

A New Old Meaning of “Ideology”

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If there were a list of subjects about which it seems that there is definitely no more to be said—or that even if there were, nobody would want to hear it anyway—then surely the topics of ideology, in general, and ideology in Marxist theory, in particular, would have to rank very near the top. Diffusing outwards from Western Marxism’s postwar preoccupation with the mechanisms of capitalist hegemony, the concept has now become virtually ubiquitous in the humanities and social sciences. Yet we feel reluctantly impelled to add one more paper to this already overflowing pile, hoping to catch readers’ attention even as reflexive ennui glazes over their eyes. For a (though not, we trust, the only) virtue of the thesis we are going to propose is its originality in relation to the contemporary spectrum of opinion. If we are right, then, in one of Marx and Engels’ main uses of the expression “ideology” they were not referring to ideas at all, but to the social superstructure itself. Even on purely scholarly grounds, it would be of some interest that so many commentators could have missed this meaning of “ideology” in texts as thoroughly scrutinized as these have been. But more importantly, if our analysis is correct, then certain very famous passages in the Marxist corpus (such as the 1859 “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and parts of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) have been misinterpreted for decades.

1.

In a recent survey paper on ideology, one of us, Charles Mills, reviewed twenty books and articles on Marxist theory and argued that the dominant interpretation of Marx’s use of “ideology” (held by three-quarters

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of the authors surveyed) is mistaken.¹ Since the present joint paper builds on—but also revises—some of that paper’s conclusions, a brief recapitulation of its argument will be necessary. Mills suggested on the basis of his examination that three main positions could be distinguished on the question of Marx’s use of “ideology”: (a) the dominant view, that “ideology” in Marx is a generalized polemical term, referring univocally and pejoratively to class ideas; (b) a minority view, that “ideology” for Marx is an “epistemologically neutral” term referring to class ideas; (c) another minority view, that Marx used “ideology” in two main senses, one being pejorative but the other being neutral.

Mills argued—to our mind, quite convincingly—that the passages standardly cited (usually from *The German Ideology*) as evidence for Marx’s negative view of class ideas in *general* can actually be better read as attacks on *idealism* in particular, and that in fact the term “ideology” can in most of its appearances be simply translated as “idealism” (so that *The German Ideology* itself just means the *German* version of idealism). The recurrences of the metaphor of “inversion”/“turning things upside-down”, then, should not be taken—as it usually is—as a trope for general cognitive deficiency, but as a specific diagnosis of the defining theoretical flaw of idealism, viz. that it transposes (what is claimed to be) the actual hierarchy of societal causation. Mills therefore rejected both position (a) and position (b) in favour of position (c), which claims that the pejorative meaning (“ideology” as “idealism”: most explicitly in *The German Ideology*) coexists with a neutral meaning (“ideology” as “partisan class ideas”, without epistemic judgment one way or another: for example in the 1859 “Preface”).

Now the virtue of position (c) is that it seems to account for the undeniably widespread pejorative usage of the term while simultaneously, through the bifurcation of the senses, saving Marx from self-refutation (since Marxism would then be an ideology in the second but not the first sense).² But the weakness of the position, we suggest (which Mills now concedes), is that there is something *ad hoc* about it; simply on *prima facie* grounds, it seems somewhat implausible for Marx to have, without explanation, two meanings of the term that are so different. Moreover, while the pejorative (“idealist”) sense is quite clear-cut in its appearances, and is instantiated at numerous places in the text, the hypothetical neutral sense turns up far less frequently, and its appearances are considerably more ambiguous.

1 Charles Mills, “‘Ideology’ in Marx and Engels”, *The Philosophical Forum* 16 (1985), 327–346.

2 Of the twenty writers Mills surveyed, three held this position: L. N. Moskvichov, *The End of Ideology Theory: Illusions and Reality*, trans. Jim Riordan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974); Göran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1980); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

We now, however, advance an interpretation which we believe solves the riddle of the apparent inconsistency of usage *without* the implausible semantic divide of the reading above. We agree that one sense of “ideology” in Marx is equivalent to “idealism”, but we now believe that the other sense (related, as we shall see), which can be found in the 1859 “Preface” and scattered locations elsewhere, does not refer to ideas in particular but to the superstructure in *general*.³ As indicated at the start, this is an interpretation which, to contemporary Marxist eyes, is likely to seem quite bizarre. Nevertheless, it is not without historical precedent: it has, in fact, the backing of both Lenin and Gramsci (hence our title). More importantly, it also has clear textual support in Marx and Engels’ writings (we see no divergence between them on this point), and makes intelligible certain passages which most commentators have either ignored or treated as uninteresting anomalies. To demonstrate this will be the burden of what follows.

