

On Mountains and Molehills:

PROBLEMS, NON-PROBLEMS, AND THE IDEOLOGY OF IDEOLOGY*

Introduction

If the theory of ideology is the answer, what is the question? In its slick over-simplification and pseudo-profundity, this question-about-a-question brings to mind the well-rehearsed patter of the doorstep evangelist. As I'll argue later, we might do better not to ask it at all. However, much contemporary writing on the topic seems not only to assume that there is some determinate question which the theory of ideology is designed to address, but also to agree on one answer as to what that question might be – namely: Why do the victims of oppression not rise up against their oppressors (and sometimes not even seem to show any inclination to do so)?¹ The particular explanation associated with the theory of ideology invokes 'ideological false consciousness', which may for present purposes be understood as follows: *distorted or false ways of representing or relating to the world, where the distortion or falsity admits of a 'functional explanation'² in terms of its tendency to serve certain social interests – such as the interest an oppressor has in continuing to oppress rather than being overthrown.*³

In what follows, I'll use the position taken by Michael Rosen (1996) as a convenient case study. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that I believe his

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¹ See e.g.: Rosen (1996; 2000); Heath (2000). As Rosen observes, there is a long tradition of interest in the perceived problem of why the oppressed appear to accept or acquiesce in their own oppression – see e.g. de la Boétie (2008). This question remains a central one for contemporary theorists of oppression (see e.g. Cudd (2005; 2006) or Allen (2008)).

² The term 'functional explanation' is borrowed from G. A. Cohen (1978).

³ Even if 'false consciousness' is understood to include, as I think it should, problematic *omission* as well as more positive illusion, it may be held that ideology is not just a matter of false *consciousness*, but of certain entrenched *practices, dispositions, arrangements or structures* (see Cooke (2006; p.18, n.11). For convenience, I'll still phrase things here in terms of 'false *consciousness*', but in doing so I do not mean to exclude this idea, which seems to me a sound one, especially in view of the untenability (clearly recognised by Marx) of a sharp dividing line between the 'ideal' and 'material'.

position to represent a fairly common way of treating the theory of ideology.⁴ The other reason is that, besides identifying the 'under-mobilization'⁵ of the oppressed as the problem to which the theory of ideology is a response, Rosen's approach also instantiates a further tendency which strikes me as being in need of critique: he goes on to make use of 'rational choice theory' in order to arrive at an alternative solution to the problem – and here, again, he has company.⁶ Thus, Rosen's position represents two regrettable trends in the literature on ideology. And these trends are connected. Only by assuming that the point of the theory of ideology is to explain why the oppressed do not rise up, is Rosen able then to offer a competing 'rational choice' 'solution' to this problem. Both stages of his argument seem to me to have their roots in a (mistaken) reaction to a concern for a (misconstrued) human rationality.

This may all sound rather negative, but from the point of view of someone interested in the theory of ideology, mistakes – and, especially, widespread or dominant mistakes – are entirely appropriate objects of study. It is characteristic of this theory, though by no means peculiar to it, to think that we can learn something by looking at the cases where our thought goes wrong and by asking how this might best be explained. A further 'reason to be negative' is best expressed by a line from Novalis which Rosen takes as his opening citation: 'The truthful presentation of error is the indirect presentation of truth.' If that is right, and if I am right to think that a common approach to the topic of ideology embodies a fundamental error, then perhaps getting clearer on what the error is (and why it occurs) may double as a pointer in the direction of something better.

It's worth giving a quick preview of the structure of this paper now. I want to argue for the following claims: we shouldn't use a rational choice framework to solve the problem of the 'under-mobilization' of the oppressed; it doesn't solve the problem

⁴ Partly, this may indicate that Rosen himself has had a significant influence, but the important point is just that his approach is not an anomaly.

⁵ Dowding (2001; p.37).

⁶ See, for example, Heath (2000), who adopts a position very similar to Rosen's in that he construes the theory of ideology as a response to the non-resistance of oppressed groups, going on to argue that the problem admits of an alternative game-theoretic solution. Cudd (2005; 2006) also argues for a rational choice explanation of oppression (although she does not share Rosen's and Heath's explicit presentation of this as an alternative to the kind of explanation offered by theories of ideology). Dowding (2001) discusses similar approaches to *power*. See also Carling (1986) for an overview of the use of rational choice theory by Marxist thinkers. For an example of someone who attempts to apply a rational choice approach to more or less everything, see Becker (1974).

anyway (at least, the kind of 'co-ordination problem' invoked by Rosen cannot solve it); it's not the problem which the theory of ideology is supposed to solve – in fact it isn't really such a problem at all; and anyway, we can solve it (with a bit of help from the theory of ideology and a different problem of co-ordination). Despite appearances, these claims can be made to cohere. In the first part of the paper, I'll consider and criticise the appeal to the 'co-ordination problem', before sketching an alternative: a more informal 'problem of co-ordination'. In Part II, I'll try to clarify the sense in which 'under-mobilization' is (and is not) a problem, thereby anticipating some objections and misunderstandings, and showing why the collection of claims above is not so haphazard or contradictory as it might seem. In the third and last section, I say something about why this issue matters: I suggest that some of the misrepresentations and mistaken criticisms of the theory of ideology charted here may themselves admit of an analysis in terms of the theory of ideological false consciousness (that is, they constitute part of an 'ideology of ideology'). Finally, I suggest that philosophers would do better to take a broader view of both the purpose and scope of that theory – which also means taking a good look in the mirror.

I. 'Reich's Question' and the problem of co-ordination

For Rosen, the point of the theory of ideology is to give an answer to a question which he takes from Wilhelm Reich:

'What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike.'⁷

Rosen's *On Voluntary Servitude* opens with 'Reich's Question', takes it to be central to any theory of ideology, and makes it central, also, to the over-arching argument of the book.⁸ Rosen eventually dismisses the theory of ideology on the basis that it both

⁷ Reich (1975), p.53. It's worth noting that the question that interests Reich is quite different from the one that Rosen ascribes to him. Reich is concerned to account for why populations embrace (or at least tolerate) authoritarian regimes such as that of the Nazis, a kind of regime which looks to be in important respects novel and unprecedented when it emerges in the early twentieth century, as opposed to the more or less universal phenomenon whereby the mass of the population endures a social order that goes against its interests. Furthermore, Reich did not entertain anything immediately recognisable as a theory of *ideology*, in accounting for the acceptance of authoritarianism, instead explaining this in terms of a psychoanalytic theory of sexual repression.

