

Race, Crime, and False Consciousness: Ideology and the Need for Emancipatory Theory

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Abstract:

This paper develops a unified account of the epistemic defectiveness of ideologically held beliefs.

Focusing mainly on examples of false consciousness and ideological beliefs about race and crime, I argue for three main claims. First, ideological beliefs are epistemically defective either because they are unjustified, or because they are based on misleading evidence generated by oppressive circumstances. Second, we must adopt a broader notion of misleading evidence if we are to fully understand ideology’s epistemic defects. Third, the complicated nature of these defects underscores the need for (practically-engaged) theorizing in order to overcome the distortions of an oppressive ideological system, even for oppressed people.

Keywords: Race, Ideology, False Consciousness, Misleading Evidence

1. Introduction

Western countries are highly unequal and stratified societies. In both the UK and the US, women are paid approximately 80% of what men are.¹ The life expectancy at birth of males living in England’s most deprived areas is 9.3 years less than their counterparts in the wealthiest areas; in the US, men in the top 1% of income earners live approximately 15 years longer than those in the bottom 1%.² And appalling racial inequalities exist in the US, where in 2010 “the imprisonment rate for blacks was 4.6

¹ Robin Bleiweis <<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/03/24/482141/quick-facts-gender-wage-gap/>>., and Brigid Francis-Devine <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/how-much-less-were-women-paid-in-2019/>>.

² See Gareth Iacobucci (2019) and Chetty, et al. (2016).

times that for whites,” numbers which though shocking, somehow represent a relative improvement on the 1990s.³

Oppressive societies are often maintained by force, as exemplified in the US in 2020, with the state’s response to the Black Lives Matter protests. Donald Trump infamously demanded the National Guard be sent in as he tweeted “when the looting starts, the shooting starts,”⁴ and New York’s Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, responded to police *driving into protestors* by commenting that the protestors should have “gotten out of the way.”⁵ But oppressive societies are also often maintained with the seeming support and consent of the people – both oppressed and non-oppressed.

This paper focuses on people who suffer from false consciousness – that is, oppressed people with a certain kind of defective belief, which supports their own oppression. Let’s take false consciousness to refer to: “the manipulated social consciousness of the oppressed” (Pines, 1993:15), where the oppressed, suffering from “miscognition[s] of reality due to social causes” (Torrance, 1995:5), have beliefs which *function* to support their own oppression.⁶ This paper provides an account of the sense in which beliefs held in false consciousness (and in ideology generally) are defective. I will focus on examples of false consciousness concerning race and crime:

³ National Research Council (2014:58).

⁴ Barbara Sprunt <<https://www.npr.org/2020/05/29/864818368/the-history-behind-when-the-looting-starts-the-shooting-starts>>.

⁵ Rashaan Ayesh <<https://www.axios.com/de-blasio-video-nypd-driving-protesters-e2176e86-b4bd-4b90-a595-fab5ab1ab486.html>>.

⁶ John Torrance argues that something like this is Marx’s notion of false consciousness. This differs from Engels’ notion of false consciousness (which Shelby (2003) adopts), which was about having false beliefs about one’s motives, which Torrance argues is not found in Marx (1995:5). For Engels’ view of false consciousness, see his letter to Franz Mehring, 14 July, 1893 (Engels, 1978:765–67). For a discussion of other Marxist views on false consciousness, see Torrance (1995), especially pages 1-28.

Race and Crime. Even Black people tend to overestimate the amount of crime that occurs in their neighborhood based on the number of (young) Black men that live in the neighborhood.⁷ This suggests that even Black people to some extent overly associate crime with Black men, and believe – to an erroneous level – that Blacks commit more crime. Additionally, many Blacks think that courts are *not harsh enough*; through the four decades from 1970 to 2010, consistently over 60% of Blacks reported this belief, with an average of 76.74%.⁸ Over half of Blacks (52%) in 2000-2001 supported “three-strike” laws.⁹ These beliefs seem to suggest that Blacks support, at least to some level, the punitive nature of the US carceral system. Indeed, it seems that many Blacks think the system should be harsher. This is despite the fact that much of the disproportionate incarceration of Blacks is due to the egregiously severe level of punitiveness in the US “justice” system, which, between three strike laws and mandatory minimums (especially for drug offences), consistently uses punishments that are clearly unreasonable, and far exceed those given in other liberal democracies. Furthermore, this heavy-handed use of incarceration has had minimal effect in reducing crime, while having extremely deleterious effects on minority communities.¹⁰

What should we say about the defectiveness of the kind of beliefs described above? For the purposes of this paper, we can understand false consciousness to refer to the condition in which oppressed persons have ideological beliefs that support the system which oppresses them. So this paper is really offering an account of what’s wrong with ideological belief. I will often focus on cases

⁷ See Quillian and Pager (2001).

⁸ Wright, Jasinski and Lanier (2012:158).

⁹ Peffley and Hurwitz (2010:152–153).

¹⁰ See National Research Council (2014:9).

of false consciousness, because they may seem to be especially perplexing and in need of explanation. But my analysis of false consciousness and ideology will run together.

To explain what's defective about ideological beliefs, I will turn to the "critical conception" of ideology (Shelby, 2003:157) employed by critical theorists who recognize ideology as something which plays a crucial functional role in the perpetuation of unjust social relations of domination and subordination. In particular, I will build from the view that "an ideology is a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations" (Shelby, 2014:66).

This view of ideology is representative of an important strand of critical theorists who are *cognitivists*, who, as Sally Haslanger says, take "ideology to consist in "beliefs and judgements," and patterns of reasoning" (2017a:3). Pertinently, they take ideology to involve an *epistemic* property (Geuss, 1981:13), because they hold that ideology and ideologically held beliefs are liable to an epistemic critique.¹¹

How then, should we think about the *epistemic* badness of ideology? Or, to put the question another way, what is epistemically defective about people's ideologically held beliefs? Recent work in philosophy has shown this to be a difficult question to answer. Consider Amia Srinivasan's paper "Radical Externalism." In her own words, the paper deals with "'bad ideology' cases – that is, cases that feature subjects who exist in conditions in which pervasively false beliefs have the function of sustaining (and are in turn sustained by) systems of social oppression." She says that "what intuitively matters most in such cases is whether the subject's truth-tracking capacities are distorted

¹¹ See, for example, Shelby's talk of ideologies "misrepresent[ing] significant social realities."

by ideological forces, or whether the subject is endowed with capacities that allow her to pierce through ideological distortion” (2020:408).

But there is a problem with an epistemic critique of ideology that emphasizes the falsity of ideological beliefs. It’s widely recognized that some ideological beliefs are, in fact, *true*. As an example which I’ll return to throughout this paper, the belief that “Black people, relative to their population share, commit more crime than white people” is plausibly an example of a racist ideological belief – it is certainly a belief that racists have, and which has been used to justify racist police practices. Nonetheless, it is also a true belief,¹² and therefore insofar as we grant that it is ideological, we cannot just dismiss all ideological beliefs as false. This problem motivates some people to reject cognitivist accounts of ideology. In response to the problem of true ideological beliefs, Srinivasan says in a footnote that she is inclined to accept that some true ideological beliefs *are justified*, and that her favored (externalist) account “can only explain the deficiencies of *false* ideological beliefs, not true ones” (2020:409).

