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Ideology or Utopia? From the Sociology of Knowledge to the Contradictions of Realism

The title of this essay will no doubt call to mind the landmark book by Karl Mannheim — now more frequently invoked by name or allusion than studied or read — published first in German in 1929 under the title *Ideologie und Utopie* and then reissued in English translation in 1936, with entirely new first and final sections, as *Ideology and Utopia*[1]. There, Mannheim struck a note that resonates surprisingly with Machiavelli's *The Prince*, arguing that his principal concerns lay with "the problem of how men actually think" and with how thinking "really functions in public life and in politics as an instrument of collective action"[2]. The contrast he was seeking to establish was between what "active men" think and do and what philosophers have thought — philosophers, he suggests, who "have too long concerned themselves with their own thinking". Mannheim's method was that of the sociology of knowledge. His aim was to approach the actual world by describing the "pre-scientific" forms of thought that guided most action on the social level:

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[1] The final chapter of the book was originally published separately in 1931 as "Wissensoziologie" ("The Sociology of Knowledge"). Among the most important engagements with Mannheim's work is the chapter in Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 159-80.

[2] *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. Louis Wright and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1936), p. 1.

> This so-called pre-scientific inexact mode of thought… constitutes a complex which cannot be readily detached either from the psychological roots of the emotional and vital impulses which underlie it or from the situations in which it arises and which it seeks to solve.
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> It is the most essential task of this book to work out a suitable method for the description and analysis of this type of thought and its changes, and to formulate those problems connected with it which will both do justice to its unique character and prepare the way for its critical understanding. (p. 2)

What the "sociology of knowledge" contributes to this effort is an understanding of thought as collective. Rather than regard particular ways of thinking as merely instances of universals (e.g., political ideals, or principles of virtue), the sociology of knowledge hoped to understand the particularities of thought as they emerged from within specific historical-social contexts, contexts that are by nature collective ("knowledge is from the very beginning a co-operative process of group life," p. 29). Its ambition was explanatory and descriptive, not predictive or prescriptive in any direct way. Mannheim's work nonetheless carried the strong assumption that we would stand little chance of knowing what to do, or how to act, if we were to begin from a misguided conception of how human beings actually think in the social world. Forms of thought and forms of society are linked, and it is this linkage — a starting point for any understanding of politics, to be sure — that the sociology of knowledge hoped to elucidate.

Along with the work of a few fellow-travelers, Mannheim's ideas initially formed the basis for a somewhat circumscribed set of projects among left-leaning sociologists and political theorists during the post-war years. The more important and lasting importance of Mannheim's work lay in his analysis of the term "ideology," and specifically in the attention he drew to the distinction between ideology at the level of the particular and ideology as something more systematic or general ("total" was his word). The distinction itself derives from Marx, but it was Mannheim who brought it back into focus. Ideology in the limited, "particular" sense suggests a local distortion of the truth about reality, driven by relatively close-range interests. It acts as a disguise for what may otherwise be regarded as "facts," or underlying intentions, and provokes a cautionary, skeptical stance toward the claims of any individual speaker or social actor. It is manifested, moreover, principally through *content* rather than through frameworks or structures. In contrast stands the "total" conception of ideology, any explanation of which would need to go beyond individual motives or particular psychological motivations in order to arrive at an understanding of the relationship between ways of thinking and the social formations within which knowledge is produced. The *individual* can be the bearer of an ideology insofar as we locate ideology in the analysis of some specific *content*; the *social group* (e.g. class) is the bearer of ideological forms that enter into the processes that *structure and differentiate knowledge*, including those that set the conditions for what "knowledge" itself may be. There is no way to arrive at an understanding of ideology in the "total" sense by additive means, e.g. by collecting information about the way large numbers of individuals think and act. Nor can we understand ideology in this sense by the methods of "collective psychology." Mannheim himself was aware of this:

> Analysis of ideologies in the particular sense, making the content of the individual thought largely dependent on the interests of the subject, can never achieve this basic reconstruction of the whole outlook of a social group. They can at best reveal the collective psychological aspects of ideology, dealing either with the different behaviour of the individual in the crowd, or with the results of the mass integration of the psychic experiences of many individuals. And though the collective-psychological aspect may very often approach the problems of total ideological analysis, it does not answer its questions exactly. (p. 59)[3]

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[3] Louis Althusser outlines a way of linking these two levels of ideology when he argues that the meaning of an ideology as a whole depends "not on its relation to a *truth* other than itself but on its relation to the existing *ideological field* and on the *social problems and social structure* which sustain the ideology and are reflected in it." *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 62. He goes on to say that "the development of a motor principle of a particular ideology [i.e. that which sustains it] cannot be found within the ideology itself but outside it, in what *underlies* (*l'en-deça* de) the particular ideology: its author as a concrete individual and the actual history reflected in the individual development according to the complex ties between the individual and this history" (p. 63). *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005).

The upshot of this set of distinctions bears upon one of the central questions in Mannheim's book. It is one of the oldest questions in politics and one that has important implications for how we situate literature in this field: Is a science of politics possible? While Mannheim's answer to this question was "yes," it was a qualified "yes" insofar as it distinguished between what can and cannot be incorporated into the science of politics, hence what can and cannot be known and validated. Neither interests, purposes, norms, or ends would be part of it. "The only thing that we can demand of politics as a science is that it see reality with the eyes of acting human beings, and that it teach men, in action, to understand even their opinions in the light of their actual motives and their position in the historical-social situation" (pp. 163-4).