2.

The etymological key to the whole affair, we suggest, can be traced back to Marx’s polemical response to the Hegelian tradition, for which history was basically determined by the Idea of the unfolding Mind/Spirit. Thus in an early work like the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, we find Marx making what would become his familiar complaint that for Hegel “the idea is made the subject”, whereas “the real subjects” are civil society and the family. So “the condition is postulated as the conditioned, the determinant as the determined, the producing factor as the product of its product”, and the state is expressed “as an act of the idea” (*CW* 3, 8-9).⁴ Marx goes on to refer with apparent equivalence to “this idealism” and “this ideality” (*CW* 3, 22), and later talks about “the ideality of the state” and “state idealism” (*CW* 3, 24). Similarly, in the Kreuznach notebooks, he mentions “the state idea” and says that for Hegel “the idea of the state is made the determining factor” (*CW* 3, 130). And in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, he describes how Hegel’s “uncritical idealism” dissolves state power and civil life into aspects of consciousness, “*spiritual entities*” (*CW* 3, 332).

What we have here, we propose, is a thinker who is in the process of developing a polemical vocabulary for the demarcation of a set of views

3 Cf. Danny Goldstick, “Reading Althusser”, *Revolutionary World* 23-25 (1977), 117 and n. 20, 130-131.

4 For ease of reference, we are placing the main sources in the text itself, using the following abbreviations: Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd ed.; New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1978) (*MER*); Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (in one volume) (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968) (*MESW*); Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vols. 3-29 (New York: International Publishers, 1975-1987) (*CW*); Karl Marx, *Capital*, vols. 1-2 (New York: International Publishers, 1967) (*CAP*); Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963) (*TSV* 1).

to which he is theoretically opposed, and employing to this end a cluster of terms—ideal, ideality, idealism—which we think were for him largely interchangeable, and which derive from the Hegelian *Idea*. Our basic argument is that “ideology”, as it came to be used by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, is simply another member of this family, with the same essential reference, which eventually displaced the others.⁵

Consider the place of this work, and the significance of its attack upon “ideology”. *The German Ideology* is usually judged to be the most detailed early statement of what would come to be called “historical materialism”. As such, it represents the systematic working-out of Marx’s famous materialist “inversion”, following Feuerbach, of the Hegelian world-view. From now on, therefore, the “Idea” and its products were to be causally subordinate rather than determining, the conditioned rather than the condition. But just as in Hegel (as we have seen above) the Idea/consciousness signifies more than mere *ideas*, and includes the *state*, so in Marx’s materialist transmutation of Hegelianism, the causally subordinate *ideal* would be more than just the *ideational*. Instead, the “ideal” would denote *generally* that subset of human actions, practices and products which Marx saw as determined by a particular material/economic structure. The ideal, in short, would be co-extensive with the *superstructural*. This is why, in *The German Ideology*, he and Engels can refer to “the state and ... the rest of the *idealistic* superstructure” (CW 5, 89; our emphasis). The ideal is therefore not restricted to ideas, but includes political systems and juridical institutions—i.e., everything that the superstructure includes.

The reader will now be able to anticipate the direction of our argument. If the superstructure as a whole is *ideal*, and if for Marx and Engels there is a semantic family-relationship between ideal/idealism/ideality/ideology/ideological, so that they move indifferently from one term to another, then we can see why for them there would be no terminological awkwardness in referring to the superstructure *itself* as “ideological” and “ideology”. The linguistic combination sounds peculiar to *us* because we are projecting back on to the texts our twentieth-century “ideational” understanding of the term. But the important thing, obviously, is how *Marx and Engels* understood it. And if the reader can suspend this reflexive attribution of meaning while examining the texts, then we suggest that their conception will emerge quite clearly.

Here is the evidence. If our interpretation is correct, and the superstructure as a whole is ideology/ideological, then an *ideologist* will be not necessarily a specialist in *ideas*, but, more generally, a specialist in ideal/non-material/non-economic/*superstructural* labour. Thus the

5 The earliest mention of “ideology” we can actually find is in *The Holy Family*, where Marx makes a passing comment about Napoleon’s “scorn of *ideologists*” (CW 4, 123).