This paper offers a cognitivist account of what’s epistemically defective in ideology, including cases of true ideological belief. I argue that a useful account of the epistemic badness of ideologically held beliefs is that they are *all held either without justification, or with justification, but on the basis of misleading evidence*. This account aims to vindicate a Marxist view of ideology while cohering with views of epistemic defects familiar in contemporary analytic epistemology. My account discusses how our interest-motivated-psychology leads humans to form beliefs against the evidence, and how the ruling class disseminate their ideology using their position. But my account emphasizes that unjust societies generate misleading appearances which support ideological beliefs, even in rational people responding to evidence. In explicating the mirage-like quality of oppressive societies,

¹² I’ll discuss the truth of this proposition more in Section Four.

I argue for a new conception of misleading evidence, which can explain the epistemic defectiveness of a belief, even if it is true, justified, and its justification is properly connected to its truth. In doing so, my account answers an important challenge posed to cognitivist accounts of ideology. More importantly, the account I'm offering is fruitful because it helps illuminate why people fall into false consciousness, why it's difficult to escape, and why collective emancipatory theory-building is important for overcoming oppression.

The paper shall proceed as follows. In Section Two I make a *prima facie* case that it's important to have an epistemic critique of ideology. In Section Three I argue for a particular epistemic critique of ideology, specifically, that ideologically held beliefs (including cases of false consciousness) are *held either without justification, or with justification, but on the basis of misleading evidence*.¹³ In Section Four I argue that my account explains what's epistemically defective about true ideological beliefs, while also arguing that we should expand our understanding of what it is for something to count as misleading evidence. In Section Five I argue that when we consider issues around race and crime, my account vindicates the view – held by many Standpoint Theorists, Marxists, and others – that theory-building, science, and a collectively achieved standpoint are crucially important for piercing through ideology.

2. An Epistemic Critique of Ideology

Marxists who use a critical conception of ideology often emphasize the role ideology “plays in establishing or reinforcing relations of oppression” (Shelby, 2003:173). What makes a belief or set of beliefs ideological in this critical sense is, first and foremost, a matter of the functional role it plays.

¹³ I will not argue against “practice first” conceptions of ideology (Haslanger, 2017a:16), or Srinivasan's account of the epistemic defectiveness of false ideological beliefs.

However, not all oppressed people with beliefs which functionally support an oppressive system have false consciousness. Consider the notions of the *Uncle Tom*¹⁴ and the *House Negro*, both longstanding terms among African-Americans. Brando Starkey describes the Uncle Tom as a Black person “never striving to loosen white supremacy’s unyielding grip” (2015:36). Malcolm X famously characterized the Uncle Tom and House Negro as “lov[ing] their master more than the master loved himself” (1963b), and identifying themselves with their master (1963a). Humorously, he’d describe conversations where the master would say “we got a good house here,” and the House Negro would respond “yeah, we got a good house here” (1963b). As Malcolm X describes them in those quotes, the Tom and the House Negro have false consciousness and endorse their social conditions – we can readily imagine various false or misguided beliefs they have.

But people can be Uncle Toms and House Negroes without suffering from false consciousness. Someone can be an Uncle Tom if they clear-sightedly see the horrors of White Supremacy, but nonetheless intentionally work to support it for personal gain.¹⁵ Such a person, whatever else we want to say about them and the problem they present for resisting oppression, does not suffer from ideology or false consciousness, because they do not have any miscognitions of the racial hierarchy and its normative status. False consciousness identifies how oppressive systems propagate themselves in part through some of the oppressed failing to properly recognize the evils of the social order they inhabit, or through the oppressed possessing related defective beliefs. In short, ideologically held beliefs should be criticized on *epistemic*, as well as functional grounds.

Another reason to insist on an epistemic critique of ideology is that a belief can functionally support an oppressive system yet nevertheless be true, and *in that truth* be usefully insightful to the

¹⁴ See Starkey on the origin of term (2015:29-36).

¹⁵ Indeed, some paradigmatic cases of Uncle Toms are like this, such as “The *Servile Uncle Tom*”, and “The *Sell-Out Uncle Tom*”, who “fully fashions himself to be useful in the maintenance of white supremacy,” because of “the personal benefit in being coopted” (Starkey, 2015:29-30).

oppressed. Epistemically well-founded beliefs about the prospects of different forms of resistance are plausibly of this form. One such example Tommie Shelby gives is the widely held belief among Black people during Jim Crow, “that the military and policing power of the government would crush any violent Black revolt” (2003:173). This belief, Shelby says, “no doubt... had the effect of reinforcing domination by engendering political passivity and resignation in some Blacks.” In other words, this belief played the functional role of preventing some resistance to a morally abhorrent, deeply oppressive system. Nonetheless, such a belief, given its truth, “would have been (epistemically) irrational – and pure folly – for them to reject” (2003:173).

This suggests that epistemically adequate beliefs which function to support an oppressive system should be treated differently than epistemically defective ones. Moreover, the above examples suggest that our account of ideology should be able to explain what is epistemically defective with any *specific* ideological belief, for it is the fact that the *specific* belief is epistemically defective (or not) which seems to license a specific type of criticism. And generally, it seems plausible that ideology critique (properly conceived) is concerned with how oppressive systems engender *epistemically defective beliefs* which play the functional role of supporting said oppressive system.¹⁶ Such a thought is one key motivation for cognitivist accounts of ideology. Focusing on beliefs and judgments, cognitive accounts seem particularly apt for accounting for what’s epistemically wrong with ideological beliefs.

So what’s epistemically defective in false consciousness? In his book, *On Voluntary Servitude*, Michael Rosen says his use of the term ‘false consciousness’ involves understanding falsity “in its broadest possible sense,” such that false consciousness is “consciousness that is, in some way or

¹⁶ In Shelby’s words, “we should reject a form of social consciousness, not simply because it supports the interests of the dominant classes, but because it serves their interests by means of social illusions. Ideology-critique should target those forms of consciousness that distort or misrepresent the reality of social oppression” (2003:181).

other, deficient or inadequate” (1996:2). On this broader notion even *true* ideological beliefs, such as the latent belief from *Race and Crime*, that “Black people, relative to their population share, commit more crime than white people,” might be considered “false” if they can be said to be part of an “inadequate” consciousness.

Talk of beliefs that are “false in a broad sense” may not sit easily with those used to the more traditional, narrow sense of the word. Shelby, for instance, eschews labelling all ideological beliefs as false because he thinks this does “not fully or accurately” convey the ways in which ideological beliefs are epistemically defective.¹⁷ Regardless of whether it’s useful to call all ideological beliefs “false” in some broad sense, I think we can make a further informative criticism of ideological beliefs beyond the claim that they are epistemically defective because they involve some misapprehensions of reality. In particular, I think that ideological beliefs are *all held either without justification, or with justification, but on the basis of misleading evidence*. This critique of ideology enables us to have a deeper appreciation of the epistemic bad in ideological beliefs, and to better understand why ideology has such purchase and can be difficult for people to escape.

