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False Consciousness and the Socially Extended Mind

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Abstract: In this paper I present a problem for the Marxist idea of false consciousness, namely how it is vulnerable to accusations of dogmatism. I will argue that the concept must be further developed if it is to provide a plausible tool for systematic social analysis. In the second half of the paper I will show how this could be done if the account of false consciousness incorporates Shaun Gallagher's theory of the socially extended mind. This is a theory that explores how the mind expands towards external objects and systems. I will conclude that it helps to reinstate false consciousness as a reliable tool for the analysis of cognitive dynamics within power structures.

Keywords: False consciousness; social mind extension; enactive cognition; externalism; social analysis

Introduction

In this paper I will present a problem for the Marxist notion of “false consciousness”. This concept concerns the effects of ideology on individual consciousness, and particularly the ways in which human beings within a society incorporate and reproduce power structures that are not necessarily to their personal benefit. First, I show how false consciousness poses problems for its own systematic framework, and for presenting an account of cognition and knowledge as it actually manifests itself within a set of power structures. This issue must be resolved if false consciousness is to be retained as a useful tool for the analysis of the effect of material power structures on the individual mind. I then go on to briefly elaborate how a possible solution should be approached if false consciousness is to retain its value as a concept. In the final part of this paper, I develop my own solution based on this approach by elaborating on false consciousness as a concept in light of Shaun Gallagher's theory of the socially extended mind, which explores how the mind expands towards external objects and systems. I conclude that this elaboration of false consciousness is capable of presenting an account that fulfils the criteria for a successful solution to the problem stated at the beginning of this paper.¹

The Problem With False Consciousness

The Origin of False Consciousness

The idea of false consciousness emerged as a reply to Wilhelm Reich's puzzlement with the fact that people do not actively resist exploitation (1933, 53). Although this worry dates back to Plato (book V, 459c-d), it became of particular concern to post-Marxist theory, as capitalism seemed to persevere even in times of economic crisis, and the experiments of social change of the early 20th century turned out to be repressive

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rather than emancipatory (Benhabib 1994, 66). Marx never used the term “false consciousness” as such, but the idea is rooted in his materialist ontology (Eagleton 1991, 70). Marx argues that the material foundations of society, i.e. the available material goods, how they are distributed, and who they are controlled by, provide the foundation of social practice, and that social practice is crucial to idea formation. He rejects the thought that ideas exist over and above the material realm of human agency (Balibar 1995, 71). This inevitably means that ideas developed in a society serve to uphold the same power structure as the system of material distribution. Following on from this line of reasoning, the idea of false consciousness is concerned with how this feedback loop between idea production, belief systems and power structures affects individual minds (Marcuse 1964, 145). A belief is subject to false consciousness if, irrespective of the knowledge of the believer, it serves to uphold a specific distributional power structure which operates outside our direct control. As a result, the theory of false consciousness provides an answer to Reich’s question; people are not always in the epistemic position to directly perceive what is in their own interest, thus the exploited do not realise that it is the current system that represses them.

It is important to notice that for a belief to be an instance of false consciousness it does not *necessarily* need to be propositionally false; it is a sufficient condition that the beliefs are held because this would be instrumental for the reinforcement of a specific power structure, and that this is detached from the agent’s personal reasons for holding this belief. The truth condition of the proposition is irrelevant. Coincidentally, the content of the belief is more *likely* to be false as it is not purposefully formed from evidence about the world *as it is*. The dynamics by which we come to form beliefs pervasively follow the logic of structures that aim to reinforce themselves.

As an illustration, this does not necessarily mean that all forms of scientific discovery must be undermined *as such*, but Marx questions *why* some forms of research and not others are prioritised, *how* the findings of the research interrelates with a prevailing belief system, and *what* kind of function this belief system has within the power structures of society. For instance, the belief that milk is healthy might contain a true proposition, but one might question why we hold this belief specifically, instead of beliefs about other things with similar health benefits. If it turns out that we ultimately believe that milk is healthy because the dairy industry benefits from us holding this belief, this must be an instance of false consciousness. Moreover, whether we hold the belief on these grounds is largely obscure to us, due to our socially situated perspective as epistemic agents. This perspective is skewed by the fact that the very mechanism of idea production, the way we access evidence and form beliefs about the world, follows a specific power dynamic.

At this point it is important to notice that the person who is subject to false consciousness is not simply making epistemic mistakes, or is intrinsically less skilled at making sense of epistemic evidence. The distortion is externally imposed.

Moreover, false consciousness is not a case of intentional knowledge control instigated by the ruling classes, as is the case with propaganda. This is because false consciousness is a by-product of the fact that idea production is inseparable from physical production in a given society. If material production serves a hierarchy of unjust material distribution, so does idea production.

Issues with False Consciousness

However, false consciousness is not an unproblematic concept. It has been criticised for not recognising the actual complexity and multiplicity of culture and knowledge *within* societies where capitalism is the pervasive mode of distribution. It seems incommensurable with the existence of dissidence and the fragmentation of the actual political landscape (Eagleton 1991, xxi). It cannot explain the existence of political activism that aims to counteract the effects of a given power structure.

In the remainder of this essay I will therefore aim to refine the concept of false consciousness such that it manages to account for the actual diversity that takes place within a society, while explaining why people so often are complicit in their own exploitation and oppression. The aim is to do this within a Marxist framework, which provides a systematic account capable of explaining not only singular cases of deception, but also the broader social tendency. It is important to salvage the theory of false consciousness as a tool

for social analysis, as the dynamics it highlights have been repeatedly demonstrated in sociological studies. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu found that

there are many things people accept without knowing. [...] When you ask a sample of individuals what are the main social factors of achievement at school, the further you go down the social scale the more they believe in natural talents or gifts – the more they believe that those who are successful are naturally endowed with intellectual capacities. And the more they accept their own exclusion, the more they believe they are stupid (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1994, 269).

This account of class identity as mirrored in belief in innatism seems to fit the exact idea of what false consciousness is: a mechanism that unintentionally reinforces an existing social hierarchy at the level of ideas and self-understanding. This is not a case of false consciousness *merely* because the belief at hand is factually false, but because it shows how belief changes with social perspective in a way that serves to uphold the existing power structure, irrespective of the truth condition of the belief at hand. The concept of false consciousness should therefore not be discarded as a whole; rather what is needed in order to answer the critics is a more fine-grained conception of its mechanisms. In this light, the Marxist account of idea production must be further developed.

Praxis as grounding Justified Beliefs

Given that false consciousness is a belief held for the purpose of reinforcing a given power structure, it is necessary to discuss the account of *right* grounds for knowledge that follows from this view. How are beliefs produced in a way that reflects how the world actually unfolds itself for us?

Marx's materialism is at the core of his account of how the external world should be understood to impact knowledge acquisition, and it explains how idea production parallels material production. Refuting Hegel's idealism, Marx argues that everything is essentially material, meaning that the ontologically foundational is not the idea, but the subject having the idea (Marx 1843, pt.2a). This subject is a foundationally material being that acquires knowledge about the external world through its existence at the level of objects. This does not mean that subjectivity itself is essentially material, but that it supervenes on the physical world (Marx 1845, 144). An account of adequate knowledge is therefore found in the Marxist concept of *praxis*, namely the unification of theory and practice. Theory is to be understood as any belief informing the decision about which action to perform. Practice is the action itself. Only beliefs informed by a practice are appropriately justified (Marx 1844: ch. 6, XXIII). The concept of praxis is thus founded on the idea that human beings in equal part mould and are moulded by the external world. This is what allows propositions about the external world to have meaning in a way that reflects the way the world is for us. The mechanisms behind false consciousness are based on an inadequate connection between theory and practice. In false consciousness, beliefs are held in order to prompt a desired action, namely actions that comply with and reinforce a material power structure. False consciousness is therefore the reverse of appropriate knowledge acquisition, which is the formation of a belief based on the grounds of autonomous activity.

The implication of such a conception of knowledge in a capitalist system, where labour division is the key to economic efficiency, is that the working classes are effectively expelled from the realm of general knowledge by only being allowed to take part in minute operations of the production of the whole product. Their epistemic perspective is physically restricted. This is what Marx calls alienation from the means of production (Blunden 1999, A1). Moreover, false consciousness will be perpetuated in any society that distinguishes between manual and mental labour, as theory and practice are efficiently kept apart (Marx and Engels 1846, 72). Religious, legal and bureaucratic institutions are at the centre of this mental production as well as being founded on the pre-existing set of material power structures (Marx 1846, 4).

- The issue at hand is therefore how a theory of false consciousness is compatible with how we
- i. account for the fragmentation of epistemic stances within social groups subject to the same power dynamics, and thus
 - ii. also account for activism towards social change that aims to counteract the material dynamics of capitalist society.

False Consciousness From the Perspective of Philosophy of Mind

Requirements for a Solution

A more nuanced account of the role that external power structures play in individual idea production, and how this individual idea production helps reinforce these external power structures, is required in order to resolve the above issue. Moreover, this solution must explain how false consciousness is not merely imposed on the individual, but automatically endorsed upon encounters with the external world. This must be investigated if the pervasiveness and efficacy of the concept is to be accounted for. Finally, although false consciousness is to come from within the subject itself, a solution must show how this is not inherent to human epistemic abilities and access to self-knowledge, such that emancipation can be accounted for as genuinely possible.

I will examine whether a framework from philosophy of mind could provide an additional structure that accommodates all these requirements, as it considers the same explanatory gap between mind and world as the theory of false consciousness. While false consciousness focuses on the ways in which the world imposes itself on to the mind, philosophy of mind is preoccupied with how the mind relates to the world. Although these are two different domains of philosophical discourse, it is not problematic to say that they concern the same relation as seen from different perspectives, and can therefore inform each other. This provides me with the tools to examine the idea of false consciousness both on the grand (political) scale where ideology is produced, and the implication of ideology on the smaller scale of individual minds. This will allow me to pinpoint the level of cognition at which false consciousness operates, to what extent it is a necessary part of the human psyche, and what impact it could have on epistemic capacities and self-knowledge.

The kind of theory within philosophy of mind that could sufficiently refine the concept of false consciousness would be a theory that accounts for the ways the external world plays a role in determining mental states, and how these mental states again could serve the purpose of reinforcing external power structures. Traditional externalism about mental content, functional mind extension, and enactive mind extension are all views that could fit this description. I will show that only enactive mind extension is capable of providing a sufficiently fine-grained account of false consciousness such that multiplicity and political counterculture could be accounted for.

Content Externalism

Content externalism aims to show how external, environmental factors directly determine our mental content. Hilary Putnam's "Twin Earth" example demonstrates this. He imagines earth and the planet twin earth, which are identical in most respects, including language. The major differences in linguistic meaning depend on the material peculiarities of the planets themselves. For instance, what is referred to as water is identical in appearance on both planets, but consists of H₂O molecules on earth, and an XYZ molecular structure on twin earth. The molecular structure of water is not generally known in either place. Thus, when people speak of water it is irrelevant whether they know about the relevant molecular structure. Irrespective of this, Putnam argues that when two psychologically identical people, one on each planet, talk about water, they talk about essentially different things. The meaning of water as it functions in our mental content is entirely contingent on what "water" essentially is. This has nothing to do with the epistemic status of the speaker of the word (Putnam 1975, 584).

Moreover, meaning is *socially* contingent, and depends on the division of linguistic labour within a society where some people are scientists and decide the meaning of things like water, gold, beech or arthritis, whereas other people merely need to refer back to these definitions in order for their words to have meaning. This is why it is possible for a person to talk meaningfully about water without knowing what water *essentially* means. It is the social environment, not internal cognitive structures or experiences, which determines the meaning of any given proposition (Burge 1979, 600).

Externalism is therefore capable of giving some account of false consciousness based on this theory of content production. The linguistic division of labour could be such that meaning is generally dictated to suit a specific power structure. This means that all beliefs would be formed on false grounds, since all meaning serves to reinforce this structure. It therefore explains how our beliefs become instances of false consciousness without being consciously created this way, as the agent's intentions do not affect the way words acquire meaning. Bourdieu's example of belief in innatism can be analysed on these terms; being far down on the socio-economic scale is *defined* as equivalent to being less talented on this account. The meaning of the belief has been created in order to make people compliant to the existing social order.

However, there are several problems with this version of false consciousness. First, content externalism would enforce that the belief in the correspondence between social position and innate abilities would be accepted overall in the linguistic community, since this is the meaning to which "lower social standing" is generally attributed. This is not the case according to Bourdieu's study; the belief in this correspondence was only held at the lower socio-economic levels of a society. Secondly, externalism does not account for false consciousness in terms of general power structures, but in a deliberate dissemination of false consciousness by agents who control the determination of meaning within a society. Thus false consciousness bears closer resemblance to a propaganda mechanism than a default by-product of a given material power structure. Thirdly, content externalism does not provide an inadequate extension of the theory of false consciousness, as it is too crude to explain how belief could ever be accessible on the *right* grounds. I therefore reject content externalism as a plausible extension of the theory of false consciousness. I will therefore look towards theories that claim that not only meaning, but the mind itself, is determined outside the confines of the brain.

The Extended Mind

Such an account is mainly attributed Andy Clark and David Chalmers, who famously claim that in certain interactions with the external world "the human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right" (Clark & Chalmers 1998, 8). The essence of this argument is summed up by what Clark and Chalmers call the parity principle. If a process in the world works in a way that we would count as a cognitive process if it happened in the head, this external process should also count as a cognitive process (Clark & Chalmers 2002, 644). This principle is illustrated through the example of Inga who has normal mental capacities and Otto who has severe Alzheimer's disease but writes down all the things he knows and learns in a notebook. For Otto, the notebook serves as an external memory, responsible for founding beliefs which he may or may not choose to act upon, in much the same way as the latent memory stored in a mind like Inga's. When Otto and Inga both want to go to the Museum of Modern Art, their cognitive processes seem identical, with the single difference that Otto consults his notebook in order to know how to get from A to B, whereas Inga retrieves the same information from memory (Clark and Chalmers 2002, 647). They should therefore be treated as the same cognitive process.

With the extended mind view, cognition can happen in a way such that the external becomes a part of this cognitive process. This means that it is possible for the individual agent to produce beliefs by incorporating external factors in the cognitive process, such that these beliefs still have the same status as beliefs that the individual would form without any external influence whatsoever.

It is here possible to account for false consciousness as a result of this direct coupling with the external world. If the parity principle holds, this means that belief can be produced through the coupling of the mind not only with innocuous objects which do not alter the content of the belief itself, which is the case with the notebook, beliefs could also couple with external ideological structures. The coupling of internal and external structures means that the external structures could guide idea production such that the ideas produced could be made to reinforce a given power structure. Bourdieu's example can thus be explained through the coupling of the individual's cognitive structures with external power structures, for instance, the coupling with various social norms and institutions that function as cornerstones of a given social structure. The belief of the individual would depend on the social structures encountered.

However, this account of false consciousness is yet too vague to provide a sufficient elaboration of false consciousness. A further specification can be developed based on the responses given to a worry about the extended mind view raised by Rob Rupert. The worry, known as the “cognitive bloat”, accuses extended mind theories of inflating the mental to the border of the insignificant (2004). Cognition could happen so far from the individual mind that it seems absurd to talk about these cognitive processes actually adhering to any specific mind. This is a worry that must be addressed by advocates of the extended mind view. If all cognition at all times could be a part of an external structure and happen at a level remote from the individual agency that it couples with, it becomes difficult to discern how emancipation from false consciousness could come from within any individual agent. It leads to a view of individuals as just a part of a larger cognitive network where individual agency is reduced, to the extent that it threatens any possibility of emancipation from this social structure.

A solution to the cognitive bloat must therefore be to qualify how extension to the external world could only happen if there is a way the individual holds a sense of ownership over this extension. There are two alternative accounts that fill this condition; Andy Clark’s functional vehicle view and Shaun Gallagher’s enactive view. I will examine both, and conclude that only Gallagher’s enactive view is capable of presenting a potential solution to the issue at hand.

The Functional Vehicle View

Andy Clark’s functional vehicle view presents four restrictions to the original extended mind thesis. The mind can only extend to external objects if it is reliably invoked, automatically endorsed, accessible when required, and has been consciously endorsed in the past (Clark 2008, 79). Thus the mind can only extend to vehicles of belief, since this is the sole aspect of the mind that fits all the criteria. A vehicle is a material object that plays a role in enabling a system to have a mental state. It could be any kind of internal or external function (Clark 2008, 76).

The mind therefore cannot extend its own structures to external ideological structures because a structure cannot be consciously endorsed. Otto’s notebook, on the other hand, is such a vehicle, since it is reliably invoked and accessible when required (he carries it with him at all times), while being automatically endorsed because he knows that at some point, he personally acquired these beliefs. With this view, *belief* is not produced through coupling with the external world, rather the external plays the role solely as a vehicle for already existent cognitive content.

This leads to a problem for an account of false consciousness in terms of mind extension. Since the mind only extends to vehicles, it simply does not account for the production of belief at all, leaving it incapable to account for the mechanisms behind false consciousness. The only way in which false consciousness could be explained on this view would be through the distribution of vehicles within a given material power structure. This could for instance lead to a lack of access to research equipment, or a lack of notebooks for people with memory loss for that matter, meaning that access to certain types of belief would be restricted. But this would only diminish the set of possible beliefs in a society; it would not account for whether and when the beliefs actually held are instances of false consciousness.

The Enactively Extended Mind

Shaun Gallagher’s enactive view of the extended mind incorporates the foundation of Clark and Chalmers’ original extended mind view, namely the parity principle. Gallagher claims that if this principle is the foundation of the extended mind view, the restriction of the theory to vehicles only must be *ad hoc* (Gallagher 2013, 2). Vehicles are only a subset of all cognitive structures that would work on the parity principle, meaning that a restriction of the extended mind to the vehicle view would exclude possible cognitive coupling with external structures that *must* be invoked for central concepts in a society to acquire meaning. This is altogether counterintuitive, granted the acceptance of the parity principle.

To illustrate his point, Gallagher introduces the example of the legal system, which is what he calls a “mental institution”. It can be argued that such institutions could play a similar role in cognition to, for instance, a calculator, which is generally accepted on Clark and Chalmers’ view. When engaging with the legal system it provides external structures that take the role of cognitive structures, shaping how to think about a subject. When the mind extends to the legal system, it extends to a whole set of rigid social practices and norms, encompassing books, buildings, behaviour, people, and a network of specific cognitive procedures. When engaging with a legal issue, there is simply no way that it can be understood in cognition without the use of the structures provided by a specific legal system in a specific society.

Aiming to retain the force of the parity principle, Gallagher therefore introduces a different kind of restriction to his theory as a response to the cognitive bloat. For cognition to truly belong to an individual it is necessary to look at the *mechanisms* of the given account of ownership. As a result, Gallagher adapts a Lockean theory of ownership through labour as a restriction as to when and how the individual mind extends. Although Locke’s account originally is a theory of physical labour, Gallagher understands idea production as the kind of labour that would be applicable (Gallagher 2013, 7). The Lockean theory of labour states that when a person X is mixing his labour with an external object in order to transform it, the object transformed by X’s labour becomes a part of X’s property (Locke 1690, §27). The mind therefore only extends to the external world if it is *actively* engaged with the individual’s production of ideas. The cognition happening outside the individual’s head only truly belongs to the individual if mental labour is applied in order to produce ideas. For example, the mind only extends to the legal system in cases where legal structures play a role in the formation of a new idea.

If someone stole my bike, my mind would extend to the legal system insofar as I would create the idea of *theft* in relation to my acknowledging that someone else took my bike without my consent. This idea of theft has meaning in virtue of instigating the appropriate set of behaviours that the concept entails: reporting to the police; instigating an official investigation; and a trial against the thief, eventually resulting in fines or imprisonment. In a society without a legal system, the fact that my bike was taken without consent does not mean anything other than just that. The concept of theft does not have any specific meaning because it does not entail an appropriate set of behaviours that it could instigate. This illustrates Gallagher’s argument that certain concepts would be meaningless if they did not invoke these cognitive external structures.

Therefore, for the Lockean theory of ownership to be united with a theory of mind extension, Gallagher suggests that the parity principle should not hold functionally, but enactively (Gallagher 2013, 2). Enactive knowledge is knowledge acquired through action, and is therefore shaped by the external and internal structures that guide this action (Wilson & Foglia 2011). Consequently, as with the example of bike theft, when the mind extends to the external world, the external world becomes a part of our cognitive structures that shape how the external world is engaged with, and therefore also the ideas produced as a result of this engagement. A belief therefore acquires meaning from the actions that shaped it, and the actions it could lead to, as resonated in the concept of *praxis*.