term's reference *will* include "ideologists" in the sense familiar to us, but will also extend to *other* professions (political, juridical) which would not, on current definitions, be seen as "ideological". Consider in this light some of the lists of "ideologists" given by Marx and Engels. In *The German Ideology*, a marginal note by Marx describes "priests" as "the first form of ideologists" (CW 5, 45). Later in the manuscript "ideologists in general" are categorized as "jurists, politicians (including the practical statesmen)" (CW 5, 62). They are "clerics, jurists, politicians (statesmen in general), moralists" (92); "philosophers" (99); "the holy ones" (172); "the theoretical liberals" (197); "political ideologists" (348); "politicians, lawyers" (355). The repeated references to politicians and lawyers, we would argue, suggest that Marx and Engels' conception is clearly broader than the ideational, and linked to the political and juridical regions of the superstructure mentioned in the 1859 "Preface" and elsewhere. This breadth of reference can also be found in some later works of Marx. Thus in *The Class Struggles in France*, he talks about "the *ideological* representatives and spokesmen of the above classes, their savants, lawyers, doctors, etc., in a word: their so-called *men of talent*" (CW 10, 49). And in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx describes: "The spokesmen and scribes of the bourgeoisie, its platform and its press, in short, the ideologists of the bourgeoisie ..." (CW 11, 170).

However it could obviously be argued, in opposition to our claim, that many of these references *are* interpretable in the contemporary intellectual/ideational senses ("philosophers", "theoretical liberals", "savants", "spokesmen"), and that the mentioning of lawyers, doctors, politicians, etc., to which we are attributing such significance, is simply intended to denote their *intellectual* role. Consider, then, the following lists from Marx's later economic works, where we think the case for our interpretation is clinched.

In CAP 1, Marx runs through a general catalogue of sections of the population other than production workers, which includes those "too old or too young for work, all unproductive women, young persons and children, the '*ideological*' classes, such as government officials, priests, lawyers, soldiers, etc.; further, all who have no occupation but to consume the labour of others in the form of rent, interest, etc.; and, lastly, paupers, vagabonds, and criminals" (446; our emphasis). The groups listed alongside "the '*ideological*' classes", and the addition of *soldiers* to the latter list, make it evident, we suggest, that the criterion for inclusion is not the specialization in *ideas*, but membership in a social stratum engaged in non-economic, i.e., superstructural labour. Here are some further examples to nail it down. In CAP 2, Marx refers to "all so-called unproductive labourers—government officials, physicians, lawyers, etc." (457). In TSV 1, he glosses "unproductive labour-

ers" as "the ideological, etc., classes" (175). And having distinguished "material" and "spiritual" production (285), he later concludes that "the contradictions in material production make necessary a superstructure of ideological strata" (287).

We think it is undeniable, then, that the connection between "ideology" and "superstructure" has been established. Finally, consider the semantic equivalence suggested, from the other direction so to speak, by the following passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of different and distinctly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations" (CW 11, 128). This listing—"sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, views of life"—makes no mention of law and the state, only of *ideas*, yet Marx uses the term "superstructure". To us, this indicates the extent to which "ideology" and "superstructure" were for him largely interchangeable. Both terms could refer sometimes *just* to ideas and at other times to the juridical and political regions *also*.

"Ideology" in one sense, then, can refer to the "superstructure", and, correspondingly, "ideological" can mean "superstructural" and "ideologist" can mean "superstructural worker". *But this finding immediately enables us to construct the semantic bridge over to the other sense of "ideology"—"ideology" as "idealism"—with which the discussion began.* For one of the basic themes of *The German Ideology* is a sociological hypothesis to the effect that superstructural workers will be prone to the formulation of *superstructuralist* analyses of society. The claim is that though the superstructure is internally complex, and divisible into different regions, all superstructural workers will have in common—literally, as an occupational hazard—a theoretical predisposition to exaggerate the importance in social life of the non-material factors with which they are professionally concerned (ideas, juridical codes, political systems, weaponry). They will tend to see in their "ideal", "non-material" products an autonomy of development and a capacity to shape the economic sphere which in fact (if Marx and Engels are right) these products do not have. As such, they will all be inclined to the "illusion" of *idealism*. (Correspondingly, Marx and Engels sometimes distinguish specific varieties of idealism within this general category, each associated with the respective superstructural region. Thus they say that "the political illusion ... is after all closer to reality" than the "religious illusion" of the Germans [CW 5, 55], and they refer to the "juridical illusion, which reduces law to the mere will" [CW 5, 91].)

