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Ideology

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The academy, no less than any other institution – and certainly the radical academy – is subject to the vagaries of intellectual fashion. “Ideology” as a concept was a crucial tool for Western progressives in universities in the 1960s and 1970s seeking both to theorize the repressive dimension of ostensibly liberal capitalist states and to challenge their own disciplines as generally complicit with that repression. In the United States in particular, the revival of the Marxist left (albeit “New” rather than “Old”) on campus after the purges and witch-hunts of the McCarthyist 1950s would stimulate the formation of radical caucuses in a wide range of subjects (Ollman and Vernoff 1982). Railing against establishment orthodoxies, establishing new journals where they could speak truth to disciplinary power, these radical scholars saw “ideology” at work in both everyday and elite consciousness. Whether drawing on Frankfurt School “critical theory” (Held 1980), Georg Lukács’s (1971) “reification,” Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) “hegemony,” or Louis Althusser’s (2001) “ideological state apparatuses,” they sought to reveal and expose ideology’s pervasive and negative influence on social cognition. But the increasing problems, and eventual collapse, of self-describedly Marxist states and movements would take down with it Marx’s apparatus, whether justifiably or not. By the mid-1980s or so, and even more glaringly following the 1989–91 East Bloc debacle and accompanying proclamations of “the end of history,” talk of Ideologie and Ideologiekritik began to seem hopelessly old-fashioned, tied to a dubious meta-narrative about capitalist crisis and the coming socialist revolution, and committed to an Enlightenment vision that seemed to some intrinsically “totalitarian.” Instead these critical lenses would largely be replaced by Derridaean deconstruction and Foucauldian discourse theory. Postmodernism and post-structuralism would become the new radical orthodoxy for scholars in need of an optic for the emancipatory revisioning of the existing order.

But recent years have seen a shift back to the left and increasing dissatisfaction in at least some quarters with what is now called, in retrospect, “the culturalist turn.” A “new” materialism (or materialisms) has been announced, in some respects continuous with, in other respects breaking with, older materialist traditions like Marxism (Coole and Frost 2010). Today, decades later, there are some signs – possibly as part of the same trend – that “ideology” may also be in for a revival as a critical concept, as indicated most recently (as I write) by a very successful January 2016 conference on the subject at Yale University, where indeed the original version of this chapter was presented.
What I want to do in this entry is to try to relate the concept of “ideology” to some of the literature in social epistemology inspired by Miranda Fricker’s (2007) *Epistemic Injustice*. Fricker’s book was an important intervention in the development of an epistemology nominally more sensitive to the social circumstances of the knower, yet which in actuality marginalized the obvious fact of domination in real-world societies. But the fact of social domination was, of course — though admittedly reduced primarily to its class aspect — the central theme of Marxist theory. Late twentieth-century feminist epistemology and feminist standpoint theory, to which Fricker pays brief tribute as precursors of her project, were themselves indebted to late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Marxism and its claims, most famously in Lukács (1971), about “bourgeois” and “proletarian” perspectives on social reality. Insofar as “ideology” is taken to be the Marxist concept crucial for illuminating and explaining these cognitive patterns, then it should be a valuable exercise to see whether, or to what extent, “ideology” in some form can provide a useful instrument for engaging current debates in the field.

1. “Ideology” in Marxism

What, if historical materialism as a theory of society and history is correct, would the implications be for the realm of the ideational? And even if historical materialism is not correct — acknowledging the greater degree of agnosticism or skepticism on this point in these post-Marxist times — what worthwhile core might still be salvageable from the concept of ideology?

The basic Marxist claim is not at all hard to understand in principle, even if working out the details will be complex and contested in practice. It can, indeed, be expressed in a sentence (and a short one at that): *social class oppression negatively affects social cognition*. More long-windedly: systems of domination will have deleterious cognitive effects on those enmeshed within its relations, both the privileged and the subordinated, via multiple determinants of group location, group identity, group interest, and group power (or its lack). Marx’s own focus was limited to class oppression, and these days we would want to broaden it, as I have, to group oppression. But you can immediately see why such a claim anticipates, and should be relevant to, the contemporary epistemic injustice debates. Marxism takes for granted the necessity of a socio-historical account of cognition, one typically shaped by the “materialist” causal dynamics of classes in relations of domination and subordination, and is committed to a non-relativist epistemic perspective on the resulting beliefs and concepts.

