideology should be thought of in a critical, 'epistemological' or in a neutral way that focuses on class consciousness, is still relevant for contemporary theorists of ideology. Within a roughly Marxist literature, and in writing that has been influenced by the Marxist tradition, there can be no doubt that the echoes of the debate linger, necessarily, on. It is not a transcended problem, although it is given less importance in many of the newer perspectives than it had previously. To illustrate the continuing relevance of this issue I shall refer to recent work by John Thompson and Goran Therborn, as examples of positions on ideology that – though nuanced, sophisticated and 'soft' in comparison with the polar positions on the continuum – can usefully be distinguished along the critical/neutral fault line.

John Thompson's view on how ideology should be defined is clarified in the course of his detailed discussions of a wide variety of recent theorists in *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. Thompson himself concentrates on language, as the 'principal medium' of ideology, and his approach is particularly influenced by the analysis of power and domination in writers such as Jürgen Habermas. He defines ideology in the following terms: 'to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination'.²⁴ He suggests that three main processes, or modalities, can be identified in the way ideology operates. The first cited is *legitimation*, in the Weberian sense of an appeal for legitimacy on traditional, rational or charismatic grounds. A second is *dissimulation*: the 'seldom intentional' concealment of relations of domination in ways that are themselves often concealed – this is the point at which Thompson is nearest to the classical 'critical' definition (for example to the idea of a 'structural exclusion from thought' that John Mepham identifies

in Marx's later approach to ideology).²⁵ Habermas makes a comparable point when he says that ideology serves 'to impede making the foundations of society the object of thought and reflection'.²⁶ A third form of ideological operation is *reification*, which for Thompson means 'representing a transitory, historical state of affairs as if it were permanent, natural, outside of time'.²⁷

These modalities are not stated dogmatically, and Thompson explains that there is considerable overlap in their operation and that others may be required in particular analyses. They sketch out, however, a position on ideology that locates it firmly within an understanding of, on the one hand, a general conception of society in terms of domination and, on the other, an insistence that the crucial mechanism at work is language. In that context Thompson, whilst departing from the classical Marxist model, notably in the crucial shift from 'class' to a general theory of 'domination', has none the less taken a position on the so-called epistemological side of the issue.

Goran Therborn, by contrast, has recently argued for a definition of ideology stripped of the 'critical' dimension. He suggests that ideology 'will refer to that aspect of the human condition under which human beings live their lives as conscious actors in a world that makes sense to them to varying degrees'.²⁸ Therborn is principally interested in the problem of subjectivity – an issue which is completely neglected in the classical tradition but has been central to more recent debates – and he attempts to formulate a definition of ideology that will enable subjectivity to be explored as constructed both by class and by other social relations. Therborn accepts that such an approach to ideology would need to recognise the salience of unconscious psychodynamic processes and that consciousness largely functions through symbolic language codes. He concludes his definitional statement on ideology with the following remarks: 'Thus the conception of ideology employed here deliberately includes both everyday notions and "experience" and elaborate intellectual doctrines, both the "consciousness" of social actors and the institutionalised thought-systems and discourses of a given society. But to study these as ideology means to look at them from a particular perspective: not as bodies of thought or structures of discourse *per se*, but as manifestations of a particular being-in-the-world of conscious actors, of human subjects. In other words, to conceive of a text or an utterance as ideology is to focus on the way it operates in the formation and transformation of human subjectivity'.²⁹

This definition might cause one to ask whether there are any

drawbacks to such an all-inclusive and over-general delineation of the term ideology. All the components identified by Gramsci, from philosophical systems down to the arbitrary residues of cultural folklore, would here be included – in addition to an existentialist emphasis on social being – and this makes the approach very general. The broadness of Therborn's definition is motivated, however, by (among other considerations) a rejection of the 'false consciousness' or critical view of ideology in which class interest is given as the underlying explanation of behaviour. Therborn argues that this view, long dominant within the Marxist tradition, should be rejected in favour of the Marx of the 1859 Preface who takes the view that ideology is where 'men become conscious ... and fight out' the conflicts generated by relations of production.³⁰

Therborn's work illustrates the continuing influence of the classical debate on contemporary work: though whether he is right to attach, as indeed others have also done, so much weight to this one sentence of Marx is perhaps a moot point. And, as we shall see later in considering Althusser's approach to the interpellative process of constituting subjectivity, there are difficulties in reconciling an emphasis on 'fighting out' conflicts generated by production relations with the analysis for which Therborn calls on unconscious as well as conscious dimensions of subjectivity. In practice, most existing discussions of unconscious processes have focused on dynamics quite other than class, although this is changing in some recent work in this area.³¹

Therborn is by no means concerned, as others have been, to establish the correctness of a particular reading of Marx, and in general his approach is similar to John Thompson's in the degree to which it is influenced by but independent of the Marxist tradition. His definition raises, however, some general issues about what substance and precision a theory of ideology can have if it is stripped of both the epistemological dimension and also of an organising focus on class. Gramsci, as we have seen, is the strongest candidate for having developed the 'positive' alternative approach in Marxism, and the question of whether or not his working theory operates within or beyond a class analysis remains bitterly contested in social and political theory. Therborn, in proposing a yet wider scope of reference for the concept of ideology – that includes unconscious as well as virtually all forms of conscious meaning – is making a determined bid for what is essentially a more descriptive understanding of ideology than is common. Alex Callinicos has argued that Therborn is correct in rejecting both the epistemological definition and the

emphasis on consciousness and summarises Therborn's position on ideology as 'the primarily discursive practices through which human beings live their relation to reality'.³² But it remains unclear whether Therborn's position could be engaged, as Callinicos has recommended, with a Gramscian perspective. Callinicos calls, at the end of his discussion of ideology, for 'the confrontation of Gramsci's thought with theories of discourse' as the key to further advance,³³ but the call is easier made than accomplished.

