

What (if anything) is ideological about ideal theory?

European Journal of Political Theory

1–24

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14748851221107198

journals.sagepub.com/home/ept**Titus Stahl** 

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

It is sometimes argued that ideal theories in political philosophy are a form of ideology. This article examines arguments building on the work of Charles Mills and Raymond Geuss for the claim that ideal theories are cognitively distorting belief systems that have the effect of stabilizing unjust social arrangements. I argue that Mills and Geuss neither succeed in establishing that the content of ideal theories is necessarily cognitively defective in the way characteristic for ideologies, nor can they make plausible which mechanisms ensure the alleged negative effects of the widespread acceptance of ideal theorizing. This does not mean that all hope is lost for the ideology objection, however. By turning to a second Marxian model of ideology, I argue that the ideological character of ideal theories is not so much a matter of their content, but rather of their form. Ideal theories falsely present the normative concepts that they use as semantically practice-independent and thereby block potential challenges from subordinate groups to dominant ideologies. It is therefore not the normative content of ideal theories which proves to be objectionable, but the particular role their concepts play in wider political discourse.

Keywords

Ideal theory, ideology, idealization, Charles Mills, Raymond Geuss, Karl Marx

Corresponding author:

Titus Stahl, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringstraat 52, Groningen, The Netherlands.

Email: titus.stahl@rug.nl

Introduction

So-called “ideal theorizing” of the kind paradigmatically found in the work of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin has been attacked in a variety of ways during the last two decades. While opposition to “ideal theory” comes in a wide variety of flavors, this paper will focus on one particular complaint made against ideal theory, namely that it is *ideological*. This accusation must mean more than the idea that ideal theories are unconvincing or unhelpful. It must mean that ideal theories distort our understanding of social reality and, because of that distortion, have the effect of stabilizing prevailing relations of power. It must also mean more than the idea that *some* ideal theories have such ideological effects or incorporate ideological beliefs. The claim that ideal theorizing is ideological is only an interesting claim if it means that *all* instances of ideal theory are *necessarily* ideological.

This article will consider two versions of the ideology objection: one that has been advanced by Charles Mills (2005, 2018) and another that builds on arguments by “radical realists” in political philosophy such as Raymond Geuss (2008, 2009b, 2020), Prinz and Rossi (2017), and Rossi (2019). I argue that both versions ultimately fail to clearly establish that there is something necessarily ideological about ideal theories, as they narrowly focus on allegedly false claims made by ideal theories or on their problematic consequences. As an alternative, I develop an argument for the claim that ideal theories are ideological that builds on an idea that remains implicit in Mills and Geuss: the claim that ideal theories are committed to a false picture of the relation between the concepts they use and the historical-social reality in which these concepts function. My argument is based on a pragmatist reconstruction of Marx and Engels’s original notion of ideology. In particular, I argue that (a certain kind of) ideal theory necessarily entails a commitment to the assumption that political are *semantically practice-independent*, i.e. they assume that we must apply a unique and unchanging set of fundamental normative concepts to understand the political. I argue that at least those who take the plausible view that this assumption is false can legitimately characterize all forms of ideal theory as ideological.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first two sections, I will lay out the conceptions of “ideal theory” and ideology, respectively. In the subsequent two sections, I examine and assess Mills’ approach and radical realist arguments. In the final section and the conclusion, I propose a competing model of ideology and argue that ideal theories are in fact ideologies in the relevant sense.

What is an ideal theory?

As is well established, the distinction between “ideal” and “non-ideal” theory can be drawn in various ways. While we can call all political theories that construct a model of an ideal state of affairs in politics “ideal,” such models can serve different purposes (Valentini, 2012), ranging from being a mere illustration that things can be better, to serving as a vision that is supposed to motivate political agents, to being a standard against which to measure reality.

Clearly, not all of these projects can be accused of being ideological, and not all of them are, in fact, seen as objectionable by those who raise the ideology objection. The ideology objection is typically raised against the more specific idea that we cannot determine what the right conception of (for example) justice is without knowing what rules would legitimately govern an idealized state of affairs (for example, one in which there is full compliance). In other words, the model of an idealized society in ideal theory (in the sense that I will be using the term) serves the purpose of *theory construction* (Valentini, 2009: 352).

To make the discussion more tractable, I will only examine the ideology charge for a somewhat restricted conception of “ideal theory.” An ideal theory in this sense is a normative theory in political philosophy for which the following holds:

- IT1. An ideal theory identifies a *concept* of some normative standard *S* (such as justice) for which it is true that we need a (correct) *conception of S* to answer the question of whether social and political arrangements are acceptable to those living under them.
- IT2. To develop a correct *conception of S*, an ideal theory considers which principles of *S* would have to regulate an idealized society that
 - (a) is capable of fully meeting *S*. To that purpose, the theory will make idealizing assumptions such as strict compliance;
 - (b) is a “realistic utopia” insofar as it does not involve anything that is strictly impossible or impossible to realize by any development starting from our current society.

An ideal theory then takes the principles that would realize *S* in that fictional society as *settling what the most justified conception of S is*.

- IT3. An ideal theory assumes that we have to know what the most justified conception of *S* is (and thus go through the procedure in IT2) in order to subsequently develop a *complementary non-ideal theory*. The procedure in (IT2) thus has *theoretical primacy* for the development of an action-guiding, non-ideal theory.

For the sake of brevity, I will describe all theories that do not subscribe to these claims as “non-ideal theories,” even if not all authors whom I discuss would accept this label.

Even though this is a narrow conception of “ideal theory” that does not cover the entire range of theories to which the term is sometimes applied in the literature, it is not an overly restrictive conception. Clearly, standard examples of ideal theory, such as Rawls’s theory in *A Theory of Justice* and Dworkin’s egalitarianism, meet this definition.

However, this conception also covers more than mere standard Rawlsian liberalism in three respects. First, it does not entail *universalism*, as it does not require that the conception of *S* that a given ideal theory proposes needs to be universally justified, for all societies or cultures.

Second, it does not entail *moralism*. *S* does not need to be a *moral* standard, and thus the ideology objection against ideal theory cannot be reduced to familiar realist critiques of “moralism” (Williams, 2005).

Third, it does not entail *practice-independence*, at least as this term is standardly understood (Sangiovanni, 2008, 2016). This is because it allows for the possibility that *S* will only make sense as a standard or have any definitive meaning within certain institutions or practices. I will argue in section “Ideology as a denial of semantic practice-dependence” that it entails a different kind of practice-independence, which I call “semantic practice-independence.” This is the claim that there is a unique and unchanging set of fundamental normative concepts that define the subject matter of political philosophy. I will argue that if this claim is false, an argument to the effect that ideal theory is necessarily ideological can be constructed.

For now, however, I want to argue that the conception of ideal theory presumed here is independent of a number of additional commitments that some proponents of ideal theory take on. There are several advantages to adopting a conception that encompasses a rather wide range of theories for the purposes of this article. First, it makes the ideology objection more interesting. Second, adopting such a wide definition also makes it obvious that the ideology complaint is not reducible to one of the familiar complaints of communitarians, institutionalists, realists, and practice-dependence theorists against features of specific ideal theories (such as Rawls’s original theory). Third, this definition of ideal theory avoids the charge that it builds some of the most criticized features of specific ideal theories into the definition of “ideal theory.” Most importantly, it does not entail that ideal theories must make the (obviously unjustified) assumption that the social reality their non-ideal part is supposed to apply to already approximates an ideal state of affairs (Estlund, 2019: 12; O’Neill 1996: 41; Valentini, 2009: 341).