⁸ The book's reviewers seem to have been universally impressed by the elegance of this way of

fails as and is redundant as a solution to the problem it is meant to solve:⁹ the theory of ideology can't answer Reich's Question, but that's ok – we can answer the question without it.¹⁰

Of course, there is a sense in which it is no great mystery that many of those who are hungry do not steal, nor that the exploited do not strike. The particular explanation will depend on the case, but we will not generally be at a complete loss for things to say: perhaps the people concerned are constrained, rightly or wrongly, by certain moral convictions; perhaps they lack certain skills or knowledge; perhaps they fear – possibly with justification – the long- or short-term personal consequences of resistance. Some of these accounts may be couched in terms of the notion of ideology, but others may not. And as regards the *general* question of why the oppressed do not rise up and overthrow the order that oppresses them, one kind of explanation stands out. This explanation is represented by the so-called 'co-ordination problem'¹¹ – an explanation which Rosen himself eventually suggests. Co-ordination problems may be constructed in a variety of ways, but it is enough for my purposes here to set out Rosen's characterisation and contrast this with what seems to me a more appropriate version.

Rosen depicts the problem as follows. Step one is to note that what it is rational for an agent to do depends on what *others* can be expected to do. To borrow Rosen's

framing the issue, adopting it uncritically and often with evident enthusiasm (Archard (1997), Harkin (1997), Herzog (1997)).

⁹ I'll concentrate here on the 'redundancy' part of Rosen's argument, rather than the additional arguments he adduces for thinking the theory of ideology positively problematic. I think that these additional arguments also fail, but there is not space to establish that here.

¹⁰ This 'redundancy argument' is often supplemented in the literature by further ones: e.g. that it is patronising to attribute 'irrationality' to people; or that if ideology were really the explanation of non-resistance, decades of the unmasking and critique of ideological forms of thought would have done away with the *explanandum* by removing the barrier to 'mobilization' – see Heath (2000), who uses all three arguments. I'll touch on the 'patronising' worry a little later. It's worth noting now, however, that this accusation ignores a crucial point about Marx's view of ideology, namely that there is an important sense in which ideological false consciousness *is* rational (and even 'true'). The third objection also seems to rest on a misreading of Marx, who scorned the view that emancipation could be achieved merely by exposing and correcting illusion: 'Thus, for instance, after the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed *in theory and in practice*' (Marx (1967; my emphasis). It may be that a particular kind of 'vulgar critical theory' is guilty of a naïve faith in the emancipatory power of critique, but this hardly counts against all forms of the theory of ideology.

¹¹ A better term would be 'problem of co-ordination' which, unlike the technical term 'co-ordination problem', does not commit us to a game-theoretic framework. Freedom from game-theoretic associations should be regarded as an advantage, for reasons which will become clear.

example, a group of hostages may all have an interest in overpowering a gunman, but it is only rational for each individual to take part in the attempt at overpowering *on the expectation that others will do the same*; if any individual tries it alone, that individual will be shot. We are to assume not only that all the parties are rational, but that they know that the other parties are rational too (Rosen's acceptance of this premise, a characteristic assumption of game theory, will be crucial). So, an individual in this situation knows both that she has a reason to act if others also have a reason, and that others do in fact have such a (similarly conditional) reason. Therefore, being rational, the parties to this problem will act collectively so as to secure the outcome that is in the interests of all.

Thus far, there is no problem. That comes, says Rosen, when we make a slight alteration to this set-up 'in the direction of reality'.¹² It is not generally the case that *universal* co-operation is needed in order to secure some common good. Very often, all that is needed is for *enough* people to act in a certain way: a 'critical mass'. This, though, creates the possibility of 'free riding': according to Rosen, the rational hostage will opt to hang back, because the best option for her is not that in which she takes part in a rush on the gunman (an enterprise requiring an investment of energy and carrying some risk), but rather the option in which *others* rush at and overpower the gunman, so that she gets the benefit without incurring the cost. This gives us a way of explaining the non-resistance of the oppressed masses without attributing irrationality to them, and without appealing to false consciousness: if everyone behaves perfectly rationally, there will be no revolution, because everyone will wait for everyone else to make it happen; and that secures a sub-optimal outcome for everybody. Thus, on Rosen's portrayal, a kind of paradox arises whereby people collectively act in a way which is highly irrational, as a result of being individually *too* rational (where 'rationality' is understood as competence in the exclusive pursuit of a narrowly defined self-interest).

This account of the 'co-ordination problem'¹³ is typical in supposing that the individuals involved are fully rational and informed about the relevant features of

¹² Rosen (1996), p.261.

¹³ It is worth noting (although it doesn't matter much) that what Rosen calls a 'co-ordination problem' isn't really one in the strict sense of the term. In a co-ordination problem, the outcome that is optimal for each individual is the same. This is not the case where there is a possibility of free riding, since for each individual, the best outcome is one in which she gets the benefit whilst others bear the burden – and that, *ex hypothesi*, is not the best outcome for the burden-bearers.

their situation (including the full rationality of the other parties),¹⁴ and then asking how such agents can be expected to behave. The point of this, one would hope, is not to suggest that individuals actually *are* perfectly rational, but to avoid having to invoke irrationality in order to explain non-resistance. We are all irrational to some extent or other, at least some of the time. But if the consistent failure of the oppressed to resist their oppression had to be *explained* in terms of their behaving irrationally – the thought may be – that would commit us to too damning a verdict about the rationality of the bulk of the population who suffer oppression at the hands of the remainder.

There is a serious question to be asked, however, as to whether anything useful can be shown through thought experiments about what perfectly rational agents would do in extremely artificial situations – whether the situation of 'perfect information' often presupposed in monetarist economics, or that of being behind a 'veil of ignorance' (a staple of Rawlsian political philosophy).¹⁵ What does it tell us if perfectly rational agents would not rise up? It tells us something about what perfectly rational agents would do. *We*, however, are *not* perfectly rational, and it may well be the case that the failure of *actual* oppressed people to rise up *is* partly explained by their (human) irrationality, regardless of what our imaginary perfectly rational agents would do. The point that the co-ordination problem is being used to make, I've acknowledged, is just that we don't strictly *need* to explain non-resistance in terms of irrationality.¹⁶ But so what? We knew *that* already. We could explain it, for example, in terms of imperfections in people's information (about the causes of their suffering, about each other's situations and attitudes, about the likely consequences of rising up, about how overthrowing the existing order is to be approached). For that matter, we could explain it by magic beans. The more interesting question is not that of what explanations are *possible*, but the question of which explanations are remotely plausible.

