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Steven Lukes

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In Defense of “False Consciousness”

Steven Lukes[†]

I want to defend the answer to a question. The answer is “false consciousness.” I will turn to the question in a moment, but first I want to comment on why attributing false consciousness to people, a practice I seek here to defend as sometimes legitimate and appropriate, can seem highly objectionable. The concept of false consciousness is closely associated with others, notably that of “real” or “true” or “objective” interests, that is, of interests that false consciousness supposedly conceals from those whose interests they are. Those who object to this answer generally do so on two distinct, even opposite, grounds. The first, more traditional objection is that these concepts suggest an arrogant assumption of superior knowledge, an assumption notably embedded in the Marxist tradition—a claim to privileged access to what is “correct,” a claim theorized by Georg Lukács¹ and well exemplified by Leninists, Trotskyists, Stalinists, and Communist Party apparatchiks across the decades of the twentieth century—and a corresponding disposition to treat people as cultural dupes. The second objection is more recent. The suggestion, commonly associated with postmodernist thinking, is that there cannot be false consciousness since there are multiple true consciousnesses—socially constructed “regimes of truth,” generated and sustained by power. On this view, to impute false consciousness is mistakenly to believe that there even could be a correct view that is not itself imposed by power. So I want to defend the answer, separated, if that is possible, from the bad names it has acquired—and raise the question whether, thus defended, the answer is subject to either of these objections, or, worse still, both.

So what is the question? It was, I think, first asked by Montaigne’s friend Étienne de la Boétie, author of *Discours de la ser-*

[†] Professor of Sociology, New York University.

¹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (first published 1923) (MIT Press 1972) (Rodney Livingstone, trans). See also Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* 159–60 (Verso 2000) (Esther Leslie, trans).

vitute volontaire.² Why do the many submit to the tyranny of the few? Why do “a hundred” or “a thousand” “endure the caprice of a single man?”³ De la Boétie offers three answers. The first is the force of custom and habit: enslaved people become “degraded, submissive, and incapable of any great deed.”⁴ The second is “bread and circuses”⁵ plus the gullibility of the subjects: “Plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient peoples the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty, the instruments of tyranny.”⁶ The third answer is that the tyrants surround themselves with dependents, who in turn have their own dependents.⁷ In short, the three answers, in modern parlance, amount to cultural inertia, manufactured consent, and patronage.

Wilhelm Reich asks the question no less directly. “[W]hat has to be explained,” he writes, is “why the majority of those who are hungry *don’t* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don’t* strike.”⁸ More directly still—why do people accept governments and follow leaders and vote for politicians when doing so is against their interests? Here is a graphic and contemporary version of the question from Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*⁹ How can we explain the phenomenon

of sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off the land; of devoted family men carefully seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working-class guys in midwestern cities cheering as they deliver

² Étienne de la Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (Free Life 1975) (Harry Kurz, trans).

³ Id. See also Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* 63 (Harvard 1996).

⁴ De la Boétie, *Politics of Obedience* at 68 (cited in note 2). See also Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude* at 63 (cited in note 3).

⁵ The idea, originating in Juvenal’s *Satires*, that the Roman populace could be appeased and distracted by means of free wheat and costly circus games. For a classic modern discussion, see generally Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism* (Viking and Penguin 1990) (Brian Pearce, trans).

⁶ De la Boétie, *Politics of Obedience* at 69–70 (cited in note 2). See also Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude* at 63 (cited in note 3).

⁷ De la Boétie, *Politics of Obedience* at 78–79 (cited in note 2). See also Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude* at 63 (cited in note 3).

⁸ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* 53 (Penguin 1970) (Vincent R. Carfagno, trans). See also Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude* at 1 (cited in note 3).

⁹ Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (Metropolitan 2004).

up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life, will transform their region into a "rust belt," will strike people like them blows from which they will never recover[?]¹⁰

Given the limits of this short Article, I will offer, like de la Boétie, a trio of capsule answers. Each answer identifies a different kind of mechanism. The first two are obvious and widely accepted, but the third is contentious.