What is ideology?

The term “ideology” is perhaps even more contested than the term “ideal theory.” However, those who raise the ideology objection against ideal theory agree in broad terms that they proceed from an understanding of ideology as it has been developed in the Marxist tradition. There, we find three features that are often taken to be definitive of ideologies (see Eagleton, 2007: 24–25; Geuss, 1981: 13–21; Rosen, 1996: 32; Shelby, 2003):

- D (*cognitive distortion*)—a cognitive phenomenon is ideological if it represents social reality in a cognitively distorted way.
- E (*effects*)—a cognitive phenomenon is ideological if, once it is widespread in a society, it has the tendency to stabilize existing or emerging social relations of power in virtue of its distorting features.
- G (*genesis*)—a cognitive phenomenon is ideological if its widespread occurrence is best explained by social causes that are reflectively unacceptable to the individuals or groups who exhibit it (i.e. they are such that if people knew that these were the causes, they would lose confidence in the relevant beliefs, theories, etc.).

Clearly, these features are not sufficient for being an ideology, taken individually. Many beliefs and theories are false, but they are not ideological since they have no substantial

social effects and have innocent epistemic origins. Other belief systems have stabilizing effects without thereby being ideological because they are straightforwardly true. The most natural way to understand these proposed criteria is thus to treat them as jointly sufficient conditions for ideology. In order to find out whether this is plausible, it is helpful to briefly examine their precise meaning.

We find a variety of ways to spell out (D) in the literature (Geuss, 1981: 13–15; Rosen, 1996: 33–49):

- D1. Theories can represent social reality in a cognitively distorting way if they include *straightforwardly false descriptive or explanatory claims about social reality*. For example, we can describe Aristotle’s political theory as ideological because it includes the false claim that women are less capable of rational thought than men and that it is therefore impossible for the entire adult population to participate in politics.
- D2. Theories can represent social reality in a cognitively distorting way if they include *normative claims that only make sense under false empirical or theoretical assumptions*. For example, if a theory holds that historical European colonialism was a moral necessity that reflected a proper concern for the interests of the colonized, we should not have any compunctions about describing this claim as distorting since it clearly relies on false empirical claims about the effects of colonialism.
- D3. Theories, understood as systematic bodies of belief that are actually held by people, can represent social reality in a cognitively distorting way if they include *false second-order claims about how those who believe in some of their constituent first-order claims acquired these beliefs* (Rosen, 1996: 33; Shelby, 2003: 170).
- D4. Finally, theories can represent social reality in a cognitively distorting way if they use *descriptive or normative concepts that are in some sense defective or held unreflectively* (Haslanger, 2017: 23–25; Stanley, 2015: 202). For example, a social theory might employ a concept of “woman” that is taken to refer to an unchanging biological and psychological essence. Even if every particular claim that such a theory makes about women happens to be true, it would still be ideological since these claims are couched in terms that are misleading or inappropriate.

As already mentioned, the fact that a theory involves any of these cognitive distortions does not yet make it an ideology. We can reasonably only call a theory an “ideology” if its distorting features also have a tendency to increase the stability of existing or emerging social relations of power and if it thus also satisfies (E). However, it needs to have these effects not accidentally but *in virtue* of its distorting features (Shelby, 2003: 174), since belief systems (even cognitively distorted belief systems) that stabilize relations of power independently of any cognitive defects are not thereby ideological. In addition, it would be unreasonable to require more than a tendency to have stabilizing effects, as there are no belief systems that will have stabilizing effects under *all* possible

circumstances (including even the most exceptional and extreme circumstances). Rather, we should only require that, *given a normal range of circumstances*, we can expect an ideology to have stabilizing effects (for the notion of a tendency, see Cohen, 1988: 86).

Finally, it is not useful to treat the genetic properties of belief systems as a necessary condition for being an ideology (Boettcher, 2009: 243). First, knowledge about whether (G) holds is unnecessary for deciding whether something is an ideology. For example, if we know that a racist belief system involves a distorted representation of social reality and that it stabilizes forms of racist oppression, this seems sufficient to call it an “ideology.” Second, accepting (G) imposes too high a burden of evidence on justifications of the claim that some cognitive phenomenon is ideological, as it is usually impossible to have any conclusive evidence for the claim that people’s beliefs were caused by any particular factor.

In what follows, I will examine whether one can show for ideal theories (in the sense discussed in the section “What is an ideal theory?”), first, that they necessarily involve at least one of the distortions in (D1)–(D4) and, second, that the relevant distortions have a tendency to stabilize unjust relations of power (i.e. E).

Charles Mills’ critique of idealization

In what is perhaps the most famous version of the ideology charge, Charles Mills (2005; see also Boettcher, 2009 for an overview) objects to ideal theories (focusing on ideal theories of justice) on three counts. First, he argues that ideal theories involve pernicious idealizations that distort, mislead, and contribute to (epistemic) injustice. Second, ideal theories are useless guides in any attempt to realize justice, and they crowd out serious engagement with important moral problems. Third, ideal theories reflect the limited perspective of privileged groups while purporting to represent an impartial conception of justice.

Initially, I will consider the first and third charges, since they involve claims to the effect that ideal theories are cognitively distorting. I will then consider the second charge concerning the alleged negative effects of the widespread endorsement of ideal theorizing.

Idealization as cognitive distortion

In regard to the issue of idealization, Mills (following O’Neill, 1987) distinguishes *abstraction* (which all theories must engage in) from *idealization*. Whereas abstraction removes some irrelevant complexities from a description of social reality to provide a model that is easier to understand (in Mills’ terms, an “ideal-as-descriptive-model,” Mills, 2005: 166), idealization involves constructing a model of reality based on assumptions about how it *should* work that are false, as an approximation of the current reality (“ideal-as-idealized model”). I will examine three idealizing assumptions that “some or all” (Mills, 2005: 168) ideal theories are alleged to make, concerning an *idealized social ontology*, the *absence of historical injustice* and an *idealized cognitive sphere*.

The first objection argues that ideal theories describe the existence of the main institutions of society in a vocabulary that cannot account for domination and oppression, presenting societies as “cooperative ventures for mutual advantage” (Mills, 2018: 62). This is misleading since the existence of many institutions must in fact be explained in terms of oppression, domination, and coercion. By ruling out this possibility on the level of social ontology, Mills argues, ideal theories are implicitly committed to false beliefs about society.

While this charge may be plausible in regard to Rawls and some other liberal theorists, and while issues of social ontology remain undertheorized in the liberal tradition (Brännmark, 2019), it is less clear whether this assumption is indeed a *necessary* feature of ideal theories in the sense discussed above. An ideal theory of that kind can acknowledge that social institutions can rely *both* on cooperation and on domination and coercion for their continued existence. If it is sensitive to this fact, it will therefore incorporate a social ontological framework that allows for both possibilities. There is nothing that makes it impossible to do so.

