



What’s new in the new ideology critique?

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Published online: 15 February 2019
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Abstract I argue that contemporary accounts of ideology critique—paradigmatically those advanced by Haslanger, Jaeggi, Celikates, and Stanley—are either inadequate or redundant. The Marxian concept of ideology—a collective epistemic distortion or irrationality that helps maintain bad social arrangements—has recently returned to the forefront of debates in contemporary analytic social philosophy. Ideology critique has similarly emerged as a technique for combating such social ills by remedying those collective epistemic distortions. Ideologies are sets of social meanings or shared understandings. I argue in this paper that because agents must coordinate on them to be mutually intelligible, ideologies, on the fashionable contemporary account, are conventions. They are equilibrium solutions to a particular kind of social coordination problem. The worry is that changing pernicious conventions requires more than the epistemic remedy contemporary critical social theorists prescribe. It also requires overcoming strategic impediments like high first-mover costs. Thus contemporary proponents of ideology critique—the “new ideology critics,” as I’ll call them—face a dilemma. Either their account of social change fails to account for important strategic impediments to social change, in which case it is inadequate, or it incorporates a theory of strategic behavior, and thus merely reinvents the wheel, poorly. It adds nothing to prominent convention-based accounts of social change in the social sciences. More generally, this is an example of a pernicious trend in contemporary critical social theory. Contemporary critical social theorists have abandoned their predecessors’ commitment to engaging with social science, thereby undermining their efforts.

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Keywords Ideology · Social philosophy · Critical theory · Critical social theory · Ideology critique · Moral progress · Social norms

The Marxian concept of ideology—a collective epistemic distortion or irrationality that helps maintain bad social arrangements—has recently returned to the forefront of debates in contemporary analytic social philosophy.¹ Ideology *critique* has similarly emerged as a prospective technique for combating such social ills by *remediating* those collective epistemic distortions. Ideologies are constituted by sets of social meanings or shared understandings. I argue in this paper that because agents must coordinate on them to be mutually intelligible, ideologies, on the fashionable contemporary account, are *conventions*.² They are equilibrium solutions to a particular kind of social coordination problem. The worry is that changing pernicious conventions requires more than the epistemic remedy contemporary critical social theorists prescribe. It also requires overcoming strategic impediments like high first-mover costs. Thus contemporary proponents of ideology critique³—I’ll call them the “New Ideology Critics”—face a dilemma. Either their account of social change fails to account for important *strategic* impediments to social change,⁴ in which case it is inadequate, or it incorporates a theory of strategic behavior, and thus merely reinvents the wheel, poorly.⁵ It adds nothing to prominent convention-based accounts of social change in the social sciences. I’ll lay out the basic ideology-critique picture and argue for each horn in turn.

1 Why do bad social arrangements persist?

Contemporary critical social theorists like to explain the persistence of bad social arrangements by appeal to “ideology”. For social theorists of a broadly Marxian bent, “ideology” is an analytical tool that helps us explain why some bad social arrangements persist.⁶ “Ideology critique” is a meliorative strategy for dismantling

¹ For example, in 2016 Yale held a conference on ideology, which has resulted in a forthcoming edited volume. Cf. Celikates et al. (2019).

² Lewis (1969) and Schelling (1960).

³ Cf. Celikates et al. (2019), Celikates (2006), Gooding-Williams (2019), Haslanger (2012, 2017a, b, c), Jaeggi (2008, 2015), Mills (2007, 2013), Shelby (2002, 2003, 2014, 2016) and Stanley (2015).

⁴ “Strategic” just means that the outcome of some action that someone might take depends on what actions *other* people take. The study of strategic behavior is called *game theory*. Most broadly Marxian social theory fails to account for strategic behavior; notable (and noble) exceptions include Elster (1985) and Sensat (1988).

⁵ The better version of the wheel belongs to e.g. Bicchieri (1993, 2006, 2017), Bicchieri and Muldoon (2011), Binmore (2005), Brennan et al. (2013), Elster (1989), Kuran (1995), Mackie (1996, 2000, 2003), Muldoon (2016) and Young (1998).

⁶ Cf. Haslanger (2017a, 8): “Ideology...is intended to function as an answer to the *explanatory* question: What explains persistent racial injustice?”

those bad social arrangements by exposing their ideological character.⁷ Both the analytical and meliorative projects are notoriously fraught, not least because “ideology” is a famously diffuse concept: there are as many theories of it as theorists. Michael Rosen identifies no fewer than four separate models of ideology in the Marx corpus,⁸ and this number grew exponentially in the twentieth century. Obviously, this paper doesn't deal with all of them. My target, rather, is a more-or-less theoretically unified collection of contemporary philosophers in (broadly) the critical theory tradition inaugurated by Horkheimer.⁹

For them, ideology is a pervasive epistemic distortion that helps maintain and reproduce bad social arrangements *in virtue of its distorting character*.¹⁰ This definition specifies a particular phenomenon common to many prominent accounts of ideology¹¹ and allows us to avoid talking past one another and come to analytical grips with the phenomenon. It also allows us to sidestep the worries about conceptual mission creep that have plagued words like “neoliberalism,”¹² because it prohibits us from diluting the term's analytical bite by using the term “ideology” to refer to whatever (we think) explains the persistence of social arrangements we don't like.¹³

Even within the particular literature I'm dealing with here, there's some variation. In particular, there's an active dispute about what the *components* of an ideology are. Are they beliefs? Attitudes? Concepts? Something else?¹⁴ But there are enough commonalities to extract three core features. First, ideologies are sets of shared understandings or common social meanings. Second, they're *distorted*. And third, these distortions explain the persistence of bad social arrangements. Let's talk about each of these in turn.

First: Ideologies provide sets of common understandings or interpretive tools that allow us to understand our circumstances and respond appropriately to them.¹⁵ Here is Rahel Jaeggi on that hermeneutical role: “...ideologies constitute our relation to the world and thus determine the horizons of our interpretation of the world, or the framework in which we understand both ourselves and the social conditions, and

⁷ This follows Geuss' (1981) taxonomy, on which theories of ideology can have epistemic, functional, and “genetic” or etiological dimensions. Cf. also Shelby (2003).

