



## Ideology, False Consciousness, and Beyond: The Marxian Critique of Ideation

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores Marx and Engels' infamous theory ideology, which I argue is best understood as a critique of ideation. The piece explores what the pair did and did not say about ideology and similar concepts, focusing on six key terms: alienation, mystification, commodity fetishism, social consciousness, ideology, and false consciousness. I read across the Marxian corpus, from *The 1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* to the three volumes of *Capital* and Engels' late writings. Along the way, the article advances two fundamental claims: 1) Marx and Engels' views on ideation are more multifaceted than is often assumed; 2) the two authors provide a broad lexicon for the critique of ideation, one that allows for the construction of a dynamic portrait of consciousness within the social totality of capitalism. Ultimately, the account is not designed as a master theory meant to replace all other forms of analysis, Marxist or not. As a result, the critique of ideation operates in tandem with their other intellectual contributions (to economics, history, and the like). Further, it is compatible with perspectives from aesthetics, the natural sciences, and a range of other disciplines. Even so, it offers potent resources for analyzing forms of thought under capitalism, supplementing larger discussions within Marxism and without.

**KEYWORDS:** Marxism, ideology, false consciousness, alienation, commodity fetishism, mystification.

### Introduction

Ideology is perhaps the most controversial term to emerge from the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The concept is also subject to widespread misunderstanding. Especially since the 1960s, the Marxian account of ideology has often been interpreted as a general theory of consciousness as a whole. This perspective has inflamed passionate responses

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from champions and critics alike. Positively, the philosopher Louis Althusser saw ideology not only as a means of explaining social beliefs, but a more fundamental way to grasp the structure of capitalist society (Althusser 2014). Negatively, the philosopher Paul Ricœur argued that Marxism as such was a form of “suspicious” interpretation. Set alongside Nietzsche and Freud, Marx constituted one of the “three masters” who “dominate the school of suspicion.” As a result, he emerged as a “destroyer” who perpetuated “absurd theory” when he chose “to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false consciousness’” (Ricœur 1970, 32–33).

Such robust interpretations stand in stark contrast with how little Marx and Engels actually wrote about the topic of ideology. Neither author produced a singular monograph defining the term or similar concepts such as false consciousness. What the pair did write about these ideas was seldom the primary focus of a given text; frequently, these themes were found in the space of theoretical asides or marginalia. While Marx produced thousands of pages during the development of his critique of political economy, he never set out to produce a comprehensive critique of knowledge. Even *The German Ideology*, ostensibly the most definitive statement on the topic, was left as a series of unfinished manuscripts. And it would take until decades after Marx and Engels’ deaths to see the publication of many such writings.

This article argues that Marxian analyses of ideology, false consciousness, and similar concepts are best understood as elements of a critique of ideation. My analysis focuses on six major concepts that received theoretical engagement from the pair: alienation, mystification, commodity fetishism, social consciousness, ideology, and false consciousness. These notions represent key Marxian theories of what is commonly “ideology,” or what we might more inclusively call critical theories of ideation.

My goal is partially Marxological and reconstructive. I survey Marx and Engels’ corpus from a wide vantage point, using texts from *The 1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* to the three volumes of *Capital* and Engels’ late writings, all to show that the two authors explored ideation in nuanced ways throughout their work. My approach is also critical, and I engage primary sources alongside secondary sources that carefully analyze specific concepts. As a result, I conduct my work in dialog with a wide range of careful textual interpreters, such as Terrell Carver, G.A. Cohen, Marcello Musto, Guido Starosta, and Amy E. Wendling.

More broadly, I use my analysis to support two wider critical contentions: 1) Marx and Engels had no unifying foundational concept meant to

explain all forms of human thought. No text says as much, nor do their engagements with the topic imply such a concept; even so, 2) they theorized several categories related to social consciousness, yielding a loose and flexible analysis of ideation. Less a master theory or a totalizing model of suspicious reading, the two authors produced a lexicon of terms we might use to think about the way capitalist social relations relate to forms of knowledge.

This understanding of ideation allows for a dynamic critique of consciousness, something better suited to understanding capitalism as a social totality. Moreover, their account is far from a model designed to crowd out other forms of thought. It operates in tandem with Marx and Engels' other contributions (to economics, history, and the like). Further, it remains compatible with perspectives from aesthetics, natural science, philosophy, and other disciplines. In the end, Marx and Engels provide materials to continue to build theories of ideation, supplementing broader discussions within Marxism and without.

Throughout their texts, Marx and Engels do display a consistent interest in *social* ideas, forms of collective knowledge produced by the institutions of capitalist society and expressed in the activities of groups of people. As a result, I refer to their theories with the broader term ideation, which characterizes ideas and practices of idea formation instead of an idealized realm of pure mental activity. This framing is more comprehensive than ideology alone, but it also refers to something narrower than the general nature of human cognition.

Really, the pair wrote little about topics such as psychology, the mind, or the metaphysics of knowledge. Marx and Engels' understanding of consciousness was materialist, and materialist in a more precise way than is often presumed. Their theories were not a model for boiling down all sorts of viewpoints to economic relations. Instead, the Marxian conception of ideation was equal parts intellectual and practical. In other words, Marx and Engels saw conscious life as something thought as well as *done*, ideation as something that was both produced in the course of social life and productive of it. Alienation, social consciousness, and like concepts characterize practical components of social existence. Humans are actors, ones who often behave in perfectly rational ways corresponding to the configuration of capitalist society. In this sense, the Marxian account of ideation opens toward a greater form of analysis, rooted in rigorous economic critique and a transformative political project.

The practical character of ideation can be understood in terms of what Evald Ilyenkov calls the *ideal*, which he characterizes as the “form of a thing created by social-human labour, reproducing the forms of the objective material world, which exist independently of man” (Levant and Oittinen 2014, 76). Ideation is not something reducible to mental activity (or similar distinctions between the physical and the realm of thought). To the contrary, it denotes forms of life-activity arising outside of human beings through human creative activity. Otherwise put, ideation is a practical activity of human beings, and therefore it relates to but is not reducible to the economy.

