Marx and Engels certainly did not elaborate an explicit and systematic ideology-theory in any way comparable to the rigour and coherence of their critique of political economy. Rather, they used the concept of ideology ad hoc, in concrete circumstances, mostly in confrontation with various opponents. This does not mean, however, that they utilised the term in an arbitrary way, or that their reflections were without theoretical validity. On the contrary, as soon as one distinguishes between the concrete discursive scuffles they were involved in and their methodological approach, one can see that their different usages were held together by an implicit coherence which, in an astonishing way, foreshadowed many of the achievements of later ideology-theories.

The fact that Marx and Engels deployed the term ‘ideology’ in different contexts and in different ways resulted in three primary tendencies being derived from their works in subsequent theoretical writings: firstly, an ideology-critical approach, represented in particular by György Lukács and the Frankfurt School, which interpreted ideology as ‘inverted’ or ‘reified’ consciousness; second, a ‘neutral’ concept of ideology, formulated in particular by Lenin and predominant in ‘Marxism-Leninism’, which understood ideology as a class-specific conception of the world and therefore also considered Marxism to be an ‘ideology’; and third, a conception that ranged from Antonio Gramsci to
Louis Althusser, and from Stuart Hall to the Projekt Ideologietheorie (PIT), which understood the ideological as the ensemble of apparatuses and forms of praxis that organise the relation of individuals to the self and to the world. These three interpretations are not always clearly separated from each other, but could also overlap and be combined.

2.1. From ‘inverted consciousness’ to ‘idealistic superstructures’

The critique of ideology as necessarily inverted consciousness could refer to numerous formulations in which Marx and Engels (for example, in relation to religion) spoke of ‘inverted world-consciousness’, an ‘independent kingdom in the clouds’, a ‘distorted conception’, a ‘standing on its head’, and so forth.\(^1\) Ideology was accomplished by the thinker with a ‘false consciousness’, who missed the real motives impelling him; ‘otherwise’, noted the late Engels, ‘it would not be an ideological process’.\(^2\) According to The German Ideology, ideologists ‘inevitably put the thing upside-down and regard their ideology both as the creative force and as the aim of all social relations, whereas it is only an expression and symptom of these relations’.\(^3\)

2.1.1. The camera obscura and its critics

Different descriptions of ‘distortion’ and ‘inversion’ were embodied in the image of a camera obscura: ‘If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.’\(^4\) In order to disprove the idealist inversions of ‘German philosophy’, which according to Marx and Engels ‘descends from heaven to earth’, they claimed not to start from ‘what men say, imagine, conceive’, but rather from ‘men in the flesh’: ‘Setting out from real, active men [vom wirklichen tätigen Menschen], and on the basis of their real life-process’, they attempted to demonstrate ‘the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process…. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness’.\(^5\)

These descriptions have been vigorously questioned by different schools of ideology-theory. Projekt Ideologietheorie (PIT) criticised the terms ‘reflexes’ and

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1. For example, Marx 1843, p. 175; Marx and Engels 1845, pp. 27 et sqq.; Marx 1873, p. 19.
2. Engels 1893, p. 164.
5. Marx and Engels 1845, pp. 36 et sq.