The first obvious answer assumes that people have given desires and beliefs. This answer embraces the gamut of *incentives* they face: positive and negative sanctions; actual and potential costs and benefits; offers and threats; and, following Robert Nozick, "thoffers," that is, offers the refusal of which is seen as threatening.¹¹ It is hardly surprising that people seek advantages and believe in promises, only to find themselves disappointed, disadvantaged, and disillusioned by false promises. And people will comply with regimes that oppress or suppress them out of the fear of the consequences of noncompliance. James C. Scott observes that "slaves, serfs, untouchables, the colonized, and subjugated races" will typically exhibit "reactions and patterns of resistance that are [] broadly comparable." They are likely, behind the scenes, "to create and defend a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced."¹² The simplest cases are those of overt coercion where the interests of the oppressed are clear. Examples include slavery, blacks in apartheid South Africa, and national minorities in oppressive circumstances (for example, Kurds in Turkey). But there are also subtler cases, where the regime induces complicity in a social world of mutual and generalized distrust and suspicion, as in Václav Havel's essay *The Power of the Powerless*, where a greengrocer puts up a sign saying "Workers of the World, Unite!"—a slogan he scorns—for fear of the consequences of not doing so.¹³ Moreover, the fear need not be actively induced by the powerful, who may not even be present or active, as in

¹⁰ Id at 10.

¹¹ Robert Nozick, *Coercion*, in Peter Laslett, W.G. Runciman, and Quentin Skinner, eds, *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Fourth Series* 101–35 (Blackwell 1972).

¹² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* xi (Yale 1990).

¹³ Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, in Václav Havel, et al, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* 27–28 (Hutchinson 1985) (John Keane, ed).

Michel Foucault's emblematic account of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, symbolizing modern disciplinary power.¹⁴

The second obvious answer also takes people's desires and beliefs as given. It proposes that what they face is a *lack of alternatives*. Here we are dealing with powerlessness to resist or act otherwise. There are many variants of this lack of alternatives, but they can be seen as falling into two broad kinds. The lack may be of *actual* or *real* alternatives. A national minority may have no institutional means of expression, such as a political party. There may be no countervailing power to the dominant one because civil society is weak or nonexistent. Mobilization may be bound to fail because the collective action problem cannot be solved. Trade unions and political parties may be banned or seriously discouraged. Lack of actual opportunity can be economic, social, legal, or political. There may be no jobs or extensive discrimination or legal barriers and even political exclusion, or all of these, as with convicted felons in an economic downturn. Or the lack may be *subjective*—a lack of awareness that there can be alternatives. People can be trapped in a set of beliefs that sanctifies the inevitability of existing inequalities. Where caste prevails, there may be no prospect of changing one's status in this life, and under traditional forms of male dominance, one's gender-assigned status can be similarly inescapable. Moreover, people can be persuaded to lower their expectations and adapt their preferences to what they believe to be the only feasible option. (This was Margaret Thatcher's great success; as she famously said: "There is no alternative.") And indeed, these two kinds of powerlessness—objective and subjective—may coincide: people may be right to believe that they have no other realistic choice than compliance, that there are no feasible alternatives to servitude. On the other hand, they may not. This leads us to consider the third answer.

The third, contentious answer is, as I have suggested, typically associated with several provocative expressions, notably false consciousness and real, objective, or true interests. Here, the core idea is that acquiescence to an actual or potential government or regime, and even enthusiastic support for its spokesmen and advocates, can be the result of our mistaking or misconceiving where our interests lie. It is worth noting that this

¹⁴ See generally Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 195–228 (Vintage 1977) (Alan Sheridan, trans).

need not be because we have been bamboozled by the powerful; we can be fully engaged in bamboozling ourselves.

The contrary view was forcefully expressed by the classical utilitarians, notably Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The latter saw that answer as paternalistic and asserted that "each is the only safe guardian of his own rights and interests."¹⁵ This view makes sense on Bentham's assumption that our interests lie entirely in pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, for we can hardly be mistaken in our understanding of what these experiences consist in.¹⁶ Similarly, if, like most mainstream economists, you assume that one's interests consist merely in preference satisfaction, then it is hard to see who could be in a better position than oneself to know whether one's preferences are satisfied. And yet John Stuart Mill's endorsement of the utilitarian view is questionable, since he himself rejected both these assumptions, holding that one can be more or less expert about where one's interests lie and that such expertise derives from diversity of experience.¹⁷

A contemporary exponent of this third answer is Thomas Frank, whom I quoted above. Frank's problem is to understand the "cultural backlash": how to explain that people are preoccupied with cultural and religious issues rather than economic ones, and how it is that "the Kansas conservative rebels profess to hate elites but somehow excuse from their fury the corporate world, even when it has so manifestly screwed them."¹⁸ One entirely convincing objection to Frank's way of posing the problem is that it is arbitrary to just assume that people's real interests are economic; we should take their priorities seriously, not assume them to be deluded because they see things differently. If one believes that abortion is murder, how could one reasonably allow it to count less than one's material comforts, or even necessities? Moreover, those, typically on the political left, who observe and deplore the failure of the disadvantaged to perceive and pursue their material interests, are often precisely those

¹⁵ John Stuart Mill, "Representative Government" in *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government* 208 (Dent and Dutton 1910).

¹⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* 11 (Athlone 1970) (J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart, eds) ("Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*.").

