

FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS: A RELEVANT CONCEPT?

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ABSTRACT

False Consciousness: A Relevant Concept?

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False consciousness was a concept originally developed by Marx and Engels in the 19th century, to explain the actions and behaviors of the bourgeoisie. In the 20th century, various political thinkers such as Lukács, Marcuse and Jost broadened its definition to explain the actions and behaviors of all members of society, including those from lower or subordinate classes. False consciousness has since been used by some Marxian political thinkers and anti-capitalist activists to make sense of people's quiescence towards the capitalist system. This interpretation of the concept has attracted an array of critiques that have severely affected false consciousness' legitimacy and value. These critiques demonstrate that people's quiescence toward the capitalist system is not necessarily synonymous with false consciousness and it should not be used as an excuse for communism's failure. Despite the severity of these critiques, Augoustinos disputes that false consciousness is not an outdated and useless concept, but that it is necessary to redefine it in order to increase its credibility. It must be situated, not in people's mind, but within the capitalist structure, which presents itself as a superior version of what it truly is and sustains misconceptions about its real capacities and limitations. This thesis is thus an implicit defense of the validity of the Marxian concept of false consciousness.

SOMMAIRE

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Le concept de fausse conscience fut développé par Marx et Engels au cours du 19^{ème} siècle afin d'expliquer les actions et le comportement de la bourgeoisie. Au 20^{ème} siècle, plusieurs penseurs politiques, notamment Lukács, Marcuse et Jost, ont modifié sa définition pour expliquer les actions et comportements de tous les membres de la société, incluant ceux des classes pauvres et du prolétariat. Depuis, l'idée de fausse conscience a été utilisée par divers penseurs Marxistes et militants anticapitalistes pour rendre compte de l'immobilisme des gens face au system capitaliste. Cette interprétation du concept a attirée nombre de critiques et a sévèrement affecté la légitimité et la valeur de la notion de fausse conscience. Ces critiques démontrent que l'immobilisme des gens face au system capitaliste n'est pas nécessairement synonyme de fausse conscience et que cette notion ne devraient pas être utilisée pour expliquer l'échec du communisme. Malgré la sévérité de ces critiques, Augoustinos démontre que la fausse conscience n'est pas un concept désuet et inutile, mais qu'il est nécessaire de le redéfinir pour le rendre plus crédible. La fausse conscience ne doit pas être campée dans la psyché des gens, mais dans la structure capitaliste elle-même, qui se présente comme une version améliorée de ce qu'elle est en réalité et qui entretient de fausses idées sur ses capacités et ses limites. Ce mémoire se veut donc une défense implicite de la validité du concept Marxiste de fausse conscience.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Research Question	2
Literature Review	6
First Chapter – False Consciousness.....	13
I.I - The origins of the concept	14
I. II – Lukács and Marcuse	25
I. III – Contemporary Political Psychology	35
Second Chapter – Assessing False Consciousness: A Quartet of Critiques	44
II.I – False Consciousness Goes Against Rationality Principles	45
II.II – False Consciousness Underestimates Peoples Critical Thoughts	57
II.III – False Consciousness Supports the Dominant Ideology Thesis	64
II.IV – False Consciousness Supposes the Existence of True Consciousness	70
Third Chapter – Preserving the notion of False Consciousness.....	78
III.I - Going back to Marx.....	79
III.II – The Quartet of critiques.....	85
III.III – Rationality of capitalism	90
Conclusion	103
Bibliography	106

Introduction

In the 19th century, Marx and Engels set out to describe how capitalism functions, how it is maintained and how individuals suffer from living in such a system. Consequently, they also presented an explanation of why the lower and subordinate classes accept social conditions that are against their best interests. They developed the notion of false consciousness. Closely linked to the theory of ideology, it provides insight into how the capitalist reality can present itself to the members of lower and subordinate classes in such a way that it hides its inherent biases and misleads people to think that it is the only sustainable system, capable of ensuring common good. Capitalism's true nature, which encourages inequality and exploitation, is thus kept hidden from the majority of the population.

Since Marx, false consciousness has been used as a catch-all phrase to explain people's past and current attitude towards the capitalist system. In fact, this concept has been used by various political thinkers and by anti-capitalist activists to describe people's quiescence towards this dominant economic system. The purpose of this paper is to determine the validity of the concept of false consciousness and to demonstrate its use for political scientists and for progressive politicians in general. It will be shown that the concept has evolved significantly over the last century and that its definition has varied depending on the time period. Marx, Lukács, Marcuse and Jost's definitions will be presented. A quartet of critiques undermining the legitimacy of the concept will be presented to show the ambiguity raised by the notion of false consciousness. Finally, based on Augoustinos' work, it will be argued that despite the severity of these critiques,

by returning to Marx's original definition and by situating false consciousness in the structures of capitalism rather than in individuals' mind, this concept becomes a relevant critical tool for political scientists.

Research Question

The failures and shortcomings of the capitalist economic system have manifested themselves in various ways in the past decades in North America, and over the world, and have affected most spheres of society. We have witnessed “massive increase in social and economic inequality, a marked increase in severe deprivation for the poorest nations and peoples of the world, a disastrous global environment, an unstable global economy and an unprecedented bonanza for the wealthy.”¹ The capitalist economic system has served the interest of a fairly small number of people, but has not benefited the majority and has been detrimental for a large number of people. The arguments of this paper follow a Marxist approach to the state, which suggests that the state plays an important role in sustaining the capitalist system. This approach shows how the functions of the state, through its policies and institutions, serve to protect and reproduce the social structures of this economic system² and relies on three basic hypotheses:

1. There is a capitalist class defined by its ownership and control of means of production.
2. The capitalist class uses the state to dominate the rest of society.
3. State policies further the general interests of the capitalist class in maintaining their domination of society.³

¹ Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People* (New York Seven Stories Press, 1999), 8.

² Clyde W. Barrow, *Critical Theories of the State* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

³ Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 23.

The involvement of the state in the safeguard of capitalism has been subject to debate and continues to fuel confrontations. This research does not aim to contribute directly to this debate, but in order to contextualize the concept of false consciousness, it is necessary to understand that it is by drawing from this Marxian approach to the capitalist state that, for decades, there have been dissident voices, anti-capitalist activists and progressive politicians trying to generate a wave of opposition to this system and criticizing the actions of the state. They have warned of the dangers of the free market and of capitalism's "underlying tendency towards crisis"⁴ and strongly believe that this system does not serve to maximize the self-interest of the members of the general population. As a result, many have advocated for the necessity to oppose and resist the dominating rules and conventions imposed by the current governments and have tried to convince people of the necessity to demand social change.

Despite the evidence supporting the claims of the anti-capitalist activists and progressive politicians, we have not witnessed the emergence of massive opposition movements. Marx's predictions concerning revolution and capitalism's inevitable collapse did not come true. Capitalism's potency continues to be encouraged by most Western governments and continues to hold legitimacy in the population in general. Even when presented with the opportunity to engage in social change or to elect political parties more critical to capitalism, people have generally been quiescent to this dominating system and have chosen to support parties that would work in favor of status quo, rather than propose substantial economic and social reforms. In North America, alternative

⁴ Barrow, *Critical Theories of the State*: 51.

political parties, based on more socialist or progressive values, have not been able to gain much electoral support.

Faced with this reality, many progressive and anti-capitalist activists have tried to explain the lack of concern of the population and have tried to justify the low number of uprisings. In order to reverse this situation and make sense of people's quiescent attitude, they have attempted to answer this question: "Why do the many accept the rules of the few, even when it seems to be plainly against their interest to do so?"⁵ Many efforts have been made to provide a logical response to this interrogation. One of the interesting answers that have been advanced is the notion of false consciousness. It refers to what Marcuse calls the Happy Consciousness: "the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods."⁶ This implies that people prefer to maintain what they already know and understand, because it has become intertwined with their way of thinking and of life, sometimes to the expense of the improvement of their self-interest. Therefore, when activists or a political party positions itself against or challenges the existing system, the simple thing to do is to continue to support or to vote for what you already know, without evaluating if this actually serves to maximize your self-interests. Thus the status quo can be maintained.

When analyzed superficially, false consciousness does seem to account for the passivity and inaction of the majority of the population who rarely attempts to challenge

⁵ Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1.

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 1.

capitalism. However, through more serious research, it can be observed that the validity of this concept has been largely criticized in the past decades. Many scholars and philosophers in political science have developed alternate concepts and moved beyond false consciousness. Therefore, before making use of the concept to demonstrate how false consciousness contributes to the potency of the capitalist system and ensures status quo in specific situations, it seems more pressing to determine if the concept of false consciousness is an outdated concept or if there is a way to render it more relevant for political scientists and anti-capitalists protagonists ? It is hoped that by clarifying and analyzing the concept of false consciousness, it will be possible to attend to the reasoning behind political acquiescence and to determine the causes and consequences of false beliefs that sustain status quo and prevent change. In order to accomplish this, the conceptual development of false consciousness will be analyzed from a “critical Marxist”⁷ perspective. At its center is a historical account of the intellectual background from which the theory of false consciousness has emerged. The main goal is to provide a new perspective on a classical Marxian concept, to determine if there have been misunderstandings about its original definition or if this concept’s validity can be revived. Unlike less ambiguous Marxian concepts, false consciousness has not had much academic literature devoted specifically to its study. There are many thinkers who have briefly evoked the issue, but very few extensive analyses have been conducted. This is what this thesis aims to do.

⁷ Ron Eyerman, "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," *Acta Sociologica* 24, no. 1/2 (1981).

Literature Review

In order to make sense of the concept of false consciousness and to comprehend the arguments that will be developed in the following chapters, it is essential to refer to the appropriate definition of consciousness. Consciousness must be understood in the literal meaning of the term, as “the quality or state of being aware especially of something within oneself.”⁸ People are thought as falsely conscious when the things of which they are aware, are false. For example, people identify their self-interests, but sometimes without their knowledge, these self-interests can be detrimental to their well-being. This is the type of false consciousness that informs most definitions of the concept. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish false consciousness from other similar concepts used in psychology, such as cognitive dissonance. Although they present similarities, false consciousness refers exclusively to people’s attitude and behaviors towards the capitalist system. This research does not aim to examine every way in which false consciousness, or similar concepts, has been influential in the past centuries, but aims precisely to analyze the evolution of the political significance of false consciousness. These considerations serve as core basic postulates throughout the entire research.

False consciousness’ apparent “inherent epistemological dilemmas”⁹ seem to have been detrimental to its acceptance as a concept sufficiently viable to be included in major political science reference books. For example, false consciousness is not defined as a

⁸ "Consciousness," in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004), 265; *ibid.*

⁹ Martha Augoustinos, "Ideology, False Consciousness and Psychology," *Theory and Psychology* 9, no. 3 (1999): 304.

key concept in Marc Bevir's *Encyclopedia of Political Theory* or in Garrett Ward Sheldon's *Encyclopedia of Political Thought*¹⁰, two major books of reference in political philosophy. Bevir only evokes the concept briefly when discussing ideology:

Marx's deepest idea in this text [The German Ideology] is that ideologies of political systems are recognizable because of the false consciousness they produce in subjects. The idea here is that, for an unjust political system to motivate subjects to continue supporting the regime, the system must produce ideas that misrepresent the way society works, conceal its less palatable aspects, or – as with religions – simply distract from political concerns.¹¹

In fact, the inextricable relationship between ideology and false consciousness, to which Bevir alludes to, is representative of the way in which false consciousness has mainly been interpreted since Marx and Engel's developed the concept. False consciousness is often evoked as a complement to other key Marxian concepts such as ideology, commodity fetishism or alienation, but rarely as a key concept itself. The centrality or not of false consciousness in Marx's work is not the main focus of this research. The primary goal is to evaluate if the relevance of such a concept has been underestimated.

The classical Marxian conception of false consciousness is not contested by the majority of Marxists thinkers. What remains uncertain is the scope of its application and its potential to be used as a universal concept. Did Marx consider that only the capitalist intellectuals and ideologues could be affected by false consciousness or did he extend these ideological illusions to the members of the working class and to society as a whole? This is where uncertainty remains and the first chapter of this research will aim to answer

¹⁰ *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Marc Bevir, 3 vols. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2010); Garrett Ward Sheldon, *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (New York: Facts on File, 2001).

¹¹ *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*: 343.

this question. There are contemporary thinkers such as Ron Eyerman who subscribe to the first assumption and argue that “In the writings of Marx and Engels,[...]the concepts of false consciousness and ideology are used synonymously and applied only to intellectuals, or to capitalists for whom history happens behind their backs.”¹² “This was a much narrower meaning of false consciousness than the one that is current in more recent Marxist discourse.”¹³ It will be argued that this is the appropriate interpretation of Marx and Engels’ definition of false consciousness.

A majority of thinkers subscribe to the second assumption and expand false consciousness to all the individuals of society, regardless of their social class. They do not reject the classical Marxian conception of false consciousness, although, they imply that it is incomplete and does not account for every aspect of the concept. Meyerson suggests that in Marx and Engels’ writing, in addition to the false consciousness of the bourgeoisie, there is also an “accomplice to it, namely the fact that the people who do not have a stake in the status quo take up and accept the self-definitions of those who do.”¹⁴ Many Marxian thinkers such as György Lukács and Herbert Marcuse have developed definitions that reflect this interpretation of Marx. As it will be demonstrated, they argue that the ideological illusions – i.e. false consciousness – are not limited to the bourgeoisie and to the ruling class, but affect the members of the working class and society as a whole. Thus, resulting from the introduction of these new elements, false consciousness

¹² Eyerman, "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," 45.

¹³ Allen W. Wood, "Ideology, False Consciousness, and Social Illusion," in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. Brian P. McLaughlin and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 352.

¹⁴ Denise Meyerson, *False Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 36.

came to be defined “as the holding together of false or inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one’s own social interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or the group.”¹⁵ As will be seen through Jost’s work, this definition is the one mainly used in contemporary political science.

Despite the apparent critical utility of a concept such as false consciousness, it has faced multiple critiques and its legitimacy has suffered from the severity of these critiques. This explains why its relevance for political scientists has been questioned and why it has been rejected by many. Four main critiques have been identified. Understanding the nature of these critiques will be the focus of the second chapter of this research.

First, contemporary economists such as Hayek and Friedman have repeatedly advocated for the unrealistic and impractical nature of Marx’s ideas. The notion of false consciousness underestimates individuals’ ability to act as free rational actors. People are able to judge what is in their best interest and they do not support capitalism because they are affected by false consciousness, but because it is the most rational economic system. Scholars, such as Lewy, argue that certain instances of submissiveness that appear to be caused by false consciousness, may in reality, be rationally justifiable. Callinicos, a Marxian thinker, believes this concept has incorrectly been used as an excuse for socialism’s defeat and fails to address the core issues explaining this defeat.

¹⁵ John T. Jost, "Negative Illusions: Conceptual Clarification and Psychological Evidence concerning False Consciousness," *Political Psychology* 16, no. 2 (1995): 400.

Secondly, false consciousness is accused of underestimating people's critical thoughts. James Scott is the main proponent of this critique. He strongly believes that there are many factors that can serve to explain quiescence, other than false consciousness. One of the main misconceptions advanced by proponents of this concept is that the appearance of quiescence is synonymous with quiescence. In various instances, people are resisting the dominant ideologies or the dominant systems in which they live through subtle gestures of through psychological mechanism that are very difficult to perceive. Scott suggests that, for various reasons, most people engage in a "critique of power while hiding behind anonymity."¹⁶ False consciousness is insensitive to all this array of resistance and critical thinking.

Thirdly, Abercrombie and Turner have criticized false consciousness for its adherence to the dominant ideology thesis. This thesis implies that it is possible for an ideology to prevail and impose its ideals, values and beliefs over all members of a given society. Ideology is believed to be able to act as a "social cement [...] binding individuals to a social order."¹⁷ Abercrombie and Turner argue that there is much evidence to demonstrate that ideologies are unable to hold such potency over all members of a society. They agree with Marx's original definition of false consciousness, which suggest that false consciousness affects mainly the bourgeoisie and the ruling class, but reject Lukács, Marcuse and Jost's definition that relies on the belief that capitalism has been

¹⁶ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xiii.

¹⁷ John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 91.

able to hold potency over everyone. Capitalism is not as binding as the dominant ideology thesis implies.

The fourth and last critique that will be presented in the second chapter, addresses false consciousness' support of the existence of true consciousness, articulated through the works of Cunningham and Therborn. The idea that people are quiescent towards capitalism because of false consciousness suggests that if they were able to free themselves of these misconceptions and achieve true consciousness, they would realize the limitations of such a system and would not support it. It goes even further and implies that by overcoming the false consciousness and recognizing their true interest and their true needs people would necessarily aspire to build a communist society. Cunningham and Therborn demonstrate that there is no such thing as true needs and true interest and that aiming for true consciousness is as problematic as living under false consciousness.