Generally, Marx and Engels’ discussions of ideation fall within two spheres: 1) analysis of practical forms of ideation, concepts manifest through human activity in the marketplace, reflected in categories such as alienation, mystification, and commodity fetishism; 2) analysis of reflective forms of ideation, intellectual concepts developed through institutions, including social consciousness, ideology, and false consciousness.

I begin my account with Marx’s theory of alienation, a reoccurring theme in Marxian thought. Alienation characterized ways that the social nature of human life was obscured because of the capitalist organization of production. Given its wide focus, the concept explained several elements, from the laboring conditions of workers to a broader situation that cast individuals as conflicting actors in a game over which they had little control.

My discussion continues with mystification and commodity fetishism, two closely related concepts. Mystification represented a more basic form of social misapprehension. This phenomenon arose as atomized individuals experienced the behemoth of capitalism, as in the case of the capitalist who comes to believe that they and not workers are the one who creates wealth. Commodity fetishism diagnosed a more particular type of mystification, where the commodity form in particular was charged with concealing the social nature of production.

The next major concept is social consciousness, developed in tandem with Marx’s often-debated base-superstructure schema and his complex assertion that it is people’s “social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx and Engels 1975, 29:263). By reconstructing Marx’s schema, I show that social consciousness frames the institutional nature of knowledge, the ways in which the structure of capitalism facilitated and curtailed forms of thought.

From there, I arrive at Marx and Engels' theory of ideology proper, which provided a critique of a particular form of social consciousness. Ideology resulted from the protracted sectoral division of labor, which created a class of auxiliary workers including philosophers, teachers, and civil servants. I conclude the article with an exploration of Engels' late concept of false consciousness. Acknowledging the significance of his contributions following Marx's death, I explore how Engels rearticulated the account of ideology while also insisting that economic influence is mediated by history and social life more generally.

Ultimately, I conclude that Marx and Engels generated a space for understanding the complex relationship of ideas, social institutions, and economic life under capitalism. Moreover, their critique implied alternative forms of ideation, forms of knowledge generation and collective experience proper to a truly liberated human community.

### **Alienation**

Though Marx and Engels never developed a comprehensive theory of ideation, *alienation* (*Enttäusserung/Entfremdung*) was a reoccurring thematic in their writings. Throughout their careers, the two authors took a keen interest in how capitalism was rendered opaque to individuals, something that impeded broad understanding and free experience. Far from a theory of individual cognition, alienation was developed as a means of understanding the social nature of consciousness.

Marx and Engels' theory of alienation influenced the later theories of many writers (e.g., Lukács 1972; Adorno and Horkheimer 2007; Althusser 2006; Foster 2000). Alienation also inspired a wide range of interpretations, and commentators have disagreed about the precise meaning of the notion and its centrality in Marx and Engels' overall intellectual project. Some critics have downplayed the scope of alienation, while others have argued the concept is essential for understanding Marxian theory as a whole (see Musto 2021).

At the least, the term does appear in several writings, from the "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (the *1844 Manuscripts*) and *The Holy Family* to the *Grundrisse* and the volumes of *Capital*. Alienation assumed various guises over time as it found its way into different projects, including the discussion of inalienable and alienable legal rights in "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law" and the discourse on religion found in "Comments on James Mill, *Elémens d'économie politique*"

(Marx and Engels 1975, 3:101; 3:212). As a result of its diffusion, Amy E. Wendling and Marcello Musto have identified distinctive meanings of alienation across the Marxian corpus (Wendling 2009, 37; Musto 2021, 3–36).

Marx's most extensive writings on the topic are found in the *1844 Manuscripts*, a series of notes drafted from April–August 1844 that were not published in full until 1932. There, he writes:

[T]he object which labour produces—labour's product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour. Labour's realisation is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realisation of labour appears as *loss of realisation* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*. (Marx and Engels 1975, 3:272 [emphases original])

Here, Marx is saying that worker and commodity stand apart from each other. The worker “alienates” or gives up the commodity insofar as they retain no ownership over it—instead, the commodity belongs to the purchaser of the worker's labor, who is free to dispense with it as they choose. At another level, the worker surrenders the direction of their work (to an owner or supervisor), therefore ceding control over the laboring process itself. At a more general level, workers as a whole find themselves estranged from society at large, given that they are thrown into a competitive sea of rivals.

Several commentators have observed that Marx's description of alienation has similarities to G.W.F. Hegel's own use of the concept (Dupré 1972; Wendling 2009; Sayers 2011; Musto 2021). Alienation gained a systematic place in Hegel's 1807 book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, which included “Spirit Alienated from Itself” (*Der sich entfremdete Geist*) in the overall architecture of the argument (Hegel 2018, 281). However, his account of alienation was only one example of a broader German theory of *modernity*, a view that humankind had become estranged from a more fundamental essence that was proper to earlier stages of history. This line of thought linked many social-theoretical projects, from Hegel's account of subjectivity to Feuerbach's critique of idealism and Adam Smith's political economy (Feuerbach 2012; Drosos 1996).

Alienated modernity often contained a cultural lament, a melancholy sentiment that the effects of modernization undermined spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic life. This sense unified prominent writers such as the playwright and poet Friedrich Schiller, the art historian Johann Joachim

Winckelmann, and the music critic E.T.A. Hoffmann (Schiller 1993; Winckelmann 2006; Comen 2018). These and other thinkers idealized antiquarian culture (often, Ancient Greek art), and they shared a belief that modern humankind stood at a distance from the cultural heights of the past. Hegel's thinking, particular his *Aesthetics*, represented a development of this paradigm, yielding the so-called "death of art" thesis: art has arrived at a condition in which "no Dante, Ariosto, or Shakespeare can appear in our day," since "what was so magnificently sung" has "been sung once and for all" (Hegel 1998, 608).