To defend this critique of the beliefs held under false consciousness and ideology, I shall consider different ways such beliefs arise by distinguishing three classic Marxist explanations of why people have false consciousness. I shall refer to these three sources of ideological belief as *interest-motivated-psychology*, *ideological dominance*, and *the appearance-reality disparity*. I will argue that these three all generate beliefs that are either held without epistemic justification, or with epistemic justification, but on the basis of *misleading evidence*. Since these are the three classic sources through which ideological beliefs are thought to arise, this argument gives us good reason to think that all

¹⁷ Shelby prefers the term “cognitive defect” to refer to the negative epistemic characteristics of ideologies,” and refers to “these various cognitive defects as ‘ideological illusions’ or simply ‘illusions’” (2003:166).

ideological beliefs will admit of one of these two forms of epistemic critique. Further, once I have demonstrated how my account works in these paradigm cases, we'll be well situated to understand the general applicability and plausibility of the epistemic critique I'm advancing.

3. How False Consciousness Forms and What Epistemic Defects It Consists In

3.1. Interest-Motivated-Psychology

Interest-Motivated-Psychology explains the existence of ideological beliefs by identifying certain psychological features in humans, which cause us to engage in irrational motivated thinking. The classic Marxist example is when Marx calls religion “the *opium* of the people” (1978:54) when explaining the prevalence of religious beliefs. On the Marxist view, the suffering oppressed people endure causes them to seek out some belief that will serve as an ‘opium,’ to find “illusory gratifications and consolations” (Pines, 1993:25). In short, interest-motivated-psychology identifies how people form beliefs on the basis of their psychological interest in holding them, rather than on evidence of their truth.

It is easy to imagine members of non-oppressed groups forming ideological beliefs because of their interest-motivated-psychology, which serves the purpose of justifying illicit benefits they receive from oppression.¹⁸ It is slightly less intuitive to think that interest-motivated-psychology could lead to false consciousness, especially since being in the grips of false consciousness is in some sense *against* the interest of the oppressed. However, as Jon Elster says, “interest-induced beliefs are shaped by the drive to find momentary relief from frustration and unhappiness” (1985:165). Thus, such psychological mechanisms in the oppressed are still induced by their interests, even if only in a *narrow* sense of “interests.”

¹⁸ Consider Charles Mills’ discussion of motivated irrationality and “white ignorance” (2017).

One such mechanism for the formation of false consciousness is what Elster calls “sour grapes’, i.e. adaptation of preference to what is seen as possible” (1985:22).¹⁹ In the context of the oppressed, sour grapes functions to “make people content themselves with what little they can get” (1985:116). If people think their conditions of oppression are impossible to change, sour grapes can cause them to be skeptical of other systems, and form beliefs which accept the status quo.²⁰ Beliefs formed by interest-motivated-psychology are not properly held on the basis of evidence (nor a reliable truth-tracking process), and are therefore unjustified. They are also resistant to rational revision, since people will be disposed to hold onto them even when presented with countervailing evidence, because of the psychological interest they satisfy.²¹

3.2. Ideological Dominance

The source of ideological belief that I’m identifying as *ideological dominance* corresponds to Marx and Engels’ view that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby... the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it,” and that the dominant class “rule also as

¹⁹ The term ‘sour grapes’ comes from the fable *The Fox and the Grapes*. There, “a famished fox” tries to reach some ripe grapes. Failing to obtain them, she turns away, complaining that the grapes are sour, and not as ripe as she thought. The fox exhibits the psychological phenomenon of sour grapes, not by just *saying* that to console herself. Rather, the fox, through her subconscious, is motivated to genuinely believe that the grapes are sour, to ease her pain in failing to obtain the grapes.

²⁰ Sour grapes seems to be clearly documented in Gaventa’s work, *Power and Powerlessness* (1980), where many Appalachian miners who were unjustly treated, but powerlessness to change their unjust economic situation, ended up accepting the legitimacy of their plight. Recent work in psychology on system justification theory supports the idea that the oppressed have motivational pressures to form faulty beliefs which support their own oppression (Jost, 2020).

²¹ For Jason Stanley, the distinctive “property of ideological belief is its resistance to rational revision” (2015:178). His argument that people have group identities which “lead to the formation of beliefs that are difficult to rationally abandon” (2015:19) fits with the view elucidated here. See especially the discussion of stereotype threat for why oppressed people might adopt unjustified beliefs that legitimate unjust structures (2015:240).

thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age” (1978:172-173). Ideological dominance, as I’m using it, refers to how an oppressive system’s ruling group and their corresponding ideology dominates most institutions and social thinking, such that the ideas of that ideology have an especially high salience which promotes their adoption.

Ideological dominance clearly plays some part in beliefs about *Race and Crime*. A significant part of the Black population has thought for decades that the justice system needs to be more punitive. The belief that US courts need to be *more punitive* is false – the US incarcerates (and executes) far more people, and for far longer, than any other liberal democracy. This incarceration is partially attributable to decades of heavily disproportionate sentences imposed because of mandatory minimums, three-strike-laws, and “truth-in-sentencing” laws, which routinely leave people behind bars for decades for minor offences.²² The belief can also be seen as part of White Supremacist ideology, since these severe penalties, disproportionately given to Black men, were essential to the rise of mass incarceration.

Support for harsher penalties was not born in a vacuum. Through their framings, politicians increased support for punitive policies, by making crime seem to be more serious and common than the facts warranted. It’s been found that “punitive sentiment increased... when presidents framed crime as a result of a permissive criminal justice system” (Ghandnoosh, 2014:8). Notoriously, Reagan’s escalation of “the war on drugs even though drug use had been falling,” coupled with the “enactment of tough new federal drug laws in 1986 and 1988”²³ had a significant effect on public opinion. In fact, research indicates “that federal and state officials’ public statements about crime and drugs, rather than the actual incidence of crime and drug use, significantly influenced public concern with these issues between the 1960s and 1990s” (Ghandnoosh, 2014:24). “Tough on crime”

²² National Research Council (2014:91).

²³ National Research Council (2014:119-120).

rhetoric has been commonplace since Goldwater and Nixon, and given that both Democrats and Republicans heavily invoked this rhetoric in the 1980s and 1990s, it's worth stressing how elites of both major parties have increased support for punitive sentencing.²⁴

Of course, political elites are just one source of ideological dominance. In the context of *Race and Crime*, it is worth emphasizing the role of social scientists working in tandem with politicians in creating support for ideology.²⁵ As Elizabeth Hinton puts it, conservative political scientists working under Nixon, like Edward Banfield and James Q Wilson, saw “black poverty as a fact of American life and crime and violence as somehow innate among African Americans,” supporting the war on crime over community and welfare programs, as they argued that “black cultural pathology, rather than poverty,” is “the root of crime” (2016:21). Liberal social scientists played a similar role; famously, “[Daniel] Moynihan grounded his case for systemic reform in behavioral and cultural assumptions” (Hinton, 2016:59). In other words, public officials *in concert with social scientists*, pushed for and helped create support for “the war on crime,” and the ideological beliefs purportedly justifying it.²⁶

It's plausible that ideological dominance can produce both unjustified beliefs, and beliefs that are justified on the basis of misleading evidence. In circumstances where people should know not to trust them, it may be that the testimony and policies of public officials²⁷ provide no good evidence for the ideological beliefs they promote. In those cases, public officials make ideological positions so salient and readily available that people inevitably adopt them, even though their

²⁴ See National Research Council (2014:120-121). For an examination of how increased support for punitive sentencing has led to judges running for office (and passing rulings) in ways that conform to being “tough-on-crime,” see Berryessa, Dror & McCormack (2022).