Finally, taking into account the critiques undermining the legitimacy of the concept, there are many scholars who still argue that there is a necessity in political science for critical constructs such as false consciousness. This is the argument defended in the last chapter of this research. Martha Augoustinos argues that in order to make the concept stronger, it is necessary to take a step back from contemporary definitions and to return to Marx's original version of false consciousness. She believes that false consciousness is much more relevant when it is grounded in the structures of capitalism, than within individuals' "faulty cognitive capacities."¹⁸ Furthermore, this conception of false consciousness is

¹⁸ Augoustinos, "Ideology, False Consciousness and Psychology," 296.

much more thorough and does not attract as many critiques as Lukács, Marcuse and Jost's definition.

The belief that capitalism's structure is biased and fails to reveal its true nature is supported by various thinkers. They attack capitalism's legitimacy from different perspectives, but all aim to demonstrate that this system has become dominant because it has been able to sustain several key misconceptions about its true imperfect nature, thus creating false consciousness. Castoriadis argues that capitalism's basic postulates¹⁹ – i.e. the existence of the *Homo oeconomicus*, the centrality of *mathematicization*, the reliance on equilibrium and the notion of *separability* – are erroneous and contribute to maintain fraudulent hopes about the system's capabilities. For their part, Ralston Saul and Chomsky believe that the main misconception that is propagated in contemporary times concerns the type of capitalism that is said to be defended. Through the disguise of classical or Smithian capitalism, a more aggressive form of capitalism has become dominant and has allowed corporations to gain power over all sectors of society. This “corporate capitalism”²⁰ has served to promote the interests of companies to the disadvantage of the majority of the members of society. Due to these misconceptions about capitalism's true nature, people have been confronted to the reality of living in a social order based on false consciousness.

¹⁹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*, trans. Helen Arnold (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

²⁰ John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1995).

First Chapter – False Consciousness

“The Whole is the untrue.” – Theodor Adorno

I.I - The origins of the concept

In order to determine if false consciousness is still a useful notion for political scientists today. Its definition differs depending on the period in which it is used and on the thinker to whom one refers. It will be argued that the concept has greatly evolved in the past century. Marcuse's definition of false consciousness is similar to the contemporary understanding of the concept by most Marxian thinkers. Despite the fact that these thinkers refer to Marx and Engels as the creators of the concept, they rely on a different version of the concept, which is much broader than Marx and Engels' original definition of false consciousness. It is only through other concepts in Marx and Engels's general theory that the contemporary meaning of false consciousness is comprehensible. Thus, in order to better understand the manner in which the concept is used in today, it is necessary to get a better understanding of its origins and illustrate its evolution over time.

There is evidence that the idea of false consciousness, and its political consequences, were taken into consideration by multiple political philosophers much earlier than the 19th century. They did not use the phrase *per se*, however, they implicitly referred to the concept. More than two thousand years ago, Plato was concerned with the irrationality of the soul and with human beings' inability to live according to the principles of rationality. He thought this would have an impact on the state.²¹ Centuries later, Rousseau suggested that "amour-propre" was a form of false consciousness since it compelled people to pursue things that were not in essence good for them but things that would make them

²¹ G.R.F. Ferrari, ed. *Plato - The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 138.

appear enviable to others.²² For his part, Hume insisted on the idea that subject-matters that are uncertain or emotional, like religion and politics, are areas where people are more prone to show excessive credulity.²³ Hence, the idea or concept of false consciousness had a long history of relevance for various political philosophers to explain and justify human behaviors that at least appeared to an impartial spectator to be illogical or irrational. They were trying to demonstrate that underlying motives and subjective forces, of which people have no consciousness, can have important consequences on their political actions and should be taken into consideration when analyzing human nature. These philosophers were aware of the limitations of rationality and although they did not present elaborated theories on false consciousness, they believed it was important enough to be part of their general contributions.

Despite the works of previous political philosophers, the conceptual development of false consciousness is mainly ascribed to classical Marxian theory. In fact, scholars such as Joseph Gabel believe that it is one of the core parts of the theory. “The problem of false consciousness is not merely central to Marxian doctrine, it constitutes its entire framework.”²⁴ The ideas of Plato, Rousseau and Hume may in some way have contributed to shape the Marxian idea of the concept, however, their influence was not recognized by Marx nor Engels. Regardless, they developed a concept built on similar types of premises. There are various reasons why the contemporary concept of false consciousness is generally linked to Marxism rather than to these earlier philosophers, the

²² Victor Gourevitch, ed. *Rousseau - The Social Contract and Other Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 20-21.

²³ L.A. Selby-Bigge, ed. *Hume's Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 112.

²⁴ Joseph Gabel, *False Consciousness* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 3.

main one being that the words false consciousness were used for the first time by Engels.. The extent to which Marx and Engels actually developed this concept is open to discussion; however, it is certain that they contributed to the essential definition of the concept as it is understood today and influenced its development in the past century. Through his writing “Marx changed our way of thinking about ourselves by making us aware of ways in which our conception of ourselves is systematically distorted by illusions, forms of deception, or motivated irrationally.”²⁵ He suggested that one of the main distortions is caused by the dominating ideology of the state, in this case the bourgeois or capitalist ideology. Marx implied that the belief that the capitalist state can serve the common interest is one of the most important forms of false consciousness.

It appears that Marx never actually used the words false consciousness. The words appeared for the first time in Engels’ writings in his *Letter to Franz Mehring*²⁶. Martin Seliger argues that the fact that Marx never used the words does not imply that his views differ from Engels. “Instead of ‘false’ Marx used ‘incorrect’, ‘twisted’ ‘untrue’ and ‘abstract’ besides nouns like ‘illusion’”²⁷, when referring to ideology and more specifically when talking about bourgeois or capitalist society and ideology. When the words false consciousness appeared for the first time in Engels, it was to represent this notion. “Ideology is a process that the so-called thinker accomplishes doubtless consciously, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain

²⁵ Wood, "Ideology, False Consciousness, and Social Illusion," 345.

²⁶ Ibid., 351; Gabel, *False Consciousness*: 4; Christopher L. Pines, *Ideology and False Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 78.

²⁷ Martin Seliger, *The Marxist Conception of Ideology: a Critical Essay* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977) , 30.

unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process.”²⁸ Evidently, it is impossible to discuss the original Marxian concept of false consciousness without linking it to the concept of ideology. The extent of their connection is very profound. For Theodor Adorno, “Ideology is necessary false consciousness”²⁹ and contemporary scholars such as Michael Rosen assume that Marx equated ideology with false consciousness, going as far as to consider ideology as false consciousness³⁰. Understanding precisely how Marx and Engels conceived false consciousness represents a colossal challenge because understanding precisely the way they conceived the concept of ideology is itself a very delicate task. Exposing the different debates about the conception of ideology is beyond the scope of the present research. Taking this fact into consideration, for the purposes of this paper the concept of false consciousness should be understood in the following Marxian approach.

The sense in which ideology must be understood stems from the critique of religion, developed by Feuerbach, from whom Marx developed his own critique of the state and his concept of ideology. Feuerbach conceived ideology as “an attempt to come to principles of law and legislation abstractly – that is theoretically – rather than through the kind of practical wisdom that comes from the study of history or from direct political engagement.”³¹ Ideology was mainly used to refer to ideas held by bourgeois intellectuals and capitalists and to critique their representation of the world. It appears that Marx

²⁸ Meyerson, *False Consciousness*: 4; *ibid*; Pines, *Ideology and False Consciousness*: 1; Wood, "Ideology, False Consciousness, and Social Illusion," 351.

²⁹ Brian O'Connor, ed. *The Adorno Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 190.

³⁰ Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*: 270.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

might also have been influenced by his contemporary, Napoleon, and his use of the word ideology. Napoleon claimed that “Ideologues live in a world of speculation, detached from the real practical events.”³² Marx suggests that the dominant class proposes what they believe to be the best structure to serve the common good, but their detachment from the reality of lower classes restrains their thoughts to a capitalist illusion. In the German Ideology it is stated more clearly, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its intellectual ruling force.”³³ Marx and Engels suppose that the dominant class fails to understand the true interest of society as a whole, because they systematically distort and falsify reality, due to their position in society. Therefore, as Engels’ quote in his *Letter to Mehring* suggests, the ideologues of the capitalist society imagine rules, laws, political and moral ideals that help to reinforce their own underlying political motivations. They have a false consciousness not only about their capacities and abilities to serve the whole, but also about their intentions. They have come to believe that it is in everybody’s interests to follow the economic logic of capitalism.

Marx thought the very idea that the capitalist state’s purpose was to serve and promote the interest of all the members of the community was an illusion. What seemed most disturbing for him was human beings’ tendency to have a blind faith in the state, or the Church, and to put their lives in the hands of such institutions to guide them and control their lives. As many thinkers who have been influenced by him, Marx evokes the

³² Ibid.

³³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 2004), 64.

metaphor of the retina of the human eye or the *camera obscura* which reproduces reality in an inverted form. His concern was that this notion was ignored by the political economists of his time – i.e. by vulgar economists. “That in their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form is pretty well known in every science except Political Economy.”³⁴ He warned that, in appearance, the capitalist state would project an image of social cohesion and convince people of its abilities to promote all the ideal aspirations of society: “community and social unity, equality and equal rights, concern for the common good and public interest, mutual reciprocity and respect, guardianship of the social ethos, etc.”³⁵

Marx implies that, in reality, the very nature of the capitalist state was fundamentally unable to guarantee such ideal aspirations for a community. The capitalist state is designed to preserve the institutions and the individual property rights of the bourgeoisie in society. “As long as class society persists, however, phrases such as the general interest, the common interest and the universal interests of all society have no referent.”³⁶ Capitalist democracies maintain a society in which human beings have difficulty discarding individualistic and egoistic values. Marx addresses this issue in *Capital*: “All the mystification of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism’s illusion about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance [...], which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital - Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 677.

³⁵ Pines, *Ideology and False Consciousness*: 111.

³⁶ Wood, "Ideology, False Consciousness, and Social Illusion," 353.

the precise opposite of that relation.”³⁷ In capitalist societies the free market is portrayed as a system operating efficiently, fairly, and for the benefit of all, while alternative economic structure such as socialism and communism are ridiculed or dismissed as false or unrealistic. These ideas serve to justify or legitimize the unequal distribution of economic and political power.

Thus, capitalist ideologues create a conception of themselves and of their ideology that is systematically distorted by illusions. They have erroneous beliefs about their ability to serve the communal interest, and they promote the capitalist ideology, which is not what it appears to be. They advocate for something that should, in theory, be beneficial for the whole, which is in reality detrimental to the development of society. “There is a contradiction between thought and observable fact,”³⁸ - i.e. false consciousness. “For Marx and Engels members of the ruling class are everywhere dressing up their real motives in more respectable clothing and, what is equally important, fooling themselves with the disguise. It is the case of the wolf believing it is a sheep.”³⁹ This can be understood as the explicit definition of false consciousness in the writings of Marx and Engels.

It is only by broadening the scope of inquiry to the rest of their theory that the link between the contemporary definition becomes evident. The main issue is that Marx and Engels did not apply false consciousness to the masses directly – i.e. to the members of

³⁷ Marx, *Capital - Volume I*: 680.

³⁸ Miller, David, “Ideology and the problem of false consciousness”, *Political Studies* 20, no. 4, (1972): 442.

³⁹ Meyerson, *False Consciousness*: 34.

lower classes. They did however develop comparable concepts that can be linked to false consciousness for the masses. Marx thought that the internal contradictions of capitalism would eventually lead to its downfall and that history would eventually lead the proletariat to develop a class consciousness. He predicted that the workers and members of the lower classes would become aware that the only viable answer for society as a whole is to reject capitalism and develop a communist consciousness. Thus, they would engage in a social, political and economical revolution. For Marx, this was the only logical outcome. To explain why revolution was not taking place as rapidly as could be expected, he argued that capitalism imposed various illusions and mystifications on the minds of the proletariat such as alienation, reification and commodity fetishism, that prevented them from arriving at a class consciousness. These three concepts aim to demonstrate how capitalism contributes to objectify human beings of the lower classes and deprive them of their ability to become autonomous, self-realized human beings – i.e. maintaining a form of false consciousness.

Central to Marx's critique of capitalism is the idea of alienation. As was previously explained, he stresses that in the economic process of capitalism, the proletariat works under the control of the bourgeoisie, who possess the ruling material forces of society. Thus, the workers are not in control of their own lives, of their individuality, of their bodies, and most importantly, of their work and their production. This is accentuated by the fact that the proletariat mainly works to increase privately owned benefits, from which they do not derive anything and which does not serve their class interests. By functioning in a class society and through a process of internalization of the dictates of

capitalism, they have become alienated from the possibility of developing their true nature and becoming sociable species-beings. This term developed by Marx represents human beings ability, unlike animals, to be conscious beings, but also their undeniable connections to other human beings. He believes that in essence, human beings are social creatures, able to relate to one another, to work for the advancement of common life and that it is their “expression of sociality that defines human existence.”⁴⁰ Marx suggests that, in the capitalist economic structure, the proletariat promotes, as the bourgeoisie, individualism and egotism and they have become alienated from the necessity to develop stronger forms of association with their fellow human beings and among civil society. The workers alienation from their true nature as species-being can be identified as a form of false consciousness. By obeying the bourgeoisie’s commands, they have become unable to protect their own interests. In fact, the distinction between false consciousness and alienation is ambiguous. Contemporary scholar Christopher Pines provides a good example of this, by using the term “alienated false consciousness”⁴¹, when referring to alienation.

In addition, Marx developed the concept of reification which has also been linked with false consciousness. Literally, reification means “to regard something abstract as a material or concrete thing.”⁴² In Marx’s theory, reification refers to economic processes and to commodities. In *Capital*, he talks about the “reification of the social

⁴⁰ Paul Santilli, "Marx on Species-Being and Social Essence," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 13, no. 1/2 (1973): 80.

⁴¹ Pines, *Ideology and False Consciousness*: 124.

⁴² "Reify," in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2003), 1049.

determinations of productions and the subjectification of the material bases of production.”⁴³ He argues that the capitalist forces of production have themselves become reified and that workers have come to believe that they are part *of* these economical structures and that they are subject to the natural production processes dominating them. The economic forces are considered to be things that exist on their own, sometimes being personified and taking on human qualities. For example, “the needs of capital and the drives of production”⁴⁴ are often evoked. Capital – i.e. money – itself is believed to have power over people and over the economic processes. In reality, capital originates from the labor and the forces of productions of the workers and these same workers maintain its power. The capitalist ideologues promote these reified economic processes, ensuring the survival of their class interest. Marx argues that the forces of production and forces of capital do not appear to the working class as they really are. Thus, reification contributes to reinforce the proletariat’s illusions about the nature and the benefits of capitalism, maintaining them in a state of false consciousness.

Reification contributes to produce another very important form of false consciousness, which Marx referred to as “the fetishism of commodities.”⁴⁵ This concept implies the domination of things, products or objects over people. This domination can be interpreted in two different ways. First, in the same way as reification of capital in capitalist economic structures, the products resulting from the proletariat’s labor seem to hold power over the economic process and the relations between people in that process. These

⁴³ Karl Marx, *Capital - Volume 3*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 1020.

⁴⁴ Ken Morrison, *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), 105.

⁴⁵ Marx, *Capital - Volume I*: 163.

products become commodities once they are exchanged. “In a commodity-producing society, my social relation to others – my capacity to command their labor and my susceptibility to having my labor commanded by them – appears by nature to be a function of the utility of the object I have to offer for sale.”⁴⁶ The natural qualities and usefulness of the products has little impact on its value. The value of these objects is not determined by the hours of work or the physical labor put in by the workers, but by social conventions and subjective criteria imposed on them. The workers hold no control over the products resulting from their labor. It belongs to the owners of the means of production, namely the bourgeoisie, who exchange these products as commodities. Commodities regulate social relations because of the fluctuation of their value in the exchange processes. Thus, the character of a commodity influences the productive forces, because its value influences the means of production and imposes value on the labor. Marx demonstrates that it is not the workers labor that has value, but the commodities themselves. This results in the second form of domination of things over people. Since their labor itself loses value, people come to define themselves through their commodities and it reinforces the illusion of the “mystical character of the commodity.”⁴⁷

This demonstrates why Marxian thinkers have expanded Marx’s original understanding of false consciousness. Although he did not refer directly to these ideas as false consciousness, there is much evidence that he believed that members of the lower classes are confronted with illusions set forth by the capitalist ideology and by bourgeois ideologues. These illusions distort people’s perceptions, and as a result, the members of

⁴⁶ Wood, "Ideology, False Consciousness, and Social Illusion," 356.

⁴⁷ Marx, *Capital - Volume I*: 164.

the lower classes are unable to recognize their own best interest. It is from an amalgamation of Marx's original use of false consciousness for the bourgeoisie and their ideas on the alienation, reification and commodity fetishism among the members of the lower classes that the contemporary understanding of the concept emerged.

