

What Is Ideology?

Written for UCL's Marxism module in my second year. The question was open: what is ideology? I read Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology* closely and argued that their conception of ideology is best read as a structural critique of inverted consciousness, not a claim that any belief serving a ruling class's interests is thereby false. Most of the essay is spent defending that reading against two objections: that Marx is just committing the genetic fallacy, and the deeper worry that his own theory might turn out to be ideological by its own standard.

ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

1. Marx's target is not political belief in general but a *structure*: consciousness that inverts its own relation to the material conditions producing it.
2. That structure does two things at once. It conceals its material origin, and it presents the particular interests of a ruling class as universal.
3. So the charge against an ideological claim is not that it is false because of who holds it. It is that its form hides where it came from.
4. Objection one, the genetic fallacy: Marx seems to reject ideas by tracing their origin. I argue the structural reading dissolves this.
5. Objection two, undermining: by its own standard, Marx's theory might be ideological too.
6. Marx can answer both, but only from inside his materialist framework. That is a real limit, and it constrains any theory that diagnoses ideology at all.

The term 'ideology' is often used loosely to refer to a set of political beliefs, but Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels use it in a narrower, more technical, and more critical sense. Importantly, within the Marxist tradition, there is no single conception of ideology; in various works, it is used to refer to class belief, false consciousness, and the production of ideas more generally (Nielsen 1989, 146). Thus, given the contention surrounding the term's definition, this essay focuses on how I interpret Marx and Engels's use of it in *The German Ideology*, rather than later Marxist or Leninist uses. This text features a developed critical conception of ideology and gets at what I believe is distinctive of the Marxist concept.

I argue that Marx and Engels's conception of ideology is best read as a structural critique of inverted forms of consciousness that conceal their material origins and universalise the interests of a ruling class. However, I shall also present two objections: the genetic fallacy objection and the undermining objection. I conclude that Marx can answer both these objections, but only within his materialist framework. This is a limitation he ultimately cannot overcome and a constraint on any theory that diagnoses ideology.

Marx starts from the Feuerbachian critique that religion is the projection of man's essence and products (1994a, 57). Religion takes human capacities and attributes them to God; what is seen as a human power becomes divine. Religion masks itself as something independent of and above humans, reflecting their inability to grasp who they are. Religion estranges the individual and represents the "sigh of the oppressed creature" (Marx 1994a, 57). Religion is socially produced, yet appears to be greater than humanity. Thus, it is not religion specifically, but this structure that interests Marx. Thus, although Marx has unmasked religion as an illusion, he must show why such illusions persist.

Marx, therefore, proceeds to criticise Feuerbach for treating the human too abstractly. Feuerbach's materialist criticism fails to account for the role of "practical-critical" activity (praxis) in human essence (Marx 1994b, 116). Human beings must instead be considered not primarily as contemplative beings, but as socially productive and active agents. Thus, Marx shifts the analysis to human practice and social relations, emphasising the practical side of human activity. This sets up the later position that ideology is not merely a theological or intellectual error and allows Marx to explain how practice is connected to thought.

Additionally, Marx's theory must remain accountable to praxis (Dupré 1980, 93). A theory of human essence that detaches itself from material conditions fails in its argument. Essence is constituted by social reality and relations rather than residing within isolated individuals, meaning that any 'abstract individual' must be placed within the specific society they belong to (Marx 1994b, 117). Further, circumstances and reality can therefore be transformed by human activity (Marx 1994b, 117). This commits Marx to a practical rather than a relativist view of the truth. Objective truth is, therefore, a practical matter that is demonstrated through practical engagement with the world, rather than abstracted from it (Marx 1994b, 116).

Thus, Marx holds that "all social life is essentially practical" (1994b, 118). This applies to human consciousness, too. If consciousness is constituted by social life and all social life is practical, then consciousness must be located within a socially related and materially focused picture of human reality, rather than treated as an autonomous abstraction, external to the material world. This focus on praxis allows Marx to provide a positive account of the production of consciousness and how ideology emerges as a specific distortion of this production.

Marx begins with real presuppositions, which are the actions and living conditions of real people (Marx and Engels 1994, 123). Humans distinguish themselves from animals by producing means of life, such as food, shelter, and clothing (Marx and Engels 1994, 123). Through this process, consciousness arises, becoming "directly interwoven" into human activity and best thought of as the "language of real life" (Marx and Engels 1994, 124). Individuals are expressed by the "material conditions of their production", and conscious ideas are the "necessary sublimations" of these material conditions (Marx and Engels 1994, 124-25). This means that consciousness is not an autonomous phenomenon in a transcendental realm detached from social existence, but arises from the real-life social products of human relations (Marx and Engels 1994, 124). Thus, Marx has now historicised consciousness (that is, shown it to be specific to the conditions of a given historical time), and can begin to explain what ideology is.

