Cognitive Dissonance, Critical Theory and Political Reasoning

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Abstract

Critical theorists have long wrestled with whether and how to provide a theory of "false consciousness" to explain why the oppressed hold beliefs aligned with their own oppression. They often either eschew psychological explanations or rely solely on psychoanalysis. I suggest *cognitive dissonance theory* can also prove an important resource for understanding failures of political consciousness. Dissonance theory helps explain how subjects are "interpellated" into harmful ideologies through their actions, and how new action-possibilities, as well as the support of others, can help subjects "escape" harmful ideologies. Dissonance theory can also enrich the works of the first, second, and third generation of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. It provides clarity in debates between Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm about the role of the ego in political consciousness, without relying on Freudian theories and their often-implied patriarchal family structures. Dissonance theory demonstrates the role of a sense of self in subjects' ideological beliefs, demonstrating that an attachment to an individual fixed sense of self may leave subjects too defended psychologically to escape harmful ideologies. This is especially relevant as subjects are further atomised under neoliberalism. Dissonance theory can also provide an alternative to the developmental psychology employed by Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. It can explain why subjects arrive at poor political conclusions without turning to rigid developmental hierarchies or possibly-unwarranted normative claims. Ultimately, "false consciousness" can be defined carefully as a set of beliefs that inhibit subjects from recognising their possibilities for action, then dissonance theory can be used to understand how subjects often hold tightly to this kind of false consciousness. With

this approach critical theorists can theorise paths to emancipatory consciousness and aid social movements. Furthermore, critical theorists should explore other areas of cognitive science that may also prove fruitful in understanding political consciousness.

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Here's a tiny drop in the bucket towards understanding how everyone can think (and make) their way towards liberation.

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Introduction

> *The traditional borderlines between psychology on the one side and political and social philosophy on the other have been made obsolete by the condition of man in the present era…Psychological problems therefore turn into political problems…*
>
> -*Herbert Marcuse,* Eros and Civilisation[1]

This project combines two fields that generally want little to do with each other: critical theory and cognitive science. Cognitive scientists (and their cousins, social psychologists, neuroscientists, and the like) are generally expected to remain "apolitical" in their work. When psychology researchers do touch on political issues, they tend to gesture towards widely palatable social-political goals, such as "overcoming polarisation" or preventing conspiracy theories. It is not difficult to imagine psychology researchers dismayed to find those with backgrounds in Marxist theory traipsing through their laboratories, even metaphorically. At the same time, critical theorists are, generally speaking, less than keen to dip their hands into psychological science. Indeed, there is a long tradition in critical theory of being sceptical of the instrumental-rational nature of scientific study, and scepticism further warranted by the shorter but still-sizeable tradition in cognitive science of sloppy methodologies and forged results. Perhaps as a result, when it comes to understanding political subjectivity, critical theorists have largely stuck with the "old-fashioned" parent discipline of empirical psychology, Freudian psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, this project argues that some areas of cognitive science, and specifically a field of research that lies under the umbrella of *cognitive dissonance theory*, can be a useful tool when it

[1] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud.* London: Routledge, 2012, p. xxii.

comes to the unfashionable problem of "false consciousness" (or resistance to political consciousness of one's own oppression, roughly). I shall argue that critical theorists, especially those interested in Frankfurt School Critical Theory, can and should take up the theory of cognitive dissonance if they wish to expand the arsenal of tools they have for understanding why subjects often resist knowledge of their own political oppression and their possibilities for action. More broadly, there are important resources for answering this and other questions in critical theory within the field of empirical psychology. If critical theorists are to remain committed to questions like these and retain a commitment to contributing to real-world social movements, they should take up these psychological theories (albeit with a critical eye) and use them to strengthen and make specific their understanding of how "false consciousness" can be overcome.

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon in which subjects experience intense discomfort when they encounter contradictions between two or more of their beliefs or actions. Although the earliest researchers used dissonance to refer to both the discrepancy in cognition and the discomfort that followed from it, today researchers clarify the conceptual distinction between these two by referring to cognitive inconsistency as "cognitive discrepancy" and the discomfort as dissonance or *dissonance discomfort*. This discomfort frequently leads to *rationalisation* (where subjects construct rapid justifications to explain away these apparent contradictions) or *confirmation bias* (where subjects dismiss any evidence of contradictions) in order to reduce this discomfort as quickly as possible. In these cases, cognitive dissonance serves as a barrier to critical reasoning processes involved in activities like reading the

news, engaging in discussions with others about politics, or reflecting on one's own views. However, the very same discomfort of cognitive dissonance also sometimes leads subjects to revise their opinions instead of relying on rationalisation or confirmation bias.[2]

This psychological phenomenon, replicated for more than half a century across cultural contexts and in and out of laboratory study, represents a fundamental aspect of reasoning, including political reasoning. When dissonance creates rationalisation or confirmation bias, it impedes political reasoning; in perhaps rarer instances, dissonance may provide the impetus for subjects to instead revise their views consciously. Understanding dissonance is important in order to provide a thorough account of political discourse, since if politics is to involve the meaningful consent of the governed or anything resembling "progress," political change is likely to happen at least in part because people are able to revise understanding of the world and develop political consciousness, that is, an understanding of their political world and their interests in it. Cognitive dissonance plays a crucial role in determining when it is possible for individuals and groups to change their views and thus develop political consciousness. Nevertheless, very little analysis of cognitive dissonance has been undertaken by political theorists.[3] In this dissertation I consider the latest research on

[2] For an extensive description of this phenomenon for the non-psychologist, I suggest Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory*. Sage, 2007.

[3] There are some exceptions in political science papers, such as Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, and Maya Sen, "Explaining Preferences from Behaviour: A Cognitive Dissonance Approach." *The Journal of Politics* 80.2 (2018): pp. 400-411, and in some discussions about issues like conspiracy theories, as in Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule. "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17.2, 2009: pp. 202-227. In critical theory, there is a limited discussion in Robin Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-understanding*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018: pp. 157-179.

cognitive dissonance, especially the "action-oriented" theory of cognitive dissonance. I suggest ways this literature can contribute to key debates in political theory, from debates about how subjects are "interpellated" into ideology to a reconsideration of the role of the ego, to the problems with using developmental psychology. I suggest that all political theorists considering these issues, but especially those engaged in the broad field of critical theory, can develop a more thorough and nuanced approach to questions of political subjectivity if they include this phenomenon in their accounts. Dissonance theory also points to broader methodological possibilities that can be reached by critical theorists through the thoughtful, selected, and self-critical use of empirical psychology. For example, although much work on political discourse implicitly relies on the idea of reasoning derived from economic-rational choices, I suggest that cognitive dissonance demonstrates people's drive toward overall meaning-making in choosing what they believe (rather than merely evaluating their individual benefit). Furthermore, cognitive dissonance theory points to the significance of subjects' interest in implicit action-possibilities, or possibilities for action afforded to them in the future, when evaluating arguments. Subjects find meaning in ideas that give them a sense of their own agency and action-possibilities. This insight about the role of action-possibilities and a sense of agency allows theorists to better understand ideological interpellation, nuances our understanding of the conditions under which individuals and groups can acquire political consciousness, and suggests ways of improving political consciousness that do not rely on discourse alone.

Moreover, I suggest that if critical theorists fail to incorporate the insights afforded by this approach, not only with regard to cognitive dissonance but more broadly by incorporating relevant findings within cognitive science, they risk relying on folk-psychological assumptions in their work: on ideas about psychology that are popular but not well founded, and which will steer theories in troubling directions.[4] In contrast, cognitive dissonance literature shows with greater precision what it might entail to cultivate open-mindedness, and what kinds of group discourse might encourage this. The concept of cognitive dissonance helps to move relatively abstract thinking about political discourse towards praxis, while demonstrating weaknesses in commonsense ideas about what political progress looks like. Furthermore, when critical theorists do not incorporate relevant findings in cognitive science into their work, they implicitly surrender questions of political subjectivity to a behaviourist and/or ultimately behavioural-economics-individualist approach that has pervaded both psychological research and neoliberal economic projects. This leaves interpretation of scientific findings on psychology to be largely legitimated and interpreted by those who are often uncritical about the ways that the psychology of "incentives" and "nudges" is implicitly built around a market logic.

In Chapter One, I suggest a stronger theory of "false consciousness" is one that can be defined not by any particular question of literal truth or falsehood but by the way such beliefs limit subjects' knowledge of their oppression and obscure the action-possibilities available to them: beliefs, conscious or otherwise, that subjects hold that

[4] I generally use the lowercase critical theory in this dissertation to refer to all theories interested in challenging power structures and oppression, as the matters at hand could be helpful in this broader realm. However, my project also focuses especially closely on the Frankfurt School, and in that context the capitalised Critical Theory is sometimes used.

support or contribute in some way to their own oppression, and specifically beliefs that prevent them from recognising the action-possibilities available to them in terms of their social and political order. A good modern theory of false conscious (a term I retain in places throughout this work, despite its problematic implications, in order to draw a historical through-line on this important theoretical question) should satisfy all of these four criteria:

- A **"worm's eye view"** of the problem, i.e. an account of what specifically occurs to the subject psychologically and the mechanisms involved (as opposed to a "bird's eye view" that only discloses larger social structures
- An account that allows for **"escapability"** such that subjects could plausibly escape false consciousness and develop better political consciousness (and thus demand a better world)
- An account with **"patchiness"**, i.e. where subjects could plausibly vary widely in their political consciousness from one area of life to the next, as is observable in the real world
- An account that encompasses the **"perversity"** of the human subject, i.e. the way subjects are not just misled but affectively tied to and eager to defend their own oppression in some way, such that they resist changing their views even if it would be in their interest to do so.

I have chosen these criteria both for their emphasis on action and their relevance to social movements' need to mobilise people, and for their ability to describe the specific and sometimes curious challenge involved in persuading people. Throughout my chapters, and especially in Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I consider the ways that

dissonance theory can enrich theories of false consciousness in order to better express and explain these aspects of resistance to political consciousness.

In Chapter One, I additionally argue that critical theorists should return to the question of false consciousness that has long proved controversial, and I define the conditions under which such an investigation might be fruitful for critical theorists. I argue that understanding the way people resist knowledge of their own oppression is central to historical concerns of the Frankfurt School, and address some frequent objections to theories of "false consciousness." I then lay out my four criteria for a good theory of false consciousness. I define false consciousness in a relatively minimalist and action-oriented manner in order to avoid some of the ongoing debates about false consciousness that are less than fruitful. Finally, I point towards some of the reasons dissonance theory in particular is promising for enriching theories of false consciousness: for example, it is a theory that addresses how subjects handle contradictions in their understanding of the world and rationalise away contradictions, and it relates closely to subjects' sense of their own agency. There is also some empirical research that suggests dissonance comes into play particularly strongly in subject's minds when it comes to political issues and that it affects how people view the fairness of the systems in which they live.

In Chapter Two, I provide an overview of the development of the theory of cognitive dissonance, first through the study of a cult and then in both a laboratory setting and in social science research.[5] I outline some of the early attempts by cognitive

[5] In addition to the aforementioned book by Joel Cooper and numerous relevant articles, I naturally rely on the original publications related to the finding of cognitive dissonance, most notably Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter. *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World*. Lulu Press, Inc, 2017.

psychologists to theorise about this phenomenon and defend it from early controversies with downstream political significance. I consider, in turn, three particularly relevant and to a limited degree complementary theories about what triggers cognitive dissonance. In the *self-standards model*, cognitive dissonance occurs to protect individual subjects' existing sense of self. In another theory of cognitive dissonance, one closely related to the *new look model* of dissonance, cognitive dissonance serves to protect subjects' sense that their actions have had a positive impact on the world. Finally, I introduce the most modern and potentially most relevant model, the *action-based model* of cognitive dissonance, which combines earlier theories about the importance of the self and the subjects' actions and "theorises that when individuals have conflicting cognitions with action implications, they experience dissonance."[6] This theory suggests that individuals experience painful dissonance not simply because they unconsciously recognise a contradiction related to their sense of self or the effects of their actions, but because this contradiction calls into question which actions they can take that would be desirable or possible. In other words, cognitive dissonance is painful because it disrupts one's ability to judge how to act in the future, and therefore one's sense of individual agency. This is likely to be true, I argue, not only for action-possibilities that are primarily about personal decisions, but also for those about subjects' political actions, large and small—who they vote for, what they declare as their views, how they navigate their position within the class system or the patriarchy day to day, and so on. I then attend to some of the larger methodological risks of using

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[6] See Eddie Harmon-Jones, Cindy Harmon-Jones, and Nicholas Levy. "An Action-Based Model of Cognitive-Dissonance Processes." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24.3, 2015: pp.184-189.

this particular theory to understand political consciousness, accepting some (e.g. the risks of poor study design), defending against others (e.g. concerns this requires a total abandonment of Freud), and even arguing that one of them — the relatively Western specificity of many dissonance findings—could prove a methodological strength when it comes to its use by critical theorists.[7]

In Chapter Three, I consider the way that dissonance theory can enrich materialist accounts of ideology by providing the specifics of a psychological mechanism for the "interpellation" of subject into systems of belief, as well as the related way it can help theorists avoid folk psychology.[8] While previous theorists, especially Marxist theorists like Lukács and Althusser, have often provided accounts of how ideology serves to obscure the contradictions within the capitalist system, these theorists are sometimes less than clear about how ideology functions at the level of individual subjectivity.[9] In particular, I note the crucial role of action, always in combination with internal processes like cognition and thought. For example, Louis

[7] I use this term, "Western" throughout this text despite its potentially problematic implications but because it is in line with the usage in the literature about "WEIRD" countries and reflects a divide in the way psychological findings are measured.

[8] The term "folk psychology" is generally used to denote people's common intuitions about the functioning of their own and others' mental states. It can often be problematic because people's folk-psychological intuitions are often not very accurate. For example, many people believe that showing anger and "venting" will help "let off steam" so that the person in question will then feel better or less angry afterwards. However, a good deal of evidence suggests this is far from the case, with all kinds of downstream implications for everything from political analysis to therapeutic interventions for those struggling to control their behaviour around their families. See Russell G. Geen, David Stonner, and Gary L. Shope. "The Facilitation of Aggression by Aggression: Evidence Against the Catharsis Hypothesis." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31.4 (1975): pp. 721-726. Another problem with folk psychology is that it is often influenced by harmful social norms and stereotypes, for example, gender norms, and that this can then pollute any theories that rely on it.

[9] The two works I focus most closely on in this section are Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. MIT Press, 1972, and Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Verso Trade, 2014.

Althusser suggests that ideology works much like Pascal's analysis of religion, where subjects are told to "kneel and they will believe" —that is, they act first, and believe the corresponding beliefs afterwards. As countless studies of cognitive dissonance have shown (both in labs and in studies of fraternities, cults, and political indoctrination centres), many people come to believe radically new things very much in the way Althusser describes: they first expend a lot of effort or engage in unusual behaviour, and then the pressures of cognitive dissonance shift their views to correspond with the actions they have already taken, which they cannot change. Dissonance theory can, more than a purely material or a Lacanian account of interpellation, provide an explanation for both the perversity of beliefs (the way people are drawn to them psychologically even though they might be harmful) and the escapability of them in cases where people can first change some of their actions. This type of mechanism for radical changes in social belief is, I argue, also more helpful and concrete than folk psychology or some psychoanalytic accounts.[10]

In Chapter Four, I discuss the relationship between cognitive dissonance and the questions of the ego that have long been a part of debates within critical theory, especially within the Frankfurt School.[11] First generation theorists like Adorno, Fromm, and Marcuse faced a puzzle when it came to understanding the political influence of the ego, the conscious, active, self-directed and self-defining part of the

[10] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso, 1989. Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works.* Princeton University Press, 2015.

[11] Particularly relevant works are Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda." *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 1982; Theodor W. Adorno, "Sociology and Psychology II." *New Left Review* 47, 1968; and Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud*. Beacon Press, 1974.

self. Their work is often torn between acknowledging that a “strong” ego comes from internalisation of external figures of authority and concerns about an increasingly “weak” ego in the modern subject, one who no longer is an “individual” and who can accordingly not exercise critical reason. Fromm tended to argue for the strengthening of the ego with relatively little caveat, while Adorno and Marcuse did so in a more fraught way. I argue that there is another way to look at the same issue, an approach that one can draw from the insights of dissonance literature. Instead of thinking about egos as either "weak" or "strong", critical theorists might recommend that subjects would do best with an essentially amendable or flexible ego, one that involves a sense of self but which also has the ability to revise the self as necessary and with this revise one’s beliefs. I then point to work by Amy Allen and Joel Whitebrook that aligns with this idea from a psychoanalytic angle, and which emphasises the importance of ambivalence and mourning. This kind of revised view of what is needed for the ego provides a clearer “worm’s eye view” of what subjects need to be able to do psychologically in order to escape harmful ideology, thus fulfilling several of my aforementioned criteria for a good theory of false consciousness. Moreover, I suggest that such an approach may more accurately model the real challenges of the 21st century, where subjects do not so much blindly follow a single ideological authority but rather ardently defend their sense of themselves as individuals and independent thinkers while nevertheless being unable, in many cases, to revise their thinking. In this sense, a fixed sense of self may be a greater impediment to political consciousness than traditional conceptions of either a “strong” or “weak” ego, and dissonance theory can

help critical theorists adjust their concerns and address new versions of the problem of political consciousness.

In Chapter Five, I turn to the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School, in particular the works of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. I trace their turn away from most psychoanalytic theories and towards developmental theories as the psychological grounding for their work. I argue that while this approach does provide an account of the "escapability" of false consciousness, as humans can develop better forms of political consciousness, this approach is very limited. In particular, these theorists' use of developmental theories is often somewhat circular, with overly universalised ideas and excess biologising of what may actually be social norms. Additionally the approaches Habermas and Honneth build using developmental psychology are inadequate in theorising the problem of "transparency," and unable to explain the perversity and patchiness of subject's political consciousness. Much of the appeal of these developmental theories is, as Amy Allen has noted, tied to faulty notions of progress that should themselves be dismantled. I suggest that these methodological flaws could be improved with the application of cognitive dissonance theory. Dissonance theory can give a worm's eye view of the nature of political consciousness and one that allows for great "patchiness" in human reasoning, where subjects might be politically conscious in one area but unaware of their own oppression in another. It is also less normatively oriented than developmental theories, neither containing a theory of progress nor a complex hierarchy of developmental steps, and thus requires less in this area to function. Furthermore, dissonance theory is attuned to the way subjects may not be able to be transparent about their true motivations, even to

themselves. In this way it provides a greater account of the *perversity* involved in "false consciousness."

In Chapter Six, I bring together my arguments from the previous chapters to discuss what theorists, as well as those engaged in political practice, might do next given what I have argued about cognitive dissonance. I first provide examples of practical responses to cognitive dissonance that have been effective. I discuss the techniques used by addiction therapists, especially a practice termed "motivational interviewing" used to overcome cognitive dissonance in those struggling with addiction, while allowing these clients to come to their own conclusions about what change is needed.[12] In more political circumstances, I provide the example of what is called "deep canvassing." This technique is thus far statistically more effective than traditional methods of canvassing and talking to people about political issues in that it results in greater amounts of imagination and openness to new ideas.[13] This technique has been particularly effective for shifting the way that people in Massachusetts voted on whether transgender people could use the bathrooms of their choosing-convincing many to vote to allow them to do so. Finally, I return to the action-oriented theory of cognitive dissonance most recently developed and argue that it provides a particularly useful potential insight about what might allow subjects to resolve cognitive

[12] Discussion of this technique, as well as further citations demonstrating its effectiveness, can be found at William Miller and Ali Miller, "Instructor's Manual for William Miller on Motivational Interviewing," psychotherapy.net, 2012: pp. 16-29.

[13] Studies to support the effectiveness of deep canvassing include David Broockman and Joshua Kalla. "Durably Reducing Transphobia: A Field Experiment on Door-to-door Canvassing." *Science* 352.6282, 2016: 220-224 and Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman. "Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes Through Interpersonal Conversation: Evidence from Three Field Experiments." *American Political Science Review* 114.2, 2020: pp. 410-425.

dissonance differently. In this theory, subjects are constantly yet unconsciously, generating action-possibilities, and cognitive dissonance is a force that pushes them to choose one or the other action-possibility. Following this logic, one of the most compelling ways to move beyond common but sometimes problematic responses to cognitive dissonance is not to provide arguments for this or that course of action but rather to outline new possible courses of action that may not have been consciously available to the subject previously. (It may, for example, be easier to show people a more feminist or egalitarian set of actions than argue about why these are just.) In this way a successful form of political reasoning may look very different from the "giving of reasons" suggested by thinkers like Habermas, and may instead constitute a "giving of actions." While this kind of method would doubtless require a great deal of future research, it suggests the value of a return to praxis-led thought in engaging in difficulties in political discourse.

In the first two chapters, I defend my methodological choices in detail. For now, however, it is worth acknowledging that my approach is, by necessity when combining two different fields, somewhat eclectic. I have combined these two approaches, however, due to a larger commitment: the commitment that social theory should be done in order to aid social movements that seek to liberate people. In other words, more than any singular methodological lens, this dissertation places an emphasis on praxis. I argue that by failing to engage with the issue of cognitive dissonance, a challenge involving the real-world and empirically-tested psychology of political subjects, critical theorists have not yet sufficiently engaged with a crucial intersection between political practice and political theory. In choosing this focus I

have relied on ideas not only from critical theory but also from the pragmatist tradition, a theoretical source that critical theorists should welcome, especially as some critical theorists, including Habermas and Nancy Fraser, describe themselves as relying on pragmatist ideas or techniques. Furthermore, I hold to the idea that appropriate methods should be determined by the problem at hand, not by adherence to a particular fixed approach. This theoretical bricolage is more in line with the interdisciplinary approach the Frankfurt School historically endorsed. (Indeed, at a recent conference, Axed Honneth mentioned that, due to the increasingly disparate nature of academic disciplines, it is much harder than it was to combine disciplines as the early Frankfurt School thinkers once imagined. Nevertheless, it may be necessary to answer the big questions that remain relevant today.) [14]

I will thus make use of findings and ideas from psychological literature to consider how political subjects engage in discourse in practice and what it would mean to do as the pragmatist philosopher Charles Pierce suggested and "begin with men and their conversation" as it already is.[15] Rather than taking an idealist approach and asking what I would like political consciousness to look like, I have instead begun with the problems of political consciousness as they are right now, with humans and their conversation. Although I perhaps do so in an unusual way, this is part of a longer tradition of critical theorists studying the psychology of the political subject in order to understand social problems and structures, and particularly to understand why political

[14] I am here referring to the conference entitled "Flaschenpost: Critical Theory at 100 – The European and American Reception, 1923-2023" which happened at Harvard on October 6 and 7th.

[15] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Harvard University Press, 1931: p. 112.

subjects often do not engage in political action or resistance even when facing oppression or inequality.[16] In starting from the woes of political consciousness I hope to uncover what political theorist Seyla Benhabib terms the "anticipatory utopian" potential for a politics that focuses on the challenges of political subjectivity and possible ways of reshaping it. As Benhabib describes in her work *Critique, Norm, and Utopia,* this aspect of critical theory "views the present from the perspective of the radical transformation of its basic structure, and interprets actual lived crises and protests in light of an anticipated future."[17] I hope to take the challenges and even crises posed by these elements of human psychology and consider what practical transformations might be needed to overcome them.

In order to limit the scope of my project, I have not addressed a great many related topics. I have not sought to develop a fully-fleshed out theory of "false consciousness," retaining only a minimal definition of it as described above. I have not attempted to argue that cognitive dissonance theory is the absolute best explanatory mechanism for false consciousness, merely a particularly central and promising one. I have not looked at many other possible psychological mechanisms for false consciousness, although there certainly may be many others. I have not attempted to fully reconcile this empirical finding with Freudian ideas, although I sketch some similarities in Chapter Four. In several chapters I have suggested that dissonance theory can either demonstrate that some theories of ideology or false consciousness are

[16] Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*. Verso Books, 2017: p. 10.

[17] Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. Reprint edition, Columbia University Press, 1986: p. 226.

more or less promising, or that it can add further analysis that is not otherwise available through a materialist, Freudian, or developmental-psychological lens. I have not, however, in any sense sought to entirely disprove these other frameworks for understanding ideology and "false consciousness". I have instead only suggested they are incomplete given the task at hand and that dissonance theory can enrich them. I have additionally kept my defence of the idea of false consciousness relatively limited. I do not suggest that everyone is ideologically hoodwinked or that any situation of false consciousness is hopeless. On the contrary, I have specifically set criteria for such a theory to suggest that failures of political consciousness, including a passionate attachment to ideas that compound one's own oppression, occur in patchy and escapable ways. This, I suggest, is precisely why they are so worthy of study: because with the right approach, this type of "false consciousness" can often be overcome, to liberatory effect.

Finally, although I argue that dissonance theory is an especially strong tool for understanding what is often termed "false consciousness," my focus on it in this work can also be understood as a specific example of a larger and perhaps more important methodological point. Historically, critical theorists have shown an aversion to engaging directly with psychological theories other than psychoanalysis. But they do so at their own methodological peril, both because it means potentially missing out on key insights about what could be done to spur political consciousness, and because it may lead them to rely unwittingly on folk-psychological presuppositions about human nature. I chose dissonance theory as a starting point in part because it furnished me with the observation that the very defences that impeded reasoning were also

expressions of subjects' strong desire to think well of themselves as agents for good—an impulse that it seemed to me could also potentially have a liberatory function. Ideally, critical theorists could take up a wider range of psychological theories so as to understand how subjects with passionate attachments to their own sense of agency not only escape "false consciousness" but exercise agency in politically meaningful ways, and not just as individuals but as movements.

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Chapter One: Revisiting the Problem of False Consciousness

> *[Several motivations] … compelled the first generation of members to serve as marriage broker between Marx and Freud. The first… was the hope that psychoanalysis might help answer the exigent question generated by the failure of orthodox Marxist theory to generate revolutionary practice: why did the working class fail to assume the leading role by historical materialism in the overthrow of capitalism? The second reason was the complementary insight it might offer into the unexpected success of a political movement, fascism, that traditional Marxism had not foreseen and that stubbornly survived after World War II in what might be called the "fascism with a human face" of an "administered society" comprised of "one-dimensional men."*
>
> - Martin Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations*. [18]

This is a project that builds admiringly but not uncritically on the work of the Frankfurt School and its relatives and successors in critical theory. It argues that, given the methodological commitments of the members of the Frankfurt School to a method of interdisciplinary theorising that involves a combination of psychoanalysis and Marxist theory, as well as their political commitments to assisting in struggles against oppression, critical theorists today should broaden the scope of psychological theories they use in their work. They should do this in order to answer the two questions described above: firstly, why oppressed subjects do not resist the social order, and secondly, why they are often drawn into oppressive ways of thinking. To do this means returning to the long-running concern among emancipatory theorists, regarding the question of *false consciousness*, where political subjects hold beliefs and attitudes that contribute to their own oppression. While there are problematic aspects of this formulation, it also has a long history within critical theory and remains relevant today.

[18] Verso books, 2020: p. 51.

Moreover, as I shall argue, if we re-conceptualise false consciousness as beliefs that limit subjects' understanding of their own possibilities for political action, the term remains both relevant in today's political landscape and methodologically useful and defensible.

In this chapter, I first argue that returning to the question of false consciousness is important in the 21st century because people's attachments to beliefs that limit their potential to take political action play a central explanatory role in describing why the political world is the way it is. I also argue that if one begins with the commitments of the Frankfurt School thinkers, including aiding social movements and developing an account of why people do not resist their own oppression, it is both possible and necessary to develop a conception of false consciousness. I then address some common objections to theories of false consciousness, including the objections that theories about false consciousness are wrongheaded, too vague, falsely assume a particular inherent subjectivity, are overly psychologising, or are condescending toward political subjects. I first provide a relatively minimal definition of false consciousness. This definition resists entering many of the debates about the normative foundations of false consciousness and instead posits that false consciousness can be studied, at least at the explanatory level, in terms of which actions restrict subject's action-possibilities. This approach dovetails with the newest advances in cognitive science and not only avoids making strong claims about the ability of social theorists to identify external "truth." It also fits with the concerns of left-wing social theory, specifically preserving some belief in the potential agency of subjects. Next, I lay out some criteria for a useful explanatory theory of false consciousness, criteria that I will refer to throughout the

rest of the dissertation when explaining why some psychological theories may prove more useful than others. These criteria may help critical theorists evaluate psychological research and choose which psychology to rely on in understanding how people hold on to harmful beliefs.

Finally, having argued for a return to studying false consciousness under a very specific formulation of the idea, I present a psychological theory that can assist. I specifically argue for the inclusion of a particular strand of thought in social psychology, cognitive dissonance theory. Dissonance theory is a promising way of understanding questions of false consciousness because of its relationship to the question of how subjects rationalise away contradictions in their worldview. Dissonance theory is promising, and a particularly suitable starting point for the analysis of false consciousness for a few key reasons: 1) dissonance arises when people are faced with painful contradictions about their worldview, and these contradictions are central to critical theory's understanding of oppression and capitalism 2) dissonance tends to arise when people's sense of self, agency, and action-possibilities are thrown into question, all of which are closely tied to politics and to social movements, and 3) some empirical literature suggests that cognitive dissonance may occur more often for individuals when they consider explicitly political questions compared to apparently apolitical questions. Dissonance theory can potentially be used to evaluate the viability of different approaches to understanding false consciousness, as well as potential methods of counteracting false consciousness. It also takes the agential drive and possibilities of the subject seriously, and does not require the critical theorist to assume themselves enlightened about lofty concepts of

truth. Although I focus on this theory (also called dissonance theory; I use these interchangeably throughout the text) I do so not only because it is particularly suitable for understanding false consciousness but also so as to provide one extended example of the benefits of this cognitive-psychological approach to important questions in critical theory. This is just one of many possible similar useful interventions that could be made to strengthen the project of critical theory and the conceptual resources it has available to it as it seeks to understand why people are often mired in false consciousness. In so doing, there is the possibility to salvage the core insight about failures of political consciousness from previous problematic formulations and notions of false consciousness.

Why Return to the Question of False Consciousness?

This thesis focuses on the study of ideology, and specifically on the way it is related to what theorists have termed "false consciousness." In this work I use the term ideology in a relatively neutral sense, as "a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy."[19] However, I am, of course, particularly interested in harmful and oppressive ideologies. False consciousness is frequently used to describe the conundrum the aforementioned Wilhelm Reich observed: "What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry don't steal and why the majority of those who are exploited

[19] This is the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary.

don't strike."[20] The question is the question of quiescence, why those who are oppressed do not throw off their shackles, and why they often believe in the logic of the systems that oppress them. While I occasionally look at works by others, especially Louis Althusser, I am mostly focused on the work of the Frankfurt School, a school of sociology and critical theory founded at Goethe University Frankfurt in 1923. The first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers, as described in the quote above, combined Marxist economics and Freudian psychoanalysis to attempt to answer questions about political liberation, while maintaining a fervent critique of capitalism, Fascism, and existing state-based Communist projects (e.g. Stalinism). Under threat both because of their work and because nearly all the founding members were Jewish at least by heritage, many members fled to the United States during the second World War, where they developed a critique of mass culture and other aspects of postwar capitalism.[21] Eventually, their students, most notably Jürgen Habermas, formed a "second generation" of Frankfurt School theorists, and the students of those students formed a "third generation," who include thinkers like Axel Honneth, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser and many others. Although I focus on these thinkers, they were certainly not the only tradition within political theory interested in the question of false consciousness. The question of false consciousness has been the focus of many theorists (here listened in vaguely chronological order) including György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Guy Debord, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean-Francois Lyotard,

[20] Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Translated by Vincent R. Carfagno. Souvenir Press, 1933: p. 19.

[21] For an intriguing biography of the school, see Jeffries, Stuart. *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*. Verso Books, 2017.

Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Zizek, Gillian Rose, Frederic Jameson, and Mark Fisher (to name just a few). There has even been a resurgence of interest in ideology even among liberal and analytic philosophers in recent years.

The question of why people can sometimes be invested in these oppressive patterns of thinking is perhaps as relevant today than ever. Longstanding oppressive ideologies like capitalist, racist, or patriarchal ideologies remain powerful even in apparently "progressive" nations and societies. In addition, today some very particular trends demonstrate that straightforwardly false ideologies are as relevant and damaging as ever. For example, a 2021 survey found that 15% of Americans, and a quarter of members of the Republican party, believe the fundamental tenets of the Q-Anon theory, which posits that "the levers of power are controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles."[22] Indeed, all but a fifth of those in the right-wing of the Republican party accepted some of the Q-anon conspiracy theory. While the group of those who directly believe in such conspiracy theories may or may not be growing, their beliefs have increasingly bled into mainstream views: these beliefs contributed directly to the very high level of belief (perhaps almost a third of Americans!) that the 2020 elections were "stolen" or otherwise compromised, and to the violence at the US Capitol building on January 6th, 2021.[23] While these sorts of beliefs are ostensibly

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[22] Giovanni Russonello, "QAnon Now as Popular in U.S. as Some Major Religions, Poll Suggests. Fifteen Percent of Americans Believe that 'Patriots May Have to Resort to Violence' to Restore the Country's Rightful Order, the Poll Indicated." *New York Times*, May 27th, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/us/politics/qanon-republicans-trump.html. Accessed 18th October 2022.

[23] Ben Kaimsar. "Almost a Third of Americans Still Believe the 2020 Election Result was Fraudulent." NBC News June 20, 2023 <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/almost-third-americans-still-believe-2020-election-result-was-fraudule-rcna90145> Accessed Oct 25th, 2023.

I sometimes reference "conspiracy theories" in my discussion of false consciousness. For the purposes of this work, I see conspiracy theories as a type of false consciousness. If all false consciousness, as I

about being suspicious of (a select group of) elites, in practice they often function to redirect generalised suspicion of authority and power to work in defence of right-wing politicians who do not offer meaningful political change to their supporters, and who may even strip them further of rights and benefits. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has encountered its own set of conspiracy theories and anti-vaccination sentiments that are ostensibly about rejecting a possibly elite group of actors and their power (e.g. governments, and pharma companies). Nevertheless, these beliefs not only are scientifically unfounded but also have the potential to harm the people who believe them.[24]

Of course, ideology and false consciousness are broad and contested terms with many possible meanings. In this work I use them to refer to relatively specific concepts. I define false consciousness as beliefs, conscious or otherwise, that subjects hold that support or contribute in some way to their own oppression, and specifically beliefs that prevent them from recognising the action-possibilities available to them in terms of their social and political order.[25] (I will discuss this definition more shortly.)

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will suggest, involves an inaccurate mapping of power and the subject's opportunities for action in their life, conspiracy theories are a subset of false consciousness that maps these things incorrectly by assuming there is a conspiracy of powerful people controlling the world. Thus the saying that antisemitism is the "socialism of fools," a saying variously attributed to German thinkers in the 19th century, provides a good example: subjects correctly notice there are powerful forces that protect themselves and limit the subject's possibilities for action, but they incorrectly attribute this to Jews, instead of attributing this power to capital and those who possess and serve it.

[24] See, for example, Anthony R. DiMaggio, "Conspiracy Theories and the Manufacture of Dissent: QAnon, the 'Big Lie', Covid-19, and the Rise of Rightwing Propaganda." *Critical Sociology*, 2022: pp. 1025-1048.

[25] Notice that these beliefs do not necessarily need to be logically false! False consciousness is not whether we are correct or not about something, but about whether we deceive ourselves about, say, the topic as a whole. Thus a worker might tell themselves that "humility is a virtue", which, while arguably true, helps to keep them from demanding better working conditions.

Alongside other theorists, I also hold that false consciousness is generally held in place by some form of self-deception or resistance to critical examination. I use ideology in a broader sense to describe the collection of structures and beliefs that are often harmful and that tend to support the existing oppressive social order, to, as Michael Freeden puts it, decontest the social order.[26] I am, notably, not making larger claims about how ideology works as an entire widespread system of legitimation, but rather focusing specifically on how subjects unconsciously deceive themselves about their own political positions and interests. Cognitive dissonance itself is defined here, as in the psychological literature, as a psychological phenomenon in which subjects experience intense discomfort when they encounter contradictions between two or more of their beliefs and actions. Sometimes (frequently, in fact) this discomfort leads to "irrationality," e.g. the rationalising-away of new information that should be taken into account. However, it might, in some cases, lead subjects to consciously reconsider their beliefs. When I discuss subjects' psychological sense of agency, I define this as it is generally defined in the academic psychology literature, as having to do with apparent free choices and their perceived negative and positive effects. In later chapters, I will investigate the relationship between this sometimes-superficial psychological sense of agency and the reality of political agency. Throughout this work, I define "politics" and the term "political" broadly, as having to do with social relations of power. I am not particularly attached to the term false consciousness itself, but rather use it here to gesture to the long historical tradition of attempting to theorise this problem of subjectivity.

[26] Michael Freeden, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice*. OUP Oxford, 2013: p. 23.

The Question of False Consciousness and the Frankfurt School

Given its founding methodological commitments to ideology critique and social movements (commitments that may not be as evident in works created today), critical theorists should be interested in and committed to looking for new psychological theories that can help explain why people think and act in seemingly harmful and irrational ways, ways that reinforce their own oppression. Firstly, from a methodological perspective, the premise of so much of critical theory is that the existing social and political order is oppressive and irrational. An explanation is therefore required for why the majority of people appear to at least somewhat accept or even endorse this order. Understanding the psychology of those who might (but do not always) choose to resist oppression is a key part of critical theory's commitment to praxis and being a handmaiden to social movements. Adorno, for example, wrote that the task of the critical theorist was to "lend a voice to suffering."[27] And Nancy Fraser, for example, writes about how the work of a critical theorist is to be a participant observer—someone who theorises but is also necessarily engaged in political struggle.[28] She argues that "a critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification."[29] Many critical theorists insist, to this day, that their work is intended not only to provide

[27] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Verso, 2005: p. 17.

[28] See, for example, Nancy Fraser, and Rahel Jaeggi. *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018: p. 123.

[29] Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender" *New German Critique* No. 35, Special Issue on Jurgen Habermas, Spring - Summer, 1985: p. 113.

an accurate understanding of the political world, but also to aid the oppressed in their fight for liberation. For example, in his early well-known essay, *Traditional and Critical Theory,* the first generation Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer describes the critical theorist as a "theoretician whose business it is to hasten developments which will lead to a society without injustice" and who achieves this in part by combining practice with a dialectical form of reason.[30] Similarly, today Amy Allen argues critical theorists should mine psychology for methods to turn some of the resentments these reactionary movements draw on into opportunities to instead engage people in progressive causes. She writes that Nancy Fraser is right to say that those who turn to reactionary political movements are responding to real political crises that deserve acknowledgement, even if their reactionary responses are misguided. Allen writes,

> If Fraser's analysis is compelling, as I think it is…then we need a different kind of psychoanalytic language to help us understand the deep irrationality of our politics and the possibilities for moving beyond our current impasses. We need a psychoanalytic framework that can help us to understand what Fraser characterises as the "deepening divisions, even hatreds, long simmering but recently raised to a fever pitch by Trump."[31]

We need such a theory not only to describe the ways in which subjects are alienated from one another, but also how they are alienated from themselves, and their real political circumstances. Allen argues that critical theorists have a duty to develop a stronger psychological model of the modern subjects of capitalism, both those who are reactionaries and those who appear to be progressive. If critical theory is to live out its

[30] Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Vol. 1. A&C Black, 1972: p. 221.

[31] Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*. Vol. 73. Columbia University Press, 2020: pp. 191-192.

methodological commitment to being a handmaiden to social movements, one actively engaged in aiding political struggle, those who practise it will need to go further in understanding and addressing what Theodor Adorno, in discussing ideology, termed "necessary false consciousness." [32]

Despite their stated commitments to social movements and social change, however, many critical theorists write little about what it entails to hold this commitment to reflective practice in the real world. As James Bohman writes, modern thinkers following in the footsteps of Habermas, like Thomas McCarthy, do not yet touch this point in any detail.[33] Critical theorists may yet have further to go methodologically if they wish to combine the commitments of critical theory with the pragmatist commitment to praxis. And while there are a number of theorists who at least engage with critical theory (for example, Wilfred Sellars, Richard Bernstein or Ray Brassier) who are very committed to the pragmatist tradition specifically, it is rare that these critical theorists expend their energies on the question of aiding social movements, disrupting false consciousness, or even understanding the specific ways that it is formed.

[32] Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords.* Translated by Henry W. Pickford. Columbia University Press, 2005, 1963/69.

[33] James Bohman, "Participants, Observers, and Critics: Practical Knowledge, Social Perspectives and Critical Pluralism." *Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn.* MIT Press, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, 2001: pp. 87-113.

A Response to Some Objections to Theories of False Consciousness

Despite these apparent strong imperatives to study ideologies and false consciousness, some theorists involved in left-wing and critical theories have objected to or rejected the idea of false consciousness and the study of ideology. Perhaps most notably, around the 1970s, theories of ideology became distinctly unfashionable. In the book *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, written at the height of scepticism about false consciousness in the early 80s, sociologists Nicholas Abermcrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner argued against the idea that working class people embrace a world order distinctly to their disadvantage because of a dominant ideology that prevents the majority of people from recognising their own political interests. Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner argued that working class people do not in fact generally endorse the existing world order; instead they merely submit to it for lack of a better alternative, due to a "dull compulsion of economic relations" (this phrase a quote from Marx).[34] Similarly, in his book *On Voluntary Servitude*, Rosen argues that it is just as possible that the oppressed fail to overthrow their masters not because they are deceived but due to a problem of coordination and a failure to achieve collective action.[35] And in *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Adam Przeworksi argues that while many subjects might think socialism is more normatively attractive than capitalism, they are not prepared to risk the chaos and harm to their standards of living that such a transition

[34] Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner. *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*. Routledge, 2014.

[35] Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology.* John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

would involve.[36] Doubtless some aspects of these objections may well be true: there may indeed be a large number of people who simply accept the political order of their world not because they think it is good but because they think there are no good alternatives. But this does not provide a full dismissal of the idea of ideology or false consciousness. Firstly, it does not explain why (for example) so many impoverished people vote for the parties that cut their public services and benefits the most: after all, even if they do not think some revolutionary solution to their woes is possible, they might still choose to vote for a more progressive party or not vote at all. Secondly, the belief that there is no alternative may itself be a form of ideological belief, rather than mere pragmatism. As theorist Mark Fisher put it, many live with a sense that the world as it currently is the only possible way of living, and therefore do not seek or demand political change. What Fisher calls “capitalist realism” is an ideological idea and affect, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."[37] And thirdly, while there may no longer be one single dominant ideology in modern western societies, (e.g. no consensus on economic or political ideals) there may still be several powerful ideologies at work behind many people’s seemingly individual beliefs. For example, the idea that if one works hard one will get ahead may be extremely powerful as a force in the mind of a Tory voter hoping to open a small business, an American who also believes in the prosperity gospel, a working-class immigrant who votes Labour, or even a struggling postdoc who holds this belief half-

[36] Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.

[37] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* John Hunt Publishing, 2009: p. 2

consciously while criticising themselves for it. All these people may be under the sway of this kind of ideological belief, despite the fact that it harms them and serves the interests of those in power. In this sense Michael Rosen, for example, may perhaps construct a straw man when he insists that theories of ideology only work if they are "self-maintaining systems" that are automatically generated in the same way across a wide range of societies; it may be that ideologies arise and function in a variety of ways, even within the same societies.

In other words, dismissals of the idea of ideology that rely on the idea that people choose not to resist an oppressive social order simply out of "realism" or resignation often wrongly assume that ideology and false consciousness take the form of rigid systems of belief, where ideology is a single, unified, top-down driven set of explicitly political beliefs, and false consciousness entails avidly holding these beliefs despite their harmful effects on oneself and others. These dismissals of ideology and false consciousness thus miss the ways people can still hold beliefs that harm them and obscure their political interests even if they reject ideas that are presented by elites and major institutions. For example, it is notably not in the interests of most elites for middle- or working-class people to believe in anti-vaccination conspiracy theories during a pandemic; rather, this particular piece of false consciousness has likely emerged as an unintended consequence of an increasingly individualised worldview created through decades of neoliberalism, as well as declining trust in institutions, not to mention poorly regulated social media. The evolution of the internet, in particular, means that ideas come not only top-down (as in a newspaper or television age) but via peer-to-peer networks, so that ideology, including harmful ideologies, are constituted

horizontally and "from below." Because these kinds of "bottom up" and horizontal harmful ideological ideas have recently taken on increasing political importance, renewed attention to the question of ideology is required, and new theories will be needed if critical theorists are to make sense of the 21st century.

Similarly, some sceptics of false consciousness have argued the idea is unrealistic because there is, in fact, a great deal of resistance to oppression. Tracing the rebellion of slaves, lower caste people, serfs, and other oppressed groups, James C. Scott argues that it is in fact remarkable how *much* resistance and revolt have happened throughout history.[38] Scott rejects both "thick" and "thin" theories of ideology (i.e. theories where people truly endorse the system, and theories where they are merely resigned). He also argues there is far more resistance to oppression than historical records capture, because this is in the interests of all parties involved. Both these points may well be true. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no meaningful phenomenon that might be termed "false consciousness." Instead, even if only some members of a society come to believe in systems that are bound up with their own oppression, and even if they do so only in intermittent ways, this still goes some way to preventing systematic change. Indeed, in the observable world false consciousness is generally "patchy" and inconsistent, both within populations and within individuals, but that distorting and misleading ideas nevertheless do significant work in upholding systems of domination and oppression—encouraging people to rationalise away discomfort, conform at least some of the time to the status quo, accept poor life outcomes and so on.

[38] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* Yale University Press, 1990: p. 79.

Another common objection to the theory of ideology is that it lacks a clear mechanism in existing literature and therefore is a dubious area of study. Michael Rosen, for example, rejects the study of ideology on the basis that the traditional Marxist explanations given are without sufficient mechanisms (i.e. what might it really mean to say that ideology is the "upside down reflection" of society, and how might that inversion come to be?). This is a sensible point, as there are not yet sufficient, convincing, robust accounts of how ideology works. Yet this notably does not mean that ideology or false consciousness do not exist or could not be better understood (a point Rosen does somewhat concede).

Yet another objection to theories of false consciousness is that they assume too much of a fixed or innate interiority for the political subject, a "truth" about the internal world of the subject that may be either unmeasurable or untrue. Objections like these are especially prevalent in the work of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. Althusser argues that ideology "has no outside," but also that "it is nothing but outside."[39] For Althusser, subjectivity is what ideology does, the result of its *interpellation* of the subjects of history. There is little room in this explanation for individual psychology or agency. Some readers of Althusser, like Warren Montag, argue that this means that for Althusser, "There are only exteriorities. . . . Ideas, beliefs, consciousness are always immanent in the irreducible materiality of discourses, actions, practices."[40] These sorts of descriptions arguably offer no point from which

[39] Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Bidet, and G. M Goshgarian. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, London: Verso. 2014: p. 262.

[40] Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*, Durham: Duke University Press. 2013: pp. 154-55.

one could view consciousness as either false or true, since it is necessarily a reflection of the power relations in which one is involved and in some sense inherently true to them; concerns about people believing things against their interests do not necessarily enter into this kind of calculus. In many ways, the following work simply rejects this type of limited analysis of subjectivity, insisting that there is an individual psychology worth commenting on when it comes to false consciousness, at least in the sense that each individual person has an experience of discomfort when forced to reconcile their beliefs with their social reality. At the same time, I do not wholly reject the points that Althusser and Foucault make about the way subjectivity is politically constructed. Indeed, as the mononymic artist Mattin writes in *Social Dissonance*, one of the only books in social or political theory to focus closely on dissonance theory, noting how individuals experience this painful and individualising form of subjectivity does not negate the way it is socially constructed. One can accept the constructed nature of the self and view this all the more reason to understand how it is constructed, how it "works." Mattin, for example, concurs with Samo Tomšič's claim that capitalism relies on and generates 'the strong ego of a fictitious economic subject (the narcissism of private interest) and social segregation."[41] The modern ego may well be built in part on the transition from a postwar welfare state and mass culture (which supported one kind of sense of self) to another, neoliberal self in recent years, which indicates the need for new theories about the newest forms of subjectivity. Mattin seeks to do this using the ideas in the cognitive science literature to in turn develop methods for deconstructing

[41] Mattin, *Social Dissonance*. MIT Press, 2022: 165. Quote from Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan.* Verso Books, 2015: p. 61.

the self and exposing it as constructed in the first place—not only writing but also sound and performance experiments. Ultimately, he writes, he is "interested in breaking the inner fourth wall: the self-perception that we as individuals are stable selves and the belief that we are already subjects with agency. Breaking this inner fourth wall implies exposing the performance of the self as a historically specific and social reifying process."[42] Needless to say, although I share an interest in using dissonance theory to understand modern neoliberal subjectivity, I am not pursuing a similar methodology. No performance art or musical experiments are at play in this work. Indeed, my project diverges from Mattin's in several ways, most notably that it takes a closer look at the psychology literature and builds from there. I also avoid the aspects of his writing that involve argument by analogy, where he portrays sonic dissonance and cognitive dissonance as meaningfully similar.

Indeed, my approach is more deeply engaged with the psychological research of cognitive dissonance than Mattin's work, than Habermas' brief use of cognitive dissonance theory to discuss the cognitive difficulty of translating into secularised reasoning, or indeed the work of critical theorists like Robin Celikates, who briefly writes about dissonance theory in his book *Critique as Social Practice.*[43] This arguably leaves me open to another possible objection, that to apply psychology in this way at all is to psychologise, or reduce political issues to merely psychological phenomena. While I concede that it is possible to apply psychology to political issues in a

[42] Mattin p. 195.

[43] Robin Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

reductionist manner, it is also possible to use psychology without reducing politics to psychology. In fact the Frankfurt School and other Marxist interpreters of Freud built psychology into the methodology of their project from the start, and for a reason, as they saw it impossible to understand how oppression could continue to exist without an understanding of human psychology, which they in turn saw as necessarily an appropriate object of science. I agree with this. While there are, unquestionably, many aspects of psychological science that require a critical eye because they are deeply shaped by the drive towards profit and instrumental reasoning (for example, a great deal of psychological research is, in essence, about making human beings more productive), I nevertheless see the brain, like the body and for that matter the climate, as a bio-social phenomenon, one that cannot be captured by empirical scientific research alone but which is nevertheless a phenomenon best understood with some empirical scientific research incorporated in the analysis. Rather than reject scientific research on the mind entirely, it seems vital to me that political theorists incorporate its insights critically, that they, to quote the critical psychologist William Broughton, do as critical psychologists do and "rather than [reach] the conclusion that [our] discipline [can] only psychologise politics, [set] about the task of politicising psychology."[44] One effective way of avoiding psychologism (an issue which I return to in the next chapter) is to take up the specifics of psychology and implement them in a broader theory of political consciousness, rather than use psychology as a total explanation or rely on faulty folk psychology. Later in this work, I specifically do this by turning to the body of literature about the West's "WEIRD"ness (its cultural specificity) and point to the

[44]John M. Broughton, "An Introduction to Critical Developmental Psychology." *Critical Theories of Psychological Development*. Boston, MA: Springer US, 1987, p. 20.

way this research intersects with dissonance literature and how this means dissonance may be particularly strong in our current, individualistic culture. Although I advocate for the study of dissonance and similar phenomena, I do not understand these as merely neutral biological facts. I also return to the question of avoiding psychologising in one's interpretations in further chapters. Nevertheless, I do not assume that cognition, or cognitive dissonance itself, are necessarily fixed or static human experiences.

Finally, theories of false consciousness are also sometimes criticised for being pretentious or condescending, theories created by intellectuals who regard themselves as an elite vanguard that know better than the oppressed and have cultivated "true consciousness" for them. As Eagleton puts it, "to suggest that someone ought to adopt a particular political position may sound peculiarly patronising, dictatorial and elitist. Who am I to presume that I know what is in someone else's interests? Isn't this just the style in which ruling groups and classes have spoken for centuries?"[45] This view can also be seen as having low faith in human rationality or being too pessimistic about the abilities of oppressed people. It is surely possible for discussions of ideology and false consciousness to bleed over into a condescending depiction of the abilities of oppressed people. Nevertheless, it can both be true that the oppressed experience false consciousness and that they also sometimes have the ability to develop political consciousness. As I will argue in greater detail in later chapters, it is possible to develop a theory that takes both these possibilities into account. Indeed, from a psychological perspective false consciousness is an intriguing phenomenon precisely because it differs from the study of "bad reasoning" or mere stupidity; it appears to be

[45] Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction. Verso Books*, 1991: p. 211.

a form of unconscious, motivated thought that can occur even in otherwise capable and intelligent people. Moreover, even when people experience false consciousness, that does not mean that all their epistemic processes are faulty, or that there is nothing meaningful about their ideas. Some if not all religious beliefs are doubtless false, yet it is still possible to say that in many cases they are meaningful in that they may motivate people to live well or do good.

Furthermore, many ideas within harmful ideologies are hugely demeaning to oppressed groups, from the idea of "lazy immigrants" and people of colour to assumptions that women like to be sexually harassed or demeaned. Understanding how these ideologies work should enable theorists and movements to counter these demeaning ideas rather than look down upon the oppressed. Moreover, false consciousness itself is often painful and involves forms of suffering, and this is true of dissonance discomfort also. As Neal Harris puts it, "At its simplest, people do not want to suffer psychopathologies: they wish their anxieties and neuroses to be eased, thus they have an investment in social pathologies being transcended".[46] Ultimately, as Terry Eagleton puts it, the study of false consciousness can be aimed at restoring the dignity of the oppressed, rather than being condescending about their abilities: it is important to counter false consciousness "not only because it contributes to shoring up a dominative power, but because it is contrary to the dignity of somewhat rational creatures to live in a permanent state of delusion."[47] Despite the possibly condescending implications of a theory of false consciousness, there are many good

[46] Neal Harris, *Critical Theory and Social Pathology.* Manchester University Press, 2022: p. 25.

[47] Eagleton, p. 43.

reasons to continue to seek to understand why people retain harmful understandings of the world deeply entwined with their own oppression.

A Minimalist Definition for an Explanatory Theory of False Consciousness

Critical theorist Robin Celikates has noted that in addition to an explanatory *challenge* for theories of ideology, the challenge of explaining how ideologies work, there are two other challenges with theories of ideology: the *normative or criterial* challenge of how we can know whether an ideology is problematic or wrong, and the methodological or epistemological question about the standpoint of the critic themselves.[48] These are all very important valid considerations. However, for the purposes of this project I have chosen to largely focus on the value of explanatory aspects of theories of ideology in this work, putting aside the other two challenges, as this is where I feel psychological research can be of most help to the critical theorist. In lieu of answering these other challenges in detail, I provide a pared down set definition of false consciousness or related forms of ideology. (This is meant only for the purpose of this dissertation, not for all purposes ever).

The pared-down version I employ for the purposes of this project is as follows: I focus on false consciousness as "false" not in the sense that it is factually false but rather false in the sense that it misleads subjects about their agential possibilities.[49]

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[48] Robin Celikates, "From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique: On the Critique of Ideology after the Pragmatic Turn." *Constellations* 13.1 (2006): pp. 21-40.

[49] Naturally others have defined it differently; Celikates for example defines ideology as something that "blocks the development and/or exercise of the reflexive and critical capacities". This too seems a worthy definition for another type or project.

False consciousness in this limited sense (in my view in the defensible or salvageable sense of the term) is not exactly about the literal truth or falseness of statements as if they were simply empirical claims, but rather the possibilities for action that those beliefs enable or disable for that subject. For example, the belief that "hard work allows you to get ahead" may be true in some contexts, but still be a part of a form of false consciousness that prevents some subjects from recognising that they are in fact workers in a precarious dehumanising gig economy rather than budding entrepreneurs who can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They might think, "I love the flexibility of working for Deliveroo" or even, in another field, "It is fine that college pays me below living wage for my tutorials, because I get to teach things I am really passionate about."[50] This in turn may discourage them from joining unions or engaging in other forms of collective action to better their working conditions or change the political system.