I. II – Lukács and Marcuse

Marx and Engels promoted the idea that the working class would eventually change its circumstances and engage in a social, political and economical revolution. As history has shown, this revolution – i.e. communist consciousness – would never really take place. It was essentially after World War I that the concept of false consciousness was developed more fully by Marxian followers “seeking to explain, in part, why revolution was not forthcoming.”⁴⁸ These Marxian thinkers were trying to determine causes for the lack of mobilization amongst workers and for the absence of revolution. From their understanding of Marx's thoughts about the capitalist ideology, they extrapolated an explanation for the actions and the behavior of the proletariat. They suggested that the ideological illusions of the ruling class about the superiority of capitalism and about their motives to support such an economical structure had spread to the subordinate classes. People became “trapped within the capitalist relations of production.”⁴⁹ To define in more details the contemporary understanding of the concept, the works of György Lukács and Herbert Marcuse offer much insight on the ways in which neo-Marxian thinkers have appropriated the concept of false consciousness.

⁴⁸Jost, "Negative Illusions: Conceptual Clarification and Psychological Evidence concerning False Consciousness," 399.

⁴⁹ Pines, *Ideology and False Consciousness*: 132.

In 1923, Lukács presented his understanding of Marxism and what he judged to be the most relevant concepts in *History and Class Consciousness*. He was primarily concerned with the development of a class consciousness among the proletariat, which he believed was the only class capable of acquiring an objective perspective of the totality – i.e. of accurate historical processes. His work has been very influential on the development of the Marxian concept of false consciousness. One of his main contributions refers to the application of the concept for the working class. Lukács establishes a clear distinction between the origin of the bourgeoisie’s false consciousness and that of the working class; however, similarly to Marx’s classical definition, he acknowledges that it mainly affects the bourgeoisie. Apart from the illusions that affect the bourgeoisie’s consciousness which are rooted in their class interest, he suggests that it is the fetishism of commodities that has created a “working class false consciousness.”⁵⁰ “In his view, false consciousness, no matter what the class position of the subject, is a problem of perception and knowledge”⁵¹ and a class’ ability to have an objective representation of reality. He considers that capitalism has come to embrace the whole of society and has imposed various limitations on the bourgeoisie and the proletariat’s ability to reach class consciousness. Lukács believes false consciousness is not only produced by capitalist ideologues, but “is a form of consciousness produced in the very life practices of capitalist societies.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Eyerman, "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," 49; *ibid.*, 52.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵² *Ibid.*: 49.

Lukács argues that “the objective limits of capitalist production become the limits of the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie.”⁵³ Given that their class interests are protected and secured by the capitalist economic structure, they are unable to develop a class consciousness based on an objective understanding of history and of reality. They do not identify the capitalist economic structure as a stage in the historical process, that is temporary and subject to change, but as the ultimate historical end. Their life practices are synonymous with the dominating ideology and it is the ideology they promote; thus for Lukács, the bourgeoisie has no interest in explaining the “true driving forces which stand behind the motives of human actions in history.”⁵⁴ To reach class consciousness, and understand the underlying motives and interest of a class, those driving forces must be identified, analyzed and evaluated. The bourgeoisie gains modest benefits from engaging in such a process. They have accepted capitalism as the immutable economic structure and believe that it produces the optimal outcome for society as a whole. It is the ultimate objective law and is the natural order of things – i.e. they believe and trust Adam Smith’s invisible hand. The understanding of totality implies an understanding of the interests and the role of other classes of society, but this cannot be achieved from a limited ideological perspective.

Similarly to Marx, Lukács explains that because of their implication and their support of the economic system, the members of the bourgeoisie cannot recognize the internal forces of capitalism that affect their judgment. They can only develop a class

⁵³ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1968), 64.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

consciousness based on their observation of the world, and because of their limited point of view, the bourgeoisie will undeniably be subject to false consciousness imposed by the capitalist system. To make sense of inconsistencies, inequalities or contradictions resulting from capitalist economic practices, the system has produced various mechanisms for the bourgeoisie to unknowingly reinforce their ideological preferences. The bourgeoisie is convinced that capitalism offers equal exchange possibilities and profitable opportunities to all the members of society. Its members do not identify reification of the economic process as a problematic aspect of the economic structure and as a result, the commodity of fetishism is greatly encouraged. Lukács believes that they are unable to recognize that “the social totality disappears behind a veil of commodity and individual relations.”⁵⁵ The fact that capital itself affects the social relations and society’s behavior is never questioned by the bourgeoisie, themselves owners of the majority of capital. They believe that it can only be to the advantage of the working class to accept and follow the same dictates as them. Thus, the false consciousness of the bourgeoisie annihilates their need to go beyond capitalism or to try to undermine its value, the answer to any interrogation or concern can be found within its core principles. It is the ultimate realization of history.

Nevertheless, Lukács argues that it is incorrect to consider capitalism as the end and he believes it is only a temporary stage in the historical process. Following Marx’s revolutionary ideas, the transition to the next stage would result from the efforts of the working class:

⁵⁵ Eyerman, "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," 50.

*Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism. As long as this consciousness is lacking, the crisis remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point, repeats the cycle until after infinite sufferings and terrible detours the school of history completes the education of the proletariat and confers upon it the leadership of mankind.*⁵⁶

This would take place once they developed class consciousness and untied themselves of the illusions imposed on them by “capitalist forms of thinking.”⁵⁷ For Lukács, the major obstacle preventing the working class from achieving a true class consciousness and engaging in such a revolution is the false consciousness created by the potency of the capitalist system on their lives. The reification of the economic structure and the reinforcement of commodity fetishism that has permeated the proletariat’s belief systems has detrimental impacts to their ability to create a true class consciousness. Once their way of life became inextricably linked to capitalism, they developed a consciousness that would justify their role as instruments of production in this system. As demonstrated earlier, the system’s ability to legitimate the inequalities and contradictions found in the system combined with the bourgeoisie’s efforts to promote it ensured that this system would become every individual’s reality. Lukács’s argument is that to function in this reality, “false consciousness becomes the normal way of perceiving and acting within the capitalist society.”⁵⁸ Because of the illusion that the system works as it should, the members of working class are unable to recognize that their interests would be better served in another economical structure.

⁵⁶ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*: 76.

⁵⁷ Guenter Lewy, *False Consciousness : An Essay on Mystification* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982), 8.

⁵⁸ Eyerman, "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," 50.

Thus, the main difference between the false consciousness of the bourgeoisie and the working class is simple. The bourgeoisie benefits from the illusions they have about the capitalist system while the working class suffers from it. This is why for Lukács the bourgeoisie will never strive to develop a true class consciousness and they will unremittingly support the existing system. Hope for change lies within the hands and in the minds of the proletariat, who have everything to gain from achieving class consciousness and forcing history to evolve. It is only from the proletariat's perspective, going outside the limits of capitalism, that a plan to better fulfill the interest of society as a whole can be determined.

Various political thinkers were influenced by Lukács ideas and developed a similar understanding of the Marxian concept of false consciousness. This was the case for members of the Frankfurt school, and of one of its most influential theorists: Herbert Marcuse. His work in *One-Dimensional Man*, which is known as Critical Theory⁵⁹ has contributed to shape the contemporary understanding of false consciousness and provides a very detailed and comprehensive analysis of the concept. Published for the first time in 1964, forty years after Lukács' *History and False Consciousness*, Marcuse tries to explain and make sense of, not only the survival of the capitalist ideology in western societies, but its complete domination. Throughout every chapter of the book, he demonstrate how the vast majority of society, including the members of the lower classes, still continue to support and encourage this domination. A century has passed since Marx's critique of the capitalist system, and despite its apparent contradictions and

⁵⁹ Lewy, *False Consciousness : An Essay on Mystification*: 11.

inconsistencies, this system has been able to overcome the critiques and rally even more proponents. The gap between the rich and the poor classes of society has increased in most societies around the world and capitalism has transformed into a more radical version of itself: neo-liberalism. As Marx and Lukács before him, Marcuse insists that “The fact that the vast majority of the population accepts, and is made to accept, this society does not render it less irrational and less reprehensible. The distinction between true and false consciousness, real and immediate interest still is meaningful.”⁶⁰

Going beyond Lukács’ definition of false consciousness, which differs for the higher and the lower classes of society, Marcuse developed one broad definition for false consciousness, which permeates all spheres of society. “To the degree to which they correspond to the given reality, thought and behavior express a false consciousness, responding to and contributing to the preservation of a false order of facts. And this false consciousness has become embodied in the prevailing technical apparatus which in turn reproduces it.”⁶¹ People are born, educated and evolve in this system. It has become their reality. Thus, they consider that their interests and well-being is inextricably linked with this reality. If they are unsatisfied or recognize the existence of inequalities, Marcuse believes that the majority of the population will attribute this to a malfunction of capitalism rather than to capitalism itself. People are capable of legitimating any predicament that goes against or challenges this “objective natural order things.”⁶² A

⁶⁰ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*: xlv.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 144.

consciousness which is incomplete and restricted to a specific reality is a “partial consciousness”⁶³, hence it is a false consciousness.

The title of his book *One-Dimensional Man*, is a good indicator of his views. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how the capitalist economic structure, through false consciousness, has contributed to create a state of “unfreedom”⁶⁴ for most people in society. The era in which his thoughts were developed, the 1960’s, had a great impact on the nature of his reflections. He argues that the development of new technologies and new modes of communication have contributed to reinforce the power of capitalism on individuals and maintain status quo. The capitalist society is presumably a system where liberty, autonomy, self-interest and freedom are encouraged. Marcuse suggests that with the development of new technologies and modes of communication, the modes of production changed considerably. This new technology permitted more leisure time for both the high and the lower classes, but more importantly, many new leisure commodities were introduced on the market. Marx had argued that if the lower classes had more leisure time, they would have time to think about their true interests, to reflect on their economical, political and social circumstances and become conscious of the detrimental effects of capitalism on their lives, and engage in revolution. Because of false consciousness, once they were able to acquire more leisure time, the members of the lower classes were mainly interested in raising their standard of living and purchasing the same leisure commodities as the higher classes, because that is what capitalism

⁶³ Harold Bleich, *The Philosophy of Herbert Marcuse* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977), 154.

⁶⁴ Lewy, *False Consciousness : An Essay on Mystification*: 11.

encourages. This for Marcuse is a state of unfreedom. The working class is unable to identify its true interest; it is not free to think and behave without restraint. False desires and needs are imposed on them by the system.

According to Marcuse, the capitalist society functions under principles of technological rationality, which involves “automation, standardization, mass production, efficiency, etc.”⁶⁵ Technological rationality relies on Marx’s ideas of commodity fetishism. It reaffirms the power of commodities over human beings, but also stresses the role of machines and technology in the perpetuation and propagation of capitalist values and ideals amongst all classes. As previously discussed, commodity fetishism encourages the creation of false needs. “False needs are false by virtue of the fact that they are imposed by those whose interest they serve while not genuinely serving the interest of those who express them.”⁶⁶ In a one-dimensional society, self-determination becomes the right to be like everybody else and to have what everybody else has. In that situation, it has little importance if possessing what other people possess does not truthfully contribute to self-determination, because it creates the illusion that it does. Thus, corporations whose sole purpose is to make profit can largely benefit from the creation of false needs to sell more products and take advantage of people’s illusions. The lower classes want to increase their standard of living, or at least have the impression that they are working towards that. Because of commodity fetishism, the accumulation of more possessions can simulate that and provide a sense of happiness. “The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split level home, kitchen

⁶⁵ Bleich, *The Philosophy of Herbert Marcuse*: 121.

⁶⁶Ibid., 157.

equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.”⁶⁷ The products themselves have become a source of annihilation of human beings’ desire to engage in the development of a stronger sense of community and achieve a more balanced redistribution of resources. They take comfort in their things and are convinced that, in the system in which they live, any individual is free to work for what they desire and achieve a higher standard of living.

For Marcuse false consciousness is an essential part of the realization of a one-dimensional-society and of one-dimensional men. The extent to which society has internalized and identified with the dictates imposed by capitalism, such as technological rationality and commodity fetishism is colossal. People have become part of this system. They contribute to reinforce its potency. Their ability to critique or question has been sublimated by their feeling of belonging to this capitalist whole. False consciousness has become a part of them. Through the satisfaction of their false needs and the belief that the system serves their interest, society has found “euphoria in unhappiness.”⁶⁸ They are able to forget or to legitimize the inequalities and injustices caused by the capitalist economic structure. False consciousness has made most individuals apathetic towards the apparent contradictions of the system in which they live and they have developed a happy consciousness. “The result is the atrophy of the mental organs for grasping the contradictions and the alternatives, [...] *Happy consciousness* comes to prevail.”⁶⁹ Thus, the only rational options are those that are in line with reality –i.e. capitalism – and any

⁶⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*: 9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

thoughts that undermine or challenge its legitimacy is disregarded or labeled as ideal or utopian. This happy consciousness also affects people's political decision and actions. Political parties that present non-capitalist ideas and advocate for socialist or progressive politics are not taken seriously. Even if people's self-interest would be better served by these parties, they are under the impression that the parties in line with capitalism are the only reliable ones. Marcuse calls this the "closing of the political universe."⁷⁰

I. III – Contemporary Political Psychology

Since Marcuse, the notion of false consciousness has been criticized and rejected by many political thinkers and even by Marxists themselves. Consequently in order to justify its utility and demonstrate its value, various political thinkers have attempted to clarify and better define the Marxian concept of false consciousness. Scholars, such as Meyerson, Pines and Wood⁷¹ have used the concept and attempted to develop new ideas and have applied the concept to a broader variety of actions and behaviors, but they have not presented significant additions to Marcuse's ideas. A small number of social and political psychologists have appropriated the concept to discuss individuals "errors in cognition."⁷² Contrasting Marcuse, Lukács and Marx, false consciousness explained through errors in cognition can be applied to individuals rather than classes or to society as a whole. The works of Frank Cunningham and John T. Jost have been influential on the development of such ideas and both have made significant contributions to expand

⁷⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁷¹ Meyerson, *False Consciousness*; Pines, *Ideology and False Consciousness*; Wood, "Ideology, False Consciousness, and Social Illusion."

⁷² Jost, "Negative Illusions: Conceptual Clarification and Psychological Evidence concerning False Consciousness," 402.

and make more relevant the concept of false consciousness for contemporary political scientists.

Building on Marcuse's idea of the closing of the political universe, in *Democratic Theory and False Consciousness*, Frank Cunningham discusses the utility of false consciousness to explain why many socialists and activists encounter "apathy and resistance on the part of those whose interests they wish to promote."⁷³ He defines false consciousness as "the harboring of beliefs that sustain one's own oppression"⁷⁴, similar to internalized oppression, which can serve to perpetuate their social, economic and/or their sexual domination. Not all false beliefs can be categorized as false consciousness in Cunningham's view. Only the oppression-sustaining beliefs, held by people whose oppression is partly maintained by them holding such beliefs, create a false consciousness, and only if these beliefs are sufficiently prevalent to be part of society's political culture. A political culture implies "beliefs widely held across some or all portions of a society's population as common-sense social and political descriptions with recognized normative implications."⁷⁵ Cunningham recognizes capitalism as a political culture. He argues that a majority of people in the Western world have internalized the oppressions resulting from capitalist ideals, institutions and practices and defend the interest of the system often to their disadvantage. He describes this particular type of oppression as structural or institutional oppression. As a result of the constraint imposed by the capitalist structures, people have become conditioned to pursue limited goals, such

⁷³ Frank Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 236.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

as “profit making and conspicuous consumption”⁷⁶ and have become estranged from other interests they might have. The upholding of such oppressive beliefs serves to prevent the development of critical thought and maintains society in the state of false consciousness. Analogous to the closing of the political universe, this leads to what Cunningham calls political acquiescence – i.e. compliance to capitalist structures.

In order to explain the apathy and absence of resistance of the majority of society to capitalism’s oppression, he introduces two innovative types of false consciousness: namely, “fatalism and false blame.”⁷⁷ As a result of oppression, many people come believe in the inevitability of the existing inequalities and of systemic malfunctions. Because of the false beliefs they have about the reliability of the system in which they live, they are unable to imagine themselves in another system. They hold fatalistic convictions about the possibility that change could happen and that the present system could justifiably be contested. Cunningham suggests that this explains why many people believe in the futility of protest and the unlikelihood of social change. Capitalism is reality and there is no way to escape reality.

False blame is another type of false consciousness that serves to maintain oppression. This implies an incorrect identification of the oppressor. To prevent having to challenge one’s reality and legitimate one’s beliefs, Cunningham suggests that it is easier for people to identify alternate explanations for their oppression than to assess the deficiencies of the system they believe in. For example, he says that many people ascribe low wages and

⁷⁶ Ibid., 238.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 237.

high percentage of unemployment to immigrant cheap labor rather than to structural deficiencies in the system that contributes to create and maintain these problems.⁷⁸ Thus, this contributes to reinforce the false beliefs about the nature of capitalism and prevents people from engaging in protest and demanding change. Cunningham believes that unless people engage in self-critique and in the development of critical thought to recognize the presence of these biases, they will never be able to free themselves of false consciousness.

