Non-Ideal Theory as Ideology

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Abstract: Charles W. Mills developed an argument against ideal theorizing that is inspired by the early writings of Marx and Engels. He argues that the development and refinement of non-ideal theories contributes more to ending oppressive power structures than the development and refinement of ideal theories. For this reason, he concludes that ideal theories play the role of an ideology. In this article, I expose a yet undiagnosed weakness of this argument: I point out that history is rife with examples of political organizations that struggle to identify an effective political practice because they find themselves in a situation of theoretical crisis. Thus, *contra* Mills, it turns out that ideal theorizing is sometimes a more viable strategy to end oppressive power structures than non-ideal theorizing. So, if we accept the basic premises of Mills's argument, it turns out that non-ideal theorizing should be classified as an ideology as well. To further corroborate this claim, I point out some problems for Mills's interpretation of Marx and Engels. If my assessment is right, then it turns out to be unclear if the intellectual authorities that Mills invokes actually lend support to his critique of ideal theorizing.

> "[T]he recovery of theory's independence lies in the interest of practice itself." – Theodor W. Adorno

§ 1. Introduction

In his influential article *'Ideal Theory' as Ideology* (2005)*,* Charles W. Mills argues that the development and refinement of non-ideal theories contributes much more to the project of human liberation than the development and refinement of ideal theories that we find in, say, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) or Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974). Thus, because ideal theories tend to 'crowd out' non-ideal theories, Mills concludes that the former play the role of an ideology. He claims that his criticism of ideal theories is inspired by Marx's and Engels's criticism of their Young Hegelian predecessors from the mid-1840s. Mills's criticism has influenced a great number of philosophers working in different fields (e.g., Stanley 2015: 27–38, Mikkola 2018, Knight 2020, McKenna 2023: 19–44, Ernst / Mühlebach forthcoming).

In this article, I point out an undiagnosed weakness of Mills's critique of ideal theory. I argue that history is rife with examples of political organizations that struggle to identify an effective political practice because they find themselves in a situation of theoretical crisis. Therefore, *contra* Mills, it turns out that prioritizing ideal theorizing is sometimes a more viable strategy to end oppressive power structures than prioritizing non-ideal theorizing. For this reason, I will conclude that a strong interpretation of Mills's objection against ideal theory turns out to be unsound. Even though I concede that Mills can evade this objection by restricting the scope of his argument, I will show that this move has an unwelcome

consequence for Mills as well: we must accept an analogous argument for the thesis that non-ideal theorizing plays the role of an ideology as well. To further support this claim, I demonstrate that Mills's framing of his position as a continuation of the intellectual project of Marx and Engels is questionable for two reasons: On the one hand, Mills seems to misdiagnose the target of Marx's and Engels's criticism. Marx and Engels criticize *both* ideal theorizing and non-ideal theorizing as insufficient political strategies in the Europe of the mid-1840s. On the other hand, taking inspiration from Theodor W. Adorno, I argue that even if we ignore these exegetical worries, Mills underestimates the extent to which Marx's and Engels's criticism is indexed to a specific historical situation that arguably no longer obtains today. If Adorno is right to claim that the political movements that are still committed to the political goals of Marx and Engels find themselves in a situation of theoretical crisis, then it becomes unclear whether their authority can be invoked today to support Mills's criticism of ideal theorizing.

I would like to clarify that my intention is not to argue that Mills's argument against ideal theorizing is without merit. I believe that Mills correctly points out that political philosophers (especially proponents of Rawls's flavor of liberalism) spend an inappropriate amount of time and resources pondering niche questions that can hardly be expected to make the world a better place. Instead, my goal is to complement his line of argument by showing that *both* ideal and non-ideal theories can play the role of an ideology and, by extension, that *both* ideal and non-ideal theories can play a meaningful role in driving positive social change. I agree that Mills's criticism was a useful intervention to break the chokehold of the sterile liberalism that dominated academic political philosophy until recently—but if my line of argument is correct, then we have reason to be skeptical that non-ideal theorizing is *always* more conducive to bringing about positive social change.

I will proceed as follows: First, I offer a charitable reconstruction of Mills's argument for the ideological character of ideal theories (§ 2). Second, I argue that if the basic premises of Mills's line of argument are correct, then non-ideal theories must be classified as an ideology as well (§ 3). Third, I criticize Mills's attempt to link his line of argument to Marx's and Engels's critique of their Young Hegelian predecessors (§ 4).

§ 2. Mills on the Ideological Character of Ideal Theorizing

To reconstruct Mills's argument for the ideological character of ideal theories, we need to get clear on what he means by an *ideology*.[1] Mills describes an ideology as "a distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population […]" (Mills 2005: 172). On another occasion, he describes an ideology as "a set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege" (*Ibid.*: 166). Thus, Mills seems to take for granted that a cognitive phenomenon counts as an ideology if and only if the following three conditions are satisfied (Stahl forthcoming: 4–6):

   a)   *Distortion:* The cognitive phenomenon in question represents reality in a distorted way.

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of the term 'ideology,' see Althusser (1971/1970), Eagleton (1991), Geuss (1981: 4–44), Shelby (2003), and Stahl (forthcoming: 4–6).

b) *Effects:* The cognitive phenomenon in question stabilizes oppressive power structures in society.[2]

c) *Genesis:* The cognitive phenomenon in question becomes widespread in society as the result of these oppressive power structures in society.