Time and again, Mannheim characterizes the focus of knowledge in the domain of politics in terms of the "actual" (as in "actual motives," above, or how people "actually" think). This suggests an adherence to a principle of truth that can be approached from two directions, one comparative and the other contrastive. The first is in comparison with Machiavelli's invocation of a cognate idea in *The Prince*, where he proposes to tell the truth about things "as they really are" (*la verità effetuale della cosa*[4]), and not treat them as others before him have tended to do, i.e., as we might *wish* them to be. This is one way in which Machiavelli distinguishes between the "truth" about reality and "illusion," even if over the course of *The Prince* it becomes amply clear that Machiavelli's strategic frankness carries with it a set of recommendations for practical, political action that may well require certain forms of deception. We can well imagine this stance as contributing to a fetishism of the "facts" of the kind that we see in public political discourse, including the many of the partisan assertions about "facts" and the "truth" in the political rhetoric of our own day. (Without wishing to anticipate conclusions, I would hazard that if literature has a role to play here it is unlikely to lie in its appeal to the facts; we'll later see how this is so even in the context of literary realism.)

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[4] Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, ed. Raffaele Ruggiero (Milan: RPS Libri, 2008), p. 147.

The second, *contrastive*, direction from which we can locate the sense of the "actual" in the way Mannheim uses it involves the set of possibilities, utopian in the end, that human beings tend to invoke when thinking about a political ideal. Indeed, the distinction between the actual and the ideal/utopian is as old in political thinking as Plato's engagement in the *Republic* with the discursive construction of the ideal state. Plato draws us to the question of the relationship between (utopian) ideals and our own, inner-worldly circumstances. Most subsequent thinkers engaged with such questions have asked how we might transcend actuality so as to give shape to a more ideal state. Some form of knowledge has customarily been seen as essential to that project, though it has often been far from clear what shape this knowledge ought to take. Plato regarded philosophy as essential to it, but what kind of philosophy this may be, what its relationship (if any) to literature would be, are far from obvious.

Given Mannheim's interest in the "sociology of knowledge," it is not surprising that his characterization of utopia was relatively under--theorized. What he offers is a description of conditions that are necessary for it, rather than anything defining of it. Utopias are first and foremost incongruous with all existing frameworks. They break the bounds of any actual order. If "ideology" in the broad, total sense describes the limiting conditions that bear upon all of knowledge, thought, and experience, then utopia is defined in strict contraposition to it. For Manheim, utopia "shatters" existing reality. The first time it was concretely thought in modernity was in the context of Chiliasm, an early religious movement (chiefly associated with Thomas Münzer), that joined forces with the active elements of an oppressed peasant class in seeking to establish a revolutionary, millennial kingdom on earth[5]. (This was, famously, the subject of Engels' book *The Peasant War in Germany*.) These views have trickled down to contemporary Marxist theorists, from Herbert Marcuse (in *An Essay on Liberation*) to Fredric Jameson, whose early work, *Marxism and Form*, in turn cites Marcuse's commitment to "the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is"[6].

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[5] Mannheim cites Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Munich: Wolff, 1921).

Not surprisingly, the subject of utopia has held little interest for social scientists, whose obligation is to study the structures, capacities, and tendencies of societies as they are and have been, rather than to speculate about what might possibly be. Marcuse responded that "utopian" interests ought indeed to have a place in social theory, arguing that what is typically excluded as "utopian" is not necessarily outside the historical world, but rather is "blocked from coming about by the power of established societies"[7]. But other, very different, objections have also been directed to Mannheim's work. Sociologist Edward Shils — who, along with Louis Wirth, was the English translator of *Ideology and Utopia* — argued that Mannheim's limitations were those of Marxism itself. Shils identified the first of these as the dubious tendency to assert correlations between "dependent" and "independent" variables (i.e. "knowledge" and "society"), while leaving both relatively undefined. The consequence, Shils argued, was that the sociology of knowledge "was doomed to remain at the point of programs and prolegomena" but produced no results[8]. To carry Mannheim's method forward would have required a deep understanding of intellectual and social history, and Shils complained that most of the thinkers in the generation following Mannheim failed to possess this understanding. More damaging, in Shils' view, was the fundamental premise (or was it the conclusion?)

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[6] Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 111. The remark is made in the context of a discussion of Herbert Marcuse. It must be considered in light of Jameson's recognition of the attenuation of all wish-fulfillment fantasies and the diminution of the power of negation in contemporary (affirmative) culture: "Attenuation of the Oedipus complex, disappearance of the class struggle, assimilation of revolt to an entertainment-type value — these are the forms which the disappearance of the negative takes in the abundant society of postindustrial capitalism" (p. 110).

[7] Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 3-4. More tempered is Anthony Giddens' sketch of "utopian realism", *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 154-158.

[8] Ref. Shils, "*Ideology and Utopia* by Karl Mannheim" (*Daedalus*, 103, 1974), pp. 83-91.

of Mannheim's work, namely that one could not study an object and hope to discover the truth about it if, from the very beginning, one were convinced that any conclusions that might be drawn were determined by one's own social circumstances, rather than by the application of criteria of truth to carefully considered evidence[9].