Enactive Mind Extension and False Consciousness

It is here possible to show how enactive mind extension could provide an elaboration of false consciousness. The organisation of the external world provides structures that the mind could couple with, and therefore guides both action and production of new ideas. Since all external structures are restrictive in some sense, they delineate both the active space of the agent, and consequently the enactive space of cognition. Moreover, actively coupling with external structures when producing ideas means that these structures control idea production directly. In virtue of this, the structures are enabled to take part in idea production for the sake of instigating actions that comply with these structures. Since the ideas produced will only have meaning based on the set of actions they result in, this account also provides an idea of how false consciousness directly reinforces a given social hierarchy.

Bourdieu’s example of a belief in innatism as an instance of false consciousness can here be explained along similar lines to the broader account of the extended mind and false consciousness as given before

the introduction of cognitive bloat as a worry, while allowing for physical restriction itself (through lack of resources) to play a role in the given epistemic space of a social group.

This is a subset of classic false consciousness commitment claiming that liberal society prompts us to believe that opportunity is available to anyone who tries hard enough, and that any failure is the fault of the individual. Other such commitments that have been attributed to a liberal outlook can also easily be accounted for by the enactivist. For instance, the belief that capitalism is a natural force can be explained by the fact that we engage with social structures that treat capitalism *as if* it was a natural force that should be left entirely to its own dynamic development. The way we engage with social and material objects form the beliefs we hold about them. Often, these beliefs are held on the wrong grounds simply because we are unclear about the origin of this behaviour. Although capitalism is man-made, once it is given priority over other forms of social organization, the mere fact that it is deregulated makes us relate to it in our agencies *as if* it was a natural force. In return, the belief that capitalism is a natural force reinforces our treatment of it as if it was one. The enactivist account thus perfectly coheres with the Marxist concept of praxis as virtuous belief formation; our belief in capitalism as a natural force is held in order to prompt a desired action. It is not a belief formed on the basis of autonomous agency. It is therefore held on the wrong grounds, and must be a case of false consciousness.

Another important feature of the enactivist account is that it provides a general theory of human cognition, while also accounting for how this cognition can be manipulated in virtue of its own faculties. For this theory to be able to produce a plausible conceptual extension of false consciousness, it is important to remember that all ideological structures are structures that could prompt enactive mind extension, whereas not all structures that could be coupled with enactively are necessarily ideological. This means that enactive mind extension as an account of human cognition is not a problem for false consciousness *per se* – the problem exists at the level of unfavourable, external power structures. This account therefore addresses the crux of false consciousness, which should not be seen as an account of how ideology forces itself on people, but “how can there be an animal which represses itself” (Brown 1959, 9).

The enactive mind view is thus the most apt elaboration of the theory of false consciousness, as it provides a specific account of how and when extension towards the external world could result in a case of false consciousness. The mind couples with external structures insofar as they provide a way to act and behave, and belief is based on this. For instance, in the case of building a fence, the mind does not extend to the fence insofar as it is a fence, although it *could* extend to the process of building a fence insofar as its function; how and where it is built, comply to a specific social practice or norm (Gallagher 2013, 8). Therefore, every aspect of the external world can stand in relation to a given social power structure, and all such norms and conditions can become part of the individual mind through the practices that they dictate.

As a result, this account of false consciousness is strong enough to sufficiently account for the pervasiveness of the concept. However, does this entail that the possibility for emancipation must be excluded? It seems intuitively desirable to assert that beliefs that invoke the legal system *must* result in cases of false consciousness, in virtue of its nature as a social institution, and therefore as the centre of ideological production as defined by Marx. Moreover, it also seems desirable to distinguish this kind of false consciousness from the false consciousness that *could* result from the process of building a fence. How can the extended mind theory provide a differentiation between these cases, and does this provide an apt explanation of political dissent?

The Solution

The Range of False Consciousness

Based on the desired distinction between false consciousness as the necessary result of mind extending to institutions, and the false consciousness that possibly arises from the process of building a fence, it seems appropriate to introduce a scale from non-ideological idea production to strict ideological idea production where the ideas created gain meaning because they instigate a specific action.

The clearest distinction between the process of building a fence and the process of engaging with the legal system is how they relate to the production of meaning. Whereas Gallagher argues that words like “theft” would be meaningless if they did not refer to the various social practices that were entailed by the word, the same would not be the case for concepts such as “fence”. A fence constructed without regards to specific social norms could still meaningfully be a fence. Although most fences stand in a clear relation to the society they were built in, such as garden fences, which primarily serve as a symbolic delineation of property, this does not mean that “fence” as a concept would be meaningless to a hermit who builds a fence around her shelter in order to keep wild animals from coming in. However, on this account, “fence” only has meaning *as it is created by, and organises someone’s agency*. This is what makes the difference between “fence” and a random stack of rocks to the hermit, and this is also why merely decorative garden fences have a specific meaning to us, according to Gallagher. They play a role in how we understand, organise and structure our lives, be it practically or symbolically.

“Theft”, on the other hand, would be a meaningless concept to this hermit, since it will not invoke any specific action or behaviour outside a given social structure. This example illustrates a crucial distinction between necessary production of false consciousness and at least a possible access to meaning outside the social hierarchy. Given an enactive account of meaning as dependent on the actions a belief invokes, this distinction can be explored further.

The external cognitive structures that the mind couples with dictate the way in which the external world gains meaning, in virtue of shaping how the external world is engaged with. This also means that autonomous agency must be agency where internal cognitive structures are not completely dominated by the external structures that the mind couples with. For instance, mind extension towards the legal system does not allow for autonomous belief formation, because the legal structures are not open to alternative cognitive processes. On the other hand, the process of building a fence would only produce false consciousness insofar as the social norm is followed and reinforced. Obviously, the political significance of this belief formation might be minimal, and it is also possible to be fully aware of the fact that one is following the social norm for the sake of following the social norm, and still happily comply with it. This is not the issue at stake. The significant point, as stated in the example about the hermit, is that it is *possible* to develop a belief about fences without any reference to the socially normative, solely through the mere action of building one, while also retaining the account of enactive belief formation in conjunction with the theory of false consciousness.

The key question is therefore whether it is possible for an agent within a society to actually divorce a practice from a social norm, such that belief could be formed autonomously. It follows that I will need to explore how and when belief production that is not *necessarily* tied to external power structures could be cases of genuine belief, and contrast this with the strong case where meaning is necessarily given by such a power structure.

False Consciousness and Context Dependency

A weaker sense of false consciousness would be instances of idea production that generate meaning that does not *in all possible contexts* reinforce the ideological structure. Whether false consciousness is generated in the process of building a fence is contingent on social norms and situations. This contingency, present in the weaker sense of false consciousness, is context dependent. Some context dependency also exists in the strong sense of false consciousness, where the production of meaning itself is contingent on the kind of society it takes place in, but the weak account also allows for meaning to be context dependent *within* a society. The strictness of some social norms can depend on such small-scale contexts. For instance, the structure that leads to idea production in a family setting might lead to the production of ideas for the sake of the idea, and not for the sake of reinforcing either the familial structure, or a larger social hierarchy. The meaning of “fence” in a children’s game might not lead to agency that reinforces ideological structures.

However, although the weak case allows us to hold beliefs for the right reasons, it does not explain our epistemic access to whether our ideas are held for these reasons. It might not be clear to us whether the

children's game reflects already existing social dynamics, and thus serves to reinforce these. Therefore, although this discussion of meaning provides an answer to *when* belief can be founded on the right grounds, it does not account for whether this allows for emancipation through access to genuine belief, since knowledge about this genuineness is largely inaccessible to the agent.

In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to deduce cases of enactive idea formation where the subject knowingly holds the produced belief on the right grounds. For instance, one such belief could be "I believe it is nice to sit in the cool shade of the tree in my garden". This is a belief that has been acquired enactively through the action of sitting under a tree in a garden, and it is a belief that also prompts further actions, like repeated sitting under the tree in the garden. It is a belief that suits only my personal tastes, and has been acquired for no specific reason other than that it is a place for me to sit. The fact that I have a garden, or the fact that I have a tree in it might be embedded in a row of social norms, but my belief about what it is *like* to sit under this tree is entirely subjective. It might be in someone's interest that people generally like to sit under shady trees in gardens, but my belief about my preferences for sitting under the tree in my garden can only have come about through the fact that I sat under the tree in the garden and realised that I liked it. This cannot be a case of false consciousness because it is a belief about the external world acquired through action, not a belief about the external world that is acquired *for the sake of* prompting this action.

This is a particularly isolated case, and might not in itself lead to a realisation about the unfairness of a social structure and therefore a desire and will for emancipation. However, such beliefs can create a building block for alternative enactive structures that are developed for no particular reason other than for the sake of the beliefs themselves. For instance, I might meet another person that has the same belief about the comfort of sitting in the shade of a tree in the garden. Based on this mutual interest we might be able to create a small social context founded on this appreciation and nothing else.

Through this social context, other norms and codes might arise as a result of our beliefs about the external world and the role it plays within this context. The beliefs that arise from this context are beliefs that *could* serve as instances of false consciousness, but not necessarily so. Despite this possibility, since these beliefs arise through the enactive structures of this smaller context, they hold no specific purpose. Moreover, the subject that holds this belief is aware of the fact that this belief is held on the right grounds, because the subject is aware that the context that gave rise to this belief was developed entirely from appropriately justified belief such as the belief about the pleasantness of sitting in the cool shade of a tree.

It is here possible to imagine that the budding alternative social structures that arise from this context could eventually be the source of enactively developed ideas critical to the larger power structures of a society. In their shared experience, the small community of tree lovers might, for instance, develop social values different to the ones they would have held had they merely been part of a larger community with a different kind of social hierarchy.

False Consciousness Sufficiently Elaborated

The possibility of knowingly creating small pockets of alternative contexts, founded on appropriately justified basic beliefs *within* a larger social power structure, could lead to idea production that within this context would not be a case of false consciousness such that this would be knowable to the subject that produced these ideas. This possibility is therefore capable of providing a solution to the issues at hand, as the enactive extended mind view provides an account of false consciousness as being pervasive and strict, at the same time as it creates a window for political counterculture.

This window is nevertheless small, as any closed social context embedded within a larger society will bear traces of these overarching power structures. To intentionally create a vacuum from the beliefs acquired and held in society in general seems in itself like an unlikely feat. Nevertheless, the aim at this point is merely to show how the possibility of emancipation does not have to be altogether excluded. Moreover, the existence of alternative enactive structures, even when they are only partly founded on genuine foundational beliefs, will provide an account of the actual plurality of beliefs and actions within

a capitalist system, at the same time as it explains why this plurality has not led to a great drive towards overturning a distributive system that works against the interest of most people.

This solution fulfils all the conditions stated at the beginning of the third part of this essay; it shows how external power structures play a role in individual idea production, and how the production of these ideas again reinforce the power structure from which they were developed. It accounts for how false consciousness arises in the same way as any other belief held by the individual, instead of being a belief externally imposed through, for instance, propaganda. Moreover, it provides an account of how false consciousness is not inherent to the human epistemic abilities as such, and is only the result of external power structures. The enactive extended mind theory allows for a more diverse picture of minds, ideas and ideology while retaining a theory of false consciousness as both strict and necessary on direct encounters with the ideological structure.

Conclusion

I have shown through this discussion that Shaun Gallagher provides an apt elaboration to the Marxist concept of false consciousness. Moreover, Gallagher's theory of the socially extended mind is capable of fulfilling the conditions needed in order to sufficiently fine grain the concept of false consciousness, retaining its analytic purpose while providing a potential account of social change. The force of this account is that false consciousness is accounted for as created by the thinking agent herself, without posing a threat to her epistemic capacities as such. False consciousness is maintained as strict but not immutable, and through retaining human agency at the core of creation, this means that human beings are, to a certain degree, in charge of change and development.

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Research Article

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False Consciousness and the Socially Extended Mind

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Abstract: In this paper I present a problem for the Marxist idea of false consciousness, namely how it is vulnerable to accusations of dogmatism. I will argue that the concept must be further developed if it is to provide a plausible tool for systematic social analysis. In the second half of the paper I will show how this could be done if the account of false consciousness incorporates Shaun Gallagher's theory of the socially extended mind. This is a theory that explores how the mind expands towards external objects and systems. I will conclude that it helps to reinstate false consciousness as a reliable tool for the analysis of cognitive dynamics within power structures.

Keywords: False consciousness; social mind extension; enactive cognition; externalism; social analysis

Introduction

In this paper I will present a problem for the Marxist notion of “false consciousness”. This concept concerns the effects of ideology on individual consciousness, and particularly the ways in which human beings within a society incorporate and reproduce power structures that are not necessarily to their personal benefit. First, I show how false consciousness poses problems for its own systematic framework, and for presenting an account of cognition and knowledge as it actually manifests itself within a set of power structures. This issue must be resolved if false consciousness is to be retained as a useful tool for the analysis of the effect of material power structures on the individual mind. I then go on to briefly elaborate how a possible solution should be approached if false consciousness is to retain its value as a concept. In the final part of this paper, I develop my own solution based on this approach by elaborating on false consciousness as a concept in light of Shaun Gallagher's theory of the socially extended mind, which explores how the mind expands towards external objects and systems. I conclude that this elaboration of false consciousness is capable of presenting an account that fulfils the criteria for a successful solution to the problem stated at the beginning of this paper.¹

The Problem With False Consciousness

The Origin of False Consciousness

The idea of false consciousness emerged as a reply to Wilhelm Reich's puzzlement with the fact that people do not actively resist exploitation (1933, 53). Although this worry dates back to Plato (book V, 459c-d), it became of particular concern to post-Marxist theory, as capitalism seemed to persevere even in times of economic crisis, and the experiments of social change of the early 20th century turned out to be repressive

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rather than emancipatory (Benhabib 1994, 66). Marx never used the term “false consciousness” as such, but the idea is rooted in his materialist ontology (Eagleton 1991, 70). Marx argues that the material foundations of society, i.e. the available material goods, how they are distributed, and who they are controlled by, provide the foundation of social practice, and that social practice is crucial to idea formation. He rejects the thought that ideas exist over and above the material realm of human agency (Balibar 1995, 71). This inevitably means that ideas developed in a society serve to uphold the same power structure as the system of material distribution. Following on from this line of reasoning, the idea of false consciousness is concerned with how this feedback loop between idea production, belief systems and power structures affects individual minds (Marcuse 1964, 145). A belief is subject to false consciousness if, irrespective of the knowledge of the believer, it serves to uphold a specific distributional power structure which operates outside our direct control. As a result, the theory of false consciousness provides an answer to Reich’s question; people are not always in the epistemic position to directly perceive what is in their own interest, thus the exploited do not realise that it is the current system that represses them.

It is important to notice that for a belief to be an instance of false consciousness it does not *necessarily* need to be propositionally false; it is a sufficient condition that the beliefs are held because this would be instrumental for the reinforcement of a specific power structure, and that this is detached from the agent’s personal reasons for holding this belief. The truth condition of the proposition is irrelevant. Coincidentally, the content of the belief is more *likely* to be false as it is not purposefully formed from evidence about the world *as it is*. The dynamics by which we come to form beliefs pervasively follow the logic of structures that aim to reinforce themselves.

As an illustration, this does not necessarily mean that all forms of scientific discovery must be undermined *as such*, but Marx questions *why* some forms of research and not others are prioritised, *how* the findings of the research interrelates with a prevailing belief system, and *what* kind of function this belief system has within the power structures of society. For instance, the belief that milk is healthy might contain a true proposition, but one might question why we hold this belief specifically, instead of beliefs about other things with similar health benefits. If it turns out that we ultimately believe that milk is healthy because the dairy industry benefits from us holding this belief, this must be an instance of false consciousness. Moreover, whether we hold the belief on these grounds is largely obscure to us, due to our socially situated perspective as epistemic agents. This perspective is skewed by the fact that the very mechanism of idea production, the way we access evidence and form beliefs about the world, follows a specific power dynamic.

At this point it is important to notice that the person who is subject to false consciousness is not simply making epistemic mistakes, or is intrinsically less skilled at making sense of epistemic evidence. The distortion is externally imposed.

Moreover, false consciousness is not a case of intentional knowledge control instigated by the ruling classes, as is the case with propaganda. This is because false consciousness is a by-product of the fact that idea production is inseparable from physical production in a given society. If material production serves a hierarchy of unjust material distribution, so does idea production.

Issues with False Consciousness

However, false consciousness is not an unproblematic concept. It has been criticised for not recognising the actual complexity and multiplicity of culture and knowledge *within* societies where capitalism is the pervasive mode of distribution. It seems incommensurable with the existence of dissidence and the fragmentation of the actual political landscape (Eagleton 1991, xxi). It cannot explain the existence of political activism that aims to counteract the effects of a given power structure.

In the remainder of this essay I will therefore aim to refine the concept of false consciousness such that it manages to account for the actual diversity that takes place within a society, while explaining why people so often are complicit in their own exploitation and oppression. The aim is to do this within a Marxist framework, which provides a systematic account capable of explaining not only singular cases of deception, but also the broader social tendency. It is important to salvage the theory of false consciousness as a tool

for social analysis, as the dynamics it highlights have been repeatedly demonstrated in sociological studies. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu found that

there are many things people accept without knowing. [...] When you ask a sample of individuals what are the main social factors of achievement at school, the further you go down the social scale the more they believe in natural talents or gifts – the more they believe that those who are successful are naturally endowed with intellectual capacities. And the more they accept their own exclusion, the more they believe they are stupid (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1994, 269).

This account of class identity as mirrored in belief in innatism seems to fit the exact idea of what false consciousness is: a mechanism that unintentionally reinforces an existing social hierarchy at the level of ideas and self-understanding. This is not a case of false consciousness *merely* because the belief at hand is factually false, but because it shows how belief changes with social perspective in a way that serves to uphold the existing power structure, irrespective of the truth condition of the belief at hand. The concept of false consciousness should therefore not be discarded as a whole; rather what is needed in order to answer the critics is a more fine-grained conception of its mechanisms. In this light, the Marxist account of idea production must be further developed.

Praxis as grounding Justified Beliefs

Given that false consciousness is a belief held for the purpose of reinforcing a given power structure, it is necessary to discuss the account of *right* grounds for knowledge that follows from this view. How are beliefs produced in a way that reflects how the world actually unfolds itself for us?

Marx's materialism is at the core of his account of how the external world should be understood to impact knowledge acquisition, and it explains how idea production parallels material production. Refuting Hegel's idealism, Marx argues that everything is essentially material, meaning that the ontologically foundational is not the idea, but the subject having the idea (Marx 1843, pt.2a). This subject is a foundationally material being that acquires knowledge about the external world through its existence at the level of objects. This does not mean that subjectivity itself is essentially material, but that it supervenes on the physical world (Marx 1845, 144). An account of adequate knowledge is therefore found in the Marxist concept of *praxis*, namely the unification of theory and practice. Theory is to be understood as any belief informing the decision about which action to perform. Practice is the action itself. Only beliefs informed by a practice are appropriately justified (Marx 1844: ch. 6, XXIII). The concept of praxis is thus founded on the idea that human beings in equal part mould and are moulded by the external world. This is what allows propositions about the external world to have meaning in a way that reflects the way the world is for us. The mechanisms behind false consciousness are based on an inadequate connection between theory and practice. In false consciousness, beliefs are held in order to prompt a desired action, namely actions that comply with and reinforce a material power structure. False consciousness is therefore the reverse of appropriate knowledge acquisition, which is the formation of a belief based on the grounds of autonomous activity.

The implication of such a conception of knowledge in a capitalist system, where labour division is the key to economic efficiency, is that the working classes are effectively expelled from the realm of general knowledge by only being allowed to take part in minute operations of the production of the whole product. Their epistemic perspective is physically restricted. This is what Marx calls alienation from the means of production (Blunden 1999, A1). Moreover, false consciousness will be perpetuated in any society that distinguishes between manual and mental labour, as theory and practice are efficiently kept apart (Marx and Engels 1846, 72). Religious, legal and bureaucratic institutions are at the centre of this mental production as well as being founded on the pre-existing set of material power structures (Marx 1846, 4).

- The issue at hand is therefore how a theory of false consciousness is compatible with how we
- i. account for the fragmentation of epistemic stances within social groups subject to the same power dynamics, and thus
 - ii. also account for activism towards social change that aims to counteract the material dynamics of capitalist society.

False Consciousness From the Perspective of Philosophy of Mind

Requirements for a Solution

A more nuanced account of the role that external power structures play in individual idea production, and how this individual idea production helps reinforce these external power structures, is required in order to resolve the above issue. Moreover, this solution must explain how false consciousness is not merely imposed on the individual, but automatically endorsed upon encounters with the external world. This must be investigated if the pervasiveness and efficacy of the concept is to be accounted for. Finally, although false consciousness is to come from within the subject itself, a solution must show how this is not inherent to human epistemic abilities and access to self-knowledge, such that emancipation can be accounted for as genuinely possible.