On top of these basic methodological objections to Rosen's use of the 'co-ordination problem', it seems to me that he gets things wrong even on his own terms. The idea that rational agents would try to free ride is not without intuitive resonance, and it is

¹⁴ See Davis (1977).

¹⁵ Rawls (2005) imagines that the parties in his 'Original Position' lack knowledge of such matters as their sex, race, talents, and position in society (though also – incredibly – that they have access to the 'basic facts' of economics and sociology).

¹⁶ A distinction between different senses in which something might be explanatorily 'necessary' will be important later on.

in line with the account which 'causal' decision theorists such as David Lewis give for the 'prisoners' dilemma'.¹⁷ Lewis points out that the prisoner is better off 'ratting' on his partner, *whatever the partner does*: if the partner rats, then not ratting will mean winning nothing, whereas ratting will bring \$1000; if the partner does not rat, the ratting strategy will bring \$1,001,000, whereas not ratting will bring \$1,000,000.¹⁸ Similarly, the oppressed agent may reason as follows: either there will be a critical mass of up-risers, or there won't; if there is, then I am better off free riding than joining in; and if there isn't, once again I am better off not bearing the costs of taking part in a failed uprising.

This account of things starts to fall apart, however, when we recall the premise shared by both Rosen and Lewis: that the parties know that the other parties are, like them, rational. Lewis is strictly correct to say that the prisoner is better off ratting *whether his partner rats or not*. But this way of putting it is highly misleading, because it allows into consideration two scenarios which should be ruled out: one in which the first prisoner rats and the partner does not; and one where the partner rats and the first prisoner does not. These simply cannot arise if both prisoners are rational and relevantly identical in their situations, and given that the prisoners know that this condition is satisfied, they must know that these two scenarios are out. In that case, the choice is between the two remaining scenarios: both rat, and each gets \$1000; or, neither rats, and each gets \$1,000,000. Not a difficult choice for the rational prisoner.¹⁹

In much the same way, Rosen's claim that it is individually rational to free ride relies on something that was meant to be excluded by the set-up of the problem. If the parties really are alike in being rational and in knowing each other to be rational, then each individual will reason that their choice is between only two options: an uprising in which all participate; or universal inaction and the preservation of the *status quo*. The first, we are assuming, is superior and so will be selected: the oppressed will rise up. What Rosen wants us to imagine, by contrast, is something more like the traditional story of the three robbers, each thinking (falsely) that he is

¹⁷ There are numerous variants of the 'prisoners' dilemma', but for present purposes it is a thought experiment with the following features: two prisoners, who have committed a crime together, are locked in separate cells with no possibility of communication; they are offered the choice of (i) confessing, and turning the other prisoner in as well ('ratting'), or (ii) staying quiet; and they know the various pay-offs which attach to each outcome (e.g. prisoner 1 rats, prisoner 2 stays silent); the game is to work out what the rational prisoner will do.

¹⁸ Lewis (1986).

¹⁹ Davis (1977) seems to advance basically the same argument.

outwitting the others by not putting his ration of food into their communal stew, with an empty pot as their reward.

One might suggest, on Rosen's behalf, that we make a crucial departure from the classic set-up of the co-ordination problem and stipulate that, whilst each agent is perfectly rational, she does *not* know that others are also perfectly rational. In that case, it would be correct to say that rational agents would not rise up: each is better off staying out of it, regardless of what others do – and what others will do is, for each deliberating agent, an unknown quantity.²⁰

Now, we can do that if we wish, but it is not clear how much it achieves. We still have to face the more fundamental methodological worries already mentioned. So what, if such agents would not rise up? It shows that non-resistance *might* be explained without recourse to ascriptions of irrationality (but not that the explanation is correct or plausible). Not only is that a pretty meagre win, but with the appeal to this version of the co-ordination problem, we have ended up having to ascribe a particular kind of *ignorance* (rather than irrationality) to the agents. It's not at all clear that, from the point of view of someone who finds ascriptions of irrationality problematic in the first place, ascribing ignorance is any better: instead of an image of the masses as wild or stupid, we seem to have a diagnosis of the non-resistance of the oppressed as one big, tragic misunderstanding. This defeats the already dubious object of the exercise. How does it in any way defend the credentials of the real-life oppressed to point out that imaginary ignorant egotists wouldn't overthrow *their* oppressors either?

Consideration of this possible counter-move also raises a point of more general importance: that we have a *choice* as to the way in which we set up a problem of co-ordination. We have a choice, for that matter, as to whether we use this device at all – and we must at the very least have something to say in justification of our chosen approach. There is no pre-given and fixed 'Co-ordination Problem', which somehow presses itself upon us. On the contrary, it is game of our own construction, which we can choose to play or not to play (for various reasons), and which can be played in various different ways (again, for various reasons). So we are always entitled to ask *why* we should invoke the co-ordination problem, or a given form of it; and the

²⁰ Another way of putting this is to note that Rosen *has to* give up the idea that the parties have knowledge of each other's rationality, in order to make the adjustment 'in the direction of reality' from a *universal compliance* scenario to a *critical mass* version.

justification had better not be merely that this gives us the result we antecedently wanted.

What, then, might a better explanation of the non-resistance of oppressed populations look like? If the formal 'co-ordination problem' is a non-starter, that doesn't mean that nothing even faintly resembling this answer could be any good. We might still refer to a more informal 'problem of co-ordination', i.e. to the generic difficulty human beings often experience in the attempt to co-ordinate their actions into mutually beneficial arrangements. Indeed, it would be pretty bizarre *not* to think that this sort of problem is both real and relevant to the failure of oppressed groups to overthrow their oppressors.

Unlike the 'co-ordination problem' of rational choice theory, a more relevant problem of co-ordination must be one which makes room for the reality of human beings as imperfectly rational, imperfectly informed and somewhat confused, often fearful, subject to more or less reasonable forms of hope, prone to a condition sometimes termed 'learned helplessness',²¹ motivated to a considerable extent to pursue what we would think of as their own interests, but also motivated in ways that cannot plausibly be reduced to this – e.g. by aesthetic, altruistic, experimental, or self-destructive urges.