Marx was like Hegel to the extent he believed in the historically specific character of cultural life, with history shaping the productive dynamics of art production and the social context of aesthetic appreciation. However, Marx rejected the cultural decline theory of writers such as Schiller, instead rooting alienation in material conditions, primarily the capitalist form of wage labor and a more literal condition of poverty. Marx saw that the transformation of culture was related to the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, he spoke to the practice of artmaking in the *Grundrisse*: "Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the Iliad with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?" (Marx 1993, 111).

Marx was also critical of Hegel from the standpoint of alienation. As Patrick Murray argues, Marx understood Hegel's philosophy to speak from the standpoint of alienated labor, affirming only the positive aspects of alienated social life. In this sense, Murray writes, "The Hegelian-capitalist project of absolute self-constitution is itself a misguided divinization of humanity... Alienated labor and the yoking of human persons to their own products are of a piece with the exchange of those products through the mediation of money and the market" (Murray 1988, 54).

In addition, Marx more generally broke with the inherited historiographic model by foregrounding potentiality over nostalgia. The *1844 Manuscripts* contrast alienation to what emancipated human labor *could be*. Work could be a "conscious life activity" that met human needs and reflected human "freedom" (Marx and Engels 1975, 3:276). More than just producing to address basic desires, labor even had the capacity to bring about an elevated form of culture, guiding the production of "objects in accordance with the laws of beauty" (Marx and Engels 1975, 3:277).

As his career progressed, Marx developed new concerns, folding alienation into his economic research during the 1850s and 1860s. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx still echoes his earlier account of alienation and objectification, now expressed in terms of his blossoming theory of Value:

The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual—their mutual interconnection—here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing. In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth. The less social power the medium of exchange possesses (and at this stage it is still closely bound to the nature of the direct product of labour and the direct needs of the partners in exchange) the greater must be the power of the community which binds the individuals together, the patriarchal relation, the community of antiquity, feudalism, and the guild system. (Marx 1993, 157)

Marx reiterates his sense that the worker is alienated from their labor under capitalism. Newly, he alludes a systematic place for the product of this labor, the commodity, which becomes a distinctive kind of Value-bearing social object. Significantly, this new thought was expressed in Marx's accounts of mystification and commodity fetishism.

### **Mystification**

The theory of alienation explained how capitalism hindered people from leading a robust form of life, both on an intellectual and practical level. Mystification (*Mystifikation*) represented a development of this form, concerning the ways that the advanced structure of capitalism led to basic misapprehensions of the world. As a result, the theory of mystification closely coincides with a critique of ordinary perception. In their writings, Marx and Engels outline obstacles to apprehending capitalism as a system, and they attempt to break the surface of social experience.

A formal critique of mystification was never developed in a singular study, though the topic represented a common thematic in Marx's economic research. In this period, Marx took a keen interest in the elements of capitalism that made it difficult to apprehend the totality of the system. Such moments marked ways that the internal complexity of the capitalist social division of labor—and the isolation of individuals within it—led to forms of misapprehension.

In many cases, Marx evokes perception through metaphors of mystification and concealment. Across the volumes of *Capital*, Marx questions the



“mystifying side” (*die mystifizierende Seite*) of the Hegelian dialectic; the “mystifications” (*Mystifikationen*) of the capitalist mode of production; and the way that capitalist valorization is “mystified” (*mystifiziert*) by profit (Marx 1976, 1:102; 680; 1981, 3:138). Additionally, the social character of labor is “veiled” (*verschleiert*), while surplus value is “obscured” (*verdunkelt*) and “hidden” (*versteckt*) because of the way profit is generated (Marx 1976, 1:173; 1981, 3:267). Marx even applied the metaphor of veiling to history, as seen in his comment from his 1852 text, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: “If one looks at the situation [in France] and the parties more closely, however, this superficial appearance, which veils the class struggle and the peculiar physiognomy of this period, disappears” (Marx and Engels 1975, 11:127). Marx additionally contrasts the appearance of things with their inner reality (Levin 1980, 503). Under capitalism, the “surface process” (*oberflächliche Prozeß*) conceals what lurks in the “depths” (*der Tiefe*) (Marx 1993, 247). Similarly, economic relations are not what is “visible on the surface,” a fact that hides “the configuration of their inner core, which is essential but concealed” (Marx 1981, 3:311).

Several commentators have explored Marx’s interest in perception (see Mills 1989, footnote 30). In one of his early writings, Charles W. Mills gives an extensive reconstruction of Marx’s theory of ordinary perception, or what he calls “societal appearance” (Mills 1989, 427; see also 1985). As he argues, the surface appearance of capitalism makes it difficult to capture the mode of production in all its complexity:

[T]he structure of capitalism, Marx believes, is inherently apt to produce such phenomenal distortions (unlike earlier, more ‘transparent’ class societies, such as slavery and feudalism, where the political subordination of the exploited classes is obvious). Thus it is in his own major investigation of this structure, *Capital*, that this theme is most often emphasized, in his repeated criticisms of ‘vulgar’ economy, ‘which deals with appearances only.’ The important point, then, is that capitalism *itself* generates misleading categories and beliefs in the minds of those involved in its structure, quite apart from any efforts by ruling-class intellectuals. (Mills 1989, 433)

Mills contends that Marx is addressing an empirical fact, “not a general metaphysical view about the epistemically subversive effects of any type of causation on the acquisition of belief” (Mills 1989, 424). At a basic technical level, the capitalist mode of production is complex. It is internally differentiated and encompasses many spheres, a condition that undermines direct apprehension by individuals. This obscurity is not the result of some false belief or the actions of a ruling class. Rather, the concealment

of capitalism arises from the structure of society as it exists: a system with a depth and scope that makes it impossible to perceive on the surface.

