

Remarks and Responses

Michael Morris, *University of South Florida*

My book, *Knowledge and Ideology*, left the press in November of 2016. Reflecting on the time and events that have since intervened, I think it plain that the problem of ideology and the task of ideology critique press upon us with great urgency. Here I should be clear: the problem, as I see it, is *not* some recent proliferation of ideology – or even public susceptibility to ideology – and thus the need for a renewed commitment to the standard practices of ideology critique. Instead, echoing Karl Mannheim’s analysis of Weimar culture in the late 1920s, I suggest that our age suffers from the disseminated ubiquity of ideology critique itself, and more particularly from the cynicism, apathy, nihilism, fideism and ultimate yearning for violence that attend – so I argue – the reflexive unmasking of every norm or ideal that might guide or bind us. Contrary to popular misconceptions, Nazi and fascist commitments do not emerge from the kind of pre-reflective dogmatism and parochial narrow-mindedness that the post-modern professoriate and much popular culture so effectively demolish. The Nazi or fascist persuasion is a decidedly post-truth, post-fact, or simply post-modern persuasion.

For a vivid documentation of this point, we might turn to the Nazi play-wright Hans Johst, whose *Schlagater*, a play named for the leader of the failed German uprising against the French occupation of the Ruhr, was first performed in 1933, in honor of Hitler’s birthday. It rapidly became the most popular and frequently performed play in the early years of the Nazi state. The play provided posterity with a memorable aphorism, one that, in slight misquotation, has been ascribed to numerous high-ranking Nazi officials, each of whom purportedly loved to proclaim: “when I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun.” Excised from its initial literary context and translated into English, this maxim apparently suggests some familiar form of boorish populism, an uncouth disregard for the supposedly “fine” arts and the pretension of “high” culture. In its German and literary context, the aphorism more accurately suggests that the general process of socialization, education, or cultural formation, that is “Bildung,” is nothing but an instrument of ideological control, one that must be met with open violence. Consider the full passage from which this aphorism stems:

Schlageter: “No paradise will entice you out of your barbed wire entanglement?”

Theimann: “That’s for damned sure! Barbed wire is barbed wire! I know what I’m up against...No rose without a thorn!...And the last thing I’ll stand for is ideas to get the better of me! I know that rubbish...fraternity, equality, ... freedom..., beauty and dignity! You gotta use the right bait to hook ‘em. And then, you’re right in the middle of a parley and they say: Hands up! You’re disarmed...you republican voting swine!—No let ‘em keep their good distance with their whole ideological kettle of fish...I shoot with live ammunition! When I hear the word culture..., I release the safety on my Browning.”¹

If ideas and ideals always only express and facilitate some partisan interest, if they are veiled weapons, then many will plausibly opt for real weapons. If all culture formation is ideological deformation, at least guns are honest and open in their intent. They are also more effective.

Suspicion of the ideological import of freedom, equality, and fraternity span the political spectrum, promoting a fascination with the purported honesty and creativity of violence. Consider Sartre. In his “Preface” to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, he condemns the horrors of the European colonial legacy with a rhetoric whose extremity threatens to undermine itself:

First, we must face the unexpected revelation, the striptease of our humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it’s not a pretty sight. It was nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage...Chatter, chatter: liberty, equality, fraternity, love, honor, patriotism, and what have you. All this did not prevent us from making anti-racial speeches about... dirty Jews, and dirty Arabs. High minded people, liberal or just soft-hearted, protest that they were shocked by such inconsistency; but they were either mistaken or dishonest, for there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism.²

Much like Johst and his Nazi admirers, Sartre here apparently jettisons liberty, equality, and fraternity as nothing but “an ideology of lies.” Beyond this shared suspicion, both Johst and Sartre find themselves drawn to violence or power as the ontological foundation of social reality, as the purest expression of existence, one too often attenuated and weakened by the hypocritical machinations of ideological stratagems. Echoing Nietzsche, both Johst and Sartre turn to the eruption of violent power as the only possible source of new, more robust, largely aesthetic, and avowedly contingent values. Johst

thus has Theimann ask: “Can you really name anything which has amounted to something on earth without blood and well-marked fronts?...the main thing is that the people should cry out for priests with enough courage to sacrifice the best..., for priests who are willing to spill blood, blood, blood... for priests who can slaughter.”³ Sartre likewise praises the violence of colonial uprisings, not as a necessary means to a legitimate end, but as itself the creative source of a new humanity, of new values and identities. The “irrepressible violence [of colonial uprising]...is man recreating himself...When his rage boils over, he [the post-colonial subject] comes to know himself in that he creates himself...The child of violence, at every moment he draws from it his humanity.”⁴