I believe that we should understand the term 'distortion' in condition (a) in a fairly thin sense since Mills does not claim that ideologies necessarily say anything *false*. Instead, Mills assumes that ideologies can distort insofar as they *remain silent* on some important aspects of the objects they are supposed to represent. Furthermore, many philosophers are reluctant to take for granted that an ideology has to satisfy condition (c). Boettcher (2009: 243) and Stahl (forthcoming: 6) have pointed out that this assumption would limit the usefulness of the term 'ideology' because it is often extremely difficult to tell if a certain position spread due to oppressive power structures in society. For these reasons, I will take for granted that an ideology can be defined as follows:

> *Ideology:* A cognitive phenomenon is an 'ideology' if and only if (a) it represents reality in a distorted way and (b) reinforces oppressive power structures in society.

Second, we need to get clear on what Mills means by an *ideal theory*. Mills specifies that he understands 'ideal' in this context as "ideal-as-idealized-model" (Mills 2005: 167). Thus, an ideal theory of *P* in this sense is "a representation of *P*" (*Ibid.*: 166) that is supposed to serve as "an idealized model, an exemplar, of what an ideal *P* should be like" (*Ibid.*: 167). Mills clarifies both that ideal and non-ideal theories put forward a normative vision of the world: "Both ideal and non-ideal theory are concerned with justice, and so with the appeal to moral ideals" (Mills 2017/2008: 34, cf. Mills 2005: 168). So, perhaps confusingly, Mills claims that both ideal and non-ideal theories describe how the world should *ideally* be like. Yet, what sets them apart is that they operate on different levels of abstraction. When we develop an ideal theory of *P*, we pay little or no attention to the question whether it resembles any actually existing instances of *P*. In contrast, when we develop a non-ideal theory of *P*, we *do* pay attention to the question whether it resembles any actually existing instances of *P*. Thus, I believe that the following two definitions adequately capture Mills's understanding of ideal and non-ideal theories:

> *Ideal Theory:* A representation of *P* is an 'ideal theory' if and only if (i) it aims to describe what an ideal *P* should be like and (ii) it only distantly resembles actually existing instances of *P*.

> *Non-Ideal Theory:* A representation of *P* is a 'non-ideal theory' if and only if (i) it aims to describe what an ideal *P* should be like and (ii) it closely resembles actually existing instances of *P*.

In this light, it becomes clear that Mills's distinction between ideal and non-ideal theories is not best understood as categorical, but rather, as a gradual spectrum (Volacu 2018). Most normative representations of an object neither count as perfectly ideal theories nor as perfectly non-ideal theories but, rather, as intermediate positions on this continuum. For example, perhaps it would be desirable if the oceans were made of lemonade (to use an example from Charles Fourier), but hardly any proponents of ideal theory are willing to theorize about such profound changes of the world. However, even if the distinction between ideal theory and non-ideal theory is only gradual, it remains a useful one. When Mills

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[2] Mills (1985, 2003: 5–35) argues that this pejorative understanding of the term 'ideology' differs from Marx's own understanding of the term. Thus, by his own account, Mills's (2005) understanding of the term 'ideology' differs from Marx's.

speaks of ideal theories and non-ideal theories, we can take for granted that he means representations that are located *relatively* close to the respective ends of this spectrum, i.e., either representations that *do* closely resemble reality or representations that *do not* closely resemble reality.

To answer the question why Mills takes ideal theories to be ideological, we first need to understand why he believes (a) that ideal theories generally represent reality in a distorted way. By definition, ideal theories depict their object such that the relevant representations *only distantly resemble* actually existing instances of their object. Thus, ideal theories 'distort' the objects they are supposed to represent insofar as they remain silent on some features that can be observed in actually existing instances of these objects. As Mills puts it, ideal theories are prone to "abstract *away* from relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression, which in reality, of course, will profoundly shape the ontology of those same individuals, locating them in superior and inferior positions in social hierarchies of various kinds" (Mills 2005: 168).[3]

Second, we have to understand why Mills believes (b) that the aforementioned distorting features of ideal theories reinforce oppressive power structures in society. This step of Mills's argument is less easy to reconstruct. He assumes that we can only succeed at making the world a better place if we manage to dismantle the oppressive power structures that currently exist in society; and we can only dismantle these oppressive power structures if we are adequately informed about them. If we keep in mind that ideal theories distort reality insofar as they abstract away from these oppressive power structures (as we have seen in the previous paragraph), we can see why Mills believes that their development and refinement will not be particularly helpful to make the world a better place. In contrast, non-ideal theories are more useful in this regard because they do not necessarily abstract away from existing oppressive power structures. Mills supports this verdict by pointing out that "[i]t is no accident that historically subordinated groups have always been deeply skeptical of ideal theory, generally see its glittering ideals as remote and unhelpful, and are attracted to nonideal theory" (Mills 2005: 170). However, we need yet another assumption to show that ideal theories count as ideological in the aforementioned sense: Mills takes for granted that researchers have only a limited amount of cognitive resources at their disposal. Thus, researchers have to decide whether they want to invest their scarce cognitive resources into ideal theorizing or into non-ideal theorizing. Mills claims that if they focus on the former, they will end up focussing less on the latter and *vice versa*. Thus, he assumes that the development and refinement of ideal theories competes with the development and refinement of non-ideal theories. For this reason, Mills believes that ideal theories *crowd out* non-ideal theories. If we keep in mind that Mills believes that the development and refinement of non-ideal theories is more helpful for ending oppressive power structures than the development and refinement of ideal theories, we can understand as well why he thinks that the development and refinement of ideal theories ends up perpetuating oppressive power structures in society.[4] For this reason, ideal theories (in the aforementioned sense) count as ideologies (in the aforementioned sense).