It is our belief that the failure to appreciate the breadth of reference for Marx of the "ideal" probably accounts to a large extent for the blindness

of most commentators to the “superstructure” sense of “ideology”. Many writers have implicitly or explicitly interpreted the term “idealism” in some vague, quasi-*philosophical* sense (e.g., presuming the primacy of *ideas*), whereas in fact it really needs to be interpreted *sociologically*, as “historical idealism”, the inverted counterpart of Marx’s “historical materialism”. For what is primarily involved is not an ontological claim about the ultimate nature of what exists (reality is basically non-material, ideal), but a socio-historical claim about the ultimate causal determinants of societal evolution (the main lines of historical development are determined by superstructural variables). Thus the attribution of explanatory primacy to political changes or juridical developments will, for Marx, count as idealism just as much as the view that sees *ideas* as determining. Idealism in short, is simply *superstructuralism*.⁶

There is less need to cite the textual evidence that Marx and Engels thought there was a connection between being a superstructural worker and idealism, because, as mentioned, this is one of the recurring themes of *The German Ideology*. Here are a few of the many passages, the crucial indicator being the reference to the “inversion”, the “turning upside-down”, of the actual causal relationship between the determining material/economic base and the determined non-material/ideal superstructure. Marx and Engels observe that: “If in all ideology [read: idealism] men and their relations 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” (*CW* 5, 36). Later they say that the “whole trick of proving the hegemony of the spirit in history ... must be explained from its connection with the illusion of ideologists in general”, which in turn “is explained perfectly easily from their practical position in life, their job, and the division of labour” (*CW* 5, 62). The underline: “*Why the ideologists turn everything upside-down*”, and go on to explain: “For this ideological [read: superstructural] subdivision within a class: 1) *The occupation assumes an independent existence owing to division of labour ...* Illusions regarding the connection between their craft and reality are the more likely to be cherished by them because of the very nature of the craft” (*CW* 5, 92; see also 99, 196, 237, 341-342, 355, 363, 419-420, 447, 460).

To sum this up, then, Marx and Engels’ basic claim was that if you were an *ideologist* (a member of the superstructural/ideological professions, specializing in superstructural labour), your view of society was likely to be *ideological/idealist* (superstructuralist), in that you would be inclined to see *ideology* (the ideal superstructure) as having a greater causal power and corresponding explanatory significance than it actually possessed.

6 Cf. Mills, “‘Ideology’”, 340-343.

It can be appreciated, then, that this interpretation has the obvious virtue of showing the connection between the two senses of “ideology”, its meta-theoretical sense and its societal sense. “Ideology” as “idealism” grows out of “ideology” as “superstructure” because “idealism” is “superstructuralism”. The “superstructure” sense, in fact, is the primitive one, and the “idealism” sense derivative. By contrast, position (c)—that “ideology” refers both to idealism and to class ideas in general—has no intrinsic justification other than seeming (superficially) to fit the texts.

We should now look briefly at Engels’ writings, since some commentators have suggested that in his later work he diverged significantly from Marx’s views on this question. For our part, we see no basic disagreement between the two *once* the recommended revision of “ideology” has been accepted. In other words, we think some writers have taken Engels’ later analyses of “ideology” to be deviant precisely because of their *own* misunderstanding of the term’s meanings in *The German Ideology*. Engels’ usages of the term in *Anti-Dühring*, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, and the 1890s letters to Schmidt and Mehring (written respectively on October 27, 1890 and July 14, 1893), can all, we suggest, be accommodated by the “superstructure” or the “idealism” senses.

In *Ludwig Feuerbach*, for example, Engels says that: “The state presents itself to us as the first ideological power over man” (*MESW*, 617), which would make little sense if “ideological” means “ideational”, but is readily intelligible if it means “superstructural”. Similarly, in his famous letter to Franz Mehring, he refers to “the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological notions ... from basic economic facts”, and opposes the claim that because he and Marx “deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them any *effect upon history*” (*MESW*, 690–691). In both of these instances “ideological” would seem to mean “superstructural”. What is noteworthy is that in both texts Engels moves casually back and forth, within the space of a paragraph, between this, the “superstructural” sense, and the other “idealist” (“superstructuralist”) sense, semantic transitions which are quite opaque and baffling if one is working with the conventional interpretation of the term. Thus in *Ludwig Feuerbach* he goes on to say that ideology is “occupation with thought as with independent entities, developing independently and subject only to their own laws”, whereas in actuality people’s “material life conditions ... determine the course of this process” (*MESW*, 618). Similarly, in the letter to Mehring, where the notorious reference to “false consciousness” appears, and “ideological process” is described as one in which the “real motive forces impelling [the thinker] remain unknown to him” (*MESW*, 690).

