On Voluntary Servitude
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False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology

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The truthful presentation of error is indirect presentation of truth.

Novalis
This is a book that is written against a certain position, a position that, it also claims, has been taken for granted by many of the most influential social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As such, I am aware that it will invite a certain kind of response. Even if its arguments are successful (perhaps, particularly if its arguments are successful) it is likely that many of those whom it addresses will dispute the ascription: deny that they (or those famous names whose authority they follow) ever thought any such thing. Attributions of this kind are, of course, difficult to establish. It is one thing to argue against a position held and stated explicitly, it is another to show that that position is one to which an author is implicitly committed. In the end, perhaps, the most that one can hope for is to reverse the burden of proof. I think that those who believe they can draw the kind of conclusions that are characteristic of the theory of ideology without making the assumptions I attribute to them at least owe us a more explicit account of what different assumptions they make and why these are more defensible.

However that may be, I know of one undeniably appropriate target for my arguments: my own earlier self. I started to think about social theory in the early 1970s, a time when such thinkers as Lukács, Althusser, Sartre, Habermas, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Gramsci and Godelier were first becoming known in Great Britain. It seemed to me then that what these otherwise very disparate writers had in common was their conviction that the determination of ideas in society was something that needed to be explained systematically, as a result of social structure or historical forces prior to the individual. The chief line of cleavage, as I saw it, was between those who believed that the source of this determination lay in some kind
of a collective, social subject and those who took the social process to be
generative but agentless – between, to put it crudely, neo–Hegelians and
structuralists. The questions that interested me were: Which of these two
was right? and, What would follow philosophically from that fact?

What I did not consider at that time was the possibility that neither of
the two positions was correct. Yet, as I continued to think about the issues,
it became increasingly clear to me that the claims made on behalf of the
social determination of ideas were both excessively sweeping and alarm­
ingly imprecise, while such empirical evidence as I could find to support
them was either thin or, to say the least, questionable. Thus another
question more and more forced itself upon me: If claims made about the
social determination of ideas were, in fact, not true, why should they
nevertheless have seemed to be so obvious to so many? The task, then, was
to look at the intellectual weaknesses of the position, while, at the same
time, looking for the reasons for its appeal.

Having reached this point at the end of the 1970s, I might have set out
to write a book whose conclusions would not have been very dissimilar to
the ones presented here had it not been for the appearance of G. A.
Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence*. In that justly celebrated
book Cohen advances a position that I had not, until then, considered
seriously: that it might be possible to make claims regarding the determi­
nation of one element of social life by another very similar in content to
those advanced by the Continental theorists but without making any
assumptions about ‘collective agency’ or ‘generative structures’ – indeed,
without giving any ontological commitments that the most parsimonious
natural scientist should find shocking. I find that position no more
persuasive now than I did when I first encountered it, but the imagination
and rigour with which its author has defended it set me a serious challenge,
one which at once delayed my project and forced me to raise the level of
its discussion.

As I have worked my way towards my present views I have incurred
many debts that I must acknowledge, even if I cannot repay them. Alex
Callinicos and Charles Taylor listened to my stuttering first attempts to
articulate my sense of the problems with patience and sympathy. G. E. M.
de Ste Croix very kindly gave me the benefit of his extensive knowledge
regarding the development of Marx's thought. It was at an early stage, too
– longer ago than I think either of us would care to remember – that John
Thompson persuaded me to offer my project to Polity Press. Since then
he has been an exemplary editor, fully equal to the heavy demands I have
placed on his tolerance. I am deeply grateful for his engagement and
support.

Later, I learned a great deal from a seminar at University College
London, among whose participants I must single out Matt Brandi, Mark
Hannam, Bill Hart and Andrzej Szahaj for special thanks. Martin Jay read
a paper of mine that was later to be incorporated into Chapter 7 as well as
discussing many other issues with me at, alas, all too infrequent intervals
over the years, and I have benefited from his great knowledge of Continental social thought. I am grateful to the Rector and Fellows of Lincoln College, Oxford, for granting me two terms of sabbatical leave, and thank especially my colleague David Goldey for cheerfully taking on the burdens caused by my absence. That I managed to write a first version of the book during that precious time is due to my good fortune in being allowed to concentrate on my work while being able to take advantage of those around me. In particular, I would like to thank Rosamund Diamond and David Ish-Horowicz for their many acts of generosity.

That first version has now been transformed thanks to the enormously detailed comments of three friends: Jerry Cohen, Raymond Geuss and Jonathan Wolff. I cannot overstate how much I owe to their thoroughness, acuity and erudition. It would be impossible to acknowledge individually all the points I have taken from them; suffice it to say that any gross errors of fact or reasoning that still remain have in all likelihood been newly introduced by me or are the result of stubbornness on my part in the teeth of their good advice. In addition, I have received very valuable comments on all or part of the book from Stefan McGrath, Brian O’Connor, Alan Patten, Bob Stern, John Thompson, Gavin Williams and Hannes Wittig. I am most grateful to them all.

Thanks are due to Caroline Richmond for her skilful copy-editing and to Tom Runnacles for his work on the index.