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[3] For a more detailed reconstruction of this step of Mills's argument, see Stahl (forthcoming: 6–10).

[4] For a more nuanced reconstruction of this step of Mills's argument, see Stahl (forthcoming: 10–11). Táíwò is skeptical of this step: "[P]erhaps it is simply the case that philosophers' reluctance to engage real world forms of oppression and domination and their penchant for ideal theory are simply both symptoms of the same disease—that philosophy selects for the people least likely to take it upon themselves to research oppression–rather than the latter causing or enabling the former" (Táíwò forthcoming: 16).

Let me try to reformulate Mills's argument in a regimented form. We saw that Mills's argument relies on two assumptions about the ways in which ideal theories and non-ideal theories represent reality:

(1)   Ideal theories of human interactions distort their object insofar as they remain silent on the properties that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures (premise).

(2)   Non-ideal theories of human interactions *do not* distort their object insofar as they *do not* remain silent on the properties that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures (premise).

In isolation, premises (1) and (2) are insufficient to get Mills's argument off the ground because nothing ensures that more ideal theorizing results in less non-ideal theorizing and *vice versa*. After all, researchers could engage in more non-ideal theorizing in addition to their usual ideal theorizing. For this reason, we need to add the following premise:

(3)   The development and refinement of ideal theories of human interactions competes with the development and refinement of non-ideal theories of human interactions (premise).

From (1), (2), and (3), we may infer that the following proposition holds:

(4)   The development and refinement of ideal theories of human interactions reinforces oppressive power structures (from (1), (2), and (3)).

Finally, since we defined an ideology as a cognitive phenomenon that (a) represents reality in a distorted way and (b) reinforces oppressive power structures in society, we may draw the following conclusion:

(5)   Ideal theories of human interactions play an ideological role (from (1) and (4)).

Henceforth, I will also call this the 'strong interpretation' of Mills's argument against ideal theory.

Before I move on to assess Mills's argument, I would like to clarify some of its limitations:

First, even though Mills points out that ideal theories can be about *literally anything* including, say, "an ideal gas, a perfect vacuum, a frictionless plane, a resistance-free conductor" (*Ibid.*: 167), he only takes his criticism of ideal theories to apply to ideal theories of "human interaction[s]" (*Ibid.*). Thus, when he speaks of 'ideal theories' in his criticism, he has 'ideal theories of human interactions' in mind.

Second, Mills's argument shows that the *activity of developing and refining* ideal theories is problematic (Estlund 2020: 16–18, Táíwò forthcoming: 15–16). However, this hardly serves as an argument against any ideal theories *in themselves*. For example, even if we concede that the activity of refining and applying Rawls's ideal political philosophy distracts us from more urgent theoretical tasks, this does not force us to accept that there is anything intrinsically problematic with this philosophical framework.

Third, Mills's argument can only show that ideal theories serve an ideological role *in certain contexts*. As Stahl points out, "the argument depends on the assumption that non-ideal theories necessarily have the effect of better informing radical political practice" (Stahl forthcoming: 11). In other words, Mills takes for granted that the development and refinement of non-ideal theories is more helpful to end oppressive power structures in society than the development and refinement of ideal theories. Furthermore, on a more fundamental level, Mills's argument hinges on the assumption "that, if ideal theory had not been so dominant, a version of non-ideal theory that is more sensitive to historical injustice would have become dominant" (Stahl forthcoming: 11). However, this is not true in all situations either. If researchers focus less on developing and refining ideal theories, this does not necessarily mean that they will focus more on developing and refining non-ideal theories. Instead, they could organize a rally, rob a bank, or bake a banana bread. Perhaps, these other activities would be even more useful for ending oppressive power structures in society than engaging in either ideal or non-ideal theorizing. Thus, Mills's argument only checks out in contexts in which the importance of ideal theorizing for ending oppressive power structures in society is generally overrated and the importance of non-ideal theorizing for ending oppressive power structures in society is generally underrated. This is an important limitation to Mills's argument that will turn out to be important to set up my counterargument.