The second charge that Mills raises concerns the absence of attention to historical injustice. He argues that the problem with the fact that ideal theories abstract away from historical injustice is that a theory built on such an abstraction will eliminate considerations of racial and other historical injustices from its ideal part. In doing so—that is, by making political theory unable to respond adequately to major forms of injustice—ideal theory entails normative claims that only make sense under false empirical or theoretical assumptions. As this is one of the forms of distortion of belief (D2) mentioned above, ideal theory would be an ideology in this sense.

There are two versions of this objection: first, by idealizing away histories of oppression, ideal theories “represent [...] the actual as a simple deviation from the ideal, not worth theorizing in its own right” (Mills, 2005: 168). This objection initially seems unfair. Ideal theories do, of course, see oppression as a deviation from how things ideally should be. But it does not follow from something’s being a deviation from an optimal state of affairs that it is not worth theorizing. However, by according theoretical primacy to the ideal, ideal theories will be tempted to understand the non-ideal only *in terms adequate to the ideal*, without developing appropriate theoretical tools for understanding it. This is a real danger that ideal theories must resist by developing a rich theoretical language for the descriptive analysis of current societies that informs their non-ideal part. But there is nothing in principle that keeps ideal theorists from doing so (Boettcher, 2009: 245).

Second, Mills suggests that by constructing a model of an ideally just society in abstraction from those forms of historical oppression that affect current society, ideal theories construct a model of an ideally just society that is at best unhelpful and at worst false, as it will not truly be a model of a just society. This is because we can only understand what actions or institutional changes justice requires when we are adequately informed about the unjust structure of the real world (Mills, 2005: 178).

A first but unsuccessful rejoinder to this objection might be that an ideal theory should indeed assume that an ideally just society does not have a history of oppression and that the question of how to deal with societies that do have such a history belongs to the non-ideal part of such a theory. This rejoinder is unsuccessful because a society without any history of

oppression is, by definition, unreachable from our current situation and is therefore not a “realistic utopia.”

A second rejoinder might be that ideal theories are allowed to “idealize away” from histories of oppression in the construction of a model of an ideally just society (even if they acknowledge that every reachable ideal society does have such a history) because we can assume that an ideally just society will *in no way be affected* by that history. Consequently, for the purposes of finding the best principles for governing it, we can leave out that history as an irrelevant factor.

As Ingrid Robeyns (2008: 357; see also Valentini, 2009: 353) argues, ideal theories can abstract away from unjust features of present societies if and only if these features do not raise any questions of justice that we want the theory to answer. For example, for a liberal theory, the possibility that slavery could be just is conceptually ruled out. We may therefore simply assume that slavery does not exist in an ideally just society. By contrast, we should not abstract away from inequalities in the distribution of resources and simply assume economic equality because the question of whether any economic inequalities are acceptable is among the open questions we want our theory to answer.

To establish whether an ideal theory (in its ideal part) can abstract away from historical racial injustices, we need to ask whether, in a “realistic utopia,” there are any questions of justice that relate to the ongoing effects of historical racial injustices that are not already settled conceptually. It strikes me as obvious that the answer must be yes. All realistically achievable and ideally just societies (namely all those that develop out of current, racially unjust societies) will need to justly respond to the injustices that happened in their past, for example by having practices of compensation, remembrance, or recognition of victims (Iverson, 2008). Because every utopia that is realistic for “us” will be one in which there *are* ongoing effects of historical injustices that raise issues of justice that can by no means be settled *a priori*, we cannot abstract away from the existence of such injustices even in the ideal part. The fact that some ideal theorists systematically fail to consider historical racial injustices is therefore a severe defect of their theories. But it is a defect that we can diagnose using an appropriate model of what an ideal theory ought to look like.

A third idealization to which Mills objects is that of an “idealized cognitive sphere.” This is an idealization he accuses ideal theories of making not in relation to their model of a hypothetical ideally just society, but in relation to their own context of theorizing.

A general social transparency will be presumed, with cognitive obstacles minimized as limited to biases of self-interest or the intrinsic difficulties of understanding the world, and little or no attention paid to the distinctive role of hegemonic ideologies and group-specific experience in distorting our perceptions and conceptions of the social order. (Mills, 2005: 169)

As Mills argues, this idealization neglects how people’s cognitive capacities are shaped by oppression (on both sides of the oppressive relationship).

This suggests the following *cognitive capacities objection* against (IT2), i.e. against the assumption that the right conception of the normative standard of politics needs to be determined by examining principles appropriate to a fictive, ideal society:

1. To come up with an informative model of an ideally just society, we must be capable of correctly identifying all relevant injustices that need to be absent from such a society.
2. In our current, unjust society, people (in particular the members of privileged groups) suffer from epistemic limitations, based on their social positions, that make them unable to correctly identify and conceptualize all relevant injustices. Therefore, it is likely that any model of an ideally just society developed under current circumstances will reflect these limitations.
3. We should therefore be pessimistic about the likelihood of our being able to do the cognitive tasks that ideal theorizing needs us to do.
4. Ideal theory must claim to have constructed its model of an ideally just society on the basis of considerations that are unaffected by oppression and power. Therefore, it misrepresents itself as having achieved something impossible. This amounts to a cognitively distorted representation of the type described in (D3), i.e. a false second-order claim about how those who believe in some of their constituent first-order claims acquired these beliefs.

This is a compelling argument. However, some versions of ideal theory can resist it by either arguing that (3) does not pose a specific problem for ideal theories or resisting the conclusion in (4).

In regard to (3), ideal theorists need not deny that the cognitive distortions that are likely to be caused by unjust social relations make it likely that we will adopt distorted models of a fully just society. However, the same distortions will likely also lead us towards distorted judgments about the relative merits of social arrangements in non-ideal theory. There is no reason to assume that these limitations won't affect *all* normative theorizing equally, and so the best we can do is to come up with procedures and practices to try to limit their effects as far as possible. There is no unique problem for ideal theory.

The argument in (4) comes down to the idea that ideal theories represent themselves falsely as providing an impartial and inclusive conception of justice. In reality, however, ideal theory only represents the perspective of socially privileged groups. Mills argues that it “reflects the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population—middle-to-upper-class white males—who are hugely over-represented in the professional philosophical population” (Mills, 2005: 172). In Rawls's case, he even alleges that the methodological decision to accord primacy to ideal theory was made “to evade” problems of racial justice (Mills, in Pateman and Mills, 2007: 258). Consequently, ideal theory falsely represents itself as being motivated purely by concerns about achieving the most appropriate form of justification, while it is actually motivated by the desire to avoid a substantive discussion concerning the problems of historical injustice.

Mills is right that it is hard to explain why there is little or no attention paid to racial injustice in the works of Rawls and other liberal theorists without assuming some theory-guiding limitation. However, it is less clear whether we should attribute that fault to the ideal character of their theories. It is by no means impossible to extend at least the non-ideal part of Rawls's theory to include substantive discussion of, for example, issues of racial injustice. This is in fact what theorists who rely on Rawlsian premises (such as Shelby, 2016) have done. Thus, it is not clear that what leads some theories to insufficiently reflect the concerns of subordinated groups is their commitment to ideal theorizing.