Is it a mystery that such beings, having been born into a social order that oppresses them, often do not rise up and overthrow it? Not really, and partly for reasons that invoke what looks very much like a problem of co-ordination: we have a situation where our interests coincide (we all have an interest in overthrowing the oppressive order); our actions need to be co-ordinated in a certain way in order to get the desired outcome (enough of us have to act at the same time – and, in practice, we also have to act in organised, mutually supportive and co-operative ways); yet when we act on the reasons that seem to apply to us as individuals, this outcome is undermined rather than secured, so that there is an apparent mismatch between individual and collective rationality. It's not difficult to come up with real examples of such situations. Everyday life is riddled with cases of hesitation, uncertainty and more or less tragic (or comic, or tragi-comic) misunderstanding. Seb and Christina have one (indivisible) biscuit, but are both too polite to take it; both would consider

²¹ Seligman (1975).

the best outcome of all to be having the biscuit, the second best to be that in which the other has the biscuit, and worst of all to be the outcome in which the biscuit eventually goes stale, or is stolen by a less inhibited passer-by; each tries to persuade the other to have it, vaguely hoping that the other will be the most insistent; and the stand-off is eventually brought to an end by the appropriation of the biscuit by Rob. Two or more parties have an interest in some mutually beneficial scheme – contract, lunch, orgy, or whatever – but are mistaken about each other's desires (perhaps they have good grounds for their mistaken impressions); under these circumstances, it may make sense for the parties not to approach each other, thinking their chances too poor to warrant the pain, humiliation or other costs of failure; so nobody acts, and everyone loses out.

There are two basic conditions that make such cases possible: (i) the fact that what attitudes we have, and how we are motivated to behave, depends in part on what we take *others'* attitudes to be, and on how we anticipate that *they* will behave; and (ii) the fact that we *do not always know* what others' attitudes are, and how they are going to behave. These conditions seem to be very ordinary and pervasive facts of life.

What, though, is the particular sort of co-ordination problem which applies to the situation of the oppressed? Well, obviously enough, this will depend on which 'oppressed' we're talking about – on the historical and social context to which they belong, on the various psychological and cultural characteristics possessed by this set of people as a whole, or by sub-groups or individuals within it. But here are some things that we can plausibly say. First, we are talking here about large numbers of people, who do not have direct access to one another's mental states or intentions, and whose communication with one another is imperfect for various straightforward reasons, e.g. constraints set by geography, time, the state of technology, etc. In addition to that, and as Marx points out, those who own the means of material production are also the owners and controllers of the 'means of *mental* production',²² and so it is not surprising to find (in contemporary Western societies, at least) a mass media which tends to emphasise apathy and conservatism in the population, and to play down any signs of radical political dissatisfaction or translate it into more manageable and convenient forms – hence, for example, the frequency of references to 'greed' or the 'politics of envy'. So, oppressed individuals would quite likely *not* be fully aware of the willingness of sufficient numbers to

²² Marx & Engels (1970), p.64 [emphasis mine].

engage in resistance, even if this willingness were to exist on a large enough scale and in a conscious and articulate form.

A second consideration is that, in real life, it never happens that very large numbers of people do anything at all (apart from, maybe, breathe) *at precisely the same moment*. There must always, therefore, be a first few, and those few are likely to pay a heavy price. The reason why it makes sense for Rosen to describe those initial acts of resistance as 'non-rational', after all, is that they are often pretty much *suicidal* – acts of enormous self-sacrifice or personal risk. This is important in countering the impression that the non-resistance of the oppressed is due to a problem that arises from the tendency toward 'free riding'. There is a big difference between wanting to have all the goodies without taking your share of the burden and risk – in Rosen's example, the risk shared when hostages rush at an armed kidnapper *en masse* – and, on the other hand, merely stopping short of martyrdom (whether in the form of death or imprisonment, destitution, or more mildly and mundanely, a life of early morning paper sales, endless demonstrations and campaigns and interminable meetings). Such things might not be so bad if they could be expected to take on the 'snowball structure' that Rosen describes as characterising successful resistance movements. But what we are more likely to encounter, of course, is what we might call the 'Whac-A-Mole' structure: a small number attempt to initiate some resistance, but run out of steam, or are put down by riot police, and the whole process has to begin again – further discouraged by people's first- and second-hand experience of failure and defeat. *But why is that?* – Rosen-in-Reich's-name might ask – *Why do attempts at resistance tend to be so abortive?* Well, partly it is due to the point already noted, about the absence of perfect synchronicity in human action and of perfect immediacy in human communication and response. But it is more than just a case of tragic misunderstanding or delayed reactions, and this brings me to a third point. In order for their resistance to be successful, the actions of the oppressed need to be coordinated not only in the sense of happening at roughly the same time, but in some further sense of being *organised* in some minimally mutually supportive way.

This last point shouldn't be overstated. It may be that the moment of revolutionary overthrow itself is always fairly chaotic, but the need for organisation is clearly there at other stages of the process of resistance – especially, perhaps, those immediately preceding and immediately following this 'revolutionary moment'. In order to make Rosen's example of the hostages do justice to this, we might imagine not that the hostages simply have to rush at the gunman at the same moment, but instead that

they have to form a human pyramid – perhaps to reach a button on the ceiling, which, when pressed, would administer a fatal electric shock to their captor. The captor, of course, has (a) a very good reason not to let this happen, and (b) a gun.

Whilst consciously ridiculous, this example is actually quite instructive, as it displays very clearly the crucial disconnect between collective and individual rationality. What is needed is for A to crouch here, B to crouch there, C to stand on A's right shoulder and B's left one, and so on and so forth. This formation – which may be instantiated in numerous possible ways – is what is in everybody's interests. But what is the sensible thing to do, from the point of view of an individual hostage? Someone *could*, from an external point of view, translate the claim that the hostages collectively should form a human pyramid into the claims that (i) A 'should' move like this, and (ii) B 'should' move like that, and (iii) C 'should' position himself in a further way – etc., etc. – where all these 'shoulds' are conditional on the fulfilment of all the others. But these are not 'shoulds' that the hostages are in a position to act on, and it makes perfect sense, from their individual points of view, to sit tight so as not to get shot.

So, one level of the problem is just the imperfect knowledge already cited as a factor in problems of co-ordination: there are certain facts which may obtain, but which the parties do not know obtain – e.g. the fact that there enough people who are inclined-to-overthrow-the-oppressor-so-long-as-a-sufficient-number-are-so-inclined as to make it the case that they are actually capable of overthrowing the oppressor. But another level of the problem is not that the oppressed parties lack a certain assurance of pre-existing truths (so that we can say, 'If only they knew...' or, 'If only they had realised in time...'), but rather, that they lack an assurance of a kind that would come from their being able to *make* certain things true – in particular, from certain explicit or tacit arrangements being made amongst the parties. The reason for emphasising this point is that it provides some defence against the charge of condescension that is often levelled at any view which invokes irrationality, illusion, or ignorance. The absence of the kind of knowledge and assurance just distinguished means that, insofar as the oppressed *do* know what other people are going to do, what they know – or at least, what they have good reason to expect – is that the actions of others will *not* be co-ordinated in such a way as to make for a successful collective resistance. It is to be expected that, like the hostages in my version of the example, they will stay put, often for quite respectable reasons.