Fourth, Mills's argument only works if we accept the pragmatist assumption that the purpose of philosophical inquiry is to make the world a better place and that ending oppressive power structures is an important step to achieve this goal. Mills claims that many proponents of ideal theory such as Rawls accept this assumption (Mills 2017: 155). However, this assumption is at odds with the conviction of some philosophers that the purpose of philosophical research is to discover truths for its own sake irrespective of whether these insights will help us to better our lives.[5]

§ 3. Ideological Character of Non-Ideal Theorizing

In the previous section, we saw that Mills's argument—at least, its strong interpretation—depends on assumption (1) that ideal theories of human interactions distort their object insofar as they remain silent on the properties that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures and assumption (2) that non-ideal theories of human interactions *do not* suffer from this defect. In this section, I want to argue for two related claims. First, I want to show that both premises are false because important anti-oppressive political movements sometimes find themselves in a situation of theoretical crisis, in which they would benefit most from clarifying their political goals by means of ideal theorizing. Therefore, the aforementioned 'strong version' of Mills's argument turns out to be unsound. Second, I argue that Mills can evade this objection by weakening premises (1) and (2) and reformulating the rest of his argument accordingly. However, I show that if we accept this weaker version of Mills's argument, then we must accept an analogous argument for the ideological character of non-ideal theory as

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[5] Adams (2021) takes issue with this assumption of Mills. He argues that Mills's defense of non-ideal theorizing "performs the social role of enforcing the ascendant hegemonies of capitalism and managerialism: it obscures the value of ideal theorizing that falls outside—and indeed potentially threatens—the evaluative parameters set by these hegemonies" (Adams 2021: 11). For this reason, Adams concludes that non-ideal theories play an ideological role as well. Even though this conclusion resembles my own position, I argue for this conclusion in a different way since I do not question Mills's assumption that the purpose of academic philosophical research is to make the world a better place.

well. In other words, I argue that if we accept Mills's claim that ideal theories are ideological, then we must accept that non-ideal theories are ideological in the same sense as well.

I want to begin my argument with a historical example. The term 'socialism' has been defined in countless different, and sometimes conflicting, ways, as Mills himself knows (Mills 2017/2012: 24). Famously, Marx and Engels already wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in order to turn the ambiguous 'ghost [*Gespenst*] of communism' into something 'manifest' by clarifying its political goals. Even self-proclaimed proponents of 'socialism' often have fundamentally different ideas about what the term 'socialism' is supposed to mean. In the 1960s, Hal Draper has argued in his influential pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism* that the socialist movement suffers from an unrecognized crisis in the *meaning* of socialism. Socialists are divided in two different camps that he proposes to call 'Socialism-From-Above' and 'Socialism-From-Below.' On the one hand, Socialists-from-Above maintain "that socialism (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) must be *handed down* to the grateful masses in one form or another, by a ruling elite which is not subject to their control in fact" (Draper 1966: 4). Draper locates, say, Joseph Stalin and Ferdinand Lassalle in this tradition because they are happy to implement their favored blueprint of society in authoritarian ways. On the other hand, Socialists-from-Below maintain "that socialism can be realized only through the self-emancipation of activized masses in motion, reaching out for freedom with their own hands, mobilized 'from below' in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history." (Draper 1966: 5) Draper locates, say, Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg in this tradition.

Draper argues that this theoretical disagreement about the correct interpretation of the term 'socialism' has important practical repercussions: "[s]ocialism's crisis today is a crisis in the *meaning* of socialism" (Draper 1966: 3). He points out that Socialists-from-Above and Socialists-from-Below are organized in the same political movement even though they pursue fundamentally different political goals. Thus, the fact that the socialist movement fails to recognize this internal conflict prevents itself from formulating its goals in an unambiguous way. The lack of clarity about the meaning of the term 'socialism' makes it difficult to identify the practices that effectively advance the goals of this movement. Draper (1966: 30) mentions the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 as an example that illustrates the pernicious practical repercussions of the lack of clarity about the meaning of the term 'socialism.' In 1956, the Hungarian people erupted in a nationwide revolt against the domination by the Soviet Union. If we lack a clear account of what 'socialism' means, it is difficult to adjudicate if we should practically support the Hungarian protesters or the Soviet Union. Thus, the lack of clarity about the meaning of the term 'socialism' is a practical obstacle that prevents the socialist movement from achieving its political goals effectively.

To give another example, in the 1960s, Theodor W. Adorno criticized members of the student movement who shunned 'theory' because of its alleged inability to guide political practice. Adorno criticized that many of its members had nothing but a vague conception of their political goals that led them to engage in highly ineffective types of political practice. Adorno derogatorily calls this kind of political practice 'pseudo-activity' because it fails to effectively advance their shared political goals while keeping them busy at the same time. For these reasons, Adorno argues that the student movement would benefit practically from the "recovery of theory's independence" (Adorno 1973/1966: 143), i.e., they would

benefit practically from prioritizing the task of clarifying political goals. On another occasion, Adorno puts this point as follows:

> "I believe that a theory is much more capable of having practical consequences owing to the strength of its own objectivity than if it had subjected itself to praxis from the start. Today's unfortunate relationship between theory and praxis consists precisely in the fact that theory is subjected to a practical pre-censorship. For instance, people wish to forbid me to put into words simple things that show the illusionary character of many of the political goals that certain students have." (Richter / Adorno 2002/1969: 15–16)[6]

This lesson can be generalized to any political movement that intends to end oppressive power structures (irrespectively of whether it is socialist, Marxist, or neither): In any such political movement, conflicting interpretations of shared political goals can occur. This is what I mean by a 'situation of theoretical crisis.' In such a situation of theoretical crisis, there is a serious threat that the practical activities of the movement will become highly ineffective. Thus, in such a situation, developing and refining *ideal theories* is an important step to clarify the shared political goals of the movement. In this way, ideal theorizing is useful for the members of the movement in question because it allows them to identify the type of practice that effectively advances its respective political goals instead of wasting time with self-undermining actions or ineffective 'pseudo-activities.'