Two key questions have emerged in considering the issue of whether ideology should be seen as necessarily weak in epistemological terms, and both of them feature centrally in contemporary theoretical debates. We can take the working definition mentioned earlier, that 'ideology is mystification that serves class interest', to illustrate this point. It is worth noting that in two crucial respects this definition, which is handed down on tablets of stone in much sociology teaching, is drawn from Marx. It has the irreducible core of an emphasis on *critique* and it binds the project of demystifying ideology to the understanding of social class. But although Marx struck these together with a permanent theoretical superglue, attempts have been made to prise them apart. John Thompson, as we have seen, has formulated some of the basic arguments with regard to a general concept of 'domination' rather than an insistence on the unilateral role of social class, and these arguments, which raise interesting questions about both social structure and political agency, will be pursued further. In addition, there is now a ringing debate on the relationship between ideology and class that is trying to shift Marxism into a formally 'post-Marxist' period, and this will be the focus of chapter 4.

As far as the question of 'critique' is concerned, Richard Bernstein has noted that one of the strengths of the 'epistemological' definition of ideology is that it enables us to avoid the relativism of the view that 'all "belief system" ultimately have the same epistemological status'.³⁴ The obvious dangers of abandoning the critical edge that ideology has traditionally carried are those of relativism, pluralism, subjectivism and a general move into philosophical pragmatism. Interestingly, these are all features that can be discerned more clearly in the politics of new social groups, where the authentic voice of personal experience has come to be very powerful, than in the conventions of the Marxist-Leninist left, which always privileged the 'correct line' above individual experience. At stake in this is a difference of view about ideology and political subjectivity, in the sense that the definition of ideology as critique and demystification is one

that forces upon us a critical consideration of the ways in which we have constructed our own experience. Theories of ideology claim to offer, therefore, a reading of personal experience – a different gloss on that experience, possibly even an explanation of it. There is often considerable tension between an experience-generated political motivation and expression (whether it be the outraged vegetarianism of youth or the moralistic ranking of oppression that characterises 'identity politics' in some versions of feminism) and an understanding of ideology as the theorisation, and critique, of the unreliable category of personal experience.

This problem has, I think, been exacerbated by the fact that Marxism, in both its theoretical development and the precepts and practices of Marxist political organisations, has tended to err on the side of over-confident rulings on what is so-called science or knowledge and what is ideology and has been guilty of a corresponding contempt for the nature of experience as subjectively lived and understood. In response, we have seen a flowering of political ventures rejecting that set of priorities. Increasingly, however, enough critiques of political relativism are emerging from the contemporary scene for us to be able to say that the tide is in some senses turning.³⁵ At one level this is fuelled by the rising influence of a politics based on issues, and coalitions, rather than on the cosmic truths of a major revolutionary project.

Another reason, perhaps, is that to take subjectivity seriously is by no means to defer to the tyranny of 'authenticity'. And here the most interesting subject is psychoanalysis. Traditionally, psychoanalytic theory and practice of all persuasions comes fully equipped with a very strong orientation towards explanation. A recurring theme of psychoanalysis is the idea that *work* (analytic work, dream work) is the means to greater understanding. Psychoanalysis stresses the role of unmasking, and demystification, in the process of laying bare the dynamics of repression and understanding how material is 'buried' from conscious access. Post-structuralist reworkings of psychoanalysis naturally operate with much greater caution, and tension, in this area and Lacanians express strong critiques of the essentialist bias in much psychoanalytic thought. But, even here, there is an understandable reluctance to 'let go' of explanatory objectives, be they in the clinical context or in the application of psychoanalytic ideas to cinema or literary texts. In so far as psychoanalysis is in contention with a traditional theory of ideology as an interpretation of subjectivity, the parallel is an interesting one. In any event, one might be justified in suggesting that, leaving aside more fundamental

questions about the status of knowledge (with which the next chapter is concerned), the so-called 'epistemological' definition of ideology can generate useful and illuminating analyses and has a decisive edge over the perception of ideology as historical class consciousness.

3

Problems of Science and Determinism

'Ideology' and 'science'

Marx's warning to the prospective French readers of *Capital*, for whom he feared the book would prove a slow haul, has a bizarre ring for the modern reader who has discovered just how 'unscientific' much science has turned out to be. Marx writes: 'There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.'¹ Here we have a kind of intellectual pilgrim's progress, in which hard work and perseverance in the manner of a nineteenth-century explorer will eventually pay off with the intrepid few arriving at 'the truth'; a somewhat moralistic approach to the pursuit of knowledge that is not uncommon in Marx. There are, however, many disagreements among philosophers of social science as to whether Marx formally held the position that a clear distinction can be drawn between ideology and science, as also there are disagreements about the epistemological claims and status of his own analyses. It is not necessary to go into detail here about these debates, although they are currently a focus of work among the new 'realist' philosophers.² I want instead to go back a step, to the arguments within European Marxism and particularly those made by Louis Althusser in the 1960s on science and ideology in Marx's writings, since these have posed in a sharp, and highly contentious, way some of the key problems that need to be resolved in this area. In so far as Althusser has provided us with one of the strongest, most confident (verging on bombastic, as we shall see) statements of the claim that science and ideology can be disentangled, his work is a prime subject for scrutiny.

Althusser proposed that Marx's work should be read in terms of a fundamental divergence between the 'young' Marx – a left-Hegelian humanist and historicist, best known to us now for his theses on