Long before mainstream epistemology “discovered” that “testimony” and social circumstances were relevant to actual human cognition, Marxism was rejecting any kind of individualist Cartesian problematic, just as it rejected the social contract picture of asocial individuals coming together to create society. In both areas, theoretical “Robinsonades” — starting from Robinson Crusoe-like figures as the basic building-blocks — were to be dismissed as absurd. As David-Hillel Ruben’s (1979, 109) pioneering work from decades ago put it: “knowledge is irreducibly social.”

But although locating the cognizer in his/her sociohistorical context is a crucial first step, a necessary one, it is certainly not sufficient. The problem many progressives had with the early work on social epistemology was its ignoring or marginalization of social oppression. To use Rawlsian (Rawls 1999) language, issues of the sociopolitical in mainstream philosophy have usually been framed in terms of “ideal theory,” “perfectly just” societies. But the reality is that, once humanity exits the hunting and gathering stage, *all* societies have been oppressive on axes of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, or (by the modern period) race. Marxism’s concept of oppression is centered one-dimensionally on class — one of its many weaknesses. But its great virtue by contrast with mainstream sociopolitical theory is that it takes for granted that non-ideal theory should be our starting-point.
In her introduction, Fricker (2007, 2) refers to “the relativistic outlook of which postmodernism was the apotheosis” and suggests that this epistemic feature may explain mainstream Anglo-American epistemology’s indifference to more “ politicized” approaches to the topic. But Marxism is classically committed to Enlightenment objectivism (hence its claims about developing a “science” of history and society), and the rearguard struggle the few Marxist holdouts fought in the radical academy against the post-structuralist triumph from the 1980s onward revolved precisely around this question.

Correspondingly, the epistemic status of “ ideology” was clearly negative in a presumptively non-relativist way. That is, “ ideology” was a critical pejorative term referring to something bad, something that had to be avoided if truth were to be achieved. Self-consciously self-positioned within non-ideal theory, Marxism was claiming to have identified an important social phenomenon in the cognitive realm whose analysis, demystification, and eventual overcoming would be crucial to bringing about a better social order.

But could these claims be backed up in a non-question-begging way, or would it turn out that any set of ideas Marxists didn’t like would, simply on their say-so, automatically earn the designation? What is the etiology offered of ideology, what is its relation to “materialism,” and can it be made plausible to a non-Marxist audience? And for progressives with a view of oppression broader than class domination, are any of these insights transferable, or are they necessarily tied to a reductionist class analysis?

I have argued elsewhere (Mills 2010) that four crucial socioeconomic (“material”) variables can be identified in Marx’s writings as shaping social ideation. They are: (i) ruling-class domination, as manifest in intellectual domination (transmitted via the educational system and the mass media), (ii) societal “ appearance” (spontaneous patterns of mistaken induction and faulty concept-formation fostered by the opacities of the capitalist system itself), (iii) class interest (whether in maintaining or overturning the system), and (iv) class experience (differential experiential trajectories through the social world influenced by one’s class membership).

I suggested that these interacted in a multi-causal way to produce a pattern in which both the privileged and subordinated classes alike tended to be deceived by the “appearances” of capitalism, but that the subordinated classes had a vested interest in seeing through them as well as a differential experience with partially demystifying effects. However, they were handicapped in this cognitive awakening by the cognitive influence of the dominant classes, who had a vested interest in remaining at the level of appearance, a class-privileged experience that reinforced rather than undercut social illusions, and differential power in propagating their worldview. In Gramsci’s (1971, 333) famous conclusion, working-class consciousness would thus not be “false” but “contradictory.” It would reflect the conflicting cognitive influences, at both the doxastic and the conceptual/theoretical levels, of the workers’ own experiences on the one hand, and ruling-class hegemony in the form of crucial assumptions and constraining conceptual framings on the other.