This objection is telling. It illustrates Shils' commitment to the idea that sociology must be a "science" and underscores his adherence to the expectation that the "sociology of knowledge" must contribute to the scientific understanding of politics. Political action must be based on knowledge, and knowledge must be based on the premise that one can, at least in principle, come to know the facts as they "really are." But it ignores the fact that Mannheim was also asking about *whether* a science of politics could be possible according to the classical understanding of "science." If we limit the understanding of "science" to the relatively modern sense in which Shils interprets it, then it is perhaps little surprise to conclude that the Mannheimian version of the "sociology of knowledge" would have little to contribute to politics. Indeed, Mannheim's most important role in the long-standing debates about whether politics is a science or not may lie in the very things that Shils either overlooked or overtly criticized about *Ideology and Utopia*, i.e., in Mannheim's articulation of the place of "total" ideology in sociology and, by extension, in politics. Indeed, one of the claims that might seem to discredit Mannheim's sociology of knowledge for "scientific" purposes may be essential for an approach to understanding both politics and the nature of "science" more fully; it may prove especially useful for understanding how literature relates to our understanding of politics. This is Mannheim's characterization of ideology as "*situationally* transcendent" (p. 194; italics mine).

Ideology as it matters most is not a local distortion or pathology. It involves the shaping of beliefs and actions by deeply structured formations having to do with such things as the power of class interests, the allure of individuation, the organization of the state, and the force of the desire to participate in a reality that is in some sense “unreal”. (As Marx said in his early *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*, “That the rational is real is *contradicted* by the *irrational reality* which at every point shows itself to be the opposite of what it asserts, and to assert the opposite of what it is.”[10]) Utopia is, by definition, also “situationally transcendent,” though in a very different way. Within some frameworks, utopia can be thought of as that which transcends not just situations, but all ideology as well. Its usefulness as a theoretical term would seem to lie in its ability to establish what “truth,” “freedom,” or “emancipation” might be under ideal conditions. And that, it has often been thought, is necessary if the project of “ideology critique” is to make any sense at all. Here, the possibility of a dynamic interaction between ideology and utopia would be one in which utopian ideals exert an ongoing “pull” on ideological formations, drawing us, perhaps with the aid of reflection, ever closer to pure “truth” or absolute “freedom”. Never mind the fact that one cannot ever hope to travel from ideology to utopia (or from anywhere else, for that matter); it seems enough to conjure the possibility in order for its power to be effective.

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[9] Shils, 86. Durkheim had already expressed great skepticism about ideology, and saw it as irrationality in *Les Regles de la méthod sociologique*; and yet, his *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* incorporates the equivalent of "ideology" in its explanation of how religious life is structured.

In this respect, utopia has the force of a “wish fulfillment” dream in just the way that Mannheim suggested, read as a kind of fairy-tale about happiness on earth. The trouble, however, is that fairy tales and romances are never quite as happy as utopian thinkers might wish them to be. Fairy tales are filled with all kinds of nasty things — with children who get thrown into ovens, with witches casting evil spells, and with monsters who rise up from the deep. The “happy ending” that is characteristic of romance literature is typically won by very arduous means. Romance often promises a radical transformation of seemingly “ordinary” characters into the noblest of heroes and heroines — as when the pauper discovers that he is truly a prince (“The Prince and the Pauper,” Mark Twain), or when the gypsy girl finds the birthmark that identifies her as a princess (“La Gitanilla,” Cervantes), or in the frog who becomes a prince by virtue of a princess' kiss ("The Frog Prince," Grimm Brothers). But such so-called transformations are typically revelations of, or returns to, some anterior condition. In romance, the kitchen maid does not "become" a princess; she *always was* a princess. Moreover, romance epitomizes the very mechanisms of ideology to the extent that it portrays beginnings and ends, transformations and restorations, as *natural*. For example, the markers of nobility in romance, though sometimes unexpectedly revealed, are not really indications of anything contingent; they signal what is imagined to be *essentially* true and real. Nor is romance extinguished with the advent of modern realism. It is adapted. In the case of Joseph Conrad, who is the example Jameson examines in detail, one of the most characteristically "romantic" sites of adventure, the sea, becomes the place of modern, capital-driven commerce and imperialist expansion[11].

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[10] *Early Writings*, trans. Lucio Coletti and Gregor Bentson (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 127.

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This suggests quite a different dialectic between ideology and utopia than the one Mannheim had in mind. Most important, it suggests that utopia may be a figure within the space of ideology. What sense can we make of this? Consider first the fact that "ideology" and "utopia" name two competing totalities, or two competing screens through which we may read the truth about reality. How might one choose between them? And, assuming such a choice was possible, which one would we choose — ideology or utopia? Seen from one perspective, choosing "ideology" would appear to be choosing a lie. Why opt for distortion when one could choose transparency instead? Seen from another perspective, however, choosing ideology could well be choosing the truth by recognizing the ubiquity of the "lie," i.e., by recognizing the fact that every inner-worldly set of circumstances we encounter or could imagine is bound to participate in some systematic, structural set of distortions that we cannot fully see. What would utopia then be, if not just a recognition of the impossible dream of a more powerful transcendence?