⁸ Rosen (1996, Ch. 6).

⁹ Horkheimer (1937); Haslanger has explicitly self-identified as a critical theorist. I explicitly lay out my targets in footnote 3 above.

¹⁰ For our purposes, ideology is defined functionally. This is not the same thing as “functionalism” about ideology, according to which the functional role of an ideology causally explains its prevalence. Cf. Cohen (2001, Ch. IX, X), and Cohen (1982), the rejoinder to Cohen by Elster (1982). None of what I attribute to my interlocutors entails their being committed to a functionalist explanatory strategy; perhaps some of them are. For more on this debate cf. Heath (2015a)

¹¹ Though certainly not all of them; for perhaps the best existing account of ideology (as opposed to ideology *critique*) see Geuss (1981); for a useful survey of prominent definitions of ideology see Shelby (2003, 162–163).

¹² Boas and Gans-Morse (2009).

¹³ Cf. Eagleton (2004): “As with bad breath, ideology is always what the other person has”.

¹⁴ Cf. Shelby (2003, 2014, 2016) and Haslanger (2017a, b).

¹⁵ Cf. Gadamer (1960) and Taylor (1971/1985).

also the way we operate within those conditions.”¹⁶ And according to Haslanger, they provide “tools that shape the practical orientations in a group. Although an individual’s practical orientation can include propositional attitudes, it also includes psychological mechanisms—cognitive, conative, perceptual, agentic—that sort, shape, and filter what can be the objects of our attitudes.”¹⁷ They include conceptual tools we use for understanding the world and talking to one another about it in intelligible ways.¹⁸ They make some features of the world salient, and allow us to recognize that some things are valuable and others aren’t. And they also set standards of normalcy and deviance. Religious commitments are a great example of this. Hindus, as a rule, do not touch books with their feet, because feet are considered ritually unclean. Contact between feet and books carries a particular social meaning for Hindus that it might not carry for some other sectarian group. Similarly, cows have a particular religious significance. This is wrapped up with a set of practical and behavioral commitments—e.g. to vegetarianism. Stepping on books and eating beef marks one as a bad Hindu. The shared social meanings contained in religious commitments might also fund certain kinds of emotional responses. For example, conservative religious conservatives of many sectarian affiliations lead adherents to interpret homosexual sexual behavior as e.g. unnatural, disgusting, and predatory.

Obviously, not everything that provides common understandings or shared meanings is an ideology.¹⁹ Our ability to intelligibly converse about the weather and all sorts of other mundane topics presupposes a set of common concepts, beliefs, attitudes, social meanings etc. Indeed, these presuppositions can undergird disagreements, not just about morality, but about how the world is.²⁰ Ideologies have some other features. The second one: they’re also *distorted*. They guide our attention in ways that occlude important and valuable features of the world via mechanisms like moral legitimation, by which immoral social arrangements are portrayed as moral, as well as “naturalization” or “reification,”²¹ by which “something socially ‘made’ is imagined to be something naturally or irreducibly ‘given’...”²² Agents in the grip of an ideology need not consciously *believe* that some contingent fact is natural or necessary; it’s just that the assumption of

¹⁶ Jaeggi (2008, 64).

¹⁷ Haslanger (2017a, 16).

¹⁸ The idea of a “perspective” from analytical political philosophy is also similar: viz., “Perspectives are simply the filters that we use to view the world....we...(consciously or unconsciously) choose to group certain features together, choose to ignore certain information while focusing on other information, and choose systems of representation and interpretation.” (Muldoon 2016, 48–49) Cf. also Gaus (2017, 158–176); cf. also Bicchieri (2006, 93–94) on “schemata” and “scripts”.

¹⁹ Geuss (1981) distinguishes between ideology in the descriptive and the pejorative sense. The new ideology critics and I use the term in the pejorative sense; ideology in the purely descriptive sense is just constituted by feature 1. Geuss and Shelby use the term “form of consciousness” to denote ideology in the merely descriptive sense. Haslanger uses the term “cultural techne” for the same purpose, presumably to emphasize that inhabiting such a thing is a kind of learned practical skill.

²⁰ Cf. Muldoon (2017) for a clear statement of how this works.

²¹ Cf. Honneth (2008), following Lukacs (1923).

²² Jaeggi (2008, 65). Cf. also Shelby (2003, 176–177), Geuss (1981, 12–15), and McCarthy (1981, 2004).

naturalness or necessity must permeate their shared background understanding. Marx's account of justice helps make this idea clear.²³ By arguing that capitalism is *unjust*, Marx's socialist opponents (Proudhon, for example) fail to recognize that trying to evaluate capitalism in terms of *justice* occludes the fact that concepts like justice are "a standard by which each mode of production measures itself."²⁴ They serve to stabilize and reinforce the capitalist mode of production. Instead, Proudhon et al. erroneously assume—perhaps only implicitly—that justice is "a standard by which human reason in the abstract measures human actions, institutions, or other social facts."²⁵ As Wood puts it, "to adopt [the standpoint of justice] as the fundamental standpoint from which to judge all social reality is to adopt a distorted conception of that reality."²⁶

Thirdly, for the new ideology critics, ideology stabilizes and reproduces bad social arrangements by providing a distorted set of social meanings and shared understandings. The distortions had by common social meanings and shared understandings constitutive of ideologies *explain the persistence of bad social arrangements*. Here is Haslanger on this function: "ideology functions to stabilize or perpetuate unjust power and domination, and does so through some form of masking or illusion".²⁷ If our shared understandings, however distorted, didn't explain anything, there would be no point in talking about them. Sally Haslanger argues that we ought to use the concept of ideology to explain the persistence of "material injustices" like "economic injustice and exploitation...systematic violence (domestic violence, sexual violence, police brutality), marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism."²⁸ Here is one of her examples: "White Supremacy teaches us to be selective in what we notice, what we respond to, what we value. Just as the promisor ignores the desire to act in self-interest and takes this to be called for, the police officer ignores or interpretively skews the cries of the poor woman of color. Her perspective is not what matters."²⁹ This is supposed to explain the inequalities in treatment by the police faced by people (especially women) of color. In a similar vein, Tommie Shelby argues that we can understand *racism* as an ideology that maintains unjust race relations.³⁰ Robert Gooding-Williams argues that the ideology of American police officers explains their execrable treatment of black citizens in places like Baltimore, Chicago, and Ferguson, MO.³¹ Rahel Jaeggi appeals to ideology to explain the persistence of "neoliberalism," which she takes to be a

²³ Wood (1972) is a lovely, clear account of how this works.