²⁵ For space considerations, I set aside a discussion of the media's (important) role in creating support for “the war on crime.”

²⁶ See Stanley (2015:xiv-xv) for a discussion of the ideological role of social scientists.

²⁷ And supporting institutions.

adoption is not supported on evidentiary (or epistemic) grounds. In line with this view, Jason Stanley has argued that the Milgram experiments show that people are drawn to believe what so-called experts in the form of authority figures (be they politicians, social scientists, or media) say, even in the face of counterevidence (2015:246-248). In this way, ideological dominance can explain why people have unjustified ideological beliefs, which are resistant to rational revision.

Alternatively, public officials and other supposed authorities may appear reliable to people, and people may have good reasons to regard them as good sources from which to form beliefs. If you've been brought up by people you know and trust – like parents, family, and teachers – and they've told you to trust public officials (and their supporting media), then it may be that beliefs formed on that basis are justified, though only on the basis of faulty, misleading evidence, which leads to false beliefs. The testimony of authorities might *really* give evidence for ideological beliefs, which people thereby rationally believe, though given an unjust structure, these authorities will systematically give (misleading) testimony which supports the unjust structure.

3.3. The Appearance-Reality Disparity

People's susceptibility to misleading evidence plays an important role in how oppressive societies propagate themselves, which brings us to the third source of ideological beliefs: the appearance-reality disparity. On Marx's view, in class societies, "everyday experience... catches only the delusive appearance of things" (Cohen, 2000:396). According to Marxists, appearances in class society are misleading and support the formation of false consciousness. In other words, there is an *appearance-reality* disparity which supports ideological beliefs. Epitomizing this idea, Marx and Engels wrote that "if in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process" (1978:154). Later, theorists like Harvey Cormier

(2007:62) and Nancy Hartsock (1983) took Marx's insights and argued that race and gender oppression also involve delusive appearances which mask the reality of oppressive society. According to G.A. Cohen, without delusive appearances serving this function, it would be much more difficult for ideological beliefs to take hold, such that we can say that the survival "of a class society... depends on a disparity between what it really is and the appearance it displays to its members" (2000:400). What can we take from this idea that oppressive societies have misleading *appearances*?

Race and Crime provides a good illustration of how the appearance-reality disparity can cause false beliefs which are justified by misleading evidence. Consider the latent beliefs that some Black people seem to have when they overestimate rates of criminality based on the presence of (young) Black men in their neighborhood. These false beliefs might appear justified on the basis of evidence about the disproportionate *incarceration* rates of Black people. Disparate rates of incarceration (and arrest) give an *appearance* that Blacks commit vastly disproportionate amounts of crimes.

However, the evidence of incarceration is misleading, for in the United States, Black people are disproportionately incarcerated for reasons besides disproportionate criminality. There is anti-Black bias and racism among law enforcement officials and at every level of the judicial system, such that Blacks are stopped, arrested, tried, convicted, and incarcerated at levels disproportionate to the amount of crime they commit.²⁸ Laws in the United States support the disproportionate incarceration of Black men too, as seen in the 100:1 and then 18:1 disparity in quantities of crack cocaine vs (regular) cocaine for mandatory minimum sentencing.²⁹ Though clearly unjust, the disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates serve as (misleading) evidence from which people form potentially justified beliefs about actual crime rates.

²⁸ See National Research Council (2014:91-103), and Clegg and Usmani (2019).

²⁹ National Research Council (2014:74).

This misleading evidence and appearance is an important part of how ideology and false consciousness take hold. People often possess ideological beliefs because of psychological interests in holding them. But they also possess them because some of their evidence will support faulty ideological beliefs. In unjust social structures we are disposed to have ideological beliefs lacking proper justification. But, because the social structure will give some (misleading) evidence (like that of the disproportionate arrest records), we will all be disposed to have faulty ideological beliefs with some epistemic justification.

Some might object that beliefs in a racial crime disparity, formed in part off of the disproportionate rates of incarceration and arrest, cannot be justified, since these disproportionate rates are the product of a racist “justice” system. The objector might say that the incarceration and arrest rates from such a system can only lead to unjustified beliefs about actual crime rates by race. The objector denies that oppressive societies have misleading appearances which systematically provide support for faulty ideological beliefs, such that one may rationally hold them.

Such a thought, however, goes too far. On many conceptions of evidential justification it seems plausible that at least some cases of biased statistical evidence will provide doxastic justification.³⁰ Moreover, although arrest and incarceration rates exaggerate racial disparities in crime, not all their disparity is attributable to bias in law enforcement, or laws like those mandating disproportionate sentencing for crack cocaine. Although research suggests that Blacks commit drug offences at roughly the same rate as whites, while being significantly more likely to be incarcerated for such offences, drug prisoners (only) compose 20-25% of the prison population – whereas 60% of prisoners have been convicted or charged with violent offences or property crimes, which it

³⁰ Internalists and externalists should think that the testimony of peer-reviewed social science can confer justification, especially given further testimony about such social science being trustworthy. Further, and related to my next point, even biased statistics may be reliable *enough*, to make it implausible that they confer no justification.

seems that Black Americans do, in fact, commit at a higher rate. Racial bias in the legal system *is* widespread and abhorrent (e.g. federal court judges “sentence black defendants to sentences that are 10 percent longer than otherwise-equivalent white defendants”). Nonetheless, it seems that as much as “70-75 percent of the black-white disparity in incarceration is explained by the fact that black Americans are more likely to commit criminal offenses” (Clegg and Usmani, 2019).³¹ Accordingly, some beliefs about disparate rates of crime are presumably justified.

Of course, much of the crime disparity is traceable to poverty and economic structural factors, including decimated employment opportunities for high school dropouts.³² Any belief about disproportionate Black criminality that *simply* thinks that Black men, qua Black men, are more likely to commit crime, is clearly a false racist ideological belief. Yet it seems unlikely that all ideological beliefs about Black rates of crime are totally (epistemically) unjustified.³³ The racist structure of society through its economic effects gives rise to the appearance that Blacks commit more crime, and some beliefs formed off that basis are justified. Our critique of false consciousness therefore cannot be that all ideologically held beliefs are unjustified. Acknowledging that some ideological beliefs are justified, but held on the basis of misleading evidence, enables us to have a more complete epistemic critique.