The Young Hegelians demonstrate an example of what Marx takes ideology to be. They treat ideas as if they were the primary sources of domination that act as 'shackles' from which liberation requires only a change in thought (Marx and Engels 1994, 122). This is ideological for Marx. The Young Hegelians reverse the direction of causation by arguing that consciousness produces material life rather than vice versa. Additionally, they present their view as not caused by a specific moment in history. This sets up Marx's account of ideology, which contrasts a consciousness that recognises its material conditions with one that does not.

However, given that all consciousness is produced by social conditions, what distinguishes ideology? In its simplest sense, ideology is human self-misunderstanding. This misunderstanding involves people becoming dominated by the products of their own actions, as they falsely view them as being independent external powers standing above them. A simple example is religion, as discussed above; humans create the notion of God, project their capacities onto it, and treat it as having dominion over them. Marx generalises this thought by claiming that humans have always had false notions about who they are and have "bowed down to their creations" (1994, 119). On this view, ideology is a state in which humans produce the very things and ideas that come to dominate them. However, ideology is not just reducible to an 'error' in ideas. It is a structural social problem arising from conditions in material and social life. Ideology, as a misunderstanding of the self, arises from a distorted consciousness of historical and social relations.

Secondly, ideology involves inversion. Ideology presents forms of consciousness and ideas (such as religion, morality, philosophy) as the true driving forces of reality throughout history, contradicting Marx's claim that praxis governs ideas. Marx strengthens his conception of ideology as inverting the true nature of things by comparing it to a camera obscura. Ideology, just like a camera obscura, makes people and their relationships appear "upside down" (Marx and Engels 1994, 124). This is more nuanced than simply saying that these relationships appear upside down and are therefore false. A camera obscura does not

randomly create fiction; rather, it takes something real and produces an inverted image. Likewise, ideology does not create something fictitious; it takes real relations and misrepresents them. Thus, ideology can contain multiple true statements, yet its misrepresentation of what happens leads an individual to adopt a similarly distorted perspective (Nielsen 1989, 149). Ideology can, therefore, contain true claims yet remain ideological. Any 'falsity' in ideology lies in its structural misinterpretation of truths to "reverse what actually occurs" (Nielsen 1989, 149). This means that Marx's conception of ideology cannot be simply spotted by checking a sentence's truth value.

Thirdly, ideology misrepresents itself as independent of its material causes. It appears eternal, natural, and autonomous, and feigns a "semblance of independence... that does not know its origin" (Dupré 1980, 100). This is why ideology cannot be corrected like usual factual errors, as it has pre-empted the framework with which one would assess counterevidence. Nonetheless, Marx believes that his 'scientific' analysis exposes ideology by tracing its true roots and placing it in its material context.

Additionally, ideology is tied to the class structure that produces it. Although it masks its material causes, it is ultimately the manifestation of the ruling class's ideas. The ruling class possesses most of the material power of the time, so that the dominant ideas of an age are nothing but the manifestation of "dominant material relations" (Marx and Engels 1994, 145). Even within this ruling class, many individuals are dominated by these ideas, so that only those "active, conceptive ideologues" do not relate to them so passively (Marx and Engels 1994, 145). This excludes the view that ideology is simply elite manipulation. Thus, the production of ideas is a class power, and ideology is the "medium through which class struggle is conducted in theory" (Nielsen 1989, 157). Ideology, therefore, is built within the very conditions in which ideas are produced and is both a political and an epistemological phenomenon.

Fourth, a ruling class secures the appearance of universality through universalisation. This is when a dominant class represents its interests as the only reasonable and universally valid ones, common to all of society (Marx and Engels 1994, 146). This does not mean pretending that a specific institution has always existed. Instead, it means that a specific interest, tied to a certain historical moment, is presented as a standpoint that is simply rational and natural for everyone. Historical instances only solidify Marx's claim. For example, John Locke's theory of natural rights presents private property as a universal right that has existed throughout time and serves to uphold a specifically property-owning interest under the guise of a universal claim. Another example is Adam Smith's political economy, which presents capitalism as the natural arrangement for humans, despite masking a class-specific interest as applicable to all. These examples showcase the ascending phase of bourgeois ideology, where claims may have an "honest scientific basis" (Drucker 1972, 154). From this, one can understand that the errors were due to limitations in knowledge, rather than to bad intentions. However, even if one argues that Smith was 'somewhat correct', his