Building on Marcuse ideas of the closing of the political universe, John T. Jost goes much further than Cunningham in his assessment of false consciousness and presenting a very detailed account of the concept. He defines false consciousness, similarly to Cunningham, as the holding of false beliefs that are in contradiction with one's interests and that sustain one's oppression. People develop favorable attitudes towards systems that maintain them in a state of oppression. The basis of his theory is that "errors in cognition produce levels of political acquiescence that may be harmful to the individual, the group, and the society."⁷⁹ Jost calls this process system justification and he suggests that its main consequence is status quo. Errors in cognition serve as "an impediment to accurate and useful representation of the world"⁸⁰ and contribute to the creation of a false perception of reality. Their inability to see things as they really are prevents people from recognizing that their interests are not being adequately taken into consideration and that they are victims of oppression. They develop political acquiescence and reinforce their

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Jost, "Negative Illusions: Conceptual Clarification and Psychological Evidence concerning False Consciousness," 414.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

sense of attachment and of trust in the dominating system. Jost suggests that people will agree to live in fundamentally unacceptable conditions or circumstances, because they have developed various unconscious mechanisms to cope with the inconsistencies of the capitalist world and have created a false consciousness for themselves.

Jost argues that there is considerable psychological evidence attesting to the existence of false consciousness and showing how it has contributed to preserve the status quo. In the past, psychologists have been apprehensive about using political theory to inform their studies and have been particularly careful about using Marxian concepts, such as false consciousness. It would be relevant to examine more carefully the motivations that prevent people from resisting the status quo or from engaging in collective action, and cultivating political acquiescence. He insists that it is time to “politicize empirical psychology”⁸¹ and to address the causes of system justification, in order to better understand why people hold false beliefs that are in contradiction with their interests and that sustain their oppression. He believes that there are many interesting findings that can be made by analyzing human behaviors from the perspective of false consciousness.

Jost also argues that “Marx may have underestimated the extent to which social-psychological mechanisms allow people to adapt to political systems which thwart their own interest.”⁸² In order to convince his fellow political psychologists to engage in the politicization of the studies and to employ Marxian ideas, he proposes a preliminary taxonomy for the types of beliefs which qualify for false consciousness and that

⁸¹ Ibid., 414.

⁸² Ibid., 399.

contribute to political acquiescence. The two first categories are those identified by Cunningham: fatalism and false identification of blame, to which Jost adds: failure to perceive injustice, justification of social roles and statuses, identification with the oppressor and resistance to change.

The first form of false consciousness is fatalism. People holding such beliefs consider that protest is futile and have resigned themselves to the current political system. According to Jost, many people are overwhelmed by capitalism's domination and have come to believe that change is impossible. As Marx had pointed out, this feeling of helplessness is reinforced by the capitalist structures, that present themselves as "the only" viable economic structures and as a part of nature. Jost also suggests that fatalism can be caused by the ideas that protest is embarrassing. Many people suppress their doubts about the system in which they live and interpret the silence of others as a sign of satisfaction. Thus, the idea of voicing their dissatisfaction seems useless and embarrassing.

As Cunningham had demonstrated, false identification of blame can also be acknowledged as a type of false consciousness. Victims of oppression sometimes blame themselves for their fate. This can also be observed for victims of capitalism. Jost believes that there are some people who subscribe to "a belief in a just world in which people get what they deserve."⁸³ Rather than challenging the system and recognizing that it is responsible for their oppression, some people blame themselves for the misfortunes

⁸³ Ibid., 409.

of life. However, more frequently people tend to put the blame on someone else or blame each other. They can blame God or faith, or as in Cunningham's immigrant labor example, they will imagine other actors that are responsible for their oppression. This prevents them from having to question their trust in the system.

The third type of false consciousness is failure to perceive injustice. It is very similar to false identification of blame. The main difference is that rather than identifying the wrong causes for oppression and injustice, some people are unable to perceive oppression and injustice at all. Jost links this with people's belief that the world is a just place and who are convinced in the justice of the social order. The problem is that if people maintain the illusion that the world is just, this can be done at some political cost and to individuals' expense or society's disadvantage. This can serve to "protect existing social institution and political leaders"⁸⁴ and reinforce the oppressing system. Failure to perceive injustice can also be caused by peoples urge to compare their circumstance with past situations or examples in history where injustice was much more evident. They consider themselves lucky not to be in "that" situation and abstain from complaining.

The fourth type of false consciousness is justification of social roles and statuses. This social-psychological mechanism is based on the idea that "whatever rank is held by individuals in the social order represents their intrinsic worth."⁸⁵ As a result of such beliefs, Jost indicates that people come to suppose that everyone is deserving of their place in society and incapable of occupying another rank. Failure and success come to be

⁸⁴ Ibid., 403.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 407.

seen as inherent to a person place in society and it encourages prejudices to be formed according to people's role, social status and wealth. At the individual level, this ensures that people follow their ascribed roles, limiting mobility, this "social interaction therefore tends to reproduce existing inequalities."⁸⁶ At group level, this leads to the development of stereotypes towards certain sections and serves to perpetuate disadvantage and legitimates part of the oppression done to these groups.

The fifth type of false consciousness is identification with the oppressor. This is the most obvious form of internalized oppression. As Marcuse and Lukács have argued, people that live under capitalist structures are unable to separate their own interest with those of their surrounding reality. They are part of the system, thus it is very difficult for them to separate themselves from this reality and be able to recognize the inherent problems that it serves to create and perpetuate. The closing of the political universe is possible mainly because people develop a sense of loyalty and dependence towards the current system and are committed to being a part of it. Jost supposes that nobody wants to be an outcast and people are able to suppress contradictory information in order to fit in.

Jost identifies resistance to change as the last type of false consciousness. Various studies have shown that people are resistant to large scale changes and suggest that implementation of change must be done incrementally. When presented with possible changes to their political situation, Jost demonstrates that people tend to select changes that are less likely to affect their current situation. This type of cognition is similar to

⁸⁶ Ibid., 408.

fatalism, however, it implies that “change, in itself, is aversive, not just difficult to achieve.”⁸⁷ This is called cognitive conservatism, because it supposes that it is very difficult for people to change their thoughts about the possibility of change. Conversely, people can also be affected by behavioral conservatism. This suggests that it is difficult to change behaviors. Do to habituation and repetition, people tend to reproduce past actions and behaviors. False consciousness can be identified when people continue to act or think in a certain way, despite their knowledge that this results from oppression or can sustain injustices.

Thus, in my estimation the concept of false consciousness, as presented by Jost, is much more elaborated than Marx’s original account, and more precise than Lukács and Marcuse’s definitions. From a very concise idea about the false consciousness of bourgeois ideologues and the illusions created by the capitalist economical structures themselves, the concept has evolved into recognized errors in cognition that affect any individual in society and contributes to the closing of the political universe and the maintenance of status quo.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 412.

Second Chapter – Assessing False Consciousness: A Quartet of Critiques

Despite the occasional use of false consciousness concept by contemporary social scientists, the notion has not been very popular over the past decades. The concept does not appear in some of the most important American reference books in political science and is absent from the discourse of a majority of political thinkers, including contemporary Marxists. It has been mentioned sporadically, but most of the authors that have used the term, have been very careful not to go into too much detail, do not define the term and do not make it an important part of their work. Some have rejected the notion altogether, some have proposed alternatives and some have made the concept less noticeable by incorporating it into a larger, more complex concept or theory. False consciousness “may be seen as a vestige of communist doctrine, a political philosophy that is widely assumed to have been disproved by historical developments.”⁸⁸ The critiques of the concept fall into four broad categories: false consciousness goes against rationality principles, underestimates people’s critical thoughts, supports the dominant ideology thesis and supposes the existence of true consciousness. They will each be developed more in detail in the following pages.

II.I – False Consciousness Goes Against Rationality Principles

Over the past century, there have been significant objections to Marxian ideas and socialist principles. It has been argued by followers of the Chicago school of economics such as Milton Friedman and Freidrich A. Hayek, that the events of the 20th century, with the rise of neo-liberal ideologies and the failed attempts to implement communism has proven Marx wrong, and has shown the primacy of the capitalist system. According to this view, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, marked the definitive victory of capitalism

⁸⁸ Ibid., 414.

over communism⁸⁹. Friedman and Hayek have repeatedly advocated for the unrealistic and impractical nature of Marx's ideas. The notion of false consciousness, as well as other Marxian concepts, has been the target for such criticism because it underestimates individuals' ability to act as free rational actors and has thus repeatedly been disregarded in political discourse. It has been condemned for its apparent inconsistencies with respect to rationality principles that are central to the smooth functioning of the capitalist market. Inspired by classical economic theories and developed in the middle of the 20th century, rational choice theory promotes many assumptions about the human nature, which undermines the very nature of the concept of false consciousness. The works of Lewy will serve to demonstrate that certain instances of submissiveness that appear to be caused by false consciousness, may in reality, be rationally justifiable. In addition, a Marxian rationalist critique, articulated by Callinicos, will show why false consciousness is an inappropriate excuse for socialism's failure.

Since its publication, Adam Smith's theory about the market's invisible hand, and the liberal ideals associated with it, has had a significant impact on the development of economics, and more importantly, on the development of political thought. Neoclassical economics advocated a system where every individual can have equal opportunities and act as a free, rational agent. But what does that imply? Smith made the assumption that "each of us can pursue our individual self-interest and, if there is no government interference, the free market will serve as an invisible hand to ensure that the common

⁸⁹ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Fortieth Anniversary ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), viii; Barbara J. Falk, "Post-Communism's First Decade: A Primer for Non-Specialists," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* 36, no. 2 (2003): 417.

good will emerge.”⁹⁰ This is the core principle underlying the capitalist system. It posits that individuals are able to pursue their-self-interest, and by extension, that “human behavior is rational.”⁹¹ Rational in this context signifies that people have reasons or conscious motivations to justify their behaviors, decisions or actions. Individuals are free to pursue or not their self-interest, but the possibility exists. What matters is the process. Rationality suggests that the most important thing is for people to have the liberty to pursue what they judge to be in their best-interest.

The purpose of the capitalist system is not to determine which interests are good for people, but to present a system in which they will be free to answer their needs and desires, whatever they might be. According to Smith, the government’s role is not to limit individuals in their pursuit of self-interest and of profit, because the free market ensures that a natural balance occurs in the system for the benefit of society as a whole. “By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”⁹² The existence of a class consciousness, in this context, becomes irrelevant given that individual interest is the primary focus of the capitalist system and is considered the most rational behavior. Thus, even if people are motivated to act according to false beliefs, in the end, the system will re-balance the disparities. Classical economists do not argue that false consciousness does not exist; rather, that trying to understand its nature and its origins will not provide any useful

⁹⁰ Kristen Renwick Monroe and Kristen Hill Maher, "Psychology and Rational Actor Theory," *Political Psychology* 16, no. 1 (1995): 2.

⁹¹ Herbert A. Simon, "Rationality in Political Behavior," *Political Psychology* 16, no. 1 (1995): 45.

⁹² Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (New York: Cosimo Inc., 2007), 351.

insight or change reality. Unconscious forces may guide people to act, but it is irrelevant to take these unknown forces into consideration.

As a result of the emergence of these ideals in the Western world, rational choice theory—i.e. rational actor theory – was developed. It has largely influenced social sciences and has imposed new standards on the discipline of political science. As with neoclassical economic theory, rational choice theory posits various assumptions about human beings.

According to Simon and Monroe, there are seven central suppositions:

1. Actors pursue goals.
2. These goals reflect the actor's perceived self-interest.
3. Behavior results from a process that involves, or functions as if it entails, conscious choice.
4. The individual is the basic agent in society.
5. Actors have preferences that are consistent and stable.
6. If given options, actors will choose the alternative with the highest expected utility.
7. Actors possess extensive information on both the available alternatives and the likely consequences of their choices.⁹³

These assumptions contradict and undermine the relevance of a concept such as false consciousness in many ways. Despite the lack of information and the different factors that influence someone's choices and behaviors, rationalists strongly believe in the power of individual self-knowledge and in people's ability to serve their interests. They assume that the individual is the most appropriate judge of what is best for him or her.

To begin with, false consciousness involves a certain deprivation of rational choice and undermines the assumption that actors pursue goals. It supposes that people are not simply free agents guided by interest and rationality pursuing clear and meaningful goals,

⁹³Monroe and Maher, "Psychology and Rational Actor Theory," 2.

but that other forces of which they are unaware, to a certain extent, influence their actions, decisions and behaviors. False consciousness implies that because of the untrue nature of their beliefs, actors will be inclined to pursue misguided goals, sometimes detrimental to their self-interests. If the individual is the basic agent in society, it presumes that he is autonomous and in command of his life and destiny. It does not exclude the possibility that superior forces, such as the capitalist ideology or companies, exert power over the individual, but it certainly implies that he holds more authority than these other forces. Therefore, rational choice theory suggests that most human beings act accordingly to their own desires and weakens the idea that ideologies hold such a strong potency over them. "Actors know what they want and can order their wants transitively."⁹⁴ If behavior results from a process that relies on conscious choice, the fact that someone's beliefs are true or false does not have a significant impact on his behavior. People are guided by the beliefs and values they are aware of and what matters is their ability to pursue goals. The validity of the motivations driving them to pursue a specific goal is secondary. This is significant because this assumptions supports core notions in Western political realities such as representative democracy. This notion is built on the idea that people are able to make informed choices and elect the representative they judge to be the best suited to defend their interest. For representative democracy to remain legitimate, the impact of false consciousness must be considered minimal, because the contrary would imply that democratic choices often result from erroneous beliefs or illusions, thus that it is built on lies, and this would challenge some of the foundational principle guiding the Western world.

⁹⁴ William H. Riker, "The Political Psychology of Rational Choice Theory," *Political Psychology* 16, no. 1 (1995): 24.

The second assumption clearly states that rational actors pursue goals that reflect their *perceived* self-interest. Thus, as classical economists had argued, rational choice theorists do not completely deny the existence of false consciousness, they simply do not attribute much importance to it. As long as actors pursue their goals through a rational process, as presented above, proponents of rational choice theory would argue that they have acted as true rational human beings. Their motivations or reasons to act might appear peculiar and at odds with their desired goals, but if they make sense for the individual, if the individuals perceive that they are acting for the advancement or protection of their self-interest, that is what matters. “When we do not find people’s reasons for their actions to be credible, we do not thereby judge the people to be irrational.”⁹⁵ If people hold false beliefs, this will affect the nature of the motivations guiding their actions, but what rationalists suggest is that this will not necessarily influence the rationality of their decisional process. Individuals are masters of their own decisions and their motivations can be considered valid or not by external judges, they act rationally by following their perceptions and beliefs.

Proponents of the concept of false consciousness such as Marx, Lukács and Marcuse were mainly concerned with its impact on people’s actions or their lack of action. They aimed to demonstrate that in various cases, people’s false beliefs and illusions about the capitalist system motivated them to act in contradiction with their collective and individual self-interest. This is a consideration that is not acknowledged by rational choice theory. The possibility that people are unable to recognize their self-interest does

⁹⁵Simon, "Rationality in Political Behavior," 46.

not influence rational theorists' choice arguments. They are interested in the rationality of the decisional process itself, not in the rationality of the motivations and the resulting actions and outcomes.

Various theorists recognize the rigidity of the assumptions posited by rational choice theory and have proposed a more nuanced version of this theory, with the introduction of the notion of bounded or procedural rationality. This notion was developed by Herbert Simon. He defines bounded rationality as “rational choice that takes into account the cognitive limitations of the decision maker – limitations of both knowledge and computational capacity.”⁹⁶ Bounded rationality has been employed to demonstrate that the human mind is constrained by various forces when engaging in a decision process. Cognitive errors such as false consciousness could be recognized as one of these forces. However, as with rational choice theory before it, bounded rationality focuses on the decisional process itself, not on the impact of such limitations on people's actions, or their outcomes. Rather than referring to a completely rational decisional process, bounded rationality theorists demonstrate that individuals often take decision by “satisficing”⁹⁷ and not optimizing their interests. Due to certain limitations, “the decision-maker may look for a satisfactory, rather than optimal alternative.”⁹⁸ Thus, although the existence and impact of false consciousness is not challenged, the relevance of understanding the effects of such a notion is rendered insignificant. People are not

⁹⁶ ———, *Models of Bounded Rationality*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 291.

⁹⁷ ———, "Rationality in Political Behavior," 295; Kristen Renwick Monroe, "Paradigm Shift: From Rational Choice to Perspective," *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique* 22, no. 2 (2001): 154.

⁹⁸ Simon, *Models of Bounded Rationality*, 3: 295.

completely rational; this fact can be recognized, but not to the extent that they are not in control of their decision as false consciousness suggests.