As this brief gloss indicates, many of these concepts can indeed be transferred and many of these moves emulated – perhaps, in fact, with greater plausibility than in the Marxist original – for non-class social groups, especially those, such as genders and races, central to the social structure. Far from being part of Rawlsian “cooperative ventures for mutual advantage,” these groups, call them G (“non-voluntary social groups” in Ann Cudd’s [2006] terminology), will be hierarchically arranged in relations of domination and subordination. Abstracting away for simplicity’s sake from issues of intersectionality and intra-group heterogeneity, then, for any particular pair, the G1s are structurally dominant over the subordinated G2s, socio-politically, economically, and, in particular time periods, juridically. But for our purposes, the crucial issue is that this domination is also manifest cognitively, in belief systems, conceptual frameworks, and
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normative assumptions. G1 ideology is pervasive and justifies or obfuscates (in different ways at different times) G1 domination. The G2s are cognitively influenced by G1 ideology, so that even though there is resistance and attempts at counter-hegemonic ideation, many or most G2s are to a significant extent (again, historically- and group-variant) under its sway. Moreover, because of their social subordination, many G2s are likely to have less access to the tools of intellectual development, and may internalize the G1 view of them as inferior cognizers. So they will be disadvantaged in developing oppositional views. If we distinguish material benefit (the chance at opportunities, status, and wealth) from epistemic benefit (the chance at getting it right, factually and morally), we could say that the G1s are generally materially advantaged while in crucial respects (at least in regards to seeing the social truth) epistemically handicapped, while the G2s are generally materially handicapped while in crucial respects (at least in regards to seeing the social truth) epistemically advantaged (though this, as standpoint theorists emphasize, is a matter of the potential insight afforded from their social location, given the obstacles just cited). 1

If it can be made convincing, then, such a picture of oppressive societies will obviously have multiple implications for patterns of social cognition and the corresponding norms of epistemic justice we will need to devise to overcome this deep structural biasing. Dominant ideologies of a patriarchal and white supremacist form can be linked not just to the group interests of men and whites, and their respective differential power over the ideational apparatuses of society, but to patriarchy and white supremacy as social systems and the “appearances” (obviously we need a different vocabulary) they generate as matrices of social cognition. That is, one moves (experientially, phenomenologically) in a “male” or “white” world constituted not merely by one’s peculiar identity-based social trajectory, but also one’s processing (via socialization) of empirical inputs through a conceptual and affective grid that so transforms them as to reinforce rather than challenge dominant framings and narratives. Given our current more conscientious awareness of the need to take different identities into account, all kinds of “intersectionality” issues need to be worked out here, not to mention a necessary updating of Marx’s archaic language and an operationalization of his vague metaphors in the light of current research in cognitive psychology, concept formation, etc. But I hope it is nonetheless evident that some useful insights can indeed be gained by bringing ideology theory into the conversation.

2. Racism as an ideology

So let us investigate some of these implications. I will use racism and racial domination as my examples, both because race is under-discussed in the literature and because, over several articles, Tommie Shelby (2002, 2003, 2014) has provided one of the most detailed analytical philosophical reconstructions ever of ideology and of racism as an ideology.

Shelby works with the concept of belief-sets as forms of social consciousness, an epistemically neutral concept that allows for both ideological and non-ideological versions. (So being a form of consciousness is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for being ideological.) Four features characterize forms of consciousness: (i) the beliefs are widely shared (as against limited to a few); (ii) they form a seemingly coherent descriptive and/or normative system (in networks of apparent explanatory or justificatory power); (iii) they shape group outlooks (e.g., as part of “common sense”); and (iv) they significantly impact social action, interaction, and institutions, constituting part of our “life-world.”