I will examine whether a framework from philosophy of mind could provide an additional structure that accommodates all these requirements, as it considers the same explanatory gap between mind and world as the theory of false consciousness. While false consciousness focuses on the ways in which the world imposes itself on to the mind, philosophy of mind is preoccupied with how the mind relates to the world. Although these are two different domains of philosophical discourse, it is not problematic to say that they concern the same relation as seen from different perspectives, and can therefore inform each other. This provides me with the tools to examine the idea of false consciousness both on the grand (political) scale where ideology is produced, and the implication of ideology on the smaller scale of individual minds. This will allow me to pinpoint the level of cognition at which false consciousness operates, to what extent it is a necessary part of the human psyche, and what impact it could have on epistemic capacities and self-knowledge.

The kind of theory within philosophy of mind that could sufficiently refine the concept of false consciousness would be a theory that accounts for the ways the external world plays a role in determining mental states, and how these mental states again could serve the purpose of reinforcing external power structures. Traditional externalism about mental content, functional mind extension, and enactive mind extension are all views that could fit this description. I will show that only enactive mind extension is capable of providing a sufficiently fine-grained account of false consciousness such that multiplicity and political counterculture could be accounted for.

Content Externalism

Content externalism aims to show how external, environmental factors directly determine our mental content. Hilary Putnam's "Twin Earth" example demonstrates this. He imagines earth and the planet twin earth, which are identical in most respects, including language. The major differences in linguistic meaning depend on the material peculiarities of the planets themselves. For instance, what is referred to as water is identical in appearance on both planets, but consists of H₂O molecules on earth, and an XYZ molecular structure on twin earth. The molecular structure of water is not generally known in either place. Thus, when people speak of water it is irrelevant whether they know about the relevant molecular structure. Irrespective of this, Putnam argues that when two psychologically identical people, one on each planet, talk about water, they talk about essentially different things. The meaning of water as it functions in our mental content is entirely contingent on what "water" essentially is. This has nothing to do with the epistemic status of the speaker of the word (Putnam 1975, 584).

Moreover, meaning is *socially* contingent, and depends on the division of linguistic labour within a society where some people are scientists and decide the meaning of things like water, gold, beech or arthritis, whereas other people merely need to refer back to these definitions in order for their words to have meaning. This is why it is possible for a person to talk meaningfully about water without knowing what water *essentially* means. It is the social environment, not internal cognitive structures or experiences, which determines the meaning of any given proposition (Burge 1979, 600).

Externalism is therefore capable of giving some account of false consciousness based on this theory of content production. The linguistic division of labour could be such that meaning is generally dictated to suit a specific power structure. This means that all beliefs would be formed on false grounds, since all meaning serves to reinforce this structure. It therefore explains how our beliefs become instances of false consciousness without being consciously created this way, as the agent's intentions do not affect the way words acquire meaning. Bourdieu's example of belief in innatism can be analysed on these terms; being far down on the socio-economic scale is *defined* as equivalent to being less talented on this account. The meaning of the belief has been created in order to make people compliant to the existing social order.

However, there are several problems with this version of false consciousness. First, content externalism would enforce that the belief in the correspondence between social position and innate abilities would be accepted overall in the linguistic community, since this is the meaning to which "lower social standing" is generally attributed. This is not the case according to Bourdieu's study; the belief in this correspondence was only held at the lower socio-economic levels of a society. Secondly, externalism does not account for false consciousness in terms of general power structures, but in a deliberate dissemination of false consciousness by agents who control the determination of meaning within a society. Thus false consciousness bears closer resemblance to a propaganda mechanism than a default by-product of a given material power structure. Thirdly, content externalism does not provide an inadequate extension of the theory of false consciousness, as it is too crude to explain how belief could ever be accessible on the *right* grounds. I therefore reject content externalism as a plausible extension of the theory of false consciousness. I will therefore look towards theories that claim that not only meaning, but the mind itself, is determined outside the confines of the brain.

The Extended Mind

Such an account is mainly attributed Andy Clark and David Chalmers, who famously claim that in certain interactions with the external world "the human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right" (Clark & Chalmers 1998, 8). The essence of this argument is summed up by what Clark and Chalmers call the parity principle. If a process in the world works in a way that we would count as a cognitive process if it happened in the head, this external process should also count as a cognitive process (Clark & Chalmers 2002, 644). This principle is illustrated through the example of Inga who has normal mental capacities and Otto who has severe Alzheimer's disease but writes down all the things he knows and learns in a notebook. For Otto, the notebook serves as an external memory, responsible for founding beliefs which he may or may not choose to act upon, in much the same way as the latent memory stored in a mind like Inga's. When Otto and Inga both want to go to the Museum of Modern Art, their cognitive processes seem identical, with the single difference that Otto consults his notebook in order to know how to get from A to B, whereas Inga retrieves the same information from memory (Clark and Chalmers 2002, 647). They should therefore be treated as the same cognitive process.

With the extended mind view, cognition can happen in a way such that the external becomes a part of this cognitive process. This means that it is possible for the individual agent to produce beliefs by incorporating external factors in the cognitive process, such that these beliefs still have the same status as beliefs that the individual would form without any external influence whatsoever.

It is here possible to account for false consciousness as a result of this direct coupling with the external world. If the parity principle holds, this means that belief can be produced through the coupling of the mind not only with innocuous objects which do not alter the content of the belief itself, which is the case with the notebook, beliefs could also couple with external ideological structures. The coupling of internal and external structures means that the external structures could guide idea production such that the ideas produced could be made to reinforce a given power structure. Bourdieu's example can thus be explained through the coupling of the individual's cognitive structures with external power structures, for instance, the coupling with various social norms and institutions that function as cornerstones of a given social structure. The belief of the individual would depend on the social structures encountered.

However, this account of false consciousness is yet too vague to provide a sufficient elaboration of false consciousness. A further specification can be developed based on the responses given to a worry about the extended mind view raised by Rob Rupert. The worry, known as the “cognitive bloat”, accuses extended mind theories of inflating the mental to the border of the insignificant (2004). Cognition could happen so far from the individual mind that it seems absurd to talk about these cognitive processes actually adhering to any specific mind. This is a worry that must be addressed by advocates of the extended mind view. If all cognition at all times could be a part of an external structure and happen at a level remote from the individual agency that it couples with, it becomes difficult to discern how emancipation from false consciousness could come from within any individual agent. It leads to a view of individuals as just a part of a larger cognitive network where individual agency is reduced, to the extent that it threatens any possibility of emancipation from this social structure.

A solution to the cognitive bloat must therefore be to qualify how extension to the external world could only happen if there is a way the individual holds a sense of ownership over this extension. There are two alternative accounts that fill this condition; Andy Clark’s functional vehicle view and Shaun Gallagher’s enactive view. I will examine both, and conclude that only Gallagher’s enactive view is capable of presenting a potential solution to the issue at hand.

The Functional Vehicle View

Andy Clark’s functional vehicle view presents four restrictions to the original extended mind thesis. The mind can only extend to external objects if it is reliably invoked, automatically endorsed, accessible when required, and has been consciously endorsed in the past (Clark 2008, 79). Thus the mind can only extend to vehicles of belief, since this is the sole aspect of the mind that fits all the criteria. A vehicle is a material object that plays a role in enabling a system to have a mental state. It could be any kind of internal or external function (Clark 2008, 76).

The mind therefore cannot extend its own structures to external ideological structures because a structure cannot be consciously endorsed. Otto’s notebook, on the other hand, is such a vehicle, since it is reliably invoked and accessible when required (he carries it with him at all times), while being automatically endorsed because he knows that at some point, he personally acquired these beliefs. With this view, *belief* is not produced through coupling with the external world, rather the external plays the role solely as a vehicle for already existent cognitive content.

This leads to a problem for an account of false consciousness in terms of mind extension. Since the mind only extends to vehicles, it simply does not account for the production of belief at all, leaving it incapable to account for the mechanisms behind false consciousness. The only way in which false consciousness could be explained on this view would be through the distribution of vehicles within a given material power structure. This could for instance lead to a lack of access to research equipment, or a lack of notebooks for people with memory loss for that matter, meaning that access to certain types of belief would be restricted. But this would only diminish the set of possible beliefs in a society; it would not account for whether and when the beliefs actually held are instances of false consciousness.

The Enactively Extended Mind

Shaun Gallagher’s enactive view of the extended mind incorporates the foundation of Clark and Chalmers’ original extended mind view, namely the parity principle. Gallagher claims that if this principle is the foundation of the extended mind view, the restriction of the theory to vehicles only must be *ad hoc* (Gallagher 2013, 2). Vehicles are only a subset of all cognitive structures that would work on the parity principle, meaning that a restriction of the extended mind to the vehicle view would exclude possible cognitive coupling with external structures that *must* be invoked for central concepts in a society to acquire meaning. This is altogether counterintuitive, granted the acceptance of the parity principle.

To illustrate his point, Gallagher introduces the example of the legal system, which is what he calls a “mental institution”. It can be argued that such institutions could play a similar role in cognition to, for instance, a calculator, which is generally accepted on Clark and Chalmers’ view. When engaging with the legal system it provides external structures that take the role of cognitive structures, shaping how to think about a subject. When the mind extends to the legal system, it extends to a whole set of rigid social practices and norms, encompassing books, buildings, behaviour, people, and a network of specific cognitive procedures. When engaging with a legal issue, there is simply no way that it can be understood in cognition without the use of the structures provided by a specific legal system in a specific society.

Aiming to retain the force of the parity principle, Gallagher therefore introduces a different kind of restriction to his theory as a response to the cognitive bloat. For cognition to truly belong to an individual it is necessary to look at the *mechanisms* of the given account of ownership. As a result, Gallagher adapts a Lockean theory of ownership through labour as a restriction as to when and how the individual mind extends. Although Locke’s account originally is a theory of physical labour, Gallagher understands idea production as the kind of labour that would be applicable (Gallagher 2013, 7). The Lockean theory of labour states that when a person X is mixing his labour with an external object in order to transform it, the object transformed by X’s labour becomes a part of X’s property (Locke 1690, §27). The mind therefore only extends to the external world if it is *actively* engaged with the individual’s production of ideas. The cognition happening outside the individual’s head only truly belongs to the individual if mental labour is applied in order to produce ideas. For example, the mind only extends to the legal system in cases where legal structures play a role in the formation of a new idea.

If someone stole my bike, my mind would extend to the legal system insofar as I would create the idea of *theft* in relation to my acknowledging that someone else took my bike without my consent. This idea of theft has meaning in virtue of instigating the appropriate set of behaviours that the concept entails: reporting to the police; instigating an official investigation; and a trial against the thief, eventually resulting in fines or imprisonment. In a society without a legal system, the fact that my bike was taken without consent does not mean anything other than just that. The concept of theft does not have any specific meaning because it does not entail an appropriate set of behaviours that it could instigate. This illustrates Gallagher’s argument that certain concepts would be meaningless if they did not invoke these cognitive external structures.

Therefore, for the Lockean theory of ownership to be united with a theory of mind extension, Gallagher suggests that the parity principle should not hold functionally, but enactively (Gallagher 2013, 2). Enactive knowledge is knowledge acquired through action, and is therefore shaped by the external and internal structures that guide this action (Wilson & Foglia 2011). Consequently, as with the example of bike theft, when the mind extends to the external world, the external world becomes a part of our cognitive structures that shape how the external world is engaged with, and therefore also the ideas produced as a result of this engagement. A belief therefore acquires meaning from the actions that shaped it, and the actions it could lead to, as resonated in the concept of *praxis*.

Enactive Mind Extension and False Consciousness

It is here possible to show how enactive mind extension could provide an elaboration of false consciousness. The organisation of the external world provides structures that the mind could couple with, and therefore guides both action and production of new ideas. Since all external structures are restrictive in some sense, they delineate both the active space of the agent, and consequently the enactive space of cognition. Moreover, actively coupling with external structures when producing ideas means that these structures control idea production directly. In virtue of this, the structures are enabled to take part in idea production for the sake of instigating actions that comply with these structures. Since the ideas produced will only have meaning based on the set of actions they result in, this account also provides an idea of how false consciousness directly reinforces a given social hierarchy.

Bourdieu’s example of a belief in innatism as an instance of false consciousness can here be explained along similar lines to the broader account of the extended mind and false consciousness as given before

the introduction of cognitive bloat as a worry, while allowing for physical restriction itself (through lack of resources) to play a role in the given epistemic space of a social group.

This is a subset of classic false consciousness commitment claiming that liberal society prompts us to believe that opportunity is available to anyone who tries hard enough, and that any failure is the fault of the individual. Other such commitments that have been attributed to a liberal outlook can also easily be accounted for by the enactivist. For instance, the belief that capitalism is a natural force can be explained by the fact that we engage with social structures that treat capitalism *as if* it was a natural force that should be left entirely to its own dynamic development. The way we engage with social and material objects form the beliefs we hold about them. Often, these beliefs are held on the wrong grounds simply because we are unclear about the origin of this behaviour. Although capitalism is man-made, once it is given priority over other forms of social organization, the mere fact that it is deregulated makes us relate to it in our agencies *as if* it was a natural force. In return, the belief that capitalism is a natural force reinforces our treatment of it as if it was one. The enactivist account thus perfectly coheres with the Marxist concept of praxis as virtuous belief formation; our belief in capitalism as a natural force is held in order to prompt a desired action. It is not a belief formed on the basis of autonomous agency. It is therefore held on the wrong grounds, and must be a case of false consciousness.

Another important feature of the enactivist account is that it provides a general theory of human cognition, while also accounting for how this cognition can be manipulated in virtue of its own faculties. For this theory to be able to produce a plausible conceptual extension of false consciousness, it is important to remember that all ideological structures are structures that could prompt enactive mind extension, whereas not all structures that could be coupled with enactively are necessarily ideological. This means that enactive mind extension as an account of human cognition is not a problem for false consciousness *per se* – the problem exists at the level of unfavourable, external power structures. This account therefore addresses the crux of false consciousness, which should not be seen as an account of how ideology forces itself on people, but “how can there be an animal which represses itself” (Brown 1959, 9).

The enactive mind view is thus the most apt elaboration of the theory of false consciousness, as it provides a specific account of how and when extension towards the external world could result in a case of false consciousness. The mind couples with external structures insofar as they provide a way to act and behave, and belief is based on this. For instance, in the case of building a fence, the mind does not extend to the fence insofar as it is a fence, although it *could* extend to the process of building a fence insofar as its function; how and where it is built, comply to a specific social practice or norm (Gallagher 2013, 8). Therefore, every aspect of the external world can stand in relation to a given social power structure, and all such norms and conditions can become part of the individual mind through the practices that they dictate.

As a result, this account of false consciousness is strong enough to sufficiently account for the pervasiveness of the concept. However, does this entail that the possibility for emancipation must be excluded? It seems intuitively desirable to assert that beliefs that invoke the legal system *must* result in cases of false consciousness, in virtue of its nature as a social institution, and therefore as the centre of ideological production as defined by Marx. Moreover, it also seems desirable to distinguish this kind of false consciousness from the false consciousness that *could* result from the process of building a fence. How can the extended mind theory provide a differentiation between these cases, and does this provide an apt explanation of political dissent?

The Solution

The Range of False Consciousness

Based on the desired distinction between false consciousness as the necessary result of mind extending to institutions, and the false consciousness that possibly arises from the process of building a fence, it seems appropriate to introduce a scale from non-ideological idea production to strict ideological idea production where the ideas created gain meaning because they instigate a specific action.

The clearest distinction between the process of building a fence and the process of engaging with the legal system is how they relate to the production of meaning. Whereas Gallagher argues that words like “theft” would be meaningless if they did not refer to the various social practices that were entailed by the word, the same would not be the case for concepts such as “fence”. A fence constructed without regards to specific social norms could still meaningfully be a fence. Although most fences stand in a clear relation to the society they were built in, such as garden fences, which primarily serve as a symbolic delineation of property, this does not mean that “fence” as a concept would be meaningless to a hermit who builds a fence around her shelter in order to keep wild animals from coming in. However, on this account, “fence” only has meaning *as it is created by, and organises someone’s agency*. This is what makes the difference between “fence” and a random stack of rocks to the hermit, and this is also why merely decorative garden fences have a specific meaning to us, according to Gallagher. They play a role in how we understand, organise and structure our lives, be it practically or symbolically.

“Theft”, on the other hand, would be a meaningless concept to this hermit, since it will not invoke any specific action or behaviour outside a given social structure. This example illustrates a crucial distinction between necessary production of false consciousness and at least a possible access to meaning outside the social hierarchy. Given an enactive account of meaning as dependent on the actions a belief invokes, this distinction can be explored further.

The external cognitive structures that the mind couples with dictate the way in which the external world gains meaning, in virtue of shaping how the external world is engaged with. This also means that autonomous agency must be agency where internal cognitive structures are not completely dominated by the external structures that the mind couples with. For instance, mind extension towards the legal system does not allow for autonomous belief formation, because the legal structures are not open to alternative cognitive processes. On the other hand, the process of building a fence would only produce false consciousness insofar as the social norm is followed and reinforced. Obviously, the political significance of this belief formation might be minimal, and it is also possible to be fully aware of the fact that one is following the social norm for the sake of following the social norm, and still happily comply with it. This is not the issue at stake. The significant point, as stated in the example about the hermit, is that it is *possible* to develop a belief about fences without any reference to the socially normative, solely through the mere action of building one, while also retaining the account of enactive belief formation in conjunction with the theory of false consciousness.

The key question is therefore whether it is possible for an agent within a society to actually divorce a practice from a social norm, such that belief could be formed autonomously. It follows that I will need to explore how and when belief production that is not *necessarily* tied to external power structures could be cases of genuine belief, and contrast this with the strong case where meaning is necessarily given by such a power structure.

False Consciousness and Context Dependency

A weaker sense of false consciousness would be instances of idea production that generate meaning that does not *in all possible contexts* reinforce the ideological structure. Whether false consciousness is generated in the process of building a fence is contingent on social norms and situations. This contingency, present in the weaker sense of false consciousness, is context dependent. Some context dependency also exists in the strong sense of false consciousness, where the production of meaning itself is contingent on the kind of society it takes place in, but the weak account also allows for meaning to be context dependent *within* a society. The strictness of some social norms can depend on such small-scale contexts. For instance, the structure that leads to idea production in a family setting might lead to the production of ideas for the sake of the idea, and not for the sake of reinforcing either the familial structure, or a larger social hierarchy. The meaning of “fence” in a children’s game might not lead to agency that reinforces ideological structures.

However, although the weak case allows us to hold beliefs for the right reasons, it does not explain our epistemic access to whether our ideas are held for these reasons. It might not be clear to us whether the

children's game reflects already existing social dynamics, and thus serves to reinforce these. Therefore, although this discussion of meaning provides an answer to *when* belief can be founded on the right grounds, it does not account for whether this allows for emancipation through access to genuine belief, since knowledge about this genuineness is largely inaccessible to the agent.

In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to deduce cases of enactive idea formation where the subject knowingly holds the produced belief on the right grounds. For instance, one such belief could be "I believe it is nice to sit in the cool shade of the tree in my garden". This is a belief that has been acquired enactively through the action of sitting under a tree in a garden, and it is a belief that also prompts further actions, like repeated sitting under the tree in the garden. It is a belief that suits only my personal tastes, and has been acquired for no specific reason other than that it is a place for me to sit. The fact that I have a garden, or the fact that I have a tree in it might be embedded in a row of social norms, but my belief about what it is *like* to sit under this tree is entirely subjective. It might be in someone's interest that people generally like to sit under shady trees in gardens, but my belief about my preferences for sitting under the tree in my garden can only have come about through the fact that I sat under the tree in the garden and realised that I liked it. This cannot be a case of false consciousness because it is a belief about the external world acquired through action, not a belief about the external world that is acquired *for the sake of* prompting this action.

This is a particularly isolated case, and might not in itself lead to a realisation about the unfairness of a social structure and therefore a desire and will for emancipation. However, such beliefs can create a building block for alternative enactive structures that are developed for no particular reason other than for the sake of the beliefs themselves. For instance, I might meet another person that has the same belief about the comfort of sitting in the shade of a tree in the garden. Based on this mutual interest we might be able to create a small social context founded on this appreciation and nothing else.