II. Problems and non-problems

If all this seems obvious, that is part of the point.

Question: *Why do the oppressed not resist their oppression?*

Answer: *Some do, of course, but it is often made difficult (bordering on impossible) by numerous factors, such as: individuals' limited knowledge of each other's dispositions; the lack of underlying arrangements between individuals which might allow them act as a collective, knowing their actions to be co-ordinated with one another in a productive way; the considerable costs attached to the attempt to promote this sort of co-ordination, costs which will be especially high for those who are prepared to make the first move, and which are not compensated for by any significant degree of justified confidence in being able to secure the desired end, even for future generations.*

Anyone who has ever even seriously *considered* being part of some political struggle will be perfectly familiar with these sorts of obstacles.

So, I'm claiming, there is an important sense in which the problem of 'under-mobilization' is not a problem at all. The fact that the majority of the hungry don't steal and the majority of the exploited don't strike is not obviously more mysterious than the fact that, sometimes, they do. 'Reich's Question' merely places one mundane phenomenon alongside another. Compare: 'What has to be explained is not why people eat food, but why the majority of those who eat food first *buy that food in shops*'; or, 'What has to be explained is not why people use their keys to unlock doors, but why sometimes they use their keys to make a jangly noise, or why they often *lose* their keys and have to go searching for them...'

Philosophers often pride themselves on taking what we would think was something unproblematic and simple, and showing that it is actually complicated and fraught with various difficulties, and that we don't understand it as well as we thought we did. How do I *know* that there is a table in front of me? And is it really a table, or a collection of particles, arranged table-wise? For any of our notions, it is possible to ask questions up to a point where we become confused or unsure. We could always meet any proffered answer to 'Reich's Question' by dragging it into a 'why'-regress, for example. There are certainly instances where it is laudable to make manifest the difficulty and complication in things we would otherwise tend to take for granted.

But philosophers had better not believe that they can apply this technique to all objects. They can't, for two good reasons: first because they are finite beings, and second, because in problematising one thing we will always have to assume other things and hold those things fixed. We must therefore be constantly making decisions about what to problematise and what to leave alone, decisions which can (and frequently do) go wrong in two main ways: we can leave things unproblematised which we ought to problematise, or we can problematise things that we would do better to let pass. It is not always easy to avoid these mistakes, or to judge whether and when they are being made. But it should be noted that there is a particular phenomenon in *political* philosophy, where some of these 'mistakes' are not *simply* mistakes, but rather, they are devices potentially admitting of ideological explanation. We find that certain concepts, like 'justice', 'equality', 'rights', are frequently treated as if these were straightforward and obvious, as if we all knew what they meant (or at least that, whatever exactly they mean, it must be something good and important). They are ushered in like old friends, whilst other concepts – in particular, any associated with Marx or Marxism – are stopped at the door and subjected to a strip search. Perhaps Rosen profits from the image of the philosopher as shining an unforgiving light on what others are prepared to pass over, but his decision as to where to direct the beam may be seen as conforming to this general pattern, a pattern which – although Rosen, of course, could not accept something of this form – seems apt for an explanation in terms of its friendliness to the philosophical and political *status quo*.

Rosen, in any case, does not suggest that the non-resistance of the oppressed is even superficially unproblematic, but seems to regard it as mysterious in a sense which goes well beyond the philosopher's high-minded sense (in which *everything* is mysterious). The assumption underlying this, I take it, is that people generally do what it is in their interests to do, when they can. So when they don't, we are owed an explanation. That may be fair enough, for an appropriate sense of 'can'. Such a 'can' would *not* allow us to say that the hostages 'can' electrocute the gunman (by a pulling off a lightning-fast, spontaneous human pyramid trick). There is no mystery as to why we don't do things like that – things which we 'can' do in a much thinner sense – even if those things would promote our interests. To suggest that 'Reich's Question' constitutes a puzzle because, in the normal run of things, people promote their interests 'when they can', is a bit like saying that objects have a tendency to fall to the ground, and so it is mysterious that everything is not lying on the floor.

Unsupported objects fall to the ground, sure. That does not make it surprising to discover that many objects sit on tables, or hang on pieces of string.

This should, I hope, help to pre-empt one kind of objection, which persistently re-asserts the intuitive mysteriousness of 'non-mobilization'. The key here is to distinguish between different types or levels of 'problem'. To call something a 'problem' or 'mystery' is, of course, to say something about (a) our own purposes or goals, and (b) our current levels of competence or comprehension. In the intellectual sense, something is a 'problem' if we don't understand it as much as we want or need to. With 'problems' in a very strong sense, we just have no idea what to say. Crop circles, perhaps, are a problem of this kind. Then, just as there are said to be children whom only a mother could love, there are problems only a philosopher could worry about – like the 'concept horse problem', or whether we should be 'blobjectivists' or not. The non-resistance of the oppressed clearly does not belong to either of these categories, but may be said to be a problem in the relatively weak sense that there are various competing explanations, where it is not obvious exactly which explanation is the right one. A vast number of phenomena – including pretty much everything that scientists and historians argue about – are 'problems' in this sense (which clearly falls short of 'mystery').

Now, the non-resistance of the oppressed is arguably problematic in a rather stronger sense, as noted above, if it violates a general expectation that people will act in accordance with their own interests, where they can. However, my suggestion was that once we specify this 'where they can' caveat more fully, it will turn out that, more often than is usually recognised, they *can't*. There may still be a significant remainder, perhaps: an element of a truer 'voluntary servitude', where people act against their own interests even though they could act in a way that serves them. At this point, I'd suggest, the notion of ideological false consciousness is one good candidate for taking up the slack. With that, however, I come to the second point at which it may be necessary to clarify my position and to defend it against foreseeable complaint. I said at the outset that I would take issue with the view that the purpose of the theory of ideology is to explain the non-resistance of the oppressed, and I have been arguing that an informal problem of co-ordination can help to account for this non-resistance. And yet, now, I seem to be saying that the theory of ideology does form at least part of the explanation of why the oppressed do not rise up. So the theory of ideology is needed in order to answer 'Reich's Question' after all! And is this not then also, at least to a considerable extent, the *point* of the theory? For if it

turned out that ideology wasn't needed at all, in order to answer 'Reich's Question', wouldn't that be a major blow for the theory – something which would seriously weaken its appeal and undermine its motivation?²³