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[11] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

One consequence of this view suggests that the response to ideology is not, in fact, an image of "utopia" but rather the pursuit of a project of "critique," one which recognizes that the figures of ideology and utopia are in fact intertwined. The project of critique addresses itself to the structured differences, systematic misrecognitions, and embedded contradictions that define the true and the real for any given social-historical order. This notion was central to the work of Lukács and the Frankfurt School. Indeed, Lukács re-described the utopian element in Marxism so as to describe its goal not as a "state of the future" but something quite different:

> It is not a condition which can happily be forgotten in the stress of daily life and recalled only in Sunday sermons as a stirring contrast to workaday cares. Nor is it a 'duty', an 'idea' designed to regulate the 'real' process. The ultimate goal is rather that *relation to the totality* (to the whole of society seen as a process), through which every aspect of the struggle acquires its revolutionary significance… Thus it elevates mere existence to reality.[12]

The idea of totality invoked here does not imply an erasure of contradictions. On the contrary, Lukács made it absolutely clear that "totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity" (p. 12). The problem is rather that of the generation of *apparent* differences that mask the fact that such elements as production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, are in fact interlinked[13].

Where then to locate the subject of knowledge with respect to such a system of differences? In classical epistemology, the subject occupied a stable place in relation to all such differences. But, as Althusser explained, we have known, beginning at least with Marx, that the knowing subject is formed around an absence, hence is subject to systematic misrecognition in relation to any system. Insofar as history is a subject-centered system, integrated with all others, it too needs to be re-thought:

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[12] Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?", *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1986), p. 22.

[13] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 12. He is citing Marx, *A Contribution to Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (New York: International Library, 1904), pp. 291-292.

> Since Marx, we have known that the human subject, the economic, political or philosophical ego is not the 'centre' of history — and even, in opposition to the Philosophers of the Enlightenment and to Hegel, that history has no 'centre' but possesses a structure which has no necessary 'centre' except in ideological misrecognition. In turn, Freud has discovered for us that the real subject, the individual in his unique essence, has not the form of an ego… that the human subject is de-centred, constituted by a structure which has no 'centre' either, except in the imaginary constitution of the ego, i.e. in the ideological formations in which it 'recognizes' itself. (pp. 170-171)

This may go some distance toward explaining why the work of knowledge involves a critique of contradictions, displacements, and systematic misrecognitions, one that acknowledges the utopian desire to reconcile all such conflicts but that also understands that such desires are themselves determined by structures of misrecognition, avoidance, repression, etc. One of Louis Althusser's concerns in his early writings was that Marxism not be reduced to a project of *mere critique*, i.e. to a criticism of local falsehoods and distortions. In order to be valid at all, he argued, Marxism would have to be a "science"[14]. However, he proposed that it must be a *new kind* of science. It must be a science of interpretation, not a platform for categorical asseverations about the real. Earlier, "orthodox" Marxism understood itself as a philosophy of the "real basis" of history. The relationship between the "real basis" of history and ideology was understood as that of a determined or "efficacious" link between the elements of a "base" and a "superstructure". Ideology in this sense was principally "the superstructure of a real basis expressed in terms of economic structures"[15].

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[14] That is to say, it must apply not only to the human sciences but to the natural sciences and to philosophy as well (*For Marx*, p. 26).

[15] This is Ricoeur's succinct formulation (*Lectures*, p. 107). Mannheim himself remained a Marxist to the extent that he saw the need to understand the *relationships* or between social processes on the one hand and the development of specific interests on the other.

Althusser was committed to the view that Marxism must do more than criticize illusion; if it were to go only that far then it would risk being re-absorbed by positivist-oriented "science"[16]. Marxism needs to be a *theory of history* and a *philosophical discipline* both. Its theory of history is well known. As part of its *philosophical* project, it needs to understand that "ideology" is not simply the realm of false or distorted imaginings; it is the realm of systematic illusions. It needs to be paired with psychoanalysis, not with mass psychology. This is because what is distorted in ideology is not the real as such but our relation to reality, which is structured as our "world". As Paul Ricoeur rightly pointed out, to speak in such terms implies that we relate to the real as a *symbolic structure*: "what is a relation to the conditions of existence if not already an interpretation, something symbolically mediated" (*Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, p. 144).

To say that interpretation is a necessary component of political "science" is also to say that our relationship to the polis is in part our relationship to a discursive construct that carries within it the contradictions, the illusions, the truths, and the ideologies that utopian thinking is always trying to overcome. Althusser's "Letter on Art" posits art as the place where such relationships can be disclosed. Art is crucial in re-shaping our conception of what "knowledge" and "science" may be in ways that turn out to be especially relevant to politics. "Art", he said, "does not give us a *knowledge* in the *strict sense*, it therefore does not replace knowledge (in the modern sense: scientific knowledge), but what it gives us does nevertheless maintain a certain *specific relationship* with knowledge"[17]. We can tease out some of what this means as follows. As knowledge, art is at its most encompassing when it understands that it is incomplete. The relationship of art to knowledge shows us the necessarily partial nature of any view of the real which we might hold to be true. Even if we were to regard wholeness or totality as features of the truth in some ideal sense, it shows that we can never be in a position to have a view of the whole, except as an illusion. Art understands that this is its truth. It works by inverting the opposition in which knowledge is regarded as “true” and art as “false”. Art is hardly outside ideology, but rather works from within ideological space in order to open the possibility for a critique of it.