²⁴ Wood (1972, 257).

²⁵ *Ibid.* 256–257.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 255.

²⁷ Haslanger (2017b, 150).

²⁸ Haslanger (2017c, 11).

²⁹ Haslanger (2017a, b, c, 43–44). Capitalization in the original.

³⁰ Shelby (2014, 66).

³¹ Cf. Department of Justice (2015, 2016, 2017).

bad thing.³² The list goes on.³³ There is considerable work to be done clarifying how this is all supposed to work. For example, what's the mechanism by which ideology explains bad social arrangements?³⁴ But I think we've got a clear enough handle on what an ideology is to successfully show that anything that plays the role of an ideology has to be a convention.

2 Ideologies are conventions

Anything that plays ideology's functional role has to be a *convention*.³⁵ Indeed, lots of sets of shared understandings, distorted or not, are conventions. The word "convention" is sometimes used loosely as a pejorative,³⁶ but it's a technical term from game theory with a fairly precise meaning. A convention is *an equilibrium solution to a social coordination problem*. The obvious example of a pure coordination problem is whether to drive on the right or left side of the road. There's no right answer, in the sense that either option works just fine as long as everyone abides by it. If half the players choose to drive on the right and half on the left, things go pear-shaped rather quickly. Driving on the right is thus an *equilibrium*.³⁷ It is *self-reinforcing* or *self-maintaining*, because unilateral deviation is generally more costly than playing the equilibrium strategy.³⁸ If you drive on the left side of the road in the United States, things will probably go very badly for you.

Similarly, common social meanings and shared understandings solve the coordination problem of *mutual intelligibility*. In order to communicate with one another, we have to be confident about how others around us are interpreting features of the world. We have to be able to *interpret them*—to figure out what they're paying attention to, what behaviors they take to be normal, what concepts get used in what ways, et al.³⁹ They lower the costs of interaction because the way

³² Jaeggi (2008); but cf. Boas and Gans-Morse (2009).

³³ Note that the new ideology critics embrace a somewhat broader application of ideology than their predecessors. Traditionally, ideology is a collective irrationality that's supposed to explain why people help reproduce *their own* oppression. Cf. Heath (2001, 163). The new ideology critics, however, don't seem to restrict themselves to cases of people acting against their own interests. Rather, they're concerned with oppression and domination more generally. Thanks to Allen Buchanan and an anonymous referee for making this clear to me.

³⁴ Cf. Heath (2000, 2001); cf. also Mummolo (2018) for an empirical examination of the issue.

³⁵ Schelling (1960) and Lewis (1969).

³⁶ Cf. Goodman (1989, 80): The terms "convention" and "conventional" are flagrantly and intricately ambiguous. On the one hand, the conventional is the ordinary, the usual, the traditional, the orthodox as against the novel, the deviant, the unexpected, the heterodox. On the other hand, the conventional is the artificial, the invented, the optional, as against the natural, the fundamental, the mandatory.

³⁷ Technically, a *pure strategy Nash equilibrium*. Each player's best response, conditional on the strategies of all the other players, is to play the same strategy as each of the other players.

³⁸ There are lots of different equilibrium concepts and I'm trying to stay neutral among them, because it's not clear which one applies here.

³⁹ Cf. Davidson (1974) for a classic formulation of this point. Cf. also Gadamer (1960); and for a contemporary scientific take, Tomasello (2014, Ch. 4, 5).

in which they “license different modes of interacting with”⁴⁰ the world around us are *common*. Thus, they allow us be relatively sure about how others around us are interpreting features of the world around them. If we didn't have them, we'd have a lot of trouble communicating with and understanding one another and going about our business. As the psychologist Michael Tomasello writes, “[w]ith conventional cultural practices, deviations are not punished per se; they are simply left on the outside looking in.”⁴¹

Ideology concerns “how members of society develop kinds of practical orientations or outlooks that enable them to coordinate their behavior.”⁴² Abiding by the dominant set of shared understandings in a given context is an *equilibrium strategy*, just like driving on the right side of the road in the United States or continental Europe. Thomas Schelling puts the point this way: “everyone expects everyone to expect everyone to expect observance, so that non-observance carries the pain of conspicuousness.”⁴³

Recall Haslanger's characterization of racist ideology from above: “White Supremacy teaches us to be selective in what we notice, what we respond to, what we value. Just as the promisor ignores the desire to act in self-interest and takes this to be called for, the police officer ignores or interpretively skews the cries of the poor woman of color. Her perspective is not what matters.”⁴⁴ The failure of police officers to correctly interpret the meaning of “the cries of the poor woman of color” ironically makes it easier for them to correctly interpret each other. Policing requires significant trust in one's colleagues, and this requires mutual predictability. A patrolman must know how his colleagues will interpret and react to events on the street. Thus, the ways police officers interpret and interact with their surroundings and with citizens will be shared. Similarly, failing to abide by the dominant shared understandings of some domain of social life has real costs. An officer who deviates from the common interpretation of a citizen's action, or who openly disagrees with others' interpretations, will be taken to be untrustworthy. Note that this is true whether or not those shared understandings are *ideological*. Epistemically and morally respectable shared understandings are also conventions. They will also be equilibrium solutions to the relevant sorts of coordination problems.

It's important to note that “equilibrium” doesn't mean “desirable”; indeed, the interesting constitutive feature of coordination problems is that they have *multiple* equilibria, some of which may be morally more desirable than others. Schelling notably argues that the way in which societies settle on an equilibrium convention often has more to do with psychological salience than with instrumental rationality per se.⁴⁵ As Mackie puts it, “[t]he salient choice is not noticeably *good*, just

⁴⁰ Haslanger (2017a, 13).

⁴¹ Tomasello (2014, 85).

⁴² Haslanger (2017c, 12).

⁴³ Schelling (1960, 91).