The assumption that rational behavior involves conscious choice has also been defended by Guenter Lewy. Unlike bounded rationalists, he does not completely disregard the existence and the possible impacts of false consciousness; however he suggests that it does not affect as many people as Marx, Lukács, Marcuse and Jost had advocated. There can be evidence of false consciousness if people world views and beliefs and based on “factually false premises”⁹⁹, however this does not happen as often as some would argue. There are instances where people seem to lack control over their lives and destiny and simply accept a part in the overarching structures in which they reside, without relying on empirically false assumptions. Lewy recognizes that it is possible that people are dealing with alienation, when they see their role in society as destiny or necessary fate. Many individuals believe that they are acting in their best interest, even when it seems not to be the case. He is reluctant to call this false consciousness. Under capitalism, many people may be alienated, but to what extent are the beliefs that maintain them in such a state, false? “If all or most members of society accept and believe in ideas that justify their inferior status, in what sense can we consider these beliefs as distorted?”¹⁰⁰

People’s motivation to act might be fashioned by their blind trust in the system, but this does not change the reality in which they find themselves and which they seem to accept.

It is inappropriate to undermine the validity of people’s beliefs from an external

⁹⁹ Lewy, *False Consciousness : An Essay on Mystification*: 118.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

perspective. Beliefs can originate from various sources and can be developed in different ways. The legitimacy of the circumstances in which these beliefs emerged can be discussed and critiqued; nevertheless, once they are accepted as true by someone, they become part of their reality. Thus, the fact that people contribute to maintaining the status quo and reinforcing an oppressive system does not necessarily indicate the existence of false consciousness. “To assume that every nonissue and nondecision is due to a mobilization bias is an unwarranted conclusion and itself an indication of political bias.”¹⁰¹ There are other factors that can explain people’s acceptance of their state of oppression and capitalism’s malfunctions, such as the conviction that it is capitalism is the only viable system.

According to Lewy, people who prefer to remain in a state of oppression and maintain the status quo rather than actively resist and challenge the oppressive system are acting rationally. By promoting the idea that people suffer from false consciousness, the possibility that they hold their own diverging or contradictory “durable standards of equity and exploitation”¹⁰² is disregarded. It is a very delicate matter to judge other peoples’ values, political preferences and interests. Who can judge the validity of such beliefs? Lewy suggests that various Marxists, have been tempted to use false consciousness to justify the small number of people that have adopted their perspective and challenge capitalism. Marxists have been unable to accept the reality, which is that a large number of people have standards that are more closely related to those promoted by

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁰² Ibid., 89.

capitalism, regardless of the fact that it does not improve their circumstances in life. For Lewy, this is not necessarily a sign of false consciousness.

The “acceptance and accommodation may well be a rational response and the optimal solution.[...] A formula for making the best of a hopeless situation.”¹⁰³ Many people may prefer to follow the dictates of capitalism rather than to engage in a lengthy and demanding process to change the system. They may consider that the result of such an engagement is not worth all the efforts they would have to make, thus status quo is a better option. “Submissiveness”¹⁰⁴ may be the most rational reaction in various situations. People might not even consider their behavior or actions as submissiveness, but an accommodation to an imperfect situation. For example, hope of the possibility that things might improve within this system can encourage people to be patient and wait for things to get better.

In addition, Lewy demonstrates that the acceptance of a dominant system, despite problems that it can create or sustain, serves a psychological need. There is a necessity for people to legitimize their existence through a superior, and sometimes, oppressive structure, such as ideologies and religions. People accept the fact that life is not perfect and it is normal for inequalities and oppression to exist. The challenging or resisting the existing system seems worthless, since a different system would also present its problems

¹⁰³ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Nature of Mass Poverty* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 64.

¹⁰⁴ Lewy, *False Consciousness : An Essay on Mystification*: 118.

and create certain inequalities. He suggests that society could not function if such dominating systems did not exist:

Not infrequently, too, the dominant values and institutions come to be seen as the only correct ones, to be regarded as facts of nature. In such cases we are dealing with reification, and because society would collapse into chaos unless certain regularities were taken for granted, one can argue that such reification comes close to being a functional imperative.¹⁰⁵

Following this logic, consensus and maintenance of the status quo are unavoidable and even preferable. This functional imperative implies that a society's norms, customs, beliefs and actions will necessarily be influenced and shaped by the dominant system and will affect people's values and standards. Consensus will appear. "One can call this consensus biased, but nothing is gained by this label, it appears to be unavoidable."¹⁰⁶ Inevitably, there will be people who are dissatisfied with the current situation and will advocate that a different system would be better. To explain the absence of mobilization for change, many will turn to concepts such as false consciousness to explain the situation. This for Lewy, is inadmissible. Reality is that consensus is rational, not the contrary.

Lewy suggests that there is a tendency for Marxists to jump to conclusions regarding the existence of false consciousness. "False consciousness often serves merely as a label for views that do not coincide with those of their leftist critics."¹⁰⁷ Using a similar argument as Lewy, Alex Callinicos, a Marxist follower, goes even further. He presented an account of Marxism in which he suggests that the notion of false consciousness should be completely removed. He believes this concept has been used and developed by Marxists

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 121.

to justify the absence of the development of class consciousness and of a socialist revolution. Rather than trying to determine the exact reasons explaining communism's failure, he suggest Marxists have developed philosophical concepts, such as false consciousness, as excuses for their own lack of success. He argues that Marx's ideas have been distorted, in order to blame the capitalist system for communism's failure, and prevent themselves from having to reevaluate and analyze Marxist principles, behaviors or actions that could be problematic. Callinicos states that "it is an error to believe that the essence/appearance contrast is the organizing figure of Marx's discourse."¹⁰⁸ It is what happens in reality and is grounded in historical materialism that is most significant for Marx. Thus, he implies that it is only by understanding the practices and actions of the capitalist systems that it becomes possible to counteract its effects or propose reliable alternatives. He is very critical of the thinkers who attribute to the capitalist system, the ability to mislead and create illusions in people's minds.

This type of critique is not made very often by Marxists themselves, but Callinicos seems to want to move away from the supernatural characteristics that are too often attributed to capitalism and to bourgeois ideologies. Turning towards abstract concepts such as false consciousness only contributes to undermine the credibility of Marxism. He illustrates this point by critiquing "the tendency of Western Marxists to attribute magical properties to bourgeois ideology"¹⁰⁹, rather than looking to reality providing concrete solution to overcome the oppression of capitalism. There are logical reasons and easily identifiable causes that explain this domination. Callinicos suggests that, for example, studies have

¹⁰⁸ Alex Callinicos, *Marxism and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 132.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

shown that the people from the lower classes are not quiescent because of the internalized unconscious forces of capitalism, but that many of them have been “controlled by cruder mechanisms of physical coercion and economic incentives and disincentives.”¹¹⁰ Marxists have been too focused on the effects of capitalism’s false ideological beliefs, when they should be paying more attention to the concrete mechanisms used by people who benefit from these economical structures to make people act according to their desired actions. Callinicos challenges the belief that that the socialist or communist revolution is primarily a matter of class struggle and of consciousness. It is a matter of reality, thus of action and practices. Changing people’s ideas is a very difficult task, but showing them alternative practices and acting according to Marxist principles can be more effective to engage them in a new direction.

II.II – False Consciousness Underestimates Peoples Critical Thoughts

The notion of false consciousness has not only been discredited because it underestimates individuals’ ability to act as free rational actors, but it has also been argued that this notion largely underestimates people’s ability to be critical actors and to resist oppression. It is similar to the previous critique, pertaining to false consciousness’s presuppositions that individuals do not always act as free, rational agents. It presumes that people are unable to recognize the oppression exerted by the capitalist system on their lives and places them in the role of quiescent victims. The perspective of James C. Scott will be analyzed in order to exemplify these critiques.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Scott's thesis in *Domination and the Art of Resistance* implies that it does not follow that because people seem uncritical and passive that they are satisfied with the system in which they live and are not resisting its oppression in their own ways. It is problematic to presume the existence of false consciousness to explain subordinate groups' quiescence. He believes that the assumption that people of the subordinate and lower classes have developed resignation towards the dominance of the capitalist system through false consciousness is "fundamentally wrong."¹¹¹ People have not accepted the capitalist system as the natural and inevitable social order and are much less quiescent than it seems. Scott rejects Lewy claim that submissiveness may be the most rational behavior to adopt in many situations of oppression. Adopting such an attitude is not rational, but suggests false consciousness. It supposes that people would be willing "to refuse what is anyway refused and to love the inevitable."¹¹² This assumption is extremely insensitive to the reality of subjects living in situations of domination and oppression. This implies for Scott that, to a certain extent, you blame the victims for the situation in which they find themselves. The idea of false consciousness, as rational submissiveness, entails a lack of aspiration and possibly even foolishness¹¹³ from the people who contribute to maintaining the existing system, since this is done at the expense of their own interests. It supposes that people are incapable of recognizing an unjust circumstances and from taking action to resist this domination, thus from ensuring a better, more fair situation for themselves. Scott argues that this does not accurately represent reality.

¹¹¹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: 72.

¹¹² Ibid., 76.

¹¹³ Jost, "Negative Illusions: Conceptual Clarification and Psychological Evidence concerning False Consciousness," 416.

More realistic is that social change has often originated from the actions and behaviors of the masses or the subordinate subjects. People are more than capable of resisting oppression and domination and of taking actions that contribute to the transformation of society. Apparent passivity is not necessarily synonymous with absolute compliance: this is only an illusion. “If there is a social phenomenon to be explained here, it is the reverse of what theories of hegemony and false consciousness purport to account for.”¹¹⁴

The concept of false consciousness has been developed to justify the lack of resistance towards the capitalist system. Scott argues that this is an error in perspective. What needs to be developed is a theory, like his, that shows how, in reality, people resist the system in many ways that are sometimes too subtle to be perceived. There might be no “explicit display of insubordination”¹¹⁵, but various less obvious or traditional forms of resistance can be observed by those who wish to uncover them. Focusing on false consciousness to account for people’s apparent passivity can be misleading and fails to perceive a society’s dissatisfaction or desire for change, and more importantly, the ways of resisting the system’s oppression which can simply be concealed from public display. For various reasons, such as fear of punishment, lack of time or energy, lack of resources, etc. people engage in discrete forms of resistance to avoid open confrontation.

Proponents of the existence of false consciousness mistakenly assume that ideological domination, or the appearance of it, contributes to ensure political stability, thus

¹¹⁴ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: 79.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

maintaining the status quo and diminishing social conflict¹¹⁶. Scott argues that in reality, for a system to sustain its domination, it must be able to face and resolve a multiplicity of conflicts. “Any ideology which makes a claim to hegemony must, in effect, make promises to subordinate groups by way of explaining why a particular social order is also in their best interests. Once such promises are extended, the way is open to social conflict.”¹¹⁷ Some might argue that these conflicts are negligible and do not challenge the dominant system at its core, possibly due to false consciousness. These conflicts are resolved by minor rectifications and they are not necessarily disruptive of the social order imposed by the dominant ideology. The promises that are made contribute to ensure a minimum level of social stability and maintain people in a state of quiescence. According to Scott, the prevalence of small scale conflicts is not an indication of status quo and does not prevent more radical conflicts from developing and from large-scale changes from occurring. In fact, most of the large-scale revolutions have been triggered by minor conflicts and resulted from, what seemed to be insignificant demands for change.

In the last century, there have been many cases that serve to support a contradictory argument. It is debatable whether such hegemony has ever really existed, excluding totalitarian regimes and systems kept in place through violence and coercion. Social change has often stemmed from the efforts of, supposedly, falsely conscious subjects. “Even in the relatively stable industrial democracies to which theories of hegemony were meant to apply, their strongest formulation simply does not allow for the degree of social

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 77.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

conflict and protest that actually occurs.”¹¹⁸ Subordinate groups such as slaves, blacks, women, LGBTQ’s, etc. have been able to change their circumstances, to disrupt the status quo and overcome part of the oppression exerted by the dominant system, even when it initially seemed like a lost cause. Scott argues that there are various modest demands, such as demands for improvement of life conditions, which initially seemed non-threatening to the stability of the system, which have stimulated or served as a basis for more violent revolts. He gives the example of the Bolshevik revolution, which was triggered by reformist demands, and which was not originally a desire for revolution, simply improvement.

Opposing theories of false consciousness, Scott advocates that in many instances, people underestimate the power exerted on them by the dominant system and have no difficulty imagining other relations of power. This contradicts the notion that people often view the dominating system, such as capitalism, as the natural and inevitable social order. In fact, he believes many people exaggerate their own power and “denaturalize domination.”¹¹⁹ Despite the discouraging historical evidence and failures of previous subordinate groups to overcome the prevailing oppressor, many people are able to foresee the possibility that the situation could be different and that this domination is not absolute. Because of the process of denaturalization, they consider that the system is not unchallengeable and are able to imagine the possibility of overpowering it. This notion does not entail a literal and physical engagement of subordinate groups in actions of resistance. It emphasizes their ability to envision other possibilities for themselves.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 79.

This suggests that even in instances of apparent quiescence, people may not suffer from false consciousness, and might be very conscious, although simply not very effective in transposing their thoughts into action. It is not because they do not engage in actions of resistance that people are not consciously conceiving alternatives to the present dominating system. “The obstacles to resistance, which are many, are simply not attributable to the inability of subordinate groups to imagine a counterfactual social order.”¹²⁰ Scott demonstrates that even with little or no knowledge of alternatives, people do not necessarily accept and embrace the existing structure. Through different mental processes, subordinate groups can challenge the hold of the dominating systems on their lives. Scott presents two of these mental processes: the inversion of roles and the negation of the existing social order.

The first way for people to imagine a counterfactual social order is through the inversion of roles. While it may be difficult for people to imagine other social and political arrangements than the one in which they find themselves, such as the caste system, serfdom or capitalism, it is much easier for them to picture themselves in a different status or position in the social order. “The millennial theme of a world turned upside down, a world in which the last shall be the first and the first the last, can be found in nearly every major cultural tradition in which inequalities of power, wealth and status have been pronounced.”¹²¹ For example, slaves imagine occupying the role of their masters and the masters becoming their slaves so they could make them go through what

¹²⁰ Ibid., 81.

¹²¹ Ibid., 80.

they have endured. In the capitalist structure, this imaginary process has been encouraged. The American Dream has been presented as accessible to all, and the idea that the poor could eventually better its circumstances and be part of the higher class has been encouraged. Scott argues that this imaginary process is not merely an “abstract exercise”¹²², but an actual basis for many revolts. When people are focusing on the possibility of a fantasy life, where the roles are reversed, this opens the door to the possibility that this reversal could take place and can lead to concrete actions of resistance.

The second way for people to imagine a counterfactual social order is through the negation of the existing social order. Without imagining a fully developed alternative system to the one in which they presently find themselves, people are able to identify specific elements that they would abolish or implement in their conception of the perfect system. Frequently, these elements represent exactly the opposite of what can be observed in the current system. “Most traditional utopian beliefs can, in fact, be understood as more or less systematic negation of an existing pattern of exploitation and status degradation as it is experienced by subordinate groups.”¹²³ People identify aspects of their daily lives that they find problematic, with which they disagree and which are considered as sources of oppression. Consequently, they imagine a world unbounded by these limitations. Without necessarily challenging the system and engaging in the promotion of the utopian system they have imagined, people are at least conscious of the possibility of alternatives.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 81.

Finally, Scott argues that quiescence results in various instances from structural or systemic barriers that limit resistance, rather than from false consciousness. People might be aware of the capitalist system's deficiencies and of the oppression it exerts on them, but face too many obstacles to overtly revolt. Despite people's cognitive abilities to imagine better circumstances for themselves and to imagine a counterfactual social order, there are tangible reasons that prevent them from taking action and from advocating for change. The fear that proponents of the dominant system will use coercion and violence to ensure stability and obedience can prevent people from engaging in open resistance to the system. When faced with threats to their lives or the lives of their friends and family, people often prefer to be quiescent and invisible than to attract attention from the oppressors and risk the safety of themselves and of their entourage. Moreover, the structures of the social order itself and of the institutions that support it can serve to limit people's ability to overcome or challenge the dominant system. The true nature of a system can be concealed from the majority of the population, such as authoritarian regimes, and offer no information regarding its vulnerable points and weaknesses, thus making it more difficult to know how to assail it. Hence, taking all of Scott's previous arguments into consideration, it can be argued that quiescence or apparent quiescence does not necessarily suggest the existence of false consciousness.

II.III – False Consciousness Supports the Dominant Ideology Thesis

Through the works of Marx, Lukács and Marcuse, there is one common assumption without which the concept of false consciousness would not make any sense. It is the

belief that a dominant ideology does in fact exist. The types of people who are affected by this dominant ideology are not the same, depending on the author. Marx believed that the bourgeois ideologues were those mainly affected by false consciousness, while Lukács and Marcuse applied this cognitive process to all members of society, from the higher to the subordinate classes. All three authors consider that capitalism has permeated most spheres of society and serves as the dominant and legitimate social order. What they all fail to evaluate, is the likelihood that such a dominant ideology could exist.

Abercrombie and Turner present a detailed critique of the dominant ideology thesis. “This thesis suggests that there is in most societies a set of beliefs which dominates all others and which, through its incorporation in the consciousness of subordinate classes, tends to inhibit the development of radical political dissent.”¹²⁴ It suggests that the dominant ideology of a given society manipulates the members of the lower classes, in order to serve the interests of the members of the dominant class. This manipulation rests on the promotion of true or false information that aims to convince all members of society of the validity of the dominant ideology and limit opposition. People must come to accept the validity of the system in which they evolve and contribute to its preservation. Due to the irreconcilable nature of the lower or subordinate classes’ interests with some of the capitalist structures, the existence of a form of false consciousness is inevitable and sometimes necessary. For the dominant ideology to maintain its power, it can be very useful to encourage the development of such a cognitive process.