A representative example of Marx's line of argumentation occurs in Volume 3 of *Capital*, where he characterizes the standpoint of the capitalist who is immersed in market competition. Deploying imagery of forgetting and appearance, Marx claims that the individual experiences their own place in exchange, not aggregate economic conditions of the whole system:

[The capitalist] simply forgets (or rather he no longer sees it, since competition does not show it to him) that all these grounds for compensation that make themselves mutually felt in the reciprocal calculation of commodity prices by the capitalists in different branches of production are simply related to the fact that they all have an equal claim on the common booty, the total surplus-value, in proportion to their capital. It *appears* to them, rather, that the profit which they pocket is something different from the surplus-value they extort; that the grounds for compensation do not simply equalize their participation in the total surplus-value, but that they actually *create profit itself*, since profit seems to derive simply from the addition to the cost price made with one justification or another. (Marx 1981, 3:310–11)

In this section, Marx is repeating one of the central arguments of Volume 3, that profit rates are shaped by average profitability across sectors of the capitalist economy. A capitalist does not directly experience this phenomenon during their day-to-day, since profit rate shifts happen on a macroeconomic level as growth and decline lead to trends over long economic periods. On the ground, a capitalist's role in the process instead concerns their own production and personal efforts to generate an individual profit.

Marx never suggests that mystification is a total phenomenon, nor does he present it as a condition that none cannot resist. To the contrary, he characterizes specific sites of mystification, moments within the circuit of capitalist production and circulation, where dynamics are not easily deciphered. However, these elements are measurable parts of capitalism, subject to analysis and empirical validation. In this sense, mystification concerns the functional roles individuals occupy within production, not a fundamental cognitive unwillingness or incapacity to perceive the structure of capitalism. Observing that capitalism is complicated is not claiming that industrialists cannot pay attention to general market processes (say, by reading market news each day). Marx simply believed that effort was required to overcome mystification. He also thought that the *most* complete understanding of capitalism would arise only through careful research—

into both empirical data and political-economic methods. That research came to constitute his work on *Capital*.

Still, Marx believed this system was intelligible and even intuitive if approached from the right perspective. Marx held that capitalism transformed how people experience some aspects of social relations, writing that “industry tore aside the veil that concealed from men their own social processes of production” (Marx 1976, 1:616). He also wrote of moments of clarity, even remarking that a simple glimpse at data could potentially “raise the veil just enough to let us catch a glimpse of the Medusa’s head behind it” (Marx 1976, 1:91).

More emphatically, Marx held a relentless optimism that any working-class individual was capable of better understanding capitalism, suggesting in the Preface to the French edition of *Capital* Volume 1 that the book could be published as a serial in order to be more accessible to the masses (Marx 1976, 1:104). In the end, then, Marx used his critique of ordinary appearance to point out obstacles to general comprehension and to call for intellectuals to lead us toward it.

### Commodity Fetishism

Marx afforded special meaning to one form of mystification, commodity fetishism, and he explored this concept at length in Volume 1 of *Capital*. This account is notable both because it plays a specific architectural role in that text and because it was treated in a more systematic fashion than many of Marx’s other ideation concepts.

Commodity fetishism is one of Marx’s most frequently used (and misused) concepts. Like alienation, it provoked controversy and inspired novel critical theories (see Starosta 2017, 103). Fetishism represents a distinctive category of social misapprehension, one that results from capitalist social relations as they are manifest in the commodity form. In such instances, what becomes obscured is the fundamentally social character of human labor.

The term fetishism was originally used by the French writer Charles de Brosses in the eighteenth century, a component of his anthropological analysis of religion (Iacono 2016). Marx adopted the term while developing his own critique of religion. That topic was central to his 1841 doctoral dissertation and to a planned treatise on religious art began that same year. Additionally, the theme was explored at length in the *Bonn Notebooks*, written in the midst of Marx’s collaborative friendship with Bruno Bauer. By

1842, the concepts “fetish” and “idolatry” appeared in Marx’s journalistic writings (Kangal 2020). A representative period usage of the term occurs in a May 10, 1842, *Rheinische Zeitung* article on freedom of the press, where he quips, “Of course, the province has the right, under prescribed conditions, to create these gods for itself, but as soon as they are created, it must, like a fetish worshipper, forget that these gods are its own handiwork” (Marx and Engels 1975, 1:147).

By the time of *Capital*, Marx had systematized the concept of fetishism and established it as a core plank of his economic theory. There, Marx argued that the commodity form is the source of a key type of mystification. Under capitalism, individuals are alienated from production. Consumers do not typically meet the capitalist producer of a given commodity, nor do they meet the laborer who created the commodity, the financier who funded the factory, or the merchant who brought the commodity to the store where it was purchased. Instead, consumers encounter the final product, the commodity itself. As a result, Marx argues, the commodity “reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things” (Marx 1976, 1:164–65).

He clarifies this point by suggesting that commodity fetishism obscures fundamental aspects of capitalism:

[I]n the first place, however varied the useful kinds of labour, or productive activities, it is a physiological fact that they are functions of the human organism, and that each such function, whatever may be its nature or its form, is essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, and sense organs. Secondly, with regard to the foundation of the quantitative determination of value, namely the duration of that expenditure or the quantity of labour, this is quite palpably different from its quality. In all situations, the labour-time it costs to produce the means of subsistence must necessarily concern mankind, although not to the same degree at different stages of development. And finally, as soon as men start to work for each other in any way, their labour also assumes a social form. (Marx 1976, 1:164)

On a basic level, commodities are products of human labor. They are made by people, and it is the work of people that affords commodities with properties that make them useful to others. Additionally, exchange value, the value of commodities on the marketplace, arises from this human labor. Commodities are made, and it is this making that leads commodities to have value. Most generally, Labor is inherently social. The capitalist divi-

sion of labor facilitates the mass production and distribution of commodities. As a result, the farmer is dependent on the manufacturer, the capitalist on the miner, and so on (see also Cohen 2000, 115–33; Basu 2021, 93–94).