⁴⁴ Haslanger (2017c, 43–44). Capitalization in the original.

⁴⁵ Schelling (1960) and Mackie (1996, 1007).

noticeably *unique*.”⁴⁶ It has some feature that sets it apart from other choices that are no less rational. Salience becomes even more important when *lots* of people have to coordinate. And this means that it’s very easy to coordinate on a suboptimal equilibrium. Ideologies are like this. Each successive agent will coordinate on the same set of common meanings and understandings as her fellows because she will wish to fulfill everyone else’s expectations about how she will act.

Here are some other ways to misunderstand the point I just made. First, game theoretic explanations are about the structure of interactions. They’re a formal representation of the relationships between the actions agents take and their consequences. Nothing about the claim that ideologies are conventions entails that agents need to consciously represent the coordination problem to themselves as a coordination problem. Calling a convention an equilibrium solution to a coordination problem also doesn’t entail that the convention was intentionally settled upon in order to solve the coordination problem, which, as we’ve just stated, needn’t even be an object of conscious awareness by agents. What’s more, nothing about this claim requires that agents be perfectly instrumentally rational or self-interested.⁴⁷ It assumes “methodological individualism” only in the very thin sense that collective or social phenomena like ideologies are only causally relevant when mediated by the behavior of individuals.⁴⁸ It doesn’t require some ontologically thicker assumptions about the “fundamentality” of individuals over groups, whatever that means. Rather, the basic goal is to show the relationship between individuals and the broader social order. The concept of “convention” and the set of analytical tools provided by Schelling and Lewis and their successors allow us to rigorously characterize the way in which individual action is conditioned and constrained by the broader social order.

3 Horn one: ideology critique is inadequate

Suppose you think that an ideology is at least partially responsible for some bad social arrangements. How might you go about trying to change things? If you’re a contemporary social theorist, you’ll concentrate on figuring out how to make our shared understandings less distorted, because your analytical story concentrates almost entirely on the nature of those distortions. Even if we grant that ideology sometimes successfully explains the persistence of bad social arrangements,⁴⁹ the *meliorative* project of ideology critique is guilty of excessive rationalism. The new ideology critics spend a lot of time trying to show both that there are different and

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 1007.

⁴⁷ This common way of understanding rational choice theory comes from e.g. Green and Shapiro (1994) and Satz and Frerejohn (1994). Cf. Lovett (2016, 238): “For the most part, people view [Rational Choice Theory] as a species of intentional explanation. Roughly, according to this view, the point of RCT is to explain social phenomena by showing how they arise from the deliberate or intentional pursuit of self-interest by social actors (and especially, individual persons).” Lovett (2016) is an extended, and to my mind, convincing argument against this position.

⁴⁸ Cf. Elster (1986).

⁴⁹ But cf. Heath (2001) for some skepticism about this.

less distorted sets of shared understandings, and that wholesale adoption of them would improve our social arrangements. But they systematically ignore the role strategic considerations play in driving and preventing social change. This leads to an impoverished account of how social change works.

Ideology critique seeks to replace distorted shared understandings with less distorted ones, in the hopes of spurring social change. The intuition behind this critical strategy is pretty simple. If people are exposed to the ways in which their engagement with the world is distorted, and the ways in which those distortions have pernicious downstream causal effects, the scales will fall from their eyes, and they will stop acting in ways that maintain pernicious social arrangements. Here are some examples of this overarching concern.

Celikates (2006) gives some paradigmatic examples: the attempt to show that particular interests stand behind a moral position that presents itself as universal, that an agent was lured into a moral judgment by arranged evidence, or that under certain social conditions someone was unable to come to the “right” insight, is part of the practice of morality. It becomes ineffective if voiced as a generalized suspicion from a standpoint that localizes itself outside of this practice.⁵⁰

Haslanger (2017a): ...ideology critique, in the sense I've sketched, challenges not only the truth/falsity of our beliefs about 'the facts,' but also the terms used to describe the facts. For example, redescribing meat as the flesh of tortured animals, or racial profiling as racial targeting, matters. Hegemony both creates a world and a way of seeing a world, but the world created can be seen in different ways. This is part of what ideology critique offers.⁵¹

Haslanger (2017b): ...social movements seek cultural change, for example, a reorganization of our society around different values, a restructuring of our practices so that we are positioned to recognize the value of new or different kinds of thing and coordinate on just terms.⁵²

Haslanger (2017c): ...due to the ideological filters that guide [the defenders of patriarchal White supremacy's] practical orientation, they lack the relevant moral knowledge....Gaining the relevant knowledge may require changes to the cultural techne, the frame of social meanings and social practices, that shape their practical orientation.⁵³

Most of these thinkers are committed to the claim that ideology critique is part of a process of social transformation, but are silent about the causal connection between the critique of ideology and social change. And to their detriment, they ignore the fact that knocking a society from one convention to another requires more than just convincing everyone of the superiority of the new convention. The best way to

⁵⁰ Celikates (2006, 33).

⁵¹ Haslanger (2017a, 19).

⁵² Haslanger (2017b, 169).

⁵³ Haslanger (2017c, 46–47).

illustrate this is with an example: the political scientist Gerry Mackie's well-known convention account of foot-binding and infibulation.

Here's the basic problem: Infibulation—the most extreme form of female genital mutilation (hereafter “FGM”)—is a major public health problem in the developing world. It's also *extremely* painful; arguably it's a human rights violation. Similarly, in China until the early twentieth century, footbinding was a common, painful practice inflicted upon female children. Both practices had some common features. First, they were nearly universally practiced, including by those who disapproved of them. Second, they were manifestations of strict norms surrounding female purity, necessary to preserve family honor and the marriageability of daughters. Thirdly, they were both generally thought to be eradicable only in the long term. But footbinding was eradicated in China within a generation. So how do we understand what's going on? Why did footbinding and infibulation arise? Why do they persist, despite vast changes in culture, politics, and individual attitudes? And how are they to be eradicated?