¹²⁴ Nicholas Abercrombie and Bryan S. Turner, "The Dominant Ideology Thesis," *The British Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 2 (1978): 150.

Abercrombie and Turner indirectly attack the legitimacy of the concept of false consciousness. They argue that there is evidence demonstrating that all members of a given society rarely share exactly the same ideology, thus that dominant ideologies do not really exist. However, the dominant ideology thesis, which presumes the existence of a dominant ideology in every society serves as the rationale for every political, economical and social culture that exists, or that appears to exist. In order for political scientists and sociologists to be able to critique or assess a given society, they need a frame of reference and a starting point. The dominant ideology often serves this purpose. Capitalism has been considered the dominant ideology for most Western societies for the past century. Its impact on society has been analyzed, but proof of its actual potency over the members of society and its literal definition has rarely been provided. “Conventional interpretations of the dominant ideology thesis often do not indicate how such ideologies are to be identified, and are equally unspecific about their actual content.”¹²⁵ Rather than assessing the actual origin and nature of the apparent dominant ideology, Abercrombie and Turner argue that, in general, it is assumed that the dominant ideology is the one shared by the dominant class. This implies that the members of the dominant class advocate and effectively promote their values and world-views, and are able to convince the members of the subordinate classes of the validity of their preferred ideology. This thesis fails to consider the possibility that the governing ideology might not be the one held by

¹²⁵ Ibid., 153.

dominant classes, but could be that of a “rising yet not dominant class”¹²⁶, of intellectuals, corporations, states, and even subordinate or lower classes.

According to Abercrombie and Turner a dominant ideology *can* exist; however, it rarely affects all members of society in the same way. Essentially, they argue that “subordinate classes in contemporary capitalism do not straightforwardly adopt the dominant ideology.”¹²⁷ The social order of a given society might be subjugated to a specific ideology, but the members of lower and subordinate classes can continue to maintain distinctive values and ideals. As Scott has argued, it is not because they evolve and act in accordance with the rules and standards of the dominant system that they completely abandon their own interests and completely embrace the dominant ideology. The political, economical and social reality might be controlled by the dominant ideology, but members of the lower and higher classes can preserve separate cultures. The material conditions and interests of these individuals are very different and one dominant ideology cannot be shared and accepted in the same way by members of the all the social classes. The day-to-day reality of each class is different. They do not have the equivalent resources and abilities to implement the rules and conventions dictated by the dominant ideology, and they do not share an analogous common culture. This argument suggests that subordinate classes have not blindly accepted the dominant ideology as theirs, but follow a much less strict line of thoughts than what this notion implies.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 158.

Closely linked to this argument, is the focus on the impacts of this dominant ideology on subordinate classes, and its lack of recognition of the impacts on the dominant class. Abercrombie and Turner believe that “the prime function of the dominant ideology is towards the dominant class.”¹²⁸ For the most part, the performance and preservation of a system, such as capitalism, does not result from the actions and behaviors of the subordinate classes, but from those of the members of the dominant classes. The dominant ideology is designed to fulfill the needs and interests of the dominant class and serves to preserve the existence of a class culture that itself, serves to reinforce the dominant ideology. The dominant ideology has far “more significance for the integration and control of the dominant class itself”¹²⁹ than for members of lower and subordinate classes. This is closely related to Marx’s conception of ideology and to its impacts on the bourgeois ideologues. Institutions are built to accommodate the needs and the culture of the dominant class, but also insure that through the participation of the members of the dominant classes in these institutions, that the status quo will be maintained. It is a vicious circle. One serves to reinforce the preservation of the other, and vice-versa.

The dominant ideology thesis attributes excessive power, and more importantly, ascribes too much persuasiveness to the dominant ideology. It overestimates its ability to convince members of subordinate classes of its validity. The thesis suggests that a certain set of beliefs is able to dominate all others and to incorporate itself in the consciousness of subordinate classes. This implies that a dominant ideology, such as capitalism, is able,

¹²⁸ Ibid., 159.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 153.

through an “extremely powerful set of agencies which transmit beliefs downward from the dominant classes to 'persuade' subordinate classes of the truth and moral relevance of a set of beliefs which are contrary to the interests of the subordinate class.”¹³⁰ This set of agencies is referred to as the apparatus of transmission. Abercrombie and Turner argue that such a set of agencies is not as powerful as this theory suggests and is not so efficient to impose a dominant set of beliefs on members of subordinate classes. Education and mass communication media serve as examples. The elites have always had access to schools of higher quality and to more sophisticated technology. The transmission of the dominant ideology beliefs and values has thus been more direct and more successful. On the contrary, the apparatuses of transmission used by capitalist ideologues have not been very effective and have unsuccessfully influenced the subordinate classes, because of the difference in quality of the apparatuses used. They have mainly served to reinforce their hold over the members of the dominant class.

Despite the previous observations, Abercrombie and Turner recognize that members of subordinate classes are not completely disconnected from the dominant ideology and admit that it can influence them in certain ways. They argue that contrary to what the dominant ideology thesis suggests, the lower or subordinate classes' consciousness, and to a certain extent the higher classes' consciousness, is constituted of competing value systems and sets of beliefs that are rooted in dominant and also in subordinate cultures. Their conceptions of the world, thus, their dominating set of beliefs, is formed by an amalgamation of various sets of beliefs, not by a uniquely dominant ideology.

¹³⁰Ibid., 159.

Abercrombie and Turner base this argument on Frank Parkin's work on power relations among and between social classes. He identifies three main sets of values that influence the formation of the subordinate classes' perceptions and beliefs: "a dominant value system, a subordinate value system which promotes accommodative responses to inequality, and a radical value system which promotes opposition."¹³¹ Ideological compliance has largely been exaggerated and people's world-views, values and beliefs are defined by a broad and complex oscillation between these competing systems. False consciousness implies that the dominant and the subordinate value system are both controlled by the dominant ideology and that the radical value system has been obliterated. Nevertheless, the formation of consciousness and of a set of beliefs is much more complicated than what the dominant ideology thesis suggests. Members of lower and subordinate classes may have accommodated the dominant ideology, however this does not necessarily entail the rejection of all other types of beliefs. This leads to the fourth and last critique of the notion of false consciousness.

II.IV – False Consciousness Supposes the Existence of True Consciousness

The fourth and last critique directed towards the concept of false consciousness is probably the most severe, and definitely the most prevalent among its opponents. It stems from the fact that the notion of false consciousness supposes the existence of a true consciousness. This suggests that people are truly conscious only if they hold certain beliefs and act in a certain way, thus that a specific set of beliefs is better than others, or

¹³¹ Frank Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order* (London: Paladin, 1972), 82.

to at least, more genuine. This assumption constitutes an “epistemological position”¹³² that is problematic for various reasons.

To suggest that a dominant ideology, such as capitalism, encourages the development of illusions and false beliefs – i.e. false consciousness – implies that if people overcome these illusions, they will be able to reach true consciousness. “The concept of false consciousness assumes that one can arrive at a true or veridical version of reality.”¹³³ For most proponents of the concept of false consciousness, including, Lukács and Marcuse, it appears that the main goal of their work is to determine why it is essential and how it is possible to overcome these distortions in perception. But what is true consciousness? True consciousness, sometimes referred to as class consciousness, inevitably leads members of lower and subordinate classes to recognize that their interests are not defended by capitalism and that another type of system is necessary. If people were not influenced and manipulated by capitalist ideologues, and overcame false consciousness, they would oppose this system and promote the creation of a socialist or communist system. This is Lukács and Marcuse’s version of a true reality, of what a true society should be. However, there are very few things in this world that can be accepted as “True”, without any nuances or ambiguity. History has shown that there is no perfect system. “The perfect society where people can maximize all values simultaneously exists only in the imagination of utopians.”¹³⁴ Both capitalist and communist societies have failed to implement a society void of injustices, discrimination and inequalities, most

¹³² Augoustinos, "Ideology, False Consciousness and Psychology," 300.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Lewy, *False Consciousness : An Essay on Mystification*: 125.

probably because such societies cannot exist. Lukács and Marcuse strongly condemn capitalism's domination over all members of various given societies, but propose to replace it by another dominating system that can impose similar types of distortions and create other types of problems.

True consciousness is closely linked to interest, more specifically to class interest. According to Marx, class consciousness refers to a class's ability to recognize that the capitalist system functions for the benefit of the bourgeoisie, but fails to serve the true interests and needs of the members of the lower and subordinate classes. These class interests are referred to as the "objective interests"¹³⁵ – i.e. those that truthfully serve the well-being of the members of the lower and subordinate classes and that are not biased by the interests of the bourgeoisie. False consciousness suggests that, because of the hold of capitalist ideas on their thoughts, members of the subordinate classes are unable to identify their objective interests and true needs and are incapable of making decision that will serve to maximize their class interests. They possess a series of false needs. In the same way as for a true reality or society, it is difficult to determine and judge if the interests and needs people have are true or false, or appropriate or not. Therborn, a Marxist political thinker, has rejected the notion of false consciousness precisely because of this issue. He argues that the idea of objective interests is problematic. What can be right for one person might not be for another. It seems impossible to know individual's true interests and needs. "This notion of motivation by interest assumes that normative conceptions of what is good and bad and conceptions of what is possible and impossible

¹³⁵ Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism*: 239.

are given in the reality of existence and are accessible only through knowledge of the latter.”¹³⁶ He believes it is impossible to identify objective interests without being deterministic or authoritarian, and engaging on the same road as the capitalist ideologues.

Therborn’s point raises another issue relating to the belief in a true and false consciousness. In order to overcome false consciousness, people must discover their objective interests and true needs. How is it possible to determine which interests and needs are true and those that are false? And who is to judge if these interests and needs are true or not? In the past, the communist party has played this role and has imposed a set of standards, without much success, and sometimes by means of coercion. For example, Lenin believed that it was better to force people to live under socialist laws than wait for them to achieve class consciousness and oppose the capitalist system. He argued that through the cadre party, “Marxism was to act as an educating force”¹³⁷ towards the members of the lower and subordinate classes, and inform them about their objective interests and true needs. Other thinkers, such as Habermas, have advocated that people will overcome false consciousness through critical reflection.¹³⁸ Lewy argues that contrarily to what true consciousness implies, there exists numerous ways of being human, thus of being a member of subordinate class, and several sets of interests and needs that are valid. No specific truth can accurately represent the complexity of reality. “Emancipation from false consciousness, if it is to be truly liberating, must be open-ended. It must set people free to make their own rational choices without committing

¹³⁶Göran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: NLB, 1980), 5.

¹³⁷Eyerman, "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," 47.

¹³⁸Lewy, *False Consciousness : An Essay on Mystification*: 116.

them to a specific political philosophy or program.”¹³⁹ Overcoming the domination of capitalism is not necessarily a bad thing; however, the idea is to work for a more just and emancipated society, not for a finally good society.

The idea of true consciousness fails to recognize the complexity of the human mind and the diversified set of beliefs that each individual can accept as true and which gives meaning to life. Individuals do not necessarily structure their world-views and values only according to their social class or following the dictates of the dominant system. Most people are pluralist, and hold a set of beliefs and values that are far from being unified along a single ideology. Therborn strongly criticizes the concept of class consciousness and of objective interests and advocates for a pluralist vision of individuals. He argues that these concepts do not account for “the complexities of social heterogeneity and compartmentalization; [...] and for the ever-ongoing formation and re-formation of subjective identities.”¹⁴⁰ There might be one set of beliefs that is dominant, but can be subject to change and variation depending on multiple factors, such as time, age, health, education, life experience, etc. If the creation of a class consciousness is possible, it revolves around collaboration between a variety of people, not around a set of objective interests and specific list of needs. Furthermore, this class consciousness cannot be considered a true consciousness for the reason that people’s identities are not static and are subject to change throughout time. The recognition that individuals, including those of the lower and subordinate classes, hold a diversity of opinion and beliefs implies that very few people follow a strict ideology.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 121.

¹⁴⁰ Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*: 102.

In reality, as Abercrombie, Turner and Parkin have argued, the perceptions and beliefs of the members of lower and subordinate classes are influenced by various value systems, and by various ideologies. The domination of one ideology in society does not imply its complete acceptance and a complete rejection of other ideologies. Furthermore, its acceptance does not necessarily indicate the presence of false consciousness and as Scott has demonstrated, does not signify absolute quiescence. Individuals hold beliefs and values that are not necessarily compatible with the dominant ideology, but are that important to them. In order to illustrate the co-existence of beliefs originating from different ideologies, the concept of split consciousness has been proposed. "Split consciousness perspectives propose that dominant and potentially challenging beliefs may coexist without any necessary force toward change."¹⁴¹ This notion suggests that people can possess opposing and sometimes even contradictory beliefs without being confused. People are able to develop coherent identities. Split consciousness, also referred to as dualistic consciousness¹⁴², leads to a compartmentalization of the various sets of beliefs someone can hold. It allows members of lower and subordinate classes to accommodate themselves to the dominant ideology, without having to reject their beliefs that do not correspond with this ideology.

Finally, the concept of false consciousness, thus idea a true consciousness, has been criticized for its normative character. Therborn argues that the concept of false

¹⁴¹ James R. Kluegel, "Accounting for the Rich and the Poor: Existential Justice in Comparative Perspective," in *Social Justice and Political Change*, ed. James R. Kluegel, David S. Mason, and Bernd Wegener (New York: Aldine de Gruyter Inc., 1995), 182.

¹⁴² Abercrombie and Turner, "The Dominant Ideology Thesis," 161.

consciousness is grounded in “normative political philosophy”, which is “centered on how political power *ought* to be grounded.”¹⁴³ The proponents of false consciousness argue that the dominant ideology – i.e. capitalism – is inadequate, and that it should be replaced by another type of dominant ideology – i.e. socialism. It is based on a specific conception of power, which revolves around a hegemonic form of power, rather than pluralist forms of power. Because people do not follow strict ideologies, replacing one dominant ideology by another seems to propose insignificant advancement for society as a whole. Hegemonic systems, no matter the nature of the system, will present limitations regarding the inclusion of the complexity and the variety of individuals composing a society. Another problematic aspect of the normative character of the political philosophy supporting the concept of false consciousness is the idea that “political change *ought* to be based on revolutionary class consciousness.”¹⁴⁴ It suggests that major changes in society can only be accomplished through recognition of objective and unified interests among lower and subordinate classes rather than through recognition of a diversity of valuable needs and interests. This focus on objective interests is detached from reality promotes individual liberties and diversity, while socialism is associated with conformity and unity.

To summarize, there are various issues with the concept of false consciousness. Four main critiques have been presented: it goes against rationality principles, it underestimates people’s critical thoughts, it supports the dominant ideology thesis and it supposes the existence of a true consciousness. These critiques serve to delegitimize the

¹⁴³ Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*: 104.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

use of the concept in political science and explain the small number of political thinkers that make use of the concept in their work. Even among Marxists, it has lost most of its credibility. However, despite the severity of these critiques it seems that this notion has more to offer and can be a useful concept. The next chapter will demonstrate that the four critiques misjudge the concept and fail to recognize the misuse of the concept.

Third Chapter – Preserving the notion of False Consciousness

“It is not the subject who deceives himself, but reality which deceives him”

- Maurice Godelier

The severity of the critiques examined previously cannot be disregarded and raise interesting concerns about the validity of the concept of false consciousness. These critiques have led many political thinkers to completely abandon the use of this notion and to challenge the credibility of the work of those who continue to use it. The notion of false consciousness, as defined by Lukács, Marcuse and Jost, might appear excessively ambiguous for political scientists who wish to avoid undermining the legitimacy of their work. It can nonetheless be argued that, with refinements, false consciousness remains a valuable notion, that need not provoke as many disagreements and as much resistance in the field as it does at present. Based on the arguments of Martha Augoustinos, and going back to Marx and Engels' original definition, an improved definition of false consciousness will be presented that attracts fewer critiques than the traditional understanding of the concept. Through the works of Castoriadis, Geras, Galbraith, Ralston Saul and Chomsky it will be demonstrated that making use of this refined version can be useful for political scientists who aim to broaden the political discourse and challenge capitalism's potency.

III.I - Going back to Marx

Only a small number of political thinkers have openly and explicitly advocated in favor of false consciousness and have tried to demonstrate its value. In contemporary times, Jost has been the most prominent scholar to attempt this task. His work mainly focuses on the utility of the concept for the field of political psychology and serves as a key notion for research focusing on political acquiescence. His conception of false consciousness is closely related to Lukács, Marcuse's definition and is undermined by the severity of the

critiques delegitimizing the concept. Nonetheless, if articulated differently, the concept could possibly serve as a more valuable theoretical political construct. Martha Augoustinos has attempted to present such a definition.