While this analysis is relevant to a broader critique of ideation, it is important to keep in mind the specific role afforded to commodity fetishism in Volume 1. In an extensive study of the topic, Guido Starosta argues that Marx’s account introduces the subjective aspect of capitalism, understood in terms of subjective practical action. Insofar as individuals make decisions based on the appearance of the system (even or especially strategic ones made within the game of capitalist exchange), they engage in “alienated practical action in order to reproduce the materiality of their lives, thereby becoming determined as personifications of the autonomized self-movement of those objectified forms of social mediation” (Starosta 2017, 131).

Fetishism thus characterizes practical activity—the ways human beings live and behave. Whatever the virtue of later theories of reification or mass deception, Marx does not present commodity fetishism in such a fashion. As David Andrews argues, Marx’s account serves to illustrate a certain social aspect of capitalism. Capitalism plays an orienting role as individuals seek the means of their survival. To act as if commodities have Value is not a form of cognitive error or self-deception, but a rational mystification rooted in the fact that commodities *do* hold value within the capitalist system (Andrews 2018).

Even if Marx’s account serves a specific role, the ramifications of fetishism are significant. Indeed, if commodity fetishism does anchor the illusion that we are all atomized individuals, it is a powerful illusion. Ascribing power to capital naturalizes inequality and entrenches us within the market through our very actions. Further, fetishism takes power away from the “expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, and sense organs,” the work by billions of individuals to produce the commodities that sustain us (Marx 1976, 1:164). There are consequences to forgetting that humans are social beings, that we as a species thrive because of the labor and creative energy of others. Commodity fetishism anchors the worst forms of elitism and constructs obstacles to solidarity, calcifying the isolation that prevails under the capitalist mode of production.

## Social Consciousness

Alienation, mystification, and commodity fetishism ultimately function as much as an account of ideas as descriptions of the actions of human beings. However, Marx and Engels also believed that capitalism shaped more reflective modes of understanding. For this reason, the Marxian critique of ideation also explores “social forms of consciousness” (*gesellschaftliche Bewusstseinsformen*) or what we might simply call *social consciousness*. Marx’s account of social consciousness provides a means of categorizing certain large-scale types of collective knowledge formation.

The most significant discussion of social consciousness occurs in Marx’s 1859 “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the source of the infamous “base-superstructure” schema. There, Marx outlines what he calls the “guiding principle” of his studies of Hegel’s theory of politics and law:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite social forms of consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx and Engels 1975, 29:263 [translation modified])

This excerpt and the rest of the section that follows contain several potent claims about the human will, politics, the law, economic structure, and the prospect of a post-capitalist society.

There is a longstanding tendency to understand Marx’s distinction between base and superstructure as a schema to divide human activity between all economic entities and all mental entities, including art, religion, and culture. However, several authors have developed a more precise interpretation of the “Preface.” In particular, G.A. Cohen’s extensive writing on the section and Dileep Edara’s “restrictive” account challenge the conventional perspective (Cohen 2000; Edara 2016; see also Ervin 2020). As Edara characterizes it, Marx is not presenting an “all-encompassing paradigm that explains away all the social spheres in reference to the economy,” but “a conceptual model to explicate the inextricable connection between the production relations (the base) and politics and law (superstructure)” (Edara 2016, 16).

In Edara's understanding, the superstructure is a collection of institutions. It is a set of organizations, such as the State bureaucracy and the legal system. To reiterate the point, this means that the superstructure is equivalent to *institutions*, not mental categories or ideas. In more modern parlance, we might interpret the superstructure as representing two key spheres of society, the *public* sphere and the civic sphere (also known as the non-profit or third sector), areas comprised of institutions such as courthouses, government offices, universities, and NGOs (Ervin 2020).

Importantly, this understanding means that notions such as art, ideology, or culture are not themselves *the* superstructure. Cohen makes this point at length, using the example of natural science. For him, natural science is not exclusively part of the base or the superstructure, though it can be related to either sphere (Cohen 2000, 45–47). Science can be a part of the economic foundation as a *force of production*, as when a for-profit company uses methods or technologies to produce commodities for market. Science can also be developed in the superstructure, as when a public educational institution uses science in the classroom to teach students. Additionally, science might be understood as a third thing, a *social form of consciousness*: science itself, the intellectual domain or mental aspect of knowledge that transcends any specific institution. These observations do not mean there are no ambiguous or mixed cases, such as an ostensibly public university producing research to later be used by for-profit companies. However, said examples only further prove that science is not a superstructure.

It is against this backdrop that we can consider Marx's account of social consciousness. A rigorous interpretation of base and superstructure clears up some misconceptions about his theory, which is not meant as a general rubric to reduce all forms of human activity to direct causal mechanisms of the market. Even so, Marx still advances a strident claim about how capitalism shapes the social character of knowledge. In particular, he argues there are "definite forms of social consciousness" that "correspond" to the economic infrastructure, meaning that the "mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life." Interpreting this claim represents the true challenge of understanding Marx's conception of social consciousness.

Two precise elements of this account are worth underscoring. First, Marx refers to social "forms of consciousness" (*Bewusstseinsformen*). In phrasing it this way, Marx delineates particular *forms* of consciousness. The

usage of the word “forms” implies that the account applies to specific categories of ideas. Marx does not systematically explicate this point, but later in the paragraph, he does reference a set of “ideological forms” including “legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic” ideas. This collection of examples provides some sense of what Marx takes social forms of consciousness to be. Among other things, these forms represent foundational intellectual traditions with significant levels of institutional backing. Legal ideas are codified by the State, philosophical ideas in universities, religious ideas in churches, and so on. They also are formal traditions, with rigorous and slowly shifting paradigms. As a result, these disciplines contrast with the realm of personal belief, where individuals exercise more direct agency over their own views.

The second element of Marx’s account is the claim that forms of social consciousness are “conditioned” (*bedingt*) by the “mode of production of material life” (*Die Produktionsweise des materiellen Lebens*). In his interpretation of Marxian thought, Jon Elster understands Marx to be constructing a “filter model,” not positing a direct line of influence where members of some ruling class hand-pick each singular intellectual notion. Instead, more fluid forms of support or acquiescence serve to “filter” content, to sort through ideas and privilege the most amenable forms of thought. Elster stresses that ideas are also filtered at a micro-foundational level, where individuals themselves make rational choices based on their need to survive in a market economy (Elster 1986, 470–76). While many people may elect for dissent, there are powerful tendencies against radically controversial ideas—after all, attacking capitalism is not the easiest way to make a living.