Mackie argues that footbinding and infibulation are *conventions*. In the case of both footbinding and infibulation, the coordination problem is about *paternity confidence*. Societies with radical poverty and inequality practice hypergyny, because being the *n*th wife of the richest man is a lot better for one's children than being the first wife of a commoner. Similarly, men want to guarantee their paternity and the fidelity of their spouses, because they do not want to expend resources raising other men's children. So both men and women (and their families) have an incentive to coordinate on a norm that ensures the fidelity of women to their husbands. This means that a high-status man with lots of spouses will adopt a “costly method of fidelity control,”⁵⁴ which allows families to advertise the purity and chastity of their daughters, which manifests as infibulation in Sub-Saharan Africa and footbinding in China. This norm then percolates down the social hierarchy as lower-status families begin to imitate higher-status ones in the hopes of securing social advancement for their daughters. This means that the practice's value as an advertisement of relative purity and chastity becomes diluted. As Mackie puts it, this “convention signifying paternity confidence was imposed at the social apex, and then hypertrophied and diffused in positional competition”⁵⁵ among families seeking to improve their daughters' social status. So the societies in question settled on extremely suboptimal equilibria.

The problem is that often, suboptimal equilibria can become “sticky.” The point about the psychological salience of conventions does some work here. The easiest way to coordinate with everyone else, and ensure that you don't suffer by playing a nonequilibrium strategy, is to *do what everyone else is already doing*. As Mackie notes, “[o]ne common explanation [for the practice of infibulation offered by agents]...is simply that ‘such is the custom or tradition here’.”⁵⁶ Conventions persist because (a) agents don't know that there are alternative ways of doing things

⁵⁴ Mackie (1996, 1008).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 1004.

and (b) even if they do know about the alternatives, being the first party to try to move to a new convention is extremely costly; by definition, an equilibrium is a state such that the utility-maximizing strategy for each individual is not to deviate. Each family was incentivized to continue footbinding or infibulation (*mutatis mutandis*), not necessarily because this conferred social advantage, but because *not* doing so conferred social disadvantage. Women with natural feet or intact genitalia were considered unmarriageable.⁵⁷

What's more, the circumstances that motivated hypergyny and costly fidelity control changed. Both China and Sudan became richer. But the norm didn't, because of a set of mechanisms that held it in place. One problem is the propagation of false beliefs surrounding the empirical, spiritual or health-related effects of the practice, as well as beliefs about the possibility of alternative practices. Note that the (often religious) norms surrounding purity and chastity look a *lot* like "ideology," in the sense used by the new ideology critics. They present distorted pictures of value, privileging chastity over bodily autonomy, and helping sustain and propagate false beliefs about and attitudes towards women's anatomy and sexuality. They also present the idiosyncratic practice of FGM as natural, because practitioners are often unaware of alternatives. This is a case in which ideology, or something a lot like it, seems to help explain the persistence of a set of very bad social arrangements.

Importantly, this convention is abandoned only when a sufficiently large number of people both agree that there's a better alternative *and coordinate on the move* to the new convention.⁵⁸ It's vital to note that this collective action problem is a part of the formal properties of conventions, regardless of their content. This is the key feature of conventions that the new ideology critics miss. Even if every member of a given community comes to see that the purity and chastity norms that organize practices surrounding women's sexuality are distorting and unjust, there is still no guarantee that agents will shift from the existing convention to a better one. Indeed, (and vexingly for theorists and reformers) footbinding and FGM were reproduced and propagated primarily by *mothers* who had been bound or infibulated themselves.⁵⁹ This is due to a phenomenon called *pluralistic ignorance*. Timur Kuran uses the term to mean "misconceptions of preference distributions,"⁶⁰ but the point translates to the components of ideologies as well. Even if an agent knows that there are multiple sets of potential ways of interpreting some pieces of reality, and prefers some new set to the set currently in common use, she may not know that other agents have the same knowledge and preferences. And because of this, she might overestimate the costs of publicly using the new set of interpretations. This is especially consequential in the cases of FGM and footbinding. Picking the non-equilibrium strategy will doom her daughter to spinsterhood and shame her family.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 1004: "The most common explanation given by participants is that infibulation is required for marriage and honor".

⁵⁸ Cf. also Bicchieri (2017, 108–111).

⁵⁹ Mackie (1996, 1000, 1003).

⁶⁰ Kuran (1995, 78).

Mackie argued in 1996 that anti-footbinding *pledge associations* introduced to China by campaigners in the late nineteenth century solved this coordination problem by allowing large groups of agents to credibly commit to natural feet, and that a similar mechanism would prompt the abandonment of infibulation. In conjunction with education campaigns that informed parents that nobody else bound their daughters' feet, and that footbinding was bad for their daughters' health, anti-footbinding campaigners formed "societies, whose members pledged not to bind their daughters' feet nor to let their sons marry women with bound feet."⁶¹ It turns out that unbeknownst to Mackie, a similar dynamic took place in Senegal⁶² in the 1990s. A group of women participating in an education program began to convince their fellows that keeping their daughters intact was good for their health and for human rights.

These pledge associations did two things. First, they allowed a space for education campaigns about the ill effects of FGM, and which allowed agents to learn and deliberate about the religious chastity norms that supported it. This effect is broadly similar to the effect the new ideology critics envision for ideology critique. It changed the terms in which agents conceived of and talked about the practices of FGM and footbinding. Secondly, *in addition to this*, the pledge associations allowed a critical mass of agents to simultaneously coordinate a shift from the FGM convention to a new FGM-free convention. This lowered first-mover costs by allowing a number of agents to coordinate on a new convention *simultaneously*. And by coordinating on the new norm simultaneously, they could ensure that the *n*'th person's move from the old norm of infibulation to the new one is relatively costless. This dynamic explains another interesting feature of footbinding and infibulation: their *astonishingly* rapid abandonment.⁶³ Campaigners against both footbinding and infibulation predicted that change would take hundreds of years. But in both cases, widespread abandonment took only a generation. Mackie's story explains "tipping point" dynamics precisely *because* it captures causally-relevant strategic features shared by both foot-binding and infibulation.⁶⁴ The results of the intervention? "The commitment worked: public opinion continues to resolutely oppose FGC ["female genital cutting"], and villagers say that deviators will be identified and punished."⁶⁵ This is pretty good evidence that Mackie was right.

And it's pretty good evidence that first mover costs engendered by pluralistic ignorance—and, more generally, formal features of conventions and their

⁶¹ Mackie (1996, 1011).