Through this social context, other norms and codes might arise as a result of our beliefs about the external world and the role it plays within this context. The beliefs that arise from this context are beliefs that *could* serve as instances of false consciousness, but not necessarily so. Despite this possibility, since these beliefs arise through the enactive structures of this smaller context, they hold no specific purpose. Moreover, the subject that holds this belief is aware of the fact that this belief is held on the right grounds, because the subject is aware that the context that gave rise to this belief was developed entirely from appropriately justified belief such as the belief about the pleasantness of sitting in the cool shade of a tree.

It is here possible to imagine that the budding alternative social structures that arise from this context could eventually be the source of enactively developed ideas critical to the larger power structures of a society. In their shared experience, the small community of tree lovers might, for instance, develop social values different to the ones they would have held had they merely been part of a larger community with a different kind of social hierarchy.

False Consciousness Sufficiently Elaborated

The possibility of knowingly creating small pockets of alternative contexts, founded on appropriately justified basic beliefs *within* a larger social power structure, could lead to idea production that within this context would not be a case of false consciousness such that this would be knowable to the subject that produced these ideas. This possibility is therefore capable of providing a solution to the issues at hand, as the enactive extended mind view provides an account of false consciousness as being pervasive and strict, at the same time as it creates a window for political counterculture.

This window is nevertheless small, as any closed social context embedded within a larger society will bear traces of these overarching power structures. To intentionally create a vacuum from the beliefs acquired and held in society in general seems in itself like an unlikely feat. Nevertheless, the aim at this point is merely to show how the possibility of emancipation does not have to be altogether excluded. Moreover, the existence of alternative enactive structures, even when they are only partly founded on genuine foundational beliefs, will provide an account of the actual plurality of beliefs and actions within

a capitalist system, at the same time as it explains why this plurality has not led to a great drive towards overturning a distributive system that works against the interest of most people.

This solution fulfils all the conditions stated at the beginning of the third part of this essay; it shows how external power structures play a role in individual idea production, and how the production of these ideas again reinforce the power structure from which they were developed. It accounts for how false consciousness arises in the same way as any other belief held by the individual, instead of being a belief externally imposed through, for instance, propaganda. Moreover, it provides an account of how false consciousness is not inherent to the human epistemic abilities as such, and is only the result of external power structures. The enactive extended mind theory allows for a more diverse picture of minds, ideas and ideology while retaining a theory of false consciousness as both strict and necessary on direct encounters with the ideological structure.

Conclusion

I have shown through this discussion that Shaun Gallagher provides an apt elaboration to the Marxist concept of false consciousness. Moreover, Gallagher's theory of the socially extended mind is capable of fulfilling the conditions needed in order to sufficiently fine grain the concept of false consciousness, retaining its analytic purpose while providing a potential account of social change. The force of this account is that false consciousness is accounted for as created by the thinking agent herself, without posing a threat to her epistemic capacities as such. False consciousness is maintained as strict but not immutable, and through retaining human agency at the core of creation, this means that human beings are, to a certain degree, in charge of change and development.

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Ideology and False Consciousness

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The myth to be discussed here was given its purest expression by John Plamenatz when he asserted that 'Marx often called ideology "false consciousness"^[1] Not surprisingly, Plamenatz cites no instances of this usage, as, in truth, Marx never calls ideology 'false consciousness'. Indeed, he never calls anything 'false consciousness', a phrase that does not occur in his work. The standard of Marx scholarship in English has, it must be admitted, greatly improved since Plamenatz's time. No serious commentator today would propose a relationship in the terms he employs with such assurance. There is, nevertheless, a sense in which the shadow of the false consciousness connection still looms large over the subject. This may be illustrated by the work of two later writers, both of whom recognise that Marx does not himself speak of 'false consciousness'. Moreover, both have been highly influential and are representative of distinct general tendencies. Jorge Larraín, while eschewing the language of 'false consciousness', maintains that Marx identifies ideology with cognitive distortion in the specific sense of the concealment of social contradictions.^[2] Terry Eagleton for his part believes that this language will serve to characterise not Marx's sole conception of ideology but rather one he held among others.^[3] In general, it may be suggested, the dominant view in the literature is that Marx should be credited with an understanding of ideology as necessarily involving what is cognitively defective or deficient, in being illusory, deceptive, partial, distorted or at any rate failing in some way to present a veridical picture of the social world. This is the myth which the present discussion seeks to expose.

It should be said by way of preliminary that the association of ideology and cognitive deficiency is now so widespread that it must be assumed to serve a deep need of the age, the need for a concept that collects items in virtue of just that sort of deficiency. No objection will be raised here to the devising of such a concept, or to labelling it 'ideology'. What will be argued is simply that the ascription of the result to Marx is entirely gratuitous. It has generated what may properly be called a 'myth' in one familiar sense of the term, a systematic, internally coherent, imaginative construction that lacks any rational foundations. In matters of exegesis the foundations required are a grounding in the testimony of the relevant texts. The discussion will show that there are no such grounds in the present case. Thus, its aim is merely negative. It will not seek to put forward a positive, and necessarily disputable, interpretation of what Marx means by 'ideology' beyond whatever is directly conveyed by the textual evidence that will be cited.^[4]

An important aspect of this evidence might be captured, without undue strain, by remarking that Marx never calls ideology anything. We have to deal not just with the kind of reticence that is evident in the case of such concepts as 'class' and 'dialectic'. The difficulty here is still more basic in that Marx never manages even to set the scene for an attempt at conceptual explication since the bare substantive 'ideology' hardly figures at all in his work. The noun is almost always accompanied by an epithet such as 'German', 'republican', 'political' or 'Hegelian', or by a qualifying phrase, as in 'the ideology of the bourgeoisie' or 'the ideology of the political economist'. More typical in any case is the adjectival usage in which such varied items as 'forms', 'expressions', 'phrases', 'conceptions', 'deception', and 'distortion' are said to have an 'ideological' character. Even more distinctive is the frequency, amounting to approximately half of all references in the relevant range, of invocations of the 'ideologists', the creators and purveyors of the ideological forms. It is in general almost impossible to exaggerate the concrete, conjunctural nature of Marx's dealings with the ideological, in marked contrast to the abstractions that characterise the later debates.

Thus, one should not expect to find in Marx's writings a definition, even in a veiled form, of 'ideology'. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that they will provide some clues as to the nature of the general considerations that control his use of the term. The most important of these is to be found in a text in which, it is generally agreed, he reaches unusual heights of methodological self-consciousness, the 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. There he describes the conflict between material forces and relations of production and goes on to refer to the 'legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out'.^[5] What is most striking about this reference for present purposes is that so far from associating ideology with cognitive deficiency it associates it rather with cognitive achievement, the 'becoming conscious' of the fundamental social conflict. It is an association which, to put it mildly, has not been allowed its due weight in the interpretative literature. Moreover, it is far from unique among the occasions on which Marx offers some guidance as to the main lines of his thinking in this area. Thus, in *The Communist Manifesto* we learn that, when the class struggle nears its decisive hour, 'a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole'.^[6] The natural reading is surely that these thinkers raise themselves to theoretical comprehension of the historical movement as a whole just in their role as bourgeois ideologists. It also seems natural to suppose that this achievement is what triggers their going over to the other side in the class struggle, a move that presumably brings that role to an end.

In the light of these passages anyone suffering the burden of the prevailing myth might be tempted to conclude that, so far as Marx's explicit guidance goes, ideology is true consciousness. As a slogan this at least would have the merit of having some basis in the evidence of the texts. By itself, however, it could never amount to more than a misleading, if for a limited purpose salutary, paradox. This is shown, to look no further, by Marx's all too frequent references to bourgeois ideologists who remain mired in incomprehension of the historical movement as a whole. The correct conclusion is surely that, for Marx, ideology is conceptually compatible with both theoretical comprehension and incomprehension. This is to suggest that ideology is not, for him, an epistemological category of any kind. In more concrete terms he is, it may be said, indifferent to questions of truth status in deciding to designate items as 'ideological'. To attempt to say more positively what his linguistic practice is determined by would, however, go beyond the limits of the present discussion.

What has been attempted here is a summary account of the direction in which the textual evidence points. It is time to consider more closely the relationship between that evidence and the view that was characterised above as 'mythical'. For it is not to be supposed that those who propagate, or fall victim to, that myth do so without some reassuring sense that the weight of Marx's writings is to be reckoned on their side. Even if this support is at best a matter of misleading appearances, the appearances still have to be revealed as such and, so far as space allows, traced to their roots. They are rooted in part, it might be suggested, in a degree of confusion. The confusion in question may itself arise from another feature of Marx's dealings with the ideological, their overwhelmingly forensic and polemical character. In practice, he tends almost exclusively to be concerned with ideological forms he wishes to criticise and reject, above all with elements of the ideology of the bourgeoisie. This is not quite uniformly the case. Thus, when he writes of the 'ideological superstructure' of the 'proletarians', one would need to be firmly in the grip of myth to suppose that he intends a criticism.^[7] Nevertheless, it may be that the rather consistently hostile tone of his references to the manifestations of ideology has, so to speak, tended to rub off on the concept itself, creating a negative aura around it. If so, this could be only a matter of association and slippage of ideas, not of inference. For it is plainly one thing to characterise particular ideological beliefs as deceptive or distorted and quite another to conclude that ideology as such necessarily partakes of deception and distortion, thereby inflating a contingent circumstance into a conceptual truth. Moreover, so far from supporting such a conclusion, Marx's quite frequent references to 'ideological deception' and 'ideological distortion' rather point away from it. For, if it were true, they would have a pleonastic character from which they could be rescued only by supposing that a contrast is intended on the occasions of their use with 'non-ideological' deception and distortion. Such a suggestion is, however, so lacking in vitality and resonance in the context of Marx's work that it has never figured significantly in the literature. It seems that the prevailing myth may be tacitly relying in some degree on vagueness and unclarity with regard to the way the texts bear on it, on unexamined assumptions that turn out on examination to be untenable.

A sense of there being massive support held in reserve, without needing to be called upon any particular occasion, may help in some measure to explain a curious feature of the prevailing view, the fact that so often its advocates seem to experience no need to provide any textual warrant at all. It is any rate the case that it tends to be taken for granted, not made the object of self-conscious scrutiny or seen as a contentious doctrine in need of justification. Yet it would not be quite true to say that no attempt is ever made to adduce evidence on its behalf. At this point, however, the task facing an attempt at the exposure of myth can be drastically simplified. For over and over again, when, so to speak, the pressure is too great to ignore, it is a particular passage that is called into service, the well-known passage with the image of the *camera obscura* from *The German Ideology*. It may be reduced to its working parts for present purposes in the form of a single sentence. This is standardly translated as follows:

'In all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura* this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.'^[8]

It may be that the quickest way to show how little support this sentence actually lends the prevailing myth is to draw attention to a matter of translation. The key phrase rendered above as 'in all ideology' is in the original 'in der ganzen Ideologie'.^[9] On linguistic grounds, however, it seems more natural to render this combination of definite article, adjective and noun by some such phrase as 'in the whole ideology'. Such a rendering would make clear that what is in question here is the totality of a particular ideology or that ideology taken 'as a whole'. If read in this way there is only one possible candidate, the ideology that is the central and, so to speak, eponymous concern of *The German Ideology*. The reading fits well not just with the overall context of the work but also with the specific thrust of the sentence in which the key phrase appears and with the immediate context of that sentence. For Marx is concerned here not with cognitive defect in general but with a specific, even if large-scale, error. This is the reversal in German idealism of the true order of priority of ideas and material reality. The image of things being 'upside-down', 'standing on their heads', (*auf den Kopf gestellt*) is a standard recourse of Marx in characterising his relationship with Hegelianism, and indeed may be taken as an echo of phrases in Hegel's own work. Marx is far from thinking that the image is serviceable in characterising a wide range of other thinkers such, for instance, as Adam Smith, Ricardo, Bentham and the older French materialists, who, nevertheless, seem uncontentionally to count for him as ideologists. Thus, he does not think of it as capturing a defining feature even of bourgeois ideology, still less of ideology as such.

The sense of a specificity of reference is reinforced by the immediate continuation of the sentence that was quoted above. It assures us that that 'In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven'. This encourages the suggestion that the chief point of the key sentence may be condensed as follows: 'Even if the entire German ideology gets things upside-down, this can be explained in materialist terms'. It might be thought that the kind of materialist explanation on offer is fairly crude, and destined to be superseded in the course of Marx's development, in view of the way it seems to assimilate a complex, socially mediated process to a simple natural one. This does not, however, affect the conclusion to be drawn for present purposes. This is that the *camera obscura* passage offers a reflection on a feature of a particular ideology, not a conceptual remark about ideology as such. The passage now falls back easily into its place within the consistent texture of the parent work as a whole, no longer seeming to aspire to a meta-level of self-consciousness alien to it. Any appearance of supporting the dominant view has thereby vanished and it is left without a basis in Marx's work.

The discussion should seek by way of conclusion to trace the false consciousness theme to its source. This is to be found beyond all question in Engels:

'Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces.'^[10]

It would be idle to deny that some conceptual connection is being proposed here between ideology and false consciousness. Yet more needs to be said if its weight is to be assessed correctly. The first point to make is that the proposal, Engels's only explicit reference to 'false consciousness', comes from a letter written some ten years after Marx's death. Moreover, Engels himself has a sharp sense of the division between private correspondence and work intended for the public realm. A short time later he was to warn another correspondent: 'Please do not weigh each word in the above too scrupulously... I regret that I have not the time to work out what I am writing to you so exactly as I should be obliged to do for publication'.^[11] The conception that was sketched in his private correspondence plays no part, it should be noted, in Engels's own use of the concept of ideology in works written for publication, even in those of which he was the sole author.^[12] Moreover, his warning has in one sense been thoroughly heeded. For very little attention has been paid in the later literature to the particular shade of meaning he wished to attach to the notion of false consciousness. What he seems to have had in mind is a quite specific kind of cognitive failure on the part of an individual, a failure of self-awareness, a lack of insight into the 'motive forces' of their own thinking. What is generally in question later under the rubric of false consciousness is, as was suggested above, some form of collective illusion of much more general scope. Plainly this cannot claim even so much of the authority of Engels as would otherwise attach to the contents of the false consciousness letter.

It should be added that this letter is not the only source of guidance on the question of ideology that Engels has to offer after Marx's direct influence on him was removed. In a text Engels did intend for publication, and indeed over which he might be assumed to have taken particular care, he speaks of 'the great law of motion of history, the law according to which all historical struggles, whether they proceed in the political, religious, philosophical or some other ideological domain, are in fact only the more less clear expression of struggles of social classes'.^[13] This may surely be taken as a version of the formulation of Marx's 'Preface' that is helpfully more explicit in one important respect, its reference to 'the struggles of social classes', than the earlier work could afford to be in its own class. An attempt to develop a positive account of what ideology means to Marx and, a lone aberration apart, to Engels also, could hardly do better than to start here. To do so would be a more fitting tribute to Engels's intellectual legacy than that represented by the pursuit of the spectre of false consciousness he so lightly conjured into existence.

Notes

1. J. Plamenatz, *Ideology*, London, Macmillan, 1970, p.23.

2. J. Larraín, *Marxism and Ideology* London, Macmillan, 1983.

3. T. Eagleton, *Ideology*, London, Verso, 1991.

4. An attempt at such an interpretation is made in J. McCaerney, *The Real World of Ideology* Brighton, Harvester, 1980.

5. K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1970, p.21.
 6. K. Marx and F. Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', *The Revolutions of 1848* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 77.
 7. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1965, p.417.
 8. *German Ideology* p.37.
 9. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1960, p.22.
 10. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d., p.541.
 11. *Selected Correspondence* p. 551.
 12. The discussion of the ideological significance of religion in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* is typical and instructive in this regard. See K.Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* vol.2, Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958, pp. 380- 402.
 13. Preface to K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1934, p.9.
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'Capitalism' as False Consciousness¹

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Abstract

The assertion on which this paper is based is that Capitalism has been superseded by Corporatism. I put forward an argument as to why Marxist scholars can and should abandon the idea that Capitalism still exists based on Marx's approach to understanding political economy. Further, I argue that Marx's method can be deployed to better understand and change the corporatist system in which we are currently living first by understanding what it means to be "labour" in a system governed by complex structures of debt.

Overview

The central assertion I wish to defend in this paper is that capitalism no longer exists as a social relation of production and that it has been superseded by a corporatist system. The question I am asking of Marx's work is therefore largely methodological. The Marxian concepts of 'labour' and 'consciousness' provide a focus on what I perceive to be a flaw in much contemporary analysis of global political economy, Marxian or otherwise. That flaw is the insistence that we continue to live in some form of capitalism or other. I argue that the system of political economy currently exerting the most force on contemporary social change is corporatist, and therefore technically fascist (if we take Mussolini's definition).

What I want to show here is that Marx's method of analysis, especially evident in his earlier work, remains useful for political economic analysis in corporatism and any subsequent systems that emerge from it. I proceed by framing conceptions of labour and consciousness within what I understand to be the most relevant aspects of Marx's approach for understanding contemporary political economy: namely, his dialectical method and historical materialist framework. I argue that it is unhelpful for Marxians to retain the terms and tenets of Capital for understanding a system that flourishes primarily by propagating impostures of capitalist behaviours. Further, by holding fast to discussions about capitalism in the current context, the overall effect is to obscure the corporatist character of the system and its historical meaning.

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“Labour” and its referent

In classical political economy, labour is a factor of production, a variable cost. What supposedly distinguishes labour in capitalist relations is its status as a commodity. I have had a number of discussions with fellow Marxists who insist that as long as labour is a commodity we must accept that we are still ensconced in a capitalist form of political economy. I disagree that this is necessarily the case.² As far as I see it, Marx's definitive comments on the essence of labour are the following, if for no other reason than they contain a specific element that changed very little throughout the course of his scholarship: what is called “labour” in *Capital* is essentially an historically specific designation for the mediating relationship between humans and the rest of nature:

[1] workers can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material in which labour realizes itself, in which it is active and from which, and by means of which, it produces. (Marx, 1844/1972)

Quote [1] is from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), one of Marx's earliest works in political economy. Later, Marx emphasises that labour not only realises itself in nature but is a force of nature:

[2] Labour is *not the source* of all wealth. Nature is just as much a source of use values ... as labour, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power. (Marx, 1875/1972: 382)

Quote [2] is from Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, written thirty years after the Manuscripts. Again, labour is both a part of nature, as well as the subjective (by which I mean active) aspect of human existence in relation to the rest of nature. Later, in volume three of *Capital*, he criticises the bourgeois economists' conception of labour because it is

[3] nothing but an abstraction and taken by itself cannot exist at all, or, if we take *what is actually meant here*, [labour is] the entire productive activity of man, through which his metabolic interchange with nature is mediated (1981: 954 my emphasis).

Marx is critical of this conception of labour in the context of *Capital* because it is unhistorical and permits no analysis of social relations in respect of *Capital* which *is* an historically specific relation of production. Throughout his work, Marx suggests that the essence of “labour”—its universal referent—transcends class and historically specific social relations however defined because it is nothing less than humanity's interactions with each other and the rest of nature. Marx's distinction between productive and unproductive labour made in

Capital (1976) and elsewhere is based on whether surplus value is extracted from particular types of labour. Given the orientation of my argument here—that capitalism no longer exists—a more “universal” definition of human-nature interactions delineates a particular aspect of humanity through which to analyse what *was* “labour” in Capital *has become* in global Corporatism. Moreover, the widespread talk of “a global knowledge economy” indicates that the entire spectrum of human energies has been subsumed under systemic appropriation regimes, thereby giving all human energies the character of universally productive labour. From the “audience labour” of mass mediated societies (Smythe, 1981), to the “hard labour” of mining and building industries, to the “cheap” piecework of low-paid factory workers throughout the developing world, to the “leisure” industries, to exercise factories, to legalised prostitution and corporate childcare systems, the entire spectrum of human activity now exists within corporatist frameworks of value extraction. It is conceivable that such a comprehensive system of appropriation could exist within Capitalist social relations. But there are three main features of corporatism that delineate it from capitalism: the dispersion of ownership through a generalised savings system (pensions and retirement funds, superannuation, equity markets); the separation of ownership from control; and a generalised credit system that extends from individuals to whole nations.

The basic premise of Marx’s analysis of Capital is that it is a system unique in being geared solely towards commodity production in pursuit of increased exchange-values. It is therefore a system of self-valorising values. It is divided into two great classes: the owners of the means of production (Capitalists) and those who work for them (Labour). Universal commodity circulation through various media of exchange is the presupposition of Capital. Workers are reduced to the status of commodities because their mode of participation in this system entails them selling their energies to capitalists thereby creating systemic antagonism between the two classes. Commodity consciousness—the ceaseless pursuit of exchange-values in exchange for human life force—pervades the consciousness of workers and capitalists alike. This is of course a great simplification of Marx’s analysis. However, the point I wish to make is this: Marx proceeds from the assumption that the way we produce, which includes our motivations for doing so and the social character of *what* we produce, defines who we are in relation to the system in which we produce. Simultaneously, the relationships that characterise an historically specific system of production imbue its constituents with the tenets and terms of that peculiar system, thereby making the system seem universal and immutable.