More generally, the conclusion in (4) comes down to the claim that ideal theories must misrepresent themselves as being the result of an exercise of cognitive capacities that are not available to anyone in the current society. However, it seems possible for an ideal theory to describe itself as fallible regarding its use of idealizations for a justification of (for example) a conception of justice and as being engaged in an attempt to, as far as possible, minimize the influence of distortions resulting from the social positions of theorists (e.g. by making an effort to take up theoretical contributions by marginalized groups). No false claim about undistorted cognitive capacities needs to be involved. Furthermore, there is no reason to think that non-ideal theories have any principled advantage over such an epistemically realistic form of ideal theory.

If many specific versions of ideal theory are forms of false consciousness, this is consequently best explained by other factors. But if there is nothing forcing ideal theories (in the sense at issue here) to misrepresent social reality, it follows that it is not necessarily the case that they need to hide that fact by adopting false second-order claims regarding their epistemic origin.

Idealization as stabilizing injustice

So far, I have considered Mills' arguments to the effect that ideal theories involve cognitive distortions or false beliefs. In this section, I turn to the allegation that the widespread acceptance of ideal theory has the effect of stabilizing unjust social relations.

Mills alleges that ideal theories "can only serve the interests of the privileged" (Mills, 2005: 172); that is, in being believed and endorsed they stabilize certain unjust relations of power. There is a weaker and a stronger version of this claim.

The weaker version is the claim that ideal theories cannot serve the interests of the oppressed. This claim is compatible with the idea that belief in an ideal theory need not have *any politically relevant effects at all* and therefore serves *no-one's* interests. This could be an effect of their not having any action-guiding function at all, a claim that is widely discussed in the literature (Erman and Möller, 2013; Valentini, 2009).

First, this weak claim seems insufficient to substantiate the charge that ideal theories are ideological. If a given form of political theory does not inform our political agency, this speaks against it (Galston, 2010: 403; Uberti, 2014: 209). However, failure to do so does not make it ideological. If ideal theories were intellectual pursuits, like pure mathematics, that do not aspire to effect any changes in world, they would not contribute to the pursuit of justice (and thus perhaps fail as political theories), but they would also not

thereby be an obstacle to it. Second, it is hard to imagine that people developing an adequate conception of an ideally just society would not at least draw our attention to the shortcomings of current societies and thus have some (even if minimal) positive effect on our capacity to pursue justice.

Therefore, the allegation concerning the ideological nature of ideal theories is better captured by the stronger version. This is the claim that the widespread acceptance of ideal theories has a tendency to *negatively* influence the project of achieving justice. The most likely mechanism that could produce such effects is that it generates opportunity costs by crowding out other theories (Adams, 2019: 7; Stemplowska and Swift, 2012: 378). If philosophers generally accept that ideal theory is the only legitimate way to do political theory, thesis advisors will push their students to pursue that line of thought, lecturers will teach it, and hiring committees will disregard applications from non-ideal theorists. If ideal theorizing had not been as dominant as it has been for some time, one could argue, then more resources might have been spent on the development of non-ideal theories, and this, one might argue, would have had positive effects on political practice aimed at addressing injustice.

However, one must make a number of controversial assumptions to make this argument in regard to ideal theorizing *as such*. First, one must assume that *all* forms of ideal theory, independently of their substantive claims, have negative effects on political practice. But this is at least not obvious. The alleged negative effects of the popularity of Rawlsian liberalism, if they exist, might have been a matter of its specific features. If another, more radical form of ideal theory had achieved popularity instead, they might not have obtained. Second, the argument depends on the assumption that non-ideal theories necessarily have the effect of better informing radical political practice, rather than, for example, limiting the imagination and focusing on incremental reforms (see Adams, 2019), and that, if ideal theory had not been so dominant, a version of non-ideal theory that is more sensitive to historical injustice would have become dominant. This is also not obvious.

While the allegation that ideal theorizing has stabilizing effects on social relations of power is perhaps harder to counter for the ideal theorist, since the empirical factors at play are hard to establish, it is at least not self-evident. Even if it were, the ideal theorist could still argue that there is no cognitive distortion at play. As argued in the last subsection, Mills does not provide us with a clear explanation of why ideal theories must necessarily involve cognitive distortions.

A radical realist critique of ideal theory

In this section, I turn to a second version of the ideology objection that I find more promising. This objection builds on arguments made by Raymond Geuss and other scholars who describe themselves as realists in political philosophy. Geuss is concerned not with rejecting ideal theory abstractly but with a broader set of objections against Rawlsianism—and he would describe himself neither as an “ideal” nor as a “non-ideal” theorist. As I will show, however, one can use Geuss-style radical realist arguments to strengthen Mills’s critique concerning the assumption of idealized cognitive capacities.

Geuss argues that our normative and political concepts are shaped and determined by social relations of power (Geuss, 2008: 49; 2010: 429; Raekstad, 2021: 5). Relations of power not only affect our *beliefs* about what an ideal society that completely meets some standard S would look like but also shape the *conceptual framework* through which we make sense of S (such as, in Rawls's case, the formal concept of justice). Geuss, therefore, criticizes both ideal and non-ideal theorists for uncritically using concepts like "justice," "equality," and "rationality" without paying attention to their social history and the context of their emergence. These theorists, he argues, treat these concepts as external to politics and history, effectively as "eternal" standards for politics (see also Prinz and Rossi, 2017: 350). As a result, they adopt a misleading account of political philosophy as merely "applying" concepts that it does not include in its own object domain (Geuss, 2008: 6), and this entails a corresponding misleading account of political judgment (Geuss, 2009a). Because of the way in which this methodology preempts certain forms of social critique, they also become forms of ideological distortion.

The version of "radical realism" (Raekstad, 2021; Rossi, 2019: 5) that Geuss offers is not opposed to the Utopian *content* of ideal theory (see Geuss, 2010: 428; Prinz and Rossi 2017; Rossi, 2019). However, one can use it to make a radical realist argument to the effect that ideal theories are *conceptually* misguided in three ways (although Geuss himself probably would not go that far): first, they falsely assume that there is an unchanging set of concepts that define the normative scope of political theory (and subsequently politics); second, they at least implicitly assume that we can identify, under current circumstances, concepts that are sufficient to allow us to construct a theory that is itself sufficiently capable of giving us a justified assessment of the legitimacy of relations of power. This assumption, however, only holds if current social relations do not have distorting effects on our concepts that could limit their critical potential. Third, this leads such theories to divert our attention from issues of power (Geuss, 2008: 54; Raekstad, 2021: 10).

As I will argue in the next section, the first of these criticisms can be used to develop a plausible version of the ideology objection. Geuss, however, focuses his argument on the second and third. He argues that once we acknowledge the genealogical insight that all our concepts are shaped by social circumstances, among them relations of power, we can no longer make the assumption that we can, without further reflection, identify a set of concepts that are sufficient to allow us to construct a theory that is sufficiently critical. If ideal theories commit this idealizing assumption, this will have the effect of diverting "attention away from the dependency of some form of consciousness on a particular configuration of power" (Geuss, 2008: 53), which stabilizes certain configurations of power by making it more unlikely that critical questions will be asked. Geuss, therefore, proposes a genealogical approach as an alternative to ideal theory (and to much of non-ideal theory in the liberal tradition as well) because it is less ideological and thus more critical and less prone to wishful thinking (Freyenhagen and Schaub, 2010; Geuss, 2010). Such a genealogical approach examines how our concepts have been shaped by social circumstances, interests, and relations of power, and it thus allows us to gain some critical distance from them. This objection indeed identifies one respect in which at least some ideal theories can be uncritical about themselves.