Whether we look without or within, I think we today find powerful impulses that range from fideism to nihilism, from apathy and careerism to the aestheticized and identity-forming cult of the violent clash. In *Knowledge and Ideology*, I trace these impulses back, in part, to the widespread practice of what I call *functional ideology critique*. This critique largely dismisses the epistemic dimensions of beliefs, the ways that beliefs purport to be *about* the world. Ignoring questions of truth, logical-entailment, and justification, functional ideology critique analyzes beliefs as mundane objects *in* the world. It focuses on the causes, the effects, the functions, the associations, and distributive mechanisms of beliefs. Functional ideology critique thus simply follows the standard approach of much contemporary sociology, marketing research, public relations, and political campaign strategy, though it maintains a radical presupposition and aim: it insists that the current distributions of beliefs play some functional relationship in the perpetuation of social injustice, and that the revelation of this functional relationship can or must play a central role in the attainment of justice.

Along with much empirical research in sociology, functional ideology critique has rightly revealed the deeply interested and particularistic social dimensions of beliefs. We therefore have much to learn from it, though we must overcome and transform it. The social causes, predictable distributions, and all-to-convenient effects of beliefs are increasingly evident, even in the more rarified and abstract forms of human inquiry. These social properties of belief stand in significant tension with the traditional epistemic treatment of them. In general, the social causes of a belief belie or at least problematize its justification.

Here we might pursue three different responses. First, we might renew our efforts to purify and abstract our epistemic practices from all suspicious sociological admixture. Secondly, we might accept some form of post-modern relativism. Or, thirdly, we might attempt to reconceive social reality and

epistemic practice in some synthetic fashion, developing an inherently social account of epistemic practice, one that treats certain kinds of social interests as properly constitutive of knowledge. This third option presents the central task of the minority strand of ideology critique, what I call *epistemic ideology critique*. In its neo-Kantian variation, best exemplified by Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interests*, this social theory of knowledge posits a limited number of universal human interests that constitute fundamentally disjointed types of human knowledge or inquiry, and it avowedly denies the capacity of thought to capture the world as it is. This anti-ontological or anti-realist stance may seem justified: if human interests inherently constitute knowledge, then it seems plausible to insist that knowledge cannot capture the basic structures of a presumably dis-interested reality.

While making common cause with Habermas against the corrosive social effects of merely functional ideology critique, I criticize his solution, and I seek to revive and defend what I take to be Marx's own neo-Hegelian form of epistemic ideology critique. I reconstruct and defend this tradition with a heavy reliance upon Lukacs's interpretation of Marxism, particularly in *History and Class-Consciousness*, and also upon certain reconstructed dimensions of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. Developing "practice" as the central category of social ontology, I argue that the interested structures of social reality can only be conceived through interested forms of knowing. I further argue that these interested-forms of knowing at least initially emerge from diffuse social contexts, and that possible integration of these knowledges does not proceed through social abstraction and/or the generalities of some purportedly public reason, but rather through a form of ideology critique that examines how local purposes both constitute and distort these local knowledges.

Here I draw parallels between epistemic ideology critique and Freudian psychoanalysis. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the dream manifests the distorted or sublimated realization of some thwarted aspiration. The dream reveals something beyond itself, but only in distorted form. In order to interpret the dream, we must consider the broader waking life of the psyche in relation to particular forms of distortion in the dream. Similarly, I argue that local knowledges or ideologies simultaneously reveal *and* distort the aims that structure a given practice in its relation to the broader social environment. Thus in addressing ideologies – be they our own or those of others – we do not simply reject the ideology to get a better look at reality. This would be like rejecting the dream to look directly at waking life. We look at waking life, but the dream provides the clues that illuminate it. A similar process occurs in epistemic ideology critique. Ideology always reveals and conceals. And

there is no way to approach social reality except through a contextual interpretation of the ideology itself.