⁶² Admittedly, Senegal is in West Africa; Mackie's original (1996) paper was about the practice in Sudan. But the convention story explains the Senegalese events. Cf. also Orubuloye et al. (2000).

⁶³ Mackie (1996, 1008): "As measured by a sociologist's data, for example, the population of Tingshien, a conservative rural area 125 miles south of Peking, went from 99 percent bound in 1889 to 94 percent bound in 1899 to zero bound in 1919".

⁶⁴ Thanks to Allen Buchanan and an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. Another example of this is the Schelling segregation model. Cf. Schelling (1969, 1971, 1978), Fossett and Dietrich (2009), and Muldoon et al. (2012).

⁶⁵ Mackie (2000, 257).

dynamics—are an important part of any adequate story about the causes of social stasis and social change. It is almost wholly absent from the new ideology critique.

4 Horn two: ideology critique reinvents the wheel, poorly

But it need not be. Nothing about the argument in section III shows that the various core commitments of the New Ideology Critics are *incompatible* with properly appreciating the role of strategic interactions in social change. Occasionally, Haslanger in particular seems sensitive to the importance of strategic interaction. She notes that “emancipation in particular, and justice more generally, is not achieved simply by ‘seeing the truth,’ or getting others to see the truth. What’s required is a different way of living together, different, and more just, forms of interpretation and coordination”⁶⁶ and “requires...insight into the pathologies and potential of collective action.”⁶⁷ But this never pays off in a deep engagement with the strategic obstacles to social change. Similarly, both Haslanger and Celikates spend time thinking about the role of social movements in causing social change.⁶⁸ And social movements—the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, et al.—are plausibly the space where agents can coordinate on new ways of interpreting the world *because they lower first-mover costs*. They play the same role as anti-footbinding pledge associations (though presumably on a larger scale).⁶⁹ But again, neither Haslanger nor Celikates says anything about this role. Haslanger’s discussion of the details of how social movements lead to changes in bad social arrangements proceeds almost entirely in terms of their ability to open up new epistemic possibilities.⁷⁰ Celikates, similarly, says nothing about the internal strategic dynamics of social movements.

We could conceivably just tack a theory of strategic interaction onto their story and fix the problems I’ve pointed out. But this just creates a new problem. Ideology critique, as its contemporary proponents conceive of it, reinvents the wheel, poorly. It’s unclear what the language of ideology and ideology critique, supplemented by the resources of contemporary game theory, adds to our existing understanding of social change.

Remember, at heart, the stories Haslanger, Jaeggi, Stanley, Shelby, and Celikates tell are about diagnosing and remedying social ills. They are, in part, *causal* stories about what drives social change, and in particular moral improvement in social arrangements. And so we can fruitfully compare the best version of the ideology critique story—one in which it’s supplemented by a reasonable theory of strategic factors relevant to social change—with the best accounts we have of social change and social progress. The idea that ideologies are *conventions*, and that their

⁶⁶ Haslanger (2017c, 24).

⁶⁷ Haslanger (2017c, 25).

⁶⁸ Haslanger (2017b) and Celikates (2016).

⁶⁹ Feminist consciousness-raising groups might also be an example of this.

⁷⁰ A representative example is Haslanger (2017b, 169); this theme appears throughout the paper.

dynamics mirror those of other conventions, gives us the part of the causal story that depends only on ideologies' formal properties. But the contribution of the New Ideology Critics is *substantive*, not formal. They advocate for particular ways of convincing agents that some conventions are better than others. What does the substantive content of the theory of ideologies and ideology critique contribute over and above existing theories of moral and social change? As it happens we can answer this question by comparing the new ideology critics to our pretty good existing accounts of changes in the content of moral conventions.⁷¹

Both Gerry Mackie and Cristina Bicchieri describe the circumstances under which agents become convinced to abandon the FGM convention in the terms of contemporary behavioral science. Bicchieri argues that pernicious conventions “are embedded in a thick web of values, beliefs, and other norms that form shared cognitive schemata”.⁷² The concept of “schemata” and the associated concept “scripts” do all the work that the concept of ideology is supposed to do. Indeed, Haslanger occasionally refers to the terms in her own work.⁷³ Roughly, cognitive schemata are “generic knowledge structures that lie at the base of our understanding of the natural and social world.”⁷⁴ Scripts are schemata for events that govern how agents behave in particular situations.⁷⁵ Schemata and scripts are thus the cognitive support for social arrangements.⁷⁶ They are the tools with which agents interpret the world and guide their actions. Bicchieri gives the example of child marriage:

There are important schemata related to gender, sexuality, patriarchy, family values, the role of women and society, concepts such as honor and purity, the nature of marriage, the idea of what a bride should be, and so on. The marriage script will vary depending on specific traditions and economic and legal conditions, and will include beliefs, values, and social expectations that stem from the schemata. The marriage script will vary depending on specific traditions and economic and legal conditions, and will include beliefs, values and social expectations that stem from the schemata. The marriage script may signal that the bride should be a young, modest, virgin woman with (in some cases) a dowry that is proportional to her age, and that she will have to accept a broom who is chosen by her family.⁷⁷

This story does all the work that a theory of ideology does to explain the persistence of a bad social arrangement—in this case, child marriage. We can tell a similar story for FGM using schemata and scripts surrounding purity, chastity, religious

⁷¹ This should not be taken as an endorsement of the “meta-ethical” claim that morality *is* conventional, though I think that’s a stance I endorse; rather, by the phrase “moral convention” I mean a set of moral commitments *accepted in general*, and which have the formal structure of conventions.

⁷² Bicchieri (2017, 121).

⁷³ Haslanger (2017a, 13, b, 155, 156, 157).

⁷⁴ Bicchieri (2017, 132).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Both good and bad ones, but let’s concentrate on the pernicious ones.