Marx took an interest in superstructural entities because they exemplify processes of idea formation. The State, for example, maintains laws that affirm or otherwise support capitalist activity (e.g., property laws), and it also provides other forms of material support to industry. As a result, law and policy have tendencies toward capitalist functionalism. Similarly, non-profit educational institutions maintain close relationships with the for-profit sphere. Many even depend on industry funding, which is given in support of patents or technologies that will subsequently be applied in for-profit production. Even civil society non-profits such as professional associations or industry auxiliaries have a functional character vis-à-vis the market, as they provide support for industry and in turn rely on industry for membership or other forms of financial support.



Marx also considered less obviously purposive forms of social consciousness, citing religion, philosophy, and art as examples. In the case of the arts, there are many examples of filtration, whether seen in the patronage systems of wealthy donors who support elite arts institutions or even instances such as when the CIA offered material support to certain artists as an antidote against communism (Saunders 1995). However, there are also more indirect forms of filtration. It is understandable, for example, that Marxism has tended to remain relatively marginal in the education systems of capitalist societies. In the U.S., for example, there were not only formal restrictions and political blacklists (e.g., the Red Scare during the Cold War) but also looser filtration processes where writers who affirm the free market receive strong degrees of funding and mainstream acceptance.

Ultimately, Marxian thinking allows us to articulate the complex intertwinement between market, public, and civic institutions—exactly the animating purpose of Marx’s theory of base and superstructure. In addition, this theory lends itself to a concrete, empirical form of analysis, not a mechanistic model whereby each singular idea is directly selected for by a capitalist class. We can explore cases of influence and develop more detailed models of the relationship between sectors, asking about the precise ways and the extent to which ideas are (or are not) conditioned by the mode of production. Still, Marx also left space for dissent, whether seen at the micro-foundational level of choice or at the social level, since the advanced division of labor created spaces for more radical forms of thinking.

## Ideology

Marx and Engels dedicated the most energy to diagnosing a particular form of social consciousness, ideology (*Ideologie*). This term was never presented as an umbrella term for Marxian critical theories of ideation as a whole, but rather represented a specific critique of intellectuals, the “ideologists” of the day.

The term ideology was used at several moments in Marx and Engels’ career, but the most definitive statement on the concept is found in *The German Ideology*. At the outset, it is worth bearing in mind that the book commonly known as *The German Ideology* was not created or even conceived of as a unified monograph by Marx or Engels. This widely read text was only later assembled from manuscripts drafted by the pair during the 1840s. Engels returned to these sources while going through Marx’s papers following the latter’s death in 1883, and they were not published as a

single book until 1932. Most strikingly, the influential first part, “I. Feuerbach,” is a construction—the section was compiled from highly incomplete manuscripts by editors, and it bears little resemblance to the documents that the authors themselves produced. For this reason, the editors of the 2017 volume for the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA<sup>2</sup> volume I/5) proclaim that an “integral or even fragmentary work ‘The German Ideology’ from the pen of Marx and Engels does not exist” (In Marx and Engels 2017, 125–26).

Despite this context, ideology is one of the most consistent and thoroughly developed terms found in the manuscripts. It is also one with a long history. Originally, the concept was coined by the French Enlightenment intellectual Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy. In its first connotation, the ideologists were a group of intellectuals, not believers of false ideas per se (Drucker 1972, 152–53). Marx and Engels retained the sense of ideologists as denoting a specific group of people. However, their account introduces two novel elements to ideology: 1) ideology is a *vocation*, a trade as well as a calling for a particular class of workers; 2) ideology is an *idealism*, a specific form of thought produced by ideologists.

Marx and Engels’ vocational critique regarded the ideologists as part of the classes that arose as a “consequence of division of labor,” a social structure that separates production from circulation, commerce, finance, state administration, education, and other socially necessary functions (Marx and Engels 1975, 5:447). The term vocation refers to a person’s real job, their profession, but also to a sense of calling or dedication to one’s work. For the two authors, the ideologist occupies a specific intellectual trade and embodies the values of this career path.

Throughout *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels diagnose several ideological professions. In the aborted drafts of “I. Feuerbach,” for example, Marx’s annotations point to the clergy, reading, “the first form of ideology. Priests.” He also identifies religion as an original form of ideology, branding it “ideology as such” (in Carver and Blank 2014, 79, 80 [original emphases]). Similarly, the “Saint Max” section points toward the example of a lawyer as “an ideologist of private property” (Marx and Engels 1975, 5:230). Additional comments focus on politicians, “petty bourgeois dreamers,” the “dancer,” and the “prominent physician” (Marx and Engels 1975, 5:355, 372, 392). Above all, Marx and Engels target Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner, and Ludwig Feuerbach, ideologists par excellence: intellectuals who were outspoken social critics as well as professional teachers and/or writers.

In the manuscripts that were eventually published as *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx would define this class of people as *unproductive labor*. There, Marx referred to the “flunkeys, the soldiers, sailors, police, lower officials and so on, mistresses, grooms, clowns, and jugglers” as well as intellectuals, “ill-paid artists, musicians, lawyers, physicians, scholars, schoolmasters, inventors, etc.” (Marx and Engels 1975, 112–13). The association of unproductive labor with ideology would be cemented in Volume 1 of *Capital*, where Marx identified “ideological groups” (*die ‘ideologischen’ Stände*) such as government officials, priests, lawyers, and soldiers; he further branded the political economist as the capitalist’s “ideologist” (Marx 1976, 1:574; 718).