RESPONSE

The thoughtful comments made by Bert and Miles suggest at least three important questions. These concern (1) my critical characterization of Foucault; (2) my potential failure to appreciate the resources provided by the late Habermas; and (3) my neglect of certain metaphysical dimensions of Hegel's project. I shall address these questions in turn.

First, what is wrong with Foucault and functional ideology critique? Miles admits that Foucault may lack philosophical ground to justify his ideals, but he questions whether he and other figures I mentioned actually find themselves allured by violence. Similarly, Bert reminds me of Foucault's political activism and champions him for a skepticism that is "reflexive, engaged, and politically forward looking, in which the deconstruction of inherited identities and norms are meant to create new spaces of self-realization and self-invention." I should begin by saying that I do not present Foucault as a principle exemplar of the tendency of functional ideology critique to breed violence. Instead, I present Stirner, Sorel, Sartre, Johst, Hitler, and Jünger as primary examples of this tendency. I am obviously aware that the political engagements of Sartre and Foucault differentiate them from Johst, Hitler, and Jünger, but the deeper similarities should – I think – be deeply troubling. Like Nazis such as Johst, Hitler, Jünger, and Schmidt, Foucault also views social reality, including normativity and the self, as nothing but varied manifestations of power. With regards to Sartre, I think we can say that fascism is simply existentialism as a collective project. Just as existentialism releases the pure freedom of the self from all empirical and rational content, so fascism sees mythically accompanied violence as the ungrounded source of political change, a change unrestrained and unguided by the present or past. More importantly, I think that a society which embraces such views of power and autonomy will tend, in the long run, towards fascism, not towards more traditional forms of left-wing liberational projects.

Let me try to justify this by turning to a dimension of functional ideology critique that has not yet been mentioned today. In the broadest terms, the functional critique of ideology attempts to uncover the tacit or hidden forms of power, those that are generally supposed to perpetuate oppression in the face of the ultimate primacy of the power of the oppressed. Obviously, beliefs sometimes serve this function, but so do desires, habits, customs, etc.

In this sense, functional ideology critique attempts to unmask all forms of voluntary servitude, to uncover the internalized norms, desires, and customs that actually thwart our true self and keep us subordinate to some oppressive power.

However, this project both presupposes and tends to undermine some distinction between the true self and the social forms foisted upon it. But what is this true self? Typically, thinkers rely upon some notion of rational autonomy or freedom, the ability of a person to step back and endorse or reject the beliefs, desires, and customs she has received from without. Unfortunately, this kind of self-determining agency either smuggles some merely given content into its determination of itself or it identifies itself with a freedom that is empty or indeterminate. This creates alienation or division between the empty capacity of self-determination and all determinate or given content. If the self as detached capacity to choose experiences all content as contingent and given from without, then it can only experience its freedom through repeated acts of the negation of particular identities or contents, not through any stable act of identification.

In Foucault we plainly see this loss of the self or subject, which becomes nothing but a bundle of power-manifestations foisted upon a body or upon some explosive capacity to break out. This vision of the self has two implications. First, it channels the experience of the self into acts of negation, where the self asserts itself through denying its appearance or its past. Thus consider Foucault's account of the self, in his essay on enlightenment, where he imagines a carnival where masks are constantly changed with skill and rapidity, and where there is no true self beneath the mask, nothing but ability to take off one mask and coyly or ironically adopt another. Or consider Stirner's lament: "Doesn't my will of yesterday continue to bind me today and tomorrow? Then my will would congeal. Oh, vexed stability! My creation, that is a particular expression of my will, would then become my sovereign. But in my will, I, the creator, would be inhibited in my flow and my dissolution."⁵