So forms of consciousness as such are not intrinsically problematic and in fact are obviously necessary for us to navigate the world. Ideological forms of consciousness, however – the epistemically negative subset – are marked by (i) epistemic deficiencies of various kinds, for example
false factual or normative claims, or tendentious framings and theoretical misrepresentations even when true claims are involved; (ii) problematic origins, that is belief-formation and norm-uptake by the epistemic agent for bad reasons; and (iii) functionality for the establishment (when not yet existing), or reinforcement (when already existing), of systems of social oppression, via the epistemically deficient aspect of these forms of consciousness. (Epistemically respectable sets of beliefs can also serve the interests of privileged groups, so the role of this feature needs to be specified to avoid committing a version of the genetic fallacy.)

Ideologies thus serve to justify, rationalize, legitimize, and/or obfuscate wrongful social domination. And what makes this account a materialist one is the crucial explanatory role played in the genesis and reproduction of these ideologies by group power and group interests within socioeconomic structures and conditions. Vested group interests provide a causal explanation for the endurance of ideologies even when the evidence clearly refutes them.

Shelby then demonstrates how racist ideology fits this characterization very readily. During slavery, anti-black racist ideology justified treating blacks differently because they were not equal individuals worthy of white respect; in the post-Emancipation period, anti-miscegenation taboos justified “separate but equal”; today, racial profiling reinforces stereotypes of blacks as differentially prone to crime and needing societal surveillance. Shelby points out that ideologies work in different ways, through moral legitimation (depicting existing power relations as just), social reification (representing as natural what is actually the product of social causality), and metaphysical mystification (resorting to supernatural explanations of subordination). Thus if blacks are inferior, they do not deserve the same opportunities as whites; if blacks have a racial essence that limits their capabilities, remedial social policy past a certain point will be fruitless; if blacks are doomed by Noah’s curse on Ham, empirically this-worldly argumentation about their situation is pointless.

Finally, note that this account is not a conspiracy theory, since the agents of such ideologies will generally accept these illusions themselves (so they are not consciously promoting false beliefs). In the case of racism, for example, there is no reason to believe that most racist theorists were not quite sincere in their racist assumptions. The bottom line is that a critique of ideologies that does not address their material roots in oppressive social structures will ultimately fail. Ideologies are illusions, but illusions whose power and resistance to elimination are based in material conditions.

3. Racist ideology and epistemic injustice

Against this background, let us now turn to the question of how bringing ideology into the debate on epistemic injustice might contribute to the conversation, using racist ideology as our specific example.

Fricker’s (2007) book differentiated two main varieties of epistemic injustice, testimonial and hermeneutical, and spent most time focusing on the former (hermeneutical injustice only gets the final chapter). Dominant-group ideologies typically derogate the cognitive capacities of the subordinated, as racism certainly did, but I think it is the understanding of hermeneutical injustice that could most benefit from engagement with the ideology literature. Fricker characterizes hermeneutical injustice as follows: “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resources” (155; italics removed). Her key illustrative example is the naming of the concept of “sexual harassment,” as a result of which women subjected to this experience were now better equipped to identify what was happening to them and protest it: “extant collective hermeneutical resources can have a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be” (150–1).
Consider now some implications for this issue of the foregoing analysis of ideology. We can readily see how ideology as an epistemically deficient form of consciousness serving to reproduce group domination fits here. Sexist ideology provides a descriptive and normative worldview in which male access to women is legitimized, so that any contrary framing is to be resisted. Yet at the same time, one wonders whether “collective hermeneutical resources” best characterizes the cognitive situation, or whether it concedes too much to the Rawlsian idea of society as a “cooperative venture for mutual advantage.” If one is taking the competing non-ideal, group domination picture of society as one’s starting-point, then conflictual and adversarial relations, whether open or submerged, are central to the social order, thereby shaping the doxastic and hermeneutical. It will generally be the case, then, that such “lacunae” are integral to the ideology of domination, functional for the reproduction of the existing order. It is not a matter of an innocent misunderstanding or gap, but of a misrepresentation generated organically, materially, from the male perspective on the world, motivated by their group interests and phenomenologically supported by their group experience. And depending on how pivotal this misrepresentation or non-representation is to the preservation of the status quo, its reformist naming or renaming will be vigorously resisted by the system’s male beneficiaries. So in assessing the likelihood of a cooperative pooling of “collective hermeneutical resources,” we will need to take into account the group interests at stake, and how the G1s will respond to the putting into jeopardy of their group domination.