These accounts are essentially just extrapolations from the joint position articulated by Marx and himself in *The German Ideology*, where the social genesis of superstructuralist views is attributed to the division of mental and material labour, and the fact of professional specialization in particular superstructural regions. (See also: *Anti-Dühring* [CW 25, 89, 597]; letter to Schmidt [MESW, 684-689].) But because of the already-mentioned tendency of some commentators to define “idealism” in philosophical terms, the connection with the earlier work is usually missed, so that Engels is seen as pigheadedly pursuing some perverse agenda of his own. David McLellan, for example, cites the passage above from the Mehring letter, and then says, with complete incomprehension: “This view [Engels’] was founded on a kind of metaphysical materialism to which ideology was seen as the opposite. The falsity of ideology was not so much due to its origin or function as to its ontological status, its propensity to deal with things that simply were not there.”⁷ In fact, Engels is simply making the familiar (*historical*) materialist point about the social determination of belief, and the characteristics idealist failure to appreciate the role of material/economic causation in shaping the dominant ideational constellations.

We propose, then, that on this review of the textual evidence a case for the existence of a *superstructure/superstructural/superstructuralist* complex of related meanings centred on the term “ideology” has been clearly established. This reading has the merit of being able to unite and explain passages that are decades apart, from *The German Ideology* to *Theories of Surplus Value*, including some references (e.g., in *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value*) that (when they have been noticed at all) have seemed theoretically quite anomalous.⁸ It also makes an organic connection between the difference senses cited. In addition, it shows the continuity of thought on this issue between Marx and Engels, and while

7 David McLellan, *Ideology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 23.

8 For example, Bhikhu Parekh agrees that one sense of “ideology” in Marx means “idealism”, but he regards the 1859 “Preface” and *Theories of Surplus Value* appearances of the term as aberrant “sporadic usages”, and consigns mention of them to an endnote: see Bhikhu Parekh, *Marx’s Theory of Ideology* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), chap. one and also 230, n. 1 to chap. one. This oversight results, in our opinion, from a definition of “idealism” which conflates the sociological and ontological senses. Thus he says: “Idealism assumes that the spirit or consciousness is conceptually and, for some, even temporally prior to matter. For it matter is not and cannot be the ultimate reality, and cannot generate and explain consciousness” (ibid., 3). As we have argued above, this is simply mistaken, since one could be an ontological materialist (believing that matter is all that exists, and that ideas are brain events) and a sociological idealist (believing that ideas determine the course of history). Feuerbach himself was a theorist of this kind: see Marx and Engels, *CW* 5, 38-41, 57-59. For a useful discussion of different senses of “material” in Marx, see Andrew Collier, “Materialism and Explanation in the Human Sciences”, in John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Materialism* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), 35-60.

this should not, of course, be taken for granted, the fact that their agreement can be independently demonstrated is, we think, a point in favour of the interpretation.

It was mentioned at the beginning that the “superstructure” reading, though aberrant in the context of contemporary Marx scholarship, does have the backing of Lenin and Gramsci. We now cite these references briefly. In one of his earliest works, Lenin says: “[Marx and Engels] basic idea ... was that social relations are divided into material and ideological. The latter merely constitute a superstructure on the former.”⁹

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci uses “ideology” in various ways, including the neutral ideational sense. At one point, however, in a brief historical note, he comments that for the “founders” (Marx and Engels): “‘Ideology’ itself must be analysed historically, in the terms of the philosophy of praxis [Marxism], as a superstructure ... [T]he name ideology is given both to the necessary superstructure of a particular structure and to the arbitrary elucubrations of particular individuals.”¹⁰

Gramsci’s subsequent discussion, admittedly, seems to be framed in purely ideational terms, making no reference to the state or the juridical system. Nevertheless, it is clearly significant that he could employ the term in this way, and we suggest that the usage is comparable to that in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* quotation cited above.

3.

At this point we need to address a possible misunderstanding of our intentions. We are not recommending a terminological *revision* of the current Marxist usage of “ideology” in the light of what appears to be Marx and Engels’ actual but unrecognized employment of the term. There is obviously a space within Marxist theory for a term referring to class, or, more generally, group ideas, and “ideology” serves the purpose well, even if (as we are now suggesting) Marx and Engels themselves did not intend it to be used that way. Their own obsession with Hegelian and post-Hegelian idealism stimulated the development of this vocabulary, but for theorists not so preoccupied, it is not really very useful, encompassing as it does such a diversity of meanings. So the idea is not to *rectify* conventional usage but to *recognize its deviation* from Marx and Engels’ actual categorization, and to show, correspondingly, how the acknowledgment of this conceptual divergence necessitates the re-reading of certain texts. We will conclude by looking briefly at two examples.