From wage labour to debt serviceability

Given that Marx's approach was useful for understanding the character of capitalism, let us consider the relationships that constitute the current system. It is my contention that the corporatist system is premised on the production of exchange-values in the future tense, or put simply: *debt*. Corporatism is characterised by a system in which the production, distribution, circulation, and exchange of indebtedness dominates the consciousness of its constituents. Debt consciousness has begun to pervade societies and their constituents throughout the world at every level. Credit underpins the corporatist system's feudal character because it provides the basis of loyal "service" and is the realisation of corporate benefice for that service. Marx describes the moral basis of the credit system:

[4] Credit is the economic judgement on the morality of a man. In the credit system man replaces metal or paper as the mediator of exchange. However, he does this not as a man but as the incarnation of capital and interest ... Human individuality, human morality, have become both articles of commerce and the material which money inhabits. The substance, the body clothing the spirit of money is not money, paper, but instead it is my personal existence, my flesh and blood, my social worth and status. Credit no longer actualizes money-values in actual money but in human flesh and in human hearts. (Marx 1844 [1975]: 264)

In a universalised credit system, "labour" is no longer a commodity, it is literally "human capital"—people are exchange values set in the future tense so that we are worth only what we owe.

The rise of consumer credit, national and international systems of credit, the proliferation of privately issued money, and the means of global communication linking these systems of debt provide the basis of a system that was unthinkable in Marx's day. The historical movement of money-as-medium has resulted in humanity making *itself* the expression of exchange values. Consequently the credit system (which is many systems more or less closely linked) is a systematic claim upon massive amounts of future human life. Trade in abstract forms of money constitutes roughly 99.9% of *all* "trade", and new forms of tradable debt continue to proliferate at an astonishing rate (cf. Hart 1999; Saul 1997; Graham, 2006). The bulk of transactions that occur within the globally mediated system that has cynically been called "the knowledge economy" is constituted of nothing less than claims on future life. It is the mass "monetisation" of past and present human life and its subsequent mortgage against some imagined future based on actuarial calculation. The result is a mass indenture of future human life to the service of corporatised debt. The movement from

capitalism to corporatism is in large part an achievement of expert discourse, particularly the languages of law, finance, policy, and econometrics.

Credit is money in the subjunctive mood; it is the future-in-present expression of potential human life calculated in terms of exchange-values. In Marx's description of credit [4], we see a recognition that the credit system contains in embryonic form the total colonisation of social values – spiritual, cultural, social, economic, and moral – by monetary values. The credit system transforms people into mere *materials of commerce and the material which money inhabits*. In *all* its future tenses, money infuses *human flesh and human hearts*, and with these, human imaginations. With the emergence of a more or less generalised credit system, money values are no longer expressed in the alien, objectified forms of paper, gold, or silver, but in *personal existence, flesh and blood, social worth and status*: today, “human” and “social” capital have very literal meanings. But the movement does not stop at the colonisation of individuals.

From student loans and credit card debt; from consumer debt to household debt to national debt; from partisan political debts to personal financial favours, the oppressive character of debt now fills the imaginations of people everywhere. Rather than working for one's living, people in advanced and developing societies now work to “service”, “manage”, or “retire” their debt. This holds as much for entire nations as it does for individuals. Listen to Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard:

[5] Well [the treasurer] has unveiled a larger than expected surplus. It just shows how well the economy is growing and how well it's being managed by the Government. ... Self evidently we are very keen to retire debt. We inherited a mortgage of \$96 billion from Mr Beazley and we're very happy to have been in a position of repaying almost \$53 billion dollars of that by the end of this financial year. (Howard, 2000)

There is a significant systemic shift evident in such utterances. The nation has become an entity to be *managed*. It has a *mortgage*, a debt owed to someone or something, though to whom or what is almost always unspecified. In corporatism, excellent national management will *retire debt*, remain creditworthy, and create a *surplus*. In this view, civic institutions of the “welfare state” become an impediment, and the governance of entire nations takes the form of a Harvard Business School case-study. The administrative unit (nation, state, province, or municipality) is viewed by its management as a corporate entity that must operate efficiently. But what it is that must be done so “efficiently” is rarely specified.

Managing the Corporatist State

The following is from George W. Bush's *The President's Management Agenda* (2001) and further indicates that capitalist era institutions of governance are becoming an encumbrance to effective administration of corporatism because they lack the flexibility of "private" institutions:

[6] Federal managers are greatly limited in how they can use available financial and human resources to manage programs; they lack much of the discretion given to their private sector counterparts to do what it takes to get the job done. Red tape still hinders the efficient operation of government organizations; excessive control and approval mechanisms afflict bureaucratic processes. Micro-management from various sources—Congressional, departmental, and bureau—imposes unnecessary operational rigidity. (Bush, 2001: 5)

And, from Britain, the corporatist and feudal character of the current system is evidenced in the Blair Government's development of a National Asset Register, British government's first effort to estimate the fiscal worth of everything it "owns" since 1086:

[7] The government will this week publish its National Asset Register – the "Domesday Book" of all the assets owned by the government with their monetary values. [...] The Treasury, hopes the register can be a key tool in improving the efficiency of the public sector, by making it possible to calculate whether government departments are getting good value for money out of property and other assets. [...] A Treasury official said "Departments now have the tools, the information and the incentives they need to improve the productivity of their assets". (Crooks 2001)

The historical implications of such statements are far reaching. Governments at all levels now see themselves as management teams, and the domain over which they exercise authority is reduced to the status of a corporation. They are agents of productivity, owners of assets, and the promoters of managerially defined efficiencies.

Marx notes that within the capitalist class, specifically in the domain of financial control, a 'further division of labour' develops, 'both a division into various branches independent of one another, and the development of the workplace within these branches (large offices, numerous book-keepers and cashiers, and far-reaching division of labour)' (1981: 433). His definition of labour includes the intermediaries of capital, such as managers (1981: 506-9). He makes a qualitative distinction on the basis of social function and possessive antagonism between managerial labour and 'social labour' more generally (1981: 509):

[8] This work of management and supervision, in so far as it is not simply a particular function arising from the nature of all combined social labour ... arises from the *opposition* between the owner of the means of production and the owner of mere labour-power - whether labour-power is bought with the worker himself, as in the slave system, or alternatively the worker sells his own labour-power, so that the production process appears at the same time as a process of consumption of labour by capital. (1981: 509).

This definition is worth some consideration given the political utterances and initiatives I have cited above. It goes to the very definition of capitalism itself. For the purposes of my argument regarding the passing of capitalism, the key concept here is the notion of "owners of the means of production". This is a core element in Marx's definition of capitalist relations (1973, 1970, 1976, 1981) and is the basis of his theory of the 'two great classes' that characterise capital as a system of social relations: owners of means of production and wage-labourers.

Ownership, labour, and the production of corporatist consciousness

In the current system ownership is not identical to control. Ownership of the most influential systems of production is now dispersed among, or invested in, corporate "persons", or corporations, or combinations thereof. They are fictions of law whose appointed representatives now overtly exercise direct influence in the course of human affairs. The utterances of political leaders from throughout the world, such as those quoted above in [5], [6], [7], and [8], indicate that government administrations see themselves as owners of productive assets, with administration being responsible for the assets' "productivity". These "assets" consist of debt-burdened people, whether directly indebted or paying for national debt through poverty, homelessness, ill-health, organised violence, or early death. An often repeated dictum of corporatist political representatives is that the "property" of governments is public property, but that such property is better off being "privatised", by which is meant placing public infrastructure under corporate control—per the doctrine of "privatisation"—to create increased efficiencies (Saul, 1997). Transfers of massive public infrastructure—jails, transport, health, education, and warfare—to corporate interests continues throughout the world at an accelerating rate. This has an unusual effect on the composition of labour, even in the most extreme of circumstances

[9] Private corporations have penetrated western warfare so deeply that they are now the second biggest contributor to coalition forces in Iraq after the Pentagon, a Guardian investigation has established.

While the official coalition figures list the British as the second largest contingent with around 9,900 troops, they are narrowly outnumbered by the 10,000 private military contractors now on the ground (Traynor, 2003)

Private contractors have become so entangled in US-led military operations that the military can literally not do without them (Traynor, 2003). This is Lewis Mumford's theory of "organisation man" writ large.

Corporatist modes of ownership and the mobilisation of future labour

Corporatist modes of ownership are of great significance in understanding corporatist social relations. We can begin to do so by focusing our investigation at the institutional level. For example, there has been much made in recent times of mutual funds and their influence on "the economy", especially in respect of poor (if not criminal) corporate governance. Legal malfeasance aside, corporations have been key in the dispersion of ownership, the centralisation of control, and the separation of control from ownership. The practical effect of corporatised pools of funds, in combination with compulsory savings policies throughout the developed world (e.g. superannuation, 401K plans, etc) and myriad "off balance-sheet" financial instruments, has been to mobilise a vast pool of personal savings that provides the basis of a system in which circulation of exchange values becomes the primary determinant and measure of economic "success" and productivity. In turn, by exercising control over the bulk of exchange-values, and by being charged with the continual increase in the value of these exchange-values, these types of corporations help to disperse ownership to the point at which, at any given time, it is often impossible for individual persons to know where or in what their savings are invested, or for how long.

The hoard that people put aside for their future, either through taxation or enforced pension plans, is now used by mutual funds, banks, and other financial institutions as gambling stakes in the global market for shares, derivatives, bonds, and manifold forms of debt and insurance. The direct result of this is that people often have no idea what they own or what their savings actually mean in terms of real ownership. We therefore have no possibility of exercising control in the entities and projects in which our monies may be invested. The institutional points at which public savings are pooled and mobilised are the points at which ownership and control are separated. Simultaneously they are the points at which control becomes more centralised as ownership becomes more dispersed, anonymous, ephemeral, and socialised.

From a Marxian perspective it is ironic that the institutional mechanisms that have enabled the closest approximation of “social ownership of the means of production” have simultaneously enabled the separation of ownership from any meaningful function in the control of political economic conditions. For the relatively few corporate persons that exercise control over the bulk of exchange-values, the pool of “assets” they control provide a means through which power can be “leveraged” at a hitherto unprecedented scale and scope. For example, Rupert Murdoch can exercise control over a global media empire by owning less than 15 percent of the company's equity. That is the notion of a “controlling interest” in corporate governance. Here is how changes in such arrangements are communicated to the public in official terms, and how a relatively small share in one corporation can be translated into a larger share of another (the mechanism is debt):

[10] This page provides information on the joint application filed by General Motors Corporation (“GM”), Hughes Electronics Corporation (“Hughes”) and The News Corporation Limited (“News Corp.” and, collectively with GM and Hughes, the “Applicants”) to the Commission seeking consent to transfer control of various Commission licenses and authorizations, including direct broadcast satellite (“DBS”) and fixed satellite space station, earth station, and terrestrial wireless authorizations held by Hughes and its wholly- or majority-owned subsidiaries to News Corp. (“Application”). The proposed transaction involves the split-off of Hughes from GM, wherein Hughes will become a separate and independent company, followed by a series of transactions where News Corp., through its majority-held subsidiary, Fox Entertainment Group, will acquire a 34% interest in Hughes. The remaining 66% interest in Hughes will be held by three GM employee benefit trusts (managed by an independent trustee), which combined will hold an approximately 20% interest in Hughes, and by the general public, which will hold an approximately 46% interest in Hughes. (Federal Communications Commission, 2003)

Note the complex combination of interests expressed here. Three corporate persons, News Corporation, General Motors, and Hughes Electronics Corporation, have proposed an arrangement that gives a single person control over a global, extra terrestrial media system—the sole purpose of which is to produce forms of consciousness on a global scale—by mobilising employee benefit trusts and the money of “the general public”.³ Such an arrangement would not have been possible a mere 25 years ago.

To emphasise the complexity of ownership expressed here, it is worth noting that it is not News Corporation that owns a controlling interest in Hughes Electronics. It is to be owned by

Fox, a subsidiary of News Corp. Murdoch owns a controlling interest of *less than 15 percent* in News Corp. As the above example demonstrates, a “controlling interest” in one major corporation can be leveraged to exercise ownership of more and more subsidiary corporations with larger and larger shareholdings by piling mortgage upon mortgage at arm’s distance through corporate structures and the deployment of debt.

In this situation, debt is revealed as the oppressive weapon that it is. The following is a report of a hostile move on the Murdoch “empire”:

[11] With 48m voting shares – some bought in the open market – and 210m non-voting shares, Liberty now has an total equity stake of 17pc, making it the biggest single shareholder. The Murdoch family owns 13pc of the equity, but retains 30pc of the votes. [...]

The surprise deal raised questions over the future of the News Corp empire. Theoretically, Mr Malone could swap more of his non-voting stock for shares with voting rights, thus increasing his influence on the company. But he would find it difficult to wrest control from the Murdoch family.

At present they are protected by a number of “poison pill” defences, including one stating that all of News Corp's \$8.7billion debt falls due if there is a change of control at the company. (Litterick, 2004)

Here corporate control and debt are revealed as key levers in the new political economy. News Corp’s debt is Murdoch’s protection over his personal control. The threat is that Murdoch’s deferred debt will become *real* debt, due *now* if he or his family loses control. This is how, at each step in the corporate process of leveraging “controlling interests”, an increasing number of relatively minor shareholdings gets transformed into control over larger and larger amounts of labour, by which I mean human activity in general.

Universal labour and the emergence of corporate consciousness

It is in this very general sense that Marx provides a useful distinction that is perhaps best seen as a distinction between synchronic and diachronic aspects of labour. It is the distinction between

[12] universal labour and communal labour. Both kinds play their role in the process of production, both flow one into the other, but both are also differentiated. Universal labour is all scientific work, all discovery and invention. It is brought about partly by the

cooperation of men now living, but partly also by building on earlier work. Communal labour, however, simply involves the direct cooperation of individuals (1981: 198).

In his definition of 'universal labour', Marx includes the productive forces of people throughout history, their intellectual and cultural activities, their technologies, and the various modes of relatedness through which they have passed. As Marx points out, the distinction between universal and communal labour is somewhat problematic because it is clear that these two broadly defined forms of labour are intimately entangled at any time—they are literally two different views of social relatedness at any particular time: synchronic and diachronic. Such a distinction is especially problematic in the presence of a "knowledge" or "information" economy, in which even certain forms of thinking and representing are counted as productive forces.

While any neat division between "manual" and "intellectual" labour is patently false (Schiller 1996: 20-1), it is worth seeing the difference between diachronic and synchronic views of labour in terms of social knowledge, especially in what is being widely touted as a knowledge economy. In one view, the diachronic, we see that all knowings, all expertise, all techniques have their social and historical provenances. In the other view, the synchronic, we see how specific interactions instantiate, comprise, and transform the communal (or social) production and reproduction of universal labour at any particular time. The two views are inseparable in characterising a system of social relations. A knowledge economy, for example, is an economy that presupposes more and less valuable ways of knowing. Such ways of knowing are produced in rarefied contexts (such as universities, banks, or corporate board rooms), distributed, valorised, and exchanged in various forms of language "made" for and by different groups of people.⁴ A corollary to this, considering the 'division of intellectual labour' (Jarvis 1998, pp. 87-88) that knowledge of varying values presumes, is that certain dialects—or ways of representing—are more readily valorised than others, largely because of their institutional context of production. To clarify: valuable knowledge is *necessarily* the product of valorised institutional contexts, and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1991). Throughout history, valorised dialects have played an important role in creating 'knowledge monopolies' and socially dominant classes, as have other technologies that the "owners" of sacred knowledge deploy (cf. Innis, 1950). Such dialects have, at various times, included those of politicians, scientists, priests, lawyers, economists, kings, and so on (cf Lemke, 1995: chapt. 4). The inalienably political character of such dialects converges with their social and historical origins:

[13] The fact is, therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into ... definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals ... The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourses of men [*sic*], the language of real life ... The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics etc. of a people. ... If in all ideology men [*sic*] and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process (Marx & Engels, 1846/1972: 123-124).

This much-cited view is a synthesis of universal and communal labour, as described above. Apart from identifying the social and historical links between labour and consciousness, Marx and Engels identify the obfuscatory nature of valorised dialects and their relationship with other forms of social production and reproduction, including the links between historically specific forms of social consciousness and historical context. Valorised dialects, when viewed as materially enacted, socially embedded products, take on the appearance of objective “things”. That is because language is ultimately entangled in the labour of conscious distinctions: ‘Language *is* practical consciousness’ (Marx & Engels, 1846/1972: 124). Therefore a critical examination of how consciousness is actively produced implies a perspective grounded in a critical analysis of which meanings are most influential and how such meanings are produced and reproduced. Such an approach, I argue, is at the core of Marx’s analytical framework. Furthermore, I believe it to be as useful for understanding the debt-laden consciousness of corporatism as it was when Marx used it to analyse nineteenth century capitalist relations.

Marx, social analysis, and critical method

Norman Fairclough and I (2002) have detailed elsewhere an argument for understanding how Marx’s dialectical method can be seen as a form of what is now called “critical discourse analysis”, among other things. More broadly, Marx’s is a socially grounded, historically informed method of critical language analysis designed to challenge and change orthodoxies. Some have suggested that Marx lacked a systematic ‘theory of language’ (e.g. Cook, 1982: 530; Lepschy, 1985). But that is to entirely overlook the foundations of nineteenth century scholarship. Marx’s contribution to qualitative social analysis, especially

his contribution to critical language analysis (however named), cannot be understood without taking into account the enduring influence of classical scholarship throughout most of the nineteenth century (Bloom, 1943). Nor can we grasp the centrality of critical language analysis to Marx's method without taking into account Marx's philosophical and juridical education in Germany at a time when Hegel's philosophy was considered to be a revolutionary intellectual force (cf. Bloom, 1943; Colletti, 1975: 46; Hook, 1928a,b: 114; Tucker, 1972: xvii-xviii). An understanding of language was central to scholarship during the time Marx studied. It was, in fact, the foundation of nineteenth century classical scholarship (Adorno, 1973: 56, 1994: 18-21, 116-118; Cook, 1982: 530; Grote, 1872).

Fairclough and I identified three conceptual elements that are central to understanding the "critical linguistic" aspects of Marx's method of analysis. The elements we highlight are: the doctrine of *abstraction*, the nineteenth century conception of Aristotle's *dialectic*, and the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century conceptions of *ideology*, the philosophical counterpart of post-revolutionary political economy in France and Germany. When we trace these themes out in their historical context, what we find in Marx's formulation of dialectics is an intense mixture of naturalism and humanism intertwined with a discursive and relational approach to analysing social phenomena (Fairclough and Graham, 2002). I only have time here to touch on what I think is the most relevant and overt aspect of Marx's method for understanding the changes that we are going through: dialectics.

As developed in the classical system, dialectical arguments have 'for their province words and discourse; they are ... powers or accomplishments of discourse' (Grote, 1872: 384). Dialectical arguments are therefore primarily concerned with language. Dialectic focuses on *Endoxa*, 'premises, propositions and problems' that are 'borrowed from some one among the varieties of accredited or authoritative opinions' – from 'a particular country', 'an intelligent majority' or from 'a particular school of philosophers or wise individuals' (1872: 383). *Endoxa* are found 'exclusively in the regions of ... received opinions', and dialectical argumentation proceeds upon the assumption that in 'every society there are floating beliefs, each carrying with it a certain measure of authority' (385-6). Dialectics assumes that the beliefs and propositions common to a given community will often contradict each other. But they are an important focus for precisely for this reason—*Endoxa* form the basis of what we call "common sense". Each individual, as they mature, 'imbibes of these opinions and beliefs insensibly and without special or professional teaching' (385). Consequently, they 'carry with them more or less authority, and it is from them that the reasonings of common life ... are supplied' (385).

Endoxic propositions carry with them an assumption of 'probability', precisely because of their status as authoritatively received or common opinion within a given social context (389-90). Endoxa have 'support from the mass of opinions and beliefs floating and carrying authority at the same time', and dialectical analysis 'is carried on within this wide field of floating opinions' (389-90). The method is to search 'for a "counter syllogism" of which the conclusion is contradictory' (an antithesis) to the Endoxa it is investigating (390). Such a method does not proceed from first principles; rather, the purpose of deploying dialectics is to 'open a new road to the first *principia* of each separate science' (391). In any case, first principles 'can never be scrutinized through the truths of the science itself, which presuppose them and are deduced from them' (391). Such principles can only be challenged from outside a particular science, and dialectical argumentation is designed precisely for this purpose. Its most useful function is that of 'dissipating the false persuasions of knowledge' based on contradictory principles or taken-for-granted, commonsense beliefs and assumptions (391).