Similarly, Prinz and Rossi (2017) argue, much in the spirit of Geuss, for a realist form of ideology critique which focuses on a reflection on the concepts we use (ibid. 359; Prinz, 2016: 784), uncovering their genealogy, which is often hidden by the fact that these concepts present themselves as universal and untouched by social interests (ibid. 360), and thus diagnosing “structurally problematic conceptual practices” (ibid. 360; see also Rossi and Argenton, 2021).

Both variations of the argument raise the question of whether the relevant claim is merely that, in the absence of *particular* negative influences, we would develop normative concepts that would not be vulnerable to genealogical objections. Geuss sometimes suggests as much in his specific critique of Rawlsian liberalism, which uncritically relies on intuitions without questioning their embeddedness in historical structures of power (Geuss, 2008: 90; Raekstad, 2021: 9, for a similar radical realist argument regarding libertarianism, see Rossi and Argenton, 2021). But one could also try to formulate a more radical argument according to which political concepts are *necessarily* (i.e. under *all conceivable circumstances*) influenced by social power. If ideal theories always take such concepts as unproblematic starting points, they divert our attention away from that influence.

If the argument is that our political concepts are distorted by *particular* epistemically unfavorable conditions or problematic conceptual practices, then—as I have argued in the last section—ideal theorists need not quarrel with this claim. By contrast, if the argument is that the influence of power and interests will affect our political concepts under *all conceivable circumstances* (as Prinz, 2016: 784 suggests) and that ideal theories necessarily cannot integrate this insight, the charge will weigh more heavily.

This more radical argument implies that we cannot describe political concepts as more or less distorted or ideological. In this interpretation, the genealogical strategy does not aim to uncover any particular defect of specific political concepts. It is merely critical on a second level, as it undermines the false second-order belief that our concepts are independent of or uninfluenced by social and historical circumstances. However, once we admit this, we might continue to use “our” concepts (only now conscious of their historical embedding) without there being any reason to exchange them for another framework. In particular, it does not follow from the insight that normative concepts only have context-dependent validity and are socially shaped that any given normative concept should only play a “subordinate” role in “administrative decisions” (Geuss, 2008: 100). More importantly, this insight leaves open the possibility of doing ideal theory in a historicist-contextualist mode (such as the late Rawls might have been engaged in; see also Prinz, 2016: 789 for a description of Geuss that seems largely consonant with this conclusion). There is nothing about it that specifically rules out the possibility that the best way to settle on the right conception of justice (or any other normative concept) is by engaging in ideal theory.

An ideology argument building on radical realist premises thus seems to be faced with the dilemma that it either needs to claim that existing forms of ideal theory contingently rely on false beliefs or inappropriate concepts. This is acceptable for the ideal theorist. Or, it needs to restrict itself to the more global claim that normative concepts are not independent of the context of social power in which they develop (which does not have the critical force that the ideology objection to ideal theory needs).

Next to this dilemma, it is also not clear that the radical realist arguments help us to make sense of the claim that ideal theorizing is more likely to have the effect of stabilizing prevailing relationships of power compared to other modes of theorizing. If conceptual distortions are only contingently caused by social circumstances, then their negative effects seem to be tied to those circumstances, not to the form of the theory. If, by contrast, conceptual distortion is inevitable, or if we can't make any distinction between more or less acceptable conceptual commitments, then it becomes unclear why switching from ideal theory to genealogical criticism should have less stabilizing effects than the (perhaps false) belief in the truth or universal applicability of certain normative ideals.

While the conceptual distortion argument is promising, the radical realist criticism of ideal theory relies on a claim to the effect that its fundamental concepts might be distorted or are usually shaped by power. The explanation offered for this claim, however, is too unspecific to substantiate ideology critique. In the next section, I will therefore turn to the Marxian conception of ideology to develop a different version of the conceptual distortion objection that I think is more defensible.

Ideal theory: ideological after all

In this section, I propose an analysis of how ideologies work that can help to substantiate the ideology charge against ideal theories—for the conceptions of “ideal theory” and “ideology” that I have proposed in the sections “What is an ideal theory?” and “What is ideology?”—and is not vulnerable to the objections raised in the last two sections. I first examine how this model of ideology emerges from a pragmatist reading of Marx and Engels's theory of ideology. I then argue that it applies to ideal theory in the narrow sense that is at stake in this article.

Marx and Engels' theory of ideology: a pragmatist reading

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels famously contrast the idealism of the “Young Hegelians”—who assumed that political domination is a result of the prevalence of false ideas—to their preferred materialist alternative. According to that alternative, ideas are nothing more than a reflection of material circumstances. The Young Hegelians' claims to the contrary are consequently described as ideological. It is important to note, however, that Marx and Engels do not use the term “material” in the crude sense that economic interests directly determine people's ideas. Rather, their argument is that societies consist of cooperative social practices (Marx and Engels, [1846] 1976: 43) through which they reproduce themselves (including the production of the necessities of life, procreation, and the upbringing of children), and that more narrowly “intellectual” practices are only properly understood as part of that overall process of social reproduction (Marx and Engels use the term “material” in the sense of “not purely intellectual”). This argument denies that intellectual practices can be properly understood in isolation from a wider set of social practices within which they play a particular role.

This claim about the embedding of ideas in social, intellectual practices and about the determination of these intellectual practices by the wider environment of social-material

practices makes it possible to read Marx and Engels as adopting a specifically *pragmatist* understanding of the nature of ideas and concepts. While I do not want to argue here for the resulting account of ideology as a matter of Marx scholarship (see Stahl, 2013), I will argue that it is suitable to substantiate a new form of the ideology objection against ideal theories.

Put briefly, one can read Marx and Engels as arguing that language originally offers nothing more than the capacity to express commitments and distinctions that are already implicit in the wider, “material” social practices of a community (Marx and Engels, [1846] 1976: 43–44). The *conceptual distinctions* human beings make in language are, on this model, only properly understood when we view them as “reflecting” the *practical distinctions* they make in their non-linguistic, social-material practices, which are in turn to be explained by reference to the overall purpose of those practices. That our concepts (and the ideas we develop by using those concepts) “reflect” material reality does not mean that ideas are mechanically determined by material interests, but rather that how we *conceptually* relate to the world to a large extent expresses an underlying *practical* relation to the world that emerges from our cooperative practices (for the tradition in which this expressivist theory is embedded, see Taylor, 1975: 13).