⁷⁷ Bicchieri (2017, 133).

commitments, etc. Mackie, for example, argues that FGM is supported by an honor culture that requires that women stay virgins before marriage: FGM “fosters virginity, first, because the physical barrier prevents rape, and second, because the...barrier and the attenuation of sexual desire protect the supposedly oversexed and promiscuous woman from temptation.”⁷⁸ This story appeals to a whole host of social meanings surrounding the notion of virginity, of women’s sexual conduct, of honor, et al. It’s unclear what the New Ideology Critics’ accounts of ideology add to this story. What’s more, Mackie argues that *some* beliefs that support FGM are “self-reinforcing”, in that they are perpetuated because the cost of testing the belief is too high. For example, “[t]he Bambara of Mali believe that the clitoris will kill a man if it comes in contact with the penis during intercourse.”⁷⁹ The New Ideology Critics provide no analysis of a similar dynamic in their account.

We can tell an analogous story about ideology *critique*. Remember, for the New Ideology Critics, ideology critique is about convincing agents that there is a better set of schemata or social meanings worth coordinating on. But again, Bicchieri and Mackie have a fleshed-out account of how this happens. Bicchieri argues that, for example, “...the observation of a few, highly schema-discrepant instances can induce a sudden, dramatic revision of the associated schema.”⁸⁰ And similarly, Mackie argues that many social arrangements are reproduced simply because agents are unaware that there is a better alternative: the health effects of FGM were largely unknown to its practitioners; similarly, practitioners of both FGM and footbinding were unaware of the parochial nature of their respective practices.⁸¹ But it also may require a “reframing” of the terms in which agents talk about the practice of FGM. Bicchieri recounts a campaign in Sudan that “induced a schema change by reframing the conversation about girls’ bodies.”⁸² This effort introduced a new vocabulary word to refer to uncut girls that connoted a natural, pristine state, combined with an advertising campaign that “linked traditional values of honor and purity to the idea that uncut girls are complete and pure.”⁸³ This is a perfect example of the sort of ambitions Haslanger has for ideology critique as a social-meliorative tool. Remember, Haslanger argues that the key contribution of ideology critique to social change is “queering our language, playing with out meanings, and monkey-wrenching or otherwise shifting the material conditions that support our tutored dispositions”⁸⁴ (especially when those “tutored dispositions” help maintain bad social arrangements) and expose to us a new, less oppressive way of doing things. But the abandonment of FGM shows us that we already have the conceptual resources to get a handle on how this sort of schema-change works. How does the new ideology critique better help us understand this?

⁷⁸ Mackie (1996, 1004).

⁷⁹ Mackie (1996, 1009).

⁸⁰ Bicchieri (2017, 137).

⁸¹ Mackie (1996, 1011–1012, 2000).

⁸² Bicchieri (2017, 139).

⁸³ *Ibid.* 139–140.

⁸⁴ Haslanger (2017a, 10).

Another major difference between the two research programs is that Bicchieri and Mackie (and the legions of social scientists working on these issues) have a whole causal theory that's well-supported by historical examples as well as detailed causal mechanisms. The theory of the New Ideology Critics is, by contrast, conjectural. It includes no causal analysis to speak of. It's just a happy coincidence that it resembles a theory that works pretty well.

The New Ideology Critique's resemblance to a well-supported social-scientific theory of social change seems to count in its favor, at least *prima facie*. The problem is that this close resemblance seems to render ideology critique redundant. The best version of the New Ideology Critique—one supported by a robust theory of strategic interaction—doesn't explain anything that theories like Mackie's and Bicchieri's don't explain better. It is a redundant research program.

5 A concluding complaint

This is all part of a more general complaint. Laying out the entire complaint is beyond the scope of this paper, but I'll try to briefly motivate the bigger issue here. The first generation of the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung aggressively pursued social-scientific as well as philosophical research—Martin Jay's authoritative history of the Institut contains an entire chapter on its empirical studies.⁸⁵ Robin Celikates—a core member of the group I'm calling the New Ideology Critics—explicitly claims that critical theory in the vein of the Frankfurt School is “*interdisciplinary*,” in that it opposes any desire for philosophical purity and integrates philosophical analysis with social research.”⁸⁶ But contemporary adopters of the “critical theory” mantle—including the New Ideology Critics—almost totally ignore relevant literature in economics, political science, psychology, and anthropology⁸⁷; they thus depart quite radically from their predecessors, for whom serious engagement with the social sciences was explicitly part of the mission. This is especially important because, as I argued above, a theory of “progressive” or “emancipatory” social change requires a well-supported causal story about how such change has happened in the past. Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell note that “explanatory deficits translate into *normative* deficits: an inadequate understanding of how moral progress comes about supplies incomplete guidance for how to sustain and achieve more of it.”⁸⁸ One feature of contemporary social science unavailable to the Frankfurt School's first generation is a set of rigorous methods for making causal inferences. Contemporary social science has plenty to say about the causal structure of the social phenomena that most concern

⁸⁵ Jay (1996, Ch. 7).

⁸⁶ Celikates (2017, 846). Italics in original.

⁸⁷ One notable and noble exception is Joseph Heath.

⁸⁸ Buchanan and Powell (2018, 147). There are a number of examples of social-scientific literature on topics of interest to the New Ideology Critics. Here is an incredibly abbreviated list of works on the causes of persistent racial inequality: cf. Fryer (2010), Hutt (1964), Loury (1994), and Rothstein (2017).

the new ideology critics. For brevity's sake, here is just one example, which I think adequately motivates the larger point.

Haslanger's discussion of ideology is a part of a larger account of how culture organizes human social life. On her theory, a "cultural techne" is a set of competencies that allow us to participate in shared social life.⁸⁹ It's the more general category, of which ideologies are a pernicious subset. As we've seen, it supplies the tools people use to navigate their natural and social surroundings. And cultural change is a central piece of her theory of progressive or emancipatory social change. The effects of culture on cognition⁹⁰ have been extremely well-studied by anthropologists and psychologists, and social scientists of various stripes have long debated the explanatory role of culture.⁹¹

The psychologist Dan Kahan, for example, documents the way in which political ideology affects the way agents interpret a political protest. It turns out that your political commitments play quite an important role in whether you see a political protest as a "protest" or a "riot". And this effect is robust across the political spectrum.⁹² This is an experimental result; it's the sort of evidence that you'd need to make a case for how culture affects cognition. It's entirely possible that the analogous pronouncements about the effects of anti-black ideology or "neoliberalism" are true; but this requires empirical investigation. Indeed, there is experimental evidence that priming black faces makes agents more likely to see an object as a "weapon".⁹³ There are also experimental results about comparative measures of social trust among citizens of Western democracies and the former Soviet Bloc. Presumably, these would tell us something about the existence and effects of a "neoliberal ideology".⁹⁴ It's empirical literature that exists, but Haslanger and Jaeggi neglect to cite it.