Of course, theorists including myself still carry their own implicit normative assumptions about what it looks like when subjects are misled (I tend to think workers encouraged to work hard as individuals rather than unionise are misled about their true best possibilities for action. Similarly women who are told their true nature is to be homemakers are not facing their full possibilities for action.) But much of what follows works with only the above minimal definition in mind, such that those with different concerns and views might still make use of it. This is partially for reasons of space, and partially because of a recurring insight about action-possibilities in modern

[50] These examples gratefully taken from my cohort-mate Jasper Friedrichs.

psychological studies: the subjects often come to apparently irrational beliefs in order to preserve their sense of agency.[51] In the narrow world of psychology studies, the term agency refers to subjects' sense of free choice; in the wider context of political life, it may be more meaningfully understood as the ability for subjects to direct their own lives and make change in their social world. Psychological studies point to the way that in order to continue to feel a strong sense of agency, subjects actually repressed thoughts about the real contradictions of their everyday lives. It is this complex and contradictory relationship between subjectivity and agency that has remained central to my reading throughout this project. A useful definition of agency for this project at the political level is the ability for subjects to recognise, act on, and even develop new action-possibilities for themselves related to political issues. It is then possible to understand "false consciousness" as quite simply, a set of ideas or ways of thinking (which may in some factual sense involve statements that are "true") but which nevertheless limit the subject's ability to recognise or construct future possibilities for action. This is especially important because action and knowledge are often part of an epistemological loop: that is, once we are limited in future actions we can take we are also limited in our ability to learn from the actions we did not take; what limits our action-possibilities also limits our ability to know more. In this way of thinking about things pragmatically, agency and knowledge are always related. Indeed, if one accepts a constructivist approach to the truth, where many truths, at minimum, are constructed by the knower and/or their society, then it is only through the exercise of agency that new truths can be developed or known. Subjects who are not aware of some of their

[51] In the studies I discuss in this and the next chapter, I provide key examples of this, and I describe similar points about the action-oriented line of research in Chapter Six.

political action-possibilities are not just prevented from knowing an existing truth but from constructing a preferable one.

Using this concept of false consciousness allows critical theorists, at least those with commitments to both pragmatism and historical materialism, to defend the idea of false consciousness, define it narrowly enough to use it, and to describe what it looks like in practice in more specific and accurate ways. False consciousness describes beliefs political subjects hold that, as judged over the course of the unfolding of history, are shown to have played a part in preventing these subjects from recognising their possibilities for political action. These beliefs are "false" not because they are falsifiable (they may even be factually true) but because they constrain and oppress the subjects from pursuing new ways of being in the world. This is a minimally normative vision that still allows for some exploration of the problems of ideology and the challenges of emancipatory politics. It mainly assumes that there are some understandings of one's political world that are more accurate, simply because they more clearly demonstrate the possibilities for action that will lead to peoples' emancipation and which better allow them to understand the structure of power and social pathologies. Conversely, our minimal normative assumptions suggest, there are some ways of understanding the political world that leave people feeling overly hopeless, or that mischaracterise the possibilities for political action available to the subject. This emphasis on action and people's subjective state with regard to it also resonates with many recent writings about the subjectivity of the subjects of late capitalism in the writing of left-wing theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Mark Fisher, who writes that subjects become affectively attached to false possibilities for action in

their lives or cease to be able to imagine alternatives to their current means of existence.[52]

At the same time as this definition of false consciousness maintains many of the original concerns of Marxist theorists and Critical Theorists: it does not assume that political subjects are always and inevitably passive dupes. Indeed, the description of the human subject here is that of an action-oriented creature, deeply invested in its own possibilities for agency, even if this psychological predisposition can sometimes work against it. In this sense my work is an attempt to salvage ideology theory from some of the more problematic formulations of the idea of false consciousness; to preserve what is useful about the concept while transcending that which is overly pessimistic and unhelpful.

Criteria for an Explanatory Theory of False Consciousness

In addition to using this very specific definition of false consciousness, one which emphasises the way beliefs affect subjects' ability to perceive future action-possibilities, I also have developed several key criteria for successful theories of false consciousness. These are criteria for (at least some of) what such a theory must have, and what underlying psychological theories must support, if such theories are to be useful. I have chosen these categories partially to emphasise the importance of action in my minimalist definition of false consciousness (for example, the criteria of escapability refers to what helps subjects recognise new ways of taking action). This seems especially important given critical theorists' frequently-stated aims of aiding

[52] See once again Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, as well as Fisher's book *Capitalist Realism*.

social movements, and social movements' presumed need to get people to take action. I have also included some of these criteria because they help get at some of the specific difficulties posed by "false consciousness" (for example, its "perversity") which must be overcome in order for social movements to hope to mobilise new groups of people. I will refer to these categories throughout the rest of the work.

A "worm's eye view" (as opposed to bird's eye view): a useful theory of false consciousness should describe what occurs at the level of the subject and their psychology, not just at a larger structural or social level. This might include the transmission of ideas, affective experiences, conscious or unconscious thoughts or emotional experiences, or other phenomena, but it should be a defined sequence of subjective experiences with a psychological grounding.

Some theorists I mention in this dissertation, like Althusser, and Habermas, offer high-level structural explanations for peoples' obscured political consciousness, without then providing a corresponding sense of how structural elements of society precisely impact and alter the psychological processes, choices, conscious and unconscious beliefs and attitudes of the individual. They do not explain the mechanisms at work in the mind. This is insufficient for emancipatory theory because without the mechanisms it is difficult to think about changing the mind, and combating false consciousness either prior to or alongside structural change. Of course, some theorists may argue that structural conditions changing is the only way for subjects to escape false consciousness is for societal structures to change, but this, I argue momentarily, violates another important aspect of useful theories of false consciousness, which is

that they should allow for escapability. Moreover, it may be (indeed it is very likely) that some shift of political consciousness is necessary first, or alongside, structural change to allow a structural change to occur.

Previous accounts by the Frankfurt School have sometimes been too totalising and hopeless. By returning to the psychological grounds for the process by which false consciousness is generated, it may be possible to better understand not only how false consciousness "works" for political subjects, but also how it might be better overcome. Moreover, a detailed worm's eye approach helps theorists avoid vagueness, anything that looks like mysticism, or folk psychology.

Escapability: some theorists provide overly pessimistic takes on false consciousness, such that there is very little that allows for an escape from the ways capitalism and other social forces shape subjectivity. The first generation of Frankfurt School theorists, in particular, have been accused of this by their student Habermas who wrote that the early theories of the first generation Frankfurt School theorists did not leave "anything in reserve to which it might appeal; and when the forces of production enter into a baneful symbiosis with the relations of production that they were supposed to blow wide open, there is no longer any dynamism upon which critique could base its hope."[53]

[53] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. MIT press, 1990: p. 118.

While despair about people's political consciousness can be tempting, too much despair negates the emancipatory task of the critical theorist; implying any intervention at the level of strategy or ideas might be irrelevant. It is also condescending to imagine false consciousness is something that is permanent or inescapable for those who experience it, rather than something that we all experience to different degrees in different ways at different times, (and which critical theorists could perhaps theorise and help others resist).

Patchiness: some theories of false consciousness are insufficient because they do not explain why two people who are in otherwise relatively similar social circumstances may have very different levels of political consciousness. This is often a symptom of an insufficient account of the mechanisms involved in both interpellation into ideology and achieving better political consciousness. Useful theories of false consciousness are able to explain the relative "patchiness" of political consciousness within the human population, because they are able to describe how people become drawn into these belief systems, and how they might come to escape them at least some of the time. Structurally similarly-positioned individuals with very different political consciousness can thus be explained at least in part by whether they have undergone various psychological and interpersonal processes. Good theories can also explain the "patchiness" of belief systems *within* individuals. As I will discuss in my chapter on Habermas and Honneth, universalising theories of psychological development like the ones they employ in their writings fall short in part because they cannot explain why individuals may reason astutely about some political issues and simultaneously reason

poorly about others. In other words, individuals, and not just populations, can be "patchy" in their political thinking, strong in some areas and weak in others, and it is therefore an important test of the usefulness and accuracy of theories whether they can account for this social and individual "patchiness."

Perversity: Some theorists (for example Sally Haslanger) understand ideology as a set of cognitive errors, bad conceptual architecture in need of some kind of replacement.[54] However, this is an insufficient criteria for understanding political consciousness and the lack thereof. A further common aspect of harmful ideological beliefs is that they are difficult to dislodge. Indeed, one of the more baffling aspects of false consciousness is how strongly people may cling to these harmful beliefs, even when others seek to persuade them away from these beliefs, and even when they have good self-interested reasons to abandon them. In other words, to theorise something like false consciousness successfully, theorists have to be able to explain why people sometimes "*fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation."* [55]

Building on Freud's use of the term, we might describe this aspect of false consciousness as the *perversity* of the human subject: that is, the way human beings often are drawn to self-destructive behaviours, to beliefs that do not serve them, to repetitive behaviours and interactions that merely repeat destructive and painful

[54] Sally Haslanger, "I—Culture and Critique." *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume.* Vol. 91. No. 1. Oxford University Press, 2017.

[55] Part of a longer quote describing insights from Spinoza and Wilhelm Reich, from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Penguin, 2009: p. 31.

experiences. Freudian descriptions of this tendency in human beings tend to describe it in terms of the unconscious and repression, reenactment of previous unhelpful patterns, unconscious resistance to new ways of thinking, and even mental illness.[56] The death drive played a prominent role in many theories of human perversity as well. Later, drive theories fell out of fashion. It may not be necessary to have a theory of drives in every theory of false consciousness, but it is insufficient to have a theory of ideology or false consciousness that does not provide some explanation for why people are not only bad at recognising their own possibilities for political action but are also passionately drawn to defend oppressive beliefs. This is the *perversity* of false consciousness, a stubborn and even potentially self-destructive aspect that comes, at least some of the time, alongside faulty political consciousness. Theories that do not contain an account of perversity cannot easily explain the vehemence with which many people defend these beliefs.

Indeed, the persistence, the "stickiness" of people's attachment to oppressive systems and belief structures, has remained an important concern for social theorists, even as they have eschewed the term false consciousness. For example, Lauren Berlant terms related affective phenomena *cruel optimism*, while Judith Butler describes how subjects form "passionate attachments" to the systems of power in which they live (in the psychic life of power).[57]

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[56] See discussion of two versions of this in Daniel Cho, "Thanatos and Civilization: Lacan, Marcuse, and the death drive." *Policy Futures in Education* 4.1, 2006: pp. 18-30.

[57] See Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism." *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2010: pp. 93-117. Also Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press, 1997.

Why Cognitive Dissonance Theory?

If the study of false consciousness remains important as ever (even if re-definition of the problem is required), what new conceptual resources might be brought to the problem today? This project presents at least one possible conceptual aid: cognitive dissonance theory. Cognitive dissonance is defined as a psychological phenomenon in which subjects experience intense discomfort when they encounter contradictions between two or more of their beliefs and/or actions. Dissonance often, though not always, results in "irrational" dismissal of challenges to one's belief system, or to shifts of belief towards harmful ideologies.

There are at least three key reasons to focus on cognitive dissonance. Firstly, cognitive dissonance arises when subjects encounter contradictions, which brings it in line with an existing body of literature described above that seeks to address the question of false consciousness by understanding it as a process that conceals these painful contradictions. It is also a drives-based approach with an account of the unconscious, and is thus able to provide an account of how subjects rationalise away these uncomfortable contradictions. Secondly, a great deal of literature on cognitive dissonance demonstrates that dissonance is likely related to and/or triggered by reference to subjects' understanding of themselves and their sense of agency; that is, subjects experience dissonance as painful in part because they have encountered an idea that threatens their sense of themselves as capable or good agents. This in turn suggests that dissonance is particularly likely to happen when subjects are considering questions about political or social issues, and that it may therefore be an especially relevant psychological phenomenon for considering questions of political

consciousness, as political and social issues generally relate fairly directly to our sense of agency and ethics. Finally, some empirical literature suggests dissonance is triggered most strongly when subjects consider political issues, and it may thus be particularly relevant to failures of political consciousness. I shall now address each of these points in turn in order to justify turning to this theory, before diving into it in greater detail in the next chapter.

Historical Fit and An Emphasis on Rationalising Away Contradictions

Dissonance theory is a particularly promising theory for use in critical theory because it pertains to how subjects reconcile contradictions between their own beliefs or actions, and how they frequently do this by rationalising away contradictions. *Rationalisation*, which I define as using reasons or logic to justify beliefs that are in fact motivated by something else, is a significant aspect of false consciousness because it describes one of the ways that people maintain false consciousness even when faced with reasons to question the social order. It is the way that they "cover over" contradictions that would otherwise pose challenges to their worldview. Several different strands of left-wing political theory also make use of the idea that false consciousness and ideology are what serves to cover over or obscure the contradictions in the social order. As Andrew Glyn notes, although among Marxists the idea of the "contradictions of capital" is "sometimes used, in a very loose sense, to describe virtually any malfunction or indeed objectionable feature of the capitalist system," Marx used it in a very specific way, to describe features of the economic and social order that involve "a contradiction between a society's system of economic

organisation and its capacity to develop its productive potential."[58] Marx's work also addresses some psychological aspects of the way subjects experience these contradictions, as in the concept of commodity fetishism, in which subjects experience a distorted consciousness such that value of things is no longer about their use-value but about their value in exchange. This phenomenon of "commodity fetishism" is just one of many aspects of social life that are (to use the famous term employed by the Marxist philosopher György Lukács) "reified" and seen as falsely natural or innate. [59] Marx more generally notes regularly that people's consciousness is the product of material relations, and not the other way around, as when he writes "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." [60] False consciousness is also described by Engels, in 1893, in a letter where he writes that ideology is a process of false consciousness in the sense that "the real motives impelling [the agent] remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives."[61] From the start, then, the Marxist tradition carried with it the idea that people are not fully conscious even of their own thoughts and motivations, and that this enables them to mentally obscure the contradictions of their social order and hold or maintain oppressive beliefs. A similar implication lies in

[58] Andrew Glyn, "Contradictions of Capitalism." *Marxian Economics*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1990, p. 104.

[59] See eg. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. MIT Press, 1972: pp. 83-222.

[60] From Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." Trans. Yuri Spodnikov. *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol 29*: Marx: 1857-1861 (1987): p. 263.

[61] Friedrich Engels, "Marx-Engels Correspondence 1893: Engels to Franz Mehring." https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm, 20 October 2022.

the way Marx described religion as "the opium of the people," a set of comforting beliefs that serve to mask the harsh reality of modern life.[62] Religion might in this context serve as a way for oppressed subjects to rationalise away their discomfort with the existing order of things by telling themselves they will receive divine reward or justice.

This focus on the rationalising-away of contradictions is also a common usage in the writings of the Frankfurt School, whose understanding of false consciousness draws not only on Marx and the idea of commodity fetishism but also on Freud. As Terry Eagleton notes, false consciousness is more or less an innate part of Freudian theory, where it is less a theory of class and more a part of the "psychopathology of everyday life."[63] Freud mostly does not address the political aspects of this part of human consciousness, but he does occasionally touch on them. In *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, for example, Freud specifically notes that "[t]he suppressed classes can be emotionally attached to their masters; in spite of their hostility to them they may see in them their ideals."[64] Carrying on in both the Freudian and the Marxist tradition, the members of the Frankfurt School sought to understand not only the structural contradictions of capital but the way that those within capitalist societies rationalised away evidence of these contradictions. In their 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, Adorno and Horkheimer write that reason and reasoning are constrained by

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[62] This is from Karl Marx, "From Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law." *Sociology of Religion. Routledge*, 2015: pp. 27-28.

[63] Eagleton p. 176.

[64] Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 21: The Future of an Illusion-Civilization & Its Discontents & Other Works*. Vol. 21. National Geographic Books, 2001, p. 13.

the development of modern technologies and cultural forms in such a way that the type of instrumental reasoning celebrated by enlightenment thinkers became totalising and oppressive. This type of obstructed political reasoning is expressed in fascism and totalitarianism particularly but also the state-planned economies and modern consumerist societies in the grip of a mass culture industry.[65] In a related vein, in his 1950 study entitled *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno (alongside co-authors) similarly provides an account of distorted consciousness in modern society, one that makes some individuals more likely to acquire fascist beliefs.[66] Through a questionnaire, interviews, and theory, the authors found a correlation between key apparently non-political views and a preference for authoritarian rule. The authors argued that specific childhood experiences lead to key traits (including conventionality, rigidity, superstition, submission to authoritarian figures, cynicism, an insistence on "toughness," and exaggerated concerns about sex) which in turn cause people to accept authoritarian regimes. In other words, the study provides reason to theorise that modern life breeds a particular kind of pre-political disposition which in turn manifests politically in authoritarian views. A success in many ways, the study nevertheless focuses only on a narrow band of problematic beliefs and does not fully replicate when retested empirically.[67]

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[65] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Vol. 15. Verso, 1997. Here I focus especially closely on Adorno and Marcuse, in part because I return to address their thinking about the ego later on in these writings.

[66] Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality*. Verso Books, 2019.

[67] H. Edwin Titus, "F Scale Validity Considered Against Peer Nomination Criteria." *The Psychological Record* 18.3, 1968: pp. 395-403.

This interest in the psychology of false consciousness ran all the way through the writings of the first generation Frankfurt School thinkers, into their last years of their writing, and ultimately included an interest in the problem of contradictions. Adorno's criticism of the "identity principle" (for example, in his 1966 *Negative Dialectics*) can be understood in part as a critique of the way that identity thinking erases contradictions.[68] Similarly, in his 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse repeatedly describes the way that modern culture "flattens out" the contradictions between culture and social reality, so that art no longer has a radical potential; he argues that "the decisive difference [in modern subjectivity] is in the flattening out of the contrast (or conflict) between the given and the possible, between the satisfied and the unsatisfied needs."[69] Marcuse describes the structural creation, through consumerism and a relative level of affluence, of false needs and with them products that fill these needs and simultaneously quell the possibility of critical thought, so that modern subjects can, at best, engage only in acts of refusal of the current system—a refusal that was, at the time, embodied in the hippie and feminist movements.[70] By noticing and supporting these movements, Marcuse was more hopeful than Adorno or Horkheimer about the immediate possibilities for human liberation. Nevertheless he still viewed modern society as replete with the creation of false needs and the dimming of critical social thought such that people evade consciousness about the contradiction in the social order. All these works seek to explain how subjects grapple with their

[68] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. Routledge, 2003.

[69] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society. Routledge*, 2013, p. 10.

[70] *Ibid.*

social world and its contradictions, often by ignoring or mentally eliding these contradictions.

Ultimately, dissonance theory is a promising avenue of research because it addresses the same question of how subjects psychologically handle contradictions in their world. It furthermore remains usefully compatible with much that has already been theorised. It contains some of the same foundational assumptions that have long proved fruitful in psychoanalysis in that it is a drives-based theory that acknowledges the role of the unconscious and the irrationality of the subject. In contrast to the behaviourist theories that were popular when dissonance theory was first theorised, it does not describe a mostly rational utility-maximising subject. Instead, although it acknowledges that subjects are often rational as well, it describes a subject with an unconscious and drives, including a drive to rationalise away painful inconsistencies in one's sense of self and understanding of the world in order to preserve one's sense of agency and/or meaning. This makes it particularly suitable for critical theorists, and complimentary with their otherwise-usually-psychoanalytic approach. Indeed, although in this work I encourage critical theorists to move beyond an approach that only makes use of psychoanalysis, I do not argue that psychoanalysis is not useful or needs to be contested as useful approach for critical theorists; rather, I am merely suggesting other forms of psychological science can also be used, sometimes even together with psychoanalytic insights.

A Focus on the Question of Agency

A second reason dissonance is likely to arise and be a relevant aspect of analysis in political situations, i.e. when people consider their relationship to structures

of power and domination, is because it is a phenomenon triggered by subjects' sense of self, their sense of agency, their sense of their future action-possibilities, or some combination of these three. In many cases, political issues involve at least one or two if not all three of these possible dissonance triggers, whether or not those experiencing the dissonance recognise their concerns as political. Another way of thinking about this is that dissonance literature is closely related to how subjects understand their own agency (defined in the psychological literature in terms of apparent free choices and their perceived negative and positive effects, although it can of course be defined differently for critical theorists). Cognitive dissonance is therefore a ripe area for further study of how people's political attitudes are formed. This theoretical point is interesting on its own, but more so for being closely tied empirical evidence—along both sociological and psychological grounds—that dissonance may be at work in certain kinds of false consciousness. An example of this first phenomenon—dissonance's involvement with certain aspects of false consciousness—is the work of John T. Jost, a social psychologist unusual for his interest in the question of false consciousness. Alongside fellow researchers, Jost has developed his own theory about why the oppressed often view the systems they live in as fair, "system justification theory:"

> According to system justification theory, people are motivated to preserve the belief that existing social arrangements are fair, legitimate, justifiable, and necessary. The strongest form of this hypothesis, which draws on the logic of cognitive dissonance theory, holds that people who are most disadvantaged by the status quo would have the greatest psychological need to reduce ideological

> dissonance and would therefore be most likely to support, defend, and justify existing social systems,authorities, and outcomes.[71]

Jost notes that there are, even at a psychological level, numerous reasons why oppressed subjects will reason in this way: "Some reasons pertain to information processing factors, such as cognitive consistency and cognitive conservatism, attributional simplicity, uncertainty reduction, and epistemic needs for structure and closure…Other reasons are more overtly motivational, including the fear of equality, illusion of control, and the belief in a just world…"[72] While many of these psychological factors are common to all groups, including the elites in society, Jost argues that dissonance theory in particular is required to explain why those who a social system *least* benefits are in many cases *most* committed to justifying it.[73] Jost has argued in several papers that the sociological data about the views of the oppressed in the United States regarding the fairness of its economic system can be meaningfully interpreted as a rationalsation response to uncomfortable dissonance about the contradiction between their lived conditions and the ideology of the American Dream. In one study, for example Jost and his co-authors report:

> "… low income Latinos were more likely to trust in U.S. government officials and to believe that the government is run for the benefit of all than were high income Latinos… poor and Southern African Americans were more likely to subscribe to meritocratic ideologies than were African Americans who were more affluent and from the North..low income respondents and African Americans were more likely than others to believe that economic inequality is

[71] John T. Jost, et al. "Social Inequality and the Reduction of Ideological Dissonance on Behalf of the System: Evidence of Enhanced System Justification Among the Disadvantaged." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 33.1, 2003: p. 1.

[72] *Ibid* p. 15.

[73] Interestingly, a similar account, where working-class miners in Appalachia slowly come to internalise the ideals of those who oppress them, is provided in John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. University of Illinois Press, 1982.

> legitimate and necessary…Taken together, these findings provide support for the dissonance-based argument that people who suffer the most from a given state of affairs are paradoxically the least likely to question, challenge, reject, or change it."[74]

The cognitive dissonance involved may be created by the dissonance between the evidence from the world, on the one hand, of relative injustice and oppression and poor outcomes for individuals in the same position, and, on the other hand, a cultural and ideological belief that with hard work anything is possible or that they are in control of their own destiny personally. Many subjects appear to resolve this uncomfortable cognitive dissonance by doubling down on the idea that the system is fair. This appears consistently on a large scale and across a variety of political and social issues. Moreover, since resolving dissonance in this way preserves a (perhaps false) sense of agency and action-possibilities, this theory aligns with research that emphasises the importance of these as triggers for dissonance.[75]

Dissonance is Prominent Around Politics

Another set of studies provide further evidence that dissonance is particularly likely to be triggered by explicitly political issues. (Here and throughout this work I define "politics" and the term "political" broadly, as having to do with social and collective relations of power, those of the sort that can be influenced by group interventions.) In a 2016 study Jonas T. Kaplan, Sarah I. Gimbel and Sam Harris put

[74] *Ibid,* p. 1.

[75] See, for example, the emphasis on free choice in various studies collected by Joel Cooper and the central role of action and choice in many models. Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: 50 years of a Classic Theory*. Sage Publications, 2007: p. 14.

American self-identified liberals in an MRI machine and exposed them to evidence that contradicted a number of their views.[76] With probability values of less than .001 (strong statistical significance) they found that subjects' political views were much less likely to change as a result of exposure to contradictory evidence than were other, equally strongly held but not explicitly political beliefs. Moreover, changes to political views were far less likely to "stick" in a follow-up survey completed several weeks after the MRI test – in fact, participants returned to having almost identical political beliefs, while the strength of their non-political beliefs was somewhat altered by evidence against it even after a few weeks. The extreme ends of the study's results (as shown on the graph below) are telling.

[76] Jonas T. Kaplan, Sarah I. Gimbel, and Sam Harris. "Neural Correlates of Maintaining One's Political Beliefs in the Face of Counterevidence." *Scientific Reports* 6, 2016: 39589. The third author on this study is the well-known philosopher, author, and neuroscientist often considered one of the "Four Horsemen of Atheism." That I disagree with his views on many political subjects and am therefore made uncomfortable by appreciating his psychology study is arguably itself an example of cognitive dissonance.

N.b. In their supplementary materials the authors list the issue of "taxes on wealthy" as a political view (correctly, in my analysis) so I believe the graph I have carried over from their work has been colour coded incorrectly on that issue in error.

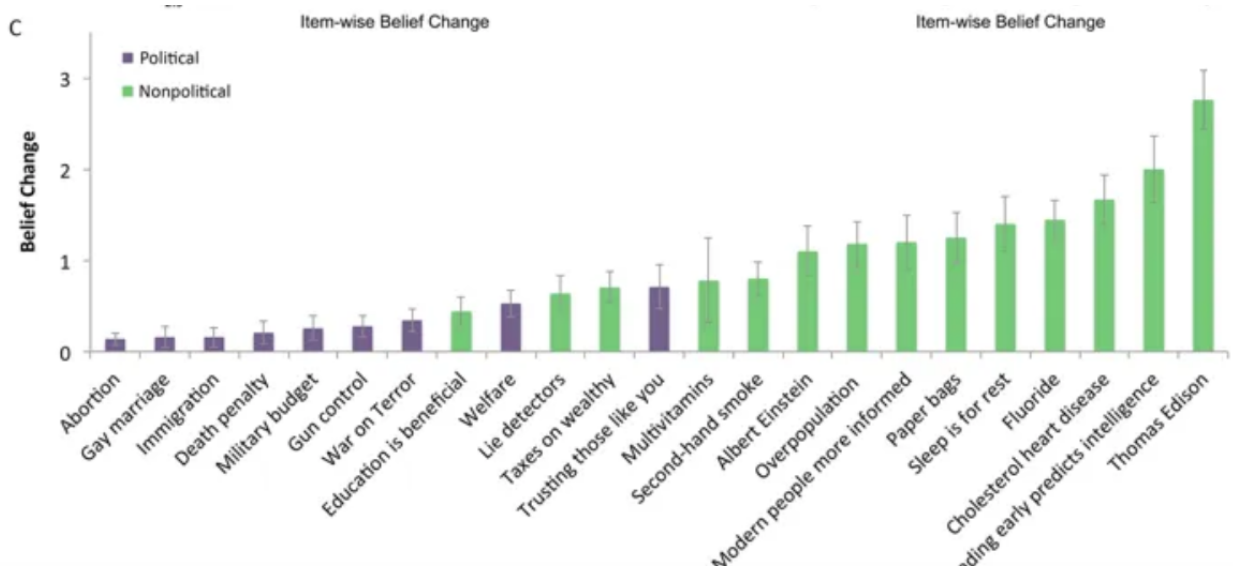

Figure drawn from paper in question.

On the far right side are topics where subjects were most likely to change their views. Subjects had a relatively easy time responding to evidence that Thomas Edison did not invent the first lightbulb, that early reading does not accurately predict intelligence, and that cholesterol is not a strong predictor of heart disease. Of these three topics, none are intrinsically about the moral value of the subjects' sense of self (though it is of course possible to moralise about health or parenting), none directly addresses their sense of how much agency they have, and, unless those in the MRI machine are parents of young children, only one provides an immediately obvious set of action-possibilities (whether or not to eat high cholesterol foods). In other words, these seemingly apolitical topics, which also happen to involve a relatively low interaction with subjects' sense of self, agency, and action-possibilities, likely trigger relatively low dissonance discomfort, and subjects accordingly appear to be able to tolerate any discomfort by simply changing their views in a way that lasts.

On the far left of the graph are topics where it is likely that subjects found contradictions far more painful and worked to rationalise away new information. This is evidenced by the fact that subjects changed their views very little no matter what evidence was provided to them, perhaps in order to rationalise away discomfort. It is also evidenced by the MRI scans which display different types of neural activity when one's political beliefs are questioned compared to one's non-political beliefs, which suggests different psychological reactions. As in other MRI related studies of cognitive dissonance, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is especially activated, indicating a specific regular biological presentation across individuals.[77] Another piece of evidence within this study for increased dissonance on political topics is the rapidity with which subjects sought to address challenges to their existing views. The researchers measured how long it took participants to first indicate they had read political statements they agreed with, then indicate they had read the contradictory evidence to those statements, and then rate whether their views had changed. The results were different for political views compared to other strongly held views; the study found that:

> On average, participants responded that they had read and understood the statements faster for the political statements...During the challenges, however, participants took longer to respond on the political challenges than the non-political challenges...When participants were asked to rate their belief in the statement following the challenges, their ratings for political statements were faster than for non-political statements.

It appears subjects understood the political statements more easily, but were more challenged by thinking about evidence that contradicted their views when the issue at hand was political. Contradictory evidence about political issues may have been more

[77] See also Keise Izuma, et al. "Neural Correlates of Cognitive Dissonance and Choice-induced Preference Change." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107.51, 2010: pp. 22014-22019.

uncomfortable than contradictions to non-political views, and taken more time to process. Nevertheless, subjects were more quickly certain of whether their views had changed (and they had in comparison changed very little) when it came to political issues. There was thus a fraught process of encountering evidence that one might be wrong about political issues, and a rush to dismiss it. If more research in this area provides similar findings, this will suggest that cognitive dissonance is particularly common in political reasoning compared to reasoning about other areas of life. As a result, subjects may rationalise away contradictory information or form beliefs retroactively to justify their behaviour more when it comes to political questions than other issues. For all these reasons, dissonance theory is an excellent candidate for political analysis because it appears likely that it is a phenomenon that is especially prevalent when people think about their political beliefs.

Similarly, in the "real world," research on rationalisation, (an effect of cognitive dissonance) has shown that people tend to shift their political views towards whatever their current status quo is. Research by Kristin Laurin, for example, has shown that "San Franciscans rationalised a ban on plastic water bottles, Ontarians rationalised a targeted smoking ban, and Americans rationalised the presidency of Donald Trump, more in the days immediately after these realities became current compared with the days immediately before."[78] For example, once a plastic water bottle ban was operationalised, San Fransiscans became in favour of such a ban, often although they had opposed it days earlier (and so on). This may be caused in part by

[78] Kristin Laurin, "Inaugurating Rationalisation: Three Field Studies Find Increased Rationalisation When Anticipated Realities Become Current." *Psychological Science 29.4,* 2018: pp. 483-495.

people adjusting their views to reduce dissonance between their views and their required actions and thus "going along" with such a change. Interestingly, these sorts of rationalisations seem most likely to occur when the political reality seems inevitable, and this may also indicate that subjects change their views to match an inescapable reality in order to feel less powerless. For example, in another study by Laurin and other co-authors, when subjects were told a ban on cell phones while driving was absolutely going to happen, they reported very little reactance, or resistant emotion, about this.[79] However, when they were told it was uncertain whether the ban would take place, they had strong negative emotions related to the ban in ways associated with resisting control by others. Furthermore, these differences were only evident when subjects were told about laws that would apply to them, rather than people in India (eg. emotion only arose with direct thoughts about one's own autonomy, rather than the intellectual permissibility of bans in the abstract). This suggests dissonance leads people to rationalise away discomfort with policies that control or restrict their lives when these appear inescapable, but are able to notice and express their dissatisfaction when it seems like resistance or changing the restrictions might be possible. If such research continues to bear similar findings this, in turn, suggests one of the most important functions of social movements is to provide a sense that things could be different, even if the outside world suggests otherwise.

There is also evidence that individuals change their minds about political issues after they take actions specific to their own lives. So, for example, in "The Turnaway Study," researchers followed people who had sought an abortion, tracking both those

[79] Kristin Laurin, Aaron C. Kay, and Gavan J. Fitzsimons. "Reactance Versus Rationalisation: Divergent Responses to Policies that Constrain Freedom." *Psychological Science* 23.2, 2012: pp. 205-209.

who received one and those who were denied one due to various technicalities (e.g. they often had miscalculated how far along in the pregnancy they were). The study showed that "Women who had been denied an abortion were more likely than those who had received one to say they had become less supportive of abortion rights (21% vs. 9%), while women who received an abortion were more likely than those turned away to become more supportive of abortion rights (33% vs 6%)."[80] This too aligns with what one would expect from the literature about choice, dissonance, and rationalisation and suggests that people's experiences in their daily lives shape their political views, including and perhaps especially if those experiences are not under their control. Subjects likely experience dissonance when there is a contradiction between their beliefs and their actions and then often adjust their beliefs to match their (frequently unchosen) actions.

Although it is useful and suggestive, a number of caveats apply to this research. Firstly, it is limited, and more would be required to draw more elaborate conclusions. Secondly, although many political issues provide triggers for dissonance, not all will. In the first study, for example, researchers chose subjects that they were likely well aware were already provocative topics in American politics like abortion and gay rights. In contrast, there are very few "technical" questions—that is, topics that do truly relate to the balance of power in the United States but about which the average person might not already have a strongly held point of view. (We don't see, for example, questions on how to control inflation or prevent gerrymandering). Unless someone is a policy wonk or expert, this kind of political question might not hit someone's

[80] Diana Greene Foster, *The Turnaway Study: Ten Years, A Thousand Women, and the Consequences of Having—or Being Denied—an Abortion*. Simon and Schuster, 2021: p. 171.

immediate moral or ethical intuitions, nor affect their sense of self, agency, or action-possibilities. In turn, this points toward an important caveat about the way that "political" issues are likely to trigger dissonance. If people feel deeply emotional about a political issue—which very often means it is tied up with their moral or ethical code, and by extension with their sense of themselves as good people and actors—then they are very likely to experience dissonance. But conversely, if they don't associate a political issue with any of these, contradictions to their existing views may not trigger dissonance. Dissonance theory is perhaps only as relevant to politics in instances where people understand issues as being relevant to their sense of self, agency, and action-possibilities. If, for example, an individual sees a political issue as having nothing to do with them and their future world, they might not experience as much dissonance. For example, my sense of self is not closely tied to the Catalan independence movement, as I have few referents for it and have never been involved in a similar movement or type of election. If I were to develop an opinion by reading one article and then have that opinion challenged, it is less likely I would experience strong dissonance, as it is unlikely to damage my sense of self or involve future actions I might take.

Indeed, more broadly, another limit to the significance of dissonance theory to analysis of politics and false consciousness is that many people report that they do not much care about politics or even want nothing to do with it.[81] If this is really the case (after all, some who say this may care enough to still have their sense of self or agency tied up in it, but protest because they are exhausted), these uninterested people may

[81] The British Hansard Society's report on political engagement, which comes out each year, provides one of many sobering reports on the matter. See "Audit of Political Engagement 16: The 2019 Report" Hansard Society. <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/audit-of-political-engagement> Accessed 22 October 2023.

well see these questions as unrelated to their sense of self, agency, and action-possibilities, and thus experience less cognitive dissonance with regard to political issues, as well as resorting less frequently to the kinds of rationalisation and confirmation bias that are aspects of false consciousness. In this case those who are uninterested in politics may ironically see political issues more clearly, in some cases, without the frequent distortions brought on by cognitive dissonance. Nevertheless, dissonance literature can help explain a wide range of otherwise curious and troubling human responses to contradictions in their worldview, and can explain many instances where people subscribe to oppressive ideologies. It is therefore especially helpful for critical theorists engaged in ideology critique.

Of course, cognitive dissonance is not necessarily the only or even most important factor in false consciousness; indeed it is just one theory and likely an imperfect one at that. That people believe in systems that oppress them is most likely an overdetermined phenomenon that comes about as a result of many mechanisms. (I am not, therefore, claiming that I am presenting a systematic theory in the sense of a total explanation; but rather that a piecemeal explanation is the accurate one). Many other explanations will be required to provide a full account of how ideology works and why people experience false consciousness. In this project I show that cognitive dissonance is an understudied and underappreciated aspect of false consciousness. Because it is especially likely to arise for people considering their sense of self and agency, and because it seems to appear regularly when political issues in particular are considered, it is especially promising as a tool for understanding what might be termed "false consciousness." Moreover, it contains a worm's eye view of how false

consciousness works, one which includes an account of the unconscious and the drives, and as I shall show in future chapters, compared to other attempts to address theories of false consciousness and ideology, dissonance theory makes it possible to more easily account for the patchiness, perversity, and escapability of "false consciousness." Of course, dissonance is not the only psychological mechanism at work when people cling to harmful political beliefs, but it is likely a core feature and therefore important as an area of study. Similarly, while dissonance is very often involved when people consider their political beliefs, that does not mean it is only triggered by political issues. Clearly there are instances where cognitive dissonance occurs in ways that are (at least not directly) political. For example, cognitive dissonance is commonly found in situations where people face for example addiction, a condition that is not immediately "political" but, in the most immediate sense merely reflects a person's struggle to not see themselves as dependent on substances, or perhaps to accept the contradiction between their claims that they are okay and the reality of their daily life. In this sense, cognitive dissonance is not inherently political; not every instance of cognitive dissonance is going to involve large-scale questions of power. Nevertheless, it may be particularly relevant to people's political beliefs than other areas, and that there are good reasons to suppose, from even the small amount of existing literature, that it carries a significant effect related to what I have defined as false consciousness. In short, modern political subjects may, for the reasons above, be particularly susceptible to self-deception when it comes to politics because politics involves both their sense of self and sense of agency at least for those who bother to think about politics at all.

Conclusion

A renewed interest in ideology theory and theories of false consciousness is required to make sense of the happenings of the 21st century. From the way that many low-income people still vote for right wing and far right candidates to the way that many refuse vaccination or action on climate change even when COVID or global warming will directly harm them, the challenge of understanding the lack of political consciousness of many, though certainly not all, oppressed political subjects remains at least as central a challenge as in previous generations. New theories to address the old problem framed as "false consciousness" are therefore needed. These problems must return to the question of psychology, and include, however carefully and critically, insights from modern scientific research on the brain and behaviour.

Dissonance theory is particularly relevant because it helps provide an empirically grounded explanation for how subjects rationalise away the contradictions in their worldview, something that has long been of interest to critical theorists, especially those in the Frankfurt school. However, unlike many of the psychoanalytic theories of those in the early generations of the Frankfurt School, dissonance theory demonstrates those experiencing false consciousness are less passive ideological dupes and more active subjects who rationalise away difficult information precisely in order to maintain a sense of meaning and agency. Indeed, dissonance theory is particularly relevant to questions of false consciousness because empirical research suggests it is triggered by subjects facing questions about their sense of self and sense of agency, both of which are bound up closely with one's political beliefs. Furthermore, multiple studies provide evidence that dissonance occurs most frequently when subjects

consider political issues. Often subjects' dissonance results in their rationalising-away of evidence that their views may not be accurate, which provides further reason to believe dissonance occurs frequently when subjects are experiencing "false consciousness" or hold tightly to beliefs that run counter to their own interests or contribute to their own oppression. In the next chapter I explore in greater detail what cognitive dissonance is and how it works, why researchers believe it is tied up with one's sense of self and agency. I will also discuss how reliable these studies are and describe why they are worth taking seriously even if one takes a critical theorist's sceptical approach to mainstream social-scientific research, and even in light of common problems with modern psychological research.

Previous theorists of "false consciousness" and ideology have fallen short in some areas, devising theories that are vague, totalising, condescending, vanguardist or overly pessimistic. But this is not an inevitability when theorising the problem of political consciousness (or the lack thereof). New theories of false consciousness (with or without this term and some of its problematic historical formulations) can and should be developed with greater insight from empirical psychology. This would not only address a pressing political-theoretical question, but it would also take up a field of literature that is currently only addressed by other kinds of writers and thinkers. Currently (as I explore in Chapter Six) a great deal of academic research, and a lot of popular psychology, combine a political analysis with new psychological research, but often through a mainstream liberal or relatively uncritical lens.[82] But similar work has

[82] Indeed, much of the research I cite is conducted by psychologists who largely focus on preventing extremism or polarisation, but make no other larger social critiques. For examples of relevant liberal writers who combine psychology and politics, consider Stephen Pinker and Jonathan Haidt, whose specific works I also cite in later chapters.

not generally been done by left wing or emancipatory theorists. Yet this type of research would be firmly in line with the history and the goals of the project of the Frankfurt School, which sought to understand (and change) not only the nature of people's material oppression but also their consciousness itself. Moreover, because it is relatively minimalist in its assumptions, it may be more relevant across historical and political contexts, and thus more relevant to the modern age. For example, while traditionally Frankfurt School theorists have been concerned about the consumption of mass culture and the effective conformity of subjects to similar ideas and ideologies, dissonance theory can use an underpinning set of ideas about subjects desire for agency and identity to explain why subjects may instead pride themselves on being non-conformists (while still embracing harmful ideas). In short, dissonance theory may allow for the extension of ideology critique in areas where older psychoanalytic ideas have not provided sufficient clarity. Furthermore, dissonance theory can in effect serve as a filter, pointing to more promising areas of research based on its premises and illuminating which accounts of ideology theory are more or less plausible. A more detailed account of cognitive dissonance may also help critical theory overcome its intellectual elitism and assumption that ordinary people lack agency. This would be one step towards making good on its emancipatory claims.

Throughout the rest of this work, I suggest ways that, by providing exact mechanisms for the perversity, patchiness, and escapability of harmful beliefs, cognitive dissonance theory can enrich political theorists' understanding of what we might term false consciousness and the way that subjects not only experience it but also might be able to overcome it. My work does not abandon earlier mainstays of

theories of ideology, such as Freudian ideas like repression. Instead, theorists might work to pick apart how these described behaviours might "work" concretely and what then might be done to counter them. This is necessary in part because it is not always obvious that the Freudian accounts of repression alone will accurately explain the many different kinds of consciousness at work in false consciousness. As Terry Eagleton puts it, "Rationalisation involves a conflict between conscious belief and unconscious or unavowed motivation, but there are problems regarding ideology in general as a question of repression in the Freudian sense. To be mystified is less to have repressed some piece of knowledge than not to have known something in the first place."[83] Cognitive dissonance, in contrast, includes an account of not just conscious thoughts that have been repressed but daily actions, action-possibilities, affective states, and other motivational states that may more precisely fit the situations in which people engage in unconscious self-deception about their political lives and the oppression they face. I shall now turn to the theory's intricacies in more detail.

[83] Eagleton, p. 54.

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Chapter Two: Cognitive Dissonance

The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass available.

-Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*[84]

In this chapter I examine cognitive dissonance in detail, describing its foundational literature and some of the newest conceptual models for it. I argue that although there is a need for caution in using dissonance literature and further research is needed, dissonance may be an ineradicable feature of human cognition, one that will continue to influence political reasoning. Dissonance theory is therefore an important theoretical resource for addressing questions about political consciousness because of its close relationship to subjects' feelings of agency and identity, as well as its apparent heightened presence in Western societies.

I first describe the discovery and development of cognitive dissonance theory, including historical challenges to the theory and what was learned from them. Next, I turn to larger possible methodological objections to using this theory. Despite concerns about the use of any psychological mechanisms, scientism, "psychologising," abandoning the Freudian tradition, the replication crisis, and possible rational explanations for behaviour sometimes attributed to dissonance, I argue that it is necessary to incorporate cognitive dissonance literature into analysis of human reasoning as it relates to politics in order to provide a more thorough account of why subjects embrace harmful ideologies, retroactively justify beliefs, reject good evidence for claims, and more. I then go further to argue that even the cultural specificity of

[84] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Verso, 2005: p. 50.

dissonance can be an aspect of a critical use of dissonance theory in understanding political consciousness, rather than a hindrance. Finally, I discuss three more modern conceptions of dissonance that show how dissonance is tied to subjects' sense of their own agency and identity: the *new look model*, the *self-standards model*, and the *action-based model*. I suggest that all three of these point to the centrality of subjects' sense of agency and identity in triggering dissonance, and that this in turn suggests dissonance is especially likely to be involved in subjects' political consciousness and is therefore a fitting subject of study for critical theorists.

What is Cognitive Dissonance?

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon first described by the psychologist Leon Festinger, his colleague Henry W. Riecken Jr., and his student Stanley Schacter. The three experimental psychologists published a book entitled *When Prophecy Fails* in 1956. In this book Festinger et al. describe how they had uncovered the psychological phenomenon while infiltrating a cult, the Seekers, who believed that aliens would arrive on a particular day and bring about the end of the world. When these aliens did not appear, the cult members experienced acute distress, sitting in stunned silence, crying, and trying to come up with explanations, until they "received" a new message through their leader, which read: "The little group, sitting all night long, has spread so much goodness that the God of the Universe spared the Earth from destruction."[85] At this point, although some members of the cult remained distressed and left, the majority soon agreed on a new narrative, in which all their devotion to the

[85] Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory.* Sage, 2007, p. 5.

cult had spared human beings from destruction. In this way they doubled down on their existing beliefs and came to believe even more deeply in the aliens, despite having just been faced with information that appeared to contradict their beliefs. Festinger theorised that members of this cult sought to resolve the apparent dissonance between their extreme behaviours (leaving jobs and even marriages to await the end of the world) and their subsequent cognitions (that aliens had not arrived) by establishing a new narrative and reinforcing the new narrative with even more intense levels of action and devotion. Subsequently cult members invested further in these beliefs by starting to proselytise for the first time, since the idea of "saving" others had now become an established part of the cult's narrative.

Festinger et al. described cognitive dissonance as "a motivating factor in its own right" for human behaviour, defining it as the discomfort subjects face when they recognise a contradiction between two or more cognitions or behaviours.[86] Dissonance, or very specifically the existence of "dissonance discomfort", was theorised from this point onwards as an uncomfortable tension that "has drive-like properties and must be reduced."[87] As the discomfort created by the gap between two or more thoughts or behaviours increases, subjects become highly motivated to reduce dissonance discomfort quickly, with efforts proportional to the amount of discomfort.[88] Subjects might do this through a combination of changing their actions, changing their opinions, or finding a way to make contradictory cognitions no longer appear contradictory – just

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[86] Leon Festinger, et al. *When Prophecy Fails. Martino Fine Books,* 2009, p. 3.

[87] Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance,* p. 7.

[88] In other words, the more extreme the dissonance, the more serious the effort to quell it, just as a very hungry person will be more motivated to find food and likely want to eat more.

as the group in the original study had changed their beliefs to explain that it was no longer the end of the world, yet aliens still existed. These behaviours are the measurable, and often seemingly irrational, evidence for cognitive dissonance.

Further research by Festinger and other psychologists demonstrated the same type of cognitive dissonance in less extraordinary situations. In 1956, Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter conducted a lab-based study in which participants were asked to complete an extremely boring task involving moving wooden pegs and spools of thread. Participants were then debriefed and told that they were in the control condition of a study, where they had been asked to do this task without any pre-existing expectations. This was, however, a ruse. The most important part of the experiment was yet to begin. In the experimental condition, the researcher explained, the other half of the test subjects would be told ahead of time that the task would be fun, and the experiment was to test how much these expectations shaped students' perception of the task. This entire explanation was, however, a lie, designed to set up the next part of the real experiment. The researcher conducting the study would then explain that the next student who was serving as a test subject would be in the experimental condition, and that a confederate of the experimenter was meant to go out shortly to the waiting-room to tell this next student that they had just done the experiment and that it was a lot of fun. *Annoyingly,* the experimenter would then muse aloud, the confederate *had not shown up today. In fact*—the experimenter would ask—*would the student play the part of a confederate, for pay, and go tell the next student how fun the experiment had been?* Although they were not required to do so to secure class credits, most participants nevertheless chose to lie to the next test participant to assist the

experimenter. Participants were then compensated either a small amount of pay (1 dollar) or a larger amount of pay (20 dollars) for serving as a confederate, before finally (privately) completing a survey on how enjoyable the task had been. Notably, it is at this point that the effects of dissonance became measurable: those who had been paid a small amount to be a confederate rated the original (boring) task as far more enjoyable than those paid a large amount of money to lie about the same task.

Festinger and his colleagues theorised that this difference in how participants rated the task demonstrates the effects of cognitive dissonance. Without dissonance, in theory, subjects should perhaps have not changed their real views on how interesting the experiment was at all, regardless of whether they had chosen to lie to someone else about it or how much they had been compensated for that lie. Or perhaps those paid more would somehow have associated the reward, pay, positively with the task itself and those paid more would retroactively consider the task interesting. But in fact the opposite occurred and those rewarded least for lying came to believe their own lies the most. This, Festinger and his colleagues suggested, was because the contradiction between lying and *not* being paid well for it was painful—the subjects knew that the task was boring, and had not been paid well to lie, but had done so anyway. That contradiction was uncomfortable, and, the psychologists suggested, to resolve the discomfort, subjects unconsciously revised their beliefs, and came to think the task interesting, as this was the easiest way to resolve the discomfort. After all, if the task were really enjoyable, they could consider themselves to not have deceived anyone. (In contrast, students who had been paid a good deal of money to lie to the next participant

in the study did not experience much dissonance, as they could explain their behaviour in terms of the high reward.)

Yet another, somewhat similar method of arousing cognitive dissonance is the *induced-compliance paradigm* (originally termed the *forced-compliance paradigm*). Festinger et al.'s study involving participants twisting spools of thread, then reporting that the activity was in fact interesting, is an example of an induced-compliance paradigm. Recall that dissonance was aroused by the conflicting cognitions of "this activity was boring" and "I told that person the activity was interesting, despite the fact that I was paid poorly to do so." Dissonance was reduced in this case by participants revising the first cognition and coming to believe "this activity was interesting." (Subjects who were paid highly to tell others the activity was interesting did not revise their views, as their dissonance was reduced by the fact that they were paid well to lie, which is compatible with the activity being boring.) The ability to choose freely whether to engage in the task appears to be key to triggering the dissonance, although there are multiple possible explanations for this.[89] I discuss this "Free Choice paradigm" for the study of dissonance further in the Agency and Identity section below. Other methods of triggering dissonance include the *effort-justification paradigm*, the *belief-disconfirmation paradigm*, and the *induced-compliance paradigm*. There is not sufficient space in this project to turn to each individually, but I

[89] See again Jean-Léon Beauvois, and Robert Joule. *A Radical Dissonance Theory*. Also Jack W. Brehm, and Arthur R. Cohen. "The Theory and the Role of Commitment." Ed. J. W. Brehm & A. R. Cohen, *Explorations in Cognitive Dissonance,* 1962. Joel Cooper and Russell H. Fazio. "A New Look at Dissonance Theory." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology.* Vol. 17. Academic Press, 1984: pp. 229-266. Melvin L. Snyder, and Robert A. Wicklund. "Prior Exercise of Freedom and Reactance." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 12.2, 1976: pp. 120-130.

will return to some of these models as they become relevant in examples throughout the work.[90]

Cognitive dissonance theory is considered an important and in some ways unexpected finding not only because it results in peculiar behaviours but because it demonstrates a way (or several ways) in which humans do not operate according to conventional, classical economic or utilitarian ideas of rationality, where individuals are expected to calculate what is to their material benefit and act accordingly. For example, in several of the aforementioned dissonance testing paradigms, subjects work harder or change views further when doing so is associated with less of a material reward. Dissonance theory thus suggests subjects are sometimes more motivated by making meaning out of their actions than receiving external rewards. Because of this, the theory challenged the existing and popular behaviourist strand of thought within social psychology. Behaviourism is a psychological theory premised on the idea that learning happens through reinforcement, and that animals, including humans, will do

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[90] Examples of effort justification include Jean-Léon Beauvois and Robert Joule. *A Radical Dissonance Theory*. Taylor & Francis, 1996. And Eddie Harmon-Jones, Tom F. Price, and Cindy Harmon-Jones. "Supine Body Posture Decreases Rationalisations: Testing The Action-Based Model of Dissonance." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 56, 2015: pp. 228-234.

Examples of belief-disconfirmation include Christopher T. Burris, Eddie Harmon-Jones, and W. Ryan Tarpley. "By Faith Alone: Religious Agitation and Cognitive Dissonance." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 19.1, 1997. Also Betram Gawronski, et al. "Formation, Representation, and Activation of Contextualised Attitudes." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 54, 2014: pp. 188-203.

Examples of the the induced-compliance paradigm include Jean-Léon Beauvois, and Robert Joule. *A Radical Dissonance Theory*. Also Jack W. Brehm, and Arthur R. Cohen. "The Theory and the Role of Commitment." Ed. J. W. Brehm & A. R. Cohen, *Explorations in Cognitive Dissonance,* 1962. Joel Cooper and Russell H. Fazio. "A New Look at Dissonance Theory." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology.* Vol. 17. Academic Press, 1984: pp. 229-266. Melvin L. Snyder, and Robert A. Wicklund. "Prior Exercise of Freedom and Reactance." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 12.2, 1976: pp. 120-130.

more of what brings rewards and less of what causes punishments or unwanted outcomes.[91] Notably, many ideas in behaviourism are very similar to the ideas driving classical capitalist economics. In classical economic models, human beings are considered to largely be "rational actors" pursuing rewards (e.g. lower prices, higher salaries, or better commodities) in line with their individual interests and this in turn is held to explain why markets lead to an efficient distribution of resources. In addition to the way dissonance theory suggests subjects may be more motivated by money and external rewards, dissonance theory also posed a methodological challenge to behaviourist models because it required a more complex account of the internal life of the subject, with multistep internal processes, even unconscious processes. In contrast, behaviourist psychologists, as the term suggests, tended to insist on relying solely on measurable behaviours as their source of data; they would simply look at the relationship between the rewards or punishment offered and the behaviour that resulted, insisting that to consider anything else was mere guesswork. This behaviourist methodological commitment had developed in part as a reaction to earlier, Freudian-inspired psychological research focused on inner states of mind that were

[91] The originator of behaviourism, the psychologist BF Skinner, is notable in part because his work has often been positioned in opposition to Freudian psychology: in contrast to Freudian theories, Skinner believed that it was not possible to speculate meaningfully on the internal states or structures of those being studied, and that one could only measure stimulus and behaviour. His work led to an emphasis on empirical research in psychology as well as an alignment with many capitalist ideas about driving worker productivity and using economic rewards to motivate subjects. Furthermore, his work carried with it many political connotations, not least the populations could be controlled through positive reinforcement and occasional punishments—a suggestion he himself furthered in a number of his speculative and utopian writings. See Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance,* 20. See also Deborah E. Altus and Edward K. Morris. "BF Skinner's Utopian Vision: Behind and Beyond Walden Two." *Contemporary Justice Review* 7.3, 2004: pp. 267-286.

difficult to measure.[92] Cognitive dissonance opened the door once again to complex, meaning-focused explanations for human behaviour, to a rejection of a purely economic-rational psychology, and to a place for the unconscious in empirical psychology.