Augoustinos relies on a different set of arguments than Lukács, Marcuse and Jost and thereby provides a new perspective on the concept of false consciousness. She recognizes that false consciousness presents “inherent epistemological dilemmas”¹⁴⁵, yet believes it is possible to render this theoretical construct much more concise and much more valuable for political scientists than it has been in the past century. Her main argument is that “the Marxist notion of false consciousness has been misappropriated by analysts who construct it simply as a psychological-cognitive phenomenon located in individuals’ head, rather than as a socially emergent product of capitalist society.”¹⁴⁶ One of the problems with capitalism is not its ability to generate false consciousness among the lower and the subordinate classes, but rather its inability to reveal itself as it truly is. It is not individuals who sustain false beliefs about the system, but the system that sustains false beliefs about its functions and capacities, thus maintaining the members of this system in a state of false consciousness.

In other words for the concept to be a useful political theoretical construct, false consciousness should be defined “not as a psychological and cognitive phenomenon suffered by the ‘less enlightened’, the passive bearers of ideology, devoid of critical and

¹⁴⁵ Augoustinos, "Ideology, False Consciousness and Psychology," 304.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 296.

reflexive capacities, but as a phenomenon grounded in social reality itself.”¹⁴⁷ Recognizing that the capitalist structure is built on distorted premises and that there are exogenous biases that impact the outcomes of this system, can serve as a useful ideological critique. What this new concept of false consciousness encourages us to do is to “critically analyse the forms and practices of life within contemporary capitalism itself and to elucidate how these shape and constrain the psychological and material reality of its participants.”¹⁴⁸ By elaborating on this type of false consciousness and making it more apparent to members of society in general, a serious study can affect capitalism’s legitimacy, can serve usefully reinforce Marxist arguments, can demonstrate the necessity for social change, or at least, open the discursive space for further critical analysis.

As Norman Geras argues, “If then the agents experience capitalist society as something other than it really is, this is fundamentally because capitalist society *presents itself* as something other than it really is.”¹⁴⁹ People believe that capitalism works in favor of their best interest, because the system presents itself as a structure capable of maximizing such interest. Today in most Western countries, people do not chose to live in a capitalist economical system, they simply live it. They are born in it, as were their parents and grand-parents and it is the only reality they have been acquainted with. They recognize that there are deficiencies and problems, but have been told that this is the only functional system available to them, in effect the ‘natural’ order. They probably are acquainted with the existence of alternative economical systems, but have not been convinced that one of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 304.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 306.

¹⁴⁹ Norman Geras, "Marx and the Critique of Political Economy," in *Ideology in Social Science*, ed. Robin Blackburn (London: Fontana, 1972), 296.

those systems could be better than the system in which they live. What they know about socialism and communism mainly stems from memories of the cold war, of Cuba and of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the proponents of such systems have not been able to argue for their ideals successfully. These events, tied to the unconvincing discourses of “non-capitalists” have shown the failure of these other systems. Capitalism has presented itself as the best system to realize people’s interests and it has succeeded, while stifling criticism of its true nature and its multiple limitations.

Augoustinos’ argument is based on her understanding of the original Marxian concept of false consciousness, which is narrower than the contemporary understanding. She has a slightly different interpretation of Marx than Lukács, Marcuse and Jost, and more specifically, a different rationale supporting her version of false consciousness. She argues that “Marx locates mystification and distortion not in the mind, but in everyday social practices and objectified social relations within capitalism.”¹⁵⁰ The capitalist system can possibly benefit a large portion of the population and can be an efficient system, especially regarding the accumulation of wealth and individual freedoms. However, the capitalist system has failed to present its major structural biases, directly affecting its ability to guarantee its predicted outcomes. According to Marx, it is by concealing these biases from the masses that the system can not only survive, but also gain support and reinforce its power. “Reality itself generates deceptive appearances, and these phenomenal forms are used by people to make sense of their everyday social

¹⁵⁰ Augoustinos, "Ideology, False Consciousness and Psychology," 305.

interactions and lived relations within the capitalist society.”¹⁵¹ Despite the various consequences it produces, such as unequal distribution of economic and political power, mass poverty, degradation of the environment, etc., as long as the system is able to maintain false consciousness about its limitations and biases, it retains its potency.

This was illustrated by Marx’s analogy of the *camera obscura*. He claimed that no system and no ideology reveals itself as it really is. “In their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form.”¹⁵² This is the case with the capitalist system. Marx deplores the fact that this notion is often ignored by political economists, who themselves contribute to maintain these illusions. The way the capitalist system presents itself and the image it projects is possibly not a complete inversion of what it truly is, but it is far from being a system built on transparency and authenticity. “All the mystification of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism’s illusion about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance [...], which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation.”¹⁵³ Marx insists that the capitalist ideologues safeguard its potency by convincing people that if it *were* functioning optimally – i.e. in a free market void of state interference and liberated from various exogenous factors – it would fulfill all the ideal aspirations of society: “community and social unity, equality and equal rights, concern for the common good and public interest, mutual reciprocity and respect,

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Marx, *Capital - Volume I*: 677.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 680.

guardianship of the social ethos, etc.”¹⁵⁴ What Marx suggests is that this is the main illusion produced by the capitalist system, whereas the truth is that even if it *were* functioning optimally, there are endogenous biases that prevent capitalism from ever being able to fulfill such promises and aspirations.

The concept of false consciousness was not originally intended to identify the actions and behaviors of members of the lower and subordinate classes and was conceived as a critique of the capitalist system itself. Marx did not suggest that the capitalist ideologues, as Engels called them, aimed or contributed to the creation of false beliefs among the masses, but rather the contrary. He insisted that the capitalist system was built on ideological illusions that sought to convince the bourgeoisie – i.e. the main benefactors of this system – of the legitimacy and well-founded nature of this system. The bourgeois intellectuals and the capitalist ideologues were identified as those whose ideology relied on distorted premises and who served to promulgate and encourage the development of the capitalist system. Marx thought the very idea that the capitalist ideologues would aim to serve and promote the interest of all the members of the community was an illusion, since the system on which they relied could not ensure such an outcome. He argued that this misapprehension originates in the works of vulgar economists, such as Adam Smith and his followers. They blindly theorized and encouraged the development of the capitalist systems, but failed to reflect on the true underlying structure, or the “inner physiology”¹⁵⁵ of such a system, and more importantly, on the long-term consequences that it can engender. “The vulgar economist does nothing more than translate the peculiar

¹⁵⁴ Pines, *Ideology and False Consciousness*: 111.

¹⁵⁵ Daniel Little, *The Scientific Marx* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 98.

notions of the competition-enslaved capitalists into ostensibly more theoretical and generalized language, and attempt to demonstrate the validity of these notions.”¹⁵⁶ They serve to spread incorrect assumptions about the virtues of the capitalist system and contribute to reinforce the false consciousness stemming from this system.

Even today, the free market is portrayed as a system operating efficiently, fairly, and for the benefit of all, and its enthusiasts argue that it is the only system capable of respecting individual rights and freedoms, such as those enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of other international conventions. “Capitalism presents itself as a ‘natural’, inevitable and rational society.”¹⁵⁷ Other types of systems, such as communism, and conflicting ideals, such as socialist political programs, are disregarded and identified as irrational and utopian suggestions.

III.II – The Quartet of critiques

Augoustinos’ definition of false consciousness counters the quartet of critique, presented in the second chapter and should not provoke as many disagreements or as much resistance in the field as Lukács, Marcuse and Jost’s concepts. The idea of false consciousness as a phenomenon grounded in capitalist reality, does not go against rationality principles, does not underestimate people’s critical faculties, does not support the dominant ideology thesis and does not suppose the existence of true consciousness.

¹⁵⁶ Marx, *Capital - Volume 3*: 338.

¹⁵⁷ Augoustinos, "Ideology, False Consciousness and Psychology," 306.

If people are affected by false consciousness because they rely on false premises and structural biases to make sense of their everyday social interactions, this does not suggest that they are acting irrationally. Rational assumptions about human beings, as defended by proponents of rational choice theory, are not challenged by this new definition of false consciousness. It suggests that it is not people's beliefs that are false or distorted, rather that the world they live in is itself based on a system centered on fallacious postulates. Individuals still pursue their self-interest, know what they want and their behaviors result from a series of conscious choices. "People are constantly and actively engaged in a complex and socially situated process of constructing reality, but they do this by using the cultural and ideological resources that are available to them. These resources are shaped by existing material and power relations and practices."¹⁵⁸ This implies that people's behaviors result from conscious choices that are limited by their surrounding social reality and the nature of the resources and information available to them. Thus, if the existing material and power relations and practices shaping their reality are partly illusory without them being aware of this situation, as Augoustinos suggests, they are affected by a false consciousness which is a "socially emergent product of a capitalist society."¹⁵⁹ They are not affected by a psychological cognitive process, rendering a system that does not serve their self-interest easier to accept and support.

More importantly, Augoustinos' new conception of false consciousness in no way questions the assumption that if given the option, individuals will choose the alternative with the highest expected utility. In fact, it serves to provide evidence for this

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 302.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 296.

assumption. Capitalism presents itself as the most rational and effective economical system, thus as the alternative with the highest expected utility. People have acted rationally by supporting and encouraging the development of this supposedly most advantageous system for the past century. They cannot be accused of having failed to perceive reality accurately and of encouraging a system that thwarts their self-interest, because to the best of their knowledge, and from what they understand, capitalism is the most appropriate choice of system to ensure the optimization of their self-interest.

Correspondingly, Augoustinos' new conception of false consciousness, does not underestimate people's critical thoughts as strongly as Lukács, Marcuse and Jost's definition. By rooting false consciousness in capitalism itself rather than in people's minds, this prevents from blaming the members of subordinate and lower classes for their circumstances while undermining their ability to recognize inequality and to demand change. "The claim that some individuals and groups suffer from false consciousness is akin to victim-blaming and pathologizing – a common by-product of psychological theory and practice."¹⁶⁰ According to Augoustinos, most researches within the field of political psychology assume that individuals have limited innate reflective processes and flawed cognitive abilities. They imply that people's behaviors, attitudes and actions, such as support for the status quo, result more from biased internal decisional processes than from the social reality in which people live. The physical, material and everyday reality constitute the structure which shapes people's existence, and serves as a focal point to make sense of his or her place in society. "The cohesiveness of liberal democracy is due

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 302-03.

not to the internalization of legitimating societal values and beliefs by dominated groups, but to the everyday economic need of these groups to participate in the wage labour system central to capitalist economy.”¹⁶¹ Capitalism has not survived and been successful for the past century merely because the members of the subordinate and lower classes have been afflicted by such cognitive processes as identification with the oppressor, as Jost’s concept of false consciousness implies. If the system does not present itself as it truly is and guarantees that balance will eventually be achieved and everybody will benefit from this economical structure, then people deliberately decide to encourage this system and cannot be considered victims of capitalism’s oppression. They are affected by capitalism’s false postulates, not because they are too weak to notice them or have deficient cognitive abilities, but because their reality is constituted of this system and these postulates are frequently used to demonstrate its infallibility. As Scott had argued, apparent quiescence does not necessarily imply that people naively encourage the capitalist system. A deeper structural analysis can be needed to provide an accurate picture of the situation.

Unlike the individualized and cognitive account of false consciousness, the concept of false consciousness proposed by Augoustinos does not encourage the dominant ideology thesis. Following Abercrombie and Turner arguments, Augoustinos believes members of a given society rarely share exactly the same ideology, values and ideals. People’s interests are diversified and everyone constructs his own identity accordingly to his or her life experiences. Individuals are not passive subjects, incapable of critically evaluating

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 299.

the potency of the capitalist ideology. People may appear to evolve completely in sync with the surrounding system, but returning to Scott's argument, appearance of quiescence and accommodating behaviors are not synonymous with internalization of values. "It is the behavioural compliance to the 'reality' of capitalism – to what Marx referred to as 'the dull compulsion of the economic' – which keeps the system intact"¹⁶², not endorsement of erroneous self-interests and of a dominant ideology due a flawed cognitive process – i.e. false consciousness. Most accounts of the dominant ideology thesis fail to recognize people's agency and individual subjectivity and ascribe a unique set of dominant values and principles for all members of a given society. Augoustinos's concept of false consciousness rejects these assumptions and focuses on a materialistic account of ideology, which focuses on the actual nature of the structures of the capitalist system rather than on the extent of the domination of this system.

Finally, Augoustinos's definition of false consciousness does not sustain the belief in the existence of true consciousness. Given that it no longer refers to a cognitive process, the notion of false consciousness found within the capitalist structures themselves, does not suppose that a true or veridical version of reality exists outside of capitalism and does not imply the existence of objective interests and true needs. People are not truly conscious only if they hold certain beliefs and act in a certain way to liberate themselves from the potency of capitalism. True consciousness, in relation to Augoustinos's definition of false consciousness, refers to capitalism's inability to be transparent about its fallibilities and structural biases and of revealing its real nature, including all the imperfections. People

¹⁶² Ibid.

are cognizant of the system in which they live and act as rational actors to the limit of their capacities, and within the capitalist system, to the limit of the knowledge that is available to them. If the postulates and structures of capitalism were revealed as they truly are, maybe this would not change people's outlook on this system, but they would be aware of the social reality that surrounds them and could make better, more informed choices.

Thus, the new definition of false consciousness proposed by Augoustinos is much more reliable than the concept used by Lukács, Marcuse and Jost. It refers more directly to Marx and Engel's original notion. By redirecting the focus of false consciousness as a phenomenon found in the capitalist structures rather than in the minds of individuals, it draws less criticism and provides a much stronger theoretical concept for political and social scientists.

III.III – Rationality of capitalism

It can be argued that there is a need for such to demonstrate the invalidity of the prevalent assumption that capitalism is an intrinsically rational and coherent economical system and to attempt to explain why this system has eclipsed alternative systems. It is not being argued that capitalism does not work and is the worst economical system, but that it has significant misconceptions and imperfections that should be recognized, to allow a more unbiased reflection to take place. This issue has been raised by Augoustinos, but it was developed in more detail by other thinkers, such as the Marxian political philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. Although he does not address the concept of false consciousness

directly, he insists on the necessity to “develop critical analysis”¹⁶³ to demonstrate capitalism’s true nature, and most importantly, to show how the deficiencies of this system result from inconsistencies with the postulates of the system itself. Ralston Saul also argues that proponents of contemporary capitalism continue to declare allegiance to a theoretically defensible course of action to justify the legitimacy of the system – i.e. classical capitalism, while, in fact developing a wholly antithetical corporatist approach, thus serving to perpetuate more significantly capitalism’s false consciousness. “It [corporatism] is not a model any of us have been taught, but most people are experiencing elements of it in their own lives in one way or another.”¹⁶⁴

One of Castoriadis’s main interests revolves around the individuals’ capacity to be creative and to define their existence through all the possibilities the world has to offer. This also includes the ability to imagine and create a system that suits different types of values and ideologies. He is concerned that capitalism limits people’s ability to be innovative and creative. Social reality has come to reflect the needs and requirements encouraged by this ideology, rather than the diversity and complexity of human beings. “Capitalist society, it is said, has proved its excellence – its superiority – by a Darwinian selection process, having turned out to be the only one capable of surviving in the struggle against other forms of society.”¹⁶⁵ This is problematic for Castoriadis because the contemporary social world is built on a system, which is based on illusions and false premises.

¹⁶³ Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*: 48.

¹⁶⁴ Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization*: xi.

¹⁶⁵ Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*: 51.

Many political scientists and economists will argue that the legitimacy of capitalism results from the rationality of this system. The proponents of capitalism have always found ways to demonstrate the possible accomplishments of their favored system. They have gained most people's confidence, and were able to entrench capitalism in the popular social imaginary as trustworthy and efficient. Over time, it has been praised for its "alleged 'scientific' character" and has been accepted as a "regime both inevitable and optimal."¹⁶⁶ It has been presented as an economical structure, aiming to ensure well-being for the majority of the population. The free market is supposedly able to ensure a sense of equilibrium and is built on the idea of equal opportunity and access to every individual. Initiated by Adam Smith, the capitalist economical system has been defended and glorified by many. Castoriadis argues that there have been a sufficient number of examples that serve to demonstrate capitalism's fallibility and its irrational nature. The true nature of this system, including its intrinsic biases, has carefully been concealed from the majority of the population. This has not necessarily been accomplished through censure, but by diminishing the importance of some issues, by deflecting blame onto something else, or simply by avoiding the existence of an issue altogether. What is not often discussed is the abuse, the private and state-led violence, fraud or exactions that have taken place to ensure the survival and the success of this system¹⁶⁷ and capitalism's various faults, such as "alienation, class struggle, surplus values, cyclical crises, depressions, un-employment, inequality in wealth, power, and income, and monopoly

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 52.

and centralization of capital.”¹⁶⁸ The dysfunctional features of capitalism have sometimes been identified as a necessary harm for the greater good, to ensure the well-being of a majority of people in society, and have been disregarded or trivialized by those who benefit from the system’s continued existence.