The primary category of classical dialectics is *Relation*. Considered in the most comprehensive sense, all the dialectical categories 'are implicated and subordinated to Relation' (115-20). Relation, 'understood in the large sense which really belongs to it, ought to be considered as an Universal, comprehending and pervading all the Categories' (120). Consequently, new relations 'may become predicable of a thing, without any change in the thing itself, but simply by changes in other things' (122). As a method of inquiry dialectics can be described as a *relational* and *social* theory of language, a theory of *language in use* that is drawn from 'common speech', and which is inalienably bound up with social consciousness and relationships in a world which is assumed to be wholly social and material in its determination. The *relational* aspect of dialectical categories is therefore its most important. The relational aspect of dialectic is 'not as one amongst many distinct Categories, but as implicated with all the Categories' (Grote, 1872: 126).

The primacy of the relational in classical dialectics can be seen throughout Marx's early texts. The relational aspect of classical scholarship is organised around the concept of *Relata* (100-104). *Relata* are 'said to be *of other things*, or are said to be in some manner *towards something else*' (100). Thus, *Relata* are 'so designated in virtue of their relation to another *Correlata*; the master is master *of a servant* – the servant is servant *of a master*' (1872: 101; cf. also Hegel, 1807/1966: 228-40). Therefore 'the *Relatum* and its *Correlate* seem to be *simul naturâ*. If you suppress one of the pair, the other vanishes' (Grote, 1872: 102).

Throughout Marx's early work, through to the *Grundrisse*, we can clearly identify elements of the formal Aristotelian method modified by Hegel's introduction of the dialectic to the time element. Dialectical terms such as "subjects and predicates"; "Ens", "genus", and "species"; "differentia and semblances"; "accidents and errors in language" and so on, pervade the texts. Marx quite clearly deploys elements of the dialectical method. Yet it would be misleading in the extreme to say that Marx relied solely upon language, or fetishised it in any way. He and Engels make this quite clear in the introduction to *The German Ideology*:

[14] Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men ... it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical, or egoistic consciousness, and thus removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to demands to interpret reality in another way, i.e. to recognise it by means of another interpretation. (1846/1972: 113)

Like the latter-day social constructivists, the Young Hegelians fought phrases with phrases. I read Marx's 'language of real life' as a many-sided metaphor for social *praxis*. His dialectical, historical materialist method recognises that meanings are produced in reciprocal relationship with the whole of social life and are expressions of the social relations in which they are produced.

Marxian futures in global corporatism

Nothing appears to irritate Marxists more than the suggestion that Capitalism is finished. Whether or not it is because without capitalism Marxians feel themselves to be irrelevant, or whether they are disappointed that a socialist utopia has not emerged from the womb of Capital, or whether I am entirely mistaken in announcing the passing of Capital, I honestly do not know. My reading of history leads me to believe that, as a social relation of production, Capital began rapidly vanishing from the end of the 1920s and that it had almost entirely disappeared by the mid-1950s. It seems to me that there have been more and less stable transitional systems in between Capitalism and Global Corporatism—State-Capitalism for example, perhaps even "hypercapitalism"—but that is not the point of my argument.

The point I wish to reiterate is this: regardless of what we call the current system, Marx's method remains relevant. There are still social classes. There are still social relations of production. There are still sophisticated mechanisms of exploitation. There are – without a doubt – manifold new forces of production emerging every day, some that promise emancipation, some that threaten total annihilation, others that demand total obeisance. Yet if we cling steadfastly to the idea that Capital still exists as a social relation of production, we have to ask ourselves: on what grounds do we make such a claim? Where are the two great classes of capital, the owners of the means of production and the wage-labourers? Who should we put in those classes? And so on.

If Marx taught us nothing else, he taught us that the orthodoxies produced in any system blind us to our actual conditions; that social relations change continually throughout history; that one day capital would inevitably wither and die. Bleak writer that he was, he promised nothing utopian to me, except perhaps an abiding faith in human nature, and therefore in nature itself:

[15] Species-life, both for man and for animals, consists physically in the fact that man, like animals, lives from inorganic nature; and because man is more universal than animals, so too is the area of inorganic nature from which he lives more universal. Just as plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc., theoretically form a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of science and partly as objects of art — his spiritual inorganic nature, his spiritual means of life, which he must first prepare before he can enjoy and digest them — so, too, in practice they form a part of human life and human activity. In a physical sense, man lives only from these natural products, whether in the form of nourishment, heating, clothing, shelter, etc. The universality of man manifests itself in practice in that universality which makes the whole of nature his inorganic body, (1) as a direct means of life and (2) as the matter, the object, and the tool of his life activity. Nature is man's inorganic body — that is to say, nature insofar as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature — i.e., nature is his body — and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature (PE notes).

Capitalism, it has been said over and over, has triumphed as *the* political economic system. It is the sole remaining alternative. Such a view is bolstered time and time again, and from every visible source. Whether claiming to be “left” or “right” leaning, scholars, politicians, and public pundits of all persuasions express the view that the political economic system we live

in can comfortably be called capitalism (Fukuyama, 1995; Harvey, 2001; Hutton & Giddens, 2000; Jessop, 2002; Soros, 2000). “New capitalism” (Fairclough, Giddens), “global capitalism” (Jessop), “hypercapitalism” (Graham), “postmodern capitalism” (Harvey)—the constant flow of descriptors claiming that capitalism, in some form or other, is alive and thriving comes from practically every sphere of public discourse. This has a number of unhelpful effects, the most deleterious of which is that it offers no alternative understandings of the system in which we live. In such a situation, all that is left to contention is whether capitalism is good or bad, whether it makes things worse or better, and so forth. So, depending on one’s attitude towards capitalism, when arguments about political economic systems are put forward, the scripted arguments “for” and “against” are trotted out and played, over and over, like a badly scratched record, leading to the inevitable conclusion that capitalism is unstoppable and universal, for better or worse, and that we must therefore embrace, fight, or adapt to the system.

The resultant lack of alternative understandings has been exacerbated by Marxians who have attempted to characterise the current system in terms of capitalism without realising that a) it is probably not at all capitalist, and b) even if it is, there are *no* critical arguments against capitalism that can have any beneficial effects in the current context because their function is to bolster a false ideal. That is to say: any arguments about capitalism—for or against—only serve to bolster the widespread notion that capitalism is a universal, global system of political economic relations when, in my assessment, nothing could be further from the facts.

Marx’s most valuable legacy, as I see it, is a very powerful analytical approach for understanding our social world that synthesises synchronic and diachronic views. It is an approach based on the analysis of social relations and focused on *what and how we produce*. It is therefore focused on *what we do*, which includes to some significant degree *what we say and mean*. The challenge for Marxians, from the inside of an almost incomprehensibly violent and complex system, is to understand what relations define this system, how it has been produced, and what we can do to change it for the better.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Marxian Futures workshop held at Cornell University in 2004.
2. ‘though every capital is a sum of commodities — i.e., of exchange values — it does not follow that every sum of commodities, of exchange values, is capital.’ (Marx, 1847 – Wage Labour and Capital)
3. It is worth noting here the employees benefit trusts and the money of the general public are treated as separate. Also, no mention is made of the monies involved in the complex of ownership

of News Corporation and General Motors, the bulk of which also involves and represents the savings of “the general public”.

4. For the sake of convenience, I use the term language here in the broadest sense. I include computer languages, images, symbols, and sounds by which meaning may be exchanged. I recognise that a more formal definition of language would separate these forms of communication into various types.

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The illusion of the digital commons: ‘false consciousness’ in online alternative economies

1. Introduction

Since the publication of Gibson-Graham's *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)* in 1996, a substantive scholarly discourse on 'alternative economies' has emerged (Fickey, 2011). Gibson-Graham (2008: 623) explains that one of the major aims of studying alternative economies is to find ways to 'maintain and expand the commons.' The digital revolution in particular seems to have facilitated the development of novel kinds of commons, in the sense that it has enabled low-cost online sharing, production and use of goods and services, and the consequent development of 'digital commons' (Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2016). The notion of the digital commons is central to our discussion, in particular because of its intimate connection to the – seemingly alternative – economic practices of the emergent 'sharing economy'. Alternative, pre-capitalist economic practices of 'sharing' – like the sharing of living spaces with strangers as a gesture of hospitality (O'Gorman, 2007) – have been digitalized, and expanded, in the post-capitalist forms of exchange platforms such as BeWelcome, Couchsurfing and Airbnb. In this paper, we discuss such platforms for 'hospitality exchange' as illustrations of economic forms belonging to the sharing economy.

The aim of our paper is to reveal how the digital commons in the sharing economy can produce an 'illusion of the commons' and how this illusion in turn gives rise to cynicism amongst digital commoners. Such cynicism can be understood as a contemporary form of false consciousness. We initially approach the digital commons as a source of resistance directed at the capitalist economy. In a capitalist economy, workers and consumers are destined to develop a 'false consciousness', because their consciousness is imposed upon them by the hegemonic ideology of the capitalist ruling classes who collect the fruits of both their capital and the workers' labor (Sklair, 1997; Walby, 2015; Ascione, 2017). 'False consciousness' renders workers and consumers powerless in effectuating post-capitalist transformations. Instead of resisting the capitalist world, workers and consumers are bound to contribute to enforcing its hegemonic rule. Scholars like Negri (2008), Hardt (2010), De Angelis (2010) and Esteva (2014) argue that commons contain a particular potential for negating false consciousness. They stress that commons are an important source of resistance for

commoners against appropriation of resources (including natural resources, parks or urban spaces) by capital. Through commoning, alternative social forms (marked by sharing) and worldviews (marked by pluralism) come to development.

The ‘spread of the commons discourse in recent years’ that Bollier (2007: 29) discerns has to be understood in connection with the ubiquitous application of digital technologies in everyday life. Digital technologies facilitate novel forms of ‘commoning’ – the practice of producing, using and managing of commons – performed by ‘commoners’ that in their producing, using and managing practices are not subjected to disciplinary markets, enclosures, and profit seeking ventures (De Angelis, 2010; Esteva, 2014; Stevenson, 2015). Digital information is turned into a key resource that allows for near-to unlimited collective sharing, production and consumption. Commons, as De Angelis (2003: 1) explains, ‘suggest alternative, non-commodified means to fulfill social needs, e.g. to obtain social wealth and to organize social production.’ They provide what Healy (2015: 345) calls a ‘postcapitalist corrective’: commoners *take care* for the commons to the point that ‘economy’ is no longer synonymous with capitalism. We define capitalism as a modern world organized by a free market economy (appropriation and growth of resources, trust in the future, reinvestment of profits in production and new technologies, and consumerism), and work in exchange for money (Kahan, 2010: 5; De Angelis, 2010). In the past decades, capitalist worlds have been marked by neoliberal hegemony. The neoliberal hegemony rests on overall consent concerning the dominant (or dominating) paradigm of global capitalism in various strata of society achieved by powerful organizations (cf. Lazzarato, 2009). This consent is marked by the post-Keynesian doctrine that the globalizing free market economy will generate efficient use of scarce resources, economic growth and technological progress, through entrepreneurial selfhood and austerity politics. Commons contradict capitalism in the sense that they confront capitalist practices of enclosure and privatization of resources; they provide a basis for resisting the capitalist ethos of appropriation (De Angelis, 2010; Stevenson, 2015).

However, the question arises to what extent the digital commons are indeed emancipatory; to what extent they are carved out of technological systems that can

resist or negate ‘false consciousness’ (cf. Brighenti, 2016). On the one hand, Greaves (2015) observes that users of digital forums act like ‘digital proletarians’ who attempt to transform their cooperative activities into economic value, without becoming revolutionary subjects who think beyond the confines of their present condition in a capitalist world. Digital technologies, Greaves explains, contribute to the displacement and dispersion of critical energy to the point that even as inequality and domination intensify in capitalist worlds, no revolutionary resistance is organized. Accordingly, digital platforms and forums recuperate radical energy and render it passive. On the other hand, Negri (2008: 184) explains that cooperation through commons today must be understood as ‘a new force implicit in today’s living labor’ that is not imposed from outside the workforce. By means of the commons, he maintains, ‘false consciousness’ is negated as ‘production manifests itself as the productive expression of the common’ (Negri, 2008: 181), against capitalist appropriations.

In line with Gibson-Graham and Negri, we welcome the post-capitalist shift to alternative economies and a renewed focus on the commons. Yet, in accordance with Greaves, we seek to emphasize the capitalist dynamics of economic practices of sharing that are conducted through global digital platforms of organizations such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing. Such organizations tend to present themselves as facilitators of ‘sharing’, but at the same time act as capitalist players that focus on profit maximization. As Eskow (2015) stresses, this remarkable tension leads to the revealing of the ‘lie’ of the sharing economy. Do these organizations misuse the word ‘sharing’? Or can we discern a more fundamental ambiguity in the very meaning of the digital ‘sharing economy’ and its relation to the digital commons? We seek to illustrate how the ‘deception’ of post-capitalist practices of sharing that we call the ‘illusion of the digital commons’ comes about and how this illusion generates a form of false consciousness. We want to show how the neoliberal hegemony is preserved by embedding acts of resistance in the culture of ‘acceleration’ of ‘new media technologies’ (Hoofd, 2009: 221-222).

To develop our argument, we firstly explain how the digital commons relate to the overall notion of alternative economies. Second, we construct a conceptual account of how the practice of ‘digital commoning’ is technologically mediated. We do so by

situating Simmel's notion of exchange and the regimes of value it affords in the broader context of technological mediation. Third, we utilize this conceptual understanding of the digital commons to ground the notion of the 'illusion of the digital commons'. The illusion of the digital commons refers to the apparent commoning through digital exchanges that is violated by explicit and implicit price mechanisms embedded in the formal architecture of these exchanges. Fourth, we seek to explain how the illusion of the digital commons results in a form of 'false consciousness' that Sloterdijk (1984) identifies as deeply rooted cynicism. We seek to illustrate that such cynicism is not only fueled by the neoliberal hegemony, but also by a particular 'alternative' economic practice; that is, by digital commoning. We claim that a reconceptualization of the digital commons through the lens of a critique of technology can assist in reorganizing the forms of post-capitalist resistance to neoliberal hegemony, and hence contribute to explicating ways of overcoming the 'illusion of the digital commons' and the 'false consciousness' (cynicism) it generates.

2. Commons and digital technologies

Originally, the academic debate on commons emerged from an increasing awareness of ecological destruction due to limitless privatization of resources and the destructive externalities of capitalist production and consumption. When Hardin (1968) wrote his 'Tragedy of the Commons', he wrote as an ecologist concerned with overexploitation in shared resource systems such as oceans, rivers, fish stocks, forests, parks and graze lands that, as Healy (2015: 353) emphasizes, are traditionally cared for by local communities. Commons have always existed in abundance: because no scarcity was experienced, commons could be used freely, in accord with an ethos of hospitality (Negri, 2008: 102-107; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Esteva, 2014; O'Neil, 2015). Hardin (1968), however, stressed that commons can become overexploited and, accordingly, the law of scarcity is being felt. Therefore, he argued that open access to commons must be restricted for ecological reasons. Ostrom revisited Hardin's tragedy of the commons dilemma. She argued that the main threat to commons arises from commodification or enclosure. This threat can be held in check if local communities

manage to develop managerial capacities – that is, develop ‘common pool resource institutions’, including rules, self-monitoring, sanctions, low cost-conflict resolution, etc. – to protect commons (Hess and Ostrom, 2007: 7).

As a result of the introduction of digital technologies in our everyday lives, the scope of the commons has been expanded to include technological constructs that Hess (2000: 14) designates as ‘digital technology commons’ and ‘information exchange commons’. In contrast with the ‘ecological commons’, the risk of overexploitation does not exist for digital commons, which are fueled by an abundance of digital information. No local communities take care of such digital commons but, instead, loose global networks of users who are driven by collective production of information and knowledge, and open or non-exclusive access (Cahir, 2004; Anheier and List, 2005; Hardt, 2010 Roggero, 2010; Wittel, 2014). As Ebru Akoglu (2015: 102) explains, ‘the center of the commons and of commoning is not a “common pool resource,” but the practice of “pooling common resources”.’ Digital commoning can be defined as the practice of pooling digital resources, for instance as digital commoners who individually contribute knowledge (e.g. Wikipedia entries) to a pooled knowledge database that is accessible to all participants of the respective digital commons. The paradigm case of digital commons is illustrated by services that exclusively consist of information exchanges, such as Wikipedia and Linux. However, many forms of digital commoning are not purely informational but are entangled within an organizational network of concrete (non-digitalized) economic practices. For instance, the sharing of a room via an online hospitality exchange is only partly a digitalized economic practice, in the sense that it includes both the practices of sharing material space and of online exchanging of the digital representation of these material spaces that enables the ‘sharing’.

One can object that services such as hospitality exchanges are not really digital commons. Hospitality exchanges form a sort of ‘hybrid’ between practices conducted through cyberspace in which there is an abundance of information and actual, concrete and material interactions that include economic objects that are private properties (houses, cars). Apart from the fact that such hybrid forms of digital commons – including hospitality exchanges (Schöpf, 2014), peer-to-peer 3D printing (Kostakis &

Papachristou, 2014) and car sharing platforms (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012) – are typically characterized as commons-based services, two compelling arguments can be brought to the fore in support of understanding hospitality exchange platforms as digital commons, at least initially.

First, the common-pool resources in question, namely the openly shared digital representations of actual living spaces, to a large extent adhere to the two characteristics of the commons as offered by Ostrom (1990). These resources have the property of rivalness, meaning that a person who opts for using the resource subtracts from the ability of someone else to do the same. The material goods and services involved in the practices of digital commoning are intimately linked to their digital representations. This means that such representations cannot be indefinitely reproduced, as is the case with exclusively informational commons. For instance, an advert of a shared living space refers to a particular material resource and can therefore not be indefinitely ‘copied’ and ‘offered’ to different commoners. Furthermore, beneficiaries are able to ‘free ride’ on the service (Dolsak & Ostrom, 2003: 7-8), implying that they can make use of hosting possibilities without providing hosting services themselves. This however, mostly applies to hospitality platforms that do not include monetary exchange in the interactions between hosts and guest – a point that we will return to in section 4.

Second, even if Ostrom’s definition can be questioned, a strong case can be made for the idea that users of hospitality platforms are engaged in a practice of ‘commoning’ as characterized by the active process of ‘pooling resources’ (Aklogu 2015: 102). That is, one can defend the claim that resources are taken care of by a community of digital commoners. These digital commoners actively engage, through discrete individual efforts (Benkler & Nissenbaum 2006: 401), in the pooling together of digitalized living spaces that would have otherwise remained inaccessible to them. The community aspect of this practice can be illustrated with an account of engagement of both hosts and guests in local ‘meetups’ (which are organized for Airbnb, Couchsurfing and BeWelcome) and by online connections made between hosts and guests (each member being part of her own online ‘community’). For the

remainder of the article, we focus on hospitality exchanges as paradigm cases to illustrate the hybrid form of ‘digital commoning’ that is central to our discussion.

3. Technological mediation of digital commoning

How do digital technologies mediate the practice of commoning and consequently, constitute the practice of digital commoning? To answer this question, Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* provides us with relevant theoretical insights. As Appadurai (2003: 77) explains, Simmel offers a valuable basis for thinking about the conditions for certain ‘regimes of value’. We approach both the capitalist economy and the commons as such regimes of value. Yet, in contrast to Simmel, we do not position them as two extremes of a dichotomy but instead as concepts that assist us in interpreting differences in organization of the economy. Simmel’s notion of exchange is based on the conceptualization of a dialectical movement that according to Lash (2005: 9) belongs to an overall ‘vitalist’ philosophy that looks at the *tensions* that arise out of certain forms of intersubjectivity (such as monetary exchange or commoning). Simmel (1900: 78-79) explains that economic practices are not based on ‘objective’ economic conditions (such as scarcity of resources) but rather on (inter-) subjective conditions for the exchange of objects of value. The subjective valuation of an object is ignited by the desire of a subject to overcome the distance that separates her from the desired object of value – a distance that can only be overcome through a sacrifice (such as the sacrifice of labor power to enjoy the value of grazing lands) (Simmel 1900: 88).