I have left until last the debt that I owe Charlotte Klonk, for it is at once my greatest and least easy to express. Throughout, it has been her sympathetic criticism that has set me the standards at which to aim and her unwavering support that has given me the encouragement to do so.
I

Introduction

I Reich's Question

'What has to be explained', wrote Wilhelm Reich, 'is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry don't steal and why the majority of those who are exploited don't strike.' That, as a simple first formulation, is the question which lies behind this book. Why do the many accept the rule of the few, even when it seems to be plainly against their interests to do so? The theory of ideology gives one very distinctive kind of answer to Reich's question. The reason, it claims, is that societies are systems that produce the kind of consciousness that prevents the members of a society from behaving as their interests would otherwise dictate. Ideology, in Theodor Adorno's phrase, is 'necessary false consciousness'. But to assess this theory will turn out to be a complicated matter. In the first place, the nature of the answer that the theory of ideology is offering requires clarification. In what sense is ideological consciousness 'necessary'? In what sense 'false'? What is behind those terms? What assumptions must we make about the nature of society and the kinds of explanation

1 Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, p. 53. This quotation is the first illustration of an issue that will strike some readers very forcefully. It has been conventional, where reference to an indefinite subject has called for a third-person singular pronoun, for writers to use the masculine. In recent years, many - myself included - have tried to offer at least a gentle corrective to any biases that may be carried by this practice by reversing the convention. This book, however, inevitably contains a great deal of quotation, paraphrase and exposition of authors who uniformly adopted the traditional practice, and not to conform to it would entail not just a small and salutary jolt to expectations, but a serious sacrifice in readability.

that can be appropriately applied to it if a theory of ideology is to be possible? All of these issues will be addressed in more detail below, but, for now, it is important to pre-empt some misunderstandings.

First, I must make it clear that when I speak, as I shall throughout the book, of the theory of ideology, I am talking of a genus with a variety of species. It is no part of my case that all the theorists of ideology share exactly the same commitments - far from it. A browse through the Bodleian Library catalogue reveals more than 800 entries with the word 'ideology' in their title. Anyone hoping for some system in this profusion will be disappointed. They will find instead that the term has become part of a vast semantic delta through which shallow and muddy channels meander without apparent purpose. My object in this book is not to survey this delta but to guide the reader through it by locating what I take to be the main channel. To do so, I shall take a step back and identify the stream (or, as I shall argue, streams) of thought which originally fed it. Reich's question will be our guide, and it will turn out that many current uses of the term 'ideology' will be only distantly related to what I take to be the central issues.

A second point to be made at the outset is that my use of the phrase 'false consciousness' is not meant to foreclose the issue of whether ideology is a matter of false beliefs. On the contrary, as I shall argue in the second chapter, that is only one form that the theory of ideology can take. For the moment, I hope that the reader will allow me to take the phrase 'false consciousness' informally, in its broadest possible sense, meaning simply consciousness that is, in some way or other, deficient or inadequate.

Nor should it be assumed that the theory of ideology is committed to the view that unequal societies are reproduced by means of some positive set of shared beliefs, values or cultural practices - a 'dominant ideology', as it is sometimes called. False consciousness can, in principle, just as well be something negative: the failure to form an adequate, shared system of beliefs, values or practices. So the mere absence of a dominant ideology does not contradict the theory of ideology in the sense at issue here; that very absence could itself be ideological.

Finally, let me clarify the sense in which the theory of ideology is committed to the view that unequal or otherwise illegitimate societies reproduce themselves by means of false consciousness. The claim here is merely that this is a necessary condition for such societies' preservation, not that it is always the sole means that they employ. As far as Marx is concerned, I believe that he thought ideology was indispensable to the survival of capitalist class society. But, of course, it would be absurd to say that Marx thought coercion played no part in the survival of capitalism; he simply believed that coercion was not enough.

3 A consequence is that many of the well-known names of contemporary writing on ideology are not discussed in this book. My interest is in looking at the underlying structure of the theory of ideology and its presuppositions; to the extent that contemporary authors simply take those presuppositions for granted (for instance, by assuming some form of the Marxist theory of society) I take it that their theories are, by implication, condemned by my criticism.
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The approach that I shall employ in this book is both historical and critical. At its centre is a historical account of the intellectual background from which the theory of ideology emerged. The point of this account is to help to identify the original scope and purpose of the theory and to articulate those conceptions of human nature and society that made it seem acceptable (or even self-evident) to social theorists. But I shall argue that we ought not to take for granted (that, indeed, there are good reasons for rejecting) the assumptions on which the theory of ideology has been based. The position I am presenting is thus critical not just of those theories of ideology that have actually been proposed but, more broadly, of any theory of ideology that proceeds from such assumptions.

Nevertheless, even if I succeed in unconvincing the reader about the theory of ideology, some fundamental issues remain. There is, first, Reich's problem itself: what other kinds of account might there be of the maintenance of order in society – in unequal societies in particular? Moreover, to reject the theory of ideology is not to eliminate the question of 'false consciousness'. While we may not be justified in supposing that unequal societies maintain themselves because societies in general have the power to produce 'false consciousness' in their citizens, there may still be a sense in which false consciousness is a pervasive feature of certain social orders (ours included). If so, then it is plainly a task of the very greatest importance to see what that sense might be. Finally, there is a question about the theory of ideology itself. Why did it seem so plausible? And what does it tell us about Western social thought that it should have been so?