³¹ It is difficult to know the exact rates of crime, given that much crime – whether that’s domestic abuse or white-collar crime – goes unreported. And there are consistently new findings about criminal and forensic bias against Black people. Still, the best social science available indicates a non-trivial crime disparity by race.

³² The consequences of which are that “African Americans born after 1965 and lacking a high school diploma are more likely to eventually go to prison than not” (Hinton, 2016:5).

³³ Indeed, evidence of disproportionate crime rates, biased or not, can provide rational support for (false) beliefs about the causes of said disproportionate crime. For all else being equal, evidence of disproportionate crime rates should increase our credence in theories that predict disproportionate crime rates, at the expense of theories that predict proportionate crime rates.

4. True Ideological Beliefs and a New View of Misleading Evidence

Let's quickly summarize the preceding section. People fall into false consciousness in a variety of ways. All of these ways result in beliefs that are epistemically defective, and not merely because they are false. Ideological beliefs are either held on an unjustified basis, as when they are held by sour grapes; or they are held on a justified basis, but that basis consists of the misleading evidence that oppressive systems provide. Put succinctly, ideological systems that support oppression depend on putting agents in bad epistemic situations. People in oppressive societies are both pressured to hold beliefs against the evidence, and to hold beliefs on the basis of faulty evidence.

Does my view of the epistemic defect in ideology work? Given the nature of ideology, it may seem that there can be ideological beliefs which are justified and not based on misleading evidence. In particular, it might be thought that true ideological beliefs – like some beliefs about racial crime disparities that correspond to the actual disparities – are justified on the basis of *perfectly good* evidence.

Being able to account for the epistemic defectiveness of true ideological beliefs is a central problem for cognitivist accounts of ideology. As Sally Haslanger rightly notes, “shared beliefs can make themselves true” (2017b:150). Part of ideology's pull comes precisely from the fact that it can't all be dismissed as false. It is probably true that Black people commit more crime (relative to their population share), even though such a belief seems ideological and partially serves as a basis to justify the racist practice of mass incarceration. Insofar as true ideological beliefs are formed on the basis of evidence which in some sense reliably supports and tracks the truth, it may be hard to see how they could be unjustified, or formed on misleading bases.

This problem is one of the reasons Haslanger endorses a “‘practice first’ account of ideology,” decentralizing the primary focus on belief (2017a:16). Recall that this problem led Srinivasan to say that she is inclined to accept that her favored account “can only explain the

deficiencies of *false* ideological beliefs, not true ones” (2020:409). I however think that we can explain why true ideological beliefs are epistemically defective, and accordingly respond to this challenge to cognitivist accounts of ideology.

A first and obvious move is to say that these beliefs are defective because as part of a *set* of ideological beliefs, they provide support for false beliefs, or misapprehensions of reality. The belief that Blacks commit more crime, when *placed* in a set of other ideological beliefs (such as: “the most likely explanation for disparate crime rates is cultural pathology”) plays a key role in a faulty ideological view of the world. The belief in that case is part of a faulty, epistemically defective view of the world. I think this move correctly identifies one reason we might be epistemically worried about true ideological beliefs. But I *also* think that true ideological beliefs aren’t *only* epistemically defective because (working as part of a set) they have the downstream effect of supporting *other faulty beliefs*. The holding of them *by themselves* is also defective because of their basis.

We should maintain that true justified ideological beliefs are formed on the basis of misleading evidence. This may seem counterintuitive, because generally we think of what it is to be misleading in a fairly narrow way. Analytic epistemologists typically think of something as misleading if it is evidence which supports holding a false belief,³⁴ or perhaps, if it is evidence which gets you to a true belief in a way that lacks a proper connection to the truth. So, when a generally reliable and trustworthy source tells you something false, we may say the source then was misleading, but you were justified in believing the falsehood. So too in Gettier cases, we might call the evidence misleading, even though it produces a justified true belief.³⁵ But an accurate picture of crime rates by race isn’t misleading in either of these ways, because it supports a true belief, and not accidentally.

³⁴ See Kelly (2008).

³⁵ See Turri (2016).

Often, justified true ideological beliefs are not accidentally true; in fact, their pull on people partially relies on their truth being more than accidental.

But as Geuss argues, critical theory – that is “theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation” (1981:2) – may require some changes to the epistemological concepts we employ (1981:26). And there are good reasons to think that true ideological beliefs are based on misleading evidence. In an oppressive society, appearances are misleading, in that they quite naturally lead people to faulty ideological views of the world. Though it’s true that Black people commit more crime, the evidence for this belief – that is, the social trends being observed – is itself misleading. The trends being observed support the formation of defective beliefs about the criminal nature of Blacks and about the normative standing of hierarchal relations; the defective belief that the incarceration of Black people is a response to their criminality.

To make the point clearer, let’s distinguish two cases of epistemically defective ideologically held beliefs, that is, two cases of false consciousness. First, consider:

Obvious False Consciousness: S, in response to (accurate) evidence, forms the true ideological belief that Black people commit proportionately more crime in the United States. They also form a further *false* ideological belief about this true belief, for example, the belief that Black people are naturally (or culturally) prone to crime.

This is clearly a case of false consciousness. In this case, the true ideological belief that Black people commit proportionately more crime may seem defective only in that it exists with the further false (racist, ideological) belief, and is perhaps providing rational support for it. But I think we should consider an important second case of false consciousness.

Less Obvious False Consciousness: S*, in response to (accurate) evidence, forms the true ideological belief that Black people commit proportionately more crime in the United States, yet does not appreciate that this evidence is misleading. Pertinently, they do not form any further false belief.

I contend that this person also has false consciousness, *even without having accepted any further racist ideology*, because they fail to realize that the evidence that Black people commit more crime, in the racist social context in which they encountered it, has the *propensity* to lead people (including themselves) to form further ideological beliefs.³⁶

I think it's important that we recognize the evidence in this second case as misleading, and that the person is suffering from false consciousness, possessing beliefs with an epistemic defect characteristic of ideological belief formation. The evidence that Black people commit proportionately more crime in the United States has the propensity to lead people to faulty ideological beliefs, and forming the true belief about disproportionate Black crime without appreciating the way this evidence is misleading is epistemically defective because one is left susceptible to being misled into further ideological beliefs.

³⁶ For example, beliefs about Black people having natural or cultural pathologies that explain crime disparities, or beliefs about the fittingness of Black incarceration rates. This follows in part from the discussion in footnote 33, which applies even to non-racist contexts. *In a racist social context* the situation is much worse, because the credence people will (irrationally *and* rationally) accord to the possibility of natural or cultural explanations of disproportionate Black crime will be higher, in large part because of racist ideological dominance. This means that prior to the evidence of disproportionate Black crime they will hold such beliefs with higher credence *and* that such evidence disproportionately confirms such propositions. While the racist ideological background is part of the problem, it is important to emphasize that non-racist people rationally updating their beliefs from the evidence of crime disparity will thereby be pushed towards these further ideological beliefs. This is how that evidence (rationally) functions in such a context, and why such evidence is misleading for people who don't understand that the evidence functions in that way.