You might also think that a theory advocating for cultural change as a path to moral progress would spend some time coming to grips with historical and empirical accounts of cultural and social change.⁹⁵ To pick a recent example: Buchanan and Powell recount the spread of abolitionist sentiment among the British public.⁹⁶ Early British abolitionists used both emotional and rational appeals to point out inconsistencies in moral reasoning and thereby mobilize public opposition. For example,

⁸⁹ Haslanger (2017b, 156).

⁹⁰ Cf. e.g. Tomasello (1999, 2014, 2016, 2019), Kahan et al. (2012, 2016) and Kahan (2016a, b).

⁹¹ Cf. Brown (2008), Bowles and Gintis (2011), Boyd and Richerson (1985, 1992, 2004), Henrich et al. (2004, 2005), Henrich and Henrich (2007), Ensminger and Henrich (2014), Henrich (2000, 2016), Bicchieri (2006, 2017), Jones (2006) and Heath (2011).

⁹² Kahan et al. (2012).

⁹³ Cf. Bolinger (2017, Section IV, and fn.19–31) for a discussion.

⁹⁴ Cf. Uslaner (2018) and Letki (2018).

⁹⁵ Cf. World Bank (2015); the 2015 World Development Report is about the role of social norms in economic development. Cf. also Buchanan and Powell (2017).

⁹⁶ Buchanan and Powell (2018, 316–325). Cf. also Kitcher (2014, 158–162).

Abolitionists sent artists, operating under false pretenses, on Middle Passage voyages to covertly sketch the horrific conditions they witnessed....These drawings were then mass-reproduced and widely circulated, triggering emotional responses not just of pity and horror but also of indignation that Britain, a country whose citizens prided themselves on the liberties they enjoyed, should be the dominant country in a trade so unspeakably vile.⁹⁷

Buchanan and Powell's account of the rise of abolitionism uses a number of theoretical resources familiar to the New Ideology Critics. But in addition to all the factors that a theory of ideology purports to tell us about, Buchanan and Powell give us a rich account of the various structural factors that made this moral change possible: "the imposition of the king's peace and the introduction of incentives for peaceful interactions and mutually beneficial cooperation through the development of markets and an increasing division of labor,"⁹⁸ and British politicians' increasing responsiveness to public opinion were necessary parts of the rise of abolitionism. So too was the fact that abolitionism began in "nonconformist" religious sects like the Quakers, which were able to take political positions opposed to the government's because they were not funded by the government (as was the Church of England). Important also was cheap mass media, which was made possible by the aforementioned rise of markets and the division of labor. This is a compact account of the institutional and social drivers of a massive cultural change. The rise of abolitionist sentiment in Britain is, presumably, the sort of cultural change the New Ideology Critics would want to take as their model. It's what success looks like. But Haslanger spends no time at all in any of the hundred and fifty-odd pages she's written on this topic engaging with this vast empirical literature on cultural change.

This is a rough example. It's true that the connections between (say) contemporary racial attitudes and Michael Tomasello's big-picture examination of the relationship between human cognition and mechanisms of learning that drove cultural evolution are non-obvious. But it's equally true that if one is to do social theory properly, one should have a handle on the various causal mechanisms that are at work in the creation, reproduction, and change of human social arrangements. As it stands, the new ideology critique is an exercise in what the philosopher Joseph Heath calls "normative sociology".⁹⁹ Heath argues that contemporary social theorists and social critics often uncritically import their intuitions about the *moral* order onto claims about how the *causal* order is patterned. The result is a tendency to misdiagnose social ills. And this undermines the admirable *moral* intuition that motivates Haslanger et al. As Heath puts it, "...the left consistently gets it right when it comes to identifying problems, but then gets the explanations wrong..."¹⁰⁰ In a set of stunning coincidences, Haslanger attributes vast causal powers to a set of

⁹⁷ Buchanan and Powell (2018, 318).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁹⁹ Heath (2015b); the term comes from Nozick (1974, 247): "Normative sociology, the study of what the causes of problems ought to be, greatly fascinates us all".

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

factors to whose moral wrongness she's antecedently committed. Jaeggi argues that "neoliberal ideology" is responsible for all kinds of social ills. Perhaps the worst offender in this regard is Stanley,¹⁰¹ who attributes all sorts of bad social consequences to economic inequality and its accompanying ideology, entirely unencumbered by empirical evidence.¹⁰² None of this is to say definitively that any of these thinkers is wrong. But despite the existence of a fairly robust social scientific literature on the topics that interest them, none of them do any work to defend the causal claims they make; nor do they do any of the work required to undermine alternative causal claims put forth by opponents. Until and unless they begin to take the empirical and theoretical social-scientific literature seriously, their inheritance of the Frankfurt School's glory days must remain incomplete.

Acknowledgements Thanks especially to Matthew Adams, Jake Monaghan, and Daniel Muñoz, all of whom read multiple drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Jonny Anomaly, Jacob Barrett, Allen Buchanan, Cesar Cabezas, Gianna Englert, Dave Estlund (who suggested the title), Arianna Falbo, Jeff Feldman, Jerry Gaus, Nick Geiser, Adam Gjesdal, Charles Larmore, Rachel Leadon, Ferris Lupino, Chad Marxen, Sam Meister, Thomas Moore, Alex Motchoulski, Julian Mueller, Ryan Muldoon, Adam Pautz, Phil Smolenski, Valerie Soon, Bobby Wallace, Taylor White, various anonymous referees, and audiences at the 2016 Princeton Workshop in Social Philosophy, 2017 Politics, Philosophy, and Economics Society, New England Political Science Association meeting, and North American Society for Social Philosophy meetings, ECAP IX, and the Brown Graduate Political Philosophy Workshop for comments, feedback, and helpful discussion.

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¹⁰¹ Stanley (2015).

¹⁰² Brennan (2017).

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