Castoriadis argues that capitalism misguidedly presents itself as being the only rational and advantageous system and has mistakenly been considered in that light. It is inadequate to believe that the system would present no dysfunctions and ensure favorable outcomes if it were functioning optimally, in a perfect setting. Not only is the possibility of the existence of a perfect setting unlikely, but many of capitalism’s faults and dysfunctional features actually result from the “basic postulates of this ideology”, that cannot ensure optimal outcomes given that they are either “vacuous or unreal.”¹⁶⁹ They contribute a false consciousness about the true nature of capitalism. Castoriadis identifies four main problematic postulates: the existence of the *Homo oeconomicus*, the centrality of *mathematicization*, the reliance on equilibrium and the notion of *separability*.

The first misleading postulate about the capitalist system is the existence of the *Homo oeconomicus* – i.e. of the human guided by the Laws of Economics. This notion implies that human beings are mainly guided by economic rationality, when making decisions or engaging in action for all the different spheres of their lives. The *Homo oeconomicus* is allegedly a creature that calculates assiduously before making a decision, who processes

¹⁶⁸ John E. Elliott, "Marx and Schumpeter on Capitalism's Creative Destruction: A Comparative Restatement," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 95, no. 1 (1980): 54.

¹⁶⁹ Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*: 56.

all the available information before going into action and who is “exclusively guided by considerations of “utility” or personal economic satisfaction.”¹⁷⁰ This logic is also applied to companies. According to Castoriadis, this postulate not only contributes to a false consciousness about the nature of capitalism, but creates a false consciousness about the nature of the individuals living within this system. Many psychological and sociological postulates demonstrate that it is not possible to predict human behaviors, attitudes or actions with definite certainty. Human beings cannot be reduced to an economical rationality. They are much more complex, can be unpredictable and do not follow any rigid natural law, which compels them to act accordingly with economic standards and rational choice postulates. “No one functions by constantly attempting to maximize/minimize ‘utilities’ and ‘costs’, and no one could.”¹⁷¹ It is incorrect to suggest otherwise.

In reality, decisions and choices are rarely taken under perfect circumstances. The information available is often incomplete and individuals do not necessarily possess the abilities to adequately process this information. This is also the case for companies. Within capitalism, the maximization of profit is the central goal for most companies and for most individuals. The market is supposedly a neutral space; however, there are various struggles of influence and power that affect the decisions and actions of the agents of this system. People are affected by all sorts of arbitrary social forces. Marketing, advertising and public relations have become tools for companies to manipulate the outcomes of the economical process and influence consumers to choose a

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

specific product or a specific brand. Contrary to what the idea of *Homo oeconomicus* suggest, habitually “choices must be made within whatever environment is available”¹⁷² and are likely to be affected by a variety of factors.

Closely related to the notion of *Homo oeconomicus*, is the centrality of *mathematicization*. By *mathematicization*, Castoriadis means that the capitalist economical system focuses excessively on economic calculations and quantitative rationality. Capitalism is described as an optimal system, in part because, to make sense, everything is treated mathematically. Everything can be quantified and has a value in number – i.e. a price. Classification according to different quantitative standards is central. Equations and graphs are used to illustrate the fluctuations in the economy and countries are judged according to their development indexes or their gross national products. This *mathematicization* is important, since it allows capitalists to predict eventual economical outcomes of their system and to elaborate economical laws. Castoriadis argues that, the actual economy does not follow any deterministic economical law and cannot be reduced to mathematical formulas. “All those ‘marginal’ curves – of costs, ‘utility’ and so on – are radically meaningless.”¹⁷³ The best they can offer are approximate calculations, but it is illusory to believe that capitalism relies on reliable and precise economical projections. Furthermore, *mathematicization* implies that in the market, there must be a specific quantitative measure of value and, in the capitalist economical system; everything has a price or money value. Castoriadis demonstrates the limited signification of money and stresses that many things cannot be reduced to a

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

quantifiable price. “Only valuations in current prices can be added up, and these only provide a ‘snapshot’, and one of limited signification.”¹⁷⁴ It is impossible to judge of the quality, the ethical and the political implications and the true value of a product or of labor, simply by looking at a price.

The third basic postulate supported by capitalism is the reliance on *equilibrium*. Adam Smith posited that the free market – with the invisible hand – ensures that a natural balance occurs in the economical system for the benefit of society as a whole. Capitalism presents itself as the only system capable of achieving such a balance, thus as the only system capable of ensuring the well-being of a majority of people in society. Castoriadis believes there is an “obsession with balance”¹⁷⁵ amongst the proponents of capitalism. This is problematic because the system is supposedly capable of achieving an equilibrium state; however, the free market is a hypothetical construct. In reality, equilibrium has never been achieved. “No one has ever seen [...] a purely competitive market. Yet, the latter stands as the normative base, the ideal type, for judgment concerning the viability of the capitalist market economy.”¹⁷⁶ In addition, it appears that the reliance on postulates of equilibrium is doubly illusory, because what can be observed in the actual capitalist economic system is the focus on growth, often to the expense of the well-being of many, rather than a search for equilibrium. “It is a known, demonstrable fact, proved by Keynes – that the system, left to its own devices, does not evolve spontaneously toward a state of “equilibrium”, however approximate, but rather toward alternating phases of expansion

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷⁶ Warren S. Gramm, "Oligarchic Capitalism: Arguable Reality, Thinkable Future?," *Journal of Economic Issues* 14, no. 2 (1980): 413.

and contraction.”¹⁷⁷ There is a positive bias in the capitalist system towards economic growth.

The last basic postulate is the idea of *separability*. This notion implies a separation or disconnection between individuals and firms. This separation can supposedly be found between individuals themselves, between firms or between a firm and an individual. This leads to the attribution of separate imputation for demand and supply, production, and for economical outcomes to one specific actor. Castoriadis recognizes that individuals and firms represent different entities, he believes the results of one’s activities or actions cannot completely be detached from the activities or actions of others. Social reality, as economical reality, is constituted of the interactions between these different entities and reflects the dynamics that occur between the various actors in a society. These interactions not only represent the present state of a society, but are also influenced by the traces of previous norms, practices and values that have affected a society. “No one person could do what she does without the synergy of the surrounding society and without the cumulative effects, in her motions and mind, of what went on before.”¹⁷⁸

This notion of *separability* relies on an economic logic based on the neutrality of the market, which is purely arbitrary. This neutrality is transposed to society and implies that the interactions between actors in a capitalist system follow specific conventions and rules, centered on the autonomy of the actors. This disregards the interdependence

¹⁷⁷ Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*: 68.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

between human beings and underestimates the authority and the influence of firms on a society's social and economical reality, thus on the behaviors and actions of individuals that interact within this social reality. Castoriadis suggests that "the social product is the outcome of cooperation within a collectivity whose boundaries are fuzzy."¹⁷⁹ The idea that individuals or firms are independent from one another and are responsible for specific economical outcomes allows for disassociation between the various actors of society and encourages detachment from the whole. This affects the development of a sentiment of collective responsibility and promotes individualism.

Ralston Saul, Chomsky and Galbraith share Castoriadis' criticism regarding the rationality of the capitalist system but they warn of an even more significant false consciousness created by the contemporary capitalist system. They argue that the proponents of this system declare allegiance to a theoretically defensible course of action to justify the legitimacy of the system – i.e. Adam Smith's version of capitalism, while, in fact developing a wholly antithetical corporatist approach. Building on the belief that capitalism is the only rational and efficient system a more radical version of capitalism is being promoted. In theory, capitalism, as Adam Smith imagined it, was based on "a project that was profoundly ethical and designed to emancipate the consumer from a producer and state dominated economy", aiming "to serve the common man."¹⁸⁰ This has been strongly defended by capitalist ideologues of all times as capitalism's true aspiration. Ralston Saul demonstrates that this idealized version of capitalism is far from

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ G. R. Bassiry and Marc Jones, "Adam Smith and the Ethics of Contemporary Capitalism", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 12, 8 (1993)pp. 621-627, p. 621.

the one found in most Western countries today, and another version of capitalism, which he identifies as corporate capitalism, serves to shape peoples economical and social reality. He argues that this idealized version of capitalism is even more misleading than the theoretical constructs defended by the vulgar economists of Marx's époque.

Whether you prefer to refer to contemporary capitalism as “neo-capitalism”¹⁸¹, “the post-industrial society”¹⁸², the “new industrial state”¹⁸³, “neoliberalism”¹⁸⁴ or, following Ralston Saul, as corporatism, these terms all substantially refer to the same thing – i.e. the type of capitalism that operates in most Western democracies today. Unlike Smith's classical capitalism that aimed to serve the common man, corporate capitalism mainly aims to serve corporations and has been excessively confident in the ability of the free-market to ensure a sense of equilibrium. This type of capitalism was strongly encouraged by members of the Chicago school of economics and by its followers, such as Hayek, who Marx would probably identify as one of the vulgar economists of the 20th century. He strongly believed in the virtue of *laissez faire* capitalism and he praised the inestimable capabilities of the free market. “It was men's submission to the impersonal forces of the market that in the past has made possible the growth of a civilization which without this could not have developed; it is by thus submitting that we are every day

¹⁸¹ S. Michael Miller, "Notes on Neo-Capitalism," *Theory and Society* 2, no. 1 (1975): 1.

¹⁸² Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹⁸³ John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics and the Public Interest* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1973).

¹⁸⁴ Chomsky, *Profit Over People*: 19.

helping to build something that is greater than any one of us can fully comprehend.”¹⁸⁵ Members of the Chicago school of economics advocated for a completely unregulated market and argued that government intervention was unnecessary. The invisible hand guiding the economical order would ensure that everybody would eventually benefit from this system. However, the results were not as positive as they had proclaimed.

Their ideas were very influential and many Western governments followed their advice and proceeded to implement the appropriate settings to allow an unregulated market to operate. Ralston Saul argues that they vowed a “religious devotion to the market.”¹⁸⁶ As a result, many governments’ decisions are now largely influenced by the will of the people in the financial sector and many political decisions seem to reflect the aspirations of the corporate elites and of their entourage rather than those of the general population. The lobbying industry has grown exponentially and applies, more than ever before, pressure on politicians. Governmental regulations regarding corporations are constantly lowered, including their taxes, to allow them to evolve in a truly competitive and free market. Too much faith has been put into Adam Smith’s invisible hand and the idea of an ethical capitalist system has disappeared. The type of capitalism that has emerged – i.e. corporatism – “lacks moral grounding” and has “no unified system of values.”¹⁸⁷ When the desires of corporations dominate governmental agendas, it is their morality that comes to dominate a society; one of competition, self-interest and profit. Thus,

¹⁸⁵ Friedrich A. von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, The Definitive ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 212.

¹⁸⁶ Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization*: 88.

¹⁸⁷ Daniel Bell, "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 6, no. 1/2 (1972): 33.

corporatism “causes us to deny and undermine the legitimacy of the individual as citizen in a democracy. The result of such a denial is a growing imbalance which leads to our adoration of self-interest and our denial of the public good.”¹⁸⁸ The interest of societies, in favor of the interest of individuals, has been replaced in favor of administrative power-sharing by interest groups. “The citizen is reduced to the status of a subject at the foot of the throne of the marketplace.”¹⁸⁹ The social order is now mainly shaped by the corporatist structures and “stability”¹⁹⁰, according to Chomsky, is primarily based on the precedence of upper classes and large enterprises’ welfare over that of the majority of the members of society.

In order for corporatism to become the legitimate form of capitalism proponents of this system have contributed to secure the existence of a major misconception; that corporatism follows the same postulates as classical capitalism. By linking corporatism to a more defensible course of action, they were able to justify the legitimacy of this system, while, in fact developing a wholly antithetical approach. Ralston Saul demonstrates that in the past decades, governments have been mainly following corporatist standards and have implemented policies which are presented as “capitalist” policies but who are in reality fundamentally corporatist. The transition towards corporatism has been made quietly, since its proponents have accomplished it under the pretence of respecting the dictates of capitalism. “The great unspoken issue is why no Western population has been asked to choose corporatism, let alone has demanded it.

¹⁸⁸ Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization*: 2.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁹⁰ Chomsky, *Profit Over People*: 21.

[...] It could be argued that we are now in the midst of a *coup d'état* in slow motion. Democracy is weakening [...] Corporatism is strengthening.”¹⁹¹ Accordingly, Galbraith believes that the “preservation of a routine capitalist image” to the benefit of large corporations in the most important “economic fraud”¹⁹² of the past centuries. Anything that argues against corporate capitalism, which is believed to be Smithian capitalism, is not only identified as ridicule by the corporatists, but also by the general population who are presented with evidence of the benefits of capitalism and who believe they are supporting a system supposedly capable of serving the interests of the common man.

Castoriadis’s critiques and Ralston Saul’s argument reinforce the necessity to have a concept such as false consciousness to identify this charade. The survival and potency of this system derives from the acceptance by the members of society of ideals that are unachievable, given the true nature of the system. The present course is not inevitable and capitalism is not as universally beneficial as it claims to be. For human beings to be creative and be masters of their destiny, they should be informed that the system they encourage is not what it appears. Making this false consciousness apparent can serve to rebalance the current situation and allow alternative economical discourses to be considered more seriously. “The marketplace is not, has never been, and never will be for as long as capitalism persists, “perfect” or even truly competitive, as political economics textbooks piously claim. It has always been characterized by state interventions, capitalist coalitions, information withheld, consumers manipulated, and open or disguised violence

¹⁹¹ Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization*: 93-94.

¹⁹² Galbraith, *The Nature of Mass Poverty*: 29.

inflicted on workers.”¹⁹³ As Augoustinos, Castoriadis and Ralston Saul suggest, it can be useful for political scientists to have tools to critique the dominant system, to broaden the political discourse and challenge capitalism’s potency by revealing its true nature.

Conclusion

Originally described as a process affecting solely the capitalist ideologues, false consciousness has changed significantly since Marx and Engels first discussed this notion. Throughout the 20th century, Lukács, Marcuse and Jost’s proposed their own version of false consciousness, which was no longer restricted to explain the actions of the few capitalist ideologues, but those of all members of society, including the members of lower and subordinate classes. Their interpretation of the concept has attracted an array of critiques that have severely affected false consciousness’ legitimacy and value. As the quartet of critiques demonstrated, people’s quiescence toward the capitalist system is not necessarily synonymous with false consciousness and it should not be used as the main excuse for communism’s failure. Despite the severity of these critiques, Augoustinos disputes that false consciousness is not an outdated and useless concept, but that it is necessary to redefine it to increase its credibility. In order for this notion to continue to be a useful theoretical construct for political scientists or anti-capitalist activists, a return to Marx’s original definition is preferable. False consciousness must be situated, not in people’s mind, but within the capitalist structure, which presents itself as a superior version of what it truly is and sustains misconceptions about its real capacities and limitations.

¹⁹³ Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*: 67.

Today, the failures of the capitalist system - i.e. of corporatism, which Marx had anticipated, have started to reveal themselves more forcefully than in the past. Due to the degradation of the environment, the widening gap between developed and third world countries and the instability of various national economies, the capitalist modes of production have slowly started to change. Socialist ideas and progressive values have regained some popularity in the 21st century, mainly through the global justice movements. However, capitalism has not yet started to lose its potency. Most people continue to believe that it is the only viable economic system and the only system capable of ensuring both individual interests and common good. Consequently, they continue to elect political parties that share and promote those ideals and who appear to be devoted to the self-interest of the citizens. Unfortunately, this is not how corporatism functions. The capitalist ideologues continue to make things appear much differently to the general population, than what reality truly is. “Large corporations have resources to influence media and overwhelm the political process, and do so accordingly.”¹⁹⁴ False consciousness is contained deeply within the structures of capitalism and new misconceptions about the current system are constantly being reinforced.

As stated in the closing lines of the third chapter it is essential for political scientists and for progressive activists in general to find tools that can help to reveal the reality about capitalism, to possibly broaden the political discourse and challenge this system’s potency. To reinforce the challenge even more, it would be interesting to evaluate if capitalist ideologues have contributed to create a second level of false consciousness

¹⁹⁴ Chomsky, *Profit Over People*: 10.

concerning the validity of alternative systems. Capitalism does not present itself as it truly is, but in order to preserve its potency, it most likely does not present alternative systems as they truly are. By creating an inaccurate conception of the systems that undermine its legitimacy and by presenting itself as the only viable system, capitalism emphasizes its superiority and creates a reality in which it remains the most coherent alternative. As long as these misconceptions are left intact, the possibility for change continues to be unlikely. Thus, it is necessary to expose this reality, through extensive researches such as this one.

Finally, although the new definition of false consciousness is embedded in the Marxian tradition and presented as a critique of capitalism within the context of this thesis, the case can be made that this concept can serve to analyze all types of dominating political and economic systems. The general idea behind the new definition of false consciousness is that it should be located primarily within the structures of a dominating system. It can be argued that the biases and illusions put forward by the capitalist system could also be found within socialist and communist structures. False consciousness can serve as a critical tool for any political scientist or any political activist who wishes to analyze a system they judge to be deficient or that they want to make more legitimate.

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