II Method

For many, philosophers especially, such an attempt to marry criticism and history may seem to represent a confusion between distinct, even antithetical, enterprises. Put crudely, they see a division something like this. The philosopher clarifies and articulates a theory. The social scientist assesses it by confronting it with historical data. Finally, the historian of ideas retraces the development of theories and identifies the factors, rational or otherwise, that led to their adoption and abandonment.

It is a guiding supposition behind this book that such a division is oversimplified. On the contrary, to the extent that questions regarding the scope and structure of the theories themselves are intertwined with controversial questions of methodology and questions regarding the nature of the phenomena to be explained – and this is especially (although not exclusively) the case in the social sciences – a historical approach can play a valuable role in the evaluation of theories.

4 I am using this phrase without commitment to the assumption that the 'social sciences' are scientific in the same way as the natural sciences. It is simply too cumbersome to talk of 'human studies' or Geisteswissenschaften just to avoid this apparent implication.
Any kind of explanation (or presumed explanation) can be divided into three. There is, first, what is supposed to be explained, what philosophers call the *explanandum*. Secondly, there is whatever it is – theory or something different\(^5\) – that we think is going to do the explaining, the *explanans*. Finally, there are the *standards* with regard to which we assess how well the explanation works: the structure and content of the *explanans* and the kind of relationship in which it stands to the *explanandum*. Now, what it is that theories attempt to explain and how they go about explaining them are not pure and presuppositionless starting points but will have their own history (which may, indeed, be the result of the development of theory elsewhere). To give an example, Darwinism explained something – why animals have characteristics that favour their survival in the environments they find themselves in – that other, pre-Darwinian biologies also explained. At the same time, it explained something else – why animals may also have characteristics that *don't* favour their survival – that predecessor theories did not.\(^6\) After Darwin, Mendelian genetics then went on to explain one of the central parts of the Darwinian theory – how breeding could lead to the development of new species – and in this way amplified (and reinforced) Darwinism. Here, then, we have an explanation that vindicates itself by explaining both what its predecessors had explained and something further that those explanations had not. And it is itself explained (and thereby justified) by a successor theory.

But the development of the scientific view of the world is not simply a matter of accumulating and expanding explanations in this way. It also consists in deciding that certain things are *not* susceptible to explanation. Astrology, for example, starts from the idea that what has to be explained is that events, fortunate and unfortunate, happen to human beings at different times. What has led to the rejection of astrology among reasonable people is not that science has offered us a better explanation than the conjunction of the stars for this fact, but that we are now persuaded that it is not the kind of fact that can be explained at all.

Finally, then, there is the question of *how* to explain: what *counts* as a good explanation. This is the most controversial aspect, and, from the philosopher's point of view, the most interesting. One way of looking at it is to see it as a second-order transformation of the first two aspects. That is, by explaining an explanation – showing how its explanation works, as Mendelian genetics does for Darwinism – we help to justify it. This usefully brings out the reflexive aspect of the enterprise – and its potential

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\(^5\) I think that the tri-partite division is just as relevant if the *explanans* in question is not a *theory* in the strict sense of the term. For example, a mythical explanation also has something to explain, something that does the explaining and some characteristic standards by which it claims to be doing the explaining.

\(^6\) That, as Stephen Jay Gould has emphasized, is a significant part of the case for the theory of evolution: ‘. . . the proof that evolution, and not the fiat of a rational agent, has built organisms lies in the imperfections that record a *history of descent*’ (S. J. Gould, *Hen's Teeth and Horses' Toes*, p. 160).
for iteration: if we think that an explanation requires explaining, might that second explanation not require a further explanation and so on?

The dilemma posed by the attempt to find standards by which to measure theories is an example of a problem that is central to and ineliminable from philosophy: what I will call 'rational indeterminacy'. The problem is this. Let us say that some subject-matter (a belief, a procedure, a theory) is assessed by a certain set of standards or criteria that it fails to meet. What should fall in consequence? The subject-matter or the standards? In most areas of intellectual life the answer is easy: the standards are stable and should take priority. But this is not the case everywhere and at all times. The problem is particularly acute in philosophy for the following reason. The subject-matter of philosophy includes the nature of reasoning itself. So philosophy is inevitably reflexive: it attempts to argue philosophically for a certain conception of reason. The method it employs is something that it is its own proper business to justify.

Natural scientific theories, for the most part, can draw upon agreement both about the subject-matter to be dealt with by the theory and about the standards by which theories are to be assessed. But in the social sciences things are, in general, not so simple. Ontology (what sorts of entities theories postulate), epistemology (what kind of access we have to those entities) and explanatory structure (the kinds of connection that we should look for between them) are all controversial. Those familiar with the literature on the philosophy of social science—in particular, the disputes surrounding 'methodological individualism'—will realize that we have reached a point at which dispute most often degenerates into a depressing sterility.

There are those philosophers and scientists whom we may call (I am afraid that not all of them will welcome the term) positivists. Positivists think that there are sufficient common features of good explanations to make it plausible, at least, to believe that there is a single set of standards against which all explanations can be measured. These standards are unchanging, although the appreciation of them may be greater or smaller at one time than another. For those who take this view the critical question is: does a particular explanation meet the standards that any explanation at any time must meet?