Relatedly, in the case of at least some systems of domination, the G1s can be argued to bear some collective responsibility for the prevalence of G1 ideology. Marx seems to suggest that capitalism is intrinsically opaque, even if “bourgeois” ideology contributes to reinforcing this opacity. But can the same be said about male or racial domination? While causal responsibility for sexist and racist ideology should not be voluntarized, reduced to the ill-will or deliberate misperception of individual male and white G1 members, collective responsibility surely cannot be altogether denied here. In one sense, Fricker (159) is of course correct to write, “In contrast, however, to the case of testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice, whether incidental or systematic, involves no culprit. No agent perpetrates hermeneutical injustice – it is a purely structural notion.” But structures are created by humans and maintained through human actions and inactions. In ill-ordered societies, where these structures privilege some groups at the expense of others, some moral responsibility must be seen as falling on the beneficiaries of injustice, even if teasing out individual from collective guilt is very difficult. The growing body of literature on the subject of group moral complicity usually focuses on wrongful material benefit – think, for example, of the large body of work in critical race theory on “white privilege.” But a case can be made for extrapolating these arguments to wrongful cognitive benefit also, involving both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice.

In the case of white racial domination/white supremacy, for example, one has extra believability not merely as a white person but because one is operating within a framework of cognitive interactions that is itself shaped in tendentious ways by an overarching hermeneutic of “whiteness” (Dyer 1997). Thus sociologist Joe Feagin (2010) speaks of “the white racial frame,” an interpretive prism whose conceptual deficiencies and biased refractions are not at all contingent but an artifact of white racist ideology. “Whiteness” and “Eurocentrism” – ideological “forms of consciousness” – constitute a pervasive worldview generated and maintained over several hundred years of European domination, and embedded in the social structure. So one virtue of putting the social epistemology discussions into dialogue with an ideology framework is that it brings out more clearly that in at least some instances of group domination it will not be so easy to conceptually separate testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, since a case can sometimes be made that the hermeneutical problems come from the collective “testimony” of the G1s. As
Fricker (2016) herself points out in a recent article, in such instances of “hermeneutical marginalization,” “we see how closely the two kinds of epistemic injustice are related” (164), since “the concepts and meanings that are shared by all are bound to reflect, in the broad view, the perspectives and experiences of those groups with more social power generally . . . [who] are very likely to be over-contributors to the shared hermeneutical resource” (166).

In The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, for example, Marx (Marx and Engels 1979, 128) writes that: “Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of different and distinctly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations.” Thus one would speak – in a vocabulary now antiquarian – of a bourgeois perspective on social reality. It is not a matter of deliberate misrepresentation (for the doxastic) or deliberately engineered conceptual bias (for the hermeneutical). Rather, it is a matter of the world seeming that way from the perspective of the G1s, and this perspective then being imposed on the G2s. And just as it would seem odd to speak of bringing together in a collective enterprise to fill lacunae and remedy distortions a “bourgeois” and a Marxist perspective, considering their polar opposition, so we would not expect to be able to integrate a white-supremacist and a racially egalitarian perspective. Rather, it is a matter of rejecting one and accepting the other.

Relatedly, another implication an ideology framework has for current debates is the potential for counter-hegemonic G2 thought. In the critical dialogue stimulated by Fricker’s (2007) book, various philosophers (Mason 2011; Medina 2012; Pohlhaus, Jr. 2012) expressed concern that Fricker’s original formulation seemed to underestimate the possibilities for hermeneutical resistance. Thus José Medina (2012) would offer a book-length exploration of what he called “the epistemology of resistance.” The danger of generalizing from the case of (white) women (the sexual harassment example) is that one may lose sight of the greater possibilities for developing oppositional ideas in other populations who are differently, and in a sense more favorably (at least epistemically), located in the social order. Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012, 724) emphasizes the importance of not ignoring the cases of geographically segregated racial groups and social classes and points out that “[M]arginally situated knowers [may] actively resist epistemic domination through interaction with other resistant knowers” (716), thereby constituting themselves as an oppositional epistemic community capable of generating counter-hegemonic cognitions.