9 V. I. Lenin, “What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963), 151.

10 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 376.

(1) Let us begin with the 1859 “Preface”. In the central paragraph which has been the subject of so many exegeses and counter-exegeses, Marx describes the onset of revolutionary transformation, and says: “In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production ... and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out” (*CW* 29, 263).

The conventional interpretation of this sentence is that Marx is referring to the complexes of *ideas* (legal, political, etc.) through which class struggle is fought out at the intellectual level. Thus Joe McCarney comments: “The ideological forms constitute, it seems, the medium of the class struggle in the realm of ideas.”¹¹ Since the context is epistemically neutral, this has always been the key passage cited by those commentators such as McCarney (and also John McMurtry, Göran Therborn, Raymond Williams et al.)¹² who have argued for the existence of a neutral ideational usage of the term, in contrast to the far more prominent pejorative usage. The central theoretical status of the “Preface”—the fact that it is one of Marx’s few summaries of the principles of historical materialism—has seemed to justify what would otherwise be methodologically somewhat questionable, viz., the placing of so much evidential weight on a single passage.

However, with the benefit of the preceding exposition, the reader will easily be able to anticipate our claim that “ideological” here is *not* referring specifically to ideas, but means “superstructural” in *general*. Note that within the flow of the passage it reads more naturally to take “ideological” as a general term encompassing the “legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic” areas, i.e., as a synonym for “superstructural”. This is why the “legal” and the “political” can be straightforwardly included in this category; by contrast, adherents of the neutral ideational reading must claim that Marx is referring elliptically to legal and political *ideas*. Further pieces of evidence are: (a) The list of areas is cognate with the lists of “superstructural workers”/“ideologists” given elsewhere that we cited above. (b) The “distinction” Marx is talking about would then emerge clearly as the familiar distinction between the material/economic base and the ideal/non-economic superstructure. Indeed this distinction runs through the *entire* paragraph from Marx’s opening declaration about his discovery

11 Joe McCarney, *The Real World of Ideology* (Brighton, Sussex and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Harvester and Humanities Press, 1980), 6. McCarney has been one of the most vigorous defenders of the neutral reading of “ideology” (what Mills designated as position [b]). For a more recent statement, see his “Recent Interpretations of Ideology”, *Economy and Society* 14 (1985), 77–93.

12 John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx’s World-View* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); Therborn, *Ideology of Power*; Williams, *Marxism*.

that “neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life”. (c) Finally, in the next paragraph, Marx describes how (in *The German Ideology*) he and Engels “decided to set forth together our conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy” (*CW* 29, 264). The use of “ideological” here is clearly negative, indicating the *idealist* Hegelian view which Marx repudiated at the start of the previous paragraph. Thus the defenders of the neutral ideational reading of “ideology” would have to explain how Marx could have switched from a neutral to a pejorative meaning in the space of a paragraph. On our interpretation, however, what is actually happening is merely the familiar semantic slide from “superstructural” to “superstructuralist”, which we have seen before.

The upshot of this reinterpretation is that the major piece of textual evidence for the neutral ideational sense of “ideology” simply collapses under scrutiny. And other appearances of the term, such as those in the historical/political works, which are sometimes cited (see, for example, McCarney)¹³ as supplementary evidence for this reading, can, we believe, all be accommodated either by the “superstructure” or the “idealism” meanings. Thus our conclusion is that there is in fact *no* term in Marx and Engels’ lexicon that refers generally to class ideas, whether pejoratively or neutrally. (The “idealism” sense will obviously only be applicable to *some* class ideas.) This is backed up by the evidence of textual silence: at no point in their collected works, so far as we know, do Marx and Engels refer to their own theory as an “ideology”. And since historical materialism is neither a variety of idealism nor the superstructure of a society, this is, on our account, not surprising (as one would think it *should* be for the defenders of the neutral ideational sense). Hence, while we are both completely sympathetic to Joe McCarney’s claim that Marx’s *conception* of class ideas was an “epistemologically neutral” one, we would deny that Marx’s use of the *term* “ideology” supports this view one way or another—it is, in fact, quite irrelevant to the question. Correspondingly, Lenin’s explicit theoretical employment of the notion of “proletarian” or “socialist” ideology, which has been taken by many commentators as a radical (and unargued-for) *conceptual* departure from the putatively pejorative conception of Marx and Engels,¹⁴ can now be seen to be at most a *terminological* innovation.