The worship of the new, the provocative, and the transgressive represents the bastard twin of any true notion of historical progress, and it ultimately yields the game to the novelty, extreme provocation, and ultimate transgression of those who, with the Italian Futurists, sing of war and the machines of destruction. Second, this conception of the self renders all forms of being together both elective and temporary. In a truly Kantian fashion, it conceives sex as the contractual – we would say “consensual” – use of body parts. With Stirner, the untethered self says to the beloved: “you are nothing but my feast, just as I am feasted upon and consumed by you.”⁶ With Stirner,

it says: "I use the world and other people! In this way, I can leave myself open for every impression, without allowing any impression to tear me from myself."⁷ This world of ephemeral use and constant self-re-creation produces a situation where every normative claim upon another person becomes a violation of a rationally ungrounded or unguided form of rational autonomy. Again consider Stirner: "Can I say that someone has committed a crime against me without assuming that he must act in the way that I think is good? The actions I think are good, I call "right," while other actions I call "crimes." In doing this, I suppose that others must act as I do. I do not treat them as individuals, who have a law within themselves and who live accordingly. Instead, I treat them as a being that should obey some 'rational law'... A criminal only exists in opposition to the holy. You can never be a criminal against me. You can only be an opponent."⁸ Here the collision of bodies, the open conflict between enemies, becomes the only form of human respect, one that demands nothing but takes whatever it can get.

Bert admits that Foucault needs a more robust conception of agency, but he clearly favors a solution that follows Habermas and locates agency and normativity in the processes of discourse. I suppose our differences are significant here. I follow Marx in seeing pre-reflective material activities as the supreme power and source of content in our lives, and I think adequate thought must draw its content and force from its deeper roots in these material contexts. In short, I simply do not see how language or any impulse towards communication can guide, constitute, or motivate either our individual identities or our collective existence. Incidentally, Habermas himself misconstrues Marx's theory of work, treating it as a strictly instrumental transformation of material in accordance with the laws of science, not as a more Hegelian process by which individuals and groups constitute themselves through the formation, interpretation, and reformation of the objective world.

This brings me to the final and by far the most damning question: can my neo-Hegelian project flourish without Hegelian metaphysics? Let me state the problem as I see it. I have argued that the critique of ideology helps us to have an undistorted – or rather less distorted – grasp of the aims imbedded in the practices that always already grip and form us as well as of the larger environment in which they operate. For Hegel, this process ultimately leads us to see the interconnection and relatively harmonious interrelations between all human endeavors, both in the individual state and the total process of human history. For Hegel and for Marx, solidarity and normative community derive from the purpose interrelations between particulars, not from the universal abstract forms embodied in each particular. It is not some generic property or capacity that grounds human solidarity: it is the fact that we all occupy dif-

ferential but integrated places in a purposively unified process. Hegel's theological metaphysics grounds this claim: all humans find their fullest identity as interrelated moments of a pantheistic, processual god. Marx jettisons the theological categories and guaranties, but he still presents the collective aim of the proletariat as the basis for establishing a form of human solidarity that points beyond the supposedly basic conflicts of class aims.

I see two possible responses. First, one might reject theological metaphysics and simply insist that differentiated but common purposiveness is the only actual form of human solidarity, even if it doesn't ultimately have a universal scope. In Marxism there are no abstract or universal human rights. Moral duties are at once formed and limited by the human interrelations generated by concrete shared purposes. When these purposes are fundamentally at odds – think of different classes or groups of people constituted by their conflicting attempts to fashion the world in accordance with divergent aims – then human solidarity and moral commitment meet a firm boundary. This vision is admittedly unappealing, and it becomes still more disturbing when we recognize the limits of class solidarity – i.e. the various fissures within the traditional Marxist conception of class that preclude the withering away of state violence. Still, a thinker in the Marxist tradition might stand firm and insist that human solidarity and peaceful cooperation are, as a matter of empirical fact, fragile and rare. Moral community should of course be pursued and tended. We should seek to forge agreement and solidarity where possible. But there is no reason to think that the basis for some stable and universal solidarity lies conveniently nested within the generic contours of human biology, enlightened self-interest, reason, or language.

The second response seems (to me) more promising: it involves the attempt to rework Hegelian theology in a more transcendent fashion, one that overcomes the unrealistic optimism and extreme quiescence of more standard Right Hegelianism. This reworking, however, presents the task of a future project.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Hanns Johst. Hanns Johst's Nazi Drama Schlageter. (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz), 89.
- 2 Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove City Press, 1963), 24-26.
- 3 Johst, 92.
- 4 Fanon, 21.
- 5 Max Stirner. *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. (Leipzig: Verlag von Philipp Reclam, 1845), 229.
- 6 Stirner, 347.
- 7 Stirner, 346.
- 8 Stirner, 237-238.