The overcoming of distance defines the practice of ‘exchange’, in the sense that this movement constitutes the economic practice that brings about value (and, consequently, objects of value). A useful insight that we gain from Simmel’s approach is a basic distinction between exchange of economic value (Simmel has a narrower understanding of ‘economy’ than Gibson-Graham) and other types of exchange. We take the exchange of economic value, as defined by Simmel, as basic for the monetary economy in which the paradigm of global capitalism thrives. Exchange of *economic*

value only comes about when both an object of value *and* sacrifices are exchanged (Shilling and Mellor, 2013: 238). Economic value is thereby distinct from other types of value involved in the practice of exchange because ‘its validity transcends the individual subject’ (Simmel, 1900: 85), tying it to the inter-subjective standards and measurements of the monetary economy. Exchange of economic value requires a mediating inter-subjective measurement – a price – to be realized (Simmel, 1900: 100). In economic practices, prices are, accordingly, the practical *expressions* of economic values. Prices express the mutual exchange of sacrifices that coincide with the exchange of objects of economic value.

All exchanges within the monetary economy, such as exchanges of stocks, real estate, commodities like gold and silver, and so forth, are mediated by the inter-subjective measurement of value that we designate as price. Conversely, in commoning practices (commoners who collaborate to co-create, co-produce and co-manage commons), exchange mostly manifests itself in two alternative ways. First, (1) there can be exchange between the commoner and the commons (the pool of resources). In this exchange, a one-sided sacrifice is needed from the commoner to overcome the distance towards the object of value; for instance, a fisherman who exchanges his labor power to catch fish from open seas. Second, (2) there can be an exchange *between* commoners without the requirement of an exchange of sacrifices. A gift exchange between family members is an example of such a form of exchange, or the exchange of a speech between an orator and his public (Simmel, 1900: 86). Platforms for the exchange of information such as Wikipedia can be seen as paradigm examples of these forms of exchange in the regime of value of the digital commons (a commoner adding information to Wikipedia or one subtracting information from it don’t need to engage in a mutual exchange of sacrifices). However, we do not propose any absolute dichotomy between economic practices: between those involving a mutual exchange of sacrifices and those that do not. In line with Gibson-Graham, we acknowledge that economic practices are essentially diverse and that they cannot be categorized according to simple oppositions. Rather, we use Simmel’s theory to argue that whenever a mutual exchange of sacrifices is involved in practices of economic exchange, these practices are *drawn towards* the monetary economy, which itself is

also diverse and imperfect as scholars such as Zelizer (1989) have shown. Accordingly, taking into account that capitalist exchange is performed in the monetary economy (Lapavistas 2000), the more an economic practice is *drawn towards* the monetary economy, the more it becomes vulnerable for being subsumed in the system of global capitalism.

Simmel's theory of money sheds light on how economic practices in the monetary economy involve a mutual exchange of sacrifices that can be practically expressed by means of prices. In commoning practices, as well as in other alternative economic practices such as household work, no mutual exchanges of sacrifices takes place to constitute the exchange relationships between commoners. Thus, we emphasize that the practices of exchange that involves a mutual exchange of sacrifices are drawn towards the monetary economy while the forms of exchange in commoning belong to what Gibson-Graham designates as the alternative economies. Simmel's conceptual lens enables us to interpret why certain online practices of 'digital commoning' are seen in similar ways as ecological forms of commoning, such as the sharing of grazing lands. When commoners share a certain ecological commons, they appropriate it as they would appropriate a natural open space (e.g. an open sea) that each commoner would be able to enjoy without having to weigh her sacrifice against that of another commoner.

Similarly, the appropriation of digital commons for collective production (such as downloading music samples from an open-access database to create a song) happens *as if* a commoner enters in an exchange relation with an ecological commons. In other words, such an exchange of digital information can be seen as the 'mirror image' of ecological commons like grazing lands and rivers (Curien et al, 2006: 2). Moreover, digital exchanges of information on digital platforms like Wikipedia seemingly are freed of the condition of mutual exchanges of sacrifices. Although a contributor to Wikipedia sacrifices her labor in order to exchange information with others, no sacrifice is directly offered in return. However, it is precisely this condition that is present in the 'hybrid' forms of digital commoning, which create the illusive aporia of the sharing economy. Practices of digital commoning through platforms such as hospitality exchanges cannot be free from the condition of the mutual exchange of

sacrifices and are for this very reason drawn towards the monetary economy, which brings about the risk of being appropriated in the hegemony of the global capitalist economy.

Before turning to the issue of the ‘promise’ and ‘illusion of the digital commons’, we first situate Simmel’s notion of exchange in a broader understanding of technological mediation of economic practices (Garcia, 2005). We do so to introduce a crucial difference between ecological commons that can be openly accessed and used freely by commoners and the digital commons. The rules embedded in the technology design of digital platforms mediate the social interactions that belong to the practice of digital commoning. Such formal rules in the context of digital environments do not only regulate but also constitute a certain virtual reality that is organized by coded or law-like patterns of interaction (Lessig, 2006; Søraker, 2012). In the context of digitalized exchange practices, human relationships are thereby always to some extent formalized and abstracted. Accordingly, informal practices of commoning through digital platforms are always to some extent resisted by the technology design of digital exchanges. As Roscoe and Chillias (2014) argue, commoning understood in its original sense is an essentially informal practice that resists the technological rationality of formalization, standardization and quantification. Therefore, exchange practices of digital commoners cannot be taken as the equivalent of ‘offline’ commoning at face value, since digital environments enforce formalized, law-like relationships in their architectures. Examples of such law-like relationships are: ‘agreeing with terms of service’, ‘providing such-and-such profile information’, ‘validating your identity’, ‘rate your stay’, and so forth. In order to find out how this tension between the practice of digital commoning and its mediation by the technological environment in which it takes place unfolds, we discuss in more detail an illustration of hospitality exchanges.

4. The promise and illusion of the digital commons in hospitality exchanges

The promise of the digital commons revolves around the idea that practices of digital commoning can be conceived as mimicking the practices of commoning in the ecological, non-digital form, because both forms are seemingly free from the condition

of the mutual exchange of sacrifices that draws economic practices towards the monetary economy. In response, and in contrast, to this promise, we define the illusion of the digital commons as the apparent online ‘sharing’ of community resources and services while such objects of value are in reality governed by technologically mediated price mechanisms, embedded in formal rules that govern the exchange practices. Accordingly, digital commons run the risk of being ‘illusory’ forms of actual commons that people relate to in their everyday lives. Changes in their technology design can move certain online platforms, such as Couchsurfing, away from the alternative economic practice of digital commoning towards commodification of the ‘digital commons’ that the platform manages. This shift towards marketization does not need to become immediately apparent for subjects exchanging and sharing through these digital platforms.

We seek to illustrate the illusion of the digital commons by discussing the hospitality exchanges Couchsurfing, BeWelcome and Airbnb. BeWelcome is an online non-profit hospitality exchange platform that enables its users to offer and receive the opportunity to have open access to a sleeping place somewhere around the world, free of charge. Couchsurfing offers a similar platform, though it has become a for-profit organization (since 2011). Airbnb is a for-profit organization that explicitly prices and exploits the exchanges of living spaces. Although Airbnb is usually not designated as a ‘real’ hospitality exchange platform (cf. Tagiew (2014: 3), who characterizes Airbnb as a ‘travel service’), for our purposes it illustrates the move towards marketization that is implied by the illusion of the digital commons. Additionally, Airbnb is an important case to consider because it does ‘resist’ and ‘disrupt’ the ‘old’ capitalist logic of centralized services that separate worker exploitation and selling their services to consumers. In contrast to this old logic, Airbnb offers a platform through which users can identify themselves voluntarily as workers, consumers or both at the same time. It thereby very successfully ‘resists’ capitalist services such as those offered by commercial hotels, and thereby creates a debate that revolves around the extremes of either being a ‘pathway to sustainability’ or a ‘corrosive form of unsustainable, neo-liberal economics’ (Martin, 2016: 149).

The identification of the illusion of the digital commons follows from an initial observation that many of the technologically mediated economic practices found in alternative economies, particularly the sharing economy, of companies like Airbnb, Couchsurfing and more ‘genuine’ digital commons like BeWelcome are remarkably similar to each other. Each platform offers services that are enabled by a digital network of members who socially engage with one-another through digital profiles and reviewing mechanisms. Three crucial technologically mediated activities are present in each platform, which are (1) the creation of a digital profile, (2) the creation of a digital representation of ones living space and (3) participation in reviewing mechanisms. Therefore, at face value, it seems that the economic practice of sharing resources manifests itself in similar ways through the digital platforms of Airbnb, Couchsurfing and BeWelcome. The main differences between these platforms are found in the ways in which price mechanisms are embedded in their technological infrastructures, and not in any radical difference between the actual practices of digital commoning.

With Airbnb, price mechanisms are explicitly present, in the sense that users directly pay to ‘rent’ a shared living space. In contrast, price mechanisms are seemingly absent in exchanges that are facilitated by the BeWelcome and in the Couchsurfing platforms. Nevertheless, as Schöpf (2015: 29) explains, although BeWelcome and Couchsurfing may seem similar, Couchsurfing re-formed itself from ‘a commons into a commodity’ by attracting investments from venture capitalists in 2011. Accordingly, the Couchsurfing community has witnessed a ‘commodification of the couch’ (Schöpf, 2014), meaning that the practice of commoning in the context of hospitality exchange (turning the household into a commons) is made undone by the decision of the Couchsurfing platform to exploit the activities of the digital commoners *through* its platform (e.g. by performing analytics on the behavior of the digital commoners that is consequently ‘commodified’). The question then arises how such an illusion of the digital commons can be made explicit. For the unmasking of the illusion associated with ‘illusory commons’ such as Couchsurfing, two aspects of the digital commons must be taken into account.

First, price mechanisms can be subjected to transformations in exchange practices mediated by digital technologies. For instance, instead of pricing separate musical expressions (songs or albums), the access to digital pools of music can be priced, as is the case with some online music services. Digital exchange platforms increasingly detach price from payment, which implies that payment can be designed as a voluntary choice (as is the case with online donations) or that the mere activity of users can be used as the ‘price’ to pay for a service (commodifying user-behavior by means of online analytics). In hospitality exchange platforms, both explicit and implicit pricing mechanisms are present. Airbnb uses explicit pricing mechanisms: guests have to pay their hosts a specific price for the shared living space they can use. Couchsurfing has developed a different commercial, capitalist model in which the exchanges of the users are tracked and analyzed to offer advertisements. As is stated in its privacy policy: the platform tracks amongst other ‘location information’, ‘device information’ and ‘log information’ of its users and uses these amongst others to ‘communicate with’ the user ‘about products, services, offers, promotions, rewards and events and provide other news and information about Couchsurfing and other third parties’ (Couchsurfing 2017). These notions imply operations that are embedded in the technology design of the platform. Also, in its commercial model, paid services are offered to enable users to increase their level of trustworthiness (Billock, 2015). By doing so, Couchsurfing implicitly prices the activities of users on its platform and thereby goes against the post-capitalist logic of digital commoning.

Second, although these prices can be expressed in the conventional way, as measures of state-issued money like euros or dollars, some alternative mechanisms of exchange can bring about expressions of prices as well – mechanisms that are more implicit. In the case of online hospitality exchange platforms, such price mechanisms are connected with the extensive reviewing mechanisms that are present on both non-profit and for-profit platforms. Users who exchange services through such platforms are nudged towards reviewing their experiences with other users, to comment on their experiences or even to rate them in a quantitative, measurable manner. This provision of acknowledgement, or reputation, constitutes what Offer (2015) calls the ‘economy of regard’. In certain digitalized economic practices, including hospitality exchanges,

the measurement of reputation is typically treated as if it were an actual currency (Dingledine, 2003). This is what draws the online economy of regard very close to the monetary economy of market-exchange relationships, since both explicit prices and reviewing mechanisms can be said to have a strong ‘pricing’ effect. Especially when communities become overcrowded, and members have to ‘compete’ with each other to engage in the sharing practices, reviews and ratings become increasingly important for members to become ‘trustworthy’. Such a transformation makes that digital commoning practices become increasingly selective, which may for instance lead to discrimination of users (Ikkala and Airi, 2015). For instance, members of certain ethnic groups may receive less or worse reviews than others, due to pre-existing racial biases of platform users towards people that do not belong to their direct communities (Condliffe 2016), which thereby causes a decrease in the ‘price’ of their offers or demands. Similar to the money-economy, the economy of regard can thereby magnify differences between the ‘haves’ (those with a solid reputation) and the ‘have-nots’ (those without a good reputation). To summarize, by incorporating explicit and implicit price mechanisms in the technology design of online platforms, practices of sharing can be distorted. The resulting ‘illusion of the digital commons’ does not have an emancipatory effect, but, instead, lead to the dominance of certain individuals or groups and accordingly to a strengthening of the neoliberal hegemony.

What effects do these developments have on the ‘resistance’ that is supposed to be directed through the practice of digital commoning? At face value, platforms such as BeWelcome largely seem to retain the emancipatory character of the ‘promise’ of the digital commons. Volunteers that develop and maintain the BeWelcome exchange platform actively keep it free from the condition of mutual exchanges of sacrifices by (1) basing it fully on open source software, (2) making all the crucial decisions about the technology design and the organizational structure in a democratic way and (3) maintaining user-friendly terms of use that respect the user’s privacy and security (Schöpf, 2014: 50). However, since reviewing mechanisms remain part of the service and a difference is made between volunteers (those developing and maintaining the service) and members (those using the service), it remains questionable whether the condition of mutual exchange of sacrifices is fully negated. Additionally, we need to

turn to an even more pervasive effect of the illusion of the digital commons on forms of resistance. That we should not underestimate the problematic forms of resistance that arise out of the sharing economy can be illustrated by the fact that not the members of ‘genuine’ digital commons such as BeWelcome, but instead of the capitalist sharing platform Airbnb are gathering on the streets in order to protest against the attempts of governments to protect the integrity of cities and local economies (Hickey & Cookney, 2016). This confronts us with the irony that not the digital commoners, but the champions of the ‘new global capitalism’ seem to be able to mobilize resistance. In New York, Airbnb hosts protested against housing regulations while local house owners, living in the ‘old’ economy of personal property, engaged in an anti-protest (Purbasari 2016). This illustrates how Airbnb successfully mobilizes its users, through their dependence on the sharing economy, to counter both conventional government and those defending the ‘old’ capitalist economy.

A certain resistance results from the illusion of the digital commons, though not all digital commoners are activists. A distinction between digital commoners in general and ‘activist’ digital commoners must be made. Bellotti et al. (2015) have conducted an empirical study of motivations of people for engaging in digital commoning in the sharing economy. By means of interviews with users of 43 different for-profit and non-profit platforms they came to two insightful observations. First, they found that the generic motivations of the users of peer-to-peer platforms diverge strongly from those expressed by the developers of these platforms. Developers tend to name the values of the digital commons such as sustainability, altruism, and egalitarianism as the main motivations for using their platforms (even though the sincerity of these claims is not warranted), while users of the platforms generally turn towards much more pragmatic, non-altruistic motivations to justify their activities. Second, they found that this misalignment persisted *across platforms*, and therefore counted in the cases of for-profit and non-profit platforms (Bellotti et al., 2015: 1088). At the same time, Schöpf shows in a different empirical study that for a certain group of members the genuine character of digital commons is conclusive for the motivations that guide their behavior. By interviewing community members of Couchsurfing and Bewelcome, he shows that the change of the Couchsurfing platform from being a non-

profit to a for-profit platform was decisive for certain members to leave the platform and use Bewelcome instead (Schöpf, 2014: 69). Moreover, he shows how the acceleration in growth of the platform and the new ‘digital commoners’ it attracted with different motivations, made members who were motivated by the intrinsic values they attached to the platform leave (Schöpf, 2014: 95).

We do not intend to use these empirical observations as conclusive evidence for our argument. Yet, we do believe that they shed some light on the dynamic of resistance that results from the illusion of the digital commons. On the one hand, activist digital commoners lead the way in appropriating and organizing new forms of digital commoning, followed by digital commoners with pragmatic motivations. On the other hand, as soon as the acceleration of new digital technologies leads to a transformation of the technological design of the digital commons that includes explicit or implicit price-mechanisms in the platform, the activist digital commoners are confronted with the illusion of the digital commons and turn towards a different platform that does respect their values of digital commoning. Doing so, they leave the vast majority of digital commoners behind. Because of this dynamic, the promise of the digital commons is increasingly re-localized in niche applications such as Bewelcome. Whereas with the ecological commons, resistance to the capitalist appropriation has to be directed at protecting *that* particular commons – and Illich (1992: 51) explains that the mistake of what he calls ‘anticapitalist politics’ has thus far been to bolster the legitimacy of transforming commons into resources that are appropriated for ideological purposes – the digital commons allow for the migration of digital commoners from one platform to another. This results, among other things, in frustrations triggered by changes in the Couchsurfing platform that are not resisted. Instead, commoners turn to an online alternative. Post-capitalist resistance is thereby averted. In other words, the illusion of the digital commons results in a form of ‘false consciousness’ that keeps the digital commoners from resisting neoliberal hegemony in a meaningful way. In the following section, we explain that, as a result, we are faced with a form of ‘false consciousness’ that Sloterdijk typifies as cynicism.

5. Cynicism as the ‘false consciousness’ of the digital commons

So far we have constructed the following theses: (1) implicit and explicit price mechanisms are embedded in the technology design of digital commoning platforms and (2) draw these platforms *towards* the monetary economy, not being capable of being freed from the condition of the mutual exchange of sacrifices, (3) which results in forms of resistance that do not meaningfully negate the neoliberal hegemony or even support it. Hence, it seems that the illusion of the digital commons produces a form of ‘false consciousness’, which evaluate in this section. The term ‘false consciousness’ was first coined (but not theorized) by Friedrich Engels in a letter to Franz Mehring in 1893, in which he stated that in bourgeois ideology (liberalism) is a thought process carried on with the ‘false consciousness’ of an unreflective ‘thinker’ who fails to grasp the motives that direct his thoughts (Gabel, 1975). ‘False consciousness’ was first conceptualized by Lukács (1971), for whom ‘false consciousness’ referred to a reified, compulsive identification of the world as an acceptable condition. In the context of a class struggle battled with workers, capitalist rule institutionalized the ‘false opinion’ that capitalism was an unalterable, or even natural, condition. Thereby, reality, and the political (revolutionary) role of dominated workers and consumers in the shaping of reality, was obscured (Gabel, 1975: 119; 134; Meyers, 2006). For Gramsci, ‘false consciousness’ referred to being dominated by a hegemonic paradigm marked by the illusion of widespread consent; the resisting or revolutionary subject emerges to develop a counter-hegemonic paradigm, through class struggle (Noaman, 2015). For Mannheim (1954), the very vocation of social science was to un-do the ‘false consciousness’ that he defined as an incorrect representation of the world. Social science served to unmask hegemonic ideologies, so as to defeat the lies, errors and distorted thinking. In his hands, social science was ideology critique and could be set into motion to negate ‘false consciousness’.

As the neoliberal hegemony is embedded in a capitalist culture through technological mediation, the new ‘false consciousness’ is exposed through technology critique. Ellul (1967) and Marcuse (1968) were the first to unmask technology, rather than bourgeois ideology (liberalism), as the force of lie, error and distortions in the

reified capitalist world. Ellul emphasized that in the technological environment of the capitalist world reality is arbitrarily fixated, without the dialectical possibility to alter that reality and shape alternative realities through post-capitalist practices. Industrial technology, Ellul explained, is not a neutral or ‘automatic’ force: it is an operation of determinism and necessity. It constitutes a collection of orders, schemas and mechanisms, programmed and conditioned by the values and interests of those in power. Marcuse stressed that a technological environment, characterized by simplifications, codifications and objectifications, is rooted in, and reproduces, ‘one-dimensional thought’ that he defined as a systematic arrangement of a sphere of ‘false consciousness’ (Marcuse, 1968: 27; 53; Gouldner, 1976: 139).

This line of thinking has produced a number of illuminating technology critiques of ‘false consciousness’. For instance, Gabriel (2008) shows how Powerpoint is a technology that in a capitalist world typically tends to facilitate programmed, uncritical learning that replaces arguments with lists and graphs. He emphasizes that potentially, in a less dominated and less programmed cultural environment, Powerpoint may well be used as a tool for generating creative performances. Likewise, Knudsen (2011) observes that in a dominated, programmed environment, technologies of observation or visibility devices generate blindness, invisibility, in-transparency and obscurity. In a similar vein, Roscoe and Chillias (2014) provide a concrete example of how the dominating formality of orders, schemas, simplifications, codifications and objectifications dictate a systematic arrangement of love matches. The technology of online dating services suggests love matches for its users, couches users in relationships, and suggests how to manage relationships in the ‘best’ way. Online dating service platforms, Roscoe and Chillias (2014: 812) explain, generate a ‘systematic deception, provoked by the economizing nature of the online interfaces.’ The phenomena of domination that Gabriel, Knudsen, Roscoe and Chillias describe can be understood as systematic arrangements of ‘false consciousness’ in the sense that they enforce one-dimensional thought: as a systematic arrangement of orders and schemas is imprinted, critical and creative and radical thought withers away.