The response to this hinges on the sense of 'need' at work when it is asked, 'Do we need the theory of ideology in order to answer "Reich's Question"?' – and the distinction I'll make between different senses of 'need' runs parallel to the distinction used in my reply to the first anticipated objection, between different senses of 'problem'. The answer, then, is 'yes and no'. We don't need the theory of ideology, in the sense that we can say plenty in reply to 'Reich's Question' before even mentioning it. In another sense, however, we *do* need the theory of ideology, *if* some form of that theory is true (and I believe it is): we need it in the sense that a *full and correct* answer to 'Reich's Question' would then be bound to invoke ideology at some point. And that means that it would indeed be bad news for the theory, if it turned out to be completely redundant for answering that question, since it would then be badly shaken by a kind of (weak) *modus tollens* argument (i.e. *If T is true, then ideology will figure in the answer to 'Reich's Question'; ideology doesn't figure in the answer to 'Reich's Question'; so, T is not true*).²⁴ There is a world of difference, however, between being merely an *implication* of a theory and being its *raison d'être*. That the theory of ideology can help to answer 'Reich's Question', I am suggesting, stands to that theory as an instance of the former rather than the latter.

To deny that the point of the theory of ideology is to answer 'Reich's Question' (or something similar) is ambiguous, however. It could be read as a psychological claim, about the intentions of the proponents of the theory of ideology. For some – although perhaps more often for its critics than for its advocates – this has indeed been the point of the theory of ideology. I was at pains, after all, to emphasise that Rosen's position is not anomalous. But when one commentator states, in the manner of the most uncontroversial commonplace, that this is what the theory meant *for Marx and his followers*,²⁵ this seems to me badly mistaken: there is no indication that Marx was ever particularly puzzled by the non-resistance of the oppressed, and in any case he figured that this was a state of affairs which was very soon to change.

²³ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Constellations* for raising the objection in this form.

²⁴ I describe this as a 'weak' *modus tollens* because it's not clear to me that the consequent strictly follows from the antecedent – nor is the antecedent at all clear. It is more a case of: *if anything recognisable as the theory of ideology is true, then it's very hard to see how ideology could fail to figure in the answer to 'Reich's Question'*.

²⁵ Heath (2000; p.363).

The claim is significantly more understandable if applied to twentieth-century Marxists or 'critical theorists', many of whom have been preoccupied with the question of the non-appearance of proletarian revolution. But their stance is importantly different from the one embodied by Rosen and others, which is the one I have been considering. First, there is an enormous difference between being puzzled by the failure of a particular group (the proletariat) to overthrow another particular group (the bourgeoisie) at a particular time (e.g. the early twentieth century), *on the grounds that this seems to defy the predictions we had made on the back of a particular theory of history*, and, on the other hand, being puzzled by the non-resistance of oppressed groups *per se* as a timeless problem which stands independently of a prior commitment to any particular theory of history and society.²⁶ Second, it's not clear that the point of the theory of ideology, for this sort of Marxist or critical theorist, could be identified as the task of solving even this (different) problem, since the notion of ideology is *already* a component of the Marxist theory which gives rise to the difficulty by making (or seeming to make) an unfulfilled prediction. It is not something which is tacked on later, in order to get the theory out of trouble. Rather, it is an integral part of the original theory of history and society, and it's reasonable to infer that this is because people have thought that there was some independent point or value to the notion.

In sum, it's not at all clear that Marxist theorists' interest in the theory of ideology has in fact been motivated by a drive to answer 'Reich's Question'; it's still less clear that it would make sense for them to conceive of their project in that way; and there is no reason to think that this is how Marx himself conceived of *his* project. As well as a psychological claim, there might then be a more 'normative' or 'imperative' one: whatever people have, as a matter of fact, taken the point of the theory of ideology to be, they *shouldn't* take that point to be (exclusively, or even mainly) answering 'Reich's Question'. This is a claim about what the theory of ideology is *good for*. In the next and final section, I'll try to say something about the respective pointfulness of the theory of ideology and also of my own arguments in this paper.

III. Concluding thoughts: What is the point?

²⁶ The thinkers I have mostly addressed in this paper are motivated by the second sort of puzzlement – e.g. de la Boétie, Heath, Rosen, or Cudd. This is not to say that there is automatically something wrong with this sort of puzzlement – philosophers have legitimately been puzzled by far less – so long as we are careful about the sense in which non-resistance is held to be a 'problem' (cf. my distinctions above).

In complaining that Rosen – in his emphasis on 'Reich's Question', and eventual invocation of some sort of problem of co-ordination as a solution – makes a mountain out of a molehill and crowns it with a platitude, I might be accused of expressing mere irritability rather than any substantial disagreement. Setting aside my criticisms of his particular use of the 'co-ordination problem', if my point is just that 'Reich's Question' is not so hard to answer, and that a sizeable part of the answer is provided by the idea of a problem of co-ordination (something to which Rosen himself is committed, even if his version of the problem is the wrong one), then isn't the difference between our positions mainly that Rosen has a higher estimation of the initial difficulty of the task (and thus a higher estimation of his own achievement)?

No, I want to say next. The disagreement matters. It matters, first, because the kind of approach exemplified by Rosen encourages us to let go of the theory of ideology prematurely. And it matters, furthermore, because the kind of approach I'm opposing has (at least) three functions that are not only dubious, but seem themselves to be crying out for an ideological analysis.

In the first place, construing the theory of ideology as an answer to 'Reich's Question' has the effect of playing into a view of human beings which artificially elevates a particular notion of rationality. It elevates this rationality both descriptively – by implying that humans are closer to the economist's rational calculator than is plausibly the case – and normatively, through the underlying suggestion that the worst thing we can accuse someone of is imperfect rationality. Once we see the use of a particular form of the co-ordination problem as a choice standing in need of justification, this opens the possibility that some uses of the 'co-ordination problem' (and the motivations behind those uses) might themselves admit of analysis in terms of ideology. Rosen's own (fairly standard) approach, for example – by couching the problem in terms of the behaviour of perfectly 'rational' agents, and by doing this in the service of an attempt to make room for the 'rationality' of the oppressed – gives sustenance to the neo-liberal ideal of human beings as rational-by-default. The 'normal', mature human being, in his²⁷ 'normal' state, is a 'rational animal': this is central to what it means to be 'human'. Our most important obligation to fellow human beings is therefore to respect their 'rationality'. This, in its turn, is taken to be a matter of treating 'revealed preferences' uncritically, on the assumption that these track people's interests and also justify the states of

²⁷ Yes, 'his'.

affairs they tend (individually and in combination) to produce. Something similar may be said for Rosen's suggestion that the co-ordination problem arises from the drive towards 'free riding'. The political connotations couldn't really be a lot worse here. On the one hand, there is a view of human beings as fundamentally greedy and selfish (perhaps lazy or cowardly, too). This is, of course, the basis of an extremely popular and convenient argument for why capitalism, inequality and hierarchy are 'natural', unavoidable facts of life.