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[16] One of Althusser's central discussions of philosophy in relation to science is the well-known essay "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists", in the volume of that title, trans. Warren Montag, ed. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1900), pp. 69-165.

[17] Althusser, "Letter on Art", *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 174.

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Such insights have a genealogy within the domains of literature, politics, and philosophy that reaches back at least to Plato. Insofar as Plato was, among other things, a political philosopher whose “background” (as we might say today) was in literature, it should not be entirely surprising to find in some of what he wrote a basic version of what “ideology critique” has come to embrace. The inhabitants of the allegorical cave described in the *Republic* are brought to recognize that they see only shadows and flickers on the wall, not things as they truly are. They live bound by something like the systematic distortions we would associate with ideology in the broad, structural sense — bound, that is, until they are brought out of the cave and into the light above. At first impression, it might seem that the role of the philosopher should be to free the prisoners of the cave from their condition, and it would seem plausible that the philosopher could do this because he has himself come to recognize the difference between the illusions of the cave and the way things “truly are” when viewed in full sunlight.

But why, then, is it said that the light of the sun is too bright, that its power is blinding rather than illuminating?

> Suppose one of [the prisoners] were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk toward the fire; all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows… And if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and retreat to the things which he could see properly… [If] he were forcibly dragged out into the sunlight,

> the process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so dazzled by the glare of it that he wouldn't be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real.[18]

The released prisoners must return to return to carry out their obligation as legislators (*Republic*, 519d). They might well wish to free those who are still held captive within the cave, but the remaining prisoners do not necessarily wish to leave. Moreover, anyone who returns to the cave must re-adjust his eyes to the darkness, and this imposes yet another, temporary, blindness. Ironically, those who return appear to see less well than the prisoners who never went up into the light at all.

If the fully illuminated world is simply too bright a place to stay without considerable adjustment (Plato suggests that it would require a fundamental change in attitude, a basic shift in bearing), then what hope is there that human beings could inhabit anything close to a utopian world, one in which truth, goodness, freedom, and beauty would reign supreme, where we could see reality as it truly is? One answer to this question, which I will characterize as more traditionally philosophical, takes Plato as urging us to strive toward the goodness and illumination of the sun, but only in the degree to which human beings are capable. That answer can be followed throughout Plato's figural system. Philosophers may never be gods, though they may imagine themselves as kings; and kings may never in practice be as wise as philosophers might wish, even though the notion of a philosopher-king can still serve as a regulative ideal, just as the notion of an ideal republic may. And yet, as has often been pointed out, there are manifestly undesirable features in Plato's sketch of the ideal state, so undesirable in fact that we have reason to wonder whether he regarded this republic as an ideal or as a counter-ideal.

An alternative way of reading Plato's allegory is one that can be characterized as "literary," or at any rate as considerably more "ironic" than the one just sketched. It depends, first and foremost, on the kind of distinction that every student of literature learns to make at a very elementary level in reading texts, i.e., the distinction between author and characters (here, the distinction between Plato and the characters in the *Republic*). It depends furthermore on understanding that Plato's ideal city is a discursive construct, a product of the dialogic interaction among characters, and not a city constructed as a theoretical ideal. The "literary" interpretation is enticing in part because utopias are by and large discursive constructs, not blueprints. The dialogue is *ironic* because it incorporates a critique of the very utopia it constructs. This ironic stance is convincing because it is consistent with the truth about human beings in relation to the blinding power of the sun and with the rejection of the inferior state that human beings might be led to imagine if they were free to envision any kind of city they might wish. This is a situation in which a relatively less transcendent stance turns out to have more power than one with larger claims. The position of knowledge from which political affairs must be conducted is one that is enlightened about this fact. It is one that recognizes that the true position vis-à-vis the "real" is that of the *enlightened cave-dweller*. Slavoj Žižek's re--framing of the myth of the cave is useful here:

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[18] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 2003), VII, 515c-516a (p. 242).

> We can, of course, start with the naïve notion of people perceiving true reality from a limited/distorted perspective, and thus constructing in their imagination false idols which they mistake for the real thing; the problem with this naïve notion is that it reserves for us the external position of a neutral observer who can, from his safe place, compare true reality with distorted mis(perception). What gets lost here is that all of us are these people in the cave — so how can we, immersed in the cave's spectacle, step onto our own shoulder, as it were, and gain insight into true reality?... We, the cavemen, have to work hard to arrive at some idea of the "true reality" outside the cave — the true substance, the *presupposition*, of our world is in this sense *always-already posited*.[19]

This "pre-positing" of the world points to the double-bind we encounter if asked to choose between ideology and utopia. To be asked to choose between them is to pose a false set of options. To choose one is in some sense already to have chosen the other, just as there is both the reflection of light and the projection of shadows in Plato's cave. Such contradictions pervade literature, from utopian fiction to the novel of realism.

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[19] Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 161-162.