13 McCarney, *Real World*.

14 Martin Seliger, for example, see Lenin’s “inclusive and hence unorthodox use of ‘ideology’” as a “drastic change of the use of the term”, for which “Lenin offered no explanation”. In his opinion, this revision was basically forced upon Lenin by his activist commitments, “since it would have been self-defeating to go on insisting that as a matter of principle all consciousness is false consciousness, as Marx and Engels’s dogmatic conception of ideology required”. See Martin Seliger, *The Marxist Conception of Ideology: A Critical Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 6.

Lenin was simply adopting the term “ideology” for what previously had *no* designation in Marx and Engels’ writings. Thus Marxism is saved from conceptual inconsistency or self-refutation (as itself an example of illusory “ideology”) not because an epistemologically *neutral* generic term for class ideas can be wrested from the texts, but because—it ironically turns out—Marx never had *any* generic term for class ideas in the first place!

(2) The other passage which we are proposing for re-examination is a notorious line from Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. In criticizing what he saw as the pernicious influence of Ferdinand Lassalle, Marx makes some caustic comments about the references to “equal right” and “fair distribution”, dismisses these ideas as “obsolete verbal rubbish”, and concludes that these “dogmas” are: “perverting ... the realistic outlook, which it cost so much effort to instil into the Party but which has now taken root in it, by means of ideological nonsense about right and other trash so common among the democrats and French socialists” (*MER*, 531).

Now if “ideological” is read, as it usually is, as a generalized polemical term indicating “illusory”, “unscientific”, etc., then what this passage seems to be saying is that talk about rights is simply nonsense, and that what the revolutionary party needs to do is to foster the “realistic” outlook which dispenses with such bourgeois niceties. Thus it appears to be a paradigmatically clear statement of the need for a Thrasymachan *realpolitik* in the class struggle, in which, although a moral *vocabulary* might be employed for strategic reasons, its underlying concepts and principles would never actually be taken seriously. It is not surprising, then, that in the current “analytical Marxist” debate over the place (if any) of morality in historical materialism, this passage has been one of those most frequently cited as evidence of Marx’s basic contempt for ethical concerns.¹⁵ (A short list of theorists who make central reference to it for this purpose includes Allen Wood, Allen Buchanan and Steven Lukes.)¹⁶

But let us now view the passage again through our proposed alternative prism. “Ideological” would then no longer mean “illusory” *simpliciter*, but would be indicating a *specific* variety of illusion, viz., idealism, the belief in a superstructural causality which can prevail over counteracting material causes. The real target of Marx’s criticism, then,

83, 81. The above account should make clear why we regard this judgment as resting on a fundamental misunderstanding of Marx and Engels’ point.

15 For a good discussion of some of the issues involved, see Kai Nielsen, “Marxism and the Moral Point of View”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1987), 295-306.

16 See: Allen W. Wood, “The Marxian Critique of Justice”, in Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon, eds., *Marx, Justice and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3-41; Allen E. Buchanan, “The Conceptual Roots of Totalitarian Socialism”, in Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., Jeffrey Paul, and John Ahrens, eds., *Marxism and Liberalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 127-144; Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

would be the idea that by preaching about “rights” and the need for a “fair distribution”, one can, without addressing one’s efforts to the tapping of underlying economic antagonisms, win society over to the socialist project. That this reading is not strained is suggested by the fact that in the very same sentence Marx refers to “the realistic outlook, which it cost so much effort to instil into the Party”. This is, we propose, the *materialist* outlook on the differential efficacy of particular varieties of societal causality, which recognizes the futility of trying to change society solely or largely by moral exhortation. So the contrast is not that between the moral point of view, which sees rights as important, and the perspective of amoral cynical Marxists, which sees rights as ideological nonsense. The contrast is between the idealist/superstructuralist point of view, which greatly inflates the actual causal efficacy of moral rhetoric in effecting social change, and the realist/materialist perspective, which is far more skeptical about the transformative power of moral demands (even when clearly justified) that are not backed up by a favourable configuration of social forces. And one only has to consider the current unhappy state of the globe—pick your worst offender—to see that this assessment is, alas, all too accurate.

We would suggest that a great deal of Marx’s stated hostility to “morality” is potentially interpretable in these terms, not as indifference to ethical claims, but as impatience with those who believe that spending one’s energies in the elaboration of a convincing moral case for social reform can substitute for economic and political organization. Whether *all* the condemnatory passages in his writings would so readily lend themselves to reconceptualization is a larger and much more problematic issue, which there is no space to tackle here. But we did at least want to point out this new angle on “ideology” as a possibly illuminating contribution to the debate.

