

Understanding Ideology

Dr. Vinod Kumar, School of Social Sciences, Punjabi University, Patiala

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Abstract

The present paper studies various theories of ideology by observing the insights given by major thinkers from Karl Marx to Terry Eagleton. Although the Enlightenment thinkers of the French Revolution played a major role in inventing the modern notion of ideology; it was Marxism which developed it into a complete theory. Peter Singer observes that we are not free to live because “we do not control our own society. Economic relations among human beings determine not only our wages and our prospects of finding work, but also our politics, our religion, and our ideas” (Singer 91). Terry Eagleton remarks that it is not possible to stick to a single definition of ideology. There are numerous definitions of it which he discusses in *Ideology: An Introduction*. He lists sixteen major definitions of it, the main are: the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life; ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; systematically distorted communication; that which offers a position for a subject; forms of thought motivated by social interests; the conjuncture of discourse and power, the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality; the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality etc. (1-2). David Hawkes, in *Ideology*, writes “. . . the market economy

produces a systematically false consciousness: an ideology” (1). Thus, ‘Ideology’ is a vast concept with a number of definitions. Although today, it has been contributed by many other thinkers, but Karl Marx and Frederick Engels are the primary and major contributors.

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Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels

Marx and Engels have contributed significantly as pioneers to the theory of ideology. Marx's important book related with it is *Capital: Volume I* (1867) and Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1888). They have also written two important works jointly: *The German Ideology* (1932) and *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Their point of departure is to relate philosophy and ideas with the given historical-materialistic environment. Criticizing Feuerbach, a German philosopher, and others, they write that “it has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of their criticism with their own material surroundings” (*The German Ideology* 36). They add that “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the

point is to change it” (617). They hold that our ideas or thoughts are shaped by the base (the material conditions of production). In fact, Marxist philosophy rests on the base and superstructure relationship. They write that “[t]he production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men – the language of real life” (42). Ideas alone are not enough to change the conditions of living, but a revolutionary materialistic practice is required because “[i]t is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness” (42). The forces and relations of production form the base, upon which rests the superstructure, which comprises law, politics, religion, art, ideology, etc. Superstructure includes the apparatus for the production of ideology. The function of ideology “is to legitimate the power of ruling class in society” (Eagleton, *Marxism* 5) because “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx, *The German Ideology* 67).

Literature, for Marx, is a part of society's ideology. It means literary writings are not mysteriously inspired but materially produced and implicated in the world. To understand a text and its ideology, “we must analyze the precise relations between different classes in a society; and to do that means grasping where those classes stand in relation to the mode of production” (Eagleton, *Marxism* 6).

However, the Marxian view of literature does not consider it merely as a part of the superstructure, as a mere

reflection of the base, but also as an active element that impacts history and the base also (7-8). Thus, literature can play an ambivalent role: it can perpetuate the dominant ideology but at the same time it can also contest that very ideology.

Luke Fretter notes that Marxism suggests to the people a way to govern their own lives: “[T]hey must come to recognize the ideologies in which they live in capitalist society misrepresent the reality of that society, so as to be able to change the system of relations of which it consists” (109). Talking about philosophy, in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Frederick Engels writes that “[t]he great basic question of all philosophy, and especially of more recent philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being” (24). Similarly, Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* state that “consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process” (42). Commenting on the relation between agency and history, Marx states:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by them, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (qtd. in Hawkes 92)

However, ideology changes with time and material conditions. “When people speak of ideas that revolutionize society, they do but express the fact that within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old

ideas keeps pace with the dissolution of the conditions of existence” (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* 72).

In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), Engels evaluates the traditional idealistic philosophy of Feuerbach and his friends, and proposes new ways for practicing philosophy in the context of the conditions of living. Rejecting the old materialism, he writes: “. . . [T]he old materialism becomes untrue to itself because it takes the ideal motive forces which operate there as final causes, instead of investigating what is behind them, what are the motive forces of these motive forces” (47). He states that all political struggles are class struggles. Talking about ideas and ideology, he observes that “the state and public law are determined by economic relations, so, too, of course is private law, which indeed in essence only sanctions the existing economic relations between individuals which are normal in the given circumstances” (50). He observes that the first and major ideological power over mankind is the state. The state is the invention of society to safeguard its common interests and provides it the authority to rule over them, but unfortunately, after its birth, the state makes itself independent and becomes a tool of the capitalist class and so helps to perpetuate the rule and ideology of that class over the masses (51). He further writes that “still higher ideologies, that is, such as are still further removed from the material economic base, take the form of philosophy and religion. Here the connection between ideas and their material conditions of

existence becomes more and more complicated and more and more obscured by the intermediate links" (52).