Not surprisingly, one of the master-tropes of utopian literature is inversion. All the most famous literary utopias work this way, from Thomas More to Aldous Huxley, and from Rabelais' Abbey of Thélème to the counter-utopia of Orwell's *1984*. Even the "utopian" first half of Saramago's *Death with Interruptions* works by a principle of inversion, as we see the political chaos that ensues when death takes a holiday. Inversions of political structures and of economic relations are staples of utopian literature. De Foe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is sometimes pointed to as the first truly modern novel. It engages questions about the fundamental nature of the economy just as much as it reflects Protestant spirituality and the adventuring spirit that drove certain forms of European imperialism. But what Crusoe famously does is to re-invent the relations between economy and society. These re-invented institutions — institutions that are re-imagined from the fictional stance of a return to "primitive" modes of production, social relations, etc. — form an ensemble that uncannily resembles the cultural forms of 18th century England. Crusoe's island is a discontinuous physical space but is nonetheless ideologically continuous with "reality". Indeed, the re-imagined relations of the island have as their underpinning an ideological system in which the subject is knit into the familiar structures of religion, economy, nation, and society, all of which are fed by the fictional idea that those structures have been invented from the ground up.

The result is best described as a form of contradiction, which can be read as the inversion of the naïve utopian inversion of the real. To be sure, the project of identifying and uncovering contradiction has long been a staple of contemporary literary criticism and theory, shared by Marxism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction alike. In classical Marxism, "contradictions" occur when the forces of production outstrip the system of social relations to which they earlier gave rise. Taken further, and married with structural anthropology, it became clear how cultural artifacts could provide the means for a symbolic resolution of underlying social and historical contradictions. Claude Lévi-Strauss made this point in *Tristes Tropiques*. In certain cultures (notably the Paraguayan Guana and the Bororo societies), deep hierarchical differences and inequalities could be resolved on a practical basis by a separation into groups (moieties), so that various forms of cultural interactions could take place in an apparently harmonious and reciprocal way. In others (the neighboring Caduevo), however, no such practical solution could be reached and yet, "they began to dream it, to project it into the imaginary"[20]. This dream-solution found expression as a symbolic act, manifested in the aesthetic domain. Levi-Strauss went on to say that "we must therefore interpret the graphic art of the Caduevo… as the fantasy production of a society seeking passionately to give symbolic expression to the institutions it might have had in reality, had not interest and superstition stood in the way" (pp. 179-180). The linkage between ideology and the aesthetic is but a short step away. Rather than trace local ideological distortions in works of literature and art (i.e. rather than assign the labor of interpretation the task of detecting local ideological investments), we can see the aesthetic object as a symbolic one whose work is, as Jameson suggests, "inventing formal or imaginary 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions"[21].

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What then can be said about realism, which would seem positioned to stand as a counterweight to utopia and likewise as contrary to such imaginary solutions? What are its relations to ideology given the fact that it is driven by conventions that aim, on one level, to show us the world just as modern politics hoped to see it — "as it is", and not as we might wish it to be. The rejection of fantasy in favor of attention to the real is one way in which *Don Quijote* and *The Prince* were surprisingly close to one another in spite of the many other differences that divide them. If the novel is the genre we most closely associate with realism, and if one premise of its approach to the real is a critique of romance, then what space does it leave for a *critique* of the real? How can it be part of a critical project and not simply a reinforcement of the real?

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[20] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Athaneum, 1971), pp. 179-180. "Contradiction" is one of the key terms in Jameson's *Political Unconscious* as it was earlier in Althusser's 1962 essay, "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (*For Marx*, pp. 87-128). Whereas Althusser begins from the question of Marx's "inversion" of Hegel's dialectic, Jameson's ingenious contribution lies in the idea that, especially in literature, we can and do find imaginary "solutions" to deep-structure contradictions that would otherwise be unresolvable. The "social contradiction" stands in relation to its imaginary, often narrative resolution, as what Althusser elsewhere (specifically in "Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution", *Reading Capital*) called an "absent cause".

[21] *The Political Unconscious*, p. 79. The task of interpretation, concomitantly, lies in the identification of those "contradictions" as well as their aesthetic "solutions These frameworks are hardly compelling if we take them as blueprints for interpretive application. Jeffrey Mehlman long ago raised a similar objection in *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 42-43.

Because realism is a representation, like the shadows on the walls of Plato's cave, it can also show the cracks and the contradictions in the real. Adorno proposed that Balzacian realism — to take a central example — does not simply reflect the truth of what is; Balzac does not "yield" to realities but rather "stares them in the face until they become transparent down to their horrors"[22]. In order to get this close to the real, literature must share intimately in the world around it, which means sharing not just in its appearances but also in the means by which it is produced. Adorno writes of art that it is modern when "by its mode of experience and as the expression of the crisis of experience, it absorbs what industrialization has developed under the given relations of production"[23]. Balzac was, however uneasily, a serial writer, just as Dickens was. The starkly penetrating view that is characteristic of

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[22] Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, I (henceforth, *NL*, I), trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 132. He is re-framing Engels assertion that a novelist like Balzac was able to step outside his own political sympathies to recognize the necessity of the downfall of a certain class — the nobility; in so doing, he also "*saw* the real men of the future" (Engels, draft letter to Margaret Harkness, April, 1888, *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, ed. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (Milwaukee: Telos Press, 1973), p. 116).

[23] *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullt-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 34. The shock of this absorption has been part of art-making since at least the moment of Duchamp's "readymades"; pop-art made it ubiquitous. One review of Hal Foster's recent book, *The First Pop Age* (2011), raises the apt question, "to what extent do artists simply delight in popular culture rather than judge it?". John-Paul Stonard, "Semblances" (*TLS*, 5693, May 11, 2012), p. 25.