Marx and Engels argue that in the initial stages of human history, linguistic and intellectual practices were transparently part of larger social-material practices (Marx and Engels, [1846] 1976: 36). I take this to mean that the people who were engaged in them found it natural to *revise* and *adapt* the concepts that structure these practices in response to the requirements and purposes of their broader practical context. Marx and Engels argue that this transparency of the practical embedding of the “ideal” within the “material” disappeared only in a later, second stage. According to Marx and Engels’s historical hypothesis, the cause of this change was the emergence of the *division of physical and intellectual labor*. As soon as a privileged class emerges that no longer participates in physical labor but whose social function consists in (intellectual) planning, management, and the exercise of commanding authority, that class can develop the illusion that the conceptual activities in which it is engaged are not dependent or expressive of the commitments of a wider practical context:

From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc. (Marx and Engels, [1846] 1976: 44–45)

This ruling class has therefore developed the illusion that its ideas and concepts are independent of other social practices, which culminates in the idea that concepts and ideas have *practice-independent validity*. This is no purely epistemic mistake, however. Because groups that wield commanding power over the physical labor of others experience their intellectual activities as something that can operate without any need to take the practical purposes of their subordinates into account, they *experience* the conceptual distinctions they use in these activities as distinctions that have

practice-independent validity, and they have the power to enforce this perspective. In other words, ideology emerges as soon as there is a privileged class that employs a certain set of concepts and ideas as if they were practice-independent and that has the power to enforce this perspective by blocking challenges from subordinate groups who want to see their own, practical interests reflected.

Ideology as a denial of semantic practice-dependence

Summarizing the model of ideology that I take from Marx and Engels, we can thus say that ideological concepts are concepts which are part of a discursive practice that:

- (a) is part of a larger, material practice with a hierarchical structure,
- (b) is structured by second-order rules that mandate treating its main concepts as practice-independent,
- (c) has a tendency, in virtue of (b), to stabilize the hierarchical structure of the practice in (a),
- (d) often (but not always) involves false second-order beliefs to the effect that the relevant concepts are practice-independent.

Correspondingly, ideological beliefs are beliefs that are framed in ideological concepts. Ideology in this sense involves a distorted representation of reality because it is based on discursive practices that mandate the treatment of concepts that are in fact practice-dependent as practice-independent. Consequently, they involve a cognitive defect in the sense of (D4)—i.e. they are beliefs framed in concepts that are defective or held unreflectively—and have a tendency to have stabilizing effects in the sense of (E).

This argument takes up insights both from Mills' discussion and from the realist critique of ideal theory. It takes from Mills the insight that part of what makes political theories ideological is a misrepresentation of the epistemic capacities of subjects. However, in contrast to Mills, this argument locates the source of the epistemic limitations not in subjective interests but in the way in which conceptual practices can, due to their internal structure, make themselves inaccessible. It takes up from radical realism the insight that ideology is often a matter of distorted concepts whose practical foundations become inaccessible. It adds to these accounts a systematic explanation that goes beyond the particular, contingent influence of social power by explaining the form of conceptual practices by reference to the authoritarian form of material practices.

To examine whether ideal theories of the kind discussed earlier are forms of ideology in this sense, it is helpful to distinguish the notion of "practice-dependence" that I ascribe to Marx and Engels from a more common notion that is currently used in political theory. This latter notion of practice-dependence refers to the idea that the semantic content of normative concepts like "equality" and "justice" is tied to the particular practices of a group and that in fixing the reference of those concepts we need to take into account the practical context in which they apply. According to this notion, the

content, scope, and justification of a conception of justice depends on the structure and form of the practices that the conception is intended to govern. (Sangiovanni, 2008: 138, 2016)

As Sangiovanni argues, not only theorists like Michael Walzer and Thomas Nagel but also the late John Rawls employ concepts of justice that are practice-dependent in this sense. I will call this idea of practice-dependence “substantive practice-dependence,” as it concerns the substantive question of which *conception* of justice is the correct one in any given context. As argued in the section “What is an ideal theory?”, the definition of “ideal theory” used here is compatible with substantive practice-dependence.

Contrast this with a second notion of practice-dependence that I will call “semantic practice-dependence”:

Semantic practice-dependence: A concept is practice-dependent (in a semantic sense) if its relevance, its scope of application, and the appropriateness of attempts to revise its meaning depend on the structure and form of the social-material practices in the context of which it is used.

The distinction between substantive and semantic practice-dependence can also be explained in terms of the concept–conception distinction. While the precise difference between concepts and conceptions is of course a matter of debate (Swanton, 1985), we can usefully distinguish cases where people agree, say, that an institution ought to be evaluated regarding its justice (or any other such standard) but disagree about what the right *conception* of justice is from cases where there is not even agreement about whether justice or some other normative concept is the *relevant standard* to apply.

Given this distinction, the difference between the two kinds of practice-dependence can be explained as follows: *Substantive* practice-dependence theorists assume that there is a set of privileged concepts for political theory (such as “justice”). However, what the right conception corresponding to each such concept is depends on the social practices in which it becomes thematic and to which it is applied. By contrast, *semantic* practice-dependence theorists, exemplified (I believe) by Marx and Engels, argue that the claim that a given normative concept is *applicable or relevant to* a practical context already depends on the social practices involved. I will argue below that Marx and Engels are in fact correct to say, at least in regard to normative political concepts, that they are semantically practice-dependent.

We can therefore reconstruct Marx and Engels’s conception of ideology in the vocabulary of practice-dependence: ideological concepts are concepts that

1. are practice-dependent in a semantic sense,
2. structure an underlying practice with hierarchical structures,
3. are part of a discursive practice that is governed by rules that rule out any revisions of the meaning of those concepts based on practical considerations brought forward by the subordinated groups in the underlying material practices, and are often (but not

- always) part of a discursive practice that involves false second-order beliefs to the effect that these concepts are semantically practice-independent,
4. are part of a discursive practice that, in virtue of (3), has the effect of stabilizing the hierarchical structure of the social practice in (2).

Consequently, *theories* are ideological if they are centrally built around ideological concepts, and concepts become ideological in virtue of their embeddedness in an ideological discursive practice. To evaluate whether ideal theories are ideological, we must therefore examine whether they necessarily employ ideological concepts.

In effect, this extends Geuss' conception of ideology. The idea is not merely that ideology results from a failure to reflect on the way in which one's concepts are shaped by power, but rather that ideologies are discourses characterized by rules that make it impossible for any such reflection—if it were to take place—to have the effect of leading to a revision of the relevant concepts.

According to this model, it will be true of very few concepts that they are *essentially* ideological. Most concepts *become* ideological in virtue of their embeddedness in a discursive practice that denies their semantic practice-dependence. Examples of concepts that can become ideological in this sense are gender, talent, and self-ownership. All of these concepts can become part of a discursive formation that is itself part of a hierarchical social order (for example, sexism, "natural aristocracy" or a possessive-individualist market society). Consequently, they are equipped by privileged groups with a specific meaning that is taken to be off-limits to practical challenges by the subordinated and where that meaning informs a discourse that stabilizes the underlying social hierarchy.

Marx is also committed to the more radical idea that *all moral and political concepts are ideological concepts* (unless used exclusively in a critical sense) because and insofar as they are part of discursive, philosophical practices in which they are treated in abstraction from the material reality they are supposed to govern. In Marx's view, all discourses that affirmatively use political and moral concepts involve a cognitive distortion in two ways. First, they involve cognitive distortion in the sense of (D4)—they involve beliefs framed in concepts that are defective or held unreflectively—insofar as they deny the semantic practice-dependence of their concepts. Second, they involve ideological effects in the sense of (E) as, in virtue of this denial, they become isolated against a set of conceptual challenges by subordinated groups (that would be effective if they did not involve such a denial), which has the effect of making them less responsive to those groups' political interventions than they would otherwise be.