arguments are still ideological, as they operate within a framework that serves ruling-class interests yet appears to represent everyone's (Nielsen 1989, 156). This contrasts with instances of ideology in which the bourgeoisie had already ascended to the ruling class. Individuals, such as Thomas Malthus, claimed that poverty was natural, absolving the ruling classes of responsibility to remedy it, without acknowledging that he was presenting a fraudulent, biased argument (Drucker 1972, 154). The same ideological form of universalising a class interest takes on different content depending on the ruling class's position relative to power. This matters because it shows how ideology is defined by its structural function rather than by the intentions of its supporters.

Marx's conception of ideology can now be stated. It is a form of consciousness that (1) inverts the order of causation by presenting ideas as the drivers of everyday life; (2) conceals its material origins, presenting itself as independent and autonomous; and (3) serves the interests of a dominant class through the process of universalisation. On this count, it is both an epistemic and a political phenomenon, judged by its function as well as its content. I now turn to two objections. First, that Marx's critique of ideology commits the genetic fallacy, and second, that Marx's materialist theory may itself be ideological.

A serious objection is that Marx's criticism of ideology appears to dismiss ideas on the basis of their origins rather than their content. If Marx were rejecting a theory (ideology) simply because it promoted a particular class interest, rather than evaluating the theory itself, then he would be committing the genetic fallacy. An example may be Locke's theory supporting private property. If Marx is dismissing Locke's theory only because it advances bourgeois interests, without showing its content to be false, then he is committing the genetic fallacy. Locke may simultaneously advance bourgeois interests and be correct. Thus, this objection highlights a serious epistemological concern. Marx may be introducing a cause as to why someone holds a specific belief, when that particular cause appears to bear no relevance to that belief's truth value (White 2010, 574). Showing why someone has a belief is different from showing the belief's justification. Arguing that ideology has roots in class interests is insufficient to establish that it is false. Thus, Marx must show not merely that ideological beliefs have a cause lying in class interests, but that this particular kind of cause produces systematically distorted beliefs. If Marx fails, his critique has reduced critical force.

This objection gains force when one asks what sort of cause of a belief is epistemologically troublesome. The mere "causal determination of belief is not worrisome as such" (White 2010, 580), as it is often the very reason why people hold beliefs in the first place; I may hold that $2+2=4$ due to education or that I am sitting in a chair due to my visual experience. These causes are fine because they accurately track reality and are sensitive to how things really are. These causes would not have produced their corresponding beliefs if reality had been otherwise. The worry is a troubling cause for a belief that operates independently of the belief's truth value. This sort of cause would produce a belief regardless of how things actually are, leading someone to believe something even if it were false (White 2010, 580).

Therefore, for Marx to evade the charge of committing the genetic fallacy, he must show not only that ideological beliefs have origins in class interests, but that these origins are insensitive to the truth. He must show that ideological beliefs would persist regardless of whether they accurately represented society.

Marx's account of ideology above is already enough to meet the objection's demands, so long as ideology is seen as more than just arising from a class interest. His criticism of ideology does not rely solely on the claim that ideological beliefs originate in particular class interests. The criticism also considers how ideology misrepresents social reality and undermines the truth sensitivity of its beliefs. Ideology inverts the order of causation: whereas Marx argues that life determines consciousness, ideology presents forms of consciousness as determining life (Marx and Engels 1994, 124). Thus, ideology distorts a dominated class's understanding of social reality without recognising that it is being done (Nielsen 1989, 156). This distortion is structural, as what matters is not just that beliefs advance a class's interests but that they do so even when universal claims fail to track social reality. These beliefs serve those interests because the framework within which they operate presents specific class interests as universal and natural, and this is preserved whether or not the claims within the framework represent society. This is what makes ideological beliefs insensitive to the truth.

This is illustrated by Smith's claims that free markets serve the common interest. Marx argues that Smith's framework serves to legitimise bourgeois interests, presenting them as the natural relations of cooperation. This happens regardless of whether capitalist free markets actually serve the common interest. This is because Smith's framework depends on the interest it universalises rather than the social reality it claims to describe. Thus, the persistence of ideological beliefs, like Smith's, relies on the function they serve to uphold. Thus, Marx is criticising the process for producing class beliefs as being insensitive to the truth of reality, and he evades the charge of the genetic fallacy.