Then there are those who believe that different standards apply in different regions of human enquiry. For them the fact that an explanation

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7 John Rawls has identified a parallel phenomenon in moral theory as 'reflective equilibrium'.
8 Hegel, of course, is the philosopher who most acutely embodies (and responds to) this dilemma. In Hegel's view, all of the subordinate conceptions of philosophical reason can be shown, in the end, to lead to his own. (See my Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism, Chapter 2.)
9 I am not saying that the natural sciences are never controversial (one need only think about the debates surrounding Newton's 'action at a distance' or those associated with the theory of evolution) or that the social sciences always are (some parts of economics, it seems to me, fit the model of 'normal science' perfectly well).
should fail to meet standards 'imported' from elsewhere is, in principle, wholly unsurprising. Yet if we are not to fall into the worst kind of relativism, the standards we apply cannot be solely those that a theory itself proposes: in that case we should be simply allowing every theory to write its own warrant. But then from where, if not from timeless standards, might rational criticism come?

A leading example of the attempt to reconstruct social scientific theories according to methodological standards that are justified by their acceptance elsewhere, to which I shall make reference a good deal in what follows, is G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence*. Cohen aims to show that ‘functional explanation’, which he takes to be characteristic of Marx’s historical materialism, does not require commitment to anything that a physical scientist need find methodologically or metaphysically offensive, but corresponds to the kind of explanation to be found quite unproblematically in Darwinian biology.

It has been said in response to Cohen that his reconstruction represents only one aspect of Marx’s enterprise and that Marx himself took himself to be operating according to different standards. As it stands, this is hardly a forceful objection. If it is the case that Marx’s theory can be reconstructed satisfactorily, but at the cost of elements of his method that he may have thought to be of vital importance – the ‘dialectic’, for example – then this will only be doing to Marx’s theory what he himself claims to have done to Hegel’s: extracting the ‘rational kernel from its mystical shell’.

However, Cohen does not succeed, I will argue. I will try to show that his methodologically austere reconstruction fails to provide a sufficient defence for Marx’s claims with respect to that part of his account that is most relevant to the theory of ideology – the functional interpretation of the relationship of correspondence between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’. The very great value of Cohen’s reconstruction, in my view, is just the opposite of what its author claims. Rather than providing a convincing defence of Marx, it enables us to measure more precisely than ever before the great distance that exists between the methodological assumptions and standards of evidence that rule in the physical sciences and in evolutionary biology and what would be required to vindicate Marx’s claims.

This throws important light upon Marx’s theory. It is widely appreciated that there are apparently distinct methodological strands in Marx’s work. This is unmissable in any comparison between the ‘Hegelian’ early writings and the later ‘scientific’ works on political economy. Marx’s interpreters have generally argued for one or the other of these as the basis for an understanding of the ‘true’ or ‘essential’ Marx. The interpretation of Marx to be presented in this book, however, will show that deep tensions

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10 *Das Kapital* 1, p. 27 [Eng. trans., p. 25].
11 The line of division is between those who believe that there is an important discontinuity between the early and the later writings and those for whom the two periods form a single, basically consistent whole.
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remain even in Marx's later (supposedly 'mature') works. These tensions do not simply amount to prevarication or vacillation on Marx's part but result from the strain of attempting to construct a theory that will do justice to two deep background beliefs about the ways in which societies change and, what is most fundamental to the theory of ideology, the reasons why they fail to do so.

A preliminary formulation of the two background beliefs informing the theory of ideology is, first, that societies are systems, in the sense that they maintain themselves (or change, as the case may be) in ways that cannot be understood simply from a common-sense individualistic perspective, and, second, that unequal societies are preserved not, or not simply, by coercion but by a form of 'false consciousness' on the part of those in whose interests it would be to change those societies. These beliefs are extremely important for the assessment of Marx's methodology, for they provide his theory with an important part of its explanandum. On the one hand, if they cannot be accounted for within the standard explanatory framework of the natural sciences, then commitment to them would provide a reason to accept that the methodology of the social sciences should be different from that of the natural sciences. On the other hand, to the extent that we were committed to the precepts of methodological positivism, we should have a reason to question the apparent self-evidence of the background beliefs themselves.

One purpose in making background beliefs explicit is to make them open to assessment and history is one way to gain such a perspective. To realize that a belief that was once (or, indeed, is now) taken for granted is not universal but arose at some particular place and time is to invite certain questions: was it simply a discovery, a rational product of intellectual progress, or did other factors play a role? Were there, perhaps, not fully rational reasons why it was found to be inspiring or consoling? Are those reasons to which we ourselves now would continue to adhere?

Marx always insisted that his approach to the study of society was 'scientific' and 'materialist' and he consciously tried to purge himself of assumptions that were incompatible with these two commitments. But this did not mean that he simply applied to society a method of which he had a clear and fixed conception in advance. On the contrary, the eclecticism of Marx's method suggests that it was in fact much more of a response: a willingness to make those assumptions he felt were necessary in order to make sense of things that he, unwaveringly and unchangingly, felt had to be accounted for.