Two common and apparently irrational responses tend to result from the discomfort of dissonance—rationalisation and confirmation bias. *Rationalisation* generally entails giving a reason for a decision that was not in fact arrived at because of that reason. For example, a person who chooses to smoke because they are addicted or simply because they find it pleasurable may rationalise that it is "good" for them because it makes them less hungry and helps them maintain or lose weight, but this is not in fact why they smoke and smoking may of course make them unhealthier overall. *Confirmation bias* is often used in psychology to refer very broadly to patterns of reason where subjects selectively accept and place more emphasis on ideas and information that confirm their existing views (and dismiss those that do not). A smoker may, for example, find reasons to discredit studies suggesting smoking is bad for them or point to the long lives of a few celebrity smokers while dismissing deaths of younger smokers as occurring for other reasons. These two approaches—in short, generating new ideas and choosing which ideas to accept to arrive at the conclusion that is easier or more comfortable—are classic examples of how subjects resolve cognitive dissonance in seemingly irrational ways, and I will return to them repeatedly throughout this work. While these ideas are not widely written about in critical theory,

[92] See a rather amusing brief history of this from the learning theorist Nick Shackleton Jones in *How People Learn*, Kogan Page, 2019, p. 82.

there are some limited moments where theorists employ them to talk about political consciousness. For example, in his well-known essay "White Ignorance," Charles Mills suggests that one way racial prejudice is maintained is through whites' confirmation-bias led reasoning, where they look for and will only accept information that maintains their existing views of Blacks: "So unthinkable is the idea that the inferior blacks could have accomplished [the take-over of the slave ship] that Delano searches for every possible alternative explanation for the seemingly strange behaviour of the imprisoned whites, no matter how far-fetched."[93] It is these two mechanisms, rationalisations and confirmation bias, that often create what we might point to as "false consciousness." Rationalisations and choosing to only believe information from some sources allow subjects to continue to hold on to harmful and oppressive beliefs. Moreover, because these phenomena happen unconsciously, and appear to happen with relative regularity in any given study, it is likely that they may not be eradicable, at least not fully. This in turn means accounting for them becomes crucial. These behaviours often allow people to come to hold beliefs that are full of contradictions and may be oppressive, and help them to continue to hold these beliefs even when presented with good reasons to abandon them. I shall argue that this is especially likely to happen during political reasoning because dissonance is so closely tied to subjects' sense of agency and identity, which in turn are key parts of political reasoning, as I argued in the previous chapter. But before I demonstrate this further, I shall turn to some common criticisms and reservations about dissonance theory and address these.

[93] Charles Mills, "White Ignorance." Sullivan, Shannon, and Nancy Tuana, eds. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Suny Press, 2007: p. 19.

Historical Challenges to the Psychological Theory Show its Relationship to Agency and Identity

Cognitive dissonance became one of the most popular and repeatable findings in social psychology.[94] By the end of the 1960s it was "arguably the most prominently researched theory in social psychology," carrying important implications for areas as diverse as parenting, addiction treatment, consumer psychology, and, of course, politics.[95] In part because of its popularity, it also faced a number of rival theories that sought to attribute the appearance of dissonance to forces other than a discomfort between two or more of subjects' beliefs or actions. And indeed, as experimental studies progressed, cognitive dissonance sometimes did not appear where it was otherwise expected, although generally this has meant revisions in the theory, rather than any widespread distrust of it. Indeed, one of the strengths of dissonance theory is just how widely it has been tested and survived those challenges, often by those who wish to disprove it. I note and address some of these challenges below. Many of these challenges and the studies that resulted not only help refine dissonance theory but demonstrate its close relationship to subjects' sense of self and sense of agency, thus reinforcing the close relationship between dissonance and political reasoning.

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[94] See an account of its wide influence on social psychology and beyond in Irem Metin, and Selin Metin Camgoz. "The Advances in the History of Cognitive Dissonance Theory." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1.6, 2011: pp. 131-136.

[95] Joel Cooper, "Cognitive Dissonance: Where We've Been and Where We're Going." *International Review of Social Psychology* 32.1, 2019, p. 3. I refer to this updated article and all other works by Cooper by their full name throughout my citations and to Cooper's longer book as simply "Cognitive Dissonance".

One challenge came from *self-perception theory*.[96] This theory suggests subjects infer their own attitudes based on their behaviour (rather than the other way around). For example, we may find our heart beating faster and conclude that we are frightened only thereafter. Some psychologists suggested self-perception theory could account for many if not all dissonance findings, such subjects revise their beliefs not due to discomfort but simply because it is easiest to judge one's attitudes from one's actions. To test whether this might be right or whether there was in fact discomfort at play, other researchers conducted studies using the *misattribution paradigm*. In these studies, cognitive dissonance is triggered and an alternative explanation for the discomfort subjects may feel is provided. For example, a loud fan may be placed in the room or a pill provided and subjects told it is likely to cause a small amount of anxiety.[97] In these studies, subjects who had dissonance experimentally triggered but were provided with an external explanation for any feeling of discomfort did not behave in a way traditionally associated with reducing dissonance (e.g. rationalisations). This suggests that they did in fact experience discomfort due to conflicting thoughts and actions, but that when given a bogus explanation for this discomfort, they did not feel the need to reduce dissonance because they incorrectly attributed their discomfort to the loud noise or pill. These results suggest dissonance is in fact due to discomfort related to the sense of self, rather than humans merely

[96] See Daryl J. Bem, "Self-perception: An Alternative Interpretation of Cognitive Dissonance Phenomena." Psychological review 74.3, 1967: 183. And Daryl J. Bem, "Self-perception Theory." *Advances In Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 6. Academic Press, 1972: pp. 1-62.

[97] Mark P. Zanna and Joel Cooper. "Dissonance and the Pill: an Attribution Approach to Studying the Arousal Properties of Dissonance." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 29.5, 1974.

deriving their attitudes from their actions or valuing consonance. (Indeed, since that time, further empirical evidence has supported the idea that dissonance is discomfort by demonstrating physiological arousal.[98]) In other words, dissonance is related to subjects' sense of self, not just a weak sense of their own attitudes, and it is triggered by discomfort that emerges when they notice contradictions about their sense of self. This in turn matters because it suggests that subjects will react in apparently irrational ways to threats to their sense of self spurred by political issues. Furthermore some studies have measured arousal consistent with discomfort.[99]

Others have suggested that the effects of cognitive dissonance might have occurred because participants in studies were conscious that others were watching them, not because of uncomfortable contradictions. For example, psychologist Milton Rosenberg suggested that participants might feel that being paid 20 dollars to lie was too much, or too much like a bribe, and that guilt kept them conscious of the fact that the task was in fact very boring.[100] Other theorists developed a different theory, the *impression-management theory*, which suggests that people essentially only pretend to

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[98] See Adam D. Galinsky, Jeff Stone, and Joel Cooper. "The Reinstatement of Dissonance and Psychological Discomfort Following Failed Affirmations." European Journal of Social Psychology 30.1, 2000. Andrew J. Elliot, and Patricia G. Devine. "On the Motivational Nature of Cognitive Dissonance: Dissonance as Psychological Discomfort." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 67.3, 1994. Russell H. Fazio, Mark P. Zanna, and Joel Cooper. "Dissonance and Self-perception: An Integrative View of Each Theory's Proper Domain of Application." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 13.5, 1977.

[99] See, for example, Marie-Amélie Martinie, Thierry Olive, and Laurent Milland. "Cognitive Dissonance Induced by Writing a Counterattitudinal Essay Facilitates Performance on Simple Tasks but not on Complex Tasks that Involve Working Memory." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46.4, 2010: pp. 587-594.

[100] Cooper, p. 29.

change their views during cognitive dissonance experiments; they do this to manage the impressions others have of them. However, studies designed in response to this theory suggest that the impressions-management theorists may simply have been engineering a test without a key ingredient for dissonance: choice.[101] Furthermore, later studies in response to this theory suggest it is simply not accurate, and that dissonance is measurable even when people do not believe they are being observed. For example, in Festinger and Carlsmith's 1959 study people reported their altered views to an apparently unrelated person (e.g. to someone not seemingly aware of the original experiment).[102] Moreover, the same results have been repeated in what appear to participants to be "extremely private" situations.[103] This once again makes it clear that dissonance is about one's internal sense of self rather than an attempt to manage the impressions of others.

A third alternate theory, *self-affirmation theory*, suggests that the results found in dissonance studies are the result of a threat to one's sense of moral integrity.[104] They

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[101] Darwyn E. Linder, Joel Cooper, and Edward E. Jones. "Decision Freedom as a Determinant of the Role of Incentive Magnitude in Attitude Change." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 6.3, 1967.

[102] Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith. "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58.2, 1959.

[103] Eddie Harmon-Jones, et al. "Evidence that the Production of Aversive Consequences is not Necessary to Create Cognitive Dissonance." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70.1, 1996. Eddie Harmon-Jones, "Cognitive Dissonance and Experienced Negative Affect: Evidence that Dissonance Increases Experienced Negative Affect even in the Absence of Aversive Consequences." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26.12, 2000.

[104] Claude M. Steele, and Thomas J. Liu. "Dissonance Processes as Self-Affirmation." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45.1, 1983. Also Claude M. Steele, "The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 21. Academic Press, 1988: pp. 261-302.

suggest that people alter their evaluation of situations to reduce the sense that they have done a bad thing (for example, they suggest that students who were not paid very much to lie about how fun the task was can reduce their guilt by deciding they liked the task, rather than because there are inconsistencies between thoughts and actions). However, in response to the development of this theory, further studies were conducted that showed that there were still instances where subjects appeared to experience dissonance even when reducing dissonance meant doing the opposite of affirming themselves as good moral agents. For example, those with low self-esteem reduced dissonance by choosing cognitions consistent with a poor image of themselves. Furthermore, research suggested that those who had chosen to make arguments against (say) funding for disabled students then did not want to read essays about why they were compassionate, although they were happy to at that point read essays about why they were creative—suggesting that affirmation does not help if it arouses dissonance, and that dissonance is therefore present regardless of positive self-affirmation.[105] In other words, dissonance results cannot be explained away by subjects only wanting to hear good things about themselves; dissonance occurs even when subjects need to think less well of themselves to have a consistent self of self. These studies do, however, add further credibility to the idea that the subject's sense of self plays a strong role in triggering dissonance, and that subject's sense of self remains important to them. This once again suggests that dissonance is a particularly relevant theory for political analysis as subjects tie their sense of self to their political views.

[105] Joshua Aronson, Hart Blanton, and Joel Cooper. "From Dissonance to Disidentification: Selectivity in the Self-Affirmation Process." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68.6, 1995: p. 986.

Finally, given this strong challenge that cognitive dissonance posed to behaviourism, many psychologists performed studies attempting to disprove the theory of cognitive dissonance and the idea that (for example) subjects might in some cases react more strongly to receiving a lower, rather than a higher, reward (as in the Festinger study). However, further studies on cognitive dissonance demonstrated an even greater number of ways in which cognitive dissonance might indicate that human beings behave differently than the economic-rational model suggests.[106] One study conducted by Jack Brehm, Festinger's mentee, asked a group of women to rate home appliances, and then selected two items and allowed participants to choose one to take home. Finally, the women were asked to assign ratings to the appliances again.[107] Participants would choose whichever item of the two offered that they had rated more highly (of course) but they would also generally re-rate the appliance they chose more highly and re-rate those they didn't choose less highly, often without noticing the shift in the way they rated the devices. This type of finding, in which choices retroactively and unconsciously shape preferences, implies that rather than individuals having a clear sense of what is in their interest and then making choices that follow from these interests, subjects will sometimes make choices and then form ideas about what is in their interests based on the choices they have already made. They will not always recognise the real reasons for their preferences or choices. The implications for political behaviour are that subjects may form political preferences not because these

[106] A good summary of several of these can be found in Joel Cooper's aforementioned excellent summary of 50 years of cognitive dissonance research, particularly his Chapter Two.

[107] Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance*, 12. See also Jack W. Brehm, and Arthur R. Cohen. *Explorations in Cognitive Dissonance*.

preferences are objectively in their best interests, but because these preferences or views least contradict the behaviour that they have already engaged in and the choices they have already made. If a political subject has, for example, voted in a way that appears to contradict their material interests (perhaps they are working class and voted against higher taxes for wealthy people, as many working class people did, for example, when they voted for Margaret Thatcher), they may find a way to rationalise it later in terms of social policies or based on the idea that they will one day be wealthier and want less progressive tax policies then. It also means that behaviourist theories that largely assume there is not an unconscious aspect to the mind may not only be wrong but actively unhelpful when considering the behaviour and thinking of political subjects.

In short, dissonance theory has withstood the challenges presented to it within the field of psychology, albeit with modifications. New models have emerged, in part in response to the above studies, that emphasise the relationship between subjects' sense of self (and agency) and their tendency to experience dissonance.

Possible Methodological Objections

In this section, I address a number of concerns about relying heavily on science of this kind and argue that dissonance theory, while not perfectly sound (as indeed few psychological theories could ever claim to be) is a relatively strong theory that withstands common criticisms of psychological science. This in turn means that it is an important source of insights about subjects' attachment to their sense of self and agency, and critical theorists would do well to take it into account when they consider

questions of false consciousness. I shall then turn to a particular criticism of psychological science findings that suggests that they are specific to Western subjects only, and suggest that in the case of dissonance theory, this strengthens its relevance to critical theorists and makes it more important to study, as it suggests there is something specific in the psychology of those in late capitalism.

Should we Research Mechanisms? Do They Apply Outside the Lab?

Some social theorists avoid using psychological mechanisms as explanations for human behaviour, noting that there are so many mechanisms involved in any observable phenomenon, each difficult to isolate, and it therefore may not be worth studying any given mechanism considering the high level of uncertainty involved. I appreciate this concern insofar as it is wise to be self-aware about the limits of any explanatory theory and the complexity of factors involved. Nevertheless, critical theorists in particular should continue to pursue explanatory mechanisms for pragmatic reasons. The task is not to make airtight singular explanations for any given scenario of false consciousness, but to generate theories that can be applied by social movements. Without some proposed mechanisms for increased or decreased political consciousness, it is difficult to do this. Even if these mechanisms provide at best partially accurate explanations, they may still be of assistance to social movements.

Yet another important objection has to do with the applicability of such studies outside the lab. Here, too, some caution is required. Can studies about women choosing appliances in a laboratory setting really be drawn out into explanations for the historical lack of political consciousness of the working class? It is certainly important to acknowledge that a great deal of further research is needed to strengthen the

connection between lab research and real-world phenomena. However, at minimum there is some evidence that dissonance appears to occur in the real world just as it does in the lab, from Jost's aforementioned statistical research on which groups most tend to believe systems are fair to the statistics about how women denied abortions tend to become less in favour of them than those who receive abortions. While more non-laboratory research would strengthen this finding, it might be fair to say there is sociological, as well as lab-based, evidence for dissonance and thus reason to think it translates outside the laboratory setting. For this reason, it merits use and further study, including by critical theorists.

Scientism and Psychologism

The Frankfurt School thinkers were often ambivalent about the use of science in social theory. Marcuse, for example, wrote "science, by nature of its own methods and concept, has projected and promoted a universe in which the domination of nature has remained linked to the domination of man."[108] Indeed, many continental philosophers have been concerned about the problem of "scientism, " which Simon Critchley defines as the creeping tendency to believe "the fallacious claim that the theoretical or natural scientific way of viewing things provides the primary and most significant access to ourselves and our world, and that the methodology of the natural sciences provides the best form of explanation for all phenomena."[109] In particular, he

[108] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* Boston, Beacon Press, 1964: p. 166.

[109] Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP Oxford, 2001: p. 115.

notes that in *Knowledge and Human Interests,* Habermas has his own concerns about "science's belief in itself: that is, 'the conviction that we can no longer understand science as *one* form of knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science.'"[110] There is a risk, when relying on psychology, that one might risk conflating the thinking, self-reflective subject of emancipatory efforts with their biological substrate and its measurable tendencies, the brain. Yet while I share this concern, I suggest there are also dangers in failing to consider the brain and measurable behaviour also. Critchley suggests that if scientism is one extreme into which thinking can fall, another is "obscurantism," "the replacement of a scientific form of explanation, which is believed to be scientistic, with a counter-scientistic, mysterious, but still causal explanation."[111] Critchley then charges continental philosophers with a variety of obscurantist sins; while the average obscurantist might believe in "the will of God, the ubiquity of alien intelligence, the action of the stars on human behaviour, and so on," continental philosophers, he notes, tend to rely on "arguably equally pernicious candidates" including the drives in Freud's work, Jung's archetypes, the concept of "power" in Foucault, or "the real" in the work of Lacan. Critchley suggests these concepts are used in vague and unhelpful ways, or are stretched to explain so much that they lose meaning. This might not be true; at minimum, the idea of a drive can be clearly defined and deployed, as can a concept of power, whether or not theorists do so carefully. But I take Critchley's wider point: there are downsides to ignoring science too, not least that it often leads to poor thinking verging on mysticism. Critchley

[110] *Ibid.* p. 112.

[111] *Ibid*. p. 118.

suggests a good way to avoid both scientism and mysticism is to employ tools from phenomenology. I would argue another, in some cases more straightforward, approach is to allow scientific analysis of the mind in the same way most critical theorists would allow scientific analysis of global warming or pancreatitis, doing so alongside rigorous reflexive social critique. It remains true, as Critchley suggests, that "the gap between knowledge and wisdom… cannot be closed through empirical enquiry."[112] But, since this work is an explanatory account of false consciousness, relying on some scientific and social-scientific research to understand why people might cling to beliefs that contribute to their own oppression is valuable. It allows for the replacement of folk-psychological and mystical or vague explanations with more precise and reliable explanations.

Perhaps due to this set of concerns about scientism, many social and political theorists reject psychological explanations for political phenomena because the former cannot account for the complexity of the latter, arguing that such reductionism is effectively "psychologism. Some argue that such psychological explanations effectively dismiss or obscure oppression and thus de-politicise the issues at stake. To turn to just one relatively recent example, in her 2018 essay "The Third Shift: The Politics of Representation and the Psychological Turn" philosopher Lorna Finlayson argues that attention to the issues facing women working in academic philosophy has taken a wrong turn as departments and administrations have come to rely on insights from experimental psychology (most of all the idea of "implicit bias"). Finlayson's concern is that the language of experimental psychology is "an inadequate replacement

[112] *Ibid.* p. 120.

for traditional social and political criticism."[113] She does not dispute the reality of the experimental psychology findings (in this case, that people carry unconscious bias) or the modest adjustments that can be made to address this (for example, anonymizing papers). Rather Finlayson argues that while analysing phenomena in this way may appear to offer insights into social problems like patriarchal or racial oppression, experimental psychology does not offer ideology critique—specifically the "exposition, analysis, and critique of the relations of power that structure society."[114] Focusing on "implicit bias" does not address the root of the issue because it does not trace ideas back to relations of power and domination. "To talk about implicit bias is also not to analyse or critique ideas, or systems of ideas: to detect an implicit bias is not to give any information as to what does and does not count as sexist, nor does it trace ideas to interests or to the distribution of power in society…Nor is there any obvious reason why we should treat this particular element as primary, in a causal or explanatory sense…."[115] Finlayson's immediate arguments are unquestionably powerful: a discussion of implicit bias alone does not constitute a critique of patriarchal ideologies or power structures, and focusing on this idea from social psychology can in effect suggest that implicit bias is the primary or only problem facing women working in this field. However, not every finding in social psychology plays a similarly minor explanatory role in social and political problems. In some

[113] Lorna Finlayson, "The Third Shift: The Politics of Representation and the Psychological Turn." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43.4, 2018: p. 789.

[114] *Ibid.* 789.

[115] *Ibid.* 790.

cases, understanding the psychology involved in a political issue can be central in interpreting the issue itself—while nevertheless not reducing the explanation for oppression to psychology alone.

Rather than merely serving as a contributing factor to a particular oppressive power structure, cognitive dissonance describes an integral mechanism by which subjects come to believe or continue to believe oppressive ideologies, and to rebuff ideas that might otherwise cause them to doubt these ideologies. To incorporate cognitive dissonance into political theory about ideology and propaganda is to have a clear picture of the "inside" workings of ideology, those that happen within the subject, and from there to be able to give an account of how ideology is maintained. In this area, I suggest it is neither truly possible nor desirable to be without an account of human psychology. Either political theorists will develop an account of psychology explicitly in their works, or they will hold an implicit set of assumptions that remain unexamined and, in many cases, unjustifiable. The study of psychology thus need not lead to psychologism and in fact can counter poor psychological assumptions instead.

Similarly, to incorporate psychology is not necessarily to abandon sociology. As the Frankfurt school well understood; the two are closely and necessarily connected. In line with this insight, rather than "psychologising" about politics here, I seek, as Marcuse put it, to "develop the political and sociological substance of the psychological notions" at work in cognitive dissonance.[116] Marcuse argues for this approach at the very beginning of *Eros and Civilization,* writing:

> This essay employs psychological categories because they have become political categories. The traditional borderlines between psychology on the one

[116] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization.* Routledge, 2012, p. xxii.

> side and political and social philosophy on the other have been made obsolete by the condition of man in the present era: formerly autonomous and identifiable psychical processes are being absorbed by the function of the individual in the state—by his public existence. Psychological problems therefore turn into political problems: private disorder reflects more directly than before the disorder of the whole, and the cure of the personal disorder depends more directly than before on the cure of the general disorder.[117]

Marcuse argues psychological problems can now be understood as political problems because people lack individuality in the modern age, such that their psychological struggles are not so much expressions of individual issues as collective, political problems. The same form of analysis is what I intend to apply to dissonance theory: while the model I present below includes some functional explanations for its existence (e.g. an explanation of its utility to the individual subject in sense-making), the specific types of dissonance that individuals face are surely contingent on their society, as I shall describe below. Ultimately, I suggest that if theorists use existing psychological concepts that are well supported by research, together with a material analysis, I suggest that it is possible to, as Marcuse put it, "develop the political and sociological substance of the psychological notions" at work in political and social theory.[118] This provides all the more reason to turn to dissonance literature and other psychological research like it.

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[117] *Ibid*.

[118] *Ibid.*

Abandonment of Freud?

Some may argue that my approach in bringing in dissonance theory is in effect an abandonment of the core methodological commitments of critical theory, specifically the commitment to a Freudian psychoanalysis. However, I would suggest that the application of this type of empirical research could equally be seen as an *extension* of or a *companion* to some of the core aspects of Freudian psychology, rather than a rejection of it. Dissonance theory is, after all, still a theory involving drives and the unconscious, two of the more central aspects of Freudian theory for psychoanalysis. This is precisely why dissonance theory can partly account for aspects of faulty political consciousness or "false consciousness," and the "perversity" in human reasoning. Indeed, Festinger had read Freud, and some of his studies were designed to further test Freud's ideas about other concepts (e.g. the importance of emotional catharsis).[119] This is not, of course, to claim dissonance theory is a type of Freudian theory, only that it may be compatible, at points, with a tradition that builds on Freudian thought.

Furthermore, dissonance theory corresponds to the kind of ego defences and resulting rationalisations and/or painful ambivalence that have been described in Freudian accounts of the ego, including Freud's descriptions of melancholia and mourning and Melanie Klein's description of depressive ambivalence. That is, dissonance theory provides an account of subjects encountering ideas or information that challenge their existing sense of self and their sensemaking of the world, and it shows that often this is too challenging to be borne, such that subjects find unconscious

[119] See, for example Cooper, p. 43.

but creative ways to avoid altering their sense of self. If dissonance theory is seen as a naturalisation, or an empirical-scientific account of the specifics, of repression, then it can offer to those interested in Freudian-influenced accounts of politics a greater specificity about some of the mechanisms involved in the formation of the self and political subjectivity, as well as a methodology and broad area for further research. In the last chapter, I noted that dissonance theory is partially useful because it can address some aspects of our pre- or unconscious reasoning that are not clearly elucidated in Freud's original works—for example, daily actions, action-orientations, affective states—but which play important roles in theories of ideology and might come to do so more frequently and fruitfully. In this way, dissonance builds on some of the same questions frequently asked in Freudo-Marxist literature, but it does so while more explicitly considering the specifics and mechanisms involved in political consciousness, which makes it potentially promising for those who want to understand what could bring people together in social movements. There are other benefits to turning to dissonance theory as well. Dissonance theory does not rest on a theoretical foundation based on the nuclear, heteropatriarchal family. The interventions that have developed in response to dissonance theory are also about changing the environment or type of discourse in the moment, rather than a years-long therapeutic process. This makes them more manageable and scalable as a form of political intervention, and more plausible as an actionable tool for social movements.

There are, of course, also differences in the way these two theories, dissonance theory and psychoanalytic theory, operate. In dissonance literature on its own there is no, for example, concept of the collective unconscious as in Jung's work or collective

repression in the sense that Freud describes in *Civilization and its Discontents.* To create a more collective theory, this sort of research would need to be extended (as Mattin notably does in his own way in his book *Social Dissonance*). If there is collective repression occurring in conjunction with dissonance, it is perhaps collective in the sense that rationalisations tend to happen in similar directions and bring people together, for good and often for ill. In other words, individual moments of rationalisation (about, say, poor economic opportunities) tend to occur such that individual subjects, no doubt influenced by group dynamics or media, for example, move towards group narratives (say, about the economic effects of immigration)—collective repression occurs in the culturally orchestrated resolution of dissonance towards harmful ideology. I have not, however, attempted to fully theorise this, only to point to some of the clarifications and extensions that dissonance theory can offer to critical theorists considering problems of political consciousness.

Indeed, one might see the use of cognitive dissonance within critical theory as an example of *triangulation*, where researchers, especially in sociology, frequently use multiple methods to consider their subject of study from multiple perspectives and check their findings. Triangulation is a methodological approach that represents an "attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint," as educational researchers Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, put it. [120] It may well be that when it comes to something as complex as human political consciousness, triangulation is required to provide a fuller picture of why human beings sometimes

[120] Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison. R*esearch Methods in Education*. Routledge, 2002: p. 254.

resist knowledge of their own political oppression. Using modern psychological science alongside older psychological theories provides a way of checking ideas from multiple methodological angles, triangulating to find ideas that transcend this or that theoretical perspective and remain relevant across these academic boundaries. Engaging with this literature also may help to keep critical theory up to date, that is, responsive to and aware of, new understandings of how the mind functions as the empirical psychology literature continues to grow in the 21st century.

The Replication Crisis

Many social psychology studies have been criticised lately due to the general social science replication crisis that began around 2015.[121] In short, many social science and psychology studies (and indeed even medical and other scientific studies) have traditionally defined a research result as having "statistical significance" when it produces a "probability value" or p-value of less than five percent. This value represents the probability that the result would occur if the hypothesis in the study were untrue. A smaller p-value indicates a greater likelihood of reproducibility and scientific significance. However, many statisticians and scientists now argue that this five percent threshold is still too high, and many studies that pass this threshold are subsequently not replicable. In addition, some researchers have engaged in "p-hacking" and other techniques designed to increase the likelihood that their data will demonstrate statistical significance, in large part due to the pressures to publish within

[121] See Open Science Collaboration. "Estimating the Reproducibility of Psychological Science." *Science* 349.6251, 2015: aac 4716.

academia and the scientific community. This crisis has led to a widespread questioning of even longstanding conclusions in social psychology, and for this reason I address the crisis briefly.

It is certainly true that, as with all social psychology studies, much of what is being studied can only be accessed and measured indirectly. It is also true that even those researchers who work with cognitive dissonance theory have argued that such studies could be better designed to measure the phenomenon more precisely.[122] Nevertheless, there are several reasons to believe that cognitive dissonance theory has and will continue to weather the reproducibility crisis, and that it carries scientific, and by extension political, significance. One reason for this is the sheer volume of studies on cognitive dissonance, including many attempts to disprove the theory that were later addressed in further studies.[123] Overall, many of the studies have been replicated many times, and often when a cognitive dissonance study fails to replicate, later research controls external factors and then manages to successfully replicate the finding.[124]

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[122] David C. Vaidis, and Alexandre Bran. "Respectable Challenges to Respectable Theory: Cognitive Dissonance Theory Requires Conceptualization Clarification and Operational Tools." *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, 2019.

[123] Joel Cooper's aforementioned book does an excellent job of addressing the long history of challenges to cognitive dissonance theory and the way social psychologists have generally managed to eliminate confounding variables and demonstrate the effect again in each case. While there is no single count of how many studies there are, Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills suggest there are at least "hundreds and hundreds" of studies on the topic. Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills, "An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory and an Overview of Current Perspectives on the Theory". E. Harmon-Jones (Ed.), *Cognitive Dissonance: Reexamining a Pivotal Theory in Psychology*, American Psychological Association, 2019: p. 3.

[124] Again, Coopers' book is replete with detailed examples of how studies that failed to replicate were re-done with closer attention to detail and influencing factors and cognitive dissonance was once again successfully measured.

Another reason to think findings in cognitive dissonance theory are significant is the way many of the "p-values" produced are far smaller than the standard benchmark of five percent, which often fails to ensure reproducibility.[125]

A third reason to consider cognitive dissonance theory credible is that although cognitive dissonance, as a subjective internal state, can only be measured indirectly (generally through the change of the subject's opinion) there are now studies that demonstrate potential neural correlates for the phenomenon, which suggests a firm neurophysiological ground for this form of cognition. For example, in a 2011 study, not only were neural correlates for cognitive dissonance observed in an MRI machine, but a change in attitude demonstrating the effects of dissonance happened to the degree that p-values were < .001, indicating stronger significant than in the types of studies involved in the p value replication crisis. [126] Yet another reason to feel relatively positive about the reliability of dissonance as a finding is that pre-registered studies (that is, studies where scientists logged publicly that they were going to do the study

[125] P values are a statistical way of modelling the probability that a particular result would have occurred if the researcher's hypothesis were false. For example, suppose a researcher's hypothesis is that a die is weighted to roll a 6, and the study involves rolling the die three times to see if it displays different numbers. If the die rolls 6 three times, this is a strong argument in favour of the researcher's hypothesis that the die is weighted. In this case, the p value represents the likelihood that an unweighted die would by chance roll a 6 three times in a row; this is (1/6)^3 or 0.005. In every study, the p value represents the probability that the researcher is wrong despite their results because their results have instead occurred by chance.

[126] Johanna M. Jarcho, Elliot T. Berkman, and Matthew D. Lieberman. "The Neural Basis of Rationalisation: Cognitive Dissonance Reduction During Decision-Making." *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 6.4, 2010: 460-467. For a more recent study that compares multiple findings, see Marco Colosio, et al. "Neural Mechanisms of Cognitive Dissonance (Revised): An EEG study." *Journal of Neuroscience* 37.20, 2017: pp. 5074-5083.

before they did it) still yielded positive results.[127] Pre-registration prevents scientists from only publishing studies that produce positive results, and is one more check against non-reproducibility in psychology and social science. This does not, of course, mean that caution is not required when approaching this topic or that future findings may not challenge it successfully. Nevertheless, based on the vast number of studies and strong statistical significance, the issue is important enough to merit this type of in-depth exploration, given its effects on political life and discourse.

How Rational is Dissonance-Driven Behaviour?

A small group of academics have suggested that dissonance studies actually show rational behaviour, rather than a distortion caused by dissonance. Economist M. Keith Chen has suggested that the "spreading of choices" described earlier in this chapter, where subjects rank options more highly after they have chosen them, may in fact be a rational response if subjects' original choice indeed reflects their preferences. In Chen's account, it is rational for subjects to re-rank the options further apart as they effectively learn from the selection process and incorporate that the next time they are asked to evaluate.[128] The mathematics involved in this calculus, similar to that of the infamous "Monty Hall problem," would help explain why these types of studies appear to show dissonance in monkeys and toddlers, even though neither group is likely to

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[127] See, for example, Alexandre Bran, and David C. Vaidis. "On the Characteristics of the Cognitive Dissonance State: Exploration Within the Pleasure Arousal Dominance Model." *Psychologica Belgica* 60.1, 2020: pp. 86–102. That said, the drive to pre-registration has only begun relatively recently, and more remains to be seen.

[128] Keith Chen, "Rationalization and Cognitive Dissonance: Do Choices Affect or Reflect Preferences?" *Cowles Foundation Discussion Paper No. 1669*. 2008. Available at SSRN https://ssrn.com/abstract=1160268.

have such a fully-fleshed out sense of self that they are defensively rationalising away the losses involved in choice. Others have disputed Chen's claims on mathematical grounds or on the basis of his assumptions about the accuracy of subjects' understanding of their own preferences.[129] Regardless of the specifics of the mathematics involved, this question of study design is certainly an important methodological question for future research. It is worth noting, however, that both Chen himself and the dissonance psychologists who accept this criticism suggest that this does not mean dissonance does not exist, only that it may not be measured in these studies in this way.[130]

A similar challenge has arisen from philosophers James Owen Weatherall and Caitlin O'Connor , who argue that it is perfectly "rational,", in the Bayesian sense, to only update your understanding of the world when presented with information from those you already share views with, as these are the people whose epistemic processes you trust.[131] They create a model of rational actors (where rational means "the agents

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[129] Brad J. Sagarin, and John J. Skowronski. "The Implications of Imperfect Measurement for Free-Choice Carry-over Effects: Reply to M. Keith Chen's (2008) "Rationalization and Cognitive Dissonance: Do Choices Affect or Reflect Preferences?"." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45.2, 2009: pp. 421-423.

[130] See the misleadingly titled article by John Tierney, "And Behind Door No. 1, a fatal flaw." *The New York Times* April 8th, 2008. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/08/science/08tier.html. Accessed Nov 4th 2023.

[131] Bayesian reasoning in this case refers to calculating and updating probabilities as new information becomes available to make the best possible predictions; most philosophers would consider it to be the main model for human reasoning about political facts. In other words, most philosophers think the right form of rationality is Bayesian, e.g. where our judgements are based on prior probability. When we experience a contradiction in our worldview, we should change our worldview if we have enough prior evidence to tip the scale in that direction. It is on this basis that the empirical scientists who work on cognitive dissonance theory believe that dissonance causes irrationality—they think that given what a subject knows about the world, they should recognise that a task was boring or that they in fact do not believe in tuition rises, but that dissonance moves them to believe otherwise. Other models of reasoning

in the model adopt a certain, arguably reasonable, heuristic for evaluating the reliability of evidence; they do not succumb to cognitive biases or motivated reasoning, nor to social pressure.") Then, using mathematical modelling, Weatherall and O'Connor demonstrate that without any other quirks of the human mind or even larger ideological structures, our tendency to rely on those with whom we agree for information can by itself explain a polarisation in views, and explain the way people tend to "factionalise" and come to agree on multiple subjects (e.g. agree on both climate change and gun control) simply because they distrust those with whom they do not share existing beliefs.[132] The authors acknowledge that ideology and cognitive dissonance (specifically confirmation bias) are likely to play a role in how individuals develop their beliefs, but they also argue that one does not need to assume the existence of powerful ideologies or confirmation bias to understand why beliefs polarise over time, and why otherwise unrelated beliefs might group together (such that, for example, those who believe that black people simply "need to work harder to get ahead" might *also* believe that global warming isn't caused by humans, although these two beliefs do not share any obvious premises). All that is required for highly-polarised groupings of otherwise unrelated beliefs to occur, Weatherall and O'Connor argue, is for individuals to not so much trust beliefs as *people,* and then, logically, adopt any new beliefs that the groups they trust develop. In that case, one might argue, dissonance theory might not be so influential after all. This is related to what is often

might, for example, be rational choice theory, which instead assumes subjects make rational calculi prior to decision making, ones that do not involve weighted probability in the same way.

[132] James Owen Weatherall, and Cailin O'Connor. "Endogenous Epistemic Factionalization." *Synthese* (2020): pp. 1-22.

called “the puzzle of dogmatism,” where it might seem like subjects are not normatively required to investigate claims counter to what one already knows (because one already knows x) but that one also should do so, in order to avoid dogmatism. This sort of thinking is representative of a field of thought that suggests that structural factors alone are largely responsible for people’s beliefs, that what is attributed to psychological bias and error is often actually rational, and thus that dissonance and similar psychological phenomena are relatively unimportant as explanations for political beliefs.

These types of models certainly provide an important point of caution about attributing subjects’ relative weighting of information towards that of those they already trust as merely the product of dissonance-driven confirmation bias. In other words, there are reasons to be cautious about over-attributing human epistemic behaviours to dissonance in many areas. There may well be many aspects of polarisation that are epistemically more rational or structural than they appear. Yet it does not necessarily suggest that dissonance does not have profound effects on reasoning, only that it has mistakenly been attributed to phenomena where it may not be present. Furthermore, of course, I neither dispute nor confirm the normative claims in these authors’ accounts about when one should shift one’s knowledge or reconsider one’s beliefs. It may be somewhat rational to attend only to information from those we already trust, and somewhat rational or ethical to attend to conflicting information, and mathematics or the Bayesian model alone cannot provide sufficient guidance in this area. Ultimately, false consciousness and polarisation are not exactly the same

problem, and my suggestion is that dissonance theory explains why people tend to believe they are not oppressed even when directly experiencing oppression.

WEIRDness

Finally, I turn to a criticism of psychological research that can in fact demonstrate the interesting aspects of dissonance theory that make it all the more relevant for consideration by critical theorists. Some have argued for scepticism about empirical psychological research because it is often conducted primarily or only using "Western" subjects, and thus the findings may well be culturally specific phenomena even as researchers fail to acknowledge this. However for criticism theorists, the differences in cultural presentation of dissonance suggest the phenomenon is especially worthy of study, as it can enrich political and cultural critique of the psychological effects of ideology in Western industrialised countries.

Perhaps the most striking study on the effects of cultural difference in psychology in recent years is about the "WEIRD"-ness of Western subjects. From about the year 2000, Joseph Henrich, a professor of evolutionary biology, began to replicate common empirical psychology studies with groups who were living in relatively isolated, non-Western and non-industrialised places, (e.g. indigenous groups in Chile). He found that many common and otherwise replicated psychology studies did not replicate in these contexts.[133] Henrich and several other researchers eventually expanded their research, and found similar results in places like tribal areas of Kenya,

[133] Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. Penguin UK, 2020: p. 53.

the Cook Islands, and several Asian countries. As Henrich puts it, "[t]he upshot is that WEIRD people usually lie at the extreme end of the distribution [on these key traits] focusing intensely on their personal attributes, achievements, aspirations, and personalities over their roles, responsibilities, and relationships."[134] This suggests that many results commonly cited in empirical psychology appear to be specific to WEIRD people—that is, to use Henrich's acronym, people in *Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic* countries. Henrich notes,

> Unlike much of the world today, and most people who have ever lived, we WEIRD people are highly individualistic, self-obsessed, control-oriented, nonconformist, and analytical. We focus on ourselves—our attributes, accomplishments, and aspirations—over our relationships and social roles. We aim to be "ourselves" across contexts and see inconsistencies in others as hypocrisy rather than flexibility. Like everyone else, we are inclined to go along with our peers and authority figures; but, we are less willing to conform to others when this conflicts with our own beliefs, observations, and preferences.[135]

There is, in short, something measurably different about those who live in Western late-stage capitalism in its most "developed" form, and it appears, empirically, to be the emphasis on the self as an individuated and internally consistent entity. Without this, many "results" of Western empirical psychology simply fall away.

Henrich ties his findings about the specific WEIRDness of the Western subject's psychology directly to cognitive dissonance. He theorises that dissonance is

[134] Henrich, 26. In a jab at the overwhelming number of studies in empirical psychology whose main participants are American undergraduates, Henrich rightly notes that "American undergraduates, in particular, seem unusually self-absorbed, even among other WEIRD populations."

[135] *Ibid*. 21.

caused by culture as much as nature, or perhaps as *culture intensifying some aspect of nature*, arguing that

> In WEIRD societies, the pressure to cultivate traits that are consistent across contexts and relationships leads to *dispositionalism* - a tendency to see people's behaviour as anchored in personal traits that influences their actions in many contexts… Dispositionalism emerges psychologically in two important ways. First, it makes us uncomfortable with our own inconsistencies. If you've ever had a course in Social Psychology, you might recognise this as *Cognitive Dissonance*. The available evidence suggests that WEIRD people suffer more severely from Cognitive Dissonance and do a range of mental gymnastics to relieve their discomfort. Second, dispositional thinking also influences how we judge others [emphasis his].[136]

In other words, cognitive dissonance does seem to exist across cultures and to some degree transcend cultural particularity, perhaps because it is in some way "built in" in some way to our neurological structures and/or tied to our need to orient ourselves in the world. However, at the same time it clearly has a stronger impact on WEIRD people. For example, those experiencing dissonance in East Asian countries tend to experience dissonance more frequently around social relationships, eg. around making decisions that involve others or on behalf of others.[137] Henrich persuasively argues that dissonance is heightened in WEIRD cultures by an emphasis on the idea that we should be consistent across multiple social contexts (e.g. that we should be reliably the same way at work and at home, that we should be hardworking all the time). Henrich suggests this is due in large part to religion and to its subsequent secularised cultural equivalents (e.g. the Protestant work ethic, in Weberian terms). There are, however,

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[136] *Ibid.* P. 33.

[137] See Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance*, p. 146.

many other possible explanations for this quality of dispositionalism in Western societies that Henrich does not consider. It may be, for example, that we are also shaped into these kinds of hyper-consistent subjects by the demands of the state, or the panopticon-like effects of our forms of media, or the demands of being employees. Regardless of the best explanation (an interesting topic for future research), Henrich's empirical work provides evidence that dissonance is a cross-cultural finding *but also* one that offers specific insights into the mentality of the subjects of Western industrialised late capitalism. The insistence of conforming across social context, for example, and the focus on "attributes, accomplishments, and aspirations" seems especially relevant in a hyper-capitalist economy, where capitalist virtue has, perhaps more than ever, become the standard metric for success whether in one's personal life or one's work. What this entails, in turn, is that dissonance is not only relevant for study because it is pervasive and possibly inescapable, or even because it describes part of the psychology involved in false consciousness. It is also ripe for study because we can compare the ways it manifests in different cultures and to better understand the effects capitalism, industrialisation, and other economic and sociological structures have on subjectivity. In particular, dissonance theory offers further reasons to believe that the highly individualised nature of Western societies shapes and distorts our ability to recognise political oppression and that it might be necessary to build less individualistic structures (from housing to social life to education and beyond) for people to more clearly interpret their social world. Marx and Marxists write about alienation; Durkheim writes about *anomie*. Dissonance theory can extend theories like this about the isolated, individuated nature of modern society to provide a very specific

description of what modern conditions "do" to the mind as it considers contradictions. Western individualism, and neoliberalism in particular, likely distort our subjectivity. making it difficult for individuals to accept and consciously think about contradictions in their sense of self and worldview.

This task of analysing the psychological effects of our economic and political system is especially pressing for political theorists given the cultural currency that psychological research tends to carry at present and the lack of critical perspectives in the field. As critical psychologist Richard Lichtman pointed out even 40 years ago, psychology has in many ways become "the dominant ideological paradigm of our age. It is the prism through which the reality of society is transformed into the mythology of individualism."[138] Without a reading of psychology by critical theorists, all these theories may simply be presumed to be neutral or biological facts. Tellingly, Henrich himself is in many ways very far from fully critical of society in his work. The aforementioned book is enthusiastic about the moral effects of markets, competition, and monogamy; the full title is *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* and it verges on being congratulatory about both the peculiarities and the prosperity. Like so many works that touch on psychology and society, it simply does not have or seek this sort of critical methodological background or critical lens. It is, in miniature, an example of how this type of research is not currently being analysed by critical theorists, which leaves it largely in the hands of far less critical thinkers. There could be a fruitful conversation

[138] Richard Lichtman, "The Illusion of Maturation in an Age of Decline," John M Broughton, and Richard Licthman, ed. *Critical Theories of Psychological Development*, 1987: p. 127.

between critical theorists and dissonance theorists about dissonance, individualism, and political consciousness that could extend beyond the current literature to provide a more thoughtful and in-depth analysis of why Western subjects in particular might experience cognitive dissonance, what it might tell us about their form of false consciousness and what might assist subjects in overcoming this.[139] Methodologically, findings like these suggest that a critical use of psychological science can help critical theorists understand not only modern subjectivity and its pathologies but also, via cultural comparison, how these might be formed and altered. What individual psychological research shows is actually the social conditions that engender it, so that, as Erich Fromm put it, "individual psychology is fundamentally social psychology" or, as Marx put it, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."[140] Where people cannot reason well, what is needed is not individual psychological fixes on their own but structural, collective change. Critical theorists can take a complex approach, accepting scientific study but at the same time insisting on interpreting these findings as involving biological, cultural, and indeed economic factors. To engage in empirical psychological research in this instance is to avoid naturalising psychological findings by questioning their origins, including their material basis. Doing this can suggest

[139] This seems an especially plausible field of study for Critical Theorists given that these findings align with the claims of the Frankfurt school that even our consciousness about ourselves is reified. After all, these findings show that in our particular cultural context, we tend to believe in a single unified self even when this is not rational, and behave in self-deceptive ways as a result.

[140] Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, London, Kagan Paul, 1942: p. 247.

Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." Trans. Yuri Spodnikov. *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol 29*: Marx: 1857-1861 (1987): p. 263.

many of the negative effects of cognitive dissonance, including our tendency to rationalise away difficult information that contradicts our sense of self, or to ignore information that suggests we lack action-possibilities or would have to change our actions, might also be somewhat culturally contingent. In another economic system or another culture, we might not engage in these rationalisations and forms of false consciousness as frequently or in the same way.

The very "WEIRDness" of dissonance, then, its curious mix of cultural specificity and cross-cultural existence, is part of what makes it such a promising phenomenon to study. In addition to using dissonance research to look for methods that help people tolerate dissonance long enough to come to new beliefs, conclusions, and actions, it may be instructive to compare how people experience dissonance across cultural and economic contexts, as this could also provide suggestions about where social movements may be more or less successful. This can provide insight and even an instructive locus for cross-cultural comparison when it comes to understanding how false consciousness functions and how it might be overcome. In this assertion I continue to take a relatively less prescriptive approach to the concept of "good" cognition in this area: my suggestion is not that Western culture and ways of thinking are "bad" and other cultures are "good," but rather than by looking at the differences between then we can notice where it is possible for subjectivity to be shaped by culture and from that perspective derive a cultural critique of the problems of our current moment. What makes it difficult to grasp new ideas may well be the very social pathologies that it is most important for political subjects to understand; dissonance's relationship to individualism mirrors Adorno's suggestion that "The splinter in your

eye is the best magnifying-glass available."[141] There is, of course, no simple or neutral way of attempting to understand social pathologies from within society, but that is arguably what makes the process all the more important. As David Ingleby writes, "In the human sciences, it is impossible to theorise in a way that does not reflect one's political commitments. Therefore, ideology critique is essential to scientific progress, quite apart from considerations of political praxis."[142]

Dissonance and Its Relationship to Agency and Identity

In the last chapter, I spent some time evaluating the evidence that dissonance is at play when subjects consider political issues, and that it influences how they behave in the real world. In this chapter, I now return to the underlying theory to demonstrate why agency and identity appear to be so deeply linked to cognitive dissonance. This in turn demonstrates why dissonance literature is so well-suited to discussions of false consciousness. Dissonance literature suggests that as subjects notice contradictions in their sense of self or agential possibilities (both of which are closely tied to their political beliefs) they are likely to turn to rationalisations and reason with confirmation bias, both of which can help to form what we might call "false consciousness." To make this point clearer, in this section I will discuss how some of the most recent (and perhaps most popular) models of cognitive dissonance, the new look, self-standards, and action-based models of dissonance, all illuminate the way agency and identity are

[141] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia,* p. 50.

[142] Richard Lichtman, "The Illusion of Maturation in an Age of Decline," p. 127.

involved when dissonance arises. These models, and the studies that helped researchers develop them, suggest dissonance occurs when subjects face a challenge to their sense of identity, their sense of agency, or the action-possibilities available to them. This in turn provides further reason to consider dissonance an important factor in how people experience their political agency (and related sense of self) and how they develop, or fail to develop, political consciousness. Once again, I acknowledge that definitions of agency in the actual psychological literature are usually limited to what is related to subjects' apparent free choices and their perceived negative and positive effects. However, at the wider political level I suggest it is helpful, when considering questions of political consciousness, to think about agency in terms of the ability for subjects to recognise, act on, and even develop new action-possibilities for themselves related to political issues.

Many dissonance studies focus on choice, and (as some of my examples in the "challenges" section demonstrate) researchers have long been able to document that an increased amount of apparent choice makes people far more likely to experience dissonance and thus behave in apparently irrational ways. This is often referred to as the *free-choice aradigm*, where subjects can choose freely between options and then experience dissonance because of their ambivalence about that choice. A classic test of the free-choice paradigm is the *spreading of alternatives*. The experiment by Jack Brehm described above, where women are asked to choose between different appliances, is a classic example of a spreading of alternatives study. In such a study, the more difficult a decision (e.g., the closer the value of the alternatives), the stronger the dissonance, which results from the cognitions "choice A was valuable in x ways"

and “I did not choose A”. The more difficult the choice, and the stronger the dissonance created by the difficult choice, the more pressure subjects will be under to reduce dissonance, which is generally observable by the degree to which they subsequently value the chosen option more highly and the option not chosen less highly (thus ‘spreading’ the value of the alternatives).[143] This type of research, as well as the types described below, suggest that dissonance is triggered by subjects feeling strongly about maintaining a sense of personal agency. This, in turn, points to the significance of dissonance when people consider political issues and their own agency in that context.

The New Look Model

After facing many of the challenges to dissonance theory discussed earlier in the chapter, theorists of dissonance revised their models to emphasise the role of identity and agency further. One particularly influential model is known as the new look model. As psychologist, Joel Cooper, one of the developers of the new look model, puts it,

> Inconsistent behaviour produces dissonance
> - but only when decision freedom is high[144]
> - but only when people are committed to their behaviour
> - but only when the behaviour leads to aversive consequences
> - but only when those consequences were foreseeable.

[143] See also Thomas R. Shultz, and Mark R. Lepper. "Cognitive Dissonance Reduction as Constraint Satisfaction." *Psychological Review* 103.2, 1996.

[144] For this particular quote with the conditions of the “New Look” model of cognitive dissonance, see Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance*, p. 73.

In this formulation, a high level of decision freedom implies that subjects felt they made the choice freely. This is usually interpreted by psychologists to mean that subjects knew they would not be punished or coerced if they chose one way or the other. For example, subjects are considered to have chosen freely if they might get a bit of extra money for performing an extra part of the study, but not if they were told they had to perform a further unexpected part of the study to get credit for the parts of the study they had already participated in. Cognitive dissonance appears to occur only or mainly when subjects feel they could realistically have chosen another way, and therefore attribute the decision to themselves. The formulation that people are c*ommitted* to their behaviour means that behaviour cannot be easily retroactively changed. For example, people appear to feel much more dissonance about statements they have made publicly and can therefore not easily retract, or decisions that will be difficult to undo, like joining an organisation such as the ROTC (elective military education group) rather than engaging in a one--time activity. So far psychologists have defined *aversive consequences* as anything that is undesirable for the subject.[145] For example, subjects appear to encounter more dissonance when they have to make a counter-attitudinal argument to someone who thereafter tells them that they have been fully convinced. In other words, it is not just having given a counter-attitudinal argument that causes dissonance, but just as much, if not more so, knowing that that action supposedly caused a negative effect in the world by causing someone to believe something the subject does not think is right. That consequences are *foreseeable* in this formulation means that subjects could have easily predicted that said consequences

[145] Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance*, p. 104.

might occur. For example, people who write counter--attitudinal essays and only later find out these were (supposedly) read by those with decision-making power feel less dissonance about the fact they may have assisted a policy change they disagree with, as they can presumably simply dismiss the contradiction by acknowledging they did not know their work would be used in this way.

The conditions provided by the new look model of cognitive dissonance suggest that cognitive dissonance, and the rationalisation and confirmation biases that it generates, most likely arises when subjects feel themselves to be in a position of agency. Here I use the term "agency" as most closely fits the empirical data, that agency refers to subjects' ability to freely decide on a course of action such that they view themselves, rather than other people or circumstances, as the primary sources of the decision. (Elsewhere I develop a broader definition to consider agency in a political sense.) Subjects especially seem concerned, in the new look model, with having behaved in a contradictory way that caused harm they could have foreseen and prevented. Cognitive dissonance literature suggests that feeling a sense of agency but knowing that one has acted in a contradictory way with negative consequences to one's life or that of others causes discomfort. That discomfort in turn leads to rationalisations that may change subjects' conscious views and cause subjects to reason less well. While it might be intuitive to imagine that a subject's sense of agency grows they will become more "rational" in their decision-making in order to best use the opportunity of choice, where rationality perhaps indicates ability to act in accordance with one's long term interests, cognitive dissonance theory suggests otherwise. It specifically indicates that those who perceive themselves to have a high level of agency, in the sense of

choice, with regards to a particular action they have performed, or have the possibility of performing, may consequently face systematic distortions in their reasoning that they are not aware of. People most experience cognitive dissonance (and thus risk rationalising away evidence or unconsciously shifting their views) in conditions of "high-decision freedom." Subjects are also most likely to experience dissonance not just when they are in a position to choose a course of action but when they are torn because a potential behaviour, or a behaviour they have just undertaken, "leads to aversive consequences." In order to cope with the possibility that they may have caused an unwanted consequence, subjects appear to rationalise or change their point of view in ways they otherwise would not. In the context of political agency, one might hope that this fear of negative consequences might be a positive factor, as it could lead to internal accountability (i.e., care for getting things right and willingness to recognise when one has taken the wrong approach). But this research suggests otherwise, that subjects most of all seek to "absolve themselves of responsibility for negative consequences," and they often do so by unconsciously avoiding uncomfortable information."[146] Moreover, as Lois McNay notes, "individual autonomy is not an obstacle or limit to social control but one of its central technologies."[147] This should be taken into account in political theories about practical challenges of political discourse.

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[146] This relates to general findings that choice is costly for people in terms of their cognitive resources, and that giving many choices may exhaust people. See for example Roy F Baumeister, "The Psychology of Irrationality", in Brocas, Isabelle; Carrillo, Juan D (eds.), *The Psychology of Economic Decisions: Rationality and Well-being*, 2003, pp. 1-15. For Cooper's case about aversive consequences, see Cooper, p. 63.

[147] Lois Mc Nay, "Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault's The Birth of Biopolitics", *Theory, Culture and Society,* 26: 2009, 6, pp. 55-77.

It may, surprisingly, mean that democratic subjects psychologically struggle with feelings of agency and must in some way be supported through these before they are able to tolerate the complications, contradictions, and threats to their sense of self that they face in reasoning together. This in turn suggests (as I will argue in Chapter Six) there are significant possible improvements that could be made to areas like the media, education, and voting.

The Self-Standards Model

A second common trigger for cognitive dissonance is a challenge to the subject's sense of self or self-image, often called the *self-standards model.* Researchers have consistently found that dissonance is particularly likely when the gap between behaviour and beliefs challenges our self-image. Researcher Claude Steele and his colleagues conducted several studies that suggested that cognitive dissonance often occurs as a form of self-affirmation, to rationalise in a way that allows people to believe, despite behaviour to the contrary, that they are "good."[148] Moreover, there is significant evidence that subjects can also experience cognitive dissonance on behalf of those with whom they identify, thus effectively extending one's relevant sense of self to include groups to which one belongs. This means political subjects may not only end up unconsciously changing their point of view or being reason-resistant with respect to behaviours that they have personally engaged in, but also those the groups to which they belong have.[149] This might, for example, explain how scandals within political

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[148] Claude M. Steele and Thomas J. Liu. "Dissonance Processes as Self-affirmation": 5 and Claude M. Steele, "The Psychology of Self-Affirmation": pp. 261-302.