In line with such critiques of technology, the unmasking of the illusion of the digital commons makes it possible to uncover a particular type of technologically

mediated ‘false consciousness’ that can be defined as follows. The activist digital commoner uses digital exchange platforms to resist capitalist modes of production, management and consumption, but moves between alternatives in the digital environment when confronted with the illusion of the digital commons, absorbed by the potential and power of new digital technologies. As such, the activist digital commoner displays a form of false consciousness that Sloterdijk discusses as *cynicism*. Simmel had already come to the diagnosis of cynicism as being endemic to the movement of economic practices towards the monetary economy. Simmel (1900: 275) stated that the mood of the cynic ‘can be most effectively supported by money’s capacity to reduce the highest as well as the lowest values equally to one value form and thereby to place them on the same level, regardless of their diverse kinds and amounts.’ Accordingly, the explicit and implicit price mechanisms in platforms for digital commoning lead to cynicism through the reduction of the particular social values (like sharing, empathy, solidarity, etc.) involved in concrete, situated practices of commoning to homogeneous, formal and quantifiable rules and measurements.

Sloterdijk, who explicitly positions cynicism as a form of false consciousness, acknowledges Simmel’s analysis, stating that ‘the Philosophy of Money reveals the phenomenon of cynicism in the fact that it seems to be an inherent power of money to entangle in *exchange* deals goods that are not commodities as if they were such’ (Sloterdijk, 1987: 316 - emphasis added). Cynicism, as Sloterdijk (1984: 202) explains, is a particular type of ‘false consciousness’ that must be contrasted with ‘the classical series of false consciousness’ – that is: ‘lie, error, ideology’. In contrast with the ‘false consciousness’ reified in industrial capitalist structures, cynicism cannot be unmasked through ideology critique (of liberalism) in the style of Lukács, Gramsci or Mannheim. Instead, a critique of technology is called for.

In contrast to technology critiques such as the ones provided by Ellul and Marcuse, Sloterdijk targets the individual, the cynic ruled by ‘false consciousness’. Originally, the cynic – Diogenes the Hound – was the ‘provocative, stubborn moralist’, who unmasked ‘false consciousness’ through the mockery of social conventions. In the ancient world, the cynic, with his ‘crudely unmasking gaze’ (Sloterdijk, 1984: 191), was an eccentric figure that uncovered the noble lie invented by the ruling classes. The

ancient cynic resisted the prevailing social order, its hierarchies and institutions; and pointed at the hypocrisy of civilized morality (Munro, 2014). According to Sloterdijk (1984: 191), the ancient cynic was ‘the earliest example of a declassed or plebeian intelligence’ – a forerunner of Marxist scholars like Lukács and Gramsci. In contrast to this ancient cynic or the Marxist of the first decades of the twentieth century, Sloterdijk (1984: 191; 192) explains, in today’s new culture of capitalism, the cynic appears as a ‘mass figure’, an ‘embittered loner’ and an ‘average social character in the elevated superstructure’. Accordingly, digital commoners, unlike Diogenes or the revolutionary subject, have become agents who, by their very act of enforcing cynical dispositions as an ‘average social character’, are incapable of engaging in meaningful forms of resistance.

Such cynicism of the ‘embittered loner’ is the ‘false consciousness’ of activist digital commoners, whose needs and means for fulfillment are reconfigured to suit the demands of the technological dictates of a capitalist world (Greaves, 2015). It is a ‘false consciousness’ because such digital commoners falsely identify their own disillusion, alienation and obsession with new digital technologies as a personal trouble, and, accordingly, fail to see how such an existence is the result of being dominated by the hegemonic paradigm of neoliberal capitalism. In the words of Hoofd (2009): the fantasies of new media technologies blind digital commoners for the fact that the logic of acceleration that is embedded in their technological environments replicates the neoliberal hegemony they try to resist through digital commoning. By relying on digital forms of commoning, digital commoners are overtaken by ‘the power of things’ in their digitalized environments, which displaces and disperses their critical and radical energies (cf. Greaves, 2015). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) stress that such displacement and dispersing of critical and radical energies – which they typify as ‘functional stupidity’ is an important resource for capitalist enterprises. ‘False consciousness’, marked by the lack of critical and radical energies, provides a sense of certainty that allows organizations to function (or managers to rule) smoothly in the monetary economy.

Through the illusion of the digital commons, digital commoners share the same kind of ‘false consciousness’ as employees, consumers and managers acting in the

monetary economy. Cynicism is the enlightened 'false consciousness' that manifests itself in the programmed environment of a contemporary type of capitalism. This is a capitalism that is largely shaped by new digital technologies that facilitate speed of response and non-hierarchical organizations like peer-to-peer networks. Not only digital commoners but also companies such as Airbnb reject the forms of bureaucratic organization that defined the 'old' forms of capitalism and are engaged in a quest for permanent technological change. Both digital commoning and economic practices in the capitalist economy are marked by the same cynicism - the internalization of the new spirit of capitalism - and accordingly by the replication rather than the resistance of neoliberal hegemony. In fact, neoliberalism has succeeded in turning the ideology critique of industrial capitalism (alienation, domination, bureaucracy) to the advantage of the market (cf. Anonymous, 2005; Kazmi, Leca and Naccache, 2016). Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) stress that capitalist systems have turned out to be highly robust, in spite of ideology critiques. Moreover, Crouch observes that even the global financial crisis, which inaugurated widespread ideology critique of global capitalism and worldwide protest movements, has not affected neoliberal hegemony. In fact, Crouch (2011: viii) notes that 'neoliberalism is emerging from the financial collapse more politically powerful than ever.' Cynicism, as Flemming and Spicer (2003) explain, does not weaken but strengthens the neoliberal hegemony. Cynical dispositions, a negative attitude towards the status quo, marked by a fundamental mistrust of rulers' intentions and the conviction that fairness is sacrificed to further the interests of rulers (cf. Brown and Cregan, 2008; Kim et al 2009) ultimately manifests itself in conformism to the neoliberal hegemony. In other words, like employees, digital commoners continue to practice corporate rituals, worship corporate symbols or brands, and reach productive levels.

6. The question concerning commoning and digital technologies

What then is the post-capitalist potential of digital commons? As Negri has shown, there are many reasons to believe that through commoning 'false consciousness' may

be negated and transcended. In his view, commons negate ‘false consciousness’ because commoning practices are not imposed from outside the commons, as is the case in the monetary economy. In pre-capitalist societies, commoners were often rebellious, as they sought to defend their traditional rights to leisure, bread, religious festivals, and so forth, which were threatened by capitalist rule (Illich, 1992; Stevenson, 2015). Negri claims that, today, commons provide the workers’ platform for acts of post-capitalist resistance. The production of digital commons requires a degree of sharing that does not sort, select or class people according to ranks and scales, but, instead, remains open and provides alternative venues for commoners to settle in (Brighenti, 2016). Negri (2008: 107) claims that ‘today, labor, in order to be creative, must be “common”, in other words, produced by networks of cooperation.’ Through such practices, the basis for post-capitalist class struggle surfaces, with workers representing common cooperation while capitalists represent multiple ways of appropriation. Negri also sees in the widespread protests against global capitalism, such as the Seattle protests of 1999, and later, the post 9-‘11 movements like Occupy Wall Street, the post-capitalist struggles in resisting the world of endless enclosure of commons (like public parks and squares, schools and libraries) and for ‘the total transformation in the nature of work and in the organization of society’ (Negri, 2008: 163).

Even though we share Negri’s commitment in the context of the ecological, non-digital commons, we emphasize that there is a lack of critical and radical potential for resisting hegemonic power structures through the practice of digital commoning. In a controlled and programmed environment, digital technologies help foster capitalist worlds (in which brands like Apple, Microsoft and Google represent great corporate value and appear as popular employers). Digital technologies can provide open access to information for all and can furnish citizens with communication links across distances that hitherto did not exist. Yet, in capitalist worlds, cultural environments are dominated by these technological systems that enforce their own schemas and codifications, and critical energies are dispersed. It is true that, with digital communing, labor is produced by networks of cooperation as Negri explains – for instance by means of voluntary review activities of members of hospitality exchange

platforms. Yet, the networking digital commoners have limited reflexivity because they operate within the bounds of digital exchange mechanisms. Thereby, they do not embody the pre-capitalist ethos of the informal solidary economy, with its notion of *communitas* (Bittencourt Meira, 2014). Similarly, they do not embody the ethos of workers' cooperatives and local exchange trade systems (Kokkinidis, 2015). Such non-capitalist practices are grounded in a negation of the capitalist ethos of autonomy, emancipation and self-reliance (cf. De Angelis, 2010). Digital commoners, by contrast, embody the ethos of bourgeois individualism, but without the sense of eccentric inner-directedness or deeply rooted principlism and affirmation of critical thinking that liberal values like individual autonomy require. Activist digital commoners work alone, as cynical 'average social characters' or even 'embittered loners', from behind computing devices; they are thereby caught in an oscillation between praise and condemnation of new technological developments that make their digital commons thrive. Yet, such thirst for new digital technologies is a manifestation of the new spirit of capitalism, which keeps such a-political desires going (Contu, 2008: 373-4).

Illich (1992: 47) points out that 'the sickening effect of programmed environments show that people in them become indolent, impotent, narcissistic and apolitical.' This is indeed the dilemma of the digital commons as a potential force of post-capitalism. The main ideals of the digital commons are grounded in a-political principles and typically resonate as technical terms: open source, peer-to-peer, decentralized applications, network neutrality, and so forth. Like the workers, consumers and managers in the monetary economy, digital commoners do not constitute revolutionary subjects who are able to think beyond the present condition or to unsettle current ruling desires (Flemming and Spicer, 2003; Greaves, 2015). This is not to say that digital commoners show no signs of resistance. Rather, their resistance does not meaningfully affect the neoliberal hegemony in which they operate. Dystopian deceptions such as those of the illusion of the digital commons extend beyond the examples of blatantly 'false commons' like Airbnb and Uber.

Additionally, self-professed promoters of the peer-to-peer economy of the digital commons, Wikipedia and Couchsurfing, as well as champions of the open-source movement like Linux have recently received fair amounts of cynical responses

from digital commoners (Fosfuri, Giarratana, & Luzzi, 2008; Greenstein & Zhu, 2012; Molz, 2012). The alleged resistance of the contemporary cynic in production, consumption, management or communing – such as online protests targeting large firms (Van den Broek, 2016) – is what Contu (2008) calls ‘decaf resistance’: it is a fake resistance to capitalist power structures that is enjoyed, typically as an outlet for a cynic’s resentment, without affecting the dominating neoliberal hegemony. The activist digital commoner, influenced by the illusion of the digital commons, is ready to engage in alternative forms of digital commoning without politicizing the underlying contradictions of the technological schemas and mechanisms of the programmed environment of a global capitalist world in which they operate.

We would like to end on a positive note, after having spelled out a rather dystopian critique of the digital commons. For this, our investigation resonates with Heidegger’s work on technology, which according to Dreyfus (2007: 26) is ‘both darker and more hopeful’ than common instrumental critiques of technology. If alternative economies in general and digital commons in particular can be thought of as branches of post-capitalist practices, they require alternative *thought*, that is, a radical rethinking of alternative economies through a critique of technology. The ‘real danger’ of the digital commons is not to be found in the destructive power of the technological systems themselves, ‘but in a restriction in our way of thinking’ (Dreyfus, 2007: 27) when engaging with the digital commons. Thus, a real act of resistance would mean to negate the internalization of the new spirit of capitalism through ‘radically changing things as we know them’ (Contu, 2008: 374). The real act of resistance, then, implies the negation of cynicism and its technological roots. And this is a *political* act that cannot be expected from a lone wolf digital commoner who is, in the words of Sloterdijk, dragged down by the power of technological things, and whose consciousness is profoundly a-political. As a first step, this would require the creation of a politics of digital commons: a political process of organizing digital commoners in ways that would allow them to democratically govern the digital platforms through which they interact. This means that the technological design of digital exchanges, such as review mechanisms, rules of interaction, user-profiling – and so on, are to become elements of a political debate that would shape the

organization of commoning practices that these exchanges mediate. The BeWelcome platform can be considered a good example of a platform that might well be able to counteract the illusion of the digital commons, for it incorporates democratic procedures that govern its architecture – such as voting procedures for members to decide on certain features of the website (BeWelcome, 2016). However, no meaningful resistance emerges as long as activist digital commoners retreat to their niche platforms while leaving the World Wide Web in the grasp of the neoliberal hegemony that perpetuates the illusion of the digital commons. Even though a politics of digital commons is necessary, it cannot be seen as sufficient for solving the illusion of the digital commons.

More fundamentally then, activist digital commoners should pay heed to Heidegger's suggestions for gaining a free relation with technologies. This implies that we should not condemn technologies and long for a pre-technological world, and neither should we turn towards technologies as the vehicles for resistance to neoliberal hegemony. Instead, we should affirm the unavoidable use of technologies while denying them the right to dominate us (Dreyfus, 2007: 28). This implies a 'transformation of our sense of reality' by which we overcome the calculative thinking that is implied in the technologically mediated practice of digital commoning and that is warned against by both Simmel and Sloterdijk. This can only be achieved through being sensitive to our relation with technologies and reflect on the way they 'order' our lives, which result in a *releasement* of technology as a way of thinking (Dreyfus, 2007: 31). This sensitivity can be fostered by questioning technological practices such as digital commoning, through a consideration of their purpose in our lives and by taking a critical stance towards their tendency to force us into conceiving of the world as standing reserve, as an efficient order. Finally, we should find a way in which the digital commons can provide space for the practices embedded in the ecological, non-digital commons that represent a different, multi-dimensional, critical and radical way of thinking. Only a symbiosis of the old and new ways of commoning without the domination of technological systems can lead to a 'free' relation to technologies in our alternative economic practices.

7. Concluding remarks

How can it be that, as Celata et al. (2014) put it, the sharing economy is such a Janus faced phenomenon, which simultaneously allows for experiments with non-capitalist practices *and* is the new center of interest for venture capitalism? In this paper, we claim that the answer can be found in the deceptive role of technology. Many ‘digital commons’ cannot be regarded as reliable forms of resistance to capitalism, because they tend to trigger an illusion that results in ‘false consciousness’ that we identify as cynicism. Hardt (2010) explains that commons constitute the very heart of post-capitalism, in the sense that, through the alternative economies of the commons, concentration of property in the hands of large organizations is overcome (cf. Healy, 2015). The digital commons seemingly offer opportunities for rethinking contemporary capitalism. ‘Economies’, including those that are constituted by digital commoning practices, as Lee et al (2008: 1113) emphasize, ‘are circuits of value and any suggestion that their materiality and sociality can be discounted is unworkable.’ Digital commoning in, or through cyberspace must be understood in its own right; with its own structures of social relations that we have identified as arrangements of ‘false consciousness’. The underlying politics of the process of digital commoning, including the technological bluff and arrangements of ‘false consciousness’, remain uncontested. Instead, digital commoners, in their resistance to large organizations, tend to engage in the lonewolf endeavors of what Sloterdijk calls ‘embittered loners’. That is to say, technologically mediated ‘commoning’ leads to cynicism that alienates commoners from the very practice of commoning (cf. Gabriel et al, 2015: 634).

The illusion of the digital commons is illustrative for a capitalist world that is marked by adaptive reasoning and functional stupidity rather than radical questioning and reflexivity (Ungar, 2003; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Contemporary capitalism is such that ‘false consciousness’, as Sloterdijk understands it, can no longer be overcome via ideology critique. The critique of the neoliberal hegemony is very widespread but has not affected its domination. In fact, ideology critique has enforced neoliberal hegemony, embraced by both right, left and third ways, as the ideological expression of cynicism. Today, ‘false consciousness’ can only be overcome if

technology critique is translated into post-capitalist acts of resistance to the dominating technology design. As Naughton (2000: 272) explains, the very architecture of the Internet has given rise to centrififying powers; such as the global data conglomerates or – as we have discussed – commons-like platforms like Couchsurfing and Airbnb. According to Lessig (2006: 4), this means ‘that the invisible hand of cyberspace is building an architecture that is quite the opposite of what it was at cyberspace's birth.’ Our analysis ties into such critiques of cyberspace. The technological architecture of digitally mediated commoning practices can negate the very idea of digital commoning. The Internet is a free, open space by design – a digital common in itself – and for that reason it is very vulnerable for rule-based regulation and control that negates open standards, universal access, flexible copyright rules and decentralized internet infrastructures. Such tendencies towards rule-based regulation violate the process of digital commoning (Boyle, 2008). However, many of these tendencies are highly opaque because they are often implicit and part of a formalised design for digital interaction that is in itself, an arrangement of ‘false consciousness’ (cf Knudsen, 2011; Roscoe and Chillias, 2014). Therefore, in order to address the problem of the illusion of the digital commons, digital commoners first need to strive to gain a ‘free’ relation with technologies, which requires new imagination and radical organizational change.

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False consciousness

False consciousness is a term used by sociologists to describe ways in which material, ideological, and institutional processes are said to mislead members of the proletariat and other class actors within capitalist societies, concealing the exploitation intrinsic to the social relations between classes. Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) used the term "false consciousness" in an 1893 letter to Franz Mehring to address the scenario where a subordinate class willfully embodies the ideology of the ruling class.^{[1][2]} Engels dubs this consciousness "false" because the class is asserting itself towards goals that do not benefit it.

"Consciousness", in this context, reflects a class's ability to politically identify and assert its will. The subordinate class is conscious: it plays a major role in society and can assert its will due to being sufficiently unified in ideas and action.

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Later development

Marshall I. Pomer has argued that members of the proletariat disregard the true nature of class relations because of their belief in the probability or possibility of upward mobility.^{[2][3]} Such a belief or something like it is said to be required in economics with its presumption of rational agency; otherwise wage laborers would not be the conscious supporters of social relations antithetical to their own interests, violating that presumption.^[4]

Cultural hegemony

The Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of cultural hegemony, the process within capitalist societies by which the ruling classes create particular norms, values, and stigmas, amounting to a culture in which their continued dominance is considered beneficial.^[5]

Structuralism

During the late 1960s and 1970s, the philosophical and anthropological school of structuralism began to gain popularity among academics and public intellectuals, focusing on interpreting human culture in terms of underlying structures such as symbolic, linguistic, and ideological perspectives. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser popularized his structuralist interpretation of false consciousness, the Ideological State Apparatus.

Structuralism influenced Althusser's interpretation of false consciousness, which focuses on the institutions of the capitalist state—particularly those of public education—which enforce an ideological system favoring obedience, conformity and submissiveness.^[6]

Contemporary developments

Other prominent Marxist philosophers and intellectuals developed specific interpretations of the concept of false consciousness, such as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School, Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem of the French situationist movement, the anti-colonialist writer Frantz Fanon, and contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Outside of the Marxist political ideology, the economist Edward S. Herman and linguist Noam Chomsky developed the propaganda model wherein information is selectively broadcast to serve the ends of a deeply centralized ownership of private media industries.

See also

- Capitalist realism
- Character mask
- Class consciousness
- Cognitive dissonance
- Consciousness raising
- Cultural hegemony
- Culture industry
- Dominant ideology
- "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"
- Introspection illusion
- Karl Marx's theory of alienation
- Political consciousness
- Propaganda model
- Spectacle
- System justification
- Turkeys voting for Christmas

Notes

1. Engels, Friedrich (1949). "Letter to F. Mehring". *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Works in Two Volumes, Volume II*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House. p. 451. "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process."
2. Lukács, Georg (1967). *History & Class Consciousness* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/lukacs3.htm>). London: Merlin Press. ISBN 978-0850361971.
3. Marshall I. Pomer (October 1984). "Upward Mobility of Low-Paid Workers: A Multivariate Model for Occupational Changers". *Sociological Perspectives*. **27** (4): 427–442. doi:10.2307/1389035 (<https://doi.org/10.2307%2F1389035>). ISSN 0731-1214 (<https://www.worldcat.org/issn/0731-1214>). JSTOR 1389035 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1389035>).
4. This phenomenon is most accentuated in the United States, and has given rise to what some European Marxists refer to as "class transference"^[1] (<http://www.progressive.org/node/128270>).

5. Gramsci, Antonio (2010). *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. United States of America: International Publishers. p. 488.
6. Althusser, Louis (1971). *Lenin and Other Essays*. United States of America: Monthly Review Press.

External links

- Joseph McCarney (2005). *Ideology and False Consciousness* (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/mccarney/2005/false-consciousness.htm>).
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