Let me elaborate what this means for Mills's argument. In the previous section, we saw that Mills's argument for the ideological character of ideal theory depends on assumption (1) that ideal theories of human interactions distort their object insofar as they remain silent on the properties that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures and on assumption (2) that non-ideal theories of human interactions *do not* suffer from this defect. If my argument is correct, then both premises are false for the following reason: There are at least *some* situations in which important anti-oppressive political movements find themselves in a situation of theoretical crisis, such that prioritizing ideal theorizing would be most useful to eliminate oppressive power structures in society because it allows these anti-oppressive political movements to get clear on the nature of their political goals and identify effective strategies for achieving them. In these situations, ideal theories *do* pay attention to the aspects of reality that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures. That is why premise (1) is false. Furthermore, in these situations, non-ideal theories distract from the aspects of reality that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures. That is why premise (2) is false as well. Thus, we may conclude that the strong version of Mills's argument against ideal theorizing has turned out to be unsound. This is the first claim that I wanted to argue for in this section. Even if one is inclined to call Draper's or Adorno's historical assessment into question, the fact that a situation of theoretical crisis is *conceptually possible* is sufficient to spell trouble for proponents of a strong interpretation of Mills's argument against ideal theorizing.

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[6] In his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that the recovery of theory's independence should take the form of a dialectical thinking that is freed from the need "to achieve something positive by means of negation" (Adorno 1973/1966: xx). Thus, while Adorno is convinced that uncompromised thinking is urgently necessary, it is not fully clear if he thinks that this kind of thinking should aim at the development and refinement of (positive) ideal theories.

Perhaps, one might object that this criticism is unfair because Mills's argument is primarily directed at ideal theories resembling Rawls's political liberalism. On this reading, the aforementioned examples from the socialist tradition fall outside of the scope of Mills's argument. However, I remain unimpressed by this objection for two reasons. First, there is no reason to assume that situations of theoretical crisis cannot arise for Rawls-style political liberalism as well. I simply focussed on cases from the socialist tradition because they are particularly lucid examples of deep disagreements among people who ostensibly share the same political goals. Second, Mills explicitly points out that his criticism concerns ideal theories of "human interaction[s]" (*Ibid.*: 167) in general as well as ideal "moral theory" (*Ibid.*) in general. Thus, his own framing suggests that it extends beyond Rawls-style political liberalism.

A more compelling objection might insist that the strong interpretation of Mills's argument is uncharitable. Maybe, Mills's argument stands a better chance of success if we assume that he meant to restrict the scope of premises (1) and (2) to a *subset* of situations. After all, it is plausible to assume that important anti-oppressive political movements *sometimes* do not suffer from any theoretical crisis, such that ideal theorizing would indeed distract from other, more urgent theoretical tasks. Thus, we obtain a more charitable interpretation if we adjust premises (1) and (2) by restricting their scope to situations of a certain type that I will simply call it *X*:

(1)*   In situations of type *X*, ideal theories of human interactions distort their object insofar as they remain silent on the properties that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures (premise).
(2)*   In situations of type *X*, non-ideal theories of human interactions do not distort their object insofar as they *do not* remain silent on the properties that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures (premise).

The remainder of Mills's argument can be adjusted accordingly, i.e., we can adjust subconclusions (4) and (5) in the following way:

(4)*   In situations of type *X*, the development and refinement of ideal theories of human interactions reinforces oppressive power structures (from (1)*, (2)*, and (3)).
(5)*   In situations of type *X*, ideal theories of human interactions play an ideological role (from (1)* and (4)*).

Henceforth, I will call this the 'weak interpretation' of Mills's argument against ideal theory. Indeed, this argument cannot be refuted by pointing out that there are other situations, in which important anti-oppressive political movements suffer from a theoretical crisis.

Interpreting Mills's argument in this weaker sense has another unwelcome consequence. Namely, it allows us to argue for the 'opposite' of Mills's conclusion, i.e., the thesis that non-ideal theories are ideological in the same sense as ideal theories. How does this argument work? We have already seen that there are some situations in which important anti-oppressive political movements find themselves in a situation of theoretical crisis. Henceforth, let us call them situations of type *Y*. In these situations, ideal theories *do not* distort their objects because they pay attention to the aspects of reality that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures. Furthermore, in these

situations, non-ideal theories do distort their objects because they distract from the aspects of reality that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures. For this reason, we may take for granted the following premises (1)† and (2)†:

(1)† In situations of type *Y*, ideal theories of human interactions *do not* distort their object insofar as they do not remain silent on the properties that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures (premise).
(2)† In situations of type *Y*, non-ideal theories of human interactions *do* distort their objects insofar as they remain silent on the properties that we need to pay attention to in order to bring about the end of oppressive power structures (premise).

The same logic that previously entitled us to argue for Mills's conclusion (5)* now allows us to argue for the 'opposite' conclusion (5)† instead:

(4)† In situations of type *Y*, the development and refinement of *non-ideal theories of human interactions* reinforces oppressive power structures (from (1)†, (2)†, and (3)).
(5)† In situations of type *Y*, *non-ideal theories of human interactions* play an ideological role (from (1)† and (4)†).