To put it another way, the bases of true justified ideological beliefs are bases which themselves support the formation of a faulty misapprehension of the social world. As such, the bases for these beliefs are misleading, since something is misleading if it supports the formation of a faulty ideological apprehension of the world. In *this* way there is continuity between biased statistics about disproportionate criminality, and statistics that accurately capture crime disparities. They both serve as misleading evidence in an oppressive society to legitimate beliefs supporting a racially unjust order.

Using the “broad” sense of false discussed earlier, we could call something ‘misleading’ in a broad sense if it supports beliefs which are false in a broad sense, that is, beliefs which are defective or inadequate. But a broad sense of falsity isn’t essential for my point. In oppressive societies, features of our social world are disposed to produce ideological views, and this makes them misleading, even in cases of true ideological belief. This helps us see why Cohen wrote that “things do not *seem* different to a worker who knows Marxism. He knows they *are* different from what they continue to seem to be. A man who can explain mirages does not cease to see them” (Cohen, 2000:401).

Intuitively, the appearance of a mirage is appropriately described as a misleading appearance for the person in the desert, who (correctly) believes that they see the *appearance* of water – but has not yet formed the belief that there is water ahead – if they do not know that the appearance is just a mirage. For such an appearance, even though it can be the basis of a true belief (that there *appears* to be water in the distance), has a *propensity* to mislead, such that we can appropriately call that appearance misleading. Further, we might think that the appearance of the mirage is a defective evidence base for someone to form *any* belief off of (even that there appears to be water ahead), if they do not have the requisite understanding (i.e., that it’s a mirage) that will prevent them from forming faulty beliefs on the basis of the misleading appearance.

In other words, I think we should recognize a third sense in which evidence can be misleading, which can explain why even a justified true belief can be epistemically defective, even though the justification seems to properly track the truth (and so is not like a Gettier case). Call a piece of evidence, *E*, *broadly* misleading in a way which makes *S**'s justified true belief in *P* epistemically defective, if something like the following conditions obtain:

- i) *P* is true
- ii) *E* provides *S** with doxastic justification for *P*
- iii) *E*'s justification for *P* is properly connected to the truth of *P*³⁷
- iv) In *S**'s (social) context, *E* has the *propensity* to serve as misleading evidence in the usual sense – i.e., to act as justification for false beliefs
- v) *S** forms the true belief, *P*, without understanding that (iv)

³⁷ This is the “Non-Gettier condition.” Does this mean that *P* is known by *S**? I think it’s a mistake to make condition (iii) be “*P* is known,” if only because I think it’s plausible that there’s an amount of evidence for a true belief which would make that belief *justified*, but which isn’t enough for *knowledge*, and my account is also criticizing those beliefs. A deeper question is whether *P* can be known on my account, given that it is epistemically defective. I think it’s implausible that *P* falls short of knowledge in some of these cases (e.g. knowing there’s a crime disparity from the best social science, or from perfect knowledge of the amount of crime committed; or knowing there *appears* to be water ahead). Since I think the belief in *P* is epistemically defective, this means that I’m committed to thinking you can have a piece of knowledge which is epistemically defective, in a way that’s significant enough to justify a serious epistemic critique (although not a critique which says that *S** would be doing something epistemically better by not holding the belief). I’m fine with that implication, although I know some may find it bizarre to say that a belief which amounts to knowledge is epistemically defective. Another option would be to say, at least for the belief in the crime disparity, that my account implies the belief *isn’t* knowledge (since it is defective), and that this offers an important kind of criticism about the difficulty of actually obtaining knowledge in oppressive societies. I recognize the appeal of that position. However, since I think it’s implausible that *P* falls short of knowledge in some of these cases, I am more inclined to say something about how pieces of knowledge in oppressive societies are liable to be defective. Further, I think it’s important to remember that this type of epistemic defect is supposed to also exist in non-oppressive situations, such as with the mirage. I think that denying that there’s knowledge in the mirage case is rather implausible, so we should think *P* can be known.

Some important things to note here. The claim is that S*'s belief *in P* is epistemically defective. That is, S*'s belief *in P* is epistemically defective *because* of the combination of these conditions. Specifically, I think S*'s belief *in P* would be improved (epistemically), if (v) were not true – if S* realized that in their (social) context, *E* has the tendency to mislead (in the usual sense). I think that this view is, intuitively, actually quite plausible. The person stranded in the desert with a mirage in front of them, who forms the true belief “there appears to be water in front of me,” has an epistemically defective belief if they do not realize that the basis of that belief (the mirage) has a propensity to cause false beliefs (such as “there *is* water in front of me”). That person’s belief, “there appears to be water in front of me,” is epistemically *better*, if they realize that the appearance is caused by a mirage. Similarly, S*'s belief “Black people commit proportionately more crime in the United States” is epistemically defective if they do not realize that in their social context the evidence for that belief supports the formation of further (false) ideological beliefs about race and racial oppression. Their true belief would be epistemically *better* if they realized that the evidence has that propensity.³⁸

³⁸ How is the belief better? In my mind, once S* realizes that the evidence has this propensity (and thus *through that understanding* ceases to be liable to be misled), we should no longer think the belief is defective. I think that, with this understanding, S*'s belief *in P* is actually *not held on the basis of E anymore*. There are at least two ways to make sense of this thought. First, we might think that S*'s belief *in P* is now held on the basis of (*E* + understanding), which is not a misleading evidence base. Alternatively, if one thinks it’s implausible that the understanding is part of the basis for the belief *in P* in some cases, I think we should then say that, for those cases, S*'s new understanding actually modifies the modal profile of *E*, such that their belief *in P*, upon acquiring the realization of *E*’s propensity to mislead, is actually believed on the basis of *E**. *E** has a modified modal profile, which precludes inferences to false beliefs about the situations in which crime disparities will hold, and therefore doesn’t have the worrying propensity I’m highlighting. It’s important to add here that *E*’s modal profile before didn’t have to be false to be faulty, i.e. *E*’s modal profile did not have to entail that the statistical generalization holds in contexts that it does not. Rather, *E*’s modal profile just needed to not rule out the possibility of the statistic generalizing to certain contexts, pertinently, contexts which *E** now rules out. This suggestion identifies an epistemic defect broader than the one Jessie Munton astutely identifies when she argues that accurate statistical beliefs may have an epistemic flaw if the implicit representation of the statistic’s modal profile has errors in it (2019), for there need not be *any* “errors” in the implicit modal profile on my account.

This account of misleading evidence seems especially helpful in accounting for epistemic defects in ideology, but given its utility in the mirage case, it is an important, novel, and plausible contribution to epistemology generally. Though I think the intuitive plausibility of the cases given is enough to motivate accepting my proposed notion of broadly misleading evidence, I recognize that spelling out the relevant sense of ‘propensity’ would be worthwhile and helpful, even though my account doesn’t depend on these exact details. Here are some brief thoughts about how to cash out the “propensity,” which makes a piece of evidence broadly misleading.