¹⁷ Mill, *Utilitarianism* at 164–65 (cited in note 15). Mill wrote: "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure." *Id.* at 8.

¹⁸ Frank, *What's the Matter* at 113 (cited in note 9).

whose interest in rectifying social injustice takes priority for them over the pursuit of their own material advantages.

And yet—and this is my claim—the structure (though not the content) of Frank’s argument is correct. People can be deluded and delude themselves about what is in their interests. Our first two answers to de la Boétie’s question take our desires and beliefs as given; the third answer allows that they, in turn, can be subject to the power of others and of themselves. In allowing the latter, it assumes that we are agents capable of reflecting upon and modifying our desires and beliefs: that it is, to a greater or lesser extent, within our power to alter them. Our preferences—what we prefer—are, to a greater or lesser extent, malleable, that is, subject to being changed on the basis of reasoning and reflection.¹⁹ The third answer also follows Mill in allowing that we can be mistaken and misled in both ways—with respect to what we desire and believe and in the beliefs that underpin our desires, and thus we can ultimately be misled about where our interests lie.

To deny this answer is to say something highly implausible. As the legal philosopher Joel Feinberg has argued at some length, we all have not only many interests but also many different *kinds* of interests that can be thought of as relating to one another in networks of interest. These range from passing wants (say, for ice cream) to instrumental wants (say, for money) to welfare interests (such as health) to focal aims (such as a happy marriage), which may, in turn, be means to other, divergent ends.²⁰ With respect to many of these, the question of what is in our interests is susceptible of objective answers. There must, of course, be “a very close connection between a person’s interests and his wants.”²¹ But there are “situations in which a person does not know his own interests,”²² and, indeed, there are “countless ways in which human interests might be classified: in terms of ulteriority, minimality, degree of comprehensiveness, the type of associated fulfilling activity, the characteristic mode of invasion, whether self- or other-regarding, and many more.”²³

¹⁹ The way that the concept of “preference” is typically deployed, especially by economists, tends to occlude this. For an example of a discussion of this concept, see Cass Sunstein, *Free Markets and Social Justice* ch 1 (Oxford 1997).

²⁰ See generally Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law: Harm to Others* (Oxford 1984).

²¹ *Id.* at 38.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.* at 55.

Rather than exploring and elaborating this complexity here, I shall conclude with two contemporary and topical illustrative examples of false consciousness. Interestingly, they both exemplify what Bernard Harcourt has called "the illusion of free markets"—that is, the notion, which emerged and matured with the Physiocrats in the eighteenth century, that market processes are "natural" and governmental intervention and regulation are artificial.²⁴ It is the illusion that "economic exchange constitutes a system that autonomously can achieve equilibrium without government intervention or outside interference—and the eventual metamorphosis of this idea, over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, into the concept of the inherent efficiency of markets."²⁵ As Harcourt comments, this "naturalization" of markets helps to "shield from normative assessment the massive wealth distributions that take place there" and "masks the state's role" and "the extensive legal and regulatory framework" backed by legal coercion that is everywhere present in supposedly free market relations.²⁶

Consider first the successful campaign to repeal the estate tax in the United States from the late 1990s and culminating in 2004. In a fine study of this campaign by Michael Graetz and Ian Shapiro, the authors ask the excellent question: "Why would the public broadly support repealing a tax paid by only 2 percent of America's wealthiest taxpayers?"²⁷ They provide several answers. One is wishful thinking: "[L]arge numbers of Americans are unrealistically optimistic about their relative and absolute economic circumstances. They underestimate the levels of inequality, overestimate their own wealth compared to others, and exaggerate their likelihood of moving up significantly and getting rich."²⁸ A second answer is ignorance of the facts: thus "[n]on-partisan polling suggests that almost half of Americans believe that 'most' families have to pay the estate tax, while only a third believe that 'only a few' families have to pay it."²⁹ And a third answer is the effects of "framing." A relentless effort to shape perceptions "flood[ed] the media with stand-alone polls on the

²⁴ See generally Bernard E. Harcourt, *The Illusion of Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order* (Harvard 2011).

²⁵ *Id.* at 26.

²⁶ *Id.* at 32.

²⁷ Michael J. Graetz and Ian Shapiro, *Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight over Taxing Inherited Wealth* 118 (Princeton 2005).

²⁸ *Id.* at 119.