In her more recent response, Fricker (2016, 164–7) has suggested that while her book did distinguish between different varieties of hermeneutical injustice, “maximal” and “minimal,” the category of “midway cases of hermeneutical injustice” could, she now agrees, have been “centre-staged” more. In these (midway) cases of “relatively powerless” marginalized groups, “in-group intelligibility is doing just fine” (167), operating “perfectly functioning and sophisticated sets of interpretive practices” (165). The real problem here is “frustratingly failed attempts to communicate them” (167) to the socially powerful. This diagnosis is particularly pertinent, I would contend, in the case of race.

Marx’s hope – if generally unrealized – was that the proletarian experience of factory work and unionization would lead to a class consciousness that would eventually become revolutionary. But in the case of race, the greater intensity and greater transparency of white group subordination of blacks meant that black oppositional ideation (with its nascently alternative belief-systems, conceptual frameworks, and normative challenges) was far more easily cultivated. During slavery and into the post-bellum period, whites were, of course, constantly watchful about what slaves and later the freedmen were up to. But precisely because whites generally shunned rather than seeking to integrate with black communities, it did mean that there were far greater
possibilities after Emancipation for developing a collective counter-hegemonic worldview than in the circumstances of white women largely isolated in individual households under the patriarchal male gaze, or white workers for whom race generally trumped class. At the end of the day, blacks are returning to black households. And in the days, when not working in Jim-Crowed jobs, they are going to black churches and black barbershops and black colleges and black organizational meetings, because though whites want to keep them under control, they emphatically do not want to mix with them. A black alternative public sphere was in existence even before the Civil War and would come into its own in the late nineteenth century onward. Not only would a thriving black press be established – a history of *The Defender* (Michaeli 2016), the most famous of all African American newspapers, has just been published – but various Negro scholarly journals (as they were then called) would be founded to contest the misrepresentations of the mainstream white academy.

In the opening essay of his most celebrated book, the 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois captures the cognitive situation through the doubly-signifying metaphor of the veil. On the one hand, he discovers as a child that blacks are cognitively “shut out from their [whites’] world by a vast veil.” Black Americans are not seen as equal human beings but as “a problem.” But Du Bois has “no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through.” Rather, he “held all beyond it in common contempt” (44), knowing that entering this white cognitive world would only mean remaining permanently in a state of “double-consciousness”: “[Such a world] yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world . . . looking at one’s self through the eyes of [white] others . . . measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” (45)

This, then, is a very different case from a hermeneutical gap or lacuna in the “collective” epistemic resources of a “community.” Rather, it is a white-supremacist vision, a racist optic that must be resisted in its framing doxastic and conceptual perspective on reality. Du Bois inverts the metaphor of the veil so as to positively valorize, so to speak, the *meta-perspective* of blacks seeing whitely, and gaining a corresponding cognitive insight into their vision: “[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world” (45). And this second sight – not spontaneously, to be sure, but through conceptual labor, and in company with others – will eventually enable blacks to *see through* the white distortions and illusions constituted by the white veil.² So the idea of common epistemic resources would in this case understate the adversarial dynamic and conflicting group interests involved, and obscure the fact that the subordinate black worldview (proposing much more than a simple conceptual supplementation) cannot simply be brought additively into relation with the ideology of white domination, since it is in fundamental opposition to it.

Correspondingly, under the non-ideal circumstances of systemic group domination, the *G1s* are not generally going to be receptive to such challenges, since of course what is at stake is the legitimacy of the system itself. In another oft-quoted Du Bois passage from decades later, this one in his autobiographical *Dusk of Dawn* (2007), he modifies Plato’s Cave – the most renowned image of cognitive imprisonment in the Western philosophical tradition – to illustrate the non-responsiveness of whites to black protests about the experience of “caste segregation”:

> It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave . . . sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and
It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. . . . [The passing white world] either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even what they hear, they do not understand.