[149] Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance*, p. 125

parties often do not have the effect one might imagine, as individuals rationalise behaviour of those in their in-group and shift their views to avoid cognitive dissonance. They might, for example, see a candidate whose policies they agree with engaged in a bribery scandal but rationalise this away by thinking that this is what it takes to succeed in the political machine, all so that they can not only maintain their sense that their candidate is a good or acceptable person, but also by extension that they too are, for supporting that candidate. Notably, although many of these experiments are focussed on the individual person and their sense of self, cognitive dissonance can thus also occur not only at scale but over issues of collective identity. Similar issues arise with regards to what we might term "false consciousness," as subjects who hold themselves to be sensible, rational actors, when confronted with evidence that they may have done something that is not in their best interests, feel their sense of self under threat and resort to rationalisations or confirmation bias.

The Action-Based Model

A final, more recent theory of cognitive dissonance incorporates aspects of earlier theories but proposes the *"action-based model"* of dissonance which "theorises that when individuals have conflicting cognitions with action implications, they experience dissonance."[150] This model is not only one of the newest models but also points to dissonance's close relationship with subjects' sense of agency and the way that subjects that feel pressure to act may resort to rationalisations and confirmation bias

[150] Eddie Harmon-Jones, Cindy Harmon-Jones, and Nicholas Levy. "An Action-Based Model of Cognitive-Dissonance Processes." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24.3, 2015: pp. 184-189.

when they encounter contradictions. Much of the action-based model research has shown that when subjects are placed in situations where they do not immediately feel the pressure of ascertaining the next actions they should take, it is harder to trigger cognitive dissonance. This in turn may make it easier for subjects to consider contradictory points of view for longer periods of time. The converse is also likely true; i.e. subjects likely feel most pressure to rationalise or engage in confirmation bias when they feel under pressure to determine their next actions. This suggests that political reasoning and people's drive to (at least feel they) have political agency bear an uneasy relationship, where the pressure of the latter may impede the former, and that a division between reflective reasoning and action can improve reasoning outcomes. At the same time, as I discuss in greater depth in the next chapter, providing new action-possibilities for subjects rather than merely discussing arguments may expand the range of possible beliefs in political life. The action-based theory of dissonance is not only one of the newest but potentially one of the most meaningful for critical theorists, because it most directly ties subjects' sense of themselves as good agents and subjects' aversion to feeling powerless to the discomfort of dissonance and the often irrational behaviours dissonance can trigger. I will return to a description of this theory in the next chapter, when I tie it directly to questions about theories of ideology.

In short, many of the most recent and/or popular models of dissonance demonstrate that it tends to happen when people's sense of self or agency are in some sense under threat. It is worth acknowledging that I am here lumping different theories together, in a way that some psychologists might question and which unquestionably mixes

models. But using a triangulation of several different theories, stressing what they have in common rather than what divides them, points to the central themes of agency and identity that run throughout all dissonance research and which point to its clear relevance for political consciousness. (It also is perhaps more sensible than attempting to pick only one model or arbitrate between them.) Indeed, psychologists generally acknowledge that all models are mere approximations of human behaviour, and that what they share in common is as important as how they differ. The creator of the action-based model, Harmon Jones, for example, writes that "dissonance theorists agree that genuine cognitive changes occur as a result of dissonance processes. They also agree that these cognitive changes are motivated in nature and that the source of this motivation is a form of psychological discomfort."[151] In any case, although all these theories provide slightly different explanatory mechanisms, it is worth noting the most recent books on cognitive dissonance tend to suggest that these theories are at least somewhat in agreement and even can be integrated with one another to a significant degree. Cooper, for example, rather than mediating between the different theories of how self-concept affects dissonance, simply summarises them as a collective: "Self-esteem affects dissonance, and is an important part of the process, but mainly in those special circumstances in which thoughts about self have become particularly accessible and salient."[152] I would agree, and add that many of these special circumstances involve politics, including ones Cooper uses throughout the book.

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[151] Harmon-Jones, Ed. C*ognitive Dissonance: Reexamining a Pivotal Theory in Psychology,* p. 17.

[152] Cooper, p. 116.

What, then, do these models suggest about what is at stake for subjects when they experience dissonance? One way of understanding the significance of one's self, feeling of agency, and a sense of future action-possibilities is that discomfort arises when our conceptual "map" of the world is troubled. A good map provides a sense of our potential actions, our agential possibilities. It tells us where we can go and what we can do. By a "map" I do not explicitly mean that we require a visual model, but simply an understanding of how agents, actions, and concepts in our world relate to one another, how that world works, and what one's possibilities for action may be.[153] Dissonance seems to work as a force that pressures the subject to find a way to create coherence in their model so they can continue to navigate the world, resolving contradictions artificially if need be, or revising beliefs systems in perhaps rare cases. The utility here, of course, is that one can only act if one has a sense of the world and one's action-possibilities within it; that is, an effective map. False consciousness, in this metaphor, is a map that represents people's action-possibilities poorly, so that they cannot spot opportunities for liberation, or so that they view their oppression as natural, inevitable, or even good. This idea of mapping cognitive dissonance is also somewhat in line with what the philosopher Wilfred Sellars terms "picturing."[154] This idea of mapping, picturing or modelling as a force for understanding is arguably common in the work of philosophers and theorists in the field of epistemology. It is also notably put forward as a depiction of ideology by the theorist Frederic Jameson. In line with

[153] Harmon-Jones et al, "An Action-Based Model of Cognitive-Dissonance Processes," p. 185.

[154] See, for example, Jeremy Randel Koons, and Carl B. Sachs. "The Role of Picturing In Sellars's Practical Philosophy." *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 2022.

his ongoing interest in how architecture has a relatively unmediated relationship with capital, Jameson suggests that it is by analysing geographic space that one can better understand the reality of power and capitalism in a way that is not otherwise available to immediate experience "[t]he truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people."[155] Of course, Jameson notes, since subjects often cannot interpret the maps of their world easily, and because the reality of their lives is often inaccessible to them, they engage in a kind of impoverished and often misleading mapping: "Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content."[156]

It is not only the world around us that is generated by a working model. Our sense of self is generated this way as well. To return to my earlier metaphor, we are ourselves, of course, situated within this map; as if with an arrow that says "you are here." Only by having a sense of ourselves can we judge "where" we are and where we can "go"—what we can do. If this sense of self is called into question by a new idea or piece of information, we don't know "where" "we" are in the spectrum of possibilities,

[155] Jameson, Fredric. "Cognitive Mapping." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988: p. 349.

[156] *Ibid.* p. 356.

and we find ourselves unable to navigate the world around us. (After all, not knowing where you are on the map makes the map far less useful!) Perhaps the most common reference to this phenomenon in British popular culture is the moment in a Mitchell and Webb comedy sketch where one of two members of the SS, pondering the skulls embroidered on the SS caps and its possible significance, has a sudden realisation and asks the other "are we the baddies?" This moment in comedy television has since become a popular internet meme. It is not only painful when we have to reconsider how to "map" and understand the world, but also when we are challenged to reconsider our place on that map. Understanding, then, is built on at least a rough sense of coherence, or in psychological terms, consonance. Sometimes, however, something arises that does not conform to our existing expectations, clashing with the assumptions that have long functioned to generate our sense of reality. This dissonance is uncomfortable because it disorients us; we no longer have a clear "map", nor can we understand where we stand within the world. This moment of dissonance is also uncomfortable not only because it brings our existing sense of the world into question, but also because it reminds us that we are in fact experiencing a mental approximation of reality, rather than perceiving reality directly. (As philosopher Thomas Metzinger puts it when describing the ego, we do not see the "window" through which we are perceiving the world unless something goes wrong with that window, unless there is a "crack" in it.)[157]

The discomfort of cognitive dissonance thus specifically arises, if we roughly summarise the shared feature of these models, when either our self, our actions, or our

157 Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*. Reprint edition, Basic Books, 2010: p. 46.

potential actions are called into question. One's subjective "map" of the world is required for us to be able to act, and rests quite literally a sense of who we are and what actions we might next engage in. Cognitive dissonance functions as a pressure for subjects to bring cognitions back into consonance so that they can understand their action-possibilities and continue to act in the world. Recall that dissonance can be understood in terms of the "dissonance ratio": "the magnitude of dissonance equals the number of dissonance cognitions divided by the number of consonant cognitions plus the number of dissonant cognitions...Dissonance can be reduced by removing dissonance cognitions, adding new consonant cognitions, or increasing the importance of consonant cognitions."[158] To make this clearer, we might consider this equation:

$$\text{Dissonance} = \frac{\text{reasons contrary to existing beliefs}}{\text{reasons to believe existing belief}} + \frac{\text{actions contrary to existing belief}}{\text{actions in support of existing belief}}$$[159]

Once it is clear that cognitive dissonance is not simply a bizarre and irrational phenomenon, but a pressure that forms when subjects' understanding of the world is troubled due to a contradiction between their beliefs and/or actions, it is easier to understand why subjects might engage in rationalisation, confirmation bias, and other types of curious behaviour. These responses to cognitive dissonance serve to repair the "map" so that subjects can once again navigate the world. The self-standards model and the new look model are also both relatively good predictors for when people will experience cognitive dissonance, because contradictions that do not involve our sense

[158] Harmon-Jones, ed. C*ognitive Dissonance: Reexamining a Pivotal Theory in Psychology.* American Psychological Association, 2019: p. 4.

[159] This is an expansion of an equation given by Cooper on page 9 of his book.

of self or our agential possibilities do not have any bearing on our ability to navigate the world or to choose actions. In contrast, if I am wrong about whether I am, say, the right kind of feminist, this has serious consequences for how I should behave; similarly if I am wrong about whether divestment, striking, or voting will bring about the political possibilities I want, I will also have to alter my understanding of the world and my course of action. In the previous chapter, I pointed to the way dissonance tends to appear frequently when people consider political issues, especially including those related to their sense of themselves as good, competent people, or when people consider whether they have possibilities for action in a given situation and what those possibilities are. The models described above help make sense of why subjects might be especially likely to experience dissonance (and therefore frequently resort to rationalisation or confirmation bias) when considering their place in the political social order. Many, if not exactly all, political questions (that is, those to do with social and collective relations of power, those of the sort that can be influenced by group interventions) implicate the subject in a question about whether they have acted well or competently and which action-possibilities they will choose. No wonder, then, that dissonance is (and rationalisation and confirmation bias are) especially likely to occur around political issues.

Of course, even when facing painful identity-threatening or worldview-altering contradictions, sometimes subjects do change their minds in line with new, probability-weighted evidence or ideas. Equally, subjects sometimes change their minds for other reasons—interest, pleasure in rethinking the world, or practicality. The suggestion here is simply that dissonance is likely a fairly important factor in why it is often so difficult

for people to change their minds about strongly held political views, including about oppressive systems. What happens in this case, I argue, is that subjects come up with a new way of mapping their world, perhaps through a new category or new narrative. Given the way that human subjects appear empirically to minimise their explanatory efforts, it appears that most subjects choose a path of least cognitive resistance, and will choose a more minimalist revision to their predictive model or worldview if they can.[160] Whatever the case, because dissonance is so painful, it tends to be resolved relatively quickly, often in mere seconds.[161] Either we retain the old model, or we find a new way of understanding the world and ourselves. When a convincing category or narrative (whether true or otherwise) helps us understand the world in a new way, we could say the "map" or the "arrow" is updated, and our ability to navigate is restored. Arguably there are not just a few distinct outcomes but rather a spectrum of possibilities: sometimes the subject represses the issue altogether, sometimes reductions of dissonance are more "rationalising" e.g. merely using weak reasons to dismiss evidence, while others involve more robust processes of judiciously resolving contradictions. Either a repression or rationalisation happens that reduces cognitive dissonance so that the subject can retain their existing views completely, or a new worldview is adopted, possibly using new categories and corresponding narratives. And it is perhaps in the process of resolving dissonance, especially when contradictions are made conscious, that new categories and ideas can be created and

160 However, philosophers who work with neuroscience like Thomas Metzinger note that we are cognitively lazy, and may thus wish to make the most minimal changes possible to our existing set of assumptions.

161 See the timescales in Jonas T. Kaplan, Sarah I. Gimbel, and Sam Harris. "Neural Correlates of Maintaining One's Political Beliefs in the Face of Counterevidence." *Scientific Reports* 6, 2016: 39589.

better, more critical political consciousness can be obtained. In other words, I have argued that dissonance theory is a relatively strong finding, one that is culturally specific in presentation but likely inescapable to some degree due to its frequency and unconscious aspects. It is also strongly tied to subjects' sense of agency and identity, and thus likely to appear regularly when subjects consider political issues. It is, however, not a purely negative phenomenon, as the pressure of dissonance may, in the right circumstances, lead to conscious contemplation of apparent contradictions and new political consciousness. For this reason, critical theorists should include consideration of dissonance in their work and even make it central to their understanding of "false consciousness" as well as the ways subjects sometimes come to greater political consciousness. I examine the escapability of false consciousness through dissonance in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Dissonance is a regular psychological phenomenon that distorts reasoning when subjects consider issues related to their identity or perceived agency—which includes many political issues. Although there are methodological issues that theorists should be cautious about when considering dissonance theory (for example, an overreliance on any one "mechanism" as an explanation for human behaviour, as well as the design of studies and their replicability) dissonance is a relatively robust finding and not incompatible with more common approaches by critical theorists in the past (for example, it holds many similar assumptions to psychoanalysis about humans having unconscious motivations and drives). It also may not be eradicable, which means that theories of

political consciousness should address it rather than ignore it. Theorists should therefore account for it in their work—in order to better theorise how false consciousness about our political possibilities forms and how it might sometimes be undone.

Dissonance theory can help provide a specific account of the psychological mechanisms in false consciousness and related aspects of ideology. I provide detailed examples in the chapters that follow. Alongside providing a more detailed account of these mechanisms, I suggest that dissonance theory can serve as one way of evaluating the many existing and often conflicting theories of ideology and understanding which might be more or less plausible given the existing scientific research on how the mind works and how humans engage in self-deception. It can serve as an indicator for which areas of further research related to ideology might be fruitful—and by extension, how critical theorists should understand the way the subjects of oppression can gain agency. It serves as a filter to point us towards more promising areas of research and to illuminate which accounts of ideology theory are more or less plausible. Through it, certain apparent contradictions between theories of ideology become resolved or are shown not to be as contradictory as they appear, while other potentially intuitive theories of ideology are revealed as false, or at least start to look less persuasive.

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Chapter Three: How Dissonance Theory Enriches Theories of Ideology, Interpellation, and the Escape from False Consciousness

> *The fundamental problem of political philosophy is still precisely the one that Spinoza saw so clearly (and that Wilhelm Reich rediscovered): Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?*
>
> — Gilles Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*[162]

In this chapter, I demonstrate ways that dissonance theory can enrich theories of "false consciousness" or political subjectivity. I use the work of Louis Althusser as an example. I argue that when it comes to theories of false consciousness, theorists require fairly specific theories of psychology that provide key mechanisms to explain why people come to believe what they believe. Otherwise, their explanations may remain confusing and possibly appear inescapable. Not having such theories also leaves them open to the risks of relying on folk psychology or the confusing or incomplete use of psychological theories. I argue that cognitive dissonance theory provides one promising (though by no means exclusive) explanation for why subjects believe in, and even fight for, ideas tied up with their own oppression. Dissonance theory provides a fairly neat and useful enrichment of his concept of "interpellation." It suggests that rationalising one's experiences and materially necessary daily actions reduces painful psychological dissonance about the gap between one's daily actions and the reality of oppression, and oppressive ideologies provide a convenient template for these often-unconscious rationalisations.[163] In this way, it provides an account of

[162] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Penguin, 2009: p. 31.

[163] I use both words because, for example, "being harassed on the train by a man" might be a political experience that changes someone's mind about political issues, but cannot easily be considered an

how subjects come to hold ideological beliefs, one that is neither (solely) about structural elements on their own nor relies on psychological explanations that are relatively vague. Dissonance theory can also help explain why oppressed subjects can sometimes escape harmful belief systems and why they generally must engage in both action and reasoning with others to do so. My argument is that dissonance literature provides useful, specific mechanisms for how subjects come to believe in ideas bound up in their own oppression, and that these mechanisms are worthy of study by critical theorists. This in turn will support my more detailed analysis, in the next two chapters, of how the Frankfurt School theorists in particular might have better resolved some of their dilemmas about political consciousness if they had been able to turn to psychological literature of this kind.

Interpellation and Agency: How Dissonance Can Enrich Theories of Ideology and "False Consciousness"

Marxist political theorist Louis Althusser's work has proposed one of the most influential accounts of ideology and how it is maintained. I have turned to Althusser's work here even though he is not a member of the Frankfurt School because his account of interpellation is a particularly useful starting point to demonstrate the wider applicability of cognitive dissonance theory to theories of ideology. Moreover, Althusser's work is famously one of the most "structural" accounts of ideology. It involves institutions and structures outside the human mind, with only a minimal

action. In contrast, "responding at work to a new set of incentives by working harder" is an action, even if we might think it compelled. Most of the psychological literature related to dissonance suggests actions have greater effect, because subjects wish to perceive themselves as having chosen freely and wisely, and adjust their beliefs to their actions to do so.

account of the psychological processes. My argument is that Althusser's account is a principal example of an account of ideology that lacks a good explanation of the connection between the structural and personal or psychological elements of ideology, and that such an account can be strengthened by a theory like cognitive dissonance theory. In other words, cognitive dissonance theory can bridge a gap in theories like Althusser's without in any way diminishing the importance of institutions and structures; dissonance theory in fact demonstrates why these might have the power to alter the way subjects think. This, in turn, makes clearer why those in the Frankfurt school tradition might also wish to take up this particular body of psychological research.

Problems with the Mechanisms of Interpellation

Like the members of the Frankfurt school who are the focus of my project, Althusser relies on psychoanalysis to explain how ideological structures (like the Church or the State) influence the beliefs of subjects. To do this, Althusser builds on the work of Jacques Lacan, particularly Lacan's description of "the mirror stage." In the mirror stage, a term first used to describe an actual developmental stage in childhood, and later a lifelong aspect of subjectivity, subjects come to understand and conceptualise themselves based on the images they receive of themselves from the outside world, even though these representations are often false. Just as the child first sees itself as a coherent whole in the mirror (although as a child especially, and as a subject of any age, it is not fully coherent or automatically "whole"!) the subject of ideology responds to the image of themself provided by the external ideological

apparatus, understanding themself according to these outside forces. In this sense, ideology is an account of false, or at least compelled and incomplete, self-recognition, and represents what the subject is subject to. (The always-doubled meaning of the subjects is ever at play here: subjects are those with agency, in the sense of apparent choice, but they are also those who must obey others, as with the subjects of monarchies.) Just as a child first sees itself in the mirror and comes to understand itself (somewhat falsely!) as a fully individuated self who will be seen by others in the same way, we "see ourselves" in ideology, and come to know ourselves, albeit somewhat inaccurately, through its lens. At the same time, this self-recognition is not wholly false, we *are* the subjects of capital, faithful wives, hardworking subjects etc. Althusser specifically notes that the subject might feel personally called and seen in some way by God, the state, or simply others around them. As he puts it, "ideology 'obtains from [the subject] the recognition that they really do occupy the place it designates for them as theirs in the world, a fixed residence:' It really is me, I am here, a worker, a boss or a soldier!"[164] This is why Althusser suggests that ideology is a representation of the "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."[165]

Famously, Althusser describes ideologies as "hailing" the subject, using the example of someone being hailed on the street (in a footnote he reminds the reader that this could well happen when a policeman hails a subject) Althusser writes:

> There are individuals walking along…the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that 'it really is

[164] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971: p. 178.

[165] *Ibid.* p. 162.

> he' who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.[166]

As Althusser himself notes, the "moment" of interpellation described in the hailing of the subjects is not meant to be a literal depiction of how interpellation works but a metaphor, a theatrical depiction of how identity is formed.

Yet to the degree that Althusser does detail the psychology of the subject here, using psychoanalysis and ideas from Lacan, there are nevertheless important questions left unanswered. Even if the subject is provided with a possible source of self-understanding by an ideological apparatus, what exactly causes them to accept this "image" of the world and with it an ideological belief? This is, once again, the failure to provide a "worm's eye view" of the matter: what does the moment of interpellation mean for the individual's subjectivity, and what are the steps it involves? What is the force that brings the subject to this new set of beliefs? After all, we do sometimes reject labels and beliefs that are suggested to us; what prevents subjects from doing this more frequently? As Terry Eagleton notes, response and recognition seem like things that happen to subjects with fully formed consciousness of their social position, so this may contradict Althusser's suggestion that we only become subjects after interpellation. Eagleton writes, "Althusser's theory of ideology would appear to lurch from the economic to the psychological with a minimum of mediation."[167] Similarly, David Leopold writes that the process of interpellation as described by Althusser "always remains a little opaque" in that 1) it seems to rely heavily on word association

[166] *Ibid.* p. 174.

[167] Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction. Verso Books*, 1991: p. 148.

2) and indirect references to Lacan, and 3) although Althusser insists human beings are not subjects (e.g. "independent and autonomous agents"), they always appear to need to feel like subjects with agency.[168] Mladen Dolar, too, finds this aspect of Althusser's work incomplete: "there is a break between his insistence on the materiality of state apparatuses on the one hand, and interpellation on the other, between exteriority and the constitution of interiority. How exactly would materiality entail subjectivation? Why would interpellation require materiality?"[169] Thus although Althusser's account of ideological interpellation has been influential and often characterised as sophisticated, his account of the psychology involved is superficial and ultimately insufficient. Although supposedly a firmly material explanation for ideology, Althusser's theory actually touches on the core of how subjects recognise themselves internally, psychologically, and the formation of selfhood. And this psychological aspect of interpellation is drawn in a sketchy, if not incomplete, manner. Dolar reminds the reader of the way that

> To elucidate the transition between the external materiality of state apparatuses (institutions, practices, rituals, etc.) and the interiority of ideological subjectivity, Althusser borrows a famous suggestion from Pascal, namely his scandalous piece of advice that the best way to become a believer is to follow the religious rituals (although they appear completely senseless to a nonbeliever), after which the creed will follow by itself with an inescapable necessity. So where does the creed come from?[170]

Dolar is particularly concerned with the question of "What made him/her follow the ritual at all? Why did he/she consent to repeat a series of senseless gestures? Clearly

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[168] David Leopold, "Marxism and ideology: from Marx to Althusser." *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, 2013: p. 33.

[169] Mladen Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation." *Qui Parle*, 6:2, 1993: p. 76.

[170] *Ibid.* 90.

the creed did not motivate this consent since it was to be the product of the situation."[171] Dolar finds Althusser's explanation for the mechanics of interpellation inadequate and suggests that psychoanalytic theory can help. He suggests that the answer lies in subjects' foundational need for the big Other, something exterior to oneself that mediates reality for the subject, like language or the law:

> Even before belief, there is already a belief involved—not belief in the Catholic faith, but a minimal supposition that there is something to believe in, that there is a "subject supposed to know" which can make sense of the string of nonsense… there is a "first empty gesture," the minimal and purely formal gesture of consent—a purely formal belief with no contents—which is enough to give rise to the Other and to give support to the unconscious; and there is a "second empty gesture," which is a formal act of recognition, giving rise to belief and inner acceptance. Althusser leaves out the second step.[172]

This attempt to bridge this conceptual gap may indeed reflect some of the reasons subjects engage in social rituals that later influence their beliefs—they may assume, even if unconsciously, that someone can give them a good reason to engage in the ritual, even though they don't have that person or explanation directly to hand. Then, by engaging in the ritual, they may identify with its belief system after the fact—a fact that can be explained due to dissonance. I shall now turn to this explanation, which demonstrates why Althusser's theory in particular, and many theories more broadly, would benefit from a stronger use of dissonance theory in particular and accounts of psychological mechanisms more broadly.

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[171] *Ibid.* 90.

[172] *Ibid.*

Interpellation, Effort Justification, and the Induced Compliance Model

Although Althusser relies on psychoanalysis as part of his explanation for ideology, he might oppose an overly psychological account of interpellation due to his structuralist commitments. Nevertheless, I argue dissonance theory provides an account of one way people are, to use his term, interpellated by ideologies: the discomfort generated when people are forced to engage in acts in the world that conflict with their existing beliefs influences people to shift their beliefs to align with their experience and especially what they see as their chosen actions. In the *induced compliance* model of cognitive dissonance, subjects perform a task that contradicts their beliefs and end up changing their beliefs unconsciously in order to reduce any painful dissonance about the contradiction between their beliefs and actions. This in practice means that people frequently align their beliefs retrospectively with actions that they made under apparent "free choice." To briefly return to an earlier example, this is what occurs in the *effort-justification study,* where people engage in an activity (action) even when they think it is humiliating or tedious (belief) and then adjust their beliefs to reduce this dissonance by concluding that the reward for the activity is extremely valuable. A common method for such studies is to ask research participants to make an argument for something they do not believe. The researchers ask participants (usually university students) to write an essay making the case for something "counterattitudinal": something they disagree with, like an increase in tuition fees.[173] After students complete the essay, the researchers tell the students that it

[173] The original and influential Induced Compliance study is Leon Festinger, and James M. Carlsmith. "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58.2, 1959: p. 203.

will be used to convince others, perhaps the administration itself. Participants then generally begin to agree (at least more than before) with the essay they wrote, despite their previous disagreement; in surveys following the essay-writing task, they score proposals to increase tuition fees far more favourably than do control groups who did not face the task of writing something that contradicts their beliefs. The essay-writing students' shifting of their beliefs occurs as a way of reducing the uncomfortable dissonance that they feel—at least unconsciously—between their previous views and their new action (writing the essay).[174] The students cannot undo having written the essay, and so it is easier to alter their own views—though this generally happens entirely unconsciously. To reduce the uncomfortable dissonance, they rationalise by concluding they in fact do support higher tuition. This theory extends beyond the lab to explain the patterns observed in fraternity inductions and cult inductions: subjects think *I freely chose to do this activity* (action), BUT *it was humiliating* (conflicting belief) HOWEVER that is okay because *the reward for the activity is very good and worth it* (changed belief). Another variant occurs in the early Festinger *induced-compliance* paradigm studies described earlier, where subjects face a contradiction between the action *I told the person the activity was interesting* and the belief *this activity is boring* and resolve the dissonance between these two by straightforwardly changing their beliefs to believe *this activity is actually pretty interesting*.

[174] Indeed, the more freedom subjects are given to not write the essay, the more cognitive dissonance they face about then choosing to write something they do not believe in and the more they tend to shift their views towards what they have written, suggesting it is the need to reconcile themselves with their actions and believe they have agency in the matter that produces part of the force of dissonance and dissonance discomfort.

All this suggests a mechanism for ideology whereby subjects and their beliefs are not only swayed by simply absorbing speech, writing and culture, but via the dissonance they experience between their actions and their beliefs. In daily life we are all effectively compelled to undertake actions that may appear to be free choices, like going to work, engaging in highly gendered relationships, or fulfilling roles prescribed within the nuclear family structure. We may experience some of these actions as oppressive, even if only unconsciously. To reduce dissonance between the possible cognition "this is unfair/bad/harmful/oppressive" and the fact that we continue to engage in these actions, we are likely to alter our beliefs in many cases, and come to find justifications for the system in which we are enmeshed. It may, for example, be easiest for a person who goes to work every day but believes their work may be unethical to come to believe that their work is in the natural order of things, or a virtue, or that it has good effects too, or that it is just inescapable and nothing can be done about it. It is easier, that is, than it would be for them to quit their job and find another, and it allows them to rationalise actions in their past as well. This phenomenon is a plausible explanation for how people adopt beliefs they previously did not hold, and which may be otherwise irrational or even harmful; it suggests one mechanism, then, for the development of what many left wing theorists term false consciousness. Cognitive dissonance may be at work in areas of our everyday life where our beliefs do not easily align with our actions.

All of this in turn helps to enrich the somewhat vague and ambiguous account that Althusser himself provides for interpellation. Althusser paints a picture of ideology and ideological beliefs where they are almost entirely structurally determined;

such a picture not only risks incompleteness but also suggests ideological beliefs might be inescapable, that subjects are effectively passive dupes. He fails, in this sense, to provide a worm's eye view of the phenomenon, an account of what happens directly to the subject psychologically, affectively, internally step by step as they come to "false consciousness" or oppressive political beliefs. By enriching a structural theory with dissonance theory, I suggest, this deficit can be addressed.

This explanation alone could be easily supported by a cousin of cognitive dissonance theory, *self-perception theory*, which suggests individuals develop their sense of self by interpreting their own actions.[175] Self-perception theory generally suggests that people might, for example, conclude they are afraid of something after they start running away, or determine they are popular based on how many social interactions they have. In my previous discussion of self-perception theory, I noted that its proponents argued that subjects who write a counterattitudinal essay may not be experiencing dissonance (that is, the discomfort of contradictions), but simply have come to believe that if they wrote that essay they must really believe its premise. And indeed, self-perception theory may well account for some of the ways subjects come to align themselves with ideological beliefs based on their daily actions. However, as described in the previous chapter, further research generally suggests that self-perception theory cannot adequately explain the attitude changes that are created in cognitive dissonance studies.[176] Studies suggest that while subjects may well

[175] See Daryl J. Bem, "Self-Perception: An Alternative Interpretation of Cognitive Dissonance Phenomena." Psychological Review 74.3 (1967): 183. And Daryl J. Bem, "Self-Perception Theory." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 6. Academic Press, 1972: pp. 1-62.

[176] Another example of a study that helps clarify this complexity is: Andrew J. Elliot, and Patricia G. Devine. "On the Motivational Nature of Cognitive Dissonance: Dissonance as Psychological Discomfort." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67.3, 1994: p. 382.

sometimes adapt their self-perception to their actions, dissonance also exists as a separate phenomenon, and can explain things self-perception theory cannot. Thus, to return to interpellation via kneeling or any other action, subjects might engage in rituals assuming there is some good reason to do so, then draw their sense of self from this. But dissonance describes cases where subjects perform an action, notice this action contradicts another cognition or action of theirs (e.g. "but this is oppressive!") and then commit to a belief system related to that action anyway. Theories like self-perception theory cannot easily explain why subjects choose to ascribe to beliefs suggested by actions that lie in contradiction to their existing or less oppressive beliefs, when they could instead face this contradiction and choose the less oppressive belief of the contradictory pair. Dissonance suggests that in these cases, subjects receive conflicting information about themselves (for example, they might be going to work but also finding it oppressive), and then choose to rationalise in favour of what is more harmful to them to avoid some shorter-term discomfort. In other words, my suggestion is that even Dolar's interpretation does not quite cover the question of why people form ideological beliefs even against the "resistance" that is likely to arise if those beliefs are in some way harmful to their own interests. It does not provide a particularly forceful mechanism, one that appears could bring people around to such extreme acts as fighting for one's own servitude. It cannot explain what I have previously described as the "perversity" of false consciousness, where subjects are affectively attached to their beliefs and refuse to part with them even as those beliefs cause them harm and pain. Similarly self-perception theory, while perhaps a mechanism that could be a part of an account of ideology, does not provide an account

of subjects taking on a sense of self that contradicts other parts of their experience, and so it cannot easily explain all of why, for example, a woman would believe patriarchal ideology. Dissonance theory provides an explanation for some of this perversity, by suggesting that if subjects *do not* reconcile themselves to oppressive beliefs, they are likely to live in discomfort and that this is not tenable psychologically.

Furthermore, to return to Dolar's question about what prompts the subject to even begin to engage in the behaviours that will ultimately shape their views, I suggest that there is yet a more obvious explanation for why subjects engage in ideological behaviour: in many cases, we engage in the actions that subject us to ideology *simply because we have to*, either to survive under capitalism or to fit in in an unforgiving social world. We are, as Nicholas Abercrombie puts it in his rejection of ideology (mentioned in Chapter One), indeed pushed along by what Marx called the "dull compulsion of labour." But my suggestion is that this dull compulsion is not (or not always) a substitute for an account of ideology; rather, the actions we are compelled to take materially are a part of the way ideology works on the mind. Subjects also engage in rituals starting from childhood, where they cannot choose because they are compelled to do things by adults (to return to Pascal's example, most Catholics kneel from the time they are very young). Dolar's explanation is thus far from complete. Moreover, he largely neglects the equally, in my view, interesting question of *why* engaging in actions would change our beliefs, a question that can be answered, at least in part, by the discomfort dissonance causes. Moreover, as Althusser himself argues, ideology has material effects; it is not merely a set of ideas but also the very real practices and institutions that embodies these ideas, like the church, state, or wage

form. (Or, as feminist theorists note, the ideology that allows society to pay women little or nothing for the care work they do in the home.)[177] These institutions may work in part because they compel subjects to live a certain way, and in doing so subjects experience dissonance about the gap between the reality of, say, doing wage labour or unpaid care work and the ideology that justifies these practices. When this dissonance occurs, it may often be easiest to manage this discomfort by rationalising the discomfort away and embracing the ideological values or ideas, because it is far more difficult to escape the need to work, or leave the family form.

My suggestion, then, is that cognitive dissonance theory provides a concrete explanation for the relationship between ideology and daily experience and actions as described by Althusser. At risk of repeating an earlier point, Althusser notes that "we are indebted to Pascal's defensive 'dialectic' for the wonderful formula which will enable us to invert the order of the notional schema of ideology. Pascal says more or less: 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe.' He thus scandalously inverts the order of things…"[178] When considered in terms of cognitive dissonance theory in general, and the induced compliance framework of dissonance in particular, it becomes clearer why a subject's actions might motivate or even compel them to accept an otherwise harmful ideology. In cognitive dissonance theory, as in the description of interpellation, subjects are often drawn to change their views to match actions they have already taken, even those taken due to duress or social norms, in

[177] For a discussion of how the family form makes patriarchal ideology take a material form see, for example, Michele Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*. Verso Books, 2014.

[178] Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*: p. 169.

order to escape dissonance discomfort, which can be excruciating. Cognitive dissonance can provide a mechanism for this sequence of events, and specifically for why we engage in what Dolar terms "the second step," because dissonance theory suggests that subjects engage in actions in line with oppressive viewpoints, *then feel uncomfortable dissonance about this gap between their actions and the nature of their views,* and then resolve this painful dissonance by changing their views (as so often happens in cognitive dissonance studies!) to match their actions. They are especially likely to do this because often they cannot go back and change their actions. Dissonance discomfort is the mechanism by which subjects are (at least in some cases) likely to be interpellated by their own actions, whether they engage in them for the psychoanalytic reasons Dolar describes or simply because they are compelled to do so to survive under capitalism or remain within a family or social group. Oppressive ideologies likely prove popular because they provide a convenient template for these often unconscious rationalisations.

Implications of Dissonance Theory's Enrichment of The Concept of Interpellation

Cognitive dissonance theory provides a clearer sense of why it is possible for beliefs to follow from actions compared to other theories of "interpellation." An account enriched by cognitive dissonance theory posits that to reduce painful dissonance, subjects will often adjust their beliefs to align with actions which they are materially compelled to undertake (e.g. going to work or living within a particular family structure). This improves on Althusser's account of interpellation, which provides only a brief psychological referent for the process of interpellation. In

particular, it helps explain why subjects would find the process of interpellation he describes powerful in the first place, and why they would hold on to beliefs that might harm them. It provides not only a clearer worm's eye view of what actually happens to the individual subject psychologically, but also a mechanism to explain the "perversity" of ideological belief: dissonance motivates subjects towards harmful beliefs as they seek a consistent sense of self. Intriguingly, when we turn to dissonance theory in particular, dissonance research suggests that subjects don't simply "go along" with external apparatuses and institutions and the ideologies these uphold, but rather (in some cases) effectively "deceive themselves" by engaging in acts in line with these institutions and then reconciling painful dissonance about this by holding on to potentially oppressive beliefs. This is, potentially, a hopeful phenomenon for left-wing social movements, at least in the sense that it suggests that subjects are not passive dupes, but rather driven to reduce discomfort about the contradictions in their actions. With sufficient social support or with the development of new activities, they might also be able to "escape" harmful ideologies.

Using dissonance theory does not require one to in any way abandon the significance of structural and material forces. Althusser has long been accused of relying on these structural explanations to a fault, but with dissonance theory one can retain these important structural explanations and have a psychological account of how the actions that these structures enforce work on the mind of the subjects. This in turn can prove helpful for those in the Frankfurt School tradition, who generally focus on combining Freud and Marx, or psychology and structural explanations. For all critical theorists, this means it becomes possible to imagine how those in social movements

can introduce subjects to new ideas by introducing them to even small actions, like going to a meeting or eating lunch with others in a movement, understanding that these small actions are important not in themselves but as a "gateway drug" that allows subjects the cognitive flexibility to shift their views over time. At the time of writing, for example, some union organisers in The United States made historic headway with unionising Amazon workers in part by cooking every day for all the workers and having them come eat the free food.[179] While this certainly was effective on a number of levels, one aspect of its effectiveness may simply be that it added a new action in favour of rejecting the status quo and subjects then might feel dissonance and adjust their views towards their actions. The "good" news for activists and critical theorists alike is that there is psychological research to suggest we can change our views through action and new forms of belonging and this in turn means there is both theoretical and practical work to be done. I will return to the specific learnings about the "escapability" of dissonance shortly.

In addition to allowing for a simultaneously psychological and structural or material approach, cognitive dissonance theory adds to theories of ideology by providing an explanation for how subjects' desire for agency (in the sense of choice and also in the sense of meaningful direction of their own lives and ability to alter their social world—the wider definition I employ in this work when not speaking simply about psychology studies) affects their reasoning. A desire for agency in all its forms can sometimes have perverse consequences on their political beliefs, for as subjects

[179] Shirin Ghaffary, "Amazon Fired Chris Smalls. Now the New Union Leader is One of Its Biggest Problems: What's Next for the Face of America's New Labor Movement." *Vox Media*. Jun 7, 2022. www.vox.com/recode/23145265/amazon-fired-chris-smalls-union-leader-alu-jeff-bezos-bernie-sanders-aoc-labor-movement-biden

seek more agency they may also hold more tightly to oppressive beliefs. This nicely expands earlier accounts of ideology like Althusser's that focus on experience, action and action-possibilities. In this regard, Althusser (influenced by Marx and Gramsci) suggests that much of ideology functions through "problematics", a set of categories that determine what is possible for us to think and say. This is one reason why applying cognitive dissonance theory to his work can be so fruitful: both theories are concerned with the political significance of subjects' understanding of their own action-possibilities. Alongside the induced compliance model, the most relevant subfield of dissonance theory for these purposes may be the action-based model of cognitive dissonance, perhaps the most recent field of research on cognitive dissonance. [180]As described in earlier chapters, it suggests that dissonance occurs most when subjects feel pressure to be able to think ahead, albeit unconsciously, about their future action-possibilities (or 'affordances'). When their model of the world is sufficiently disrupted, it is no longer possible to meaningfully think about what to do next as a "good" agent. Thus subjects feel intense discomfort and often either engage in rationalisations or confirmation bias to resolve dissonance in order to be able to continue to generate action-possibilities and retain their sense of agency. This provides a set of conditions under which cognitive dissonance, rationalisation, and with it ideological beliefs are most likely to develop: when a subject feels they are a free agent, yet in practice perform actions in line with an oppressive ideology, they are likely to embrace that ideology itself. If it is possible to draw this connection between these empirical studies and the real world, and if subjects are accordingly drawn to alter their understanding of

[180] See Eddie Harmon-Jones, Cindy Harmon-Jones, and Nicholas Levy. "An Action-Based Model of Cognitive-Dissonance Processes." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24.3, 2015: pp. 184-189.

the world to match their daily actions even when these are compelled by the social order because they feel they are choosing freely, then this relationship between ideology and agency might be an especially modern phenomenon. In contemporary societies that are officially democracies (however deeply flawed) modern subjects are given at the very least a ready-made narrative that they have agency. This is embodied institutionally through the vote, but it is also reflected in the way individuals are theoretically free in modern states to choose their professions, partners, location, hobbies, and so on. Many cultural narratives emphasise that individuals can be whatever they want to be if they just work hard enough, that they are granted freedom through rights, that the outcomes of their lives are in large part the result of their personal choices. Through media, advertising, even through encouragement to serve others through volunteering and activism, subjects are told they have agency, they can "change the world." And yet it is this sense of agency that studies suggest can trigger deep discomfort at the painful divisions that exist—within all individuals to some degree—between their varied thoughts and actions. Applying dissonance theory to Althusser's work and to wider questions about the functioning of ideology suggests that subjects may find this gap between their apparent freedom and their lived reality so painful that they come to believe oppressive ideologies. (Of course they may also handle this discomfort by, for example, projecting their sense of agency onto others, including "strong" leaders, as Adorno theorised in his work. Or they may even entirely disengage from thinking about political issues.)

In this way, adding cognitive dissonance to accounts of interpellation also provides further evidence that a belief in one's own individualistic freedom can in fact

hamper critical thinking. Ideology may ironically "work" best when subjects see themselves as having personal, individual agency, and this sense of agency may make it more difficult to recognise the ideologies they are subject to. If subjects are more likely to display dissonance in studies where they felt they freely chose to write an essay on a particular topic, they are also probably more likely to experience dissonance, and with it curious rationalisations, confirmation bias, and so on when they feel they have freely made choices in their (say) lifestyle or political views. This gives further reason to accept some of the claims of Althusser and others in the French structuralist tradition, who have long argued a sense of agency is often an illusion, a part of deceptive ideology designed to accommodate subjects to capitalism. Althusser even notes that the term "subject" which so often is supposed to imply agency, is in fact equally used to describe the lack of freedom that occurs due to being the subject of another: "In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission."[181] That these two senses of the same word are nearly contradictory in fact reveals how the idea of personal agency allows for ideology to function: the individual is made to feel that they are "a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection" to a particular system of belief or even to a leader. Judith Butler, too, has taken note of the seemingly contradictory nature of this double meaning, wherein the word subjection "has two meanings, to subordinate

[181] *Ibid*, p. 182.

someone to power and to become a subject…is there a contradiction here, or is it a paradox—a constitutive paradox?"[182] In line with this paradox, taking action can in fact lead subjects to interpellation into existing power structures. Althusser notes that subjects of ideology conduct these actions (praying, saluting a flag, striving hard in the workplace, etc.). While it may seem like they do these things because they have freely chosen to believe in the systems these actions are part of, in fact, these actions bring them further into the ideologies of these systems. In this way, the subjects' thoughts are really "material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject."[183] Both ideological interpellation and standard descriptions of cognitive dissonance describe how subjects first act in particular embodied ways, and then unconsciously revise their beliefs in order to make these beliefs consistent with their actions; precisely by being made to feel that they are truly free, subjects are placed in the difficult position of seeking to make consistent what is inconsistent in their lives, in reconciling their theoretically freely chosen and influential behaviours with contradictory thoughts.[184] Doubt and criticism of their own actions are forcefully erased, in order that the subjects can have the sense that they have chosen all of these contradictory behaviours freely.

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[182] Judith Butler, "Bodies and Power, Revisited." *Radical Philosophy*, 2002: pp. 16-17.

[183] Althusser p. 168.

[184] Indeed, one example of how people regularly strive to see themselves as having agency even when they may not have it is that the empirical literature suggests that those who have faced sexual assault in a not insignificant number of cases then choose to sleep with their assailants as part of a "fawn" response. This allows them to feel as though the first instance was consensual, as they then rationalise that since they chose to have sex with the person again, they must have wanted the sex all along. See e.g. Lori Haskell, and Melanie Randall. *The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims*. Justice Canada, 2019.

Once again, I here consider agency as related to political consciousness in terms of the ability for subjects to recognise, act on, and even develop new action-possibilities for themselves related to political issues. In this sense, a belief that one has individual agency (here in the limited sense of believing one has chosen between multiple options without coercion) actually impedes the subject's ability to know and think critically. Feeling "free" in this case means having less freedom in another sense in this area: one's preferences might actually have been subtly manipulated. (In Chapter Six, I return to the importance of Western subjects' belief in their individual agency and note some particularly relevant areas for future study.)

The strength of the type of explanation I have described above, as an explanation for ideology that involves some of Althusser's structural ideas about apparatuses and institutions, but also a dissonance-enriched sense of how subjects might accommodate themselves mentally to harmful systems and structures, is that it takes both psychology and material forces seriously, and both action and language seriously. It does not require theorists to insist on any one of these areas as the only sources of ideology over the others, and it is in this sense perhaps more integrated and realistic compared to theories that rely just on psychoanalysis, or just on material forces. Moreover, it is an account of subjectivity that includes the "positive" aspects of subject formation. As Lois McNay notes, accounts of agency in critical theories have often heavily emphasised the negative aspects of subject formation—that is, the aspects that stem from constraint or subjection. But just as important, in some instances, are the "freedoms" that are granted, or apparently granted to subjects, like the "freedom" to sell one's labour or express certain aspects of gender easily. The

problem with this focus on negative aspects of subjectification, McNay notes, is that "it does not provide on its own a comprehensive explanation of all possible ways in which the subject may relate to the other or deal with difference…it results in an attenuated account of agency which leaves unexplored how individuals are endowed with the capabilities for independent reflection and action such that their response, when confronted with difference and paradox, may involve accommodation or adaptation as much as denial."[185] It neglects the many ways in which subjects become subjects in part through apparent expressions of their own agency, which is often the more prevalent or powerful focus for the subjects of late-stage capitalism and those experiencing gender in the 21st century. Dissonance theory can help explain how this "positive" aspect of subjectification, the encouragement of certain kinds of freedoms, still results in subjects that hold beliefs in systems that oppress them. In an age where subjects are arguably more individualised than ever (for example, because they sell their labour under a neoliberal form of capitalism rather than in a Fordist model), they may be drawn into these positive forms of subjectivation more than ever as they (for example) market themselves as "personal brands," or as attempt to become "entrepreneurs." These activities involve positive forms of subjectivation, and in some cases the subject formation involved, or the interpellation involved, may be best explainable by dissonance, as subjects come to align their views with their behaviours over time to avoid dissonance. Subjects may first take time to market and sell themselves, and then secondly unconsciously adjust their beliefs towards their actions to reduce dissonance, so that they retroactively come to see themselves as individuals

[185] Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013: p. 3.

of a particular kind, or budding entrepreneurs rather than struggling subjects of neoliberalism. Now more than in earlier decades, it is necessary for critical theorists to consider positive forms of subject formation, where subjects' own actions create harmful ideological beliefs. Considering the issue in this way gives them the opportunity to look for the ways that subjects are made to "kneel" or engagee in certain actions so that they will then believe. This theory then also provides opportunities to consider how subjects can be made, to extend the metaphor, to stand up again and reshape their beliefs and self-understanding. Cognitive dissonance theory can help explain the psychology involved in this "positive" subject formation and the ways that harmful ideological beliefs might be countered by social movements. It may also be able to move critical theorists beyond the largely speech-centred framework of Habermasian thought, to place an emphasis on action as another significant, perhaps necessary way that subjects free themselves from harmful ideas and false consciousness. After all, Habermas' theory is somewhat like Althusser's in the limited sense that he provides a structural explanation for many aspects of modern subjectivity, which is the "logic" of the capitalist system "colonises" the lifeworld in which subjects live.[186] Yet Habermas' main suggestion for how subjects can escape this logic is through communicative reason and (as I will discuss later) a turn to a certain limited kind of developmental psychology. These foci arguably mean that Habermas' theories neglect other factors that might help subjects escape ideology, like taking action in the world, changes to environment and habit, or engagement in group activities that do not

[186] I am here referencing ideas from Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason.* Vol. 2. Beacon press, 1985. I discuss Habermas in greater detail in Chapter 5.

directly involve communicative reason. Yet these too may help subjects resist the ideological force of the logic of the "system" as it colonises the lifeworld. Dissonance theory points to the psychological force of action and the need for subjects to alter their actions, at least in many cases, in order to revise their thinking.

Another benefit of such an approach is that it may help theorists avoid any moralising about subjects who experience false consciousness. This seems a particular risk when theorists avoid giving an account of the psychology involved in ideological belief out of concern that any explanation that includes psychology will rely on it too exclusively and thus be an example of "psychologism." While it is indeed problematic to reduce explanations for ideology to psychology, it can be equally problematic to forgo any in-depth consideration of the psychological elements of these phenomena lest one instead end up resorting to implicit folk psychology assumptions about how the mind works. One might end up implying that those who do not recognise their oppression are individually responsible for their views, or worse, that failures of political consciousness are in some way about intelligence, weakness of will, or unwillingness to face difficult truths. A more precise explanation involving a relatively universal psychological phenomenon avoids this implication and draws attention instead to the factors that are likely to cause anyone potentially to overlook oppressive circumstances. A combined material and psychological approach provides an account that, although it begins at the level of individual subjectivity, can support a wider account. Although dissonance literature has in one sense unquestionably to do with "individual psychology", it suggests that the matter is ultimately a shared problem, that many who are oppressed but fail to spot this do not lack personal virtue nor

intelligence but are instead compelled by a combination of structures and a psychological tendency to collapse contradictions in order to continue to understand ourselves as individuals with agency. Dissonance literature, then, while in one sense absolutely about individual psychology, returns us to understanding the conditions needed for people to overcome false consciousness without moralising, even accidentally and in implicit ways. Psychology (and here dissonance theory in particular) strengthens this picture by acknowledging the importance of situated knowledge and embedded, material reality, while adding nuance to how people might respond to this embedded reality. It also does so without reducing the entire struggle to psychology. Ultimately, while this specific dissonance-related hypothesis is certainly one in need of a great deal of empirical exploration, it describes at least one important avenue for further research that may improve our current understandings of ideology, political consciousness, and the lack thereof in many modern subjects.

The Escape from Ideology: How Dissonance Can Enrich Our Understanding of How Subjects Develop Political Consciousness

There is another issue with theories of ideology that often comes up around Althusser's work. Althusser's work is also criticised for making it appear that ideology is inescapable, and that subjects once interpellated are unable to think outside of the prevailing ideology or politically resist. This is not, of course, specific to Althusser. As I similarly noted in Chapter One, Adorno, Marcuse, and others in the Frankfurt School have long been accused of a sort of fatalism, leaving no possible source of hope for subjects to escape oppressive ideologies. Most notably, Habermas, a student of these first generation thinkers, has suggested that their work does not leave "anything in

reserve to which it might appeal; and when the forces of production enter into a baneful symbiosis with the relations of production that they were supposed to blow wide open, there is no longer any dynamism upon which critique could base its hope."[187] Cognitive dissonance theory can also be useful in addressing this common issue in accounts of ideology. It can not only provide one mechanism for interpellation, but also suggests reasons subjects might sometimes be able to "escape" harmful ideologies and develop an understanding of their political world that allows them to imagine new ways of acting. This corresponds to my suggested criteria for all theories of false consciousness, where they should contain an account of the "escapability" of false consciousness. Dissonance theory's mechanisms in turn suggest that some of the theses of Frankfurt School thinkers like Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer about the all-encompassing effects of administered societies, like Marcuse's idea of the one-dimensional society, or Adorno's conception of the totally administered society, are overstated; that subjects are capable of seeing "outside" harmful ideology at times. Marcuse, for example, writes that because of the organisation of the "technological base" of society,

> contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For "totalitarian" is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole.[188]

[187] Jürgen Habermas, T*he Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. MIT press, 1990, p. 118.

[188] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Routledge, 2013: p. 3.

Marcuse describes a world that, in its smooth functioning and its creation and satisfaction of false needs, prevents subjects from recognising they are in fact living within the structure of capitalist ideology. Theorists like Adorno and Horkeheimer, too, sometimes describe ideology in a way that makes it appear inescapable, so that subjects only really have the freedom to "choose what is always the same" when it comes to belief systems.[189] They suggest that ideologies are totalising, at least much of the time. Yet dissonance theory provides some sense of how subjects might in fact be able, at least in specific circumstances, to "escape" from harmful ideologies and recognise their own oppression. It is to this question—of how subjects sometimes escape false consciousness about their political situation—that I now turn. In this way, it is of use to critical theorists who wish to arrive at a more pragmatic and helpful way of theorising about questions of ideology.

Just as dissonance theory can provide one possible mechanism for how ideologies bring or keep people in a state of false consciousness, it can also provide a mechanism for how oppressed subjects might occasionally escape these ideologies. It suggests that people are likely to shift their beliefs if they are reminded of contradictions between their own beliefs and actions *and* are able to make this discomfort conscious in some way. Moreover, if the empirical literature on dissonance carries over, then two specific conditions are likely to make belief change far more likely: 1) knowledge of the presence of others who hold the new belief system can assist in this process of moving away from old beliefs, as it provides new pressure to resolve one's dissonance in a new and different direction, and 2) taking up new types

[189] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Vol. 15. Verso, 1997: p. 136.

of action, for example by first engaging in small forms of political action in line with a new set of beliefs and then adjusting their views over time towards these new actions.

Critical theorists who work on issues concerning political reasoning, consciousness and mobilisation often claim to be working to actively assist a struggle for liberation, but they often are unhelpfully vague in their references to human psychology, perhaps for fear of crossing disciplines or overly "psychologising," and as a result their theories are unable to explain how ideology (and resistance to ideology) work in practice. Thus many theorists are often unable to explain why subjects believe in, and even fight for, ideas that justify their own oppression, and how and why they sometimes come to reject these ideas and escape harmful ideologies. With more concrete theorising of the psychology involved, political theorists can better develop and defend theories of ideology, and assist real-world political movements.

Dissonance and Others' Influence on Beliefs

The first of these two insights, that knowing others believe the same things and being in their presence is likely to support subjects in either holding to or changing their views in that direction, stems from an early observation by Leon Festinger, the developer of dissonance theory. It has to do with the influence that others' opinions have on how subjects resolve dissonance.[190] In Festinger (and his fellow researchers') original research and writings revolving around a single cult, he notes that when the cult's original prophecies did not come true, members who had previously never before been tempted to proselytise began to proselytise fervently for the first time. Festinger

[190] See Festinger's discussion of this in Leon Festinger et al, *When Prophecy Fails.* Martino Fine Books, 2009: p. 209.

and his fellow researchers suggest that the proselytising happened not simply because the cult members believed in their message (as they had believed previously yet never proselytised before) but rather because finding and converting new believers helped ambivalent cult members add "weight" to their newest beliefs; just knowing other believed something provided yet another reason one might wish to believe it. This in turn meant subjects were more likely to reduce painful dissonance in favour of these new beliefs. In Festinger's example, each new believer provided another reason to hold onto one's existing beliefs, making it easier to continue to resolve painful dissonance about the cult's failed prophecies. That is, if "but the prophecy didn't come true" created painful dissonance, "but x new people also now believe in this, so it must be true" helped reduce that dissonance by increasing the magnitude of the reasons to hold on to current beliefs. As laid out in the previous chapter, research profiled throughout this work indicates, very roughly, that

$$\text{Dissonance} = \frac{\text{reasons contrary to existing beliefs}}{\text{reasons to believe existing belief}} + \frac{\text{actions contrary to existing belief}}{\text{actions in support of existing belief}}$$

By this logic, recruiting others to the belief system lowers dissonance both because the recruitment actions provide more reasons to hold on to existing beliefs and because successful recruitment of new believers provides another apparent reason to believe in the existing belief structure (both denominators are expanded, lowering overall dissonance). Of course, in Festinger's original cult example this phenomenon is harmful, keeping people trapped in a cult that led them to abandon their families and means of subsistence. But this original finding suggests a key reason why political consciousness is necessarily a collective achievement, because those who have newly come to political consciousness face a strangely similar type of dissonance. They may

now be coming to believe that what their boss, their family, their spouse or their church told them is not true, and the contradiction between these new cognitions and their older beliefs will create painful dissonance. But the knowledge that others, even if they are not immediately present, share their newly-formed political beliefs allows them to reduce their dissonance about this in scale by providing more reasons to hold on to newly-formed political beliefs. In other words, to bear dissonance about the contradiction between old beliefs and newly formed political consciousness, subjects benefit from the knowledge that there are others who also believe as they do, as this is consonant with the new beliefs and lowers the overall amount of dissonance. Being able to not only think "it is wrong that my boss sexualises me" but also "S also sees that it is wrong" shifts the balance of a person's ambivalence towards a new political consciousness. This knowledge—even prior to other, more concrete forms of support, assistance, and education from others—provides a solution to one of the problems posed by previous theories of false consciousness and ideology; it allows for some subjects to bear the discomfort of dissonance and resolve it in favour of knowledge of their oppression where others do not. This is, of course, not the only reason being part of a group is helpful, even at the psychological level. Being in a group with others surely provides motivation for continued struggle due to the explicit emotional support and encouragement others provide. Furthermore seeing that the struggle is one others have been through makes it clearer that something is a social problem, such that, for example, one's narrative about a problem goes from "I am a bad mother and hate housework" to "relegating women to reproductive labour and devaluing it is a political problem and part of the workings of patriarchy." But cognitive dissonance theory

suggests that sharing one's beliefs with others who agree is also important because it provides a psychological counterweight to outside beliefs. Where one may have previously rationalised contradictions away in favour of an oppressive ideology, the consonant beliefs of others also engaged in political struggle change the balance of the discomfort they are facing and shift their fundamental beliefs in a new direction.