However, although Marx's position can defend itself against the genetic fallacy objection, it suffers a residual difficulty. Marx's claim that ideology is insensitive to the truth seems to work only if one already accepts that ideological ideas do, in fact, invert reality. This seems possible only if one already assumes what an undistorted reality looks like, in the form of Marx's historical materialism. This is because to identify a belief as inverted, one must first show what is not inverted. Thus, an individual who rejects Marx's historical materialism will not accept his claims about ideology. This places a limitation on Marx, but it is not unique to him. Any theory that diagnoses a distortion of social reality will find it difficult to take a position outside of its reasoning (White 2010, 604). No such theory can begin from a fully neutral position, and this is a caveat that Marx must concede. Thus, while this is not fatal to Marx, the best he can do is acknowledge the limitations of his theory.

Beyond the genetic fallacy, another, deeper internal objection remains. The worry is that Marx's conception of ideology may not leave room for the critical activity that distinguishes historical materialism from ideology. The objection does not solely rely on Marx's account being conditioned by material factors, as this is not sufficient to make a theory ideological. Rather, because consciousness is understood as being a 'necessary sublimation' of material processes, this makes a claim about consciousness as a whole. In the strongest interpretation of the phrase, ideas are not just shaped by material factors but are fully fixed by them. In this way, ideas are passively produced by material factors, rather than actively engaging with them and transforming them. If this is the case, no form of consciousness can reflectively analyse the conditions that produce it or guide the practical activity to transform them. Thus, Marx's historical materialism lacks the critical analysis to distinguish itself from ideology, even if it does not satisfy the features of ideology outlined above. This would make any "distinctions between theory and ideology useless" (Dupré 1980, 100) since no form of consciousness would have the critical position from which to distinguish itself as a theory rather than ideology. Therefore, the objection suggests that Marx's account of consciousness shows how his own theory of materialism is insufficient to produce a critical theory, and that Marx's own theory may be ideological.

The objection arises from a tension in Marx. Marx seems to support the strong claim that consciousness is determined and fully fixed by life and its material conditions. However, Marx also seems to support the position that people, through praxis, can transform their conditions. This suggests the weaker claim that consciousness, although shaped by material life, is not fully determined by it. A charitable reading must show why the weaker claim is the one that fits better with Marx's broader position.

Thus, two factors favour the weaker claim. Firstly, the stronger reading is incompatible with Marx's notion of praxis. Marx's theory holds that consciousness allows people to analyse and transform the conditions that initially produce it, rather than passively responding to them. The notion of praxis commits Marx to this view, and therefore makes the stronger claim incompatible. Secondly, the stronger claim is incoherent within its own terms. The claim states that consciousness is determined by material conditions and thus adopts a reflective stance on the relationship between consciousness and those conditions. However, this stance is what the objection's strong claim holds to be impossible. This means the objection rests on the critical position it claims cannot exist. The strong claim, therefore, faces a dilemma. It either (i) misdescribes Marx's position, in which case the objection dissolves, or (ii) it maintains a position that cannot be preserved within its own framework, in which case it undermines itself. Either way, the objection loses force. Marx's account of consciousness does leave room for critical analysis, and the distinction between theory and ideology is preserved. Thus, Marx's critical conception can be applied to itself without becoming ideological.

In conclusion, I have argued that Marx's conception of ideology is a structural critique of inverted consciousness, rather than a crude dismissal of ideas on the basis of their origins. Ideology is a form of consciousness that presents a self-misunderstanding and inverts the true order of causation between ideas and practice. It conceals its material origins and universalises the interests of a particular ruling class. These features work together to provide an insight into what ideology is. In this way, the critique does not fall victim to the genetic fallacy. What makes ideology ideological is not that its beliefs have origins in class interests but that these beliefs are truth-insensitive. These beliefs would serve class interests regardless of whether or not they tracked reality. Additionally, Marx addresses the second objection by distinguishing between how consciousness is conditioned by social life and how it is determined by it, with praxis being possible only under the former.

However, a genuine constraint remains. Marx's critique of ideology rests on his account of historical materialism and cannot fully step outside of his own framework. This is a constraint he cannot overcome, and while it does not mean his account fails, it shows the limits of his critical theory of ideology. However, this constraint is not unique to Marx. It applies to any theory that diagnoses distortion from within the reality it criticises, since such a theory assumes the validity of the framework it uses to expose others. Thus, no such theory can avoid dependence on its framework. Therefore, any account of ideology, including Marx's, must acknowledge this in order to remain honest.

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