This radical claim assumes that moral and political concepts (such as "justice") cannot play a useful role in non-ideological discursive practices (that acknowledge their stipulated semantic practice-dependence) and that consequently there are no non-ideological theories of justice. I do not find this radical claim plausible, and it is not required for the argument I am presenting here. The argument against ideal theories only assumes that ideal theories are necessarily connected to ideological discursive practices and that their central normative concepts, for that reason and only as long as they are embedded in such practices, become ideological.

Do ideal theories deny semantic practice-dependence?

Are ideal theories (in the restricted sense at issue here) necessarily connected to discursive practices that involve a denial of the semantic practice-dependence of their central normative concepts? While I will not provide a definitive answer to this question, I will argue that there are two reasons to think so.

First, in virtue of their commitment to IT1—that is, their commitment to identifying a *concept* of a normative standard *S* for which it is true that we need a *conception of S* to answer the question of whether social and political arrangements are acceptable to those living under them—ideal theories always start from the assumption that there is a unique and unchanging set of fundamental normative concepts that define the subject matter of political philosophy and thus at least implicitly deny semantic practice-dependence. This is also true of many theories that are practice-dependent in a substantive sense (such as those of the later Rawls, Thomas Nagel, and Michael Walzer).

Second, because of IT2—that is, because of the assumption that the right conception of the normative standards of politics needs to be determined by examining the principles appropriate to a fictive, ideal society—ideal theories at least implicitly assume that the normative concepts that guide people’s behavior in the hypothetical ideal state of affairs are *the same concepts* that ought to guide politics under non-ideal conditions. In other words, they assume that there must be *conceptual continuity* between the current circumstances under which they theorize and every realistically achievable ideal society, and therefore that the conceptual concerns in the current society and the conceptual concerns in that ideal society will be congruent (for example, that people in a perfectly just society will necessarily be motivated by an understanding of justice, specifically, and not some other concept). If this continuity is not assumed, then even though the concept of justice (for example) may indeed be the most adequate concept for expressing the underlying distinctions of our current political practices, the possibility would remain that attempts to realize justice could transform society in such a way that the concept of justice would no longer be adequate for expressing people’s practical concerns. If so, then we would no longer be able to settle the issue of what the right conception of justice is by imagining an idealized state of affairs, since we could never be sure whether that state of affairs would, in any meaningful sense, instantiate justice (or whatever the normative standard at issue is).

For these two reasons, I argue that political theories that have the features of ideal theories as set out in the section “What is an ideal theory?” necessarily involve discursive practices that cannot treat their own concepts as semantically practice-dependent. This is independent of whether they subscribe to practice-independence in the more commonly used substantive sense, to universalism, or to moralism.

Whether this should lead us to say that ideal theories are ideological in the sense that they *falsely* deny the practice-dependence of their central concepts depends on two further questions: Are the central concepts of political theories in fact semantically practice-dependent? And does a denial of that semantic practice-dependence by ideal theories have the effect of stabilizing an underlying hierarchical social-material practice?

The first question is the substantive question of whether the central concepts of all political theories (and thus all ideal theories) are semantically practice-dependent. If there are theories whose central concepts are not practice-dependent in this sense, they would not misrepresent anything by representing their central concepts as practice-independent. Of course, it is hard to offer definitive arguments to settle this question. However, there are good reasons that speak in favor of the idea that all political theories are semantically practice-dependent. To begin with, the burden of proof must certainly lie on the side of those who want to claim that the concepts of political theory are semantically practice-independent. It is at least plausible to say that political theory is not the sort of enterprise that picks out natural kinds but rather an intellectual activity that invents concepts with the aim of making sense of the problems of a particular form of human interaction that has emerged under historically specific circumstances and is subject to historical change. As intellectual historians would agree, we also see massive conceptual change throughout the history of political theory that is more than a mere change in the interpretation of unchanging abstract concepts. That political theories use semantically practice-dependent concepts therefore seems the most natural assumption.

Of course, many theorists will disagree with this claim and, consequently, will find little of use in the application of the Marxian model of ideology to political theory. The argument developed thus far cannot show, on the basis of universally accepted premises, that ideal theories are ideological. However, it makes clear that there is a line of reasoning toward that conclusion that does not rest on any obviously implausible premises and that can succeed on its own terms where competing arguments fail.

If one agrees with the assumption that all political theories are semantically practice-dependent, one must still establish whether ideal theories, by denying their semantic practice-dependence, tend to stabilize an underlying hierarchical social-material practice. This depends on whether the central concepts of political theories in fact reflect the distinctions of an underlying, hierarchical social practice and whether the denial of the semantic practice-dependence of these concepts will tend to stabilize the relevant hierarchies. The most likely candidate for the relevant social-material practice is, rather obviously, the practice of politics—understood as a practice of engaging in conflicts about power and about the legitimacy to exercise authority—and of managing such conflicts through political institutions. Historically, and in all current societies, this practice was and is a hierarchical one that continues to exclude parts of the relevant populations from participation (either through institutional rules, such as the exclusion of non-propertied citizens and women from the franchise and the exclusion of undocumented immigrants from formal political participation, or through “the unequal value of political liberties”).

It is plausible that (a) the basic concepts of political theory reflect the practical distinctions of this underlying political practice, (b) the choice of which concepts are used in political theory will have at least a minimal effect on people’s political self-understanding and thus their political agency, and (c) the conceptual distinctions that are dominant in the intellectual practices of thinking about politics will have a tendency to reflect the perspectives and interests of dominant groups, or will at least be less open to conceptual challenges by subordinate groups. In particular, we must assume that subordinated groups

will be subject to a range of forms of hermeneutical injustice in such societies (Fricker, 1999), meaning that they will be excluded from shaping the “hermeneutical resources” of political practice in an equal capacity.

If this is the case, then it follows that the fact that ideal theories treat their central concepts as off limits to the challenges raised by subordinated groups will have at least the tendency to stabilize the underlying political hierarchies. Of course, privileged groups may develop concepts that also adequately capture the perspectives of subordinate groups, but this is unlikely to ever be more than an exception.

Therefore, there is good reason to believe that in societies with exclusionary and hierarchical political practices, ideal theories are ideological. This is because

1. they will only make sense for people to hold as part of their participation in discursive practices in which the basic concepts of political theory are falsely treated as semantically practice-independent (which often involve false *beliefs* to the effect that these concepts are semantically practice-independent). Thus, they necessarily incorporate a distorted perspective on the relationship between concepts and social practice (a form of D4; that is, ideal theories employ concepts that are defective or held unreflectively) and tend to generate false beliefs (that is, ideological beliefs that are straightforwardly false in the sense of D1), and
2. they treat their basic concepts as practice-independent, which means that they rule out practical interest-based challenges to these concepts from politically excluded or subordinated groups. Ideal theories therefore tend to have stabilizing effects on hierarchical relations of power in virtue of their cognitively distorting features (thus satisfying E).

Ideal theories (of the kind at issue here) thus satisfy both conditions for being ideological, at least if one agrees with the idea that the concepts of political theories are semantically practice-dependent. This does not rule out the possibility that in non-hierarchical societies, ideal theories could be non-ideological because they would not have any stabilizing effects on those societies (although they would continue to include false assumptions).