Most simply, one might think that some piece of evidence has the propensity to mislead if, when it is used as evidence, it leads to the formation of false beliefs more often than true beliefs. However, this fails to capture an important aspect of something being misleading evidence, namely that it *rationally* supports the formation of a belief. If some piece of evidence supports the formation of a true belief, but people consistently misinterpret the evidence *entirely* through their own fault, and form a false belief in response to the evidence, that piece of evidence may lead to the formation of false beliefs more often than true beliefs, yet it seems inappropriate to call the evidence misleading just because people are misjudging it. So I take it that the evidence must at least provide some rational support for some false propositions. Indeed, an important aspect of ideology that my account highlights is how evidence provides *rational* support for ideology.

One might then think some piece of evidence has the propensity to mislead just in case the evidence rationally supports more false propositions than true propositions, regardless of whether anyone actually forms beliefs on the basis of it. I think this view would be mistaken, too. For something to have the *propensity* to mislead, it must actually tend to mislead people. Thus any definition couldn’t just refer to the propositions it supports in abstract. Rather, it must be that people tend to form false beliefs off the evidence *and* that the formation of these false beliefs must generally have *some* rational support from that evidence.

Although I think that the central point above is correct – the evidence must both actually tend to result in the formation of false beliefs, and it must generally do so by providing support for false propositions – we might still want to refine the definition further. When we talk about some evidence supporting “more” false beliefs than true ones, we run into issues of belief individuation, which may result in false negatives or positives for what we count as broadly misleading, depending on what (trivially) different beliefs we’re counting on each side. Accordingly, I tentatively lean towards bringing in some talk of salience into the concept of “broadly misleading.” In that vein, rather than just focusing on the number of false beliefs supported, we might focus on the number of false *occurrent* beliefs supported, and how prominent they are. Further, while this notion of broadly misleading evidence is meant to be an important contribution to epistemology generally, given that it is also supposed to do important work in social philosophy, I also think that we should call something broadly misleading, in particular, if it often results in salient false beliefs which have notable social importance.³⁹

Regardless of how to specify the propensity aspect of what makes something misleading evidence in a broad sense, I think it should be clear that the notion can help explain what’s epistemically defective in cases of *justified* true ideological beliefs,⁴⁰ such as “Black people commit

³⁹ One could interpret this suggestion as allowing some kind of pragmatic/moral encroachment, such that whether a piece of evidence is broadly misleading partially depends on the social importance of the false beliefs formed from it. It’s worth noting however that I’m not claiming there’s any encroachment on the justificatory status of the belief, or encroachment that prevents it from being knowledge. Even if one is skeptical of pragmatic/moral encroachment about justification or knowledge, the “encroachment” in my suggestion may be acceptable. The notion of broadly misleading evidence being put forward is supposed to be epistemic *and* to help identify what makes a piece of evidence defective to form beliefs on the basis of. It may be that it’s a piece of evidence’s tendency to lead to especially *important* false beliefs that makes it a defective piece of evidence.

⁴⁰ One might think that even if the account of ‘propensity to mislead’ is fleshed out, there would remain the question of what *exactly* is epistemically defective about having justified true beliefs on the basis of that evidence. One possibility might be to argue that that “propensity” makes S*’s belief

proportionately more crime in the United States.” That Black people commit more crime is in some sense “a mirage.” The fact of disproportionate Black incarceration *and crime* will, in a racist society, always be liable to cause people to develop false consciousness, to have mistaken ideological views about the rates and causes of Black criminality, and to form mistaken ideological views calling for things like more policing and harsher sentencing. This is an important part of how ideology works, and these “mirages” can affect everyone, even people not otherwise in the grips of an ideology.

Given that appearances in an oppressive social world can be misleading, understanding how these appearances are liable to mislead us is important for avoiding epistemically defective beliefs. The required theoretical activity that critical theorists and others argue for is required precisely because an oppressive social world leads to error. Collectively achieved standpoints, science, and theory can enable us to see the faultiness of all aspects of ideological beliefs, and have proper explanations of the “mirages.” Although there will still be pressures to hold ideological beliefs without epistemic justification,⁴¹ being able to demystify the misleading appearances of oppressive societies, through emancipatory theorizing (and philosophy), should help attenuate the pull of oppressive ideologies. Without such theorizing, we will be prone to fall to misleading evidence (among other things) that propagate false consciousness, adherence to ideology, and oppression.

unsafe. Merely saying S*’s belief in *P* (on the basis of *E*, where this is a belief in a crime disparity grounded on good statistics and a sound understanding of statistics) is unsafe won’t work though, because if there really is a crime disparity, and the statistics that reflect that are based on data collected carefully to be maximally accurate, the corresponding belief in *P* on the basis of that evidence will often be safe. Alternatively, we could look for something around S*’s belief that is unsafe. I’m unsure of whether explaining the epistemic defect in terms of safety is the best way forward, and think that offering a full account of the nature of this epistemic defect is best left for another paper. For our purpose, it is sufficient that it seems plausible that these *justified* (non-Gettier) true ideological beliefs *are epistemically defective*, and that the notion of “broadly misleading” evidence helps explain why.

⁴¹ In this way, overcoming ideology differs from overcoming the misleading appearances of a mirage. Being presented with an explanation that one is seeing a mirage can attenuate its tendency to mislead, in a way which being provided an explanation of an unjust social structure cannot.

5. Crime, True Ideological Beliefs, and the Need for Theory

This paper has been offering a diagnosis of the epistemic badness of ideological beliefs. I think one important upshot of the account I've offered is that it vindicates Feminists, Marxists, and Standpoint Theorists on the need for *theory*, *science*, and a *collectively achieved standpoint* to get beyond the epistemic bad of ideology – individuals on their own, including the oppressed, are badly epistemically situated. I will now address a challenge to this view that is often latent among some on the Left. Some people are resistant to the idea that oppressed people need “theory,” or “science” (in the Marxist sense) to get beyond the epistemic badness of ideology. For instance, Haslanger writes that “within certain activist traditions,” an approach which emphasizes “scientific and philosophical inquiry...might be criticized as elitist” (2017a:5).⁴² Instead, some people hold the view that oppressed people, who recognize the oppressive nature of society and have views critically opposed to the dominant ideology, do not need theory to be epistemically well-situated.

Why might people be tempted to such a view? One reason is that theory and science often appear tied to elitist academic institutions. Conventional institutions of knowledge production, where much theoretical and social-scientific work takes place, are often somewhat inaccessible to oppressed people. Calls for theory and science may therefore appear elitist, and to erroneously advocate for the oppressed to follow the lead of academics. Calling for deference to academics may seem especially wrongheaded given that many academics, including on the Left, engage in minimal activist work, and live in ‘the ivory tower’ disconnected from the lives of socially marginalized people.

⁴² Also see Collins’ discussion of Black Feminist Epistemology, for a criticism of “abstract,” “theoretical” knowledge, as opposed to knowledge from the lived experience of the oppressed (2000:257-260).

A second and connected reason to eschew calls for theory and science is that we want to respect and recognize the knowledge of the oppressed. If calls for theory suggest that the oppressed should defer to academics when searching for knowledge, this may seem to disrespect the oppressed, and ignore the real knowledge they have about their own oppression.