Thus, if we interpret Mills's argument against ideal theories in the weaker but more plausible sense, then it can easily be exploited as an argument for the ideological character of non-ideal theories as well. In other words, if we assume that ideal theory is ideological in a certain sense, then non-ideal theory turns out to be ideological just in the same sense. This is the second claim I wanted to argue for in this section.

I would like to clarify that I have no reason to doubt either (5)* or (5)†. Indeed, it strikes me as plausible that both ideal theories and non-ideal theories can reinforce oppression in some situations but contribute in meaningful ways to the project of liberation in other situations. The kind of theorizing that is most appropriate to make the world a better place depends very much on the context that we find ourselves in. This, however, is a more modest position than Mills's.

The line of argument presented in this section resembles that of Adams (2021). Adams argues that Mills's goal of maximizing the tangible political results of academic philosophical research ends up "enforcing the ascendant hegemonies of capitalism and managerialism: it obscures the value of ideal theorizing that falls outside—and indeed potentially threatens—the evaluative parameters set by these hegemonies" (*Ibid.*: 11). Thus, because Mills's defense of non-ideal theorizing is ultimately motivated by a questionable managerialist and capitalist attitude, he concludes that it plays an ideological role as well. Despite these similarities, I believe that Adams's argument remains unsatisfying for the following reason: even if we assume that Adams's negative verdict about non-ideal theorizing is right, it remains unclear *what* makes ideal theorizing less ideological than non-ideal theorizing. For example, in the passage quoted above, Adams suggests that one of the advantages of ideal theorizing is that it "potentially threatens" (*Ibid.*) the "ascendant hegemonies of capitalism and managerialism" (*Ibid.*). Adams leaves unclear what it is about ideal theorizing that has the power to 'threaten the hegemony of capitalism and managerialism.' In contrast, my account is superior to Adams's insofar as it clearly articulates a potential

advantage of ideal theorizing: ideal theorizing can help to identify the type of practice that effectively advances the political goals of a political movement and, thereby, further the project of human liberation.[7]

§ 4. Reassessing Mills's Interpretation of Marxism

Mills claims that his criticism of ideal theorizing is inspired by Marx's and Engels's criticism of their Young Hegelian predecessors from the mid-1840s. Yet, I believe that Mills fails to demonstrate that the early writings of Marx and Engels actually provide support for his critique of ideal theorizing. In this section, I argue that his appeal to the authority of Marx and Engels is unconvincing for two reasons: First, I argue that Marx and Engels criticize *both* ideal theorizing and non-ideal theorizing as insufficient political strategies when they criticize their Young Hegelian predecessors in the mid-1840s. Second, taking inspiration from Theodor W. Adorno, I argue that even if we ignore these worries about the accuracy of Mills's interpretation of Marx and Engels, Mills underestimates the extent to which Marx's and Engels's criticism is indexed to a specific historical situation that arguably no longer obtains today. If Adorno is right to diagnose that the political movements that are still committed to the political goals of Marx and Engels find themselves in a situation of theoretical crisis, then it turns out to be unclear if invoking their authority nowadays can still lend support to Mills's criticism of ideal theorizing.

First, let me explain how Mills ties his own position to that of Marx and Engels. He claims that his criticism of ideal theory "can arguably be traced back, at least in implicit and schematic form, to Marxism and classical left theory" (Mills 2005: 166). More precisely, he claims that he follows the lead of Marx's and Engels's criticism in *The German Ideology*:

> "Marxism […] was famous for emphasizing, as in *The German Ideology*, the importance of descending from the idealizing abstractions of the Young Hegelians to a focus on 'real, active men,' not 'men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived,' but 'as they *actually* are,' in (class) relations of domination" (*Ibid.*: 170).

So, Mills claims that Marx and Engels criticize the ideal theories of the other Young Hegelians because these theories remain silent on an important domain of society: the oppressive power relations that can be observed in any capitalist society. Thus, according to Mills, Marx and Engels aim to develop a non-ideal theory of "*class society/capitalism*" (*Ibid.*: 173) to fill this gap in the literature:

> "Think of the original challenge Marxist models of *capitalism* posed to liberalism's social ontology: the claim that to focus on relations of apparently equal exchange, free and fair, among equal individuals was illusory, since at the level of the relations of production, the real ontology of worker and capitalist manifested a deep structure of constraint that limited proletarian freedom." (*Ibid.*: 175)

Is Mills's framing of his own critique as a continuation of the intellectual project of Marx and Engels plausible? I argue that Mills's interpretation of Marx and Engels suffers from two significant shortcomings.

Before proceeding with my first objection, a caveat is in order. Marx and Engels are two of the most controversial authors in the Western intellectual tradition. This is not only due to the inherent complexity

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[7] In footnote 5, I explain another point of disagreement between my own position and Adams's (2021).

of their work but also an unfamiliar historical context as well as the long shadow of Cold War miseducation. While I cannot address every piece of textual evidence that might be marshaled in support of Mills's reading, my aim is to present an alternative interpretation that at least warrants serious consideration.