More generally, although dissonance is often theorised and measured at the level of the individual, the fact that dissonance is likely influenced by the beliefs of those around one (and might spur one to share one's beliefs in order to bring others to agree with one) provides good reasons to consider the ways group dynamics have a large impact on what subjects come to believe. It is therefore valuable in part because it eschews an overly simplistic understanding of ideology as an individual experience, unlike some linguistic accounts of ideology. For similar reasons, dissonance theory can perhaps also, and accordingly, enrich accounts of alienation. Marxist works of ideology often emphasise that modern subjects are alienated from one another, unable to see one another fully because of the structures of capitalism. As Terry Eagleton puts it, "It is a traditional Marxist case that what forestalls [the political consciousness] of the middle class is its atomized social and economic conditions: each individual capitalist pursues his own interest, with little or no sense of how all these isolated interests combine into the total system."[191] Dissonance theory suggests the problem is not only that individuals pursue their own ends, but that they lack a sense of what others might think. There might, strangely, be a collective action problem not only about action but also about thought. Conversely, a sufficiently supportive group of

[191] Eagleton, p. 98.

people might be able to shift political consciousness by allowing subjects to experience and then resolve their dissonance about their political position in new ways. It provides further evidence for the importance of social consciousness as a group endeavour, one that is gravely threatened in an individuated society. To develop and maintain political consciousness, oppressed groups must not only be able to share their experiences and develop a new understanding of the world but also maintain it together, through both recognition of their shared beliefs and engagement in action and—as I discuss further in a moment—actions.

Dissonance and Action's Effects on Beliefs

Dissonance theory also suggests a second key mechanism that may serve as an explanation for why some who are oppressed come to recognise their oppression: changes in important or even daily experience and actions. As described earlier in this chapter, the action-based theory of cognitive dissonance subjects endure greater dissonance discomfort when they are in a state of considering action-possibilities. Similarly, the induced preference paradigm suggests that if a subject's actions change first, this may provide significant enough pressure that they change their views.

Both these aspects of dissonance research suggest that altering people's behaviour can be as significant as arguments for changing people's beliefs. In the limited sociological research that relates to dissonance theory, too, this appears true even when the actions involved are utterly accidental or contingent. As I have previously noted, one example is the way that women who are denied abortions for contingent reasons (e.g. they have miscalculated their date of conception and are no longer eligible) are found to later be less supportive of abortion rights than those who

were in the same exactly scenario but able to access abortion. This suggests that, in line with dissonance theory, each group adjusted their views on abortion to match the reality of their lived experience; those who had an abortion were more favourable to the right to abortion, those who did not have an abortion were less so.[192] Here, notably, our political views follow not only from our limited circumstances but specifically the actions our limited circumstances allow. While this can sound disempowering on its own, it also suggests that small actions of resistance may therefore allow for dissonance to grow, which, if made conscious (perhaps through the support of others) can lead to increased political consciousness, which in turn leads to larger acts of resistance. Thus if we are interpellated through our actions, we are also, I suggest, potentially freed by them mentally. In both cases we are epistemically privileged or disadvantaged through our actions and the action-possibilities available to us. The upside for social movements and the process of political liberation is that a change in a person's politically-significant actions (as Althusser and Dolar might put it, a new kind of "kneeling") may provide an opportunity for subjects to experience dissonance about their political position and resolve it via the formation of new beliefs, rather than dismissing new ideas. It may therefore be true that providing new action-possibilities as part of political discourse is more important for persuasion or organising than arguing for the "rightness" of the idea (so that it is, for example, less important to convince people of the badness of patriarchy, and more important to show them what sorts of actions they might take next to join the movement). While a necessarily tentative suggestion (as the project of discovering it lies with both researchers and

[192] Diana Greene Foster, *The Turnaway Study: Ten Years, a Thousand Women, and the Consequences of Having—or Being Denied—an Abortion*. Simon and Schuster, 2021: p. 171.

activists) this link between action and beliefs suggests that achieving greater political consciousness is in part likely if subjects are made aware of new action-possibilities for themselves and encouraged to engage in even very small-scale action. Conversely, people may not come to believe new kinds of ways of living are possible, unless they have "tasted" new types of actions, however small. Small acts of resistance become important here not for their direct consequences but for the new psychological possibilities they open for the subject. This sort of research suggests that, for example, those who are given the opportunity to use reliable public transit or install solar panels may become more invested in environmental issues thereafter (although these specific examples are hypotheses for now).

Cognitive dissonance is often used as an example of how people are not open to reasoning because when people are confronted with ideas that contradict their existing points of view, they are likely to experience uncomfortable dissonance and often hold on to existing points of view. However, the action-based theory of dissonance suggests that people do change their beliefs, but that this often happens not because reasons are provided but because people have first taken new actions (let's say they are convinced to at least attend a protest, for example, or interact with a minority group.) Those engaged in new forms of action face a dissonance between their old views and their new actions, and finally they shift their views to resolve this dissonance. This is, at one level, merely a question of "strategy"; anyone can use this technique for better or for worse, and it can be used for purposes that might be considered manipulative (as it often is by, for example, extortive cults). But the point also serves to demonstrate that political discourse on its own is not only often

ineffective or counterproductive, but also that it may be far less productive as a means of social change than getting people involved, even in a small way, in actions.

The mechanisms described above—engaging people in action and providing support of others who will share a new belief—are also mutually reinforcing; groups encourage us to change our actions, which also changes the balance of dissonance as described above. Of course, these two mechanisms are not the only mechanisms by which social movements change people's political views, and nothing about them necessarily brings people into greater truth on their own (after all, harmful cults rely on the same psychological mechanisms). Nevertheless, this theory points towards some of the crucial functions of any process or movement that might attempt to liberate people from false consciousness, and help them cultivate political consciousness. It suggests that those engaged in social movements should think more deeply about not only how to spread a message or engage in this or that strategic action but also how to build a social world that can help people maintain their newfound political consciousness in the face of the rest of their world's hostility or indifference. Critical theorists should, for this reason among others, be interested not only in argumentation and proving points (a common feature of liberal discourse theories in particular) but movement-building in all its social and sociological importance.

Conclusion

Theorists of ideology are often faced with the following conundrum: how can ideologies both be strong enough to keep people ignorant or accepting of their own oppression, yet nevertheless discernible to those who study them and, more importantly, susceptible enough to criticism that in some cases social movements and

revolutions can occur? Leaning too heavily into either the strength of ideologies or their escapability can leave theorists unable to explain other outcomes: the risk is that one is either fatalist or one is unable to explain why subjects act in ways that are complicit with their own oppression, or why they do not take action against oppressive systems.

Dissonance theory provides intellectual resources for acknowledging the difficult possibilities of "false consciousness" without condemning those who experience it to living in it forever. Dissonance theory provides an explanation for why subjects of oppressive ideologies may not be able to recognise the oppression they are experiencing, and may even come to identify with elements of their own oppression in ways that look like they (as Deleuze and Guattari put it) "fight for their own servitude as stubbornly as if it were their own salvation." At the same time, the theory contains enough specific mechanisms that it points to ways subjects can escape harmful ideologies as well. In particular, dissonance theory points to the importance of the support and agreement of others in determining beliefs, as well as the importance of even small actions undertaken by subjects. Dissonance theory specifically suggests the importance of 1) the support of others who share similar beliefs to their new beliefs (and perhaps their support in dealing with the discomfort of dissonance and making it conscious). It provides one explanation for why subjects need one another to develop, maintain and defend recognition of their oppression. It provides further evidence for the importance of social consciousness as a group endeavour, and an active practice, one that is gravely threatened in a highly individuated society. Dissonance theory also suggests that 2) people are more likely to escape oppressive ideologies if they have

already engaged in actions consonant with a new set of beliefs. Since those who are oppressed do not always have access to these factors, harmful ideologies are often difficult to overcome. But this "escapability" of dissonance-influenced theories of false consciousness provides a direction of movement in some areas of activism—it suggests that activist groups should be invested in finding small-scale areas of practice for those in their movement (and those who might join the movement) and that they may be more successful if they introduce ideas or larger requests for participation after these small-scale actions. These findings may also suggest that theorists of ideology would benefit from becoming more sensitive to problems of lived experience.

In this way, dissonance theory acknowledges the way political consciousness is not a matter of individual cunning or total structural determination but rather fragile, contextual, and developed in relationship with others. Applying dissonance theory (and potentially other theories like it) to explain the specifics of what might cause subjects to change their political consciousness can allow political theorists to better aid social movements and analyse their successes and failures.

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Chapter Four: Psychoanalytic and Ego-led Approaches to Ideology and False Consciousness

> *Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self—the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings—was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood. The effort to hold itself together attends the ego at all its stages, and the temptation to be rid of the ego has always gone hand-in-hand with the blind determination to preserve it.*
>
> –- Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [193]

In this chapter, I turn to how dissonance theory can enrich the traditional psychological explanations of the first-generation Frankfurt School thinkers, who were largely interested in understanding the psychology of political consciousness in terms of psychoanalysis. These first generation thinkers faced a problem related to theorising the ego and its relationship to modern subjects' political consciousness and agency: was best to "strengthen" or "weaken" the ego in order to improve political consciousness? In this chapter I argue that some of these apparent theoretical difficulties and contradictions involved in this dilemma can be resolved or mitigated by thinking about the questions through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory. Dissonance theory suggests that rather than seeking an ego that is either more defended or more diffuse and less defended, it may be helpful to think about a "better" ego as one that is able to withstand discomfort long enough to recognise political contradictions that necessarily challenge one's sense of self and agency. This type of ego allows for conscious acknowledgement of ambivalence. In addition to, as always,

[193] Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Vol. 15. Verso, 1997, p. 26.

providing a worm's eye view of what happens to the subject as they contemplate political issues, when it comes to questions of the ego dissonance research can enrich accounts of false consciousness by transcending this old debate and pointing instead towards a different path for the "escapability" of certain kinds of ideology.

I first consider the challenge of the ego for critical theory. I then suggest that cognitive dissonance theory provides new empirical evidence and detailed explanations for why a "strong," i.e. highly defended, ego may impede critical political reasoning as much as it helps it. This insight provides reason to be suspicious of many forms of ego psychology (including those deployed by some members of the Frankfurt school, like Fromm) that seek to build subjects' sense of themselves as intrinsically good, unique, or powerful. Dissonance theory suggests that ego defences of this kind are likely to lead to rationalisations and reliance on confirmation bias that impede some kinds of political reasoning. The autonomous subject with meaningful agency may therefore not be someone with a "strong" defended ego but rather someone who can change their sense of self along with their views. This type of ego has the benefit of being potentially achievable through the right environment, rather than existing as the result of subjects' childhood development. Furthermore, this suggests that in the 21st century, if there is a single central challenge for political subjects' political consciousness, it is not about a mindless conformity to one particular ideology (which might be implied by a weak ego) but rather a stubborn adherence to whichever of a wide range of particular views that person happens to hold in the first place (which could be implied by an overly defended ego). This is especially relevant now that the political landscape no longer involves as many singular autocratic regimes but instead

a widely dispersed set of ideological forces that often work together to support a neoliberal economy.

I ultimately argue that following on from this insight, critical theorists should attend closely to research like cognitive dissonance theory research from empirical psychology, and also to work done by later theorists like Joel Whitebrook and Amy Allen, who suggest alternative ways of understanding a "good" ego. As theorists Amy Allen and Joel Whitebrook suggest, older Freudian analyses of the question of the ego often neglect the "messier" sides of what is involved in threats to the ego, like psychological transference and a drive towards power.[194] It may also be more fruitful to consider the kinds of egos that can be constructed through Melanie Klein's depressive position: egos that are more "mature" because they are capable of navigating greater degrees of ambivalence and synthesising contradictions. There may also be further ways of thinking about this in psychoanalytic work on the topics of mourning and sublimation, as both Amy Allen and Joel Whitebrook suggest. Taking empirical psychology seriously in this area provides good reasons for critical theorists to renew their interest in interpreting affect and other unconscious processes, not just explicit and conscious political discourse.[195]

[194] In addition to aforementioned works by Habermas, I draw heavily from Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*. Columbia University Press, 2020, and Joel Whitebrook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory*, MIT Press, 1995.

[195] I am grateful to many people, but especially Mario Aguiriano and Ani Pérez, for comments on this chapter.

The Ego and Cognitive Dissonance

Before suggesting that a modern empirical psychological construct, cognitive dissonance theory, can be applied to theoretical discussions previously driven by purely psychoanalytic concepts, it is worth examining how closely cognitive dissonance relates to what Freud and members of the Frankfurt School termed "the ego." In this chapter, I consider the ego both in the Freudian sense of this specific sense of the "I", the executive function of the personality, and also in the slightly broader sense of the subject's conscious, ultimately created sense of self. The ego in both these senses is important politically because it is the "self" that does conscious reasoning about political issues and, it is both the agent involved in, and at times the obstacle to, certain important kinds of political reasoning like belief revision. The ego is tasked with making sense of the world, but it also can make political reasoning difficult when political ideas, events, or information challenge the subjects' sense of themselves as good people or ability to know what they should do or think.

Some might object that these fields of psychological study are too disparate in their methodological assumptions to be tied together. After all, Freudian psychoanalysis is a practice that is only semi-medicalised and clinical, and involves mostly longform listening by the analyst; in contrast, dissonance research today largely takes place in a lab. The former has elaborate theoretical assumptions about the unconscious and its components and is nearly 100 years old, the latter is much younger and relatively minimalist. However, when examined closely, the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance aligns with aspects of Freudian theories related to the ego. Dissonance theory can thus at least tentatively be brought to bear on questions of how

political subjects' sense of self, and the unconscious forces that work to maintain this sense of self, affect their ability to perceive the world. This is because cognitive dissonance theory describes the way that subjects unconsciously strive for a consistent sense of self and defensively rationalise away ideas and information that threaten this sense of consistency.

Cognitive dissonance theory generally posits that when subjects notice a contradiction between their beliefs and actions, even unconsciously, they experience discomfort (again often unconscious), that is akin to hunger or thirst. They then seek (still often unconsciously) to ameliorate this discomfort as quickly as possible. While in some cases this may result in a conscious process of recognising the contradiction, reasoning about what is the best way to understand it, and then changing their views about the world, very often people resolve painful dissonance by engaging either in *rationalisation*, where they develop reasons to justify their behaviour or beliefs that are not their true reasons for acting or thinking the way they do, or *confirmation bias*, where they give weight to information, reasons and actions, that confirm their existing views and actions and discount any reasons or evidence that might oppose it. Both of these responses succeed in reducing dissonance by making the contradiction in beliefs and/or actions appear not to be a contradiction, or at least less of a contradiction. However, they may also distort and impede reasoning processes, including about political issues.

In comparison to this phenomenon, the ego as it is conceptualised in Freud's work is the conscious, active, decision-making and action-oriented sense of self that develops from, and is unconsciously modified by, both internal and external

demands.[196] It is the result of repression of the drives and the subjugation of impulses, a process by which social pressures and mandates are internalised. This is because the ego is the aspect of the person's psyche that navigates the many competing pressures on the self, from the instinctual drives to the demands of the superego. By reconciling these conflicting demands, the ego enables the subject to act in the world. One of the ways the ego manages otherwise impossible demands from the id and the superego is by reshaping these demands and the subject's sense of self, so that the ego does not represent a static selfhood but one continually under revision.[197] This process is not only internal but developed via relationships with other people and even groups. In his 1921 essay entitled "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," Freud provides an account of "identification," where a person psychologically aligns themselves with another in some way. For example, a loss of some kind is coped with by being "introjected" into the ego, or the functioning sense of self; a classic example of identification might be trying to become more like a person that one is grieving, even wearing his or her jewelry or clothing.[198] Similarly individuals may identify with a group in order to shore up a consistent reliable way of navigating competing pressures in the world. Introjection may also be involved in how self-critique occurs and thus

[196] For an account of this, see Joel Whitebrook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory.* MIT Press, 1995. The first generation critical theorists were primarily focused on traditional Freudian psychoanalysis, engaging in close readings of Freud's work rather than, say, reading the works of theorists like Carl Jung or Alfred Adler, students of Freud who had broken with him on a variety of topics. Their use of the term ego thus follows his.

[197] Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id (1923)." *TACD Journal,* no. 17.1, 1987, pp. 5–22.

[198] Sigmund Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII* (1920-1922): B*eyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, 1921: p. 108.

how consciousness is formed. As Freud puts it, during the introjection involved in the mourning process one finds

> …the ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one of which rages against the second. This second piece is the one which has been altered by introjection and which contains the lost object…It comprises the conscience, a critical agency within the ego, which even in normal times takes up a critical attitude towards the ego.[199]

Freud terms this "piece" of the ego, which incorporates influences and ideals from the external world and which can cause a person to deeply berate themselves, the "ego ideal."[200] (At this point in Freud's work, he uses this term and the term superego interchangeably). The ego ideal or superego "gradually gathers up…demands which that environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to; so that a man, when he cannot be satisfied with his ego itself, may nevertheless be able to find satisfaction in the ego ideal which has been differentiated out of the ego."[201] Building from this analysis, Freud then describes the extreme discomfort that occurs as an individual discovers the gap between their ego and the ego ideal. He notes "it is quite conceivable that the separation of the ego ideal from the ego cannot be borne for long either, and has to be temporarily undone." It is, in short, painful for the subject to encounter how different they are from the way they ideally would be. When a contradiction about the self is encountered, subjects may cling to their ideal sense of self by altering their sense of themselves, even in irrational ways.[202] This painful gap

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[199] *Ibid*.

[200] See for example Jeanne Lampl-DeGroot, "Ego Ideal and Superego." *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 17.1, 1962: pp. 94-106.

[201] *Ibid*. 109.

[202] Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," p. 130.

between the ego and ego ideal, and the energy used to close this gap, closely models the type of discomfort that is experienced during cognitive dissonance.

While mindful of the variations between the Freudian conception of drives and the idea of drive as used in cognitive dissonance literature, I suggest that it is nevertheless possible to think about cognitive dissonance as the drive towards a certain kind of ego-consistency and towards instrumental-rational control over the self: a drive towards a unified, consistent, rationally-explicable "self" with actions that have a positive effect. The studies that identify cognitive dissonance show individuals made uncomfortable because their actions and behaviours do not align (breaking the illusion of a unified ego or sense of self) and/or because they perceive their actions to have a negative effect on the world, breaking the illusion that instrumental-rational control leads to predictable ethical outcomes.

The comparison between cognitive dissonance theories and earlier ideas about the superego and the self is not without support in the academic literature about the superego. For example, Joel Cooper offers a tentative theory for how cognitive dissonance develops, suggesting that children learn early that if they cause a negative event like a lamp falling over, they will create a negative reaction in a parent, which they generally seek to avoid.[203] Children develop what Cooper terms "a learned secondary drive" that motivates them to avoid adverse consequences that will be attributed to them.[204] This is very similar to how Freud conceptualises the development of the ideal ego, later termed the superego. Freud sees all of the ego, including the bit

[203] Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory*. Sage Publications, 2007: p. 88.

[204] *Ibid*.

of it that eventually becomes the superego, as an extension of what the child (consciously or otherwise) learns from those around them (most commonly their parents). Cognitive dissonance theory thus provides a relatively proximate empirically supported measurement of one of the ways that the mind unconsciously attempts to maintain a consistent sense of self and conscience through defensive rationalisations. It is one way of measuring the activity of what critical theorists have long termed the ego, in this specific area of defensive rationalisation and other unconscious errors in political reasoning. If cognitive dissonance literature were translated into Freudian terms, we might say that cognitive dissonance is the pain that occurs when subjects notice a contradiction that challenges their sense of self, especially in relation to their ideal sense of self. The ego then works to resolve this contradiction as quickly as possible, even if it means engaging in rationalisation, a form of ego-defence. My suggestion here is, of course, not that these two literatures must match exactly, nor that critical theorists must dump all the conceptual resources available in the Freudian understanding of the ego and turn to dissonance theory. Instead, my suggestion is that dissonance theory is at minimum answering some of the same questions about how subjects accommodate themselves and their sense of self, even when it is painful, to the demands and reality of the outside world, and why they often turn to forms of self-deception to do so. This in turn suggests that dissonance theory can be a useful conceptual resource (in addition to or instead of Freudian ideas) for those who, like the early Frankfurt school thinkers, take a psychological approach to understanding "false consciousness" or failures of political consciousness. And this, in turn, suggests that dissonance theory might be able to be brought to bear on the debates critical theorists

have traditionally found themselves caught up in when it comes to the role of the ego in political consciousness. I turn to these debates now.

Early Critical Theorists and the Ego

Key thinkers in the Frankfurt School tradition, most notably Adorno, Marcuse, and Fromm, built on Freud's ideas about the importance of the ego for meaningful autonomy, connecting it to a lack of political autonomy for individual subjects in modern times. The ego became a central focus for their work, in large part because it sat at the centre of the psychological puzzle of modern subjectivity and quiescence.On the one hand from the perspective of those critical of existing societies, a "strong" ego (one that strongly subjugates the drives and impulses and successfully internalises social pressures and mandates) should be viewed as a fundamentally problematic aspect of human psychology, a critical factor in alienation and oppression. At the same time, "weak" egos (ones that don't strongly repress the drives and impulses, or fail to firmly internalise social norms) appear to offer little hope either, as they should, according to Freudian theories, result in individuals who have developed the ability to differentiate themselves from their surroundings nor internalised enough qualities and judgements to have full agency. This means (at least for some members of the Frankfurt School in some of their writings, including Adorno, Fromm, and Marcuse at various times) that those with weak egos are likely to only be part of the trend of the increasing powerlessness of the individual in the face of blind social forces, potentially easy to manipulate and prone to falling into the hands of demagogues and fascists.[205]

[205] Relevant texts include, but are certainly not limited to, Adorno's work on the F-scale, where weak egos lead to overly strong superegos in those tending towards fascism, and Fromm's more general

Facing this problem, theorists and critics alike in the Frankfurt School tradition struggled to know what to say about the role of the ego in political subjectivity. Building on Freud's ideas, thinkers in the early Frankfurt School tradition like Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm were conflicted in their own writings (not to mention at odds with one another) about what a "good" ego might entail: specifically, whether a strong ego could be a good thing by increasing subjects' sense of moral judgement and agency or whether it would only lead to the internalisation of existing social norms and pathologies including instrumental reason and the authority and domination of outside forces. Most frequently these theorists chose to defend the idea of a "strong" ego with many caveats and clauses, arguing that there could be versions of the ego that were strong yet not necessarily aligned with oppressive social norms. Fromm notably argued most optimistically that a "stronger" Freudian ego allows subjects to develop agency, enabling both personal fulfilment and political action. Meanwhile, while criticising Fromm's alignment with psychoanalysis as a practice, especially what they termed "ego psychology", Adorno and Marcuse also tended to rely on a concept of the ego where a "stronger" ego was the only hope for a better form of political subjectivity. They argued that a developed ego, while perhaps necessary in order for subjects to be able to define themselves enough to hold different opinions than those around them or exercise any meaningful form of independent activity, is also a structure of domination, in many ways representing the

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concerns about weak egos throughout his work. See for example Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality*. Verso Books, 2019 and Erich Fromm,"The Humanistic Implications of Instinctive Radicalism." *Dissent*, Vol. II, No. 4, 1955.

internalisation of authority. This is because even as they were conscious of the potentially rigid, defensive, or overly instrumental aspects of a "strong" ego, Adorno and Marcuse were also concerned that modern subjects lack the necessary psychological structures to develop a truly "individual" subjectivity—an idea tied closely to the process of ego-development—and that modern subjects therefore cannot think for themselves, remaining mired in false consciousness. This meant they were conflicted, as they could simultaneously see the virtues of an ego that is "weak"-er and thus less instrumental *and* one that is "strong" enough that subjects can differentiate from their surrounding world and its attendant ideology, ultimately escaping from false consciousness.

The Marcuse-Fromm Debate

Much of this conflicted writing about the political function of the ego happened in a few short years around 1955 and 1956, where the three thinkers each published a number of pieces all of which touched closely on Freudian psychology and its relationship to politics. In 1955 Marcuse published *Eros and Civilisation* and Fromm published *The Sane Society*. In this year and the next Fromm and Marcuse publicly debated one another on the role of psychology in political theory (which I detail below), while Adorno wrote both the essay "Psychology and Sociology" and the essay "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Propaganda." Marcuse and Fromm's debate continued into 1956, the year in which Fromm published his popular book, *The Art of Loving*, and Marcuse published *Five Lectures, Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*. All of these works concentrate on the formation and effects of the modern subjects'

ego and how it should best develop to allow for a better political subjectivity and radical political consciousness.

Notably, given that he became opposed to many aspects of ego psychology, *Eros and Civilization* was developed from a series of lectures that Marcuse was invited to give by the Washington School of Psychiatry, a school associated with ego psychology, in 1950 and 1951.[206], [207] While giving lectures to groups of ego psychologists therefore shaped Marcuse's thinking, by the time Marcuse published *Eros and Civilization*, he positioned the work as a disagreement with this school of thought, writing "This procedure implies opposition to the revisionist NeoFreudian schools [that is, ego psychologists]."[208] Here I focus most closely on these two years simply because they are when these thinkers most closely wrestled with the question of the ego. Their disagreements and ambivalence about the role of the ego in political thought highlight the centrality of the questions that cognitive dissonance theory can partially answer.

While these thinkers acknowledged that some kind of sense of self and agency are essential for political consciousness, they disagreed about the possibilities for constructing a functioning ego in the modern age. Fromm, for example, argued for a "strong" ego, one that might be developed during the course of psychoanalysis. The strong ego is one that is considered to be powerful in its mastery over instincts and unconscious impulses. In line with this preference and unlike other members of the

[206] Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School.* Verso Books, 2017: p. 280.

[207] Robert S. Wallerstein, *The Common Ground of Psychoanalysis*. Jason Aronson, 1992: p. 13.

[208] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization.* Routledge, 2012, pp. 5-6.

Frankfurt School, Fromm became increasingly fond of what might be termed "ego psychology", which refers to the work and thought of psychologists and psychoanalysts who placed a special analytic emphasis on the personality, and who specifically gave equal or greater importance in their analysis to the role of the ego itself (rather than simply the drives and the id).[209] The ego psychology theorists, who included Karen Horney, Heinz Hartmann, Anna Freud, and others, generally held that having a robust ego is a key aspect of psychological health.[210] A conflict within the Frankfurt School around ego psychology came to a theoretical head in a published debate in 1955 between Fromm and Marcuse, in which the theoretical importance of whether one should "build up" a person's sense of self in an alienated society is laid bare. Criticising Fromm's turn to ego psychology and relative optimism about the possibility and desirability of well-"adjusted" individuals in modern society, Marcuse wrote that to develop a strong sense of self either means being "adjusted" to a broken society or being made into "a rebel" or (which is saying the same thing) a martyr… [Fromm] talks of the productive realisation of personality…as if man could actually practise all this and still remain sane and full of "wellbeing;" in a society which Fromm himself describes as one of total alienation, dominated by the commodity relations of the "market'".[211] As in his other works, Marcuse argues the ego psychologists or

[209] Most notably including Freud's daughter, Anna Freud as well as Heinz Hartmann.

[210] Robert S. Wallerstein, "The Growth and Transformation of American Ego Psychology." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol. 50, no. 1, Feb. 2002, pp. 135–68. Although I will later argue that ego psychology's conclusions about what a "healthy" individual looks like are unhelpful or at least incomplete when it comes to the issues facing democratic politics, it is worth noting that Anna Freud also gives one of the earliest accounts of the defence mechanisms of the ego, a study which is in many ways an important predecessor for the work done on cognitive dissonance.

[211] Herbert Marcuse, "The Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism." *Dissent*, Vol. II (No. 3, Summer) 1955, p. 231.

"revisionists" have, in an attempt to be more "sociological", mistakenly naturalised concepts like "personality" that are in fact products of our particular society. Most of all, Marcuse disagrees with these "revisionists" about whether individuals should primarily adapt to their social realities. Nevertheless, Marcuse's emphasis on the importance of the relative unity of the ego so that it can resist the superego (and the societal ideas it may carry) is very similar to the idea in ego psychology of a "strong" and unified ego as a sign of health.

Fromm defended himself in turn in a public letter of response, writing "I make it very clear in my own description of the productive character that he is rare in an alienated society" and that it is perhaps going too far to say that "any person who has integrity and is capable of love and happiness, in present-day capitalistic society must either become a martyr or insane." [212] Fromm suggests that to think dialectically, that is, to think about history in a Hegelian or Marxist way where one sees history unfolding as a series of contradictions that are slowly overcome and sublated by newer developments, requires that one see the elements in an alienated society that are already developing in contradiction to it, and that this is better than Marcuse's position in which "the only difference between the average man and the 'radical thinker,', then, is that the average man is an opportunistic automaton without knowing it, while the radical thinker is the same, but knowing it." He then ends his article on an even more incendiary note, nothing that "the neglect of the human factor and the callousness towards moral qualities in political figures, which was so apparent in Lenin's attitude,

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[212] Erich Fromm, "The Humanistic Implications of Instinctive Radicalism." *Dissent*, Vol. II, No. 4, 1955, p. 348.

is one of the reasons for the victory of Stalinism," perhaps implying that Marcuse's thought trends in the same way, and that Marcuse has effectively abandoned any consideration of morality in what it means to reason well and only considers good thinking in terms of this or that political advantage.

Though the references to Stalin may appear incidental, they in fact reveal a great deal about the underlying concerns held by Fromm (and, despite his jab, Adorno and Marcuse) regarding the political consequences of a weakened sense of individuality in modern times. Frankfurt School thinkers sought to defend Marxian ideas even as they disavowed the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union. Their emphasis on the importance of the individual reflects not only that specific time period's anxieties about the gulag but a wider running theme within much of Western intellectual history; individuality is often romanticised or effectively equated to a form of freedom in itself (and movements involving crowds or the masses are accordingly denigrated). As Frederic Jameson puts it, "This loss of self in the crowd, the submersion of individuality in the multitude, has been the central indictment proposed by counterrevolutionary ideology since its invention, knowing its high points in the grisliest mob scenes of the French Revolution (and in their analysis by Le Bon and Freud as the overcoming of the rational ego by collective irrationality)."[213] Even those who originally developed the study of ideology (to whom this work on false consciousness necessarily owe a debt) can be reasonably criticised as overly romanticising the idea of the individual; Terry Eagleton makes this point in his own work on ideology and argues that the empiricism of the 17th century that led to people

[213] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*. London: Verso, 2009, p. 431.

looking for a science of ideas was itself, "with its image of individuals as passive and discrete…deeply bound up in bourgeois ideological assumptions."[214] "Individuality", generally understood as the ability to develop different views from others rather than accept views uncritically or be consumed into a larger mob or crowd, is understood as the mark of freedom of thought, and associated with the positive alternative outcome to passive acceptance of authoritarian rule, especially from those like Stalin and Hitler. This critique is troubling for a variety of reasons, not least of which is its possible elitism, as it implies that the majority of people cannot think for themselves simply because they do not have access to the kinds of education, home life, or art that these theorists had themselves, or which they idealised as part of a past Western European society. The implication that only elite education or art can lead to the right kind of subjectivity denies many modern subjects agency. And I will demonstrate below, there are ways in which a drive towards individuality, when it manifests as a fierce clinging to one's beliefs and existing sense of self, can itself impede thought.

Despite the problems with asserting individuality as a sign of mature political subjectivity (the importance of which I return to later in this chapter), Marcuse was, like Fromm, similarly concerned that modern societies produced egos that would be too weak to allow subjects to think for themselves**.** Unlike Fromm, however, he was pessimistic about the possibility of psychoanalytic practice to assist in this problem. In his work *Eros and Civilisation* he argued that under pressures to conform, work, and enjoy according to social norms, the ego in modernity is not able to develop enough to defend against the repressive psychological effects of the capitalist world: "The

[214] Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. Verso, 2006, p. 64.

individual no longer has enough 'mental space' for developing himself … for living with a conscience of his own. His ego has shrunk to such a degree that the multiform antagonistic processes between id, ego, and superego cannot unfold themselves into their classic form." [215] In these texts, Marcuse focuses on this ideally robust or "developed" sense of self situated in the ego as the primary ingredient in a critical democratic subject. His assumption of what a good ego looks like is still very close to that of the ego psychologists: it is still problematic because it is "small" and has "shrunk"; there is a hint that the ego should have "developed" and "unfolded" in a particular way so as to manage the demands of reality, the id, and the superego, but this is left relatively hazy. It is thus still implied that a "large" and perhaps "strong" ego is what allows individuals to come to disagree with their society, spot oppression, and ultimately develop. In other words, although all these theorists disagreed about whether ego psychology was a liberatory practice (with Fromm far more positive about that idea than Marcuse and Adorno), all of them also saw the difficulty of strengthening an ego without making it rigid, defensive, or in line with existing societal norms. This paradox was also at work in Adorno's thinking.

Adorno and The Ego

Like Marcuse, most of Adorno's writings in this era express concerns about the dangers of a "weak" ego. In 1951, the same year that Marcuse was giving the lectures that would become *Eros and Civilisation*, Adorno wrote an essay entitled "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Propaganda." In this work he argues that much of the

[215] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 99.

tendency toward fascism can be attributed to a "weakness" of the individual, writing that "according to Freud, the problem of mass psychology is closely related to the new type of psychological affliction so characteristic of the era which for socio-economic reasons witnesses the decline of the individual and his subsequent weakness."[216] Adorno then describes the way that individuals in modern society both unconsciously seek someone who is better than they are in some way (and can thus serve as a model for their superego) and someone with whom they can already identify and love in a narcissistic way (due to that person's similarity to themselves). A mature person might notice and work through this contradiction in their own impulses, but for these "weak" modern subjects, another, inferior outcome remains. A leader who manages to satisfy a combination of these two desires (for example, both "a plain, red-blooded American" and a "great man") is able to satisfy both otherwise-competing desires: "Psychological ambivalence helps to work a social miracle. The leaders' image gratifies the followers' twofold wishes to submit to authority and to be the authority itself."[217] This ambivalence at work, like dissonance, requires a creative if irrational re-shaping of the ego.The ego assumes a shape where people can think well of themselves, even if this leads to deeply problematic consequences in political reasoning. The same themes arise in Adorno's essay "Sociology and Psychology" in 1951, where he writes that the ego in modern society is underdeveloped, and modern individuals are so thoroughly adjusted to their society that the ego no longer fully functions. There Adorno writes:

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[216] Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda." *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader,* 1982, p. 120.

[217] *Ibid* p. 127.

> The truly contemporary types are those whose actions are motivated neither by an ego nor, strictly speaking, unconsciously, but mirror objective trends like an automaton… Both [societal superego and id] conspire to annihilate the mediating ego; the triumphant archaic impulses, the victory of id over ego, harmonise with the triumph of society over the individual.[218]

Adorno believes that most subjects in modernity are more like "automatons" than the type of complex psychological subject that Freud imagines in his work, and therefore holds little hope that most political subjects will be able to develop independent thought and ultimately exercise autonomy or engage in political resistance. He does not closely focus, as Marcuse does, on the individual as the site of freedom, but he is nevertheless concerned with the development of a strong individual ego. As philosopher Gillian Rose puts it, "Adorno uses Freud's model of the psychology of the ego to explain the "loss of individual autonomy" and to explain how the individual adjusts to social reality in a way which makes his action less intelligible to himself."[219] Specifically, in the classic Freudian model, the child develops an ego ideal or superego based on both the model of the parent (say, how he perceives his father to be, modelling himself after and identifying with the father) and also the injunctions that this parent gives him. If this process (the process of introjection described above!) is completed successfully, Freud argues, the child will end up with a superego developed enough to help it with independent thinking–a critical voice that troubles the rest of the ego and regularly prompts it to revise its views or alter its behaviour.[220] Of course, the

[218] Theodor Adorno, "Sociology and Psychology." *New Left Review* 47, 1968, p. 95.

[219] Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, Macmillan Education UK, 1978, pp. 120-1.

[220] *Ibid*.

ideals the child has incorporated into this ideal ego or superego will still be culturally and otherwise determined. Nevertheless, in "good" circumstances (whatever these may be), they will provide the psychological basis for the child and eventual adult to regularly evaluate their own thoughts and actions and sometimes change their mind, and their actions accordingly. As Rose puts it when summarising Adorno's line of thinking:

> If the child, for some reason, does not aspire to become the father, he may continue to fear and submit to authority without introjecting it, identifying with it in such a way that it remains external to him, 'more powerful and less internalised', and an autonomous ego will not be formed. This kind of development might occur, for example, if the father is experienced by the child as impotent but authoritarian, as might be the case in a society with a highly complex division of labour, but with a high degree of uniformity in the work process...[221]

The concern is that in the modern world, as individuals lose agency politically and personally, they can no longer serve as an appropriate model from which their children can develop independent thought and action.

This is not to suggest that the only concerns the early Frankfurt School thinkers had to deal with were weak egos. Although Marcuse and Adorno are both concerned primarily with weak egos in their work and the dangers these present for modern, administered societies, they also recognise the dangers of an overly "strong" ego. They provide a more ambivalent account of the role of the ego in political autonomy, noting that it is in many ways a repressive structure. For example, in his argument with Fromm, Marcuse criticises the path of ego psychology in part because he suggests that

[221] *Ibid.*

the ego Fromm valorises is in fact created entirely as an adjustment to an oppressive society, and cannot itself represent the source of freedom.[222] Similarly, in an essay entitled "Sociology and Psychology" published in two parts in late 1967 and early 1968, Adorno takes pains to acknowledge the way that ego defence mechanisms are often expressions of political woes, writing, for example, a defence mechanism like "rationalisation" "betrays not merely neurosis but a false society."[223] The individual is unable to be honest with themselves because their society is fundamentally dishonest in masking the reality of oppression: "the individual's defence-mechanisms will…constantly seek support from their already well-established and widely endorsed counterparts in society at large" via the mechanism of rationalisation, which Adorno points out is already heavily documented in social psychology.[224] At this point in his oeuvre Adorno most directly acknowledges the possibility that the ego's defences may work to defend or reinforce existing societal narratives and ideas rather than helping the individual to reject unhelpful societal ideas. He argues that psychoanalysis should turn away from the "goal of a 'well-integrated personality'" (which again, closely resembles the idea of a "strong" ego) and, rather than helping people quell internal conflicting impulses, should help them to "grapple with them"—a suggestion in line with his conception of negative dialectics. In this way he acknowledges the importance of intra-psychological conflicts for individual development more so than does Marcuse.

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[222] Marcuse, "The Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism," p. 231.

[223] Theodor Adorno, "Sociology and Psychology," p. 82.

[224] *Ibid*.

Adorno even briefly addresses the complexity of the issue of ego defences and their potential double-sided nature when he contends that there are two ways of having a "strong" ego. Firstly, there is an arguably "false" type of strong ego, one in which internal conflicts are resolved prematurely often as the subject adjusts to their society. And secondly, there is an ego which liberates because it "differentiates" within the subject, allowing them to recognise the contradictions within the self and ultimately between themselves and their society. This latter one might allow subjects to notice contradictions and then come to recognise society's pathological and oppressive elements. Criticising the bourgeois practice of psychoanalysis (as opposed to Freud's ideas themselves) he writes:

> Psychoanalytic logic, being incapable of thinking this contradiction [between, e.g. the differentiation of the individual from society and their adjustment, both mediated by the ego], has to reduce everything to the same first principle, to what the ego once was [e.g. the drives from which it came]. In cancelling out the differentiation synonymous with the emergence of the ego, it becomes the ally of regression, its own worst enemy. [225]

In this brief moment in his work, Adorno argues for a more specific and complex type of ego than Marcuse, suggesting that a "better" political subject would have a "strong" yet differentiated sense of self. This type of ego might allow for an individual sense of self which is dynamic and allows the subject to grapple internally with social issues, rather than rigidly dismiss or categorise them. But Adorno holds little hope for this to emerge, noting that both weakening and strengthening the ego seem to lead to bad outcomes. Psychoanalysis cannot help, nor society. After all, if most political subjects

[225] Adorno, "Psychology and Sociology," p. 96.

lack even the basic structure of a traditional Freudian ego, and if, as Adorno writes in the same essay, "a brutal, total, standardising society arrests all differentiation,"[226] then the desirable type of differentiated ego lies out of reach for most political subjects, just as political consciousness does for nearly all subjects in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and it will not be practically fruitful to seek to understand the process of differentiation or what might lead subjects to do more of it. This judgement is likely the reason Adorno does not suggest a process by which political subjects might become more comfortable with internal divisions while still (as he notes must be necessary) continuing to have a sufficient sense of self by which to orient themselves in the world.[227] After all, as Adorno notes, perhaps wryly, "The psychotic's ego-defences are to prevent instinctual chaos and disintegration, and treatment is confined to 'supportive therapy' – the ego must therefore serve some function." Perhaps most modern subjects, pathological simply because of the society they live in, must get by with the weak but functioning egos they have.

Indeed it is notable that Marcuse similarly occasionally reflects on the possibility of a better ego. He acknowledges that some internal divisions within the self generate important reflection: for example, that there is some "splitting" that occurs internally as the superego functions as a conscience.[228] Nevertheless, Marcuse does not dwell on the role of the superego or divisions in general, other than acknowledging that an underdeveloped superego (of the type he attributes to modern subjects) contributes

[226] *Ibid.* p. 95.

[227] Adorno, "Sociology and Psychology", p. 94.

[228] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 54.

to the inability to think for oneself politically.[229] Instead of developing a line of thought on the merits of the divisions within the subject, Marcuse suggests that too much of this type of internal conflict can lead not only to individual suffering but to high levels of societal aggression such that "driven to the extreme…'a pure culture of the death instinct' may hold sway in the superego."[230] Both writers consider the benefits that an ego capable of division might carry, but are concerned that the path to division would lead to a weak ego that would ultimately deprive subjects of sufficient capability. As I shall demonstrate below, this means they instead largely focus on the challenge of strengthening the ego, with all the methodological contradictions that involves.

A Strong or Weak Ego? The Paradox

There is, then, a paradox at the heart of Adorno and Marcuse's writings on the ego, and the larger question they seek to address. All of these complex theories about the role of the ego ultimately create a tension in the writers of the first-generation Frankfurt school, one that remains relevant to this day. Marcuse and Adorno see ego defences as problematic for the overcoming of false consciousness, but they are also concerned about an ego that does not reject enough of what is external to it. Later theorists in the critical theory tradition have commented on this problem repeatedly. Joel Whitebrook notes, "Critics of the ego, like Adorno and Lacan, prompted by a philosophical suspicion of synthesis, tend to hypostatize pathological, rigidified forms of ego formation…as a result, they are left only with a choice between two poisons,

[229] *Ibid.*

[230] *Ibid.*

namely, violent unification or no unification at all."[231] Similarly, Amy Allen notes that Adorno "faces a further problem in that he trenchantly criticises the bourgeois, rational ego for its coercive, dominating tendencies and, at the same time, identifies ego weakness as a prime causal factor in the rise of authoritarian personalities. This leaves him in the uncomfortable position of simultaneously criticising and defending the authoritarian ego." [232] Meanwhile Marcuse too "leaves us in a familiar bind: either we bite the bullet and throw our lot in with domination on the grounds that at least it gives us autonomy, or we accept Marcuse's utopian vision of the reversal of repression and release of erotic energies as the progressive solution."[233] Jessica Benjamin connects this issue of the ego to a central paradox regarding all of critical theory:

> At the centre of critical theory's analysis of modern capitalism is a paradox about the nature of resistance to domination. Those aspects of consciousness where this resistance might be located—critical reason, individuation, integrity and ultimately resistance itself—are tied to the process of internalising authority. As a result, the rejection of authority can only take place through its prior acceptance.[234]

In short, the early critical theorists struggled to know whether it would be best for subjects to strengthen or weaken their egos. The former would better reinforce the subjects' existing sense of themselves as good and capable agents, which might increase their political agency but would also, according to Freudian analysis, mean reinforcing oppressive societal beliefs that were likely built into that ego and its

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[231] Whitebrook, *Perversion and Utopia*, p. 14.

[232] Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, p. 33.

[233] *Ibid.* p. 345.

[234] Jessica Benjamin, "The End of Internalisation: Adorno's Social Psychology." *Telos* 32. Summer, 1977: p. 42.

defences. The latter, the weakening of the ego, might destabilise the self entirely, leaving subjects unable to act. This latter risk was especially likely if, as these critical theorists believed, the ego was already fairly weak due to changes in societal and family models. This last assumption is itself worth pausing over, especially 65 years later, when feminist politics are more mature. Then, and perhaps more so today, the acceptance of authority in home life (through the nuclear, patriarchal family and the process of development in the bourgeois home) is a tenuous ground on which to imagine a resistance to other forms of authority later in life. As numerous feminist critics have demonstrated, the types of family structures that Freud describes are limiting to an extreme. For example, Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* shows how working class families cannot and do not subscribe to the same types of gendering and sentimentality as bourgeois families, and cannot fit within Freudian models, such that to universalise these models is both inaccurate and classist.[235] Luce Irigaray has shown that Freud's own conceptual tools might have shown his own misrecognition of women through the lens of a "one sex" model where women are effectively just a different and inferior version of men, Jacqueline Rose has suggested that Freud's own work involves his often misinterpreting therapeutic situations due to heteronormative assumptions and gender roles—and of course, some of the same pressures still plague psychoanalysis to this day.[236] Nor were the Frankfurt school thinkers necessarily outside of these biases; note, for example, the assertion that

[235] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*. Rutgers University Press, 1987.

[236] Jacqueline Rose, "Dora: Fragment of an Analysis." *In Dora's Case Freud–Hysteria–Feminism*. Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 128-148.

the "purpose-directed" character of the human ego is somehow "masculine" in the quote at the top of this chapter. Not only does this gendered and family-centred aspect of psychoanalysis make this shaky grounds for any theorising given the variety of class positions, family formations, genders, sexualities, and more, but it points to a deeper and broader contradiction. To rely on the Freudian concept of the ego, and to imagine that a stronger ego is needed even though this strong ego is supposedly developed via the oppressive patriarchal nuclear family, is one of the fundamental contradictions at the heart of the Frankfurt School thinkers' original approach to false consciousness; the mind is supposed to develop the ability to think freely by adapting to an oppressive familial structure.

This methodological contradiction is one reason to consider other psychological foundations for understanding this problem that may require less convoluted logic and which present other, perhaps more likely ways for people to come to question the givens of their social world. Yet as Allen notes, Adorno and his co-author Horkheimer "regard this specific structure of internalised domination as necessary for both individual autonomy and genuine resistance to modern capitalism" and thus see "great danger in the emergence of new, postliberal forms of capitalism and mass society where authority is increasingly exercised directly over individuals, rather than being mediated through processes of psychic internalisation that take shape within the context of the bourgeois family," as they believe this will lead to fewer possibilities for psychic resistance to oppression.[237] This too was a part of the paradox involved in grappling with the modern ego—the very foundation necessarily taken for granted in

[237] Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, p. 112.

adapting Freud's work, the assumption a certain kind of bourgeois and patriarchal family unit as central to psychic health, is itself politically questionable. As I outline below, cognitive dissonance theory, which requires no such assumption, may offer an alternate route to understanding the challenges facing the political subject when it comes to their sense of self.

Overall, the first generation Frankfurt School theorists mostly landed on the need to strengthen the ego. As Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner put it, "Against the trends towards conformity, massification, and submission, the critical theorists all advocate strengthening the ego and developing critical individualism. This psychological emphasis comes to shape their politics…although such emphasis on the emancipatory role of the individual psyche can help foster individual rebellion, it can also simply reproduce the egotistical values of advanced industrial society."[238] The focus on "the individual," drawn in part from concerns about authoritarian rule and mass conformity, also brought with it methodological issues and contradictions. Firstly, this focus on the question of individuality meant that, while Marcuse and Adorno both acknowledged that a strong ego might also be personally and politically problematic, for the most part these theorists considered what they assumed was already a weak modern ego and described what the weak-ego-holding political subject could reveal about the state of the modern world. There was a resultant relative aporia about the possible problems of a strong ego. Secondly, by portraying the problem of modern subjectivity as a failure of individuality, the early Frankfurt School theorists

[238] Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner, eds. *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader.* Psychology Press, 1989: p. 17.

faced a contradiction: they were able to justify drawing political insights from individual behaviour by noting that few people had true individuality, but they did so at the cost of centering individuality as a basis for political consciousness, and thus suggesting a relatively weak basis for any possible development of political consciousness. The weakness of modern individuality, these theorists suggested, meant that by looking at individuals and their pathologies it was possible to see the imprint and the structure of larger societal pathologies; psychoanalytic insights could be the route to larger socio-political critique. This might be helpful to these theorists in justifying their larger societal critiques, but it also meant that the entire idea of individuality appeared fairly nebulous, and perhaps nearly impossible to achieve. In Adorno's words, "[the revisionists] forget that not only the individual, but the category of individuality is a product of society. Instead of first extracting the individual from the social process so as to describe the influence which forms it, an analytic social psychology is to reveal in the innermost mechanism of the individual the decisive social forces."[239] Or as Marcuse put it, Freud's work actually undermines "one of the strongest ideological fortifications of modern culture-–namely, the notion of the autonomous individual."[240] Marcuse argues that Freud dissolves the idea of real personality and "bares the sub-individual and pre-individual factors which (largely unconscious to the ego) actually make the individual: it reveals the power of the universal in and over the individuals."[241] The strength of the psychoanalytic analysis

[239] This quote is from Adorno's essay "Die Revidierte Psychoanalyse" page 30; I use Jacoby's English translation from page 33 of his book (see citation below).

[240] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 57.

[241] *Ibid.*

then, is also arguably a reason to forgo hope for social change. Indeed, both theorists largely considered that individuals do not yet meaningfully exist in the modern world; as intellectual historian Russell Jacoby explains in his book *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology,* for the critical theorists "unlike the mechanical behaviourists, the point was not to prove that the individual was an illusion [i.e.. that behaviour is controlled by external factors in a predictable way]; rather it was to show to what extent the individual did not yet exist. To critical theory, psychoanalysis demonstrates the degree to which… the individual is de-individualised by society."[242] This allowed for a social and political read of individual pathologies, but it also meant that it was difficult to locate a promising political subject for emancipatory movements. In effect, Adorno, Marcuse and even Fromm's work suggests that the conditions for political consciousness might be the development of an entire "true" self or "true" individual, a process that is such a large task that their accounts often leave little reason for immediate hope about political consciousness. If one needs to develop an entirely new kind of self before political emancipation is possible, then escaping false consciousness might be nearly impossible, and in these theories (especially those of Adorno) one might conclude that any hope of political agency must be abandoned. In contrast, however, if subjects can begin to develop political consciousness prior to a re-making of the self (by, say, reacting to the discomfort of contradictions in new ways) then they may be more immediately able to recognise oppression and act against it in their social world. I turn to that possibility now.

[242] Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology*. Transaction Publishers, 1975: p. 30.

A Better Ego via Dissonance

I have until this point in the chapter explained a contradiction in the work of early Frankfurt School thinkers about the idea of the ego and its entailments for a concept of political subjectivity and agency. Many of the issues involved overlap with concerns in cognitive dissonance literature. As described above, cognitive dissonance literature demonstrates the tendency for subjects to unconsciously defend their sense of self or sense of action-possibilities (both of which are intrinsically tied up in the Freudian idea of the ego, which is the active, decision-making part of the self, the one tasked with balancing the demands of other parts of the psyche). This tendency means that subjects unconsciously protect existing harmful beliefs or justify new ones in line with their own actions. A "stronger" ego, in the sense of strongly defined or strongly defended, may thus perversely lead to greater repression and rationalisation. This use of cognitive dissonance theory can serve in this sense as a naturalised explanation for some of the activity of the unconscious and the ego, as well as one mechanism for what Marxist thinkers term false consciousness.[243] This naturalisation is useful as a hypothesis because it may be able to account for new possibilities for political organising and action, as well as new direction for theorising. It is, nevertheless, merely a reasoned suggestion, because to know how far this particular theory can account for new possibilities for political organising requires far more research. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that it may be valuable to use tools other

[243] Some Freudians would argue that Freud's work, too, is a naturalisation; in that case, allow me to say it is another naturalisation, formatted in a way intelligible to those engaged in wider fields of modern science.

than psychoanalysis to approach the question of political subjectivity and independent thought. Firstly, as mentioned just above, psychoanalysis relies heavily on a model developed by Freud that involves the nuclear, patriarchal family. This is not an ideal ground for critical theorists to begin their critique since the traditional family is itself a site of oppression. To construct the critique of the individual this way might imply that the patriarchal and heteronormative family is necessary for meaningful political subjectivity. A new theory is beneficial because in that case it is no longer necessary to rely theoretically on the forces of authority from the patriarchal nuclear family for subjects to be able to engage in critical reflection. Another reason to consider new supporting psychological theories in addition to psychoanalysis is that psychoanalysis is, by its own admission, a long and imperfect process of the slow reshaping of the self and drives, one that is not by itself necessarily radical in any political sense. The 'talking cure", as Freud would put it, is not a path not to an idyllic life or to total well-being, but simply from "extraordinary suffering to ordinary misery."[244] Posed in this way, the problem of the insufficient ego (or superego) in political consciousness can seem intractable, because of the long therapeutic years it might require. Even if an intervention from psychoanalysis works, and even if it has positive political effects (a disputed idea, even within the aforementioned Marcuse-Fromm debate!) traditional psychoanalysis takes a long time, possibly even many generations, to take effect. It is thus less than ideal to build one's idea of political health via a framework that mostly conceives of solutions in these terms. This is not to say that there is nothing valuable

[244] This quote has been translated in many different ways but is from Freud's *Studies in Hysteria*. Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud. *Studies on Hysteria*. Hachette UK, 2009.

about the psychoanalytic lens, only that it may be important to consider other ways of thinking about what can help build better political subjectivity.