Balzac's texts allows reality to display its own contradictions. In so doing, it turns that reality against itself.

If the *Comédie humaine* takes society as a whole as its transcendental subject, then why not apply the "sociology of knowledge" to it? The answer is that literary realism is not so much the evidentiary basis for social or political analysis but is itself an exposition of the contradictions and conflicts that structure social reality, including of course the tensions between "ideology" and "utopia" themselves[24]. Think of the fate of Raphaël de Valentin in *La Peau de chagrin* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*). What greater fantasy could there be than to find a talisman that would grant one's every wish? But what more direct and necessary counterpart to that fantasy than Raphaël's realization that his life is tied to the size of the magic skin, which shrinks as every his wish is fulfilled? To recognize that the resistance to transcendence as promised by the wish--fulfillment dream (the dream of eternal life, with each and every one of one's desires satisfied) comes not in the form of the working of some abstract force of fate; to see that Raphaël's fate is tied to the deadly satisfaction that the magic skin offers and is not just a fateful fulfillment of the suicidal thoughts that he entertains at the beginning of the novel; and to recognize that there is something more at stake in this novel than an indictment of social vices (the greed, the flattery, and the duplicities of this mid-19th century world): all this requires that we understand how a particular society, that of bourgeois France at the time, was capable of incorporating utopian fantasies *within* it, even while they may have been recognized as false.

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[24] Here it is instructive to note how Adorno explains the transition from realism to naturalism. Commenting on Engels' preference for Balzac over "all the Zolas, *passés, présents, et à venir*," he hazards why Zola replaced realism by naturalism: "Just as in the history of philosophy no positivist is positivistic enough for his successor but is labeled a metaphysician, so it is in the history of literary realism, But at the moment in which naturalism committed itself to a quasi-official recording of the facts, the dialectician moved to the side of what the naturalists now proscribed as metaphysics… Historical truth itself is nothing but the self-renewing metaphysics that emerges in the permanent disintegration of realism." *Notes to Literature*, II (henceforth *NL*, II), trans. Shierry Weber Ncholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 132.

What, then, can be said about those forms of realism that seem to elicit our sympathies for characters, *qua* individuals, quite apart from what they may reveal about history or about the contradictions of society as a whole? Adorno suggested that Balzac harbored no illusion that the individual existed truly for himself. But part of the "realism" of the novel as a genre has always been tied to the creation of "characters", and moreover of characters who seem to feel sympathy and for whom the reader develops a certain affinity. What is the nature of intimacy among those who inhabit a world that seems to be dominated by objectified (reified) human relations, a world populated as much by things as by persons? Is it possible at all? Consider in this regard a novelist like Dickens, whose social world is no less bleak than Balzac's, but where our sympathies for certain characters seem remarkably genuine. Among them is the angelic Nell Trent in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the orphan child whose grandfather runs the shop named in the book's title. At one extreme, sympathy in Dickens can run toward pathos; at another, there are characters verging on the grotesque who summon up feelings of horror and repulsion. Little Nell is desired by the unsavory dwarf, Quilp, who in turn fancies that she may within a matter of years become his second wife. It would be easy enough to see *The Old Curiosity Shop* — among so many of Dickens' works — as an indictment of the devastations of the Industrial Revolution. One has only to look on the surface of Dickens' works in order to see the street-level poverty, the abject working conditions, and the blackened cities it produced. As Adorno put it, the industrial city inhabited by the 19th century bourgeoisie was nothing less than a hell-space (*NL*, II, 176). There are, of course, some virtuous souls in it, but one of them, Little Nell, dreams of flight and is ultimately brought to her death by the fumes that it spewed forth.

Books themselves mediate the hope that a happier existence might be found outside the city's space. Nell recalls that there had been a copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* on her shelf at home,

> over which she had pored whole evenings, wondering whether it was true in every word and where those distant countries with the curious names might be…

> 'Dear grandfather,' she said, 'only that this place [in the countryside] is prettier and a great deal better than the real one, if that in the book is like it.'[25]

The more surprising thing about Nell, perhaps, is that she maintains an attachment to the objects to which some of the city's inhabitants devote their entire lives, as they count, covet, trade, hoard, and scheme. Nell is not simply the intromission of a spirit of innocence in a world that is nearly grotesque in its day-to-day condition; even in flight she is also part of that world, a figure of contradiction around whom questions about ideology and utopia are decisively transformed into questions about persons and things. Tragically tender hopes may well attach to her, but she dies "unreconciled". That is to say, she retains an affinity for the world against which her very purity and innocence are staked; she wants the object-world as much as that world might need her spirit. In Adorno's words,

> Nell parts from her belongings unreconciled — she is not able to take anything from the bourgeois sphere away with her… she succeeds only in flight, which has no power over the world from which she flees and remains in thrall to it. Nell's death is decided in the sentence that reads 'There were some trifles there — poor useless things — that she would have liked to take away, but that was impossible.' [p. 102] Because she is not able to take hold of the object-world of the bourgeois sphere, the object-world seizes hold of her, and she is sacrificed. (*NL*, II, p. 177)

At one point, Dickens' narrator asks, "Why is it that we can better bear to part in spirit than in body?"(p. 120). In spite of the fact that she flees, Nell dies without having come to terms with the paradox of her own existence in relation to the world of material objects. But of course there is no "coming to terms" with it, certainly not in any way that would remain consistent with literary realism. On the contrary, literary realism takes this very contradiction as irreducible.