With this caveat in mind, let me now turn to my first objection to Mills's interpretation of Marx and Engels: I would like to point out that it would not make much sense for Marx and Engels to try to direct our attention to the non-ideal reality of class society because the Young Hegelians were *already aware* of this problem.

Max Stirner, who—unbeknownst to many interpreters (Johnson 2021)—was the main target of *The German Ideology*, agreed with Marx and Engels that we should recognize reality for what it actually is and try to dispense with any idealized version of it (Whyman 2023: 425–427). In his main work *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner complains that we are "haunted" (Stirner 1995/1844: 43) by 'fixed ideas' such as "morality, legality, Christianity, and so forth" (*Ibid.*), i.e., ideas that constitute an illegitimate form of inherited authority over our thinking. Similarly, Feuerbach (1983/1841) famously tried to emancipate society from the grip of religion and the philosophy of German Idealism that (supposedly) constitutes its secular counterpart. Thus, similar to Marx and Engels, Young Hegelians like Stirner and Feuerbach share the goal to break free from any 'fixed ideas' and, instead, aim to draw attention to the world that *actually* surrounds us.

The Young Hegelians that preceded Marx and Engels were perfectly aware that the society they inhabit is far from idyllic. Already Hegel, the towering mentor of the Young Hegelians, addresses the problem of class society in his writings on political philosophy explicitly. In his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel claims that bourgeois society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] consists of three 'estates' [*Stände*] (PR §§ 202–205): 1) the agricultural estate, 2) the estate of those who work in trade and industry, and 3) the 'universal estate,' i.e., the estate who has for "its task the universal interests of society" (PR § 205). He warns us that the estate of those who work in trade and industry tends to accumulate a disproportionate amount of wealth in a bourgeois society "in a state of unimpeded activity" (PR § 243), while the other two estates are in danger of material and moral impoverishment. Hegel already depicts the downsides of bourgeois society in a quite dramatic way:

> "When the standard of living of a large mass of people falls below a certain subsistence level—a level regulated automatically as the one necessary for a member of the society—and when there is a consequent loss of the sense of right and wrong, of integrity and of honour in maintaining oneself by one's own activity and work, the result is the creation of a *rabble of paupers* [*Pöbel*]. At the same time this brings with it, at the other end of the social scale, conditions which greatly facilitate the concentration of disproportionate wealth in a few hands." (PR § 244)

The Young Hegelians did not forget about this insight of their mentor. Max Stirner explicitly pointed out the shortcomings of bourgeois society in *The Ego and Its Own*. He describes this kind of society as a "*slavery of labour*" (Stirner 1995/1844: 104). In *The German Ideology*,[8] Marx and Engels even explicitly

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[8] Carver (2019) argues that standard editions of *The German Ideology* should be considered an editorial construction. Even though this criticism strikes me as an overstatement, I will only refer to the historical-critical MEGA^2 edition of Marx's and Engels's manuscripts that was published in German in 2017.

acknowledge that Stirner "recognizes the crippling & servitude [*Verkrüppelung & Knechtung*] to which an individual has fallen physically, intellectually & socially as the result of the existing conditions" (MEGA² I/5: 488, my translation) but they take issue with Stirner's attempt to locate the causes of this phenomenon. Similarly, Edgar Bauer complains that bourgeois society results in "avarice, envy, fear, the craving for oppression [*Unterdrückungssucht*] and blind obedience" (Bauer 1843: 276, my translation). For these reasons, I believe that Mills makes an implausible assumption when he takes for granted that we had to wait for Marx and Engels to draw attention to the non-ideal reality of bourgeois society in the first place. (Of course, one may continue to hold that Marx's and Engels's understanding of the shortcomings of bourgeois society constitutes an improvement over Stirner's or Bauer's.)

So, if Marx and Engels are not simply trying to make the case for non-ideal theorizing in *The German Ideology*, what is their point instead? Arguably, Marx and Engels take issue with Stirner's and Bauer's assumption that we can break the hold of the 'fixed ideas' simply by encouraging individuals to start thinking differently. Marx and Engels claim that people tend to submit to certain 'fixed ideas' because their position in society makes them prone to believe in them. Thus, simply encouraging individuals to think differently will hardly contribute to the project of human liberation unless it is accompanied by an attempt to *practically change* the social conditions that facilitate the rise of these fixed ideas (MEGA² I/5: 175). So, despite the Young Hegelians' noble intentions to break the hold of all fixed ideas, they ultimately remain in their grip: namely, Stirner and Feuerbach continue to believe that certain ideas (e.g., Stirner's brand of egoism or Feuerbach's anthropological materialism) are so powerful that they can liberate the human race by themselves (Whyman 2023: 432–433). So, *The German Ideology* is Marx's and Engels's attempt to put forward an *immanent critique* of the Young Hegelians that preceded them, i.e., they try to expose the contradictions that are hidden in their theories; and this immanent critique motivates Marx and Engels to pivot toward a more practical political approach—one that prioritizes organizing the proletariat over producing new theories of any kind.[9]

Thus, Marx's and Engels's immanent criticism of Stirner and Feuerbach can hardly be described as a call for 'non-ideal theorizing' in Mills's sense. They believe that *any* theorizing (no matter if 'ideal' or 'non-ideal') is insufficient to make serious progress with the goal of liberation—at least, as far as the situation in 1840s Europe is concerned. Instead, they argue that we can only succeed if we *practically* change the social conditions that facilitate the rise of flawed 'fixed ideas.' In this light, it becomes clear why Marx ends his *Theses on Feuerbach* with the famous sentence: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx 1978/1845: § 11). Thus, strictly speaking, Mills's preferred political strategy of changing the world through non-ideal theorizing is *among* the targets of Marx's and Engels's criticism in *The German Ideology*. This is not implausible if we keep in mind that even theories that were produced by well-intentioned academic researchers often fail to implement positive political change (Táíwò forthcoming: 29–30).