III Background Beliefs

The test of having background beliefs in the sense that I am using the concept is that attributing them makes the best sense of the structures - the concepts and patterns of inference - that we find in texts. It is not
necessary that the beliefs should have been given clear and explicit formulation. When an interpreter talks about establishing an author's 'beliefs' the aim is to identify not only those propositions that an author consciously and explicitly maintained but also the systematic ways of using words that are implicit in his texts. So, for example, when philosophers talk about 'causes' they may believe that these are the kind of things that have 'necessary connections' to their effects. They may express this explicitly, but, then again, they may not; they may, for example, simply have taken it for granted that causes and effects are necessarily connected (who, before Hume, even thought that it was something that had to be argued for?). It is here that 'background beliefs' come in.

There is no reason to suppose that background beliefs would, or even could, have been expressed independently of the actual theories that were produced in response to them. On the contrary, when an old set of background beliefs is displaced by new ones, the latter typically manifest themselves first as a powerful image, a metaphor or an analogy. Only later do they become objects of clarification and analysis. When we meet background beliefs initially, they may seem to be confused or incoherent and, for that reason, the philosopher might assume that they do not represent a proper object of study. He would be wrong. When models and assumptions of this kind inform philosophy, they penetrate its structure and give sense to that level of explicit inference on which philosophers commonly concentrate. That a background belief is not expressed explicitly does not mean that it is a mere artefact of interpretation. The fact that background beliefs are implicit is a potential source of ambiguity, certainly, but they are no less real or powerful for that.

The sharp line between 'observation' (open, receptive, particular) and 'theory' (empirically well-defined universal propositions within a coherent logical structure) presented in the logical positivists' account of science is, at best, an ideal. Our conception of reality typically incorporates models or images ('folk theories') regarding the nature of the subject-matter rather

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12 For a somewhat more detailed examination of this point, see Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism, Chapter 1.
13 To say that a belief is not articulated is not, however, to say that it is unconscious in the psychoanalytic sense of being hidden from the awareness of the person who holds it by some kind of concealment or distortion.
14 I am not saying that inferential validity is of no importance, but it is rare indeed for a serious philosophical position to be defeated by inconsistency alone. Theories that appear to us to be fundamentally inconsistent often turn out to be consistent, but consistent with respect to background beliefs and unstated assumptions that we do not share. (In Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism I tried to show that Hegel's philosophy could be understood as remarkably consistent - but consistent with respect to a set of neo-Platonist assumptions that most philosophers would now find wholly unacceptable.)

In recent years a number of imaginative attempts have been made to interpret aspects of the history of philosophy from the point of view of the unacknowledged hold exercised over philosophers by such background beliefs and assumptions. See, for example, I. Hacking, Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?, E. Tugendhat, Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie, A. MacIntyre, After Virtue, R. Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, E. Craig, The Mind of God and the Works of Man, C. Taylor, Sources of the Self.
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than well worked out hypotheses whose predictive scope (and hence testability) is clear. It is here that we find background beliefs.¹⁵

One way that models can be justified is by being associated with a well-attested empirical theory of which they are, as it were, an informal representation (most educated non-physicists, I suppose, have an image of the earth swinging round the sun like a ball on the end of a piece of string). But the absence of such a theory is not a sufficient reason to abandon the model. No one would give up the view of human beings as having beliefs and desires, and as being capable, to some extent, of bringing the former to bear on the way that they go about realizing the latter, just because of the poverty of the theorizing of empirical psychology. They are too important a part of our background beliefs. The fact that they are not accompanied by a well-attested empirical theory represents a challenge for the construction of such a theory rather than a deficiency that should lead automatically to their rejection.

IV Society as a System and ‘Political False Consciousness’

Two background beliefs provide the core of Marx’s answer to Reich’s question: the belief that societies are self-maintaining entities, and the belief that, in the case of prima facie illegitimate societies, the way in which they do this is by means of false consciousness on the part of those who live in them.

The idea that societies operate in ways which, though systematic, cannot be taken to be just the immediate results of the conscious intentions of the individuals who compose them has been called the ‘law of unintended consequences’ by Ronald Meek.¹⁶ But this risks underplaying an important aspect of the idea, namely, that such consequences represent something different in kind from mere unforeseen causal chains (like the stone that starts an avalanche when someone kicks it on a mountain path).

The notion of ‘consequences’ at issue is analytically complex. A ‘consequence’ in this context, it is important to note, is not necessarily a separately identifiable succeeding event. For an example let us consider briefly a market in equilibrium under perfect competition. Such a system of exchanges will be what economists call ‘Pareto-optimal’ (that is, it is not possible to increase welfare for any individual without loss of welfare to at least one other individual). But Pareto-optimality is not a consequence of the system in the sense of being a further state that follows from some previous state. Pareto-optimality is a (desirable but not intended) feature

¹⁵ Typically, background beliefs are not direct empirical beliefs with a clear factual content (nor, for that matter, are they a priori in the way that the axioms of logic and mathematics are). What they seem most to resemble are those propositions that Kant called ‘transcendental’ or ‘metaphysical’ – propositions that are foundational for empirical science but that are not themselves established observationally.

¹⁶ R. Meek, Social Science and the Ignoble Savage, p. 1.
of the system. The point of equilibrium itself is a consequence to the extent that it is a state that was reached in virtue of previous states of the system (the initial endowments of the participants of the market and their preferences). But the fact that it is an equilibrium (i.e., that there is no endogenous tendency for the market to move away from that point) is, once again, a feature of the system rather than a consequence of a previous state.