Note how differently Du Bois frames his own account of “epistemic injustice.” Those in the darkness of the cave already know the social truth, viz. that they are living in an unjust society of white supremacy, and that its founding principle (nonwhite inferiority) is false. They do not need to be illuminated, nor are there hermeneutical gaps in their cognitive apparatus and mappings of the world. The cognitive problems are on the other side – the heedless whites who, walking in the bright sunlight, exist in a cognitive darkness, a white ignorance (Mills 2007).

I suggest that this scenario is more typical of the epistemic injustice involved in situations of racial domination. The racially subordinated – victims, after all, of genocide, expropriation, and slavery! – are often quite well able to recognize their situation. It is not (or not always) that the imprisoned lack the concepts, the hermeneutical resources, to understand their situation, but that the privileged lack the concepts and find them incredible or even incomprehensible, because of their incongruity with white-supremacist ideology. Even if they were to “hear” what blacks were saying, they still would not be able to “hear” them because of the conceptual incoherence of the black framework of assumptions with their own dominant framework. Whites are imprisoned (reversing the metaphor) in a cognitive state which both protects them from dealing with the realities of social oppression and, of course, disables them epistemically. As Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012, 725–6) suggests, in commenting on Fricker’s analysis of To Kill a Mockingbird:

[I]t is more complicated than just not believing someone when one ought due to identity prejudice. . . . This difficulty in the transfer of knowledge is not just because the jury won’t believe him, but because the members of the jury are using epistemic resources that do not allow for the intelligibility of what Robinson [the black defendant] has to say. . . . The jury commits an epistemic injustice in this scene because it has not, does not, and will not enter into a relation of true epistemic interdependence with Robinson.

As earlier emphasized, following Shelby, if we expand the scope of “ideology” to include “forms of consciousness” and not just formalized intellectual systems, then we get a broader notion which is more useful in tracking deficient cognition since it includes affect, sensibility, ingrained patterns of response, racialized perceptions and operationalizations of putatively abstract concepts, and so forth. “Whiteness” (as internalized white superiority) becomes a particular way of being in the world – whiteness as a form of life and understanding (Dyer 1997). And it then means that the resistance to seeing or hearing the black cave dwellers (those who are in the social darkness but the epistemic light) is far greater because their claim poses an ontological threat. One could not continue to be “white” in this way if one were to accept what is being said, but would have to reshape one’s life and existence in the light of this new understanding. Not just the material racial interests at stake, then, or the incongruity of blacks’ claims with the white narrative, but also the vertiginous threat to one’s very sense of reality, one’s lived white experience of the world – these factors all cumulatively militate against the uptake of knowledge from such a source.

A third version of the Cave, Kristie Dotson’s (2014), illustrates the obstacles involved. Dotson imagines, within the iconography of the cave metaphor, three varieties of epistemic exclusion,
the first two (in ascending order of difficulty of overcoming) being “reducible” (capable of being addressed by using epistemic resources within the system), the third being “irreducible” (needing resources from outside the system):

The third kind of epistemic exclusion, a third-order exclusion is a compromise to epistemic agency caused by inadequate dominant, shared epistemic resources. . . . This kind of epistemic exclusion is different than first- or second-order exclusion. . . . Third-order epistemic exclusion proceeds from the “outside” of a set of epistemic resources to throw large portions of one’s epistemological system into question as a result of the goals of a given inquiry. . . . This kind of recognition, which can be seen as akin to a broad recognition of one’s “cultural traditions systems,” is extraordinarily difficult.

(129, 131)

I suggest that this picture captures very well the epistemic situation of whites socialized into a white “cultural traditions system” with overt or tacit racist assumptions. The feat of cognitive estrangement required for them to liberate themselves, to see themselves and these “forms of consciousness” from outside, will thus be very demanding indeed. They will have to draw on the denied and/or stigmatized “third-order” resources of the oppositional traditions of people of color who have, for their own sanity and survival, been forced both to understand this worldview and to develop the “second sight” to see through it. And just as the injustice of the society is far more pervasive than local wrongdoings, so the epistemic injustice infecting the cognitive realm is, in a sense, global.