Antonio Gramsci

Antonio Gramsci is a major modern Marxist theorist of ideology. David Hawkes notes that Gramsci does not accept the view that ideologies are merely reflections of material forces because this view is "unable to account for the existence of 'organic' ideologies, which are necessary and in a sense true" (114). Gramsci thus rejects purely negative use of the term ideology; he asserts that all systems have a historical validity, and are necessary (115).

Gramsci refuses to believe in the metaphor of the economic 'base' on which an ideological 'superstructure' is founded. Hawkes writes that

[f]or him, the material sphere is itself a 'structure', which may be allied with and analogous to, but does not 'support', a 'superstructure' of ideas. These ideas, [he] notes, are institutionalized in 'civil society': the law courts, the bureaucracy, the religious and educational systems and the mass media. (115)

Thus, he distances cultural criticism from the overemphasis on economic relations and considers other forms of socio-cultural relationships (race, sexuality, gender, religion, etc.) as no less important. For Gramsci, philosophy in a general sense does not exist. Only various conceptions of philosophy exist, and one always makes a choice from among them. How do we make a choice? Perhaps it is not merely an intellectual decision, but a more complex one (Gramsci 326). Gramsci adds: ". . . [M]an is a process, and, more exactly, the

process of his actions" (351). He also critiques the notion of 'common sense'. He finds 'common sense' to be nothing more than the "folklore" of philosophy as it is a way of thinking about the world that is grounded in material reality. But unlike philosophy, it is unsystematic, heterogeneous and spontaneous (324).

Talking about social power, Gramsci states that it is not a simple matter of domination from one side or resistance from the other. The dominant groups or dominant alliances generally govern with the consent of their subordinates. Elucidating this, Steve Jones remarks that [i]n order to maintain its authority, a ruling power must be sufficiently flexible to respond to new circumstances and to the changing wishes of those it rules. It must be able to reach into the minds and lives of its subordinates, exercising its power as what appears to be a free expression of their own interests and desires. (3-4)

Gramsci also rejects the view that power can be achieved once and for all; rather he conceives of it "as an ongoing process, operative even at those moments when a ruling class or group can no longer generate consent" (4).

Even as Gramsci rejects the purely negative use of the term 'ideology', he also finds ideology essential in human relationships. Eagleton notes that for Gramsci ". . . ideologies must be viewed as actively organizing forces which are psychologically 'valid', fashioning the terrain on which men and women act, struggle and acquire consciousness of their social positions. In any 'historical bloc', Gramsci comments, material forces are the

‘content’ and ideologies the ‘form’” (Eagleton, Ideology 117). He further adds that, according to Gramsci, consciousness of the subordinated groups is fissured and uneven - conflicted views - one drawn from the official notions of the rulers and the other from the oppressed people’s practical experience of social reality. Such conflicts might take the form of a “performative contradiction” (118).

Adding to the Marxist approach, Gramsci introduces the concept of ‘hegemony’. Hegemony is a more sensitive and useful critical term than ‘domination’. Gramsci holds that we internalize the prevailing ideologies and accept them by consent. Steve Jones observes that for Gramsci “culture, politics and the economy are organized in a relationship of mutual exchange with one another, a constantly circulating and shifting network of influence” (5). He notes that for Gramsci, hegemony is “a project that involves the formation of moral and intellectual consensus under the leadership of a particular social group” (95).

Gramsci makes a significant distinction between civil and political society. Political society dominates directly, while civil society is a private realm in which the ruling values seem more natural and therefore unchangeable. There is a vast range of institutions which constitute ‘civil society’. These institutions include the church, the school, sports teams, the media and the family. He argues that the state provides an important mechanism in connecting civil society to the economy. This becomes ‘the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’ and as a result

ideology becomes a part of everyday life (32). Jones notes that for Gramsci a complex and well articulated society is necessary even after major upheavals (33). For Gramsci thus, civil society is the main route of hegemony. Jones observes that, in Gramsci, “. . . hegemony is moral and intellectual leadership which treats the aspirations and views of subaltern people as an active element within the political and cultural programme of the hegemonizing bloc” (55). Thus, hegemony is the process of transaction, negotiation and compromise that takes place between ruling and subaltern groups (10).

Louis Althusser

Louis Althusser attempts to theorize ideology in his famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation". He observes that the relations of production not only produce material products but also reproduce relations of production. Thus, the existing system of domination and exploitation goes on. If the existing conditions of production did not reproduce the relations of production, the whole capitalist system would collapse. He asserts that “[t]he ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production” (Althusser 1).