For the theory of ideology, two further features of the idea of unintended consequences are important. First, actions are taken to have consequences that are not apparent to those that engage in them. Secondly, this fact itself is not adventitious: there is held to be a significant reason why actions which have unintended consequences have the consequences that they do (if that reason is not apparent to the agents themselves, then the absence of understanding is a form of false consciousness on their part).

False consciousness also requires some preliminary explanation (Chapter 2 will continue this analysis in more detail). The distinctive background belief whose course we will trace is the idea of political false consciousness.

We may distinguish three forms of this idea.

(1) The first is a commonplace. Since ancient times, writers have pointed out that false consciousness – deception and irrationality, for example – may have political consequences. For the Greeks, political false consciousness was an instance, a central and extremely painful one, to be sure, of a general problem: the failure of human beings to live up to standards of rationality. The classic presentation of this comes in Plato’s Republic. In Plato’s view, the irrationality of the soul necessarily leads to the injustice of the state. What makes false consciousness political in this case is the character of its effects.

(2) A second form of the idea of political false consciousness is the idea that consciousness that is directed towards particular kinds of subject-matter (politics among them) is especially prone to false consciousness. In other words, political false consciousness is false consciousness because of its content. We shall see an example of this in Hume’s account of the illusions of enthusiasm and superstition. It is Hume’s view that subjects which are both emotionally important to human beings and also matters of uncertainty (religion and politics are the chief examples) are areas where we may expect people to show excessive credulity – in other words, they are especially liable to false consciousness.

(3) Finally, there is the idea that false consciousness is political not just because of its subject-matter or its consequences but because of the way that it is determined. One form of this view that will take a good deal of space in what follows will be the idea of sociable consciousness. False consciousness is sociable to the extent that it involves wanting to be seen in a certain way. Individuals want, in Rousseau’s phrase, not to be but to seem. In the Christian moralists, Pascal and La Rochefoucauld, sociable desire is implicit in Man’s willingness to turn away from the problem of
his salvation and to lose himself in the vanity of the world. Thus politics itself, as the sphere of vanity or *amour-propre*, constitutes a general realm of false consciousness. Rousseau takes up this idea in a way that is at once more secular and historical. According to Rousseau, *amour-propre* is a specific feature of those modern, urban, commercial societies, in which the virtues of individuals and the ties of mutual *pitié* that would keep them spontaneously in harmony with one another have been corrupted. The idea that false consciousness might be political in this sense is distinctively modern. *Amour-propre* is a form of false consciousness to the extent that it leads people to pursue not what is really good for them but whatever will make them appear enviable. It is political, to the extent that these objects are determined externally, by society, not by the individual.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I shall examine these background beliefs at some length. Chapter 3 will show the way in which the second and third conceptions of political false consciousness emerged to supplement the first conception in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapter 4 will show the emergence of the idea of society as a system from earlier, providential ideas of history. The theory of ideology, the argument is, is the product of the confluence of these two streams.

V Ideas and Historical Narrative

Described in this way, it may seem that what I have in mind for this book is objectionably circular or self-undermining. The object of the book is to assess a theory about society according to which beliefs, including theories about society, are the result of non-rational determinants and I appear to be suggesting that one of the ways in which we should do that is by considering whether those theories themselves may not to some extent be the product of non-rational determinants. Am I assuming the truth of the theory of ideology to explain the theory of ideology itself? The circularity is certainly present but it is inevitable and, I believe, not vicious. To claim that the factors affecting some of our most fundamental beliefs — about nature, history and society — are not purely rational is not to commit oneself to a theory of ideology in the Marxist or neo-Marxist sense. The conclusions that I draw regarding the best way of understanding non-rational beliefs will be consonant, I hope, with the methods that I apply in reaching them: to that extent, the argument is indeed intended to be self-supporting.

This is not to deny the difficulties involved in constructing and presenting an argument along these lines. Anyone who approaches the history of ideas with anything more than the most limited ambitions must pick their way through a veritable elephants' graveyard of grand theories. This book is aimed at one of the oldest and grandest of them all: the theory of ideology. And yet, how does one deal with this subject without subscribing (implicitly, if not explicitly) to some such theory? How is it
possible to write, as I have done, of depicting the ‘emergence’ of background beliefs without inviting the reader to reify them into healthy, Hegelian seedlings, forcing their way vigorously towards the sunlight? All that I can do at this stage is to put my cards on the table. The narrative of this book is written from the perspective of ideas. That is, it assumes that such a perspective has explanatory power: that it matters whether ideas are cogent and powerful; whether the assumptions on which they rest are plausible; that this is a part of what makes ideas persuasive to individual thinkers; and that their persuasiveness is the major part of the explanation of why they come to be accepted. But that does not mean that ideas are to be explained ultimately in terms of ideas alone: that they are self-sufficient and self-generating. Moreover, the terms that I have just used – ‘persuasiveness’, ‘plausibility’, ‘explanatory power’ – are not as neutral as philosophers who would insulate philosophy from history like to suppose. What makes an idea ‘plausible’ is not something that can be derived from the nature of rationality alone; ideas may be plausible because they incorporate background beliefs that are quite local and specific. Thus the sociological or historical understanding of the history of ideas need not come at the expense of the cognitive perspective, properly understood. Ideas of what is persuasive or plausible contain both culturally variable as well as invariant elements. Both elements must be part of a comprehensive explanation. Unlike the vulgar-Marxist version of the theory of ideology, this approach does not make ideas into puppets on the end of its strings. But how do these different elements come together?