Cognitive dissonance provides a new possible way to ask what kind of "self" might lead to false consciousness (and what kind of self might be better able to overcome false consciousness). In cognitive dissonance theory, whether people rationalise new ideas away (and repress key elements of the process of reasoning about politics, thus building or maintaining false consciousness!) depends not on what has happened in the past in their childhood, but whether they are able to *consciously* experience their discomfort about contradictions they encounter. This in turn is dependent not (or at least not necessarily) on family upbringing but on the momentary circumstances they find themselves in. For example, one of the most intriguing series of studies in cognitive dissonance research demonstrates that people can be induced to mis-attribute their discomfort about dissonant thoughts to other, external sources. That is, they notice a contradiction, and feel discomfort, but they wrongly attribute their discomfort to another phenomenon altogether. When this occurs, they no longer seek to rationalise away contradictory information, and dissonance loses its power to induce false consciousness. Participants may have dissonance induced by, say, being given information that contradicts an existing view. Participants are then given an external explanation for why they might be feeling discomfort, like a placebo pill which they are told can cause anxiety, unpleasant lighting, or a fan that causes uncomfortable amounts of noise.[245] In these studies, as in a wide range of other psychological studies,

[245] See Mark P. Zanna, and Joel Cooper. "Dissonance and the Pill: an Attribution Approach to Studying the Arousal Properties of Dissonance." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 29.5 (1974): p. 703. Also Russell H. Fazio, Mark P. Zanna, and Joel Cooper. "Dissonance and Self-Perception: An

participants are shown to be bad at *interoception*, awareness and understanding of their own internal states. They experience discomfort, but are unable to recognise this consciously and/or accurately attribute its cause. As a result, when they experience the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, they mis-attribute it to the noisy fan or the fake drug they have taken as part of the study and do not seek to rationalise the uncomfortable information away. They experience the discomfort of dissonance but do not feel the same pressure to create consonant thoughts. This demonstrates that it is possible to manipulate situations so that participants can acknowledge contradictions they would otherwise rationalise away—admittedly in a very lab-based and manipulative way. I discuss further in Chapter Six methods of discourse like "deep canvassing" and "motivational interviewing." In these techniques, conversations are arranged so that participants must present opposing points of view to themselves and often come to take a more measured approach to an issue or change their minds. What's intriguing and suggestive about all these examples is that they suggest the possibilities of interventions, built on dissonance research, that can help people become conscious of contradictions and process them consciously. This in turn points to the possibility for time-limited, intentional, environmental interventions that aid in political consciousness, which are perhaps less time and resource intensive than years of psychoanalysis. This is actionable, the kind of intervention that theory can put into practice, that critical theorists can look into as a form of political intervention.

More importantly for the immediate questions posed by theorists in the Frankfurt school, cognitive dissonance theory suggests a very specific relationship

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Integrative View of Each Theory's Proper Domain of Application." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 13.5, 1977: pp. 464-479.

between the ego and political reasoning. It suggests that ego defences provide just as much (and perhaps much more) of a threat to political reasoning than mindless conformity. In line with the self-standards and action-based models in other chapters, subjects are motivated to defend views that are already linked to their sense of self as good people, and which provide them with a sense that they can take action in the world. Notably, these views may well be views that *reject* the official views of authority or social norms; what matters is that they maintain the subject's sense of self and agency. Such views might even be conspiracy theories, and are not necessarily likely to be those given by authority. Thus a "strong" ego in the sense of strongly defined and defended may be very detrimental to individual reasoning even as the subjects with strong egos are very much "individuals" in the sense that they are capable of rejecting external arguments and views as presented to them, and are thus differentiated from others. Cognitive dissonance theory here provides a clearer mechanism for how the (often forced or somewhat artificial, in the sense of compelled via the social pressure of recognition or social norms) unification of the ego harms people's ability to think critically. In this account, false consciousness occurs not only through the reification of people and things for instrumental purposes (a common explanation in Frankfurt School writings about ideology and false consciousness). It also occurs because people who envision themselves as individuals are hugely uncomfortable with ambivalence; psychological discomfort forces people to reconcile their views as quickly as possible to an ego ideal, which limits critical thinking.

In short, then, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that when it comes to false consciousness and the ego, concerns about a rigid ego may be more relevant than ones

about the "weak" ego. One way to conceptualise this is that political subjects are more likely to be mired in endless disagreements with others, "individuating" themselves and their beliefs, rather than following some top-down streamlined ideology from the government or mass culture. In other words, although Marcuse and Adorno's worries about the "true individual" make sense in their historical context, riddled with worry about the oppressive outcomes of the Soviet Union, as well as the eroding tendencies of instrumental reason in democracies, these anxieties may be a less relevant concern today.

False consciousness then, no longer looks like an uncritical acceptance of power structures or socially normative ideas, nor (as the anti-ideology theorists of the 80s argued) a passive acceptance of the system because nothing better seems possible (as some traditional theories of ideology, and indeed aspects of Adorno and Marcuse's work, tend to imply). False consciousness can look as much like a sea of individuals disagreeing with one another vehemently as a general conformity to prevailing norms and power structures. And indeed, with a growing lack of faith in institutions and a rise in conspiracy theories and disinformation, this is precisely what false consciousness does look like in the 21st century: a sea of different views, each held strongly as a source of one's independent thinking and individuality, where few of these views amount to a full picture of power or serve as a reliable source of political consciousness. Thus as a supplement to the traditional psychoanalytic lens used in critical theories, cognitive dissonance theory provides new conceptual resources to explain one of the dangers of an overly "strong" ego; it suggests that the danger of strengthening ego defences is high. This in turn suggests that critical theorists should

reject not only ego psychology but also, to some degree, other processes and aspects of culture that reify the self, whether these are the cultivation of selfhood on social media or an emphasis on "individuality." In this way, dissonance theory provides a conceptual resource that allows theorists to point to the ways that atomising individualism and an emphasis on the self specifically sway political consciousness and artificially compress it. This in turn could allow for a critique of large swathes of modern culture, for example the "self-help" industry, the way workplace training is done, social media itself, education focused on individuality, and so on. Doing this with dissonance theory might allow for a less heavily psychoanalytic approach, one that does not rely on ideas built on the structure of the nuclear family and which will also be of interest to those who are sceptics of psychoanalysis.

Just as the Frankfurt school theorists saw the dangers of a weak sense of self leading to attachments to strong authoritarian leaders so that the leader comes to stand in for the person's own sense of self, we should today be attentive to the dangers of individuals seeking to bolster their sense of self by sand their ability to navigate the world with the sense that they are unique individuals and "right". This may lead to political subjects defending any existing views and adapting them in creative and misleading ways as they curate a sense of themselves as distinct from others, and otherwise individuated. There is much to question, then, about the psychological (and not just material) effects of liberal and neoliberal ideas that emphasise and even glorify individual responsibility, achievement, and happiness, as these may reinforce the instinctive deployment of ego defences and lead to the rationalisations that defend and build false consciousness. For example, the popularity of posturing by those spouting

reactionary ideologies is often that they are against the "mainstream media". This framing suggests that those who watch and read this type of news are themselves in possession of a counter-hegemonic kind of knowledge and have arrived there via their own "independent thinking"—even though the results are often oppressive. Similarly, the ideological emphasis on entrepreneurship often comes with the sense that entrepreneurs are true individuals, out for themselves against the world, thinking in maverick ways about their industries. This in turn helps to make glamorous the precarious type of work done by uber drivers, deliveroo riders, and many other independent contractors, who are sometimes persuaded to see themselves not as precariously employed but as working for themselves.

There is thus a tension between the early Frankfurt School thinker's interest in true individuality, the development of the individual apart from the dictates or pressures of the surrounding society, and the reality of whether an emphasis on individuality may in fact be part of the same tendency towards defending the individual's sense of self from outside challenges in ways that ultimately reduce to ego-defences. For example, in his 1965 essay "The Individual in the Great Society," while noting the flaws in the liberal conception of the individual and the false individuality promoted by capitalism and consumer culture, Marcuse describes true (and Marxian) freedom as the freedom of the individual.[246] While this focus makes sense in its historical context, especially as a reaction to the rise of mass culture and the

[246] Herbert Marcuse, "The Individual in the Great Society." *Towards a Critical Theory of Society*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.

political failures of the Soviet Union, it suggests that thinkers like Marcuse can sometimes conflate individuality for freedom itself.

Related Theoretical Models of Better Egos

This relationship between the individual egoic self and political consciousness gives greater reasons to pay attention to alternative understandings of how the ego should function in order for political subjects to escape false consciousness. In this section, I return to two threads in existing psychoanalytic critical theory literature and draw out the ways they may be helpful given what aligns with dissonance research. I specifically consider how Amy Allen and Joel Whitebrook both suggest that a different type of ego might be possible, and that this kind of ego would allow for new forms of political subjectivity. While Whitebrook focuses his work on questions of mourning, loss, control, and how subjects can grapple with these differently in the formation of their ego, Allen suggests that a fundamental insight about the ego and political subjectivity is found in the work of Melanie Klein, who emphasises the role of ambivalence in a healthy or beneficial ego. I will now turn to each of these works in greater detail.

In Joel Whitebrook's *Perversion and Utopia*, he argues that utopian thought and the psychoanalytic concept of perversion are connected in that both seek to bypass the reality principle that Freud saw as limiting human desires and structuring social arrangements. Whitebrook especially criticises Axel Honneth for his limited reading of psychoanalysis, as well as overly Lacanian interpretations of Freud when it comes to Freudo-Marxism. When it comes to the ego, Whitebrook argues that the type of ego described in much of Freudian literature (and thus taken up by Adorno, Horkheimer,

Marcuse and others) is primarily involved in controlling impulses and maintaining boundaries, but that to assume this form of the ego is to equate "a pathological mode of ego formation, namely, the obsessional, with the ego as such."[247] He argues that in Freud's later work, ego strength is less about stamping out threats to the existing sense of self and more about being able to integrate more and more of one's own unconscious content into one's conscious functioning. (Whitebrook suggests that one area of critical theory that does take note of this idea of ego strength is Adorno's aesthetic theories about the logic of a future non-reified society). The upside of finding another kind of ego would be access to the repressed contradictions so often referenced in Marxist writings on ideology, as well as the repressed aspects of the self that may be useful for emancipatory thought.

In her book *Critique on the Couch*, Amy Allen argues that psychoanalysis remains relevant to critical theory in the 21st century. She draws on Freud, Lacan, and especially Melanie Klein to argue for a use of psychoanalysis that involves loss, negativity, ambivalence, and mourning, arguing that the negative drives in psychoanalytic theory, largely abandoned by theorists like Honneth and Habermas, offer explanatory power for phenomena like polarisation, reactionary thought and conspiracy theories. For example, in psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's work, one of the central tasks of psychological maturity is moving from "splitting" difficult subjects (seeing them as either wholly good or bad, and perhaps swapping between these perspectives), to integrating both perspectives and living with critical ambivalence—in other words, with acknowledging the uncomfortable contradictions in one's worldview

[247] Whitebrook, *Perversion and Utopia*, p. 14.

rather than dismissing them. Allen suggests that this insight, and the failure to achieve this depressive ambivalent perspective, offer a great deal of explanatory value to reactionary movements (who tend to see things as purely good or evil!), conspiracy theorists, and more. In this chapter I have intentionally built on this project by examining the ways that cognitive dissonance theory, which is also a theory involving drives and negative affect like discomfort, can further explain how subjects' difficulty with ambivalence and loss might lead them into "false consciousness" and what it might take for them to emerge from that. One of the first ways that dissonance can do this is to provide a signal for areas where political reasoning is likely to be fraught; the discomfort of dissonance is a possible trigger for harmful political beliefs and also the site of possible political transformation. As Amy Allen puts it "For at least some members of the early Frankfurt School, the unconscious marks out a space of radical alterity from which critique can be launched, or what Whitebook calls "the good Other" of the "repressive ego and the logic of domination."[248] This suggests that thinking through psychoanalysis can allow theorists to overcome "joyless reformism" in their work.[249] However, it is not clear how the often-disorganised and impulsive unconscious can, by itself, launch an incisive critique of the current social order. I suggest that it may be more useful to think that our resistance and discomfort, which emerge in unconscious processes, show us areas where different kinds of reasoning are required because subjects are not yet able to handle contradictions. It is not the unconscious or the discomfort themselves that are inherently radical, but it might be

[248] Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, p. 17.

[249] Whitebrook, *Perversion and Utopia*, p. 89.

possible to use these points of discomfort as a starting point for new kinds of political thought and reasoning. At a theoretical level, this might mean seeing affective discomfort about political issues as a symptom of unresolved societal contradictions and/or areas where work is needed to develop political consciousness. In any case, returning to these questions and exploring the ways that our ego defences can be understood differently is likely a fruitful area for those interested in the question of false consciousness. We can go beyond a Kleinean analysis (as Allen does) and also use the tools of empirical psychology to understand the relationship between people's aversion to loss, change, and ambivalence related to their worldview and sense of self. This may also provide a check against ways in which some aspects of psychoanalysis, especially its intrapsychic elements, do not always neatly generalise outwards, a criticism which Honneth has made when it comes to (for example) the work of Allen.[250] Allen and Whitebrook each point to potential interesting areas of study within the traditional field of Freudian psychoanalysis; dissonance theory may provide yet another tool for understanding the importance of ambivalence and the ability for subjects to revise their sense of self.

Combining insights from cognitive dissonance theory and Freudian theories of the ego, I now suggest at least two possibilities emerge for the psychological processes that might be most crucial for political consciousness, given what dissonance theory suggests about the ego. I first discuss the importance of mourning, and then turn to the importance of ambivalence.

[250]Axel Honneth, Amy Allen, and Maeve Cooke. "A Conversation Between Axel Honneth, Amy Allen and Maeve Cooke, Frankfurt am Main, 12 April 2010." *Journal of Power* 3.2, 2010: pp. 153-170.

Mourning

A first possibility is the development of a subject whose ego is better capable of handling mourning, including the mourning of a lost sense of self as political consciousness develops and views and courses of action change. The utility of this kind of mourning is reflected in both Freudian and dissonance-based literature. Recall that in the self-standards model of dissonance, subjects may hold on to unhelpful beliefs involved in false consciousness because dispensing with them would be acknowledging the errors of a previous "self." New ideas and information cannot be incorporated into the person's subjectivity because to do so would mean acknowledging that the previous self was in some sense "wrong." In Freudian terms, this is a failure to mourn. As Freud puts it in his influential essay "Mourning and Melancholia", "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."[251] Freud notes that the work of mourning is to slowly relinquish the longing for the lost object. This is painful in large part because it involves giving up an aspect of the self (say, the part of the person that was an enthusiastic active citizen, the part of the person that was the lover in the lost relationship, or the part of the self that had the day-to-day relationship to the dead person). Freud suggests that those who fail to mourn well, and who instead lapse into "melancholia", do so in part because they get stuck in the process of letting go of this

[251] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works,* 1957, p. 243. Freud does not always tie his ideas to political or social commentary, so it is perhaps notable here how he immediately notes that mourning can occur in relation to group identity and politics.

sense of self.[252] In one of the most striking images in his entire oeuvre, Freud suggests that the subject who has failed to mourn properly, is effectively keeping the lost object alive inside himself: "so by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction."[253] Mourning (and its failure, melancholia) may therefore represent one way of understanding the egoic attachment to one's current beliefs.

Indeed, in their essay "Psychic Inceptions: Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage" in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler suggests that Freud's work on mourning and melancholia can be usefully extended to explain the nature of critical consciousness. In melancholia, Butler points out, the subject takes the lost object into itself and also develops a critical voice about this self that they use to, at times, berate themselves and address themselves as they would the lost object or ideal. This becomes a type of critical consciousness, albeit focused inwardly and perhaps narcissistically. However, if the subject is able to truly accept loss and move into a state of mourning, that broken off consciousness can be refashioned as a kind of critical consciousness about the world. A key part of this is ambivalence, the process of oscillation and acknowledgement of uncomfortable confusion and contradiction that is part of the mourning process by which the subject comes to accept loss and turn back to the outside world. When it comes to politics, then (rather than death, breakups, or other personal disappointments) this means that subjects are interpellated into a particular image of the social world but they are never without hope for emerging from harmful ideology, because they can turn from melancholia about what was lost during the

[252] *Ibid*. p. 245.

[253] *Ibid.* p. 257.

process of subjectification to the painful ambivalent work of mourning, which is the first set of steps towards acceptance of the social world and presumably from there gain the ability to act to change it. As Butler puts it:

> The power imposed upon one is the power that animates one's emergence, and there appears to be no escaping this ambivalence. Indeed, there appears to be no "one" without ambivalence, which is to say that the fictive redoubling necessary to become a self rules out the possibility of strict identity. Finally, then, there is no ambivalence without loss as the verdict of sociality, one that leaves the trace of its turn at the scene of one's emergence.[254]

The very painful conditions of being drawn into ideology via the mechanism of the self prepares the structures that are needed for the ambivalent work of mourning. It is possible to emerge from false consciousness if one can do this painful work, approach reality, and mourn what is painful about it.

One can tell a similar story using the framework of cognitive dissonance. During cognitive dissonance, too, an unconscious rejection of reality occurs because the subject is fixated on a particular sense of self. The confirmation bias and rationalisations spurred by cognitive dissonance may be seen as a failure to accept loss and mourn, to choose one outcome at the loss of another (consider, for example, the dissonance studies where subjects diminish the value of what they didn't choose when choosing between two options—they are attempting to make an admittedly small loss less painful). A person who experiences cognitive dissonance when considering a new reason to go to war may, for example, either end up repressing their aggressive instinct (finding it incompatible with the rest of their sense of self) or their pacifist tendency (for the same reason). Either way they may be avoiding an even more painful reality:

[254] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection. Stanford University Press*, 1997: p. 198.

that whatever route they choose to support, they will not be able to satisfy both tendencies within themselves. This is why Freud is able to identify melancholia and a failure to mourn with ambivalence: writing that there are "three preconditions of melancholia—loss of the object, ambivalence, and regression of the libido into the ego."[255] It may simply feel too difficult to accept the costs of choosing one option over another, or the cost of giving up an aspect of the self attached to an existing point of view. In this way subjects refuse to do the work of mourning, in Freudian terms, for the things they've given up and the difficult parts of themselves or the world. If cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people resist new information because it poses a threat to their current sense of self, then it provides a reason for critical theorists to revisit the question of mourning and to ask what types of melancholia are currently part of false consciousness. This might include the melancholia of reactionary subjects attached to an imagined idyllic past, but it could also include almost any attachment subjects have to their own role in the systems as "good agents", including the role of critics thinking of themselves as saviours, and the role of those who are neither reactionary nor critical but are attached to the idea of themselves as reasonable for taking a middle ground. The study of false consciousness and ideology then expands to the study of how to help people reinterpret themselves as good individual subjects and agents while at the same time having been mistaken in a given belief, to help them mourn former versions of themselves gracefully or at minimum change without triggering the melancholic impulse of holding on to the former self. Dissonance theory demonstrates the discomfort subjects face when they must mourn

[255] *Ibid.* p. 258

prior versions of themselves, and can potentially point to resources to help people do the necessary work of mourning in order to increase their political consciousness.

Working Through Ambivalence

Another important emphasis derived from cognitive dissonance research is the related importance of subjects being able to tolerate painful ambivalence consciously for long enough to think through difficult political questions, and thereby escape false consciousness.[256] Ambivalence in this sense means the ego continuing to function enough that a person can navigate the world and its competing pressures, yet allow themselves to consciously notice contradictions in their own beliefs and actions and freely consider them--that is, consider them for some time without the discomfort they cause rushing them to a conclusion. Mourning may of course be involved in this process once ideas are brought to the level of conscious consideration. Another common Freudian idea that may be involved is sublimation, where desires that cannot be realised directly are instead artfully reworked (so that, for example, our violent impulses are directed to sportsmanship or our unrequited love into art). This process allows for the recognition of ambivalence and may allow people to create new ways of synthesising the contradictions once they encounter them. However ambivalence is addressed once it is brought to conscious recognition, what is likely to matter most if cognitive dissonance theory is to be believed is that subjects can tolerate the discomfort

[256] While Whitebrook hints that for Adorno and Marcuse freedom might look like the dissolution of the ego, Allen contends, "the target of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique is not the ego or the self per se, but the form of ego integration required under bourgeois capitalism. This, in turn, suggests that the point is not to celebrate the Dionysian dissolution of the ego but rather to criticise the type of society in which such dissolution comes to look like freedom." Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, p. 110.

created by dissonant thoughts and actions long enough to think about these contradictions. There is thus firstly the necessary process of making contradictions conscious, and then the process of making them bearable. Both Allen and Whitebrook, in different ways, have suggested that this might be important. Allen, of course, argues for the importance of a return to Kleinian ambivalence, which she describes as a sign of mature ego development, where subjects cease to handle their conflicting love and hate for an object or person by splitting or repression and instead integrate the many contradictory features of their subjectivity together, and thus feel ambivalent.[257] Similarly, Whitebrook suggests that what is needed is an ego where the superego and ego are in communication "freely," so that one's sense of one's ideal self and the reality of the internal and external formation of the self are in a kind of dialogue where both can adjust. As Whitebrook puts it, "The ego does not most effectively establish 'mastery' over the id, as is often assumed, by dissociating itself from and suppressing the id's instinctual material. On the contrary, it achieves this end and enriches itself at the same time and to the same extent by establishing 'free intercourse' with that material."[258] Whitebook contends that ultimately the aim of psychoanalysis is, therefore, not ego's domination of id impulses but rather the achievement of an "expanded unity" of the ego through a process of "undoing repressions" that enables "'free intercourse' with the split-off foreign material."[259] For both thinkers, there may well be a way of seeking an ego that is neither merely "strong" or "weak" but instead

[257] Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, p. 76.

[258] Whitebrook, *Perversion and Utopia*, p. 117.

[259] *Ibid*.

capable of ambivalence, self-reflection, and revision in a way that still allows for certain kinds of rationality and autonomy. As Allen puts it describing Whitebrook's vision, "Hence, the choice between strengthening or dismantling the dominating ego is a false one; the task, instead, is to envision a decentered, humbled, and finite yet still coherent ego capable of rationality and autonomy."[260] I suggest that dissonance theory offers one image of what that looks like and what it entails, with all its difficulties. It suggests that a key challenge is making conscious the discomfort of dissonance and helping subjects to bear that discomfort so they can regularly revise their sense of self and understanding of the world. Exploring dissonance research further might allow critical theorists to understand the contexts in which subjects are most likely to do this (e.g. in certain kinds of company, when having certain kinds of reflective conversations, and so on). Some suggestions about this are a part of Chapter Six.

The Importance of Affect

A final important outcome of re-interpreting the issue of the ego in relationship to cognitive dissonance theory is that cognitive dissonance theory suggests that the work of the critical theorist is not only to reason well or give good reasons to others but to understand and perhaps even address others' affects, their unconscious or preconscious bodily and emotional states. This is especially clear because dissonance begins with an unconscious discomfort, or affective state. To help people work through their dissonance, social movements should look for ways to help people cope with and consciously acknowledge their own discomfort and even pain related to ambivalence.

[260] Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, p. 58.

In Kleinean theories, notably, the best position is the "depressive" position, which is achieved when subjects are able to cope with ambivalence, to see the good and bad in others and themselves at the same time. This, notably, is also what is likely required to cope with cognitive dissonance.

By reconceptualising the ego as something that is regularly threatened and re-organised, we can also begin to consider many other aspects of political subjectivity as potentially transient and therefore hopefully changeable, even from reactionary states. As Amy Allen writes about reactionaries and specifically Trump supporters, it is important not to simply consider the people themselves as pathological, completely distinct from the kinds of people who analyse them, from the critical theorists themselves. "[I]s it really the case that 'they'—those who inhabit these reactionary subject positions—are so heteronomous, so regressive, and so easily manipulated? Does such an analysis not at least implicitly position 'us,' the critics of right-wing and authoritarian movements, as autonomous, mature, and enlightened by comparison?" [261] Such a position is suspicious because it flatters both author and reader, to be sure. But it is also questionable because it is more likely that everyone is susceptible to harmful ways of thinking in the right circumstances, and that such a reconceptualisation allows for a more accurate understanding of what is at stake. Arguing for the adoption of Kleinian ideas, Allen writes that critical theorists can and should, "resist the temptation to use psychoanalysis as a tool for diagnosing them: their weak egos, their eroded superego, their un-sublimated rage and aggression."[262] In Kleinean theories, Allen

[261] *Ibid.* p. 191.

[262] *Ibid.* p. 192.

notes, problematic affective moments are part of "positions" (e.g. the "paranoid-schizoid position") rather than developmental stages. We are thus all susceptible to these troubling patterns of emotion and cognition and can return to them throughout our lives. I concur with Allen's points, but press further. Not only should we rethink psychoanalytic categories to consider them as, say, short-term positions rather than long term pathological states, but we should also extend our gaze as critical theorists to other psychological theories that can help conceptualise people's faulty political tendencies in this more minimalist, affective, positional, and perhaps more actionable manner. This in turn suggests that more emancipatory societies, and prior to these, emancipatory social movements, should support and promote the kind of energy, time, and other supports that allow for this painful ambivalence, so that our egos can be better formed through conscious reflection and not just self-domination. Perhaps more than this, social movements might see their role as providing people with the material means to work through painful ambivalence. For example, feminist movements might provide not only psychological support but also material support to allow women to leave abusive employers and partners. What this might mean when it comes to other groups is perhaps less clear at present, but prioritising providing resources and psychological support for subjects to work through possible ambivalence and dissonance about their social position and oppression creates an new and potentially transformative criteria for social movements seeking to change hearts and minds and motivate people to act.

Conclusion

While psychoanalysis offers many helpful conceptual resources for understanding some of why subjects hold tightly to beliefs that are bound up in their own oppression, it also has historically hit points of paradox and difficulty. Dissonance theory can help critical theorists move beyond this and consider the ego in new ways. A dissonance-based approach carries the benefits of being potentially persuasive to those less fond of psychoanalysis, avoiding some patriarchal baggage contained in Freudian literature, and viewing those who are experiencing false consciousness as in a potentially temporary and more easily escapable state than psychoanalytic literature might address.

Dissonance theory suggests that "strengthening" an ego, at least in the sense of making subjects strongly defend their sense of self and pride themselves in their "individual" choices and behaviour, may be unhelpful when it comes to political subjectivity. It shows that when subjects' sense of themselves as good or capable agents feels threatened, they often rationalise away information that might otherwise justly alter their point of view. Instead, we might overcome the Frankfurt School theorists' ambivalence about the best form of ego—at least somewhat—by taking the following insight from dissonance theory: that it is better yet to have a sense of self that is consciously amendable, so that subjects are willing to revise their sense of self rather than defend it when they encounter new ideas. The first-generation thinkers worried that the ego was too weak, not least due to a weakening of the nuclear family. These views may have been understandable in a way given the context of the rise of Stalinism and authoritarianism in the Soviet Union, as well as the deeply authoritarian

style of Nazi Germany. However, this focus on a weak ego within a Freudian framework not only is a curiously conservative and patriarchal concern, but it also may no longer be as relevant in our modern, atomized neoliberal world, where subjects are encouraged to think about themselves as independent thinkers, as individuals and entrepreneurs, where ideology no longer looks like one singular top-down distribution of mass culture and instead reflects a thousand small echo chambers full of people who pride themselves on thinking for themselves. The findings in dissonance research, in conjunction with changes to our mode of production and the current mediascape, suggest a new type of false consciousness that can be theorised. This fits with the changing mediascape, which now includes a wide range of outlets and individual-to-individual communication and isn't moderated through journalistic entities alone. This means views can vary widely and political subjects appear to read across news sources and views while largely retaining their existing views.[263] It also fits with the systems of production of our current era, which are increasingly individuated. Where first generation Frankfurt School theorists and Marxist theorists have long been concerned about false consciousness through reification, where subjects see the world only through its instrumental value, it is also now possible to theorise a type of false consciousness where subjects cannot see the world as clearly because they have reified the self. The discomfort of a threat to the self, exemplified by dissonance discomfort, may lead subjects to reconcile contradictions in their worldview as quickly as possible, limiting meaningful critical thinking. "Individuality" may in these cases be mistaken

[263] For an empirical investigation of current patterns of news consumption and belief retention, see Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao. "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80.S1, 2016: pp. 298-320.

for freedom when it is really a form of self-reification. This insight may in turn help critical theorists develop critiques of other aspects of modern culture and their possibly harmful ideological effects. For example, the "self-help" industry, social media, workplace training, individualistic education, and many other aspects of our culture likely reinforce the tendency for subjects to build up a specific sense of self and defend it from alteration and critique. In this way, turning to dissonance theory can help critical theorists spot the ideological structures and messages of our current moment, which look decidedly different from the ones understood by the first-generation thinkers.

Ultimately, dissonance theory's emphasis on the revision of the self, which aligns closely with ideas about mourning and ambivalence but extends that research into the specifics of situations via empirical research, provides another way to consider "escapability," or the way subjects can move away from false and harmful beliefs. Helping subjects consciously recognise their dissonance, lower their defences, understand themselves outside of cultural concepts of individuality, mourn prior versions of themselves as they shift consciousness, and tolerate ambivalence is part of the work social movements need to do to increase political consciousness. Dissonance theory, by supplying a new theoretical framework and understanding of the ego, can point to what is needed to do this.

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Chapter Five: Developmental-Psychological Approaches to Ideology and False Consciousness

> *The social psychology research programme of system justification theory [the theory that subjects may resolve cognitive dissonance by finding justifications for the current social system] is of great interest to critical social theory for two reasons. First, it manages to operationalise the notoriously vague notions of ideology and false consciousness… Second, it involves an emancipatory knowledge interest…[the theory] confronts agents with largely implicit and unconscious psychological 'mechanisms', and thus at least potentially produces reflective unacceptability and triggers a reflexive process and corresponding changes in self-understanding, which in turn are preconditions for social and political transformations.*[264]
>
> –- Robin Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding*.

In this chapter, I turn to the most recent generations of critical theorists and consider how their psychological theories rise to (and often do not rise to) the challenge of understanding false consciousness. I specifically consider the use of developmental psychology in the work of Jürgen Habermas and his student Axel Honneth. I have chosen these thinkers because they are representative of the main currents of Frankfurt School thought, and because they moved away from questions of false consciousness while still relying heavily on a few key psychological theories. While some might argue that both writers have already been critiqued or that their moment, and conception of the public sphere, has passed, their accounts of the public sphere have still been enormously influential, especially with those following the Frankfurt School tradition. Many critical theorists, including Rainer Forst and Joshua

[264]Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, p. 178.

Cohen, still work within Habermas' framework, and Honneth's students are still many of the foremost living scholars of the Frankfurt School tradition. Given this wide influence, as well as the relatively un-studied state of the theorists' reliance on developmental psychology, returning to these thinkers, their psychological ideas, and their downstream implications on critical theory remains relevant. Both theorists made the "intersubjective turn" away from older versions of psychoanalysis and towards developmental psychology because they see older theories as insufficiently intersubjective and insufficiently hopeful. They instead turn towards ideas from developmental psychologists and sociologists including Lawrence Kohlberg, George Herbert Mead, Jean Piaget, and Donald Winnicott. Their approach allows them to depict a vision of subjectivity that is compatible with their notions of political progress, and which also provides some sense of how political reasoning might improve over time for individuals and societies.

Despite the benefits of this approach, this chapter demonstrates how these theorists' use of developmental psychology, while providing a hopeful outlook on possibilities for political reasoning, is nevertheless methodologically flawed and, as a consequence, does not provide adequate grounds for a badly-needed theory of false consciousness. As I discuss below, developmental psychology has been challenged for being overly universalised, biologising reflective of social norms, and effectively racist, colonial, and sexist. Habermas and Honneth often engage with this psychology superficially, and rest their political theories on these moral and psychological assumptions in circular ways. In addition, the theories they built with developmental psychology are inadequate in theorising the problem of transparency, and unable to

explain the perversity and patchiness (or as I characterise it in this chapter, the "uneven and combined development") of subjects' political thinking. Cognitive dissonance theory can address each of these issues to some degree. I shall first describe the way other theorists have noted the gap in these works where dissonance theory and modern psychology might assist. I shall then describe Honneth and Habermas' theories and use of developmental psychology, and demonstrate their shortcomings. Finally, I will address how dissonance theory can provide another approach. It can avoid a dubious grounding in a conception of moral progress, work critically with, rather than in ways that risk aversion to, scientific research, avoid "domesticated" theorising, better theorise the problem of transparency, and account for the patchiness and perversity of political reasoning.

Habermas, Honneth, and the Challenge of Modern Psychology

Other theorists have noted that Honneth and Habermas' work could be enriched by dissonance theory, and by modern psychological research more broadly. In order to develop Habermas' ideas about how the reflective practice present in psychoanalysis can be extended into a practice of critical theory, Robin Celikates turns, albeit briefly, to cognitive dissonance theory.[265] In his book *Critique as Social Practice*, he notes that mechanisms like dissonance may explain why subjects justify the existence of oppressive systems.[266] He suggests that dissonance theory can help theorists "bring to the light a practical contradiction in the self-understanding of its addressees, in order to

[265] *Ibid*. 158.

[266] *Ibid*.

prompt a process of self-reflection, which in turn is a precondition for a transformative practice."[267] Citing Raymond Guess, Celikates suggests "a belief can be understood as reflectively unacceptable in the case agents would abandon it for being incompatible with fundamental aspects of their self-understanding if they had the relevant information about the conditions under which they came to have the belief" and that "the way in which reflective unacceptability is produced can be clarified in reference to the psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance."[268] If subjects understand dissonance theory, Celikates suggests, and understand how dissonance may have led them to their beliefs, they might find these beliefs reflexively unacceptable. Applying this consideration may also help clarify where subjects are in the grip of false consciousness. He points to Jost's work, which argues that subjects develop dissonance about the contradictions in their lives and often turn to ideas about why the current social system is good to resolve that dissonance. He notes this body of work "manages to operationalise the notoriously vague notions of ideology and false consciousness."[269] Dissonance theory gives concrete explanations for how subjects come to believe things that are not in their interests, are harmful, and would not pass the test of reflexive acceptability: "[the theory] confronts agents with largely implicit and unconscious psychological 'mechanisms', and thus at least potentially produces reflective unacceptability and triggers a reflexive process and corresponding changes in self-understanding, which in turn are preconditions for social and political

[267] *Ibid.*

[268] *Ibid.*

[269] *Ibid.*

transformations."[270] Moreover, Celikates notes, dissonance theory builds helpfully on Habermas' work because it "involves an emancipatory knowledge interest" in understanding the true roots of one's own problems via a process of critical self-reflection in order to pursue emancipatory ends. Habermas rejects the term false consciousness as inaccurate and even problematic, but is nevertheless interested in how subjects come to reflect on their own life experiences and from this rethink their political world; Celikates suggests that dissonance theory may provide some of the missing concrete mechanisms at work. Celikates' invocation of this potential use of dissonance theory is brief, but suggestive. I concur with Celikates that this research program of system justification theory in relation to cognitive dissonance is crucial, and that it can be helpful in understanding questions of ideology and false consciousness, or, to turn to Habermas' preferred terms, emancipatory knowledge interests. In other words, cognitive dissonance *is* simultaneously an explanation for why subjects adopt harmful "system justifications" and oppressive ideologies, and also helps explain how they can sometimes, due to the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, wrestle with the contradictions in their own lives and reject oppressive ideologies. However, perhaps because Celikates only touches briefly on how cognitive dissonance functions in his work, he risks describing it as a mechanism that, once explained to those experiencing it, can be overcome such that subjects recognise as false the ideology in which they have previously been entrenched. Celikates writes that "only when agents recognise which psychological processes underlie some of their beliefs, only when there has been a corresponding cognitive transformation, can they apply

[270] *Ibid*. 178

themselves to the practical transformation of the political and social situation."[271] The (possible) implication that once people are aware that cognitive dissonance may have caused some of their beliefs, they will be ready to turn to systematic change may be overly optimistic. Unconscious processes are difficult to change through conscious confrontation alone; simply identifying how unconscious processes work does not mean one can reliably overcome them, any more than understanding digestion means one can necessarily change how well or poorly one's own digestion occurs. Indeed, dissonance theory suggests subjects might reject the suggestion that their ideas come from dissonance because this could imply they have less agency than they would like. A more hopeful solution, which I lay out in the next chapter, may be to demonstrate to subjects the existence of numerous new "action-possibilities" and thus reshape subjects' understanding of the world.

Just as Celikates' work points to the potential for dissonance theory to inform critical theorists' accounts, other theorists have noted that Habermas neglects even the basic ways that a scientific account of mind can inform critical theory. In his article *The View From Nowhere*, theorist Ray Brassier notes that Habermas responds with alarm to an attempt by neuroscientists claiming their findings disprove the existence of free will. In this process, Brassier argues, Habermas rejects any overly scientific vision of human subjectivity because this kind of account threatens "to cost too much" theoretically: giving a solely biological account or acknowledging processes of which we are not aware, "would incur a self-objectification which would irrevocably estrange us from ourselves. As [Habermas himself] puts it: 'The limits of naturalistic self-

[271] *Ibid*. 179.

objectification are trespassed when persons describe themselves in such a way that they cannot recognize themselves as persons anymore.'"[272] In defending this self-recognition, however, Habermas effectively denies the importance of the reality of the science of the brain so much that he rejects, in some ways, scientific findings themselves:

> Conflating naturalism with empiricism, Habermas [ends up eliding the way the mind] possesses a neurobiological as well as socio-historical conditions of emergence. As a result, Habermas preemptively disqualifies by conceptual fiat every scientific attempt to describe and explain the transition from pre-linguistic to linguistic consciousness, from the sub-personal to the personal, and from neurobiology to culture.[273]

As Brassier puts it, Habermas "inadvertently suggests that nothing we learn about ourselves from the perspective of scientific theory could force us to revise the content of our subjective or 'participatory' self-understanding."[274] A strict insistence on a relatable image of human reasoning relegates relevant scientific findings to the theoretical bin before they can be considered, which weakens, rather than improves, our understanding of what is at stake in collective political reasoning. This is a major flaw in theorising political reasoning because, while empirical science can certainly be criticised (as being, for example, purely technical-instrumental, destructive, reifying, or

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[272] *Ibid*.

[273] *Ibid.*

[274] *Ibid*. 12. In his book related to Cognitive Dissonance, Mattin also takes note of this passage and uses it to suggest that Brassier's work in this area is tied to his interested in "nemocentric" subjectivity, where subjects are to no longer understand themselves not has "having" a self, instead knowing themselves to be fundamentally without any inherent self, as some modern psychological literature would suggest. This shift in consciousness, Mattin and Brassier both hope, might allow for new forms of political subjectivity. Mattin. *Social Dissonance*. Vol. 10. MIT Press, 2022: p. 117.

implicitly normative in problematic ways), it is wishful thinking to imagine that it can simply be dismissed altogether rather than incorporated critically into any account of how human subjects reason or how they should reason. Put simply, if the findings of empirical science are inconvenient for our existing moral and ethical schemas, we cannot and should not simply dismiss them on that basis. Dissonance theory, in contrast, provides an account of the unconscious, one that is at minimum compatible with scientific evidence about how the brain and mind may engage in unconscious activity. It is, to quote Ray Brassier's beloved Wilfred Sellars, a theory that includes both the "manifest"and "scientific" image of human consciousness; the one that makes sense to people about themselves and the one that makes sense to a scientist looking from the supposed (though actually implicated) "outside". Of course, these theorists might argue that they are not neuroscientists. This is certainly true and political theorists will always necessarily come with reservations about the forces that drive scientific research, as well as a limited overview of scientific research, some of which I addressed in earlier chapters when I discussed the challenge of scientism. But, I suggest, political theorists are still wise to develop a criterion (like the one I espouse) for which scientific theories they rely on and what they look for in this area, choosing carefully.

Although direct discussion about subjects' dissonance may not be the best possible solution to poor political reasoning, Celikates' larger point is valuable and important because it demonstrates that dissonance theory can help supplement existing work by Habermas, and by theorists like him who seek to illuminate the challenges and promises involved in political reasoning. We can better understand political reasoning,

I will argue, by choosing scientific theories that allow for a description of false consciousness, and being willing to take a heterogenous approach in choosing these scientific theories, extending our choice beyond the developmental psychology that is the main recourse of Habermas and Honneth. In this chapter I will expand on this point, demonstrating where Habermas and Honneth's thinking about psychology and political consciousness falls short and then suggesting how dissonance theory can fill these conceptual lacunae.

Habermas, Honneth, and the Turn to Developmental Psychology

In this section I first consider Habermas and Honneth's relationships to developmental psychology. I then note the relative lack of a theory of false consciousness in their works, and how this is part of a trend towards the "domestication" of critical theory. Finally, I describe the relationship between these developmental ideas and faulty notions of progress.

Habermas and Developmental Psychology

Like the first generation of the Frankfurt School, Habermas originally relied on psychoanalysis as the psychological foundation of his work. In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (written relatively early in 1968) he suggests that although psychoanalysis misunderstood itself as a science, it is nevertheless crucial for critical theory, "the only tangible example of a science incorporating methodical self-reflection."[275] Later,

[275] Ibid. 143.

however, he turned to developmental psychology for a theoretical grounding, drawing on Kohlberg, Mead, and Piaget. Habermas constructs his "theory of communicative action" which is meant to describe an "ideal communication community," on the basis of Mead's developmental social psychology, which is in turn built on an account of childhood development.[276] Like Mead, Habermas is interested in language as a means for humans to achieve goal-directed behaviour. It is through this type of communication he sees the possibilities for human beings to understand how others will see them and thus communicate in a way that is less distorted. In *Theory of Communicative Action,* Habermas describes Mead's theoretical premise, which he clearly shares, as one where "because the idea of coming to a rationally motivated, mutual understanding is to be found in the very structure of language, it is no mere demand of practical reason but is built into the reproduction of social life."[277] It is these shared assumptions that guide Habermas' use of Mead in his key works: human subjects can evolve their forms of thought over time towards higher levels of reasoning (which generally means more intersubjective reasoning), and this intersubjective reasoning allows for a reflexivity and accountability that means universal forms of truth can be developed. This idea allows Habermas to justify the normative bent of his critical theory by suggesting it is possible to develop norms via intersubjective reasoning, a key feature distinguishing him from previous generations. This developmental, progressive logic, which is extended beyond its use for individuals

[276] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason.* Vol. 2. Beacon press, 1985, p. 2.

[277] *Ibid.*

onto entire societies, provides the theoretical ground on which the project rests. Indeed, this is the great gamble of using this sort of developmental logic, as it ends up carrying the rest of the theoretical project. As Amy Allen puts it, "if critical theory's immanent grounding of normative principles…ultimately rests on a claim about sociocultural learning processes, then this means that the normative standards that enable us to envision a good or more just society…are themselves justified inasmuch as they are the outcome of a progressive process of sociocultural development or learning."[278]

Developmental-psychological ideas thus provide the foundations for many of these most famous ideas. As sociologist Luca Corchia puts it, "in [the work of George Herbert] Mead he [Habermas] finds the distinction between understanding and discursive agreement, and a definition of the 'principle of rational discourse', 'according to which truth would only be guaranteed by that kind of consensus which was achieved under the idealised conditions of unlimited communication free from domination and could be maintained over time'."[279] In other words, Mead sets Habermas up for the ideal speech situation. Building on Mead's work, Habermas constructs a theory of communicative action, by which he means interpersonal communication where interlocutors work towards genuine mutual understanding and refuse to manipulate each other, treating each other as subjects rather than objects. (Communicative action stands apart from "strategic action" in this sense, as strategic

[278] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory.* Columbia University Press, 2016: p. 14.

[279] Luca Corchia, "The Uses of Mead in Habermas' Social Theory. Before the Theory of Communication Action." *Italian Sociological Review* 2 .9, 2019: p. 217.

actions may merely manipulate their audience.) It is through communicative action that subjects can, in ideal circumstances, develop normative standards out of the horizon of their own imminent lifeworld. In a sense, Habermas uses his theory of communicative rationality to make a more hopeful claim than that of earlier generations of Frankfurt School theorists: rather than being stuck in a totalising form of instrumental reason, he suggests that there are some forms of communication, which, while not guaranteed and often distorted by money and power, stand in opposition to instrumental rationality and carve a space outside of that logic for people to discover truths another way. Communicative rationality thus stands, in a way, in opposition to ideology (although Habermas would not generally use this term). Habermas then elaborates on the different kinds of claims subjects can make under this system and the types of truth, truthfulness, or rightness that these claims may be associated with. Drawing on work from Jurist Robert Alexy and adding his own conditions, Habermas suggests that in order for communicative action to occur within an "ideal speech situation," the following conditions must be met:

> (2.1) Every speaker may assert what he really believes.
> (2.2) A person who disputes a proposition or norm under discussion must provide a reason for wanting to do so.
> (3.l) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
> (3.2) a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever. b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatsoever into the discourse. c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.
> (3.3) No speaker may be prevented by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (3.1) and (3.2).[280]

[280] Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. MIT Press, 1990: p. 89.

Rather than focusing on the problematic traditional concept of false consciousness, Habermas suggests the instrumental reasoning of the capitalist "system" comes to colonise the everyday communicative "lifeworld" in which everyday private life (and its presumed authenticity) occurs, clouding political reasoning in a new way. He writes,"In place of 'false consciousness' we today have a 'fragmented consciousness' that blocks enlightenment by the mechanism of reification. It is only with this that the conditions for a colonisation of the lifeworld are met."[281] The colonisation of the lifeworld by the system leads to "systematic distortion of communication": "the subjective non-perception of systemic coactions (*systemischen Zwängen*) which instrumentalize the communicative structure of lifeworld takes the character of an illusion, of an objectively false consciousness."[282] Although Habermas is overall sceptical about theories of ideology (to which false consciousness is related), his work still contains an intentional account of distorted political consciousness, and it is in part for this reason that it is relevant to ask whether the psychological theories he relies on are sufficient in this regard.[283]

[281] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 2,* p. 355.

[282] *Ibid*. 278.

[283] For example, he in some sense suggests that ideology is no longer a part of the picture now that there is a systematic distortion of the lifeworld when he writes "We today have a 'fragmented consciousness' that blocks enlightenment by the mechanism of reification. It is only with this that the conditions for a colonisation of the lifeworld are met. When stripped of their ideological veils, the imperatives of autonomous subsystems make their way into the lifeworld from the outside—like colonial masters coming into a tribal society—and force a process of assimilation upon it." Theory of Communicative Action Part 2, p. 273.

Dissonance theory suggests that even within the conditions that Habermas puts in place for his ideal speech situation (e.g. equal inclusion, rational not rhetorical argumentation), political subjects may not be able to take in new ideas that challenge their existing sense of self or which challenge them with inconsistency in high-agency situations. Habermas' description is not intended to reflect how things actually are in the public sphere, and point instead to an ideal that structures situations even in their imperfect state and a direction of travel. Yet cognitive dissonance theory suggests the ideal speech situation may not be fully feasible even as a direction of travel because the assumptions underlying it are too far from the ways that human minds tend to function. The mind may be unable to tolerate contradictions between different cognitions or behaviours, and as a result is resistant to reason. A new understanding of political discourse (among other political issues) may be required.

Honneth and Developmental Psychology

Honneth's work also relies heavily on developmental psychological theories. For Honneth, human identity is developed, flourishing is enabled or disabled, and ultimately problems of politics and justice can best be understood, in terms of a struggle for recognition. This happens first at the affective level, where subjects develop, through the love and friendship of others, a basic self-confidence. Then it occurs at the level of self-respect, which is achieved through the recognition, by others, of one's universal basic rights and moral capacity. And finally this is achieved in terms of self-esteem, which occurs when the community recognizes one's specific unique contributions to the community drawn from a set of shared values. (Common examples

in this paradigm are the civil rights movement or the feminist movement.) All three needs are important, and the later needs rest on the achievement of the former.[284] Honneth's model is strict and homogenous; he insists "recognition must represent the unified framework" for critical theory. Given the strict nature of these assertions, it is perhaps not surprising that many have objected.[285] There are far too many scholarly rebuttals to recount here, but these critiques generally involve the ways in which Honneth's account is too totalising, overly ambitious, insufficiently attentive to material issues, and of course socially weightless.[286] As Nancy Fraser objects, Honneth's approach is that of recognition monism; he sees all social ills through the lens of this singular question of recognition. Yet many aspects of society and social issues have little to do with recognition: "Witness the case of the skilled white male industrial worker who becomes unemployed due to a factory closing resulting from a speculative corporate merger. In that case, the injustice of maldistribution has little to do with misrecognition. It is rather a consequence of imperatives intrinsic to an order of specialised economic relations whose raison d'etre is the accumulation of profits."[287]

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[284] Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. MIT Press, 1996.

[285] Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. R*edistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. Verso, 2003: p. 113.

[286] Criticism are too many to list but a good starting place is the response to Honneth's Tanner lectures, where, for example, Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss and Jonathan Lear all argue that despite his protests to the contrary, Honneth's concept of recognition is too loaded with positive normative content to function well as a tool of critical theory. In Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

See also Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political*. John Wiley & Sons, 2014: p. 63.

[287] Fraser and Honneth, p. 35.

Or as Neal Harris puts it, it is "patently absurd" to use the recognition framework as a blanket description for all social problems.[288] This account risks being limited and unimaginative, as well as potentially condescending in suggesting that those who don't recognise the purpose or reality of social structures have simply failed at the one and only central task of political reasoning.

Feeling, in his own words, that Habermas' own attempts at "revision" of psychoanalytic ideas "did not go far enough, since they granted validity to intersubjectivism only at the methodological level of psychoanalytical procedure but not for the basic concepts of an implied social theory," Honneth turned to other psychological theories. He suggested his own preferred theories maintain an account of human irrationality but provide better grounds for understanding intersubjectivity in the social world.[289] He also eschewed earlier drives-led approaches in critical theory, and generally steered clear of psychoanalysis. This appears to have been driven by his concerns about the need to theorise the human subject as a social creature; Allen suggests that "Honneth's worry seems to be that a drive-theoretical interpretation of psychoanalysis presupposes an asocial or antisocial core of the human personality that is incompatible with the basic methodological assumptions of critical social theory."[290]

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[288] Neal Harris, *Critical Theory and Social Pathology*. Manchester University Press, 2022, p. 47.

[289] Axel Honneth, "Chapter Six. The Work Of Negativity A Psychoanalytical Revision Of The Theory Of Recognition." *Recognition, Work, Politics*. Brill, 2007: p. 105. As Neal Harris puts it, "Honneth's work presents a radical extension of Habermas's intersubjective focus, expanding the Marxian legacy of critical theory in favour of a reconstructed 'Jena-period' Hegelianism." Neal Harris, *Critical Theory and Social Pathology,* p. 7.

It is worth acknowledging, of course, that although Winnicott is a developmental psychologist he is also a psychoanalyst, and in this sense Honneth has not wholly abandoned psychoanalysis.

[290] Allen, *Critique on the Couch,* p. 17.

Critical theorists are, like good Marxists, meant to see many of the current features of our social and political world as situated, determined on the basis of social interactions (i.e. intersubjective processes) and historically derived concepts and ideas, in contrast to biological impulses that are unchangeable and/or entirely internal to the individual. On this basis, Honneth is suspicious of the "death drive" in particular, viewing it as a matter of speculative excess. He therefore steers away from explicit reference to drives and the unconscious; Allen and Joel Whitebrook have both noted he also avoids much discussion of any human drive towards power or domination, which leaves his account incomplete.[291]

Avoiding many of the darker or less sociable aspects of human beings described in psychoanalytic literature, Honneth's work builds on a few very specific ideas in developmental psychology. He builds his conception of recognition partially on Mead's suggestion that the ego, (in Mead's words, the "Me"), the sense of self, is "dependent on the possibility of constant reassurance by the Other." [292] In his most famous work, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, he extends the Hegelian project with Mead's work. Hegel's work contains an account of personal and societal development through (most famously) the "master-slave" dialectic; after critically reviewing this in the first part of the book, Honneth proceeds to offer his own account using Habermas' favourite psychological theorist, Mead. Honneth first suggests that Hegel's project "never made it past the half-way point": not

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[291] See, for example Allen, *Critique on the Couch,* p. 7.

[292] Axel Honneth, "Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality on the Theory of Recognition." *Political Theory* 20, 2: 1992: p. 189.

only did Hegel abandon his intersubjectivist take on Hobbes' theory of the state in favour of a theory of consciousness, but Hegel also built his theories on "metaphysical premises that can no longer be easily reconciled with contemporary thought".[293] Honneth suggests Mead's work is an appropriate supplement because it accounts for how "human subjects owe their identity to the experience of intersubjective recognition"[294] and that therefore Mead's theories "allow for a translation of Hegel's theory of intersubjectivity into a post metaphysical language."[295] Hegel traces Mead's theories through Mead's own interest in the problems of German idealism and the work of pragmatists like Peirce and Dewey. Mead's insight, which Honneth then uses to ground his theory of recognition, is that it is by understanding ourselves as social objects that we are able to situate ourselves in the wider world and ideally take on a "decentered" perspective, "from which I can form an image of myself and thereby come to a consciousness of my identity."[296] In other words, it is by giving and seeking and understanding one another, by striving for recognition and giving it, that we come to a higher form of reasoning that allows us to see ourselves in a more objective, perhaps even more universal way. Honneth thus chooses Mead's theory as a way of having a "naturalistic justification of Hegel's theory of recognition" that can be derived "with the tools of empirical science," a theory of how subjects come to accept the appropriate subjectivity their societies offer them through learning intersubjectivity,

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[293] Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition,* p. 67.

[294] *Ibid*. 71.

[295] *Ibid*. 70.

[296] *Ibid*. 74.

starting as children and going through concrete stages.[297] Mead's theory also, Honneth notes, posits there are more and less primitive societies, where more modern societies allow for less determined individuality.[298] The turn to developmental psychology is based on a desire for a less metaphysical way of deriving decentered and intersubjective reasoning, through the presumed-to-be more trustworthy field of empirical research.

Honneth then uses Donald Winnicott's work to further Mead's understanding of recognition, especially when it comes to the category of "love," noting explicitly that this focus separates him "from the approach found in the orthodox tradition of psychoanalysis."[299] In his later work, Honneth also relies on Winicott's account of child development.[300] Winnicott proposes a theory of development where infants become children (and eventually adults) through their ability to engage in intersubjectivity. Honneth uses this model to construct a more generalised model for what good reasoning is: "A child thus learns to relate to an objective world of stable and consistent objects by taking the perspective of a second person, and thereby gradually decentering its own primarily ego-centric perspective ... and therefore begins to perceive objects in an impersonal and objective way."[301] It is by relating to others, in

[297] *Ibid*. 75.

[298] *Ibid*. 84.

[299] *Ibid*. 98.

[300] A good classic primer to Winnicott, originally published 1947, is Donald Woods Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*. Penguin UK, 2021.

[301] Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition,* p.114.

Honneth's view, that we eventually learn to judge well and objectively, and it is from this type of thinking that culture and institutions are built. Intersubjectivity is here meant to grant a certain kind of useful objectivity. Although few have written only about Honneth's relationship to developmental psychology, many important critiques of his work touch on the pitfalls of using developmental psychology. Neal Harris sees Honneth's work as the marriage of a radical intersubjective turn and "a radical cognitivism and a flawed normative-reconstructive methodology."[302] A key flaw is it is difficult to judge from the outside whether subjects have truly "recognised" one another or not, or how this necessarily translates directly into political good or ill. Timo Jütten notes that Honneth effectively suggests autistic people are inherently less developed.[303]

Developmental Theories, False Consciousness and the Domestication of Critical Theory

Driven by similar concerns about progress and overcoming pessimism and egoism, both Habermas and Honneth rely heavily on developmental psychology and share an emphasis on intersubjectivity and developmental psychology. As Joel Whitebrook notes, (taking a phrase from philosopher Noëlle McAfee) Habermas and Honneth are part of the "relational left," believing that "if its representatives could disprove Freud's drive theory and if they moved from a 'one-person' to a 'two-person'

[302] Harris p. 12.