In both cases, Rosen might well remind us that the agents in the co-ordination problem are not supposed to be accurate depictions of real human beings: he is not saying either that human beings *are* or *should be* like that. But unless we suppose real-life agents to resemble the hypothetical ones to a considerable extent, it seems that the thought experiment cannot do what it is meant to do: we still have to explain why *actual* agents, if they are not at all like that, do not rise up against their oppressors; and so we are back where we started. My claim is not that Rosen explicitly or consciously endorses a view of human beings as hyper-rational (in a narrow economic sense of 'rationality'),²⁸ or as shameless free riders. It is more that (i) his approach would make a good deal of sense on the back of such a view (and not otherwise), and (ii) that it's plausible to see the sort of approach he takes as being *causally* connected – in terms of its likely origin, and in terms of its likely reinforcing function – with the view of human 'rationality' just described, and with the political interests associated with it.²⁹ And if the appearance and use of this form of the co-ordination problem in books such as Rosen's have this sort of function, then this provides a tempting explanation of *why* this form of the co-ordination problem should appear and be used in this way when, after all, it doesn't otherwise seem to make any sense.

Secondly, Rosen's emphasis on 'Reich's Question' conforms to an unwelcome tendency in thinking about ideology: a tendency to regard the ideological distortion of thought as primarily a disease of the poor, unfortunate or downtrodden. Note that my objection here is *not* the familiar one which regards as 'patronising' the

²⁸ This would be especially odd, given that parts of *On Voluntary Servitude* are devoted to the criticism of Western 'rationalism'. Rosen also suggests (p.262) that resistance movements always get going through initial *non*-rational acts by small numbers of people who are prepared to resist even without any reasonable expectation of success.

²⁹ An instructive comparison here is the 'propaganda model' of the mass media outlined by Chomsky & Herman (1994): the ways in which atrocities are reported is clearly traced to the end of protecting or advancing certain (US) interests, but without any suggestion that this is the result of a conscious conspiracy, or of deliberate whitewash on the part of individual journalists.

ascription of ideological false consciousness to the oppressed. What is too seldom on the minds of those who make this objection is that ideological false consciousness might equally well be ascribed to people *other than* the oppressed, and my point is that this is clearly an oversight. It is also very un-Marxist, should we care about that. Marx clearly regarded not only the views and values of the proletariat, but also the 'higher' spheres of culture and thought as having their form shaped by the demands of the material 'base' of society, and he explicitly diagnosed and criticised much of the philosophy of his day as bourgeois ideology. When he remarks that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world',³⁰ or when he calls Bentham 'that insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence of the 19th century',³¹ he is not exactly talking about poor benighted factory workers who do not notice their chains. Marx – correctly, it seems to me – saw the ideological distortion of thought as something applying across social classes and milieus, though no doubt taking different forms in these different contexts. It is not at all clear that he sees the ideological distortion of consciousness as a phenomenon whose occurrence or importance is concentrated within the ranks of the oppressed. But the tendency among contemporary commentators on Marx is to look at ideology in much the same way as the different phenomenon of *alienation* is seen, i.e. as something which, although it affects everyone, affects the working class *more* (and in an especially significant way). That verdict, which seems to me basically correct when applied to alienation, becomes inappropriate when glibly transferred to the issue of ideology. For instance, Jonathan Wolff, in his very popular introduction to Marx's thought, touches on the issue of ideology only a couple of times; but when he does, the impression given is that this is very much a lower-class problem. The examples he uses to introduce the idea are the 'taboos' against theft and unemployment,³² later adding that: '[t]he existence of religion in class-divided societies is very useful in keeping the workers in check. Distracted by thoughts of heaven, they are less likely to protest about hell on earth... While we might note that this portrayal of the workers as unwitting dupes of a bourgeois conspiracy is hardly edifying, it could be true.'³³ Leaving aside Wolff's commission of one of the most clichéd blunders in Marx interpretation – one which Rosen commits at one point as well, when he presents Marx as portraying the proletariat simply as 'passive victims' and 'obedient chicks'³⁴ – the point of present interest is that he automatically selects

³⁰ This is the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach (see Marx (1967)).

³¹ Marx (1990), Chapter 24, Section 5.

³² Wolff (2003), p.60.

³³ *ibid*, pp.103-4.

³⁴ Rosen (1996), p.182.

these examples, rather than any of the contemporary philosophers, theologians, or economists whose thought Marx criticised as being ideological. Jon Elster's treatment of the subject of ideology in his own introduction to Marx is similar, asking how it is that 'the interest of the ruling class is supposed to shape the views of the *other* members of society [my emphasis]. The view that rulers and exploiters shape the world view of the oppressed by conscious, cynical manipulation is too simplistic.'³⁵ So it is (not so much too simplistic as plain *wrong*, in fact, whether as an interpretation of Marx or as a description of reality); both Elster and Wolff are, to my mind, guilty of having too much truck with it. But again, the present point is that Elster conforms to the pattern of focusing on ideological false consciousness as something which affects the minds of the masses so as to keep them in their place: a distortion of the thought *of* the people, *by* the ruling class, *for* the ruling class.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that Rosen (or Elster, or Wolff) actually says – or even thinks – that oppressed groups are the only ones to suffer from ideological illusion (although it does not seem so unreasonable to infer that the oppressed are assumed to be worse afflicted). But we can distinguish once again between what people believe or are strictly committed to, and what *functional role* may plausibly be attributed to their choice of emphasis, what sentiments and impressions may lie behind this or be reinforced by it. The latter set of considerations, as well as the former, *must* inform the way in which we interpret and evaluate people's statements – predictable invocations of the 'genetic fallacy' (or to the absurdity of holding intellectuals responsible for all causal consequences of their interventions) notwithstanding. A particularly clear illustration of this is the focus of so-called 'New Atheists' on the evils of Islam: whilst many would claim that they are even-handedly critical of all religions – interested only in the distinction between more or less 'fundamentalist' versions of a given creed – the frequency of the selection of Islam, rather than e.g. Christianity or Judaism, as the target of anti-religious vitriol cannot be separated from a political climate marked by rising Islamophobia and the Western aggression against predominantly Muslim nations, of which Islamophobic sentiment is both a product and a cause.³⁶

To think of ideology as being exclusively or chiefly about the illusions of the oppressed is a similarly *convenient* mistake. Firstly, we get the satisfaction that goes with seeing ourselves as coming to the aid of the unenlightened, and as doing so in

³⁵ Elster (1986), p.168.