Now, let me turn to the second part of my criticism of Mills's interpretation of Marx and Engels. For the sake of the argument, let us assume that my suggested interpretation of Marx and Engels is incorrect and that Mills is right to claim that their goal in *The German Ideology* was to make the case for non-ideal theorizing. Even if we make this assumption, it is far from obvious that a consistent application of Marx's and Engels's critique would always result in prioritizing the development and refinement of ideal theories.

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[9] For a more detailed reconstruction of Marx's category of 'immanent critique,' see Jaeggi (2018/2014: 190–214).

Mills underestimates that Marx's and Engels's strategic shift occurs in a very specific context that arguably differs considerably from the context in which we find ourselves in today. In his 1962 article *Why Still Philosophy?,* Adorno contextualizes the political program of the early Marx in a very similar way:

> "Anyone who still philosophizes can do so only by denying the Marxist thesis that reflection has become obsolete. Marx believed that the possibility of changing the world from top to bottom was immediately present, here and now. But only stubbornness could still maintain this thesis as Marx formulated it. The proletariat to whom he appealed was not yet integrated into society: it was rapidly sinking into destitution, whereas on the other hand societal power did not yet command the means to assure overwhelming odds for itself in the event of any serious conflict. Philosophy, as at once both rigorous and free thought, now finds itself in an entirely different situation." (Adorno 1998/1962: 14)

Adorno points out that Marx's shift towards a more practical political approach occurred in the mid-1840s in Europe. Marx and Engels were able to identify a viable political strategy for ending oppressive power structures in this situation because they could rely on a powerful new class, the proletariat, that became progressively disillusioned with the political systems that embodied classical liberalism. In contrast, Adorno plausibly argues that the situation has changed dramatically in the meanwhile. Nowadays, there is no longer any societal power that poses a similar threat to the continued existence of oppression. Instead, the scattered forces that aim to put an end to oppressive power structures typically keep themselves busy with ineffective 'pseudo-practice.' In other words, when Adorno wrote his article in the 1960s, he diagnosed that the political movements committed to the political goals of Marx and Engels find themselves in what I called a 'situation of theoretical crisis': they struggled to identify a viable political strategy to achieve their shared political goals (Adorno 1998/1962, 1973/1966: 143–144). Thus, if Adorno's assessment remains applicable to our situation today (and I think it does), then we may call into question that Marx's and Engels's advice that emerged in the Europe of the mid-1840s is directly applicable to the present, as Mills seems to think. Instead, it is plausible that a consistent application of Marx's and Engels's advice from the mid-1840s demands that we prioritize the task of theoretical clarification in order to end the present theoretical crisis and identify a viable political strategy first; and, as I have argued in the previous section, this might very well involve the development and refinement of ideal theories.

§ 5. Conclusion

Let me summarize. In this article, I provided a charitable reconstruction of Mills's Marx-inspired argument for the ideological character of ideal theory. While I agree that Mills is right that ideal theorizing *sometimes* reinforces oppressive power structures, I argued that his conclusion is overstated. I pointed out that history is rife with examples of political organizations that struggle to identify an effective political practice because they find themselves in a situation of theoretical crisis. Thus, *contra* Mills, it turned out that ideal theorizing is sometimes a more viable strategy than non-ideal theorizing. To further corroborate this claim, I pointed out two related problems for Mills's interpretation of Marx and Engels. First, I argued that Mills misdiagnoses the target of Marx's and Engels's criticism. Marx and Engels criticize both ideal theorizing and non-ideal theorizing as insufficient political strategies in the Europe of the mid-1840s and recommend a shift towards a more practical political approach instead. Second, I argued that even if we ignore these worries about the accuracy of Mills's interpretation, Mills

underestimates the extent to which Marx's and Engels's criticism is indexed to a specific historical situation that arguably no longer obtains today. For this reason, Mills's framing of his critique of ideal theorizing as a continuation of the intellectual project of Marx and Engels turned out to be questionable.

Finally, let me reiterate two important limitations of the argument I presented in this article. First, I recognize that Marx and Engels are among the most debated and controversial figures in intellectual history. My aim was not a decisive refutation of Mills's interpretation of Marx and Engels but to offer an alternative reading of Marx and Engels that at least merits serious consideration. Second, I would like to clarify that I do not believe that Mills's argument against ideal theorizing is without merit either. I agree that Mills's critique was valuable in challenging the dominance of the sterile liberalism that shaped academic political philosophy for a long time—but if my argument holds, we have reason to question that non-ideal theorizing is *always* more effective in fostering positive social change.[10]

§ 6. References

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§ 7. Disclosure Statement