[303] Timo Jütten, "What is Reification? A Critique of Axel Honneth." *Inquiry* 53.3, 2010: pp. 235-256.

psychology, they could abrogate his anthropological pessimism and scepticism regarding the possibility of successful progressive politics."[304] In each case, developmental psychology allows these theorists to not only emphasise intersubjectivity, but also to be relatively optimistic about the possibilities for reasoning for human subjects. Habermas, for example, has long criticised earlier generations for providing a hopeless outlook, where instrumental reasoning and its problems are inescapable in modernity. In contrast, in Habermas' writings, communicative reasoning is possible, even if it is rare or difficult. Similarly, for Honneth, recognition is a real possibility, even if it happens far too infrequently. Theirs are optimistic perspectives, relatively speaking, on the possibilities of political consciousness. However, this move to developmental psychology means Honneth and Habermas provide little in the way of an account of false consciousness. The two theorists do not, and perhaps methodologically cannot, provide the mechanisms or worm's eye view of how subjects might come to believe in ideas that contribute to their own oppression. As I shall argue in this section, this manifests not only as a gap in their account of political reasoning, but also as part of an overall trend towards a "domestication" of critical theory, wherein some modern critical theorists shy away from questions of power and domination.

The closest account of a similar phenomenon to false consciousness in Habermas' work is likely the "systematic distortion of communication" due to the colonisation of the lifeworld, where it is implied that the logic of the system itself

[304] Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory.* MIT Press, 1996: p. 6.

becomes the internal psychological logic of people's thoughts (with little explanation for how exactly this occurs). While this is certainly one likely aspect of the way ideology can function, Habermas' account offers little to suggest what exactly occurs and therefore how one might avoid some of the pitfalls of false consciousness outside of the relatively abstract and idealised conditions of the ideal speech situation.[305] Instead of delving into these matters, Habermas' work focuses on the need for a specialised arena in which we can, however rarely, look for the victory of the best ideas due to the "unforced force of the better argument." But without an account of false consciousness and the many psychological forces that underpin it, his analysis of how this salutary force might come to prevail, and what might prevent it from doing so, is limited. Habermas may have an account of the material conditions of ideology (of the system colonising the lifeworld), but he lacks the corresponding psychological analysis that should come with any good Frankfurt School account of the woes of the modern world, where the insights of Marx are married to the insights of Freud, or, to broaden the point, where material analysis and psychological insight can intersect. There is neither an account of what makes modern subjects' minds susceptible to instrumental logic, nor why some might be more susceptible than others. There is thus no explanation for why some believe conspiracy theories, some support oppressive policies, and some become radical activists. There is also little description, outside of

[305] Even those who argue that the colonisation thesis is in some way a critique of ideology tend to acknowledge that it is so in a "modest" and "hidden" way. See César Ortega-Esquembre, "Social Pathologies and Ideologies in Light of Jürgen Habermas: a New Interpretation of the Thesis of Colonisation." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7.1, 2020: pp. 1-9.

certain types of communication, for what might aid subjects in overcoming the false consciousness that Habermas suggests is endemic to the colonised lifeworld.

Honneth's theories similarly provide a meagre account of false consciousness. This is interesting as, in one sense, Honneth's theory of recognition is partially constructed as a theory of how people achieve better political consciousness. For example, in response to Nancy Fraser's criticisms of his theory (she suggests it is wiser to consider claims for both redistribution and recognition when considering social issues), he argues that a great deal of sociological research confirms that regardless of underlying material events, people recognise injustices only once they appear to be about, essentially, disrespect: "[t]he conceptual framework of recognition is of central importance today not because it expresses the objectives of a new type of social movement, but because it has proven to be the appropriate tool for categorically unlocking social experiences of injustice as a whole."[306] Subjects, he argued, often thought society should owe them this, and it failed to deliver what they felt was fair "is a matter of disappointment." Honneth's insistence on an all-encompassing theory of recognition occurs in part because he believes that registering disrespect is the central cognitive factor in how people overcome false consciousness. Moreover, he suggests that many social problems occur because subjects have failed to engage in recognition—although curiously, he also suggests that in many cases they have failed to recognise the (supposed) salutary effects of various state and market institutions. His theory is both aimed at better political consciousness and also is in some ways surprisingly uncritical. As Neal Harris puts it, (summarising Michael J. Thompson's

[306] Fraser and Honneth, p. 133.

point) in Honneth's work, "market institutions are now identified as potential safe harbours, calm normative pools for equitable intersubjective recognition."[307] That markets, generally viewed by critical theorists as a mechanism that functions as part of exploitative capitalist systems, should in Honneth's work be seen as potential arenas for political consciousness, is unusual and perhaps contradictory to the goals of liberation traditionally aimed at by critical theorists. As Harris argues, "such theories function as a neoliberal-apologist justification for the socially devastating market order."[308] Honneth's account seems plausible in terms of how people might come to find self-esteem, self-respect, and similar goods. But it has few tools to explain false consciousness. As Harris puts it, "Honneth's theory presupposes an impenetrable subject, untarnished by power relationship or ideology, capable of entering intersubjective relations, absent any influence from society more broadly."[309] This is a striking turn away from earlier projects in critical theory that emphasised the importance of a theory of false consciousness; as Harris notes indignantly, "Once upon a time, critical theorists were aware ideology existed!"[310] Indeed, Harris suggests that Honneth has gotten the question of ideology fundamentally backwards: by assuming there is a "universal normative grammar" that could help subjects evaluate their own beliefs and intersubjective processes, Honneth forgets or ignores Marx's insight that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social

[307] Harris, p. 3.

[308] *Ibid*.

[309] *Ibid*. 49.

[310] *Ibid*. 53.

existence that determines their consciousness"[311] In order to advance the possibility of mutual recognition, Honneth relies on a form of developmental psychology that leaves little room for the social forming and deforming of consciousness in general and political consciousness in particular. He insists that there are essentially objectively good and developmentally linear processes for achieving intersubjectivity and for reasoning more generally, and does so without a clear account of what might impede these, even permanently. While Honneth is aware that sometimes people fail to recognise institutions and their purposes or one another, there is no account of the systematic way in which institutions themselves might deform political consciousness or how even otherwise "developed" people might come to believe politically harmful things.

Both theorists' limitations in writing about ideology fit into a larger trend of the "domestication" of critical theory. As Thompson notes, Habermas, Honneth, and others in their vein have created new theories that are, in contrast to older strands of critical theory,

> emptied of radical political content. The theories of discourse, of recognition, or of justification that contemporary critical theory has elaborated speak more to the concerns of mainstream political philosophy than to a radical challenge to its systemic imperatives and structures of power and domination; they play more into the very rhythms of the predominant social reality than seek any kind of social transformation.[312]

[311] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." Trans. Yuri Spodnikov. *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol 29*: Marx: 1857-1861 (1987): p. 263.

[312] Michael J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2016: p. 2.

There is a revision of the Freudo-Marxist insights of the earlier generation of the Frankfurt School.In turning away from some of the political subject's darker impulses, Habermas and Honneth arguably reject that people behave and think in self-destructive ways for the benefit, and often under the duress, of capitalist structures. Indeed, as Judith Butler has argued, theories of recognition can sometimes become, in effect, theories of how subjects should accept the subjectivity societies impose on them; they are nearly accounts of how subjects "should" be interpellated.[313] Their reliance on developmental ideas is likely one reason why their theories are so "domesticated" and lacking in accounts of power and oppression, as developmental theories largely explain gaps in political consciousness as failures of individuals to achieve higher-level states of moral reasoning, or failures to achieve recognition. Dissonance theory, in contrast, can provide an account that involves individual reasoning but where power, too, comes into play. For example, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters on ideology, dissonance theory can explain how power compels actions which subjects then rationalise as their beliefs due to the pressures of dissonance. Developmental theories of political consciousness tend to be too domesticated; dissonance can provide a better account in this regard.

Faulty Notions of Progress

Habermas and Honneth's relatively underdeveloped analysis of the pitfalls of political reasoning and "domestication" and relative rejection of theories of false consciousness and ideology align with their commitment to a particular vision of

[313] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press, 1997: p. 30.

progress. As Allen has argued, concepts of progress, both in the psychological sense, regarding both individual social learning processes, as well as historical progress towards higher political forms, are central to both Habermas and Honneth's work. Habermas and Honneth "are committed to a common core understanding of social progress, such that if a society can be said to have progressed then this will be because that society has followed a certain developmental, unidirectional, and cumulative moral-political learning process."[314] As Allen points out, this is potentially a grave flaw, as it is difficult, and indeed perhaps impossible, to separate a positive ideal of progress as developed by either thinker from the Western-centric, often imperialist tradition in which that concept of progress was formed.

Both thinkers attempt to justify their conceptions of progress by arguing for specific psychological achievements—"socio-cultural learning" and the achievement of a certain kind of universal reasoning available through communicative action in Habermas, and the suggestion that recognition is the hallmark of moral-political progress in Honneth. But these visions of progress, explored in Allen's work in particular (and elsewhere less directly) have their limits and limitations. The risk is both circularity of argument and a naturalising of what are merely aspects of western (imperialist) traditions: "insofar as universal pragmatics reconstructs the intuitive, pretheoretical knowledge of subjects who are deemed competent insofar as they have mastered the specific use of language required by modernity, it already presupposes a certain conception of social evolution or historical progress."[315] "Progress" is the

[314] Allen, *The End of Progress*, p. 9.
[315] *Ibid*. 52.

concept on which much of both Habermas and Honneth's theorising ultimately hangs, both normatively and methodologically, and this progress is constructed through two interdependent, often-problematic lenses: "socio-cultural learning" (and developmental psychology) and historical "progress"(often merely the history of the West and its many oppressive, bloody, imperialist projects). Indeed, as later critical theorists have pointed out, it is not obvious that historical "progress" is progress or the result of "socio-cultural learning processes." As Robin Celikates notes, "learning" is used by Habermas and those after him (notably Rahel Jaeggi) to suggest that what society is primarily up to is solving problems, and may over time learn to solve problems another way. But, Celikates argues,

> These systems were not well-intended but flawed attempts at problem solving or cooperation; they were systems of oppression and exploitation. They were not experimental attempts of a community to solve the problem of altruism-failures or of coordination; they were imposed by some groups on others and sustained by extreme violence, and if we use the language of refinement or learning to describe the processes in which they were overcome (insofar as they were overcome), we underestimate that these are not simply cumulative learning processes but that they often involve structural shifts (e.g., in the economy), radical breaks, and material force as well as violent struggles.[316]

It may simply be a fundamental misidentification to see social systems as well-intentioned problem-solving operations that learn over time; societies are also just as likely to change due to shifts in balances of power and means of production. There is a risk, Celikates argues (and I concur) that in conceiving historical change as progress, historical change becomes sentiments and ideas instead of concrete systems of oppression. We might become complacent about the action needed to combat

[316] Robin Celikates, "Forms of Life, Progress, and Social Struggle." *From Alienation to Forms of Life: The Critical Theory of Rahel Jaeggi,* 2018: p. 151.

oppression and overly cheerful about the changes that have already occurred. Learning might be a part of historical change, but it is rarely the primary strategy or mechanism for social change. I suggest a similarly critical approach is needed for the psychological theories of development that accompany historical theories of progress. Below I demonstrate that in addition to the philosophical pitfalls already noted by Allen, the psychological concepts of progress upon which Habermas and Honneth implicitly and explicitly rely are insufficient grounds for their theoretical projects, especially in explaining why people sometimes reason poorly about oppression.

Some alignment between the vision of human psychology one espouses and one's political vision are probably necessary; there is no point in arguing for a future better world unless one thinks some aspect of human psychology can support a future, better state of things. And indeed Habermas and Honneth's insistence on a more hopeful vision of human psychology is part of their method: both want to find the emancipatory potential immanent in the present (their particular vision of the "escapability" of ideology) rather than paint a picture where things are relatively hopeless or people are without agency or will only be "saved" politically by external or unforeseeable future circumstances. But there is also a trap, methodologically, in creating a too-easy alignment between one's ideal future world and the type of psychology with which one believes people already operate: if one's vision of human psychology matches one's vision of future human behaviour too neatly, it risks suggesting a vision of human psychology that is so compatible with the world one wants that it is no longer clear why that world does not already exist. Habermas and Honneth believe psychological, moral, social progress is possible but provide little

account at the psychological level for what truly impedes progress and therefore what must be overcome. As I shall argue, there is little accounting for the perversity of the human subject, or of the forces that come into play in terms of unconscious processes. This makes it difficult for Habermas, for example, to explain how people can become more "transparent" in explaining their motivations and reasons to one another.

There is an artificial and suspicious alignment between the kinds of psychology Habermas employs and end goals he would like society to arrive at. As numerous critical theorists have noted, Habermas' turn to developmental psychology allows a vision of the world with moral progress over time. As Allen puts it, "Ultimately, however, even [Habermas' own] domesticated and linguistified conception of psychoanalysis proved too speculative and disruptive for Habermas: his turn toward cognitive psychology signaled his preference for a psychological framework that could be empirically confirmed and that fit more neatly with his rationalism and progressivism."[317] These theories may have appealed to Habermas because they suggest a trajectory where people progress over time to higher order stages of learning and moral reasoning, something exceptionally convenient for the picture of societal progress for which Habermas. Joel Whitebrook notes "Habermas believed that their formal learning schemes would enable him to demonstrate the sort of progress he was seeking" as a possibility not just for individual humans, but also for humanity as a whole in the postwar era.[318] Developmental models of psychology also are congruous

[317] Allen p. 16.

[318] Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia,* p. 7

with a model of moral and political progress aligned with his that also does not involve the inconveniences of a revolution. This type of developmental narrative, as used by both Habermas and Honneth, was received enthusiastically by a new generation of critical theorists who found this point perhaps more compatible with the current political moment; as Neal Harris notes: "Honneth's account was supremely attractive to a generation of critical theorists at a particular historical moment—in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and a widespread dismissal of Marxism(s)."[319]

Although less overt, Honneth's vision of progress informs his choice of psychological references. By focusing on a concept of recognition drawn from Winnicott's work, Honneth creates a singular account of what can go wrong in political reasoning that is underpinned by a psychological account where recognition is always possible and more or less synonymous with "maturity." Both Habermas and Honneth not only choose the psychological theories most amenable to their respective projects of discourse and recognition, but also employ them selectively, rather than navigating the theories in depth and noticing where they may or may not fit neatly with the wider political project. As Corchia notes, there are more than 50 papers or books where Habermas uses Mead's work, but "in Habermas' writings we find only fragmentary analyses of Mead's thought."[320] Corchia notes that Habermas generally selects the parts of Mead's theory most "congenial" to his own project.[321] For example, in "The Development of the Self ", Habermas and his co-authors write, "Cognitive

[319] Harris p. 45.

[320] Corchia p. 210.

[321] *Ibid*.

development seems to adopt the function of a pacesetter for moral development… However, we cannot state yet whether or not cognitive development …advances autonomously or instead depends on the development of competences in the domain in which practical questions can be morally clarified, that is, the domain of communicative actions."[322] The link between cognitive development and social progress is vague; notably, this book was published six years *after The Theory of Communicative Action*. In relying heavily on the psychological literature in a somewhat circular fashion, Habermas and Honneth "tack on" rather than lead with development psychology, and thus risk overfitting or "cherry-picking" the literature to support particular visions of progress. Methodologically, they do not reckon sufficiently with potential contradictions or contraindications of their application of psychological theories to their argument.

There are further shortcomings to this approach. Firstly, developmental theories have themselves been roundly criticised in ways that Habermas and Honneth occasionally acknowledge but rarely truly incorporate into their work. At the broadest level, developmental psychology is often unhelpful outside of the context of child development. Carrying its logic over to adults, and even beyond that to civilizations (phylogenesis), may well mean unjustifiable grasping for similarities. It can also be falsely universalising, presenting culturally-specific, often patriarchal social norms as biological facts. To explore these issues specifically, we can conveniently turn to *Critical Theories of Psychological Development*, a volume published in 1987, to which Habermas himself contributed an essay. The introductory essay of this volume and

[322] Dobert, Habermas, and Nunner-Winkler, p. 286.

several others (especially one by Richard Lichtman) make a number of points about generalisability, and I employ them here as useful biting summaries of a wider field of critique of developmental psychology.[323] As Richard Lichtman puts it, "A miniscule sample of the middle class (usually Caucasian) of one or a handful of contemporary capitalist countries is taken as sufficient ground to render pronouncements on the human condition."[324] Whole stages one might consider natural, like adolescence, do not appear to exist in other societies.[325] It is not clear that the kind of development described in developmental psychology is necessarily desirable or normatively good; as Neal Harris puts it, "in light of the experiences of children, and those with learning difficulties, it is instantly apparent that there is no homogeneity to the forms of intersubjective praxis required to live a happy and meaningful life."[326] Indeed, Lichtman suggests one could argue that age itself is socially constructed and defined—many apparently natural milestones are less natural than they look (for example, we might consider 65 to be "old" because this fits with the working years of our system of production). Even those developmental milestones that do exist biologically, like puberty, acquire their meaning in large part through interpretation.[327] These sets of norms also may make non-western cultures appear pathological or deficient. As Susan

[323] I would like to thank Rory Varrato for pointing me to this most useful volume during the wonderful Rome Critical Theory conference of 2023.

[324] Richard Lichtman, "The Illusion of Maturation in an Age of Decline." John M Broughton, and Richard Licthman, ed. *Critical Theories of Psychological Development*, 1987: p. 127.

[325] *Ibid*. 134.

[326] *Ibid*. 50.

[327] *Ibid*. 135.

Buck-Morss notes, Piaget's work risks suggesting that those in "developing" countries, who have historically scored lower on his tests of childhood development, are "in some way retarded." [328] This critique extends past developmental psychology itself and directly to theorists like Habermas himself, who also takes developmental psychology as if it were a neutral empirical fact even when it provides a dubious norm. Habermas's student, Seyla Benhabib, argues he is overly reliant on developmental psychologists to make the case for what progress is: "[t]he appeal to moral psychology and development brings no exemption from the justificatory process. Lawrence Kohlberg was wrong in thinking that the "ought" can be deduced from the 'is.'"[329]

Even if we find that people tend to learn to reason about morality in a particular set of stages, we cannot, as critical theorists, assume this is good or right. Even if we find subjects tend to progress through developmental stages, we cannot assume the final stage is necessarily morally better, and indeed, to take such a normative bent may not be justifiable in terms of the relatively cutt stance that many in critical theory prefer.

Perhaps even more strikingly, some argue that at their worst, developmental theories are themselves the result of, or at least the fuel for, false consciousness. Lichtman argues that stages of adult "development" are part of an ideology about progress that provides people with a soothing narrative about the possibility of personal development and individual contributions to societal progress-–ultimately a

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[328] *Ibid*. 247.

[329] Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical theory.* Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 30.

form of placating false consciousness. Broughton similarly suggests "the metaphor of psychological growth may be one of the measures to which modern culture resorts in order to anesthetise itself to the painful rending of personal and social fabrics."[330] In this way, the universality those engaging with developmental psychology presume or reach toward may itself be a symptom of cultural malaise, a cheerful false narrative of possibility in a world where technological progress has brought many woes and social and personal progress remain elusive.

Habermas was no stranger to these arguments (after all, he was published in the same volume as his critics), but where he chose to respond to them he did so largely defensively rather than incorporating their critical insights. This is especially evident in his defence of the ideas of Lawrence Kohlberg. In addition to his reliance on Mead, by the 1970s Habermas had turned to Kohlberg's developmental psychology, arguing that the procedural reasoning he values happens only through the highest stages of Kohlberg's developmental model.[331] He also kept in touch with Kohlberg until his death. Kohlberg's model suggests moral reasoning occurs in three stages, from preconventional (where moral decisions are based on authority) to conventional (focused on social order and judgements), and finally the "post-conventional", which Kohlberg equates with decision-making via universal principles such as liberty, equality, or human rights. Habermas' interest in psychological development is driven by his desire to explain historical progress and the "developmental mechanism" that

[330] Broughton, p. 6.

[331] Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*. New Directions in Critical Theory Vol. 73. Columbia University Press, 2020: p. 28.

shows societal change in each historical epoch. He emphasises the shift from traditional to post-conventional society, where not only technical knowledge is developed but also "moral-practical knowledge which can be embodied into structures of interaction."[332] Habermas then introduces a suggested developmental sequence that is drawn "from the perspective of the socialised child" and extends all the way from individual competences to "the solution of systems problems."[333] Ultimately, he takes up developmental psychology to develop a theory of human development that both describes how individual humans progress over the course of their lifetime (ontogenetic) and how entire civilisations might be capable of adjusting to new technological conditions over time (phylogenetic): an ambitious, and perhaps overly ambitious, feat. For example, in "Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism," Habermas takes Kohlberg's moral stages and fits them on to neolithic societies, ancient civilisations, and modernity. Developmental theories like those of Kohlberg and Mead provides the conceptual paradigms through which Habermas can re-theorise (Kantian and Hegelian) ideas about finding truth progressively over time, frequently through intersubjectivity and rational discourse. Habermas applies the theories relatively literally, and is accordingly confined by their sometimes rigid stipulations. For example, alongside Rainer Dobert and Gertrud Nunner-Winkler, he conducts research on the development of teenagers' moral reasoning development. He also holds fast to the claim that development is a hierarchical, linear process involving "an irreversible

[332] Jürgen Habermas, "Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism." *Theory and Society 2.3,* 1975: p. 294.

[333] *Ibid*.

series of discrete and increasingly complex stages of development; no stage can be skipped over…"[334] In other words, subjects progress uniformly through a series of stages of moral development, without skipping stages, without regressing, without the quality of "patchiness" I have described in earlier chapters. In addition to this being a difficult claim to defend given the real world, this means his argument turns on the relative truth of developmental psychology.

For example, in Carol Gilligan's 1980 article "Moral Development in Late Adolescence and Adulthood,"[335] Gilligan re-examines Kohlberg's theory of moral development and argues that it falls short because it misses the ways that situated and contextual reasoning are equally valid and developed forms of reasoning; these forms are relied upon by women in particular because of how women are situated in networks of care-giving. Habermas accepts Kohlberg's defence via this division, defending a distinction between moral questions, which can be evaluated in terms of universal questions of justice and "evaluative questions, which fall into the general category of issues of the good life and are accessible to rational discussion only within the horizon of a concrete historical form of life or an individual life style."[336] Habermas not only effectively depoliticises important feminist issues by reducing them to ethical particularism, but also conveniently rejects a challenge to the kind of universal

[334] Rainer Dobert, Jürgen Habermas, and Gertrud Nunner-Winkler, "The Development of Self." John M. Broughton, ed. *Critical Theories of Psychological Development*. Springer Science & Business Media, 2013: p. 279.

[335] John Michael Murphy and Carol Gilligan. "Moral Development in Late Adolescence and Adulthood: A Critique and Reconstruction of Kohlberg's Theory." *Human Development* 23.2, 1980: pp. 77-104.

[336] Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 178.

reasoning process he wishes to defend. More generally, Habermas responds to critiques grounded in identifying weaknesses in developmental psychology by defending the psychological theory rather than revising or amending his philosophical and political points to account for limitations. For example, Habermas' essay in "Critical Theories of Psychological Development" offers little critique of psychology itself, instead mostly extending a model for adolescent development. He does emphasise that the account he wishes to give of development is about social not biological forces, an important first step in acknowledging the social construction of development.[337] However, the rest of the chapter not only carries many of the problematic traits of developmental psychology criticised in the same collection of essays (it is normative, linear, and rigid, for example), but does so without much reference to or defence against these possible issues. The accounts move towards a single universal form of reasoning, and focus largely on individuals (admittedly usually in terms of intersubjective interactions).

Habermas and Honneth thus choose a very specific set of ideas within developmental psychology, in large part to support their vision of political progress, and rely on them in a relatively circular and uncritical fashion. Not only do they not respond to relevant critiques of developmental theories in their work, but they also elide how developmental psychology literature may be unable to give a full account of political reasoning and may therefore need support from other theoretical resources. In particular, developmental theories tend to lack accounts of false consciousness or the effects of power. They also rely on faulty notions of progress that often carry

[337] Dobert, Habermas, and Nunner-Winkler, "The Development of Self," p. 275.

problematic connotations about sex and gender. All of this makes it difficult for Honneth and Habermas to explain the perversity of false consciousness—the way subjects are motivated to cling to it—as well as its relative patchiness, where subjects can have very different levels of political consciousness on different topics. Dissonance theory, in contrast, avoids these issues. I turn to this now.

How Dissonance Theory Can Supplement Earlier Approaches

To my knowledge, Honneth has not written directly on the topic of cognitive dissonance. However, Habermas references the term when he responds to Rawls' "proviso" that subjects in democracies have a duty to provide one another with reasons that can be endorsed "in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason."[338] Habermas is concerned about the cognitive burden this places on religious subjects of secularised societies. As he puts it, "traditional communities of faith must process cognitive dissonances that either do not arise for secular citizens, or arise only insofar as they adhere to doctrines anchored in similarly dogmatic ways."[339] Religious subjects must in this account self-reflexively relate their religious forms of reasoning (e.g.abortion or the state of Israel) to secular reasoning processes and know that the latter take priority in the public sphere. In contrast, secularised citizens do not face this pressure. Habermas suggests that the solution to this dilemma lies, in part, in two distinct but complementary learning processes, where religious subjects come to

[338] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism.* New York: Columbia University Press: 2005, p. 137.
[339] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Polity Press, 2008: p. 136.

translate their concerns in secularised terms, while secular subjects come to recognise the possibly relevant content of religious thinking.

Habermas' consideration of dissonance here is relevant to this project insofar as it touches on religion, which is arguably always an ideology and often an oppressive one. However, Habermas does not situate dissonance in relation to false consciousness. Moreover, although Habermas uses the term "cognitive dissonance" in his work, it is not clear that he is using it in the truly psychological, rather than folk psychology sense. He does not, for example, ever define the term or bring up Festinger's research or other studies. He seems to recognise it is a cognitive source of discomfort (he uses the term "burden") and relates it to the subject's sense of self and agency, but only offhand. (Indeed, Gordon Finlayson compares Habermas' use to the actual use by Festinger and finds it somewhat lacking, in large part because while Habermas seems to imply that political reasoning can only work if secular citizens wrestle with cognitive dissonance that may not actually be occurring.)[340] In any case, Habermas has perhaps only imported this term to try to express the mental strain of navigating two different epistemological frameworks in postmodern political reasoning. He has not considered the wider meaning or implications of the phenomenon. Indeed, it is not obvious why his conception of cognitive dissonance would not apply to two people who simply have very different secular epistemologies, for example a liberal and radical leftist. It is difficult to imagine how Habermas' relatively shallow use of this term could extend to the question of whether and how subjects experience "false

[340] James Gordon Finlayson, "No Proviso: Habermas on Rawls, Religion and Public Reason." *European Journal of Political Theory* 20.3 (2021): p. 458.

consciousness, ” where their beliefs limit their possibilities for action, or how they might, via postmodern reasoning, overcome this. In sum, dissonance is used as a reference but not a full theoretical tool, to the detriment of the theory.

In this section, I examine how dissonance theory can address false consciousness and extend Honneth and Habermas' thinking about political reasoning wherein developmental theories fall short. I suggest that in addition to these broader points about the problems with an uncritical embrace and application of developmental theories, Habermas and Honneth (and those who write after them) would do well to supplement their theoretical foundations with other psychological theories, and demonstrate some of the benefits of using dissonance theory in particular. As Honneth and Habermas' developmental theories currently operate, they give *f*little account of how political reasoning goes wrong, are awkwardly avoidant of even the most basic relation to scientific knowledge, are insufficiently attentive to problems of the unconscious and transparency (even by the theorists' own possible standards) and, lastly, to return to some of the criteria I developed in earlier chapters, are unable to give a thorough account of either the perversity or the patchiness of subjects' political consciousness. They therefore inadequately theorise what we might call false consciousness, or at minimum, failures of political reasoning. Dissonance theory provides an example of how psychological research can enrich theory. I now address each of these points in turn.

Dissonance and the Problem of Transparency and the Unconscious

Another area in which Habermas and Honneth's developmentally-led theories may require supplementation is the unconscious and especially its relation to transparency. This, arguably, is also a challenge to Habermas' hopes that listeners can make their reasons more transparent by limiting their speech acts. For example, Habermas is concerned about the illocutionary and perlocutionary effects of speech acts, viewing the former (which have to do with the explicit intention of the speaker, e.g. warning, informing) as legitimate and original uses of communication and part of communicative action, and the latter (which have to do with the non-explicit effects on the listener, e.g. scaring someone with a factual statement) as less legitimate and perhaps parasitic. Habermas is accordingly emphatic about the need for sincerity and transparency in speakers. Habermas' early discourse theory describes a key condition of discourse to be that subjects are "honest with each other" ("sich selbst gegenüber wahrhaftig sind") and "make their (intentions) transparent".[341] This reflects Habermas' desire to convey an ideal speech situation where speech has illocutionary rather than perlocutionary effects. In other words, speech should convey information or ideas but not have other intended, potentially manipulative effects on the reader (e.g. to scare them). He insists on "sincerity" in this regard. Ideally, subjects would be able to be entirely honest and open about the nature of the possible contentions and conflicts being discussed, so that "A lifeworld rationalised in this sense would by no means reproduce itself in conflict-free forms. But the conflicts would appear in their own

[341] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 2,* p. 355.

names; they would no longer be concealed by convictions immune from discursive examination. Such a lifeworld would gain a singular transparence…" [342]

When Habermas writes about the problem of the transparency of reason, he often appears to have deception or propagandic sway in mind (which would violate his goal of true mutual understanding). However, participants lack transparency both when they are being intentionally deceitful, but also when they are not really aware of their intentions. If someone believes tuition fees should be raised because they once wrote an essay about it as an exercise (a frequent method of triggering dissonance in studies: subjects write a counterattitudinal essay but then come to agree with their essay so as to resolve dissonance), dissonance theory suggests they may not realise that this is why they have come to believe this. The same phenomenon may similarly account for why subjects believe that capitalism is a good system (because they have invested energy in maintaining it), or that certain actions that reinforce patriarchy are in fact in their interests. In these cases, dissonance literature suggests, it is likely that subjects cannot provide an accurate account of why they believe what they believe.[343] They will therefore be in no position to provide transparency to others; they may feel they are sincere but actually be motivated by the discomfort of dissonance. The methodological assumptions at work in Habermas' writings do not take this sort of challenge into account, and they may accordingly not be sufficient grounds upon which to develop universal normative claims. Habermas' assumptions about what "transparency" is may

[342] *Ibid*., 145.

[343] For descriptions of this type of cognitive dissonance study, see much in Cooper's book, as well as Andrew J. Elliot, and Patricia G. Devine. "On the Motivational Nature of Cognitive Dissonance: Dissonance as Psychological Discomfort." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67.3, 1994: p. 382.

simply not be tenable without some kind of return to, and reckoning with, the unconscious motivations present for human beings. A new and clearer definition of what is at stake in the concept of transparency is needed.

While motivated by a sincere desire to define an area of communication that can be free of manipulation and generative of new kinds of freedom, Habermas' choice to move away from accounts of the unconscious may be unrealistic. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas grants the importance of both ideology critique and psychoanalysis as part of a set of techniques subjects required to reach "emancipatory knowledge."[344] However, his unconscious is, as numerous commentators have noted, in some ways "tame" compared to that of other theorists. As A. Özgür Gürsoy puts it, "By assimilating the unconscious to what Freud calls the preconscious, Habermas guarantees, in principle, that what is implicit can be made explicit and what is excluded from consciousness can be reflectively included in the process of communication."[345] Much of what Habermas describes as "unconscious" is simply not yet expressed in language, rather than something the subject is actively hiding from themselves or something that is in fact difficult, painful, elusive or—to use a word I will explore in more depth below—perverse, that is in some way counter to the subjects' own interests. Here, although Habermas is technically including the unconscious in his work, he does so in such a way that he nearly guarantees the outcome he wants—a world where all human reasons and motivations can be included within communicative action. In other words, his use of psychoanalysis neglects darker, more drive-related or

[344] Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests.* John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

[345] A. Özgür Gürsoy, "Unconscious Reasons: Habermas, Foucault, and Psychoanalysis." C*ontinental Philosophy Review* 52.1, 2019: p. 47.

more perverse aspects of the unconscious where people strive for things that are not "reasonable." This in turn insufficiently explains why subjects might, for example, join reactionary movements, embrace authoritarian leaders, or believe in conspiracy-theory-style political ideas.

Dissonance theory is promising in comparison to developmental accounts because it can account for pre or unconscious processes, and how the unconscious and preconscious parts of human reasoning may lead to flawed political reasoning. Dissonance research specifically troubles underlying methodological assumptions in Habermas' work by repeatedly demonstrating that how unconscious or preconscious processes affect reasoning without subjects' awareness, such that subjects cannot later give an (accurate) account, to themselves or to others, of how their views were formed. Much of the unconscious reasoning process occurs prior to the type of reason-giving that Habermas imagines in democratic discourse. Simply put, we begin to judge before we realise we are doing so; we develop preferences prior to developing fully thought-through reasons for them, and we are then often unable to change these even if we have good reason to do so. For example, in Brehm's early (1956) experiments, unconscious cognitive dissonance that occurred when subjects were asked to deliberate and make a choice shaped subjects' preferences about future choices without any formal reasoning process. In this way, rather than subjects consciously deliberating based on conscious preferences (e.g., "red is my favourite colour, therefore I will choose the red option"), subjects formed unconscious preferences that later shaped their future choices without them realising it (e.g., the subject felt discomfort that they could not also have the blue poster, so they began to value blue things less without realising why in order to feel

less dissonance discomfort. In the future, the subject will choose blue things less frequently.)[346]

These unconscious preferences matter in cases that extend beyond mere consumer choices. For example, if it is true that dissonance causes us to devalue what we cannot have or choose when it comes to life choices and not just consumer goods, then we might expect that people develop preferences for what they have been allowed to attain in life (whether a class position, a job, or membership in a community) and devalue what they can not attain (an even "better" class position, greater economic security, or membership in other communities), without any process of conscious reasoning or reflection. This suggests people will tend to defend their class position once they appear to have in some way made choices aligned with it, which would explain findings, like John T. Jost's, that suggest those most harmed by systems often think they are most fair.[347] It also suggests that institutions that facilitate a sense of agency (for example, the sense that one can rise up the ranks if one works hard, or that one has choices when it comes to voting) function as part of an ideological apparatus by creating dissonance during the choosing process and then allowing subjects to double down on their choices in retrospect. The underlying mechanism, to revisit the logic of dissonance, is people adjust beliefs towards their actions, even those that are

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[346] Jack W. Brehm, "Postdecision Changes in the Desirability of Alternatives." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 52.3, 1956. Cooper's book also has a useful description of the structure of these studies.

[347] For a review of these theories, also discussed in earlier chapters, see John T. Jost, Mahzarin R. Banaji, and Brian A. Nosek. "A Decade of System Justification Theory: Accumulated Evidence of Conscious and Unconscious Bolstering of the Status Quo." *Political Psychology* 25.6, 2004: pp. 881-919.

somewhat compelled, in order to reduce dissonance. The reasoner will come up with reasons, or rather rationalisations, to give to others in order to justify their preferences—and these reasons might reasonably be described as the "false consciousness" of the political subject. They may, for example, justify their preference for the current political order (created due to dissonance about not being able to attain greater money or class status) as it being "fair" or encouraging hard work. This is a rationalisation, not a true reason, but that is not available to the subject who professes it. These preferences become causal factors influencing decision-making but are not available to the political reasoner as reasons that could be provided to others. While critical theorists do not perhaps have to abandon theories of discourse simply because there are times where subjects may have motives that are not immediately knowable to themselves, dissonance theory provides one reason to be more sceptical about whether discourse as imagined by Habermas, or indeed recognition through deliberation and language as often imagined by Honneth, is the only or even the most important forum for politics. Reasoning in politics may involve (say) questions of power outside this sphere, or a pragmatism involved in taking collective action in the world rather than merely communicative action and similar language-based endeavours on their own. If we cannot always give our own reasons, that is, it may mean that we need to discover them in the process of attempting to change the world. I discuss this relationship between dissonance theory and the need for political action more in the next chapter.

A limited account of how the unconscious affects political reasoning is also a challenge in Honneth's arguments. Subjects may both be unable to present themselves to one another or to recognise one another if their own cognition is in part happening

beneath the level of conscious perception. Perhaps even more explicitly than Habermas, Honneth is suspicious of the unconscious and largely excludes it from his accounts of political reasoning. It is, of course, challenging to give an account of the unconscious in full (for the very reason that these thoughts are unconscious and difficult to measure or reliably understand), and Honneth is perhaps rightly sceptical about claims about the unconscious that are too large or vague. In addition, Honneth is suspicious of drive theory; as Allen puts it, "It is worth noting at the outset that Honneth's original turn to Winnicott's object-relations theory, in his important early work *The Struggle for Recognition*, was motivated by a suspicion of psychoanalytic drive theory. Drive theory, in Honneth's view, entails a problematic philosophical anthropology in which intersubjectivity takes a back seat to the 'intrapsychic conflict between unconscious instinctual demands and gradually emerging ego-controls.'"[348] Honneth avoids accounts of drives because he views these as unrealistic, overly pessimistic, and far too isolated conceptions of human psychology. His own work prefers accounts of intersubjective recognition that are based, at least in part, on the relationship between a young child and its caregiver rather than accounts of unconscious drives. Although in at least one interview Honneth speaks to the importance of preserving critical theorists' attachment to an account of the unconscious even as they use developmental psychology, in practice his own work does not give a particularly elaborate account of the unconscious.[349] As I have suggested above,

[348] *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 96.
[349] For said interview see Axel Honneth and Inara Luisa Marin, "Interview with Axel Honneth." *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis,* March 2009, https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/interview-with-axel-honneth/. June 24, 2023.

Honneth's argument is not clear about why some people reach political insights and others do not. Here, notably, Honneth can only reference a curious combination of the "cultural-political environment," "the experience of disrespect," and a nearby movement to provide the cognitive content that is needed:

> "... the injustice of disrespect does not inevitably have to reveal itself but merely can. ... Empirically, whether the cognitive potential inherent in feeling hurt or ashamed becomes a moral-political conviction depends above all on how the affected subject's cultural-political environment is constructed: only if the means of articulation of a social movement are available can the experience of disrespect become a source of motivation for acts of political resistance. The developmental logic of such collective movements can, however, be discovered via an analysis that attempts to explain social struggles on the basis of the dynamics of moral experiences."[350]

Subjects are thus more or less at the mercy of their environment, and dependent on a relatively vague "developmental logic" of collective movements in discovering the reality of their political world. Despite Honneth's acknowledgement in some interviews of the importance of the unconscious, here the unconscious is not involved in explaining why some do not recognise their own oppression, and there is no real explanation for why some individuals exposed to the same external "means of articulation of a social movement" will come to greater political consciousness and others will not. Without a foundational description of unconscious drives, it is difficult to explain observed variation in political consciousness between individuals living in similar environments, or why some individuals become deeply invested in ideas that appear to be oppressive to them.. In contrast, dissonance theory contains an account of some unconscious processes that appear with regularity in human subjects, without

[350] Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, pp. 138-9.

attempting to define all the unconscious processes that might occur or providing an overly pessimistic or overly intra-psychic vision of the human subject. Unconscious pressures shape their reasoning processes in obscure ways, but the subject of dissonance is still fully rooted in the social and material world. Furthermore, the unconscious is perhaps predictable enough at the population level that theorists can begin to consider broader implications for false consciousness.

Dissonance and the Patchiness and Perversity of Political Reasoning

In addition to providing a clearer sense of the problems of transparency and the unconscious, dissonance theory can also help theorists like Habermas and Honneth account for the perversity of some forms of political reasoning. By *perversity* I mean the way subjects sometimes willingly embrace, or even fight for, ideas that contribute to their own oppression. As I have discussed in previous chapters, theories of ideology and false consciousness, and indeed all psychological theories that underlie theories of political consciousness, are strongest when they do not merely describe harmful ideological beliefs as a cognitive or conceptual error. People are "perverse"—sometimes actively attached to and motivated to cling to harmful beliefs, which fill social, emotional, or psychological needs and make them harder to escape. This is observable in those who defend the virtues of hard work even as this work largely materially benefits others; women who embrace the oppressive aspects of patriarchy, people of colour who in some way defend the racial order, and so on. Habermas and Honneth's theories do not leave much room for intense denial or self-deception in individuals or groups, or of affective investment in systems that oppress oneself, even

these themes are present in psychoanalysis, other theories of false consciousness, and empirical social psychology. Stages of moral development, moreover, poorly explain why people would endorse systems that work against their own interests. After all, in these theories "lower" stages of development (which are always achieved first) are, if anything, those where it is easier to see and understand one's own interests, rather than those of others, which become more visible once one progresses to universal reasoning. To continue to use Kohlberg's model, for example: such a model suggests that at the higher stages of reasoning people reason by applying universalisable principles like freedom, equality, or fairness; they move from focus on the parochial to a "developed" way of thinking in more universal terms. But when the capitalist subject believes that if they strive hard enough they will "get ahead," this is not in any obvious sense a failure to universalise their considerations. They may easily apply the same standards to others or tie this to some apparently universal idea like "progress." Developmental theories provide an unreliable criteria to evaluate whether people are able to judge their own political ideas in terms of their suitability for the good life, and whether people are likely to be drawn into reasoning that satisfies some short-term affective need yet harms their long-term interests. Because neither Habermas nor Honneth provides an account of perversity-–not least because Honneth especially is interested in avoiding drive-based theories, and the death drive is usually one of the main psychoanalytic explanations for perverse behaviour—their descriptions of reasoning are often, as Allen has noted, overly conscious and linguistic, and as a result miss defence mechanisms at work. Allen points out that reasoning itself is employed as a defence mechanism, something Honneth and Habermas cannot easily account for

within their models. Indeed, this is indeed precisely what research in cognitive dissonance suggests with the term "rationalisation," brought forward from psychoanalytic studies of defence mechanisms. As Allen puts it, "even if we accept, for the sake of argument, that the end goal of this process is some sort of rational unified integrated self where the ego is master of its own house (though Freud was famously sceptical of whether this is either possible or desirable), the process for getting there is *not* a rational one. Indeed, rational insight is an *impediment* to this process, because it heightens resistance and serves as one of the ego's prime modes of defence."[351] Dissonance theory, in contrast, can give an account of why some apparent forms of reasoning might actually be defensive reactions to affective processes related to discomfort, which suggests a path forward for identifying and potentially addressing false consciousness.

In contrast, dissonance theory provides an account that is compatible with the "perversity" of the human subject, as I have defined that in earlier chapters, as it shows how people might come to hold beliefs that are against their best interests. Dissonance literature provides examples of people engaging in behaviour not in their apparent interests—from becoming deeply invested in groups because they took a lot of effort to join, to becoming more committed to an action the *less* they were paid for it. Indeed, it is this perversity that disrupted the behaviourist paradigms of the time, as dissonance studies showed people choosing to behave in ways that allowed them to make meaning out of their actions, rather than being motivated by the greatest material rewards. Dissonance theory suggests subjects sometimes pursue things not in their interest (e.g.,

[351] Allen, "Psychoanalysis and the Methodology of Critique," p. 251.

not in line with original preferences or not likely to bring them material good or relative autonomy) simply in order to reduce the discomfort they feel in noticing a contradiction between two or more of their beliefs or actions. This motivation, alongside the related tendency to feel a sense of agency and construct a meaningful narrative about one's life, means that dissonance can lead people into cults, rationalisations, system-justification, and other elements of what we might call perversity and false consciousness.

Developmental psychology may also prove a weak point for Habermas and Honneth because of its rigid insistence on a linear and irreversible process of development. Development involves all subjects going through the same series of steps, making irreversible and sequential progress in their reasoning, and doing so about all issues and areas of their lives at once. As a result, it cannot help explain why subjects within the same distorted systems may reason very differently about different aspects of their political world—that is, it is difficult to make sense of the "patchiness" of political reasoning within individual subjects. Their explanation does not account for someone who might understand politics well in one area but poorly in another, or for the possibility of "uneven and combined development" (to wryly use a phrase developed to describe economic development). This phrase has generally been used by Marxian economists, drawing on Trotsky's work, and used to describe the nature of economic development in the Global South especially. In contrast to Stalin, who suggested that the development towards communism might occur in roughly the same set of stages around the world, Trotsky and later theorists noted that countries began from very different points of economic wealth and production and "progressed" in

highly heterogeneous and variable ways.[352] As with economic development, so with psychology: just as countries are probably not logically bound to go through the same stages of economic development in exactly the same order, it is probable that humans may "develop" or progress towards more favourable types of reasoning in very different sequences, and in very uneven ways. This is perhaps especially true if one considers the reality of the variation in political consciousness observable in the world. Often a person might engage in high-level abstract moral reasoning about one topic (e.g. how to distribute aid in a crisis) and still be drawn into troubling patterns of reasoning in other areas (perhaps believing in conspiracy theories or supporting unethical industries or practices). It is not uncommon, indeed perhaps more likely than not, to see situations where people hold on to lofty universal ideals of the sort favoured by Habermas, Honneth, and developmental theorists in one area of their life (e.g. affirming liberal feminism) but are unable to enact the same type of reasoning in other areas of their lives, e.g., when thinking about labour practices or race or structural inequality or colonialism in the Global South. Yet in Kohlberg and Piaget's work, people rarely "regress" to prior stages and cannot skip stages. This strict linear development does not appear to reflect the reality of many people's reasoning processes, and in this way these theories, guided by their attendant developmental psychology, are unable to account for the messy reality of political consciousness.[353]

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[352] See for example Sam Ashman, "Combined and Uneven development", in Ben Fine Alfredo & Saad Filho (eds.), *The Elgar Companion to Marxist Economics*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2012, pp. 60-65.

[353] For an account of how Kohlberg and Piaget's accounts are fairly strictly linear, see Lawrence J. Walker, "A Longitudinal Study of Moral Reasoning". *Child Development*. 60 (1), February 1989: pp. 157–166.

In contrast, because dissonance can occur to people regardless of any given age, stage, or cognitive status in other areas of life, dissonance theory allows for an account of political subjects' "uneven and combined development." Dissonance simply emerges when subjects' beliefs and actions are in contradiction; there is no need, however, for a person to be engaged in roughly the same kind of reasoning in all other areas. In other words, dissonance theory is compatible with the "patchiness" of real human reasoning, where people may reason well in some areas of their lives but not in others. In contrast to developmental theories, dissonance theory thus also has the virtue of not being teleological (with an assumed beginning, middle, and end for how people change the way they think over time), nor demanding the individual largely be in one state or another. It demands less of an order to our lives and less consistency within individuals, both of which may be more realistic. In this way it better matches the reality of observable political consciousness, without falling into many of the weaknesses in developmental psychological theories, such as mimicking capitalist ideology about "progress", assuming such a thing as a stable individual subject, naturalising social forces related to the lifespan, universalizing, and so on.

Conclusion

Ultimately, neither Habermas nor Honneth are able to provide a convincing account of why humans sometimes act and think against their own political interests or

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For one of many empirical accounts of how people do not translate insights from one political issue into their thinking on another, see Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics (1964)." *Critical Review* 18.1-3, 2006: pp. 1-74. The author's research, which is not unusual, suggests people do not adjust beliefs logically when they reach a new belief in one area. For example, they might learn something about taxes but not apply that to the rest of the economy, or might become less prejudiced against racial minorities but then not apply this to sexual minorities, etc.

how this might be overcome. This is a major shortcoming. Critical theorists of the first generation were concerned with how modern political subjects seemed capable of falling into enthusiasm for authoritarian leaders and deluding themselves into believing their current model of society was best (although, as I have noted in previous chapters, they may have massively overstated subjects' ideological conformity). Critical theorists today have just as much reason to be concerned about this, and should develop theoretical models that can help explain why this happens and how it might be possible to combat this false consciousness. But to do this, we will need a broader range of psychological theories. To provide just one example of how to expand the arsenal of psychological ideas available in critical theory, by adding cognitive dissonance theory to our understanding of the political subject one can, begin to outline both the possibilities and pitfalls available during processes of discourse for the subjects of capitalism, as well as the possibilities and pitfalls of seeking political recognition. Dissonance theory can do this in ways the developmental theories upon which Honneth and Habermas tend to exclusively rely cannot.

In a 2007 essay Honneth argues that, "contra Habermas", there are yet good reasons for critical theory to employ psychoanalysis "in its broadest sense."[354] He suggests, of course, that this can be accomplished using object relations and that doing so allows for a more realistic vision of the rationality of the human subject, including their attachments and other seemingly "irrational" or unconscious tendencies. Moreover, Honneth accuses those who will not accept that the two-person developmental model can replace traditional psychoanalysis of "the expression of an

[354] Honneth, "The Work of Negativity," p. 103.

orthodoxy hostile to experimentation, a thoughtless defence against conceptual innovation."[355] Honneth correctly identifies the need to have a psychological theory that accounts for problems arising in political reasoning, and the dangers of sticking too closely to one theory rather than being willing to innovate. However, I argue that he does not engage any other theories besides his own preferred object relations theories. More generally, Habermas and Honneth's turn towards developmental psychology is itself in some ways an insistence on a small spectrum of psychological theories accompanied by methodological pitfalls. The result of these issues is their work does not adequately theorise the nature of false consciousness and cannot suggest how many harmful ideological beliefs are either formed or could be overcome. In contrast, dissonance theory provides a less normative and universalising basis for understanding how people form and may stubbornly retain beliefs not in their political interests. It is more compatible with the reality of unconscious processes, and more realistic about the challenge of transparency, the perversity of human beliefs, and the patchiness (or the "uneven and combined development"), that is the reality of many people's worldviews.

The psychological theories we choose should, as Honneth puts it, be realistic and accurate.[356] But more than this, they should map people's tendencies and motivations for ideological belief, help explain why so many believe in systems that harm them, and suggest possible ways to change this. Ultimately, as critical theorists, we can move beyond developmental psychology (or psychoanalysis) alone. Critical theorists can avoid overly material approaches to the question of false consciousness,

[355] *Ibid.*
[356] *Ibid.*

include but go beyond psychoanalysis, and use scientific research in a critical way; developmental psychology by itself is, however, not a promising route forward. Instead, I suggest what is required is something psychological and in line with continuing scientific study: an approach that allows for people's weirdness, perversity, and their uneven and combined development. Cognitive dissonance serves as my example of what this type of theorising could look like. In the next chapter, I point towards some possible ways that it can suggest ways forward for both theorists and those in social movements.

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Chapter Six: Implications for Further Action and Research

> *We need a different kind of psychoanalytic language to help us understand the deep irrationality of our politics and the possibilities for moving beyond our current impasses.*
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> - Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch* [357]

In previous chapters I have suggested that dissonance theory can enrich theoretical accounts of false consciousness. In contrast, in this final chapter I suggest ways that the application of dissonance theory can prove useful both practically, to social movements, and methodologically, for broader considerations within the field of critical theory. I first argue that there are already existing methods, developed in part via cognitive dissonance theory, that allow subjects to engage in conversations about politics where they can grapple consciously with their dissonance and which, accordingly, allow them to arrive at more nuanced and thoughtful conclusions. Techniques built on dissonance research to help people recognise their own poor reasoning may prove useful for emancipatory social movements, especially if adapted to scale into less individualistic interventions. The insights present in the action-based understanding of dissonance theory suggest that greater theoretical and practical attention should be given to the way social movements can get people to engage in small actions rather than presenting them with arguments alone. These methods should be developed by liberatory social movements, and critical theorists should take up these insights and consider how to employ them broadly, especially at scale. All of these possible insights could be carried over into the construction of new forms of

[357] Amy Allen, *Critique on The Couch,* p. 191.

organising and new forms of "social infrastructure" that could help people develop greater political consciousness.

I then argue that dissonance literature is not only useful for deriving immediate practical actions for social movements, but also points to wider insights from the fields of cognitive science and social psychology that can aid critical theorists in investigating the "false consciousness" of subjects in late capitalism, and indeed in other areas of critical research. Dissonance literature demonstrates how much human subjects are concerned with agency and meaning in their lives, suggesting they are far from passive dupes of ideology. Dissonance literature suggests that critical theorists would do well to account for the ways in which modern subjects are motivated to maintain their sense of themselves as agents for good and to protect their own sense of agency and action-possibilities. It would also be wise for critical theorists to consider the ways that subjects tend to seek consistency and meaning-making in their worldview, and how this tendency often drives subjects' belief formation. Doing so would allow for social movements to better speak to the desires of those who could join them. For example, it may be more effective to describe the reality of the political world in ways that are less about victimisation by oppressive forces and more about the ways subjects can take action. Dissonance theory also points to the significance of subjects' actions in the process of belief formation and this too is a promising area of study for critical theorists. And because cognitive dissonance appears to function more sharply in Western societies, it is possible that it is particularly well situated for critical theorists to analyse from a critical social perspective, in order to understand what is uniquely psychologically challenging for the subjects of our current political system.

Implications for Social Movements and Counter-Hegemonic Struggles

In this section, I argue that there are already promising techniques that make use of the science of cognitive dissonance (and surrounding research in cognitive psychology) to reshape people's subjectivity and political consciousness. I describe some of the techniques, especially motivational interviewing and deep canvassing, and point to the aspects of these techniques that might be drawn out into less expensive and individualistic interventions, and argue that critical theorists should be interested in conducting further research in this area in order to help social movements develop new ways of communicating with those who do not recognise their own oppression.

Motivational Interviewing: Operationalising Ambivalence

There are already some promising methods related to cognitive dissonance research that appear to allow people to recognise the contradictions in their political positions and achieve greater political consciousness. These methods have been largely developed in two fields: addiction treatment and political canvassing. In addiction counselling, the most relevant technique is termed "motivational interviewing." Implied in this technique is the idea that those experiencing addiction struggle with dissonance regularly, as their actions and their stated beliefs frequently contradict one another. Someone struggling with addiction may, for example, claim they do not have a problem with alcohol while compulsively drinking more of it each evening. Addiction therapists and counsellors found that if they simply told those struggling with addiction that they had a problem, they triggered all the person's defences. As

William R. Miller, the expert who developed the motivational interviewing technique put it, this backfiring is

> [s]imply the predictable result of talking to an ambivalent person and taking up one side of the argument...they would naturally respond with the other. So you wind up acting out, almost like psychodrama, what is really their internal ambivalence, between the two of you, with the therapist having the good lines and the client having the counterchange lines. And that might be sort of fun, except that clients tend to believe themselves, so as they hear themselves arguing against change, they're literally talking themselves out of change... Really, we should be counselling in a way that causes the clients to make the arguments for change.[358]

In response to this problem, Miller developed a technique that helped the clients themselves "make the arguments for change." Using cognitive dissonance theory as well as an emphasis on self-efficacy and causal control (e.g. the subject's sense that they have agency in their own life), he developed a "directive, client-centred counselling style for helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence about behavioural change."[359] In this technique a therapist often begins by helping the client to uncover the ambivalence they are feeling about the issue at hand (usually an addiction, though in some cases this technique has been used to help people begin therapy for phobias). This is often done using a 1-10 scale method, where the therapist or counsellor asks, "on a scale from 1-10, how big of a problem is [x substance] in your life?" The person undergoing treatment would generally respond with at least a 2 or so, as a 0 or 1 is unrealistic. Then, rather than asking why the client hasn't rated the

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[358] See Stephen Rollnick and William R. Miller. "What Is Motivational Interviewing?" *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, no. 23.4, 1995, pp. 325–34.

Also Brad Lundahl, and Brian L. Burke. "The Effectiveness and Applicability of Motivational Interviewing: A Practice-Friendly Review of Four Meta-Analyses." *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 65, no. 11, 2009, pp. 1232–45.