³⁶ See Greenwald (2013).

an enlightened and sensitive enough way as to acknowledge that their *un*-enlightenment is excusable and understandable. Secondly, it allows 'us' (i.e. the philosophers or other members of the intellectual elite) to forget that ideological distortion is *our* problem too. This effectively throws out the uncomfortable insight of certain later theorists of ideology, most notably critical theorists, that our thought must strive above all to be 'reflexive' – that is, to be relentlessly conscious of its own origins and social functions.

Thirdly and finally, by setting up the theory of ideology as an attempt at a 'solution' to such a triumphant non-problem, we leave the theory wide open to uncharitable dismissal. After having thrown it out for failing to be what it is not, the way is left clear for other, less threatening, less *political* concepts to fill the void. Rosen's performance is a perfect illustration. He gives the impression that there was this puzzle, which philosophers were scratching their heads over, and then some of them came up with the theory of ideology in order to solve that puzzle. That solution can't work, he adds – but never fear, because there's always the 'co-ordination problem' (among other things)!³⁷ But that structure gives a completely misleading impression of the theory of ideology. That theory is not offered in response to a pre-existing puzzle which is pinpointed by 'Reich's Question' – part of the reason for that is that the question isn't much of a puzzle to begin with, and another part of the reason is that, as Rosen says, the question may be answered in many other ways. Having misconstrued its remit, Rosen can now declare the theory of ideology redundant, making way for more widely palatable replacements: not just the 'co-ordination problem', but the familiar categories of 'wishful thinking' and 'adaptive preferences' (or 'sour grapes', in acknowledgement of Elster).³⁸

This strikes me a local instance of a more general tendency in the direction of the 'de-politicisation' of political philosophy. Everyone can accept the idea that sometimes humans engage in wishful thinking, or that sometimes they will try to save themselves frustration by adjusting their desires to fit the limited possibilities open to them. My worry is not that these concepts don't correspond to real phenomena – of course they do – but that they cannot illuminate and account for everything that the more controversial notion of ideology purports to explain. And furthermore,

³⁷ Rosen does not pretend that the 'co-ordination problem' alone can provide a full answer to 'Reich's Question', but supplements this with an appeal to *non-ideological* false consciousness – as I'll explain shortly.

³⁸ See Elster (1983) and, for the notion of 'wishful thinking' only, Geuss (2008; 2010).

they tend to encourage the thought – one laden with conservative potential – that both false consciousness and the oppressive social orders that it sometimes helps to sustain are due to the flawed cognitive and emotional apparatus of the human individual, a case of universal, unalterable human frailty.

It is one thing to reject the idea that the theory of ideology is to be understood as an answer to something like 'Reich's Question'. It is harder to say, more positively, what it *is* for. There is probably no single or simple answer to that, especially when we remember that – as Rosen rightly acknowledges – what we're concerned with is not a single or simple theory, and arguably not strictly a 'theory' at all. But if pushed, we might say that the notion of ideology is put forward as part of an attempt to account for the phenomena to do with human ideas, patterns discernible in the formation and change of human ideas across different social and historical contexts, phenomena ranging from a colleague's refusal to accept some conclusion, when the evidence is of the sort which he or she *usually* regards as completely persuasive, to the fact that it took as long as it did for British women to gain equal voting rights with men. *There is no particular puzzle to which the theory is offered as a solution* – although there may well be all sorts of otherwise puzzling phenomena, such as the two examples just given, which it may claim to help us understand. To think otherwise is, I think, to fall in line with a tendency which deserves to be viewed with great suspicion: a tendency for analytic philosophers in particular to see themselves as confronting a landscape composed of fixed, pre-given 'problems', waiting for solutions, so that for any given piece of philosophising there must be some determinate problem which is its object. The theory of ideology is not like that, any more than Marx's theory of history more broadly is like that. It is, rather, a general account of how ideal phenomena work, and in particular, what relationship they bear to *material* phenomena: it says that the former are, to a large extent, explicable in terms of the function they have for a part of the latter, namely, the function of serving certain interests. A theory of ideology is, therefore, crucially bound up with a theory of *history* – the connections between Marx's theory of history and his notion of ideology are particularly clear (or rather, it is particularly clear that the connections are close).

A theory of ideology is, furthermore, bound up with a form of *criticism*, sometimes termed 'ideology critique' (or *Ideologiekritik*): forms of thought may be criticised by

being explained as forms of ideology, i.e. in terms of their tendency to promote certain interests. If we were to insist on looking for a puzzle for the theory of ideology to solve, we *could* point to the 'problem' of finding universal, authoritative standards by which to criticise forms of thought. If we are unconvinced of their existence (or at any rate, of our ability to access them), one response is to reconceive criticism as a project of unmasking ideological functions – or, as emphasised by the associated tradition of 'internal' criticism, a project of unmasking internal contradictions within forms of thought. That, in my view, would at least have the advantage that the 'problem', in relation to which the theory of ideology is to be understood, is actually a problem.

Better still, perhaps, would be to mount some resistance to the trend noted above, which pins the problem of false consciousness on the more oppressed, poorer majority in society. Philosophers could start by taking a look at themselves. Accounting for the uneducated working-class Tory voter is one thing. Trying to make sense of what goes on inside the heads of self-styled 'liberal' or 'left-leaning' members of the intelligentsia is quite another. The superior average levels of education of the privileged in society, not to mention their greater amounts of leisure or professional opportunity for contemplation, might be thought to render the ideological false consciousness manifested by members of social elites more mysterious, on balance – at least in some instances – than that of the members of oppressed groups. Never mind 'Reich's Question', then. I can suggest another question – 'Finlayson's question', if we must play that game: Why do highly educated, intelligent people, who have plenty of opportunity to reflect and who are even paid for doing so, who are often apparently sincere in their desire to do more than simply contribute eloquent ways of rationalising and reinforcing their own and their co-travellers' privilege (and who even claim to be, instead, champions of the oppressed – or in any case, of 'truth' or 'reason'), fail so spectacularly to live up to their own self-conception?

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