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche suggests that there are three ways in which human beings make the world acceptable to themselves. Tragedy, he argues famously, is a mixture of two of them: Dionysian intoxication and the Apollonian realm of beauty. The self either attempts to escape from suffering in self-abandonment or it imagines a perfect realm. Yet both of these strategies have been displaced in the modern world, Nietzsche argues, by a third, which he calls Socratism: the idea that there is a reason for everything - suffering included. Much later, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he writes:

Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not repudiate suffering as such; he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering. 17

Socratism is part of the attempt to make the world acceptable by making it intelligible. At a certain point, as Nietzsche describes it, the Socratic ideal comes into conflict with itself: the explanations offered to make the world intelligible come up against the spirit of criticism (itself a consequence of Socratism) that requires that ideas should be justified.

Broadly speaking, I (like Max Weber) think that Nietzsche is right. The
drive for justification that is characteristic of philosophical reasoning and the non-rational beliefs about the nature of reality that the drive for justification criticizes are both a part of the search for understanding. If we want an overall perspective from which to comprehend the rise and fall of background beliefs in Western thought then the best one is to see them as having their place within this dialectic. This is not the whole of the story, to be sure, but it is an important part of it, and it is from this point of view that the narrative of this book is constructed.

In essence, the book presents a picture of discontinuity and continuity. The new background beliefs that came on the scene in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the changed conception of political false consciousness and the idea of society as a system, from which the theory of ideology arose, made their appearance in the context of certain broad continuities in the understanding of human nature and of the character of society and the natural world. These continuities, rationalism and providentialism as I shall call them, are themselves capable of being understood, I suggest, from a quasi-Nietzschean perspective. Both are, in Nietzschean terms, a way of giving meaning to the world and accommodating oneself to it intellectually.

No historical narrative can be comprehensive, of course. Deterministic theories accommodate this uncomfortable fact by turning it into a virtue: focusing on what they take to be essential structures and pivotal episodes. If one does not believe in such sharp boundaries, however, any account must involve a painful degree of simplification and schematization. In my case, this selection involves a focus on the structure of ideas themselves and their changing pattern from thinker to thinker at the expense of a broader account of their intellectual and social context. Yet this concentration on ideas inevitably carries with it the suggestion that ideas are self-developing quasi-agents.

One way of countering this tendency is to make it clear that when the ideas in question appeared they did so as part of the project of some particular thinker. Thus in presenting those figures whom I take to be most significant for the background to the theory of ideology — chiefly, Hume, Smith, Rousseau, Herder and Hegel — I shall try to give the reader a sense of what was at stake in their wider enterprise (at the cost, perhaps, of seeming at times to digress from my main point). This carries its own dangers, however. To give one's attention to only a few figures appears to suggest that the history of ideas is a matter of a small number of 'great thinkers', sitting isolated on their mountain peaks and yodelling to one another across the empty valleys.

 Unfortunately, it is very difficult to oppose any simplistic historical account without seeming to be proposing an alternative oversimplification of one's own. Rather than irritating the reader by describing further what I am not going to be able to do, let me simply make it clear that I am aware of how much would have to be done to turn this partial explanation into a complete one.
VI The Rise of ‘Social Science’

One consequence of my account of the emergence of the theory of ideology as motivated by the confluence of background beliefs is that it calls into question a picture of the development of social science that is to be found in the standard histories. The received view represents the rise of social science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as part of the Enlightenment enterprise: an attempt to bring to bear on society the methods and standards that were proving so successful in the natural sciences.\(^{18}\)

Of course, it is generally accepted by the advocates of the received view that the history of social science cannot be represented as so smoothly triumphant as the positivist picture of the development of physical science, so the received view also includes a place for the opponents of Enlightenment, stout defenders of human meaning or reactionary know-nothings according to which side of the debate one is on, whose central commitment is to the distinctiveness of the study of society from the natural sciences. Nevertheless, the received image remains misleading.

First of all, it presents the initial impulse for the development of social science as if it were methodological, originating outside the study of society itself: a group of would-be scientists are inspired to extend a successful method to a new domain of objects, while others resist them in the name of the distinctiveness of the human realm and the kind of understanding appropriate to it. This understates the extent to which development resulted from a change in the perception of society itself.

The received view represents those who rejected the idea of a science of society on the model of physics as advocating the subjective understanding of particular events as the goal of social theory instead. Here too it is misleading. While that might be a fair picture of some of the debate that took place in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, it is particularly unhelpful for the understanding of those social theorists whose ideas form the background to the theory of ideology.

Although there was, of course, some conscious comparison between the study of society and the natural sciences (one thinks of Dugald Stewart’s famous description of Adam Smith as the ‘Newton’ of the social realm\(^{19}\)) methodological commitments were secondary factors.\(^{20}\) Behind the disa-

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\(^{18}\) For example: ‘Sociology is part of that great revolution of thought in Western Civilization which passes from religion through philosophy to science’ (D. Martindale, The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory, p. 4). See also: H. Becker and H. Barnes, Social Thought from Lore to Science, and R. Brown, The Nature of Social Laws.