Lastly, and also relatedly, people are often drawn to the view that oppressed people are reliably situated to know the truth. This, in fact, seems to be something that many standpoint theorists say. On some ways of unpacking this view, ideology leads some of the oppressed astray, but the oppressed are otherwise well-positioned to know about the social world. It may seem, then, that oppressed people not in the grips of ideology are *thus* well-positioned epistemically.⁴³

I'm sympathetic to such concerns, but rather than negating the need for theory and science, I take them to tell us about the nature of the theory and science we need. Developing truly emancipatory theory requires people to engage in practical activities aimed at emancipation.⁴⁴ Further, as standpoint theorists argue, to pierce through ideology our knowledge must recognize and build on the lived experience and knowledge of oppressed people. Armchair theorists who remain in the ivory tower will not lead a political revolution. Additionally, we should recognize that "folk knowledge," sorrow songs, fiction, popular music, and beyond may all be sources of theoretical insights which can pierce through the pitfalls of ideology.⁴⁵

Nonetheless, theory and science *broadly construed* are vital to emancipation, *and* to oppressed people getting past the bad epistemic situation of oppressive societies. It would be wrong to think that oppressed people being reliably situated (if they in fact are, and in whatever way they are), are epistemically well-positioned, just as long as they don't possess ideological beliefs. Ideology includes

⁴³ Srinivasan seems committed to this view in "Radical Externalism."

⁴⁴ See Marx's Theses on Feuerbach (Marx, 1978:143-145).

⁴⁵ See for example Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000).

justified true beliefs. Accordingly, oppressed people who recognize the bad of an oppressive society can still fail to properly escape its mirages, because they fail to recognize the *true* aspects of ideology.

Take the issues around *Race and Crime*. A Black anti-racist could reject White Supremacist ideology and yet fail to properly appreciate the social situation, if they fail to recognize ideology's true elements (and how those true elements fit with the oppressive social structure) due to their lack of theory and science. This person might recognize that white racism, in officials and drug laws, causes Black people to be disproportionately incarcerated. But if they had the view that (almost) *all* disparities in arrests and incarceration were due to selective policing and sentencing, they would have a faulty view. Some of the disparity is down to actual disparities in the number of violent crimes committed. And it's important that Black activists recognize this, because this allows recognition of how other socio-economic aspects of White Supremacy, such as the substandard education, unemployment, and poverty afflicting poor Blacks, contributes to some of them committing crimes and being incarcerated.

This isn't merely a hypothetical point. According to John Clegg and Adaner Usmani, authors of *The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration*, the standard story about mass incarceration has "fixated on the War on Drugs," with the common explanation of racial incarceration disparities being "the biases of police officers, prosecutors, juries, judges, and politicians" (2019). According to Clegg and Usmani, the "neglect of crime" (i.e., the real crime disparity) "by critics of mass incarceration has costly political consequences... Most importantly, by leading progressives to misdiagnose the source of racial disparities in punishment, it makes it impossible to wage effective war against them" (2019). They argue that too many reformers have focused excessively on the injustice of biased treatment by the criminal justice system, whereas – given the real crime disparity (including for *violent* crimes) – an essential remedy to the blight of mass incarceration is widespread redistribution and better social welfare, to tackle "the foundational injustice of American racial inequality" (2019).

Now, there is some question of whether Clegg and Usmani overstated how much other academics and reformers downplayed the economic dimension of crime and actual crime disparities.⁴⁶ And of course, many Black activists do recognize the economic factors, and the real racial crime disparities; they recognize the true aspects of ideology. This explains why calls to “defund the police” *also* call for investment in poor Black communities. This demand for investment isn’t just because it will improve lives, but also because activists recognize that this investment in communities will tackle the underlying causes of actual disparities in crime rates.

Regardless of how correct Clegg and Usmani are about reformers having over-emphasized racial bias at the expense of economic dimensions, my view is well vindicated. For either way, what matters for the emancipatory project is that “reformers” correctly identify the true bits of ideology, and are then not misled into false consciousness. This will at times be difficult, and thus we need theory and science that can guide us away from the epistemic pitfalls in the way. Much of the social science research being produced on topics of crime, racism, and oppression is accordingly vitally important.

I want to address one final objection. I have been arguing for the importance of theory, including social-scientific theory, to dispel ideology. Yet given the history of oppression and racism, and given how ideological dominance works, shouldn’t we think that any theory produced will likely be ideological and support oppression? Isn’t it naive to try to use an ideological tool of subordination for emancipation?

This is an important challenge. I want to grant that we should expect that many even well-intentioned social scientists and theorists will continue to produce research which functionally supports unjust social orders. Theorists will be led astray by their class allegiances, allegiances to

⁴⁶ One article even accused them of strawman arguments. See Jack Norton and David Stein <<https://spectrejournal.com/materializing-race/>>.

dominant scripts,⁴⁷ direct and indirect funding pressures; not to mention the very misleading appearances of oppressive societies that I have been warning against.

Nonetheless, for those of us not overly in the grips of an ideology, emancipatory theorizing is crucial. Though there is no way to guarantee some theorizing will be emancipatory, we can make our theorizing less likely to be ideological by being guided by the aim of ending oppression, aware of the dangers of being misled by unjust social scripts, and keen not to discount the knowledge of the oppressed. Successful theorizing does that today. Emancipatory theorizing remains important, because we need to be wary of how unreflective theorizing can support ideology, and we need theorizing that can dispel some of the mirage-like quality of oppressive societies. To not undertake such theorizing is to fail to challenge the misleading evidence that legitimates injustice, and thereby fail to properly fight the hold ideology can have on people.

6. Conclusion

False consciousness and ideology are pervasive and essential to the propagation of oppressive systems. Ideologies should be criticized not just for their functional role, but also for their epistemic defects. Ideologies are defective because they involve misapprehensions of the world. We can also criticize ideological beliefs as epistemically defective because they are either unjustified, or justified on the basis of misleading evidence. Emphasizing this helps us to understand how ideology works, and to see why it's hard to get past ideology's epistemic distortions. It allows us to see that ideology has its uptake because oppressive systems make people poor epistemic agents *and* put people in a bad epistemic situation, such that they are liable to form justified yet defective beliefs that support those oppressive systems. To fully recognize the ways oppressive societies have misleading features,

⁴⁷ See Chapter Seven of *How Propaganda Works* (Stanley, 2015).

we need to heed the critical theorists' call for broader epistemic concepts, and the call, strong in the emancipatory traditions of Black Radicals, Marxists, and Feminists, to develop theory, science, and a collective standpoint.

The call for theory-building should not be seen to privilege the armchair theorist in the ivory tower. Practical action and activism, as well as the leadership and knowledge of the oppressed, are vital parts to this enterprise. Still, this need for theory arises even for oppressed people who do not hold ideological beliefs, because oppressive societies have misleading aspects by their very nature. Theory is needed to avoid the traps of these social mirages, and to effectively diagnose and fight the evils of an oppressive system.

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