Marx’s theory of unproductive labor was derived from his analysis of class relations, the division of labor, and the creation/realization of surplus value—it was not a means of differentiating forms of work in terms of characteristics such as their relative mental or physical character. Not until *Capital* would we see Marx’s full analysis of social sectors such as industry, commerce, finance, and agriculture, where he explained that “use-value on the social scale” guided the differentiation of spheres and the distribution of “the quota of total social labour-time that falls to the share of the various particular spheres of production” (Marx 1981, 3:774). Even so, as early as *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels revealed their familiarity with Adam Smith’s discussion of unproductive labor (Marx and Engels 1975, 5:392, footnote b). Marx also underscored this critique in an annotation to the manuscripts, noting that capitalism absorbs “the branches of labor belonging directly to the state, then all [more or less] ideological professions” (in Carver and Blank 2014, 294).

Marx and Engels’ second major argument is that ideology has a particular character as a form of idealist thought. In Marxian thinking, *idealism* represented the belief that human consciousness or subjectivity, construed through abstractions such as Spirit or Thought, formed the primary driving force of human social life. In the context of ideology, Marx and Engels saw the ideologists as believing that their intellectual work was the engine of socio-politics. The two authors make the link between vocation and ideology explicit in a passage from the section on Max Stirner, who explicitly held that intellectual work was a “vocation”:

[T]he conditions of existence of the ruling class (as determined by the preceding development of production), ideally expressed in law, morality, etc., to which [conditions] the ideologists of that class more or less consciously give a sort of theoretical independence; they can be conceived by separate individuals

of that class as vocation, etc., and are held up as a standard of life to the individuals of the oppressed class, partly as an embellishment or recognition of domination, partly as a moral means for this domination. It is to be noted here, as in general with ideologists, that they inevitably put the thing upside-down and regard their ideology both as the creative force and as the aim of all social relations, whereas it is only an expression and symptom of these relations. (Marx and Engels 1975, 5:420 [emphasis original])

Here, Marx and Engels underscore the idealist character of ideology. The ideologists give a “theoretical independence” to their disciplines, allowing law, morality, or other topics to become ends unto themselves. This view followed from the ideologists’ position within the division of labor. Given their unique role (as administrators, technical specialists, etc.), the ideologists are isolated from the masses and come to view social and political needs through their professional concerns. For this reason, the jurist might understand social progress in terms of legality, the theologian in terms of spirituality, or the intellectual in terms of philosophy. Consequentially, these vocations are held up as the “creative force and as the aim of all social relations,” the diagnosis as well as the cure for what ails modern society.

To Marx and Engels, the emphasis on ideas—the assumption that what the world needs is a better philosophy or a more righteous form of spirituality—results in the “illusions of philosophy, the ideological, speculative expression of reality divorced from its empirical basis” (Marx and Engels 1975, 5:282). The effects of this assumption were best seen in the views of Stirner, who came to believe that “the wholesale manufacturers of these ideas, i.e., the ideologists, have dominated the world” (Marx and Engels 1975, 5:420).

Ultimately, Marx and Engels’ theory of ideology focused on a specific form of thinking. They critique a class of intellectuals (ideologists) who produce a form of social analysis (ideology). They do not suggest that all ideas are ideology, nor that ideology itself is without any merit. *Capital* in particular reflects Marx’s deep admiration of philosophers such as Hegel and political economists such as Ricardo, who each provided insights about the nature of human society. Still, the implication of the Marxian critique is powerful and clear: idealism was, as Ilyenkov terms it, “partial” and “unelaborated” (Levant and Oittinen 2014, 62). Further, a new form of analysis was required. In this sense, Marx and Engels leverage critique to demonstrate their alternative, a scientific form of thought that could understand capitalism as a more dynamic social totality.

## False Consciousness

After ideology, false consciousness (*falschen Bewusstsein*) is Marx's best-known concept of ideation. However, it received even less attention from Marx and Engels than previously reviewed terms. In fact, this phrase was not even used during Marx's lifetime. It was Engels who first coined the notion in the 1893, a period where he was busy editing and publicly articulating Marxian ideas. His contributions to this concept serve two major purposes: 1) to theorize the causal relationship between ideology and economics; 2) to emphasize the role of contingency and historical flux in this relationship.

As with other ideation concepts, some writers centralize false consciousness in their interpretations of Marxian critique, arguing that Marx and Engels' theory is ultimately a theory of false consciousness (Acton 1951; Pines 1993). Other writers have challenged this interpretation or have emphasized that the ideational theories of Marx and Engels are not reducible to this idea alone (McCarney 1980; Larrain 1983). Textually, at least, false consciousness did not appear in the majority of Marx and Engels works. Further, Engels himself underscored the novelty of his own position in the letter, admitting that he and Marx neglected to address the concept in their earlier work (Marx and Engels 1975, 50:164, 165).

Following Marx's death, Engels came to occupy roles as an intellectual leader of the European social democratic movement and the principal interpreter of Marxian ideas. He particularly labored over Marx's economic manuscripts, working for eight to ten hours per day on Volume 2 of *Capital*. Additionally, he took an entire decade to complete Volume 3 (Howard and King 1989). Even so, Engels also worked to develop his own thinking, writing prefaces to earlier writings, sending letters that clarified Marxian ideas, and producing texts about several topics.

Engels used the phrase "false consciousness" in a July 14, 1893, letter to Franz Mehring, a prominent German socialist and curator of Marxism in his own right. In the letter, Engels explained that he and Marx did not fully clarify their theory of ideology. As a corrective to this omission, Engels explained:

Ideology is a process which is, it is true, carried out consciously by what we call a thinker, but with a false consciousness. The actual motives by which he is impelled remain hidden from him, for otherwise it would not be an ideological process. Hence the motives he supposes himself to have are either spurious or illusory. Because it is a mental process, he sees both its substance and its form

as deriving solely from thought—either his own or that of his predecessors. He works solely with conceptual material which he automatically assumes to have been engendered by thought without inquiring whether it might not have some more remote origin unconnected therewith; indeed, he takes this for granted since, to him, all action is *induced* by thought, and therefore in the final analysis, to be *motivated*, by thought. (Marx and Engels 1975, 50:164 [translation modified; emphases original])

Here, Engels reaffirms the earlier Marxian critique of idealism, pointing toward the ideologists who come to believe that “all action is *induced* by thought.” Newly, Engels adds that their “motives” are hidden from the ideologist.