In contrast to Mills’s critique of ideal theory, this critique alleges neither that any of the idealizations of ideal theories are necessarily descriptively false when it comes to current societies (although they will tend to falsely adopt an idealized picture of the practice–concept relationship) nor that the idealizing assumptions about perfectly just societies are necessarily normatively misguided. In contrast to the radical realist critique, this argument does not allege that ideal theories necessarily lack distance from relations of power. It also solves the realist dilemma—of either merely offering reasons for skepticism about particular concepts or implausibly claiming that there are no distinctions to be made between ways in which concepts can be distorted—by identifying a general and systematic source of conceptual distortion that cannot be addressed by being more epistemically careful or by being subjectively aware of the genealogy of one’s concepts.

Finally, this argument does not treat *idealization as such* as the core of the ideology objection. One can develop political theories that treat their own concepts as semantically practice-dependent and that still assume that the best way to arrive at a politically useful conception of these concepts involves thinking about what an ideal society that completely

conforms to them would look like (Böker, 2017). We can acknowledge that our political concepts need to be responsive to challenges by those who are excluded from the political processes they shape *and* acknowledge that our best sense of what these concepts demand might be developed by, for example, imagining utopian social circumstances.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined two versions of the claim that ideal theories are necessarily ideological. I have argued that, at least for one restricted (but not overly restrictive) conception of ideal theory and one conception of ideology, ideal theories are not necessarily ideological because they involve false representations of social reality or normatively misguided prescriptions. Nor are such ideal theories ideological because they allow for insufficient acknowledgment of the fact that their concepts might be influenced by power. Departing from the Marxian premise that concepts in general, and the concepts used by political theories in particular, can never do more than reflect the underlying concerns of practices that are subject to historical change, I have argued instead that ideal theories of the kind at issue are ideological because they involve a denial of the practice-dependence of their most basic concepts and thus, in hierarchical and exclusionary societies, will have a tendency to keep subordinated groups from successfully mounting challenges against the conceptual commitments they involve. Insofar as these conceptual commitments form part of the dominant self-understanding of the society at issue, ideal theories can play a stabilizing and conservative role.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the audience at the Workshop “Critical Theory meets Non-Ideal Theory” at the Freie Universität Berlin, to the members of the political theory colloquium at the University of Hamburg, to two anonymous referees, and to the editors of the *European Journal of Political Theory* for many helpful criticisms and suggestions and to Carolyn Benson for help with preparing the manuscript.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Titus Stahl  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6537-2196>

References

- Adams M (2019) An ideology critique of nonideal methodology. *European Journal of Political Theory*: 147488511985872. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119858727>.
- Boettcher J (2009) Race, ideology, and ideal theory. *Metaphilosophy* 40(2): 237–259.
- Böker M (2017) The concept of realistic utopia: Ideal theory as critique. *Constellations (Oxford, England)* 24(1): 89–100.
- Brännmark J (2019) Institutions, ideology, and nonideal social ontology. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 49(2): 137–159.
- Cohen GA (1988) *History, Labour, and Freedom - Themes from Marx*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Eagleton T (2007) *Ideology: An Introduction*. London; New York: Verso.
- Erman E and Möller N (2013) Three failed charges against ideal theory. *Social Theory and Practice* 39(1): 19–44.
- Estlund D (2019) *Utopophobia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Freyenhagen F and Schaub J (2010) Hat hier jemand gesagt, der kaiser sei nackt? *Deutsche Zeitschrift Für Philosophie* 58(3): 457–478.
- Fricker M (1999) Epistemic oppression and epistemic privilege. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 29(Supplement): 191–210.
- Galston W (2010) Realism in political theory. *European Journal of Political Theory* 9(4): 385–411.
- Geuss R (1981) *The Idea of a Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geuss R (2008) *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Geuss R (2009a) Political judgment in its historical context. In: *Politics and the Imagination*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, pp.1–16.
- Geuss R (2009b) *Politics and the Imagination*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Geuss R (2010) Realismus, Wunschenken, Utopie. *Deutsche Zeitschrift Für Philosophie* 58(3): 419–429.
- Geuss R (2020) Realism, yet again. In: Christ J, Lepold K, Loick D and Stahl T (eds) *Debating Critical Theory. Engagements with Axel Honneth*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield International, pp. 3–16.
- Haslanger S (2017) *Critical Theory and Practice*. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum.
- Iverson D (2008) Historical injustice. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548439.003.0028>.
- Marx K and Engels F ((1846) 1976) The German ideology. In: *Collected Works: 1845–47. Collected Works* 5. New York: International Publishers, pp. 19–539.
- Mills CW (2005) “Ideal theory” as ideology. *Hypatia* 20(3): 165–184.
- Mills CW (2018) ‘Through a Glass, Whately: Ideal Theory as Epistemic Injustice’. Presented at the 115th Central Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Chicago, February 23.
- O’Neill O (1987) Abstraction, idealization and ideology in ethics. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 22(September): 55–69.
- O’Neill O (1996) *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511621239>.
- Pateman C and Mills CW (2007) Reply to critics. In: Pateman C and Mills CW (eds) *Contract and Domination*. Cambridge: Polity, pp.230–266.
- Prinz J (2016) Raymond Geuss’ radicalization of realism in political theory. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42(8): 777–796.

- Prinz J and Rossi E (2017) Political realism as ideology critique. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20(3): 334–348.
- Raekstad P (2021) The radical realist critique of Rawls: A reconstruction and response. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. Online First. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2021.1891377>.
- Robeyns I (2008) Ideal theory in theory and practice. *Social Theory and Practice* 34(3): 341–362.
- Rosen M (1996) *On Voluntary Servitude. False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*. Cambridge (MA): Polity.
- Rossi E (2019) Being realistic and demanding the impossible. *Constellations* 26(4): 638–652.
- Rossi E and Argenton C (2021) Property, legitimacy, ideology: A reality check. *The Journal of Politics* 83(3): 1046–1059.
- Sangiovanni A (2008) Justice and the priority of politics to morality. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16(2): 137–164.
- Sangiovanni A (2016) How practices matter. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 24(1): 3–23.
- Shelby T (2003) Ideology, racism, and critical social theory. *Philosophical Forum* 34(2): 153–188.
- Shelby T (2016) *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*. Harvard University Press.
- Stahl T (2013) Ideologiekritik als Kritik sozialer Praktiken. Eine expressivistische Rekonstruktion der Kritik falschen Bewusstseins. In: Jaeggi R and Loick D (eds) *Nach Marx*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, pp.228–254.
- Stanley J (2015) *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stemplowska Z and Swift A (2012) ‘Ideal and Nonideal Theory’. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195376692.013.0020>.
- Swanton C (1985) On the “essential contestedness” of political concepts. *Ethics* 95(4): 811–827.
- Taylor C (1975) *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Uberti LJ (2014) Good and bad idealizations in political theory. *Theoria* 80(3): 205–231.
- Valentini L (2009) On the apparent paradox of ideal theory. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17(3): 332–355.
- Valentini L (2012) Ideal vs. non-ideal theory: A conceptual map. *Philosophy Compass* 7: 654–664.
- Williams B (2005) Realism and moralism in political theory. In: Hawthorn G (ed) *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, pp.1–17.