[359] Ibid.

issue as being *more* of a problem, therapists ask why the client hasn't rated the issue as a zero or one in scale. They get the client to begin to state the reasons the addiction or phobia *is* a problem in their life, helping them identify the issue for themselves and elaborate on the ways in which they might be experiencing trouble in their own words. As Miller himself notes, not only does this force subjects to develop reasons why they might want to cease taking the addictive substance and hear these reasons from their own mouth, but it also means that together with their therapist, clients "develop discrepancy"--that is, they come to see the contradictions between some of their beliefs and some of their actions. This verbalised set of contradictions then places them in a position where they must change something about their behaviour in order to reduce painful dissonance. This technique results in much higher rates of accepting treatment for addiction. For example, in one meta-analysis, researchers found that clinicians who used motivational interviewing managed to effect a change in their patients' lives 80% of the time, compared to 36% of the time among clinicians who used other means of convincing their clients to change their health-related behaviour.[360]

As researchers analysing Miller's work note, nearly all the mechanisms at stake in motivational interviewing have to do with cognitive dissonance.[361] For example, Miller's guidebooks to the technique encourages therapists to avoid argument with

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[360] Sune Rubak, et al. "Motivational Interviewing: a Systematic Review and Meta-analysis." *British Journal of General Practice* 55.513 (2005): pp. 305-312. It is worth noting that other reviews of the effectiveness of this practice note that many research designs are poor, and so better quality research is needed in the future to confirm these results. For another example of the effectiveness of this method see Chad D.Jensen, et al. "Effectiveness of Motivational Interviewing Interventions for Adolescent Substance Use Behaviour Change: a Meta-Analytic Review." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 79.4, 2011: p. 433.

[361] Simon Draycott, and Alan Dabbs. "Cognitive Dissonance 2: A Theoretical Grounding of Motivational Interviewing." *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 37.3 (1998): pp. 355-364.

their subjects, because the danger is that if the therapist and client become engaged in an argument, the client will attribute the dissonance discomfort to the argument rather than their own contradictions, and not be as motivated to change their behaviour (they will assume if they stop arguing the discomfort will go away, rather than realising a change of behaviour is required). Therapists using this technique are encouraged to restate these contradictions regularly to keep them front of mind, and thus uncomfortable and motivating, for those undergoing therapy. In some cases, therapists even ask their clients to draw up a balance sheet with the pros and cons of changing their behaviour so that they can see the contradictions between the two possible courses of action clearly and not rationalise away the reality of the trade-off they must make as they decide what to do.

Perhaps more strikingly, although much of Miller's work was developed before the action-based model of dissonance was developed, there is a huge emphasis on encouraging clients to see possibilities for action and feel they will be capable of these actions (this is the aforementioned focus on "self-efficacy"). As Draycott and Drabbs, reviewers of the Motivational Interviewing method, note,

> It is theorised that if clients feel that their intentions to change can be translated into actions, they are more likely to have a good outcome. In terms of dissonance, if clients feel they cannot translate their intentions into actions then dissonance can be reduced with no therapeutic action. They can add the consistent cognition that they have no responsibility for their conduct, thus reducing the original inconsistency and the concomitant dissonance, and blocking other possible responses. For this reason it is important to emphasise clients' ability to deal with these problems, and to give them experiences of mastery in the area in question.[362]

[362] Ibid., 358.

This aspect of motivational interviewing suggests that the action-based theory of dissonance has downstream implications for real world interventions, where people need to see their dissonance in terms of future action-possibilities. Indeed, Draycott and Drabs point to further possibilities for therapists to use this technique, in line with dissonance theory, to do even more effective counselling (for example, by defusing client's attempted rationalisations and other defences so that they must face dissonance head on and choose whether to act). All of this suggests that as powerful as dissonance is when it comes to creating false consciousness, and as frequently as its pressure causes a subject to deny painful important facts about their own lives, there are effective ways of helping people face painful dissonance head on and choose a new set of actions and with these a new and more accurate set of beliefs about their world, just as might be desirable when it comes to political false consciousness. To date, motivational interviewing is probably the most commonly used technique related to dissonance, and the best documented success. Although it is not directly political in its therapeutic uses, it provides key evidence that careful attention to dissonance theory can allow for the design of more effective interventions in the way people think about their lives and can enable them to overcome prejudice, denial and repressed ambivalence so they can attain a new way of thinking and potentially live better lives. This in turn suggests that other similarly-focused interventions may therefore also be successful--including those that are directly political. Of course, it may not be immediately obvious how an individualised therapeutic technique can be successfully generalised to the type of collective action that politics involves. But many of the techniques available in motivational interviewing are at least somewhat generalisable:

asking people to place themselves on a scale on an issue (instead of in a binary position), and asking them to articulate their own ambivalence and "develop discrepancy," emphasising the agency subjects have, even in some limited way, and being careful to meet resistance with calm so that the discomfort subjects face can be most easily attributable to the contradictions in the question itself. These are techniques that those who work in social movements could use in individual interactions, in the materials they use to communicate, and in the way they frame issues. It may also be possible to train groups to engage with new possible members in ways that align with these techniques, and this in turn might allow for larger-scale changes in political consciousness in ways that would be very helpful for social movements.

And indeed, in more recent years, some political interventions related to dissonance theory have emerged. As one historian of union movements notes, organisers have long asked (admittedly leading!) questions that force subjects to consider their own internal contradictions. Jane MacAlevey writes of the process by which organisers in the United States convince people to join unions. After someone has already described their frustration with their employer (say, about an expensive healthcare plan) but then hesitated to join a union,

> A good organiser…will say something like, "So, Sally, I want to be clear about what I am hearing. You are good with the boss continuing to charge you $440.00 per month, deducted from your paycheck, just to keep your kids healthy and you healthy enough to show up for work, for the rest of your life?" The best organisers in the CIO tradition call the moment that follows "the long uncomfortable silence," because the organiser is trained to say nothing until the worker responds—and that can take several long minutes of dead silence between two people sitting face-to-face…An axiom of organisers is that every good organising conversation makes everyone at least a little uncomfortable.[363]

[363] Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organising for Power in the New Gilded Age*. Oxford University Press, 2016: pp. 36-7.

Sitting with people as they describe their contradictory thoughts out loud, and then asking them to work through their discomfort about their own contradictions is, then, already a technique that has been long used as a political tool. More recently, it has even been explicitly developed into a surprisingly effective tool for social change, one that is suggestive of the potential power of dissonance to mobilise people and change political consciousness: deep canvassing.

Deep Canvassing: Promise in the Public Sphere

In recent years, canvassing activist groups have also developed a new and also statistically more effective way of talking to people about political issues, termed "deep canvassing." This technique is very close to motivational interviewing, but relates directly to political issues and also involves the mutual exchange of personal stories and an emphasis on the way the canvasser listens to whatever the person's views are in a non-judgemental fashion. In this technique, rather than speaking to people briefly to determine their position and then encouraging them to vote one way or another on a key issue, canvassers engage in more open-ended, and sometimes longer, conversations. In these conversations, they largely listen and occasionally ask open-ended, imaginative questions. As with motivational interviewing they tend to let the person they're listening to make the argument for themselves and change their own mind as they grapple with ambivalence, rather than engage in oppositional dialogue as so often is the case with political conversations. The technique commonly uses the scale-based question method described above and asks participants to provide reasons on both sides of the issue, and then explain their position on the scale. It frequently involves a follow up where the canvasser might provide reasons to reconsider the issue

based on their own life, as well as the elicitation of personal stories from the participant. This technique has been frequently used to advocate for greater protections for LGBT populations as well as for undocumented communities in the United States, with strikingly high success rates. As journalist David McRaney puts it,

> …the overall shift Broockman and Kalla measured in [one deep canvassing study about trans rights] in Miami was greater than 'the opinion change that occurred from 1998 to 2012 towards gay men and lesbians in the United States.'… a mind change of much less than that could easily rewrite laws, win a swing state, or turn the tide of an election…This was one conversation with people who mostly had limited experience with the technique…about ten minutes each. Had the canvassers been experts, had they continued having conversations over several weeks, had those conversations been longer, the evidence suggests the impact would have been enormous.[364]

These changes also appeared permanent; participants appear to have become less transphobic and remained this way for at least three months after the canvassing.[365] This appears to be true regardless of political orientation or starting beliefs.[366] Perhaps most interestingly, subjects who had experienced deep canvassing about transgender rights were also not as susceptible to attack ads on transgender people. This suggests that subjects were not simply "swayed" in the sense of temporarily affectively influenced in one direction (as when we watch a movie on adorable animals and choose a vegetarian meal directly after, but do not become a vegetarian), but had in some sense permanently shifted their views (as would occur if a person permanently became a vegetarian, even when tempted with meat and arguments for eating meat). It

[364] David McRaney, *How Minds Change: the Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion*. Penguin, 2022: p. 44.

[365] David Broockman and Joshua Kalla. "Durably Reducing Transphobia: A Field Experiment on Door-to-Door Canvassing." *Science* 352.6282, 2016: p. 223.

[366] Ibid.

suggests this intervention ultimately not only triggered discomfort but also longform reasoning processes leading to a new, arguably more fully thought-through set of beliefs. From a social science perspective, this finding is unusual and somewhat surprising, because few attempts to shift people's views through argument are measurably successful, especially when strangers show up on someone's doorstep.[367] But these findings align with the success of canvassing groups employing similar techniques to shift opinion on LGBT rights in general and gay marriage in particular.[368] They are therefore likely to be accurate. And there are, of course, other important caveats to interpreting these studies. Unless held by trans people themselves, transphobia or even racism against other groups are perhaps not precisely the same as (the usual definitions of) false consciousness.[369] Nevertheless, the conflicted beliefs people hold in these areas are instructive, because they show that making explicit one's ambivalence and listening to narratives from nonjudgemental others is an effective way of reshaping political consciousness.

In June 2023, I interviewed Joshua Kalla about the body of work he has developed with other researchers (most notably Broockman), and their latest thinking about the mechanisms at work in deep canvassing. Kalla suggested that dissonance is most at work in the first part of the canvassing process, where subjects are asked to

[367] Note, for example, the same author's research that suggests that conventional methods of persuasion in contrast appear to have no effect compared to deep canvassing. Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman. "The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence From 49 Field Experiments." *American Political Science Review* 112.1, 2018: pp. 148-166.

[368] See more on this in McRaney, *How Minds Change*.

[369] Though it too is a harmful ideology that as McRaney's account notes often leaves individuals alienated from the trans people in their lives rather than acting in solidarity with them; and may perhaps contribute to limiting ideas about their own gendering.

consider their views and place them on a scale from 1-10. It is this process that helps them recognise what their beliefs are and notice the areas in which they are in contradiction with themselves or conflicted. However, little empirical work has been done to analyse the effects of this first part of canvassing. Instead, researchers have focused on what Kalla refers to as the second phase of deep canvassing, which is where the persuasion itself appears to happen, and specifically on how different techniques can lower subject's "reactance"--that is, their resistance to any sense they are being forced, so that they are willing to consider new ideas themselves and change their own minds. At present, having tested both "analogic perspective-taking" (where subjects are asked about a time a similar thing happened to them, or effectively asked to put themselves in the shoes of another person) and "narrative exchange" (where the canvasser hears a story about the person's experience with a social issue and then shares their own experience), Kalla and fellow researchers believe that the latter is generally necessary for persuasion after dissonance is stimulated, while the former is not necessarily effective for a successful change in belief. Kalla notes that it is explicitly the *canvasser* sharing their story that appears to have the persuasive effect, because "you can't argue back about someone else's experience."[370] Perhaps it makes it more difficult for people to reconcile their dissonance by dismissing new information when they have received it directly from someone standing in front of them deeply impacted by the issue. This is, by itself, an interesting consideration for theories of political discourse, suggesting that people's lived experiences empirically hold water in discourse in a way other types of arguments do not. In any case, Broockman and Kalla

[370] Interview on July 1st.

tried the effectiveness of deep canvassing with and without the story-sharing aspect and found that the practice was not effective without it.[371] This analysis of this technique suggests dissonance is involved in stimulating belief change and that an exchange of personal stories following the activation of dissonance makes belief change more likely.

More research could provide promising insights about how political conversations achieve belief change. It would be instructive, for example, to how much emphasis should be placed on non-judgmental listening, and how much on understanding the consequences of ideas on those different to ourselves. If non-judgement is key, for example, it would mean that far less moralising about political issues may well be an important principle for activists and social movements. If hearing stories about people's experiences with a social issue is more important, then more storytelling about the lives of marginalised people might prove a more effective approach to creating social change. Further research is likely needed to understand the

[371] Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman. "Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes Through Interpersonal Conversation: Evidence from Three Field Experiments." *American Political Science Review* 114.2 (2020): pp. 410-425.

In contrast, "analogic perspective-taking" may not be needed, and may only help at most. This is interesting because some of the techniques described are similar to what Habermas, in his theory of communicative action, terms "ideal role taking" (drawing from Mead) or "the universal principle." In such a process, propositions are analysed as if one were a variety of other people, to test whether such a proposition would also be good for them and could be universally applied. The goal is to attempt to leave standing only normative claims that can be agreed to by all through this empathic process. While "analogic perspective taking" of the literal type e.g. "has there been a time that you also experienced discrimination" does not appear to be effective in broadening people's thinking, it is interesting that the narrative exchange of stories, which is less directly like what Habermas describes, may work to help people broaden their thinking. Thus while explicitly analogic situations don't seem to work nor does the voter talking about the issue, there are some situations less similar to what Mead and Habermas imagine that nevertheless help people learn from one another what actually in practice happens for them in relation to social issues. Exchanging stories "non-judgmentally" also appears to do some work as subjects lower their defences as they come to see that they will not be judged for their current views or for changing them.

significance of these techniques and why they, alongside techniques to help people articulate their own dissonance, may create more fruitful conditions for dialog and political consciousness. Nevertheless, this research suggests that techniques built on cognitive dissonance research are capable of power changes in political consciousness and worthy of much further study and theorising. As research on deep canvassing has progressed, cognitive dissonance is increasingly cited as one mechanism involved in the measurable shifts in belief. Organising guides for deep canvassing now not only explicitly cite cognitive dissonance as one of their obstacles and explain what it is, but also accordingly teach the techniques that (ideally and theoretically) help participants notice their own discomfort and re-evaluate their ambivalent beliefs, like the 1-10 scaled questions also involved in motivational interviewing.[372] While it is not possible as yet to be sure that the success of deep canvassing techniques is definitively related to cognitive dissonance, there is good reason to think this might be true and that it is an area worthy of further study. This is a promising area for critical theorists to draw from as they consider the challenge of "false" political consciousness.

Noting the effectiveness of deep canvassing does not, of course, mean that all uses of it are normatively good, nor that it will always be the most effective way of instigating change. It merely means the technique may be worthy of consideration as one way of aiding social movements, and that the psychology behind it is also accordingly relevant for study. Nevertheless, given that I have suggested that emancipatory movements might use this technique, it is probably worth addressing two

[372] See, for example, Charlie Bartlett, "Everyone Should Learn to Deep Canvas. Here's Why." Take Action Minnesota, 7 June 2022. https://takeactionminnesota.org/everyone-should-learn-how-to-deep-canvass-heres-why/. Accessed 23 Oct 2023.

possible problems with the technique since I have put it forward as an example of the way that research on cognitive dissonance can lead to techniques for social movement. Firstly, some have argued that it can be straightforwardly manipulative, and others have argued that it is insufficient in the sense that it does not involve sufficient further community engagement. While the first charge, manipulation is important, I find it less persuasive than concerns about further community engagement. Most deep canvassing as it is currently practised involves people being at least somewhat honest about what they are asking for (at first, they say they're with a political group and want to have a conversation to understand the other's point of view), as well as honest about their own beliefs (at least at the end of the conversation). While it is possible to argue that the conversation should be preceded with an explanation of the goal of lowering prejudice (or whatever the goal is), this would likely lead to many fewer conversations, and no long term or direct lie is offered or maintained. More to the point, as deep canvassers themselves note, the "work" or persuasion is ultimately done by the person being canvassed; they are the ones who generally end up making their own set of new arguments and changing their own mind. Compared to many political persuasion techniques, which may involve a distortion of the facts, peer pressure, and so on, the "manipulativeness" of this technique is relatively mild, and largely involves asking questions that cause the person to grapple with their own internal ambivalence more than they may have expected, plus the consideration of alternative points of view. If we consider manipulation to be persuasion that in some way is achieved unfairly, via deception or force, then this technique perhaps does not qualify. There are, however, ways in which the ethics of this technique might be further improved. In particular, the

second charge--that deep canvassing often is done in a way which is relatively superficial in terms of sustained community engagement--is worth attending to.[373] One way to think about this is that, if it is indeed the sharing of stories that allows people to overcome some of the harmful effects of cognitive dissonance and reconsider their own views, then it may be because the act of having this kind of conversation reshapes our mind to think about those other people as part of our field of action-possibilities. They have, albeit temporarily, become relevant figures in our lives, perhaps even begun to mentally figure in our calculations about our community and the way our actions may affect others. If this is so, the leftist organising criticism of some of the deep canvassers is that they have shown up to this community in a superficial or even deceptive way, doing what Jane McAlevy would call "shallow mobilising" rather than "deep organising."[374] Rather than delve into this in detail given limited space, I leave this thought as a cautionary point about the significance of canvassing work and its relationship to organising--simply because a technique works does not mean there might not be better and worse ways of using said technique. If dissonance literature and deep canvassing literature can be used by critical theorists in aid of social movements, they should perhaps be only "used" alongside genuine long-term embedded efforts within a community to act in solidarity in a myriad of ways.

[373] See, for example, Kristin Demetrious, "Deep Canvassing: Persuasion, Ethics, Democracy and Activist Public Relations." P*ublic Relations Inquiry* 11.3 (2022): pp. 361-377.

[374] Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts,* p. 2.

Structural Changes to Stimulate Positive Dissonance

My suggestion is not that "deep canvassing" as it is currently practised is the main way for emancipatory theorists to develop their research into a useful praxis for social movements. Rather, it is that the type of psychological situations and reasoning involved in deep canvassing may prove a model for organisers and social movements as they develop their own ways of helping mobilise people. For this strategic reason, dissonance theory should be of deep interest to critical theorists as one of many ways of understanding how individuals sometimes overcome false consciousness, and it is worthy of study alongside other psychological processes that appear to work in tandem with dissonance to expand political consciousness, like analogic perspective-taking (rather than empathy on its own). Moreover, if these components are better researched and understood, it is possible that they could be translated into interventions that are less difficult, time-consuming, and expensive than deep canvassing. Overall, it might be possible to further develop techniques to help people grapple with the discomfort of dissonance and their own ambivalence about social and political issues so that they could arrive at new, often more liberating, conclusions. In addition, it may be possible to not simply create "techniques" for one set of human beings to employ on another, but to consider what structural changes might allow for conversations of the type described above to happen regularly simply as a function of the way the environment is designed. Perhaps the closest example at present to efforts in this area is the intentional creation of *social infrastructure.* Social infrastructure is sometimes defined narrowly, as the development of infrastructure that supports social services. But it can also be used more broadly, as the sociologist Eric Kleinenberg does when he describes it as

what "influences seemingly mundane but actually consequential patterns, from the way we move about our cities and suburbs to the opportunities we have to casually interact with strangers, friends, and neighbours…while social infrastructure alone isn't sufficient to unite polarised societies, protect vulnerable communities, or connect alienated individuals, we can't address those challenges without it."[375] Kleinenberg includes in his calculus libraries and parks, marketplaces and schools, playgrounds and gardens, and points towards a wealth of evidence that designing these spaces so that groups of people of wildly different backgrounds can mix while sharing a common set of resources leads to greater social trust and openness and the kinds of deeper conversations that reduce affective polarisation, the anger and distrust of those on "the other side" of political issues. It would be beneficial to consider what sorts of social infrastructure would allow for the same effects as deep canvassing, especially because these types of interventions may ultimately be cheaper or easier to organise (or even less "manipulative") than a team of dedicated canvassers.

Moreover, some research related to the action-based model of dissonance suggests that people can better handle dissonance discomfort when they do not feel as pressured to act immediately.[376] This in turn suggests that simply creating situations for people to consider their views without as much immediate pressure to act could lead some subjects to new conclusions (even if not directly in the framework of deep canvassing). Earlier I noted that while many current interventions related to cognitive

[375] Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces For the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarisation, and the Decline of Civic Life*. Crown, 2018: p. 14.

[376] This is the theory provided in, for example, Eddie Harmon-Jones, Cindy Harmon-Jones, and Nicholas Levy. "An Action-Based Model of Cognitive-Dissonance Processes." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24.3, 2015: pp. 184-189.

dissonance are energy intensive and individualistic, they can nevertheless point to wider insights. For example, if narrative exchange continues to prove important in helping people overcome the effects of dissonance, then social movements should look for ways to provide stories about social issues. If feeling a lack of judgement is important, the messages given by social movements may have to be less morally loaded than they currently are. Similarly, if the action-based approach to dissonance continues to demonstrate results, it suggests that people experience more dissonance when they feel it is possible to take action related to the topic at hand. There are two emancipatory possibilities that might emerge from this: one is a role for reflective thought where subjects do not feel pressured to act, so they can consider issues without the pressure of dissonance altogether (which might allow for longform, unpressured contemplation). This could be achieved not only through individualistic therapy-like sessions but through a fight for greater free time for all, or for longform learning processes as parts of social movements. The other, interestingly very different possibility is that social movements might wish to develop persuasive techniques that, like deep canvassing, do trigger the discomfort of dissonance but then help people make that discomfort explicit to themselves while giving them immediate, emancipatory possibilities for action. For example, social movements might provide communications that show people the gap between their stated views on racism or climate change and their actual daily actions, and then get them to immediately commit to antiracist or environmental activism. Even small actions provide new impetus for a shift in beliefs, thus helping move subjects both in terms of their actions and beliefs at the same time.

Accordingly, further research in this area is needed, both by empirical researchers (psychologists, social scientists, and the like) and by critical theorists interested in understanding why people change their views, and especially how those who are negatively impacted by harmful systems might be able to change their views to better understand this. More research is needed to develop a stronger sense of how modern subjects think about themselves, others, and oppressive systems. Further techniques could also be developed that build on the insights of existing techniques but improve on them in some way perhaps by making them more ethical, more long-term and embedded in the community, or both. Before this research can begin in full, however, the fundamental mechanisms allowing people to develop greater political consciousness ought to be thoroughly examined. What I have described above is a field without conceptual clarity about whether cognitive dissonance is the only factor at work in the success of these techniques and what else enables people to change their minds. At present, researchers have been hesitant to make claims about exactly what is causing people to change their political views after examining their own ambivalence. This is due in part to the limitations of disciplinary boundaries and the way that those trained in one field rarely wish to comment on the work of those done in another, especially if this might in some way limit their appeals for funding. Broockman and Kalla are, as they note, political scientists and thus more interested in proving their results are replicable than discovering their underlying mechanisms. Psychologists may similarly worry about approaching the kind of work Broockman and Kalla do to comment or collaborate, as they may feel they might be seen as promoting a particular political agenda.

But the role of critical theorists is to do just this: to use interdisciplinary critical social-scientific research to aid social movements that have a political agenda. They can and should contribute to pragmatic solutions that help social movements win people's hearts and minds, and vanquish "false consciousness." It should do this if it is, as Nancy Fraser, suggests, meant to "[frame] its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification."[377] Being willing to take the methodological leap and incorporate social-psychological empirical research in general, however critically and carefully, is a central aspect of doing this well. In addition to the lab research described in earlier chapters, the techniques described above provide solid ground for imagining, researching, and testing new ways of developing political consciousness at scale. Capitalising on a renewed interest in psychology in the wake of recent political events (Trump, Brexit, the January 6th insurrection, and so on) many liberal and even reactionary theorists have spilt endless ink and even built careers interpreting political events through the field of cognitive psychology.[378] But critical theorists have been cautious. It is time to connect this research with the political consciousness of the oppressed, to avoid the previous quietism of the Frankfurt School tradition and instead offer tools for social movements to help people come to greater political consciousness.

[377] Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender" *New German Critique* No. 35, Special Issue on Jurgen Habermas, Spring - Summer, 1985, pp. 113.

[378] Often these fields of literature focus on terms like motivated reasoning, bias, and polarisation.

Implications for the Field of Critical Theory

Dissonance literature provides a specific account of how subjects develop "false consciousness," or a faulty understanding of their own political agency. But it also points to wider implications for the field of critical theory. Below I describe how dissonance literature means critical theorists should view subjects as less acquiescent and more motivated by agency and meaning. I also suggest that critical theorists can turn their attention from matters of argumentation and discourse to action. And finally, I argue that critical theorists should come to value and use cognitive science more regularly in their work.

Subjects Crave Agency

Dissonance theory's relationship to subject's sense of agency should disabuse theorists of the image of a passive subject, one who does not care about their agential possibilities. Dissonance theory findings suggest that even as people experience "false consciousness" (and resist evidence of their own oppression) they do so in part because they want to preserve their sense of agency and their own action-possibilities. This stands in sharp contrast with many accounts of false consciousness that portray the oppressed as essentially acquiescent. Many accounts by those in the early Frankfurt school are relatively pessimistic about possibilities for subjects to recognise their political position or (accordingly) take action towards liberation. Adorno verges on suggesting the only way to break out of the illusion of ideology is through high art, and Marcuse thinks it is nearly impossible to think well in our current society (although both thinkers of course view themselves as thinking well). The general suggestion is that instrumental reason and its detrimental effects are so all-encompassing that it is

nearly impossible for subjects to arrive at a critical stance about society. As Habermas notes, this puts this generation of thinkers in a curious position in which there is hardly "anything in reserve to which it might appeal; and when the forces of production enter into a baneful symbiosis with the relations of production that they were supposed to blow wide open, there is no longer any dynamism upon which critique could base its hope."[379] This positioning of the question of false consciousness by first generation thinkers risks being both fatalistic and condescending. It also is likely a contributing reason that critical theorists of that and subsequent generations were less focused on coming up with tools for social movements than they might have been: they may have believed that no tools for social movements would be sufficient to help the subjects of late capitalism come to greater political consciousness or even win back a better form of life should they recognise their position. And of course, critical theorists are not alone in this pessimism and lack of belief in subjects' desire for agency. Even accounts of political consciousness opposed to the concept of false consciousness (like that of Abercrombie, who suggests people are merely resigned to their fate due to the "dull compulsion of labour") depict subjects who are not significantly motivated by agency, where agency again means the ability for subjects to direct their own lives and make change in their social world.

In contrast to the Frankfurt School's failure to theorise forms of agency for the oppressed, research on cognitive dissonance suggests that political subjects in modernity are in fact motivated to exercise agency or at least maintain the sense that

[379] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. MIT press, 1990, p. 118.

they have agency, even if they often do this in seemingly perverse ways. This finding is especially clear in the relatively new research on the action-based theory of dissonance, where subjects are so motivated to take action that dissonance is largely a discomfort that occurs when it is unclear how to act. But it is also evident in models of dissonance theory where one's sense of self as an agent for good is under threat (e.g. Cooper's self-standards model), and even in the very early "induced compliance" tests I described in Chapter Two. All this research suggests that subjects would rather shift their beliefs in otherwise improbable ways, or hold on to beliefs that are difficult to defend, rather than acknowledge they have less control over their lives than they would like. Indeed, subjects may choose not to believe in their own oppression precisely because to accept this political reality would force them to reckon with their own lack of individual agency. As John T. Jost's work on "System Justification Theory," described in earlier chapters, suggests, those who are most oppressed may be actually be the most likely to endorse the social system as fair, in part because it allows them to believe that there are still opportunities for them within it and therefore that they are not without agency to change their lives. In contrast, those already doing well within a system may know it is not fair but do not need to believe it is to continue to engage in their daily actions because, due to luck and structural advantages, they still have good opportunities available to them.[380] Importantly, to return briefly to insights for social movements and struggles, those who seek to address oppression may need to avoid focusing on framing issues in terms of victimisation, as this might cause people to

[380] See once again John T. Jost, et al. "Social Inequality and the Reduction of Ideological Dissonance on Behalf of the System: Evidence of Enhanced System Justification Among the Disadvantaged." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 33.1, 2003: p. 1.

avoid acknowledging that systems are unfair (even though this is often true). If Jost's theories are correct, subjects feel uncomfortable dissonance when they learn about the unfairness of systems because it triggers dissonance about why they continue to act and even support a system even though it works against them. Subjects then resolve this dissonance by discounting the evidence that they are oppressed or at a disadvantage. Narratives that place the oppressed as helpless victims may be especially unlikely to be effective, and those who work in social movement building should take heed of these kinds of findings. Another key insight can be drawn from this field of "System Justification Theory". Some of this research suggests people reconcile themselves with restrictions on their lives, or oppression, that they cannot escape or see as inevitable.[381] This in turn suggests that one of the roles of social movements is to make another world imaginable, as this in turn appears to enable subjects to feel dissatisfied and resistant to the status quo.

Subjects are, according to this research, not passive dupes, but in fact care deeply about the relationships of power in their own lives and their relationship to politics. In fact, they care a great deal—but sometimes care in ways that lead them to live in denial about their own political reality. At the same time, in contrast with the assumptions of many theorists, there is hope that the same desire for agency can lead subjects to greater political consciousness. If, as the field research described earlier in this chapter suggests, subjects can come to more thoughtful views by being induced to face their dissonance directly, then there are also instances where subjects may be

[381] See e.g. Kristin Laurin, Aaron C. Kay, and Gavan J. Fitzsimons. "Reactance Versus Rationalisation: Divergent Responses to Policies that Constrain Freedom." *Psychological Science* 23.2 (2012): pp. 205-209.

brought around to greater political consciousness by being allowed to work out the contradictions of their views in a supported way, for themselves, in a way that highlights how they might direct their lives differently in the future. This insight is important because it diverges from the totalising accounts of ideology or a fatalist acceptance of a passive proletariat described above. Instead, it suggests that the subjects of modernity face pressure to maintain an account of themselves as agents for good, and that this pressure can in some specific cases lead them to greater political consciousness. There is no need to be fatalistic in all instances of oppression; people can and do sometimes leave what we might call "false consciousness," and there are reasons to hope they could come to greater political consciousness more often. This finding in turn suggests that it is probably also important for theorists look closely at the way subjects seek and preserve this sense of agency more broadly (that is, in other areas of psychology outside of dissonance theory) and to consider this as one important factor in helping people "escape" false consciousness and develop political consciousness.

Subjects Crave Consistency, Meaning and Sense of Self

Dissonance literature does not only suggest that people seek agency as they develop their political beliefs; it also suggests that people seek consistency about their sense of self and the ways they find meaning in the wider world, two other relatively neglected considerations in theories of false consciousness. Defending one's sense of having done good in the past or being able to do good in the future, or wishing for a sense of consistency between one's actions and beliefs (the literal definition of cognitive dissonance!), is all part of a larger orientation towards being able to build a

coherent sense of who one is and what one does. Dissonance theory thus suggests subjects deceive themselves because they are driven towards consistency and meaning-making about their lives. Their harmful political beliefs are not the result of mere stupidity or gullibility, but a psychological drive toward meaning-making, especially meaning-making that allows for a certain kind of positive agential self-image, even if this comes at the expense of truth. At the moment, reactionary movements make use of this drive by providing narratives about how subjects can "take back control" or "make America great again," but progressive movements could potentially also play to this sense of agency if they are able to describe a world where enough collective action can reshape the world towards less racial oppression, patriarchy, capitalist oppression, and so on. This point in turn provides further reasons for critical theorists to consider ways to reach those who otherwise will turn to regressive ideas to build a sense of meaning and coherence in their lives. As both Nancy Fraser and Amy Allen put it, it is foolish and incorrect to imagine that current reactionaries are simply "bad." As Allen puts it (when rehashing Fraser's argument)

> …is it really the case that "they"—those who inhabit these reactionary subject positions—are so heteronomous, so regressive, and so easily manipulated? ...This is not at all to deny that there are hard-core racists, white nationalists, misogynists, and homophobes who support right-wing populist movements. But it is to wager that there may be many Trump voters who do not fall into these categories and who thus could be part of a new, progressive political realignment against neoliberalism. If Fraser's analysis is compelling, as I think it is, and if critical theorists would do well …to understand the affective energies that fuel authoritarian movements, as I think we would, then we need a different kind of psychoanalytic language to help us understand the deep irrationality of our politics and the possibilities for moving beyond our current impasses.[382]

[382] Amy Allen, *Critique on The Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis*. New Directions in Critical Theory Vol. 73. Columbia University Press, 2020: p. 191.

Many who are drawn into regressive or oppressive movements or ideas are not simply hateful or deplorable. Subjects join these movements or embrace these ideas for affective reasons. If further research in this area points to similar conclusions, it suggests critical theorists interested in questions of ideology and false consciousness might fruitfully explore a relationship with affect studies and other strands of theory that acknowledge the role of emotion and affect in people's political lives. Effective research and praxis involves an interest in subjects' affective states, not just their stated beliefs (just as in dissonance research it is the subject's unstated discomfort that is relevant, not just their sometimes-strange conscious rationalisations). And one of these important areas of study related to affect is people's drive towards meaning-making and consistency in their sense of self. The subjects described by Fraser and Allen could be drawn out of their reactionary belief systems once again via thoughtful intervention that is conscious of the role of affect and the need for meaning-making. These subjects could satisfy the same desires for meaning and consistency in progressive movements. But unlike Allen in this particular passage, my suggestion for how to understand these possibilities goes beyond psychoanalysis. While psychoanalysis has many uses and virtues, it also has some methodological downsides. As I discussed in earlier chapters, it is often built off assumptions about the nuclear family that critical theorists should be suspicious of, and it is generally aligned with a very time and money intensive process. There are, however, many insights in dissonance literature that can be applied without such assumptions and in less "expensive" ways. Moreover, dissonance literature can quite simply add to and diversify the number of theoretical tools that are at hand to turn

reactionary subjects and those in false consciousness towards greater political understanding.

Subjects are Changed by Action as Much as Argument

Cognitive dissonance research also suggests that social movements interested in helping to politicise people's consciousness should not underestimate the role of helping people engage in small-scale action. Actions that not only get people involved for a moment but change who people identify with or how they behave on a daily basis, are likely to be even more powerful and effective. This is on the one hand a concrete point for those engaged in social movements, but it is also a suggestion about areas for further research. Overall, findings in the cognitive dissonance literature about how people align their beliefs with actions that are seemingly freely chosen suggests that when it comes to analysing false consciousness, it is important not only to look at media and communications that people receive, as so many theorists do, but also at the actions that they are pragmatically engaged in day to day, as these actions may determine as much as anything the beliefs they come to hold. Moreover, if our actions are often the precursor to our beliefs, and not the other way around, then this can help explain why discourse alone may be so ineffective at changing our minds. This in turn suggests that rather than merely seeking to transform the ways that people engage in discourse (as emphasised in Habermasian thought), it would instead be more effective to consider ways of either altering people's daily action-possibilities or getting people to change their daily activities. For example, community organising, in the sense of organising people to perform new activities, from acts of mutual aid to protest to going

on strike, may be more effective at long-term belief change than any particular alteration in speech acts themselves. As a result it may be more important to make joining the union free and easy than to come up with the best possible arguments for why unions are good (to provide just one example). It may be more important to engage in a "giving of actions" when it comes to social change than a "giving of reasons."

Critical Theorists Can Value Cognitive Science

What I have laid out here and in previous chapters suggests the need for theorists to take cognitive science and social psychology seriousl--though not uncritically--in ways they have not done so far. Only a few critical theorists have written about, or made use of, brain science, in part because they have some justification for avoiding these areas. Some may be concerned about "psychologising" about political problems (a concern I have addressed in earlier chapters). Others may recognise there is frequently scant practical reward in academia for crossing disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, turning to these areas involves taking on an entirely different field with a very different methodology than our own. Furthermore, there is a great deal to criticise about the current state of social psychological research, from imprecise study design, the low replicability scandal involving p-values that were likely too high to indicate a reliable result, and in some cases straightforward fraud (including in the earliest version of a study I have cited in this chapter, on deep

canvassing).[383] Indeed, even the fact that many cognitive psychology studies are conducted largely on a researcher's own undergraduates (because these students can be compelled to be study participants in exchange for class credit) is clearly problematic.[384] Critical theorists interested in working in this field should be alive to this very serious set of methodological pitfalls. But they are also well positioned, because of their critical approach to the positivist method, to spot some of these errors (like an overly individualistic or naturalistic account of dissonance) and in so doing avoid these traps while providing useful critiques of the field. For example, as they glean some insights from this research, they can highlight the motives that drive scientific results under capitalism and caution other researchers about the often-flawed frameworks under which these studies are conducted (so that mental health is often defined in terms of productivity, to give just one obvious example).

Despite these understandable objections, I suggest that there are even stronger reasons for critical theorists to incorporate findings from these fields. Firstly, these neighbouring areas of research, cognitive science and social psychology, are likely to only expand over time, and so critical theorists ignore this burgeoning area at their peril. Researchers proceeding without it risk appearing ignorant or outdated in their thinking by not engaging with this work, and risk theorising in ways that will appear implausible as we gather more information about how human minds and social

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[383] See the history of this in Brian Resnick, "How to Talk Someone Out of Bigotry." *Vox.com.* Jan 29th, 2020. https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21065620/broockman-kalla-deep-canvassing. Accessed Dec 2nd, 2023.

[384] Plus, as Joseph Henrich notes, "American undergraduates, in particular, seem unusually self-absorbed, even among other WEIRD populations." Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. Penguin UK, 2020: p. 26.

interactions appear to work. Ignoring these fields also risks leaving the social movements with which critical theory aligns itself without an effective account of what they are likely to face when it comes to changing people's minds, building social movements, and overcoming what many left-wing theorists call false consciousness. To ignore the most modern research on human psychology, however imperfectly conducted, is both methodologically and politically problematic, as it alienates critical theorists from a social and psychological methodology on which they could fruitfully, if critically, build, and in so doing refuses the important challenges of strategically shaping political consciousness in the 21st century. I suggest that if critical theory is to be an effective handmaiden to social movements, it should instead incorporate research from psychology with a critical and thoughtful eye. Critical theorists should consider and sometimes acknowledge, interpret, and even make use of the insights of model cognitive science.

There is no need as critical theorists to exclude ourselves from these insights simply because we are aware that they are in many cases flawed or historically contingent--so long as we are willing to do so in a way that is mindful of flaws and historical contingencies. Historians have already set a precedent for this kind of work, i.e. the mixing of traditional methods and cognitive science. For example, in his work *The Navigation of Feeling*, the historian William Reddy considers the range of possibilities for human emotions that appear possible cross-culturally, using both an anthropological and cognitive-scientific lens. He then uses this analysis to construct suggestions about which sorts of environments (and by extension political orders)

might allow subjects greater "emotional freedom."[385] This last nearly-prescriptive aspect of his research may be a stretch for the tradition of negative critique that has long prevailed in critical theory (especially Frankfurt School critical theory). Yet there is nevertheless an important insight here and in this type of work: it may be possible to judge certain political possibilities more clearly, and eliminate some poor theories about how things work or could work for political subjects, if we can apply a cognitive-psychological lens. As Reddy noted in an interview in an interview in May 2010, while it is probably not crucial that all historians of emotion immerse themselves in cognitive psychology or neuroscience research, "it is worth noting that sociologists, political scientists, and economists are actively developing subfields…that rely on cognitive neuroscience for their research paradigms… the discipline of history could benefit in similar fashion. At the same time, I also think that it is a serious mistake to simply 'utilise' uncritically the results of research in this field."[386] This dissertation aligns with the case Reddy is making towards fellow historians, an argument for increased attention to the insights of modern scientific research on the brain. We can accept that there are some important insights in cognitive-scientific and social-psychological literature that can be used as tools to seek liberation, while also taking into consideration the cultural and historical peculiarities of our current moment and the way the biases of our current, capital-driven society twist knowledge production and even our own subjectivity. These insights can be held together. One starting point

[385] William M. Reddy. *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[386] Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: an Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns." *History and Theory* 49.2, 2010: p. 248.

for this kind of research is the insights of Joseph Heinrich's research, described in Chapter Two. As I have argued, critical theorists should pick up on this area of research and go further, to demonstrate modern "Western" culture shapes the mind in unhelpful and individualising ways. Another might be the work of Thomas Metzinger, who combines philosophical reflection with neuroscience and whose work I have mentioned earlier, and who demonstrates the way a constructed sense of self functions as an illusion.[387]

It is especially important for critical theorists to engage with social psychology and cognitive science because doing otherwise effectively leaves the insights of cognitive psychology and social psychology to other theorists and public intellectuals, many of whom put these fields of psychological science mainly towards relatively mild ends, like "building consensus" and preventing polarisation. In recent years a large number of books written by academic psychologists have not only been popular within the academy but also influential outside it. Perhaps the most famous account of this kind is *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman.[388] Another hugely influential work is the book *Nudge* by Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, which generated considerable enthusiasm among many policymakers as a guide for how to "nudge" citizens into making more "rational" choices at an individual level.[389] (Others view the book as paternalistic or indicative of the overly individualistic framework of

[387] Metzinger's work plays a central role in Mattin's writings on dissonance. Earlier I cited his public-facing book; the more academic tome is Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*. MIT Press, 2004.

[388] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Macmillan, 2011.

[389] Richard H. Thaler, and Cass R. Sunstein. *Nudge: The Final Edition.* Yale University Press, 2021.

neoliberalism.) Other influential examples are the works of Stephen Pinker and Jonathan Haidt, two American psychologists who have each written a series of books on how individual subjects might come to reason better via specific changes in discourse (e.g. reframing, cognitive exercises to sharpen one's logic, and so on).[390] While there is perhaps value in avoiding cognitive biases where one can or even nudging students in the school cafeteria line away from brownies and towards bananas, these books share a few crucial flaws: an uncritical approach to the way the science itself is produced, liberal frameworks where the implied or explicit political goal is some type of consensus or at minimum convergence of views, and a largely uncritical understanding of material political questions involving money, capital, or power.[391] These critiques have been made regularly since the rise of these types of books and the semi-celebrity status of these psychologists. For example, Moira Weigel writes of *The Coddling of the American Mind,* by Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, that "despite the title, which suggests cultural or civilisational diagnosis, the checklists and worksheets distributed through this book make clear that its genre is self-help…the framing leaves no room to consider how historical and social change might legitimately change institutions or individuals, or that individuals might want to change their world." By suggesting that most problems can be fixed with small changes to the

[390] See Jonathan Haidt, and Greg Lukianoff. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin UK, 2018. Also Steven Pinker, Rationality: *What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*. Penguin, 2022.

[391] See Moira Weigel, "The Coddling of the American Mind Review–How Elite US Liberals Have Turned Rightwards." *The Guardian*. 20th Sept 2018. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/20/the-coddling-of-the-american-mindreview Oct 23rd 2023.

malfunctioning of the human mind, these types of books neglect the much larger structures and social problems and the way they deform social consciousness.

These liberal theorists use psychology in a relatively uncritical way, but they have at least engaged with it more than superficially, unlike many critical theorists. To respond to them, and to be able to provide necessary critique of their underlying political philosophies, scholars in the critical theory tradition cannot simply ignore the related field of science--both because it has provides insights and because it avoids a full conversation about what is possible for human societies, and what is at stake politically. We too need to be able to give an account of human behaviour, one that does not ignore empirical studies, even as it demonstrates their situated and sometimes problematic nature. Only then can we provide a stronger, better account of why human beings reason poorly about politics and what it would look like if they reasoned better. At the moment, it is writings like those of Pinker, Haidt, Sunstein, and indeed even stranger and darker popularisers like Jordan Peterson that dominate the public's understanding of how minds work and how this affects political reasoning. Because these writers can claim legitimacy through their scientific research, their work appears to simply be "reasonable," and the political views they import into it come across as commonsense. If critical theorists wish to in some way alter people's assumptions about what good political consciousness looks like, they may need to engage with the same science but point out (as I have attempted to do here) that it can be used alongside very different political concerns to work towards more radical political ends. In other words, research by critical theorists that incorporates recent psychological science could also provide an important response to other fields of political theory that

have taken a renewed interest in psychology, but which use psychological research to draw very different political conclusions.

Liberal writers and theorists (including the ones I just mentioned) tend to focus their suggestions about how to improve the public sphere on "unbiased" media and the teaching of "critical thinking." While neither of these is undesirable, both can be rather vague and many attempts of this kind appear to have little effect.[392] The underlying assumption in works like these is that once consumers of ideas are given a basic consumer education about the "marketplace of ideas" and taught to avoid psychological pitfalls, they will be able to overcome their faulty heuristics and biases in order to choose the best ideas. But as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, the mind and brain do not appear to work this way. Subjects begin with a set of existing beliefs and defend them regardless of further reasoning or evidence provided to them. This is not because people are stupid or "biased" but because cognitive dissonance makes it painful for our ideas and our actions not to align. In other words, to change their minds, dissonance theory suggests that subjects do not simply require a mental re-adjustment. If one attempts to change people's beliefs without providing new opportunities for action, they will likely experience dissonance about the gap between their lifestyle and the new ideas and resist. They will likely continue to believe whatever is needed to justify the lifestyle that they hold (from eating meat to going to work) even if it is not, in some other sense, in their best interests (because, for example, eating meat will worsen climate damage to their local area or because their

[392] An analysis of just how difficult it is to teach "critical thinking" can be found here: Tim Van Gelder, "Teaching Critical Thinking: Some Lessons from Cognitive Science." *College Teaching* 53.1 (2005): pp. 41-48.

labour is exploited). To truly think freely, subjects would need to be able to live a life where they could have a different lifestyle, so that new beliefs could form in consonance with a new way of living and thus be tolerable to contemplate in the first place. Critical theorists can use insights from dissonance theory, and perhaps other psychological theories as well, to demonstrate that understanding human psychology points not only to the need for psychological adjustments or minor environmental adjustments but to radical change in people's lives if they are to be able to think more freely.

Another source of possible scaleable insights is the action-based theory of dissonance, which suggests dissonance is triggered when subjects notice a contradiction between their beliefs and actions that challenges their future ability to know how to act. This branch of the theory suggests that subjects might either benefit from an unpressured environment (eg. not tied to any particular set of possible actions for the subject) or that they require many immediate possibilities for emancipatory actions presented as part of any introduction to new ideas. It matters more, in other words, if people can realistically (say) create a local affordable childcare centre, install solar panels, defund the police, live communally, or go on strike than whether they can hear good arguments for related ideas. At present, there is too much emphasis on argumentation, from traditional liberal conceptions of a marketplace of ideas to the works of Honneth and Habermas. If, as some forms of dissonance research suggest, we are most persuaded by seeing a contradiction between our actions and beliefs and then recognising there is something we can do to change our actions and realign some of our beliefs, then the action-possibilities available to subjects, even "small" ones, are as

important as any arguments. Social movements should be at least as much about organising action-possibilities for people to consider as providing arguments, and this distinction, it seems to me, is crucial to moving forward from a Habermasian conception of the public sphere into something more likely to create effective change. Such an approach would also far outstrip the approach of liberal theorists who focus on abstract questions about relatively abstract arguments or free speech. Critical theorists can analyse some of the same psychological research already written about by liberal writers, but find ways to bring about far more effective and radical praxis.

Finally, as I discussed in detail in Chapter Two, dissonance theory has been part of a wider analysis of the cultural specificity of the Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic" or "WEIRD" subject. Recent literature suggests that while cognitive dissonance does appear in both Western and non-Western subjects, it is particularly prevalent in the subjects of Western, industrialised, rich, and "democratic" countries. Moreover, Western subjects are especially concerned with their own agency and motivation, as well as their individualised sense of self. This type of research on WEIRDness carries with it its own important methodological insight for critical theorists: that there are cross-cultural psychology comparisons within cognitive psychology that can be utilised by critical theorists. In the hands of critical theorists, these cultural studies may provide one way of understanding what is specific to western industrialised subjectivity under capitalism. Dissonance literature can help theorists understand these individualised facets of political consciousness as not "natural" but culturally, historically, and even economically specific, part of the way that capitalism and its accompanying social pathologies shape our subjectivity. This

wider analysis of what dissonance theory demonstrates about subjectivity provides yet another reason for critical theorists to engage with psychological literature in this area. Unlike most psychologists and liberal theorists currently interpreting cognitive science and social psychology (that is, unlike those who do this primarily through a liberal political lens, with implicit assumptions about what is "natural") critical theorists can build on the critical angle provided by the traditional "marriage" of Marx and Freud to combine material analysis with psychological research.

Conclusion

If recognising painful contradictions in one's own behaviour and beliefs can in fact eventually lead to better forms of political understanding, then overcoming the pernicious effects of cognitive dissonance can help not only individual subjects but also societies better understand their political reality. In this chapter I have suggested ways that social movements can build on some preliminary successes in canvassing that help people notice their dissonance consciously and arrive at more thorough evaluations of political issues. While these techniques are by themselves only one limited kind of approach to helping subjects overcome false consciousness, they demonstrate the potential of techniques that build from the cognitive dissonance literature. More research and testing are needed to not only determine exactly what is at work in these successes but to create and test further techniques, some of which might work better at scale. Critical theorists should support these areas of praxis with theory and aid for empirical research.

At the same time, these successes and my wider points about dissonance suggest areas for further theoretical work. In particular, I suggest that critical theorists should return to the question of false consciousness and not only apply the specific insights I have highlighted in earlier chapters about interpellation and the ego, but also note more generally the importance of subject's sense of agency when contemplating their political reality, as well as their drive towards a sense of coherence, meaning, and future action-possibilities. Critical theorists should consider these needs when seeking to understand why political movements fail or succeed, how capitalism sustains itself, and what liberatory struggles could do better. Finally, I suggest that beyond this, critical theorists should dare to extend the marriage of Marx and Freud to include modern psychological science. There are a number of problematic aspects of empirical cognitive science and social psychology research, but a critical perspective on these can not only account for these issues but also incorporate some of these psychological insights into an evaluation of why human beings think and behave the way they do in late-stage capitalism. Moreover, by engaging with this research but placing it in the context of material and social forces (as most psychologists and liberal theorists do not) critical theorists can enhance our understanding of modern subjectivity in all its woes and possibilities in new and interesting ways.

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Conclusion

> *A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point.*

- *Leon Festinger et al, When Prophecy Fails*[393]

As I have argued in previous chapters, critical theorists often claim to be working to actively assist a struggle for liberation, but often are unhelpfully vague in their references to human psychology, perhaps for fear of crossing disciplines or else "psychologising." Others rely heavily on psychoanalysis, which has many interesting insights but also limited in some ways as it relies on assumptions about the nuclear family, is expensive as an actual practice, neglects modern research techniques and insights of neuroscience, and more. In recent decades, many critical theorists have also increasingly turned away from theories of false consciousness, perhaps for fear of appearing patronising or psychologising material woes. Despite this trend, social movements today still require a theory of false consciousness given the massive challenge of mobilisation for change facing left movements in the 21st century, on issues ranging from climate change to automation to inequality. Theorists without a psychological account of false consciousness are unable to explain why subjects believe in, and even fight for, ideas that justify their own oppression. This in turn leaves them unable to theorise about solutions, to understand how and why subjects can sometimes come to reject oppressive ideas and escape harmful ideologies.

[393] Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter. *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World*. Lulu Press, Inc, 2017.

Dissonance theory can help with this pressing theoretical and practical challenge. I have argued that cognitive dissonance theory provides both evidence and explanation for the mechanism of "interpellation," whereby subjects are drawn into belief systems via their actions. In the 21st century, as subjects live in neoliberalism rather than Fordist models of capitalism, it may be more accurate to describe the process of ideological subject-formation in terms of subjects engaging in actions and then bringing their beliefs into alignment with these actions, rather than being passive dupes or merely engaging in conformity. Dissonance theory can help explain how this kind of "positive" subject formation works psychologically. I have also argued that cognitive dissonance theory provides a new and more thoughtful understanding of the role of the ego in subjects' belief formation, whereby a "good" ego, one capable of reasoning well about issues, is neither "weak" in the sense of loosely defined nor "strong" in the sense of defended but rather one that can tolerate ambivalence and ambiguity. And I have argued that dissonance theory can do a better job of explaining the reality of political reasoning than accounts underpinned by developmental psychology, one that better represents the patchy and mixed ways that subjects reason. While each of these chapters respond to a very different set of theories about what has classically been termed "false consciousness," in each case dissonance theory can provide direction and clarification where previous theories have run into a troubling lack of clarity, an apparently unresolvable paradox, or simply an unrealistic picture of human reasoning. In all these cases, by thinking about theories of false consciousness through the lens of cognitive dissonance, it becomes possible to analyse which theories are most likely to be accurate, useful descriptions of how modern subjects interpret

their political world and how they come to believe (or overcome) harmful ideologies. What is needed in any theory of false consciousness, I have suggested, is a "worm's eye" view that looks at psychological mechanisms (though not psychological mechanisms alone!), one that demonstrates the "escapability" of poor political consciousness, one that contains an account of the perversity or strong attachment humans form to their own harmful beliefs, and one that allows for patchiness, where subjects can have political consciousness in one area but not in another, and where subjects in similar circumstances might come to different levels of political consciousness. Dissonance theory helps provide all four of these characteristics to any theory of ideology or false consciousness as it provides an escapable mechanism, an account of the strong drive towards apparent consistency in one's sense of self and agency, and a situation- and topic- specific account of beliefs. All this in turn is important because understanding how false consciousness is formed at the psychological level, with a structural underpinning, remains a critical task in a world where people not only believe in more "traditional" harmful ideologies about race, capitalism, patriarchy, religion, and the state, but also new harmful false beliefs related to things like climate change, coronavirus, Q-Anon, and more. Dissonance theory provides a starting point for greater strategic clarity, a particularly central and informative psychological theory.

To the extent that critical theorists continue to ignore the tools of contemporary psychology, it has foreclosed its own action-possibilities. This is a shame for many reasons, not least that it leaves psychology to others with perhaps less liberatory ends. At present, perhaps the most common usages of psychology in the realm of politics in

recent years have involved "nudge units" designed to adjust citizens in an individualistic and unconscious way towards policy outcomes while appearing "apolitical."[394] Much of the possible interesting or genuinely transformative usage of cognitive psychology for political ends is probably yet undiscovered, but it may be that there are ways to use this kind of empirical insight to help people achieve conscious deliberation about the contradictions in their world and what they might do about them. Indeed, I have returned to dissonance theory in part because it is one of many modern psychological theories that emphasise subjects' attachment to their own sense of self and agency. The WEIRD literature I have mentioned in previous chapters (i.e. the work on the peculiar traits of people in Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich Democratic countries)broadly suggests that Western subjects in particular are very tied to this sense of individual self and agency. This attachment to self and agency can, ironically, be an impediment to political consciousness, as demonstrated by dissonance theory, but I suggest that it is nevertheless also a hopeful phenomenon in some ways. While this sense of an agency is often overly individualised, atomised, and even simply inaccurate, it is something that left-wing theorists should appreciate and be attentive to, because it suggests that people do in fact want to have control over their lives and destinies, and that, if this desire were in some way reoriented or harnessed, it could fuel emancipatory movements. Dissonance theory suggests human beings are motivated by a sense of agency and can be motivated by meaning rather than material benefit. This, too, could work to the benefit of social movements. That human beings

[394] See Andy McSmith, "First Obama, Now Cameron Embraces 'Nudge Theory'" *The Independent*. 12 August 2010. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/first-obama-now-cameron-embraces-nudge-theory-2050127.html. Accessed 9 December 2023.

are subjects motivated to understand the world and do good in it, troubled by the contradictions that arise in doing so, and sometimes able to consciously reflect on these contradictions, suggests that there is always reason to hope for greater political consciousness. Furthermore, since dissonance is likely at least somewhat ineradicable, it is best that theorists account for it in their theories of political consciousness in order to better model realistic possibilities for political consciousness. Critical theorists should take up whatever tools they can, always with a methodological caution and self-awareness, to help individuals and social movements come closer to understanding the world as it is, in all its oppressive elements and liberatory possibilities for action. Armed with a better understanding of human psychology, perhaps both critical theorists and social movements will then be able to not just understand the world but also change it.

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