Since I began by referencing the 1960s-70s challenge to the academy by the left theorists of the time, I want to close by looking at how the “epistemic exclusions” of white-supremacist ideology have shaped mainstream (“white”) thought in the disciplines themselves, problematizing their identity as neutral “collective hermeneutic resources.” Consider the general category of the sociopolitical, both nationally and internationally, and the disciplines that study it: sociology, political theory (whether as a section of political science or as political philosophy), and international relations. If the analysis of the black cave-dwellers is correct, white racial domination has in modernity been central to U.S. social structure, U.S. political dynamics, and U.S. relations to the rest of the world. Once this would have been admitted, and positively valorized (i.e., white racial domination is a good thing, or does not count as “domination” because it is rule over natural inferiors). But in the postwar period, of course, especially in the post-civil rights epoch, this could no longer be acknowledged. What one would expect, then, is fanciful histories in all three of these subjects, which whitewash both the racial past and their own racial past, and construct alternative genealogies of modernity and their own disciplinary evolution that erase the shaping role of race on both.

And this is in fact – mirabile dictu – exactly what one finds. Moreover, the recognition of Du Bois’ pioneering work in all three areas has been central to the new revisionist literature exposing this whitewashing. Aldon Morris’s (2015) book on Du Bois, The Scholar Denied, makes the strongest case yet for the longstanding black American claim that he rather than Robert Park should be seen as the father of American sociology, and that, at a time when Park and mainstream sociology were still operating with overt or tacit social Darwinist assumptions, the “Atlanta School” created a social science on the assumption of racial equality rather than racial hierarchy. Similarly, Robert Vitalis’ White World Order, Black Power Politics (2015) has recovered the role of the “Howard School” of international relations (IR), which indicted a white supremacy that was not merely national but global, in keeping with Du Bois’s vision (1969, xi) of a global “color line.” International Relations was originally predicated on the imperative of maintaining global white
domination – the journal we now know as Foreign Affairs was originally titled the Journal of Race Development. Whites saw themselves as ruling a world of colored races and were preoccupied with staving off the danger of a global race war. But of course in the postwar, post-colonial period, such a past became too embarrassing to be avowed – hence the need for a disciplinary purging and self-reinvention. Finally, work on Du Bois’s political thought by various theorists – Robert Gooding-Williams (2009), Lawrie Balfour (2011), and others – is beginning to establish “Afro-Modern Political Thought” as a respectable category, whose foundational assumptions are the recognition of white supremacy and the struggle against it as political, and the rejection of what has come to be called the “anomaly” view of American racism (Smith 1997).

The point, then, is that in all three cases, it is the black perspective on social reality that has been vindicated, or that is well on its way to being vindicated, contesting its erasure by the white mainstream, whether in sociology (the Atlanta School is barely acknowledged), in IR (the Howard School has been so thoroughly “disappeared” that even Vitalis was shocked to discover its existence), or in political theory and political philosophy (where, whether in Alexis de Tocqueville, Gunnar Myrdal, and Louis Hartz, or in Rawls and Rawlsianism, race is either confined to the status of an anomaly in U.S. political culture or denied recognition as an appropriate subject for the remit of social justice).

I suggest that it is in examples like these that we have the most profound variety of epistemic injustice, since it is here that we have the formal disciplinary study and erasure of the racial realities of the United States. But by the same token, it is difficult to recast these disciplines because of the implications of such a recasting for the legitimization of the existing racial order. Social injustice and epistemic injustice thus remain deeply intertwined. Bringing the concept of ideology back to the center of our theoretical attention can help us to understand this deep connection, and, one hopes, show us the way to overcome both.

Related chapters: 11, 12, 13, 17, 24, 34, 37

Notes

1 Most of this paragraph comes from Mills (2013, 38–9).
2 For a detailed analysis of this famous text, see Gooding-Williams (2009).

References