²⁹ *Id.* at 125.

unfairness of the tax,"³⁰ thereby isolating the issue from the overall federal budget. The estate tax was decried as "double taxation" and repeatedly described as the "death tax." By 2003, "the fusion of 'death,' 'inheritance' and 'estate' taxes was so complete in the public mind" that, according to one conservative pollster, "it scarcely mattered which term was used."³¹

Consider finally the distinctive American political tradition that unites paranoia about "liberal" elites with both faith in the beneficent functioning of unregulated capitalism and the idea that government intervention and taxation invade individual property rights. That tradition's current incarnation in the Tea Party movement operates at different intellectual levels. Its leaders and promoters such as Glenn Beck recommend the reading of Frédéric Bastiat, Ludwig von Mises, and Friedrich Hayek, alongside Ayn Rand, Beck himself, and others, while its followers, according to the sociologist Donald Warren, are persuaded that "only they could be trusted to look out for their own best interests."³² Consider, in particular, the case of Tom Grimes from South Bend, Indiana, who lost his job as a stockbroker in January 2009.³³ An admirer of Beck and reader of his recommended books, he blamed the Obama administration's economic policies for aggravating the recession and held that one has "to cut taxes, cut expenses in the government and let the market go free and wild."³⁴ As journalist Kate Zernike reports,

He had been on Medicare and Social Security since he was laid off. But he said he could do without those government programs. "If you quit giving people that stuff, they would figure out how to do it on their own," he said. "People would overcome it. It's the economic engine."³⁵

It is, of course, neither straightforward nor simple to justify the claim that ordinary citizens supporting repeal of the "death tax," on the one hand, and Tea Party supporters such as Tom Grimes, on the other, are mistaken about what their interests are, what harms them, what would best serve them, and who can be trusted to look after them. But such a claim is subject to nei-

³⁰ Id at 126.

³¹ Graetz and Shapiro, *Death by a Thousand Cuts* at 124 (cited in note 27).

³² Kate Zernike, *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America* 59 (Times Books 2010).

³³ Id at 11, 78.

³⁴ Id at 78.

³⁵ Id at 78-79.

ther of the objections to the notion of false consciousness with which this article began.

Both groups hold factual beliefs that are susceptible of truth and falsity (thus meeting the second objection). Some of these key beliefs can be shown to be false. Showing them to be so need not involve the arrogance of claiming some privileged access to the truth (the first objection). Ignorance of facts about the complex world in which we live, not least in the economic sphere, can, after all, sometimes be distinguished from theoretical disagreement over how to explain them. Moreover, such ignorance can have many explanations, including structured ignorance due to local and narrow perspectives, as well as the manipulative framing of issues by those whose interest, profession, and mission it is to shape our perceptions.³⁶

People in both groups are also, we must assume, authorities with respect to judging what their interests are. But these are fallible judgments. It is not always easy to know what your interests are, especially for those who are remote from what Marx called the means of mental production. To judge well—to assess rightly what policies or programs are in one's interest—one needs, first, to have an adequate understanding of the status quo; second, to have a convincing view of what is (counterfactually) feasible; and, third, to judge whether the costs of transition to what might be a better situation are worth paying. Here too the recognition of these sources of fallibility involves neither an arrogant claim to privileged access to truth nor the claim that there is nothing for such judgments to be mistaken about.

I conclude that people can sometimes, even often, be mistaken about their interests and the mistakes they make can be conceptual and cognitive. At the deeper, conceptual level, as Harcourt shows, the mistakes concern fundamental categories for explaining and understanding the social world, such as the placing of a distinction between what is "natural" and what is "artificial," resulting in illusions with far-reaching consequences that occlude the constraints inherent in voluntary exchanges and preclude the raising of normative questions about their consequences for social justice. Cognitively, as cognitive psychologists have abundantly shown,³⁷ people typically exhibit all kinds of irra-

³⁶ For an interesting discussion of the concept of "structured ignorance," see Michael Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure: The Southern Farmers' Alliance and Cotton Tenancy 1880–1890* 150–53 (Academic 1976).

³⁷ See, for example, the work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman and many of the writings of Jon Elster.

tionality, including wishful and magical thinking. In particular, they can exhibit what has been given the name of false consciousness. As our examples show, they can have systematically distorted beliefs about the social order and their own place in it that work systematically against their interests and they can feel a “blanket distrust of institutions and an astonishing—and unwarranted—confidence in the self”³⁸ and, in general, be unable to see what links “public issues” and policies with “private troubles.”³⁹ To state these conclusions need not invoke any epistemic privilege, while nonetheless assuming that, in these matters, there is truth to be attained. But this, of course, leaves unaddressed the next task, which is to specify the various sources of these failures of reasoning and understanding and to ascertain to what extent they are irremediable and to what extent rectifiable.

³⁸ Mark Lilla, *The Tea Party Jacobins*, 57 NY Rev of Books 53, 54 (May 27, 2010).

³⁹ This phrase is adapted from the first chapter of C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* 3–24 (Oxford 1959).