\(^{19}\) The phrase seems to have become a *topos*: Kant is supposed to have said exactly the same things about Condorcet.

\(^{20}\) Having objected to the oversimplification of the received view, I do not want to replace it with a monocausal view of my own. An adequate history of the development of social science would
agreement as to the extent to which the proper method for the study of society resembled or differed from physics was a more widespread commitment to the idea that society acted as a system. Yet, paradoxically from the standpoint of the received image, the first consequence of this idea was actually to put the analogy between social science and physics into doubt. For, if it is true that society maintains itself as a system by acting in ways that transcend the actions of the individuals that compose it, then this, it seems, shows that it is radically unlike the corpuscularian picture of matter in motion. Hobbes in the middle of the seventeenth century was actually far closer to the idea of a social physics than were the leading social theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So far from being driven by the extension of a successful method from physics, the view of society as a system was methodologically and ontologically equivocal in its implications. If there was a natural science that appeared to provide a parallel to the study of society it was biology, not physics.

In its classic form, the organic analogy committed those who held it to two theses about the nature of social theory, the acceptance of which would place them on both sides of the received view’s assumed cleavage between objective explanation and subjective understanding. To see society as an organism was to see it as an ‘organized whole’ – that there was a special relation of internal interdependence between its parts and that it was self-maintaining in ways that contrast specifically with what were presumed to be the characteristic features of those systems that formed the subject-matter of physics. On the other hand, this was supposed to be a general fact about societies, the basis for a form of social explanation that was no less valid or objective than the explanations of physics. For Hegel, it is only because we ourselves are vehicles for the unfolding of Geist that we are able to grasp the (wholly objective) way in which Geist’s structures
give some weight to each of the following factors:

1. the debate among natural lawyers regarding the relationship between jus naturale and the jus gentium
2. the impact of contact with ‘primitive’ cultures as narrated in the various Histoires de Voyages
3. the ‘quarrel’ between the ‘Ancients’ and the ‘Moderns’
4. an attempt to come to terms theoretically with de facto religious diversity
5. the perceived loss of community consequent upon the development of commercial society
6. the theological debate regarding the ‘particular’ or ‘general’ role of Providence (whether there is divine intervention in particular cases or whether it is only the general framework of laws that is providential) and the attempt to provide a ‘general’ providential interpretation of history
7. the perception of the economy as an autonomous region of social life, not requiring constant direct intervention from the political realm
8. the successful development of scientific methods in the natural sciences.

The interaction between these factors is immensely complicated and I do not want to commit myself to any definite view regarding the balance between them. It is important, however, to recognize that no single factor can give the whole explanation.

21 No less valid – but not necessarily in just the same way. In particular, it may be the case that social explanation requires some special connection between observer and observed.
determine and its striving for self-realization motivates the development of history.

The received view does not appear to recognize the possibility of such a position — social theorists are either advocates of social science on the analogy with the natural sciences or they deny that objective explanations of the realm of ‘understanding’ are possible at all. According to G. A. Cohen, Hegel, unlike Marx, offers no more than a ‘reading’ of the nature of history:

... we may attribute to Marx, as we cannot to Hegel, not only a philosophy of history, but also what deserves to be called a theory of history, which is not a reflective construal, from a distance, of what happens, but a contribution to understanding its inner dynamic. Hegel’s reading of history as a whole and of particular societies is just that, a reading, an interpretation which we may find more or less attractive. But Marx offers not only a reading but also the beginnings of something more rigorous.22

This is plainly wrong. Whatever one thinks of its success, Hegel’s intention was to offer an explanation of historical development every bit as objective, just as much of a contribution to ‘understanding its inner dynamic’, as the explanations of the natural scientists. To assume that an approach that does not employ those methods that Cohen finds (in their ‘beginnings’, at least) in Marx is therefore no more than a ‘philosophy’ (quelle horreur!) rather than a ‘theory’, is to beg the question that should, I suggest, be at issue.23

VII Rationalism

The first part of this book explores the emergence of the two background beliefs — a political conception of false consciousness and the idea of society as a system — behind the theory of ideology. My argument is that these ideas did not belong to an unchanging stock of thought about politics but started to emerge in the forms with which we are now familiar only in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Insofar as this is a change that can be explained (rather than simply a brute fact to be recorded), it must be understood, I suggest, in the context of changes in the dominant conceptions of human nature and of society and history, respectively.

22 Karl Marx’s Theory of History, p. 27
23 Another example comes from the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard. According to Evans-Pritchard, anthropology ‘studies societies as moral systems and not as natural systems ... , it is interested in design rather than in process, and ... it therefore seeks patterns and not scientific laws, and interprets rather than explains’ (E. Evans-Pritchard, Essays in Social Anthropology, p. 26, quoted in D. Sperber, On Anthropological Knowledge, p. 9). The contrast between ‘moral’ and ‘natural’ systems may be dubious (what is more natural to human beings than morality?) but much more so is the assumption that the first terms in each of the contrasting pairs necessarily go together and imply the exclusion of each of the second terms. Could there not, for example, be an explanation in terms of design? What entitles Evans-Pritchard to assume the contrary?