4.

Perhaps the best way to conclude would be by asking what the overall theoretical consequences would be if our proposed reinterpretation were accepted as valid.¹⁷ Simply on an academic level, of course, it would be worthwhile to have demonstrated that several decades of Marx scholarship have been wrong about Marx and Engels’ intentions. But obviously one wants to do more than establish “a difference that makes no difference”. Here then are two sets of implications of our view.

(1) Formally, as earlier indicated, it shows the internal consistency of Marx’s position on the social determination of belief—or more mod-

¹⁷ There is a partial overlap here with the conclusions of Mills’s earlier paper, since, as noted, we do agree that one sense of the term means “idealism”. See Mills, “‘Ideology’”, 343–344.

estly, shows that a perennially-raised *objection* to the possibility of such consistency (the putatively self-undermining character of Marx's statements about "ideology") is actually groundless. We are referring here to the problem mentioned at the beginning of the paper, sometimes dubbed the "Mannheim paradox" after Karl Mannheim's critique of Marx in *Ideology and Utopia*.¹⁸ Taking "ideology" to mean class ideas in general, or even ideas *simpliciter*, this interpretation attributes to Marx sweeping negative claims about ideation which are ultimately self-refuting. Once it is realized that the ideational sense of "ideology" just means "idealism", however, and was never intended to be so promiscuously employed, this problem becomes a non-issue. A whole network of conceptual traps and logical difficulties, involving numerous unprofitable puzzles (self-refutation, mysterious Marxist exceptionalism, epistemological relativism, etc.), can therefore simply be side-stepped from the start without position (c)'s awkward straddling of two *separate* ideational senses.

(2) Substantively, it implies the disappearance of a central pillar of the standard, received wisdom about Marx's views on the sociology of belief (such as the necessarily pernicious epistemic effects of social determination) and on the characteristics of political ideologies (such as the ineluctably illusory character of all ideology). These imputed views were in fact never very helpful in aiding the understanding of the social genesis and internal features of such actual ideologies as liberalism, conservatism, socialism, nationalism, racism, feminism, etc. But what we can now appreciate is that they were mistakenly inferred from Marx and Engels' pronouncements about *idealism*, and while some socio-political ideas will have idealistic characteristics, these cannot be generalized to class or group ideas as such. Correspondingly, the necessary epistemological opposition between "science" and a generic "ideology", which has been such a pervasive feature of postwar Western Marxist debate (Althusser et al.), rests, it can be argued, on a fundamentally misconceived conceptual cartography, in that socially-determined and socially-mobilizing sets of ideas are automatically denied cognitivist status. We are not disputing, of course, that class society produces mystificatory ideas, and that this process needs to be studied by the left.¹⁹ But we are suggesting that any Marxist theorization of these

18 Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (Bonn, 1929; New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968). For one of many discussions of the "paradox" and Mannheim's "solution", see Seliger, *Marxist Conception*, chap. eight.

19 An anonymous referee for *Dialogue* asks how Marx's description in CAP 1 of "commodity fetishism" (sect. four of chap. one), and its role in mystifying capitalist social relations, fits with our conclusions about "ideology". These pages are, of course, crucial in understanding Marx's views on one very important set of obfuscatory appearances, and they should be treated as such. But it is not "ideology" in Marx's sense, since fetishism characteristically involves the "naturalization" of the social,

issues—the social determination of consciousness, the internal structure of socio-political belief systems, the extent to which ideologies will be veridical—needs to be worked out anew, independently of many of the standard textual bases.²⁰ Indeed it could be urged, with only apparent paradox, that if one really wants to reconstruct from the texts what Marx *would have said* (*sic*) about ideology, a good starting-point to reduce confusion would be to ignore, or at least bracket, what he said about “ideology”.

All in all, it seems to us that a significant amount of scholarly rethinking would therefore become necessary. Who would have thought, after all these years, that the old man still had so much life in him?

and is thus, within the geometry of the base-superstructure metaphor, equivalent to a “downwards”, *anti*-idealist conflation of socio-economic and natural causality. Cf. Norman Geras: “[Fetishism as a] type of mystification consists of reducing the social objectivity of the forms of capitalist relations to a natural objectivity”; “Marx and the Critique of Political Economy”, in Robin Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science* (Glasgow: Collins, 1972), 296-297. Note that nowhere in the discussion of fetishism does Marx describe it as “ideology”; indeed the term hardly appears in the three volumes of *Capital*.

20 For an attempt along these lines, see Charles Mills, “Determination and Consciousness in Marx”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 19/3 (1989).