The descriptive powers of Balzac and Dickens produce an object-world that is not just "realistic," descriptively denser, but also stranger than much of what we find in the symbolic realm of earlier fiction.

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[25] *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. Norman Page (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 123.

It has been observed many times that these novels are populated by objects as much as by people, and that the objects in question are largely detached from history and from their productive sources. Consider the great assortment of things, most of them old and taken out of their "native" contexts, that one finds in the antique stores, curiosity shops, great old mansions, and other collection spaces in the realist tradition. The curiosity shop in Dickens is a case in point. It is described as "one of those receptacles for old and curious things which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town and to hide their musty treasures from the public eye in jealousy and distrust. There were suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china and wood and iron and ivory: tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams" (p. 13). In Balzac, Raphaël de Valentin enters a space that is part museum and part mausoleum, where

> [...] his tired eyes were greeted by, in turn, a number of paintings by Poussin, a sublime statue by Michael Angelo, several enchanting landscapes by Claude Lorraine, a Gerard Dow which resembled a page from Sterne, Rembrandts and Murillos, some Velasquez canvases as somber and vivid as a poem by Lord Byron; then ancient bas-reliefs, goblets in agate, wonderful pieces of onyx! In short, works that would discourage anyone from working, so many masterpieces brought together as to wear down enthusiasm and turn one against the arts. He came upon a Madonna by Raphael, but he was tired of Raphael. A face by Correggio demanded his attention but failed to obtain it. A priceless vase of ancient porphyry, chased round with carvings figuring the most grotesquely licentious of all Roman priapic orgies — how it would have delighted some Corinna of five centuries before Christ — drew scarcely a smile from him. He felt smothered under the debris of fifty vanished centuries, nauseated with this surfeit of human thought, crushed under the weight of luxury and art, oppressed by these constantly recurring shapes which, like monsters springing up under his feet, engendered by some wicked genie, engaged him in endless combat.[26]

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[26] I cite the translation of Herbert J. Hunt (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 39-40.

These heaping accumulations of things go well beyond what would be necessary to create what Roland Barthes famously described as the "reality effect". Rather, there seems something strangely un--real about such scenes. It would be tempting to read these passages as indicative of a world in which all objects have been transformed into commodities, as lifeless things to be bought and sold, or hoarded and stored. The art of "collecting" was constructed as the luxury form of such activities. But, surprisingly, there is more than just a hint of animism that weighs against the lifelessness of these scenes. In Balzac, the paintings seem to speak and move, to summon and greet Raphaël; fantastic shapes "spring up". In Dickens, things "crouch" and "hide". This is exactly the opposite of reification, in which individuals and the relationships among them acquire a thing--like quality. Although the impulse is hardly utopian in the classic sense, there is something about the ascription of life to dead things that suggests the desire to satisfy a primal wish to inhabit an animate world. It is a counterweight to the process by which people acquire the attributes of things, which of course happens often enough in realist texts — both metonymically (e.g. Dickens' "Sally Brass" and "Mr. Short") and descriptively, as when Nell is described as "the wax-work child" (p. 240) and Sampson Brass as "the ugliest piece of goods in the stock" (p. 103)[27]. The passage above from Dickens goes on to incorporate the grandfather as part of his own shop's inventory: "The haggard aspect of the little old man was wonderfully suited to the place… There was nothing in the whole collection but was in keeping with himself nothing that looked older or more worn than he" (p. 39).

But if the fantasy of an animate world is imagined as the counterweight to reification, what place can it possibly have in the world of realism, and what relationship might it have to the ideologies that bind it? One of the best answers may come in relation to a set of remarks made by Walter Benjamin in the essay "Unpacking my Library", where Benjamin devotes several pages to Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin*. Benjamin's interest lies as much in the book as object as in with the book as the portal to intimate experience. He remembers acquiring a copy of the book at auction as much as he does reading it. The essay is drawn in those two contradictory directions at once. There are the memories that come alive as Benjamin looks at his many books, even though most are still in their crates ("What memories crowd in upon you. Nothing highlights this fascination of unpacking more clearly than the difficulty of stopping this activity"[28]). But there is also the awareness that a collector stands to his things as an owner does to objects in his possession ("a collector's attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner's feeling of responsibility toward his property", p. 66). A book (*The Wild Ass's Skin*, in particular) is of course an object, a mere thing, which Benjamin has in fact bought and stored. And yet Benjamin positions his relationship to this book, as to all property, as "the most *intimate* relationship one can have to objects" (p. 67; italics mine). Could a nearly vacant library be Benjamin's critical version of utopian space? At the very least, it would seem to be a utopia that bears the contradictions of realism within it. In response to the materiality of the book, Benjamin re-imagines intimacy as a form of relationship with things. And as yet he goes on to say, with some reserve of hope, it is not that the books come alive in him, but rather he who lives in them.

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[27] For a detailed account of these transpositions, see Michael Hollington, "The Voice of Objects in *The Old Curiosity Shop*" (*Australasian Journal of Victorial Studies*, 14.1, 2009), pp. 1-8. On utopia in the context of realism, see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 155-162, "Reification as Utopia".

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[28] Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library", *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Shocken Books, 1969), p. 66.