As Christopher L. Pines interprets it, Engels is underscoring way that “human agents are unaware or ignorant of the motive force impelling their thoughts and actions” (Pines 1993, 2). Still, the 1893 letter says little about what these motives truly are. The strongest indication of how to interpret the passage occurs when Engels critically discusses Martin Luther, GWF Hegel, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith. There, Engels argues that these figures are guilty of idealism, something seen in Luther’s belief he had theologically overcome Catholicism or Hegel’s belief he had philosophically superseded Kant and Fichte.

Against this account, Engels implies that external historical-economic facts condition ideas, marking idealism as “the conceptual reflection of changed economic facts” (Marx and Engels 1975, 50:165). In his short 1886 book *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels provides a more extensive account of what he saw as the true foundation of ideology. Also addressing the notable achievements of intellectuals such as Hegel, Engels claims that ideas of the modern era were not pure intellectual discoveries. Rather, “what really pushed them forward most was the powerful and ever more rapidly onrushing progress of natural science and industry” (Marx and Engels 1975, 26:368).

Engels point is that intellectual currents such as the Protestant Reformation, rationalism, idealism, and materialism were made possible by the emergence of a new economic system. In the case of religion, for example, capitalism no longer required Christianity to maintain social order, as was true in the Middle Ages. Consequently, the bourgeoisie was free to maintain, challenge, or even overthrow religious traditions, since “it makes no difference whether these gentlemen themselves believe in their respective religions or not” (Marx and Engels 1975, 26:396).

While strongly asserting the role of economic factors in shaping ideas, Engels also argued for contingency in the course of history. There is a tendency to downplay the significance of Engels' contributions to Marxism, both during and after Marx's lifetime, frequently because of a belief that Engels' interest in the natural sciences marked him as a vulgarizer of Marx's otherwise more humanistic views (Gedik 2022). In fact, Engels had a strong interest in offsetting what he saw as the "mechanical" materialism of his era (Marx and Engels 1975, 26:370). Jorge Larrain explains that Engels' later works are centrally concerned with an intellectual landscape that was different from the one that shaped his and Marx's youth. A half-century after the death of Hegel, as the natural sciences dramatically asserted their power in industry, the dominance of idealism was in question. Hegelianism battled against a growing form of materialism, dominated by positivism and naturalism. While some people embraced the new materialism, Engels saw these trends as mere inversions of idealism, a belief that "mind itself is merely the highest product of matter" (Marx and Engels 1975, 26:370, 369).

Against these mechanical currents, Engels insists on a dialectical relationship between consciousness and material existence, seeing the "world as a process, as matter undergoing uninterrupted historical development" (Marx and Engels 1975, 26:370). He alludes to a similar theme in the 1893 letter, arguing that consciousness was determined by economic factors only within a dynamic historical process. As he writes, "an historical element, once it is ushered into the world by other, ultimately economic causes, will react in its turn, and may exert a reciprocal influence on its environment and even upon its own causes" (Marx and Engels 1975, 50:165).

Engels' understanding of false consciousness becomes clear when read against his broader thoughts about the role of historical contingency. He does present a more wide-reaching account of ideology than that of *The German Ideology*, now emphasizing that the economic and political circumstances of an age form part of the motives impelling the ideologist. In this sense, he expands the purview of the concept, which previously focused on the vocational aspects of intellectuals who play a role in the capitalist division of labor. By the time of the 1893 letter, ideas are more generally framed in relation to an historical epoch, defined by but not reducible to its mode of production.

However, Engels elevates contingency, emphasizing that the mode of production is mediated by history and individual agency. As a result, he

posits a less linear form of idea formation than the one implicit in *The German Ideology*, which lacked a robust mechanism to explain why unproductive laborers across several distinctive industries develop similar ideological views. In the 1893 letter, Engels shows that what marks ideas as “false” is precisely the way they obscure the relationship of ideation to an historical-economic epoch.

In the process, Engels does foreclose one thing: the presumption that intellectuals participate autonomously in an ideal sphere isolated from society at large. Still, he makes space for an alternative understanding, of a world in which ideas are fundamentally embedded in history and experience. For him, ideas emerge as documents of the economic transformations that define an epoch and testimonies of struggles by the working classes to better their lives. In thinking this way, Engels calls for a richer form of intellectual activity, rooted in a sense of historical purpose and motivated to advance the lives of all humans.

## Conclusion

Despite the lack of any definitive monograph on the topic of ideation, Marx and Engels’ critical work left behind a broad, flexible lexicon for theorizing social consciousness. Their interests bridged the conceptual and practical nature of human society, both reflexive forms of consciousness, such as academic forms of knowledge and political theories, and practical ways that people go about producing a way of life. Despite their wide range of concerns, these categories were reasonable in scope and precise in design. The two writers outlined various levels at which we might consider social ideas, but they also delimited forms of analysis that were proper (or improper) to specific degrees of abstraction.

Along the way, Marx and Engels revealed that relations of production participate in the realm of human ideas. Their portrait allows us to conceive of capitalism as a totality, both as an integrating form of socio-economic life and a dynamic, multifaceted system. More than merely restricting consciousness, the productive economy contributes to reflective activity in myriad ways. Capitalism shaped practical understanding, the ways that individuals interpreted and interacted with their environment. It also shaped institutions, which supply the material conditions under which intellectual life takes place.

Despite the sharpness of their perspective, Marx and Engels went beyond mere negative analysis. Their critique hints at an alternative vision,



indicating a powerful sense that human consciousness might reach greater heights. Their theory points toward a better form of life. As a result, the critique of ideation suggests the possibility of a truly free mode of social experience, where thought and practice alike would be given space to satisfy the whole of human needs.

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## Biography

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