David Hawkes notes that ideology, for Althusser, constitutes persons as subjects through “interpellation”. Ideology exists before the individual; it perpetuates itself through interpellation. A person is hailed in a way that forces him into a pre-allocated subject-position (119). A subject understands of the self and the world depends upon several factors which include,

as Marx famously pointed out, his/her material conditions. But this process is mediated by ideology. Commenting on 'base' and 'superstructure', Althusser states that there is a 'relative autonomy' of the superstructure and there is also a reciprocal action of the superstructure on the base (Althusser 7). Althusser sees state as a machine of control, which enables the ruling class to rule through force and ideology (8).

Explaining ideology, Althusser states that it "is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of living" (24); secondly, it "has material existence: an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material" (26). Ideology makes us happy and passive by concealing the real conditions of our existence from our conscious awareness.

Althusser analyses the apparatuses of domination in a class society and broadly divides them into two categories: Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). RSAs include the government, the police, the military, the courts, the prisons, etc. ISAs include religion, the education system, family, culture, etc. He holds that against one RSA, there are numerous ISAs (11-12). The RSA dominates by violence, while ISA dominates by ideology. Ultimately, the ruling ideology is effectively realized through Ideological State Apparatuses (including literature). "All Ideological State Apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist

relations of exploitation" (18). Any form of ideology - religion, art, literature or politics - "always expresses class positions" (21). Ideology recruits persons as subjects, by interpellating them: ". . . [T]here is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject: meaning, by the category of the subject and its functioning" (29-30). Althusser writes that ideologies are produced but they also produce the conditions of their own production. A text not only produces an ideology but also the conditions to reproduce ideology. Eagleton notes that besides this, Althusser finds terms 'true' and 'false' quite inapplicable to ideology, because it is not any kind of knowledge. Eagleton notes that "ideology implicates subjects; but for [Althusser] knowledge is 'subjectless' process, so ideology must by definition be non-cognitive" (Eagleton, Ideology 52).

Althusser does not reduce literature to ideology. He argues, rather, that the two have a complex relationship. Eagleton summarizes Althusser's observations on literature and ideology: "[I]deology signifies the imaginary ways in which men experience the real world, which is, of course, the kind of experience literature gives us too - what it feels like to live in particular conditions, rather than a conceptual analysis of those conditions. However, art does more than just passively reflect that experience. It is held within ideology, but also manages to distance itself from it, to the point where it permits us to 'feel' and 'perceive' the ideology from which it springs" (Eagleton, Marxism 16-

17). Althusser himself summarizes his thesis on ideology in the following words: [T]he interpellation of 'individual' as subjects; their subjection to the subject; the mutual recognition of subjects and subject, the subject's recognition of himself; the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen – 'so be it'. (Althusser 36)

Pierre Macherey

Pierre Macherey, another famous theorist of ideology, states that "[t]o know what an ideology means, to express this meaning, we must . . . go beyond and outside ideology; we must attack it from the outside in an effort to give form to that which is formless" (148). He holds that it is the responsibility of the critic to bring out the ideological elements of a text. He observes that a 'decentered' reading of the text helps a critic to find out its hidden meanings. Meanings are scattered in the text because of its ideological elements; a text is not ideological because of its statements but because it conceals reality: "What is important in the work is what it does not say" (97). An ideological analysis must make the textual silences speak. In other words, a text is always incomplete at the level of articulation. Its ideological significance lies in its gaps, silences, contradictions and irregularities. Explaining Macherey's insight, Eagleton writes that "[t]he critic's task is not to fill the work in: it is to seek out the principle of its conflict of meanings and to show how this conflict is produced by the work's relation to ideology" (Eagleton, *Marxism* 33).

Although there are silences, gaps, contradictions and irregularities in a text, yet these are the things which give life to the text, because "[i]n its every particle, the work manifests, uncovers what it cannot say" (Macherey 94). In this context, Eagleton states that "[i]deology for Macherey is the invisible colour of daily life, too close to the eyeball to be properly objectified, a centreless, apparently limitless medium in which we move like a fish in water, with no more ability than a fish to grasp this elusive environment as a whole" (Eagleton, *Ideology* 46).

Although Macherey observes that literature is not truer than illusion yet at the same time he points out that it can neither be accurately called false nor true. Literature has a place between science and ideology as a text is ideological because of its ideological elements but at the same time it also challenges the prevailing ideology. Elucidating Macherey's perception, David Hawkes notes that the literary language does not concern itself with truth or falsehood but constructs its own truth, and thus literature occupies the place between both (125). Macherey states that "[t]he book is neither reality nor experience, but artifice. The artifice is not a riddle, but an authentic mystery which lives entirely in the trajectory of its resolution" (42). A book thus may have a double function: to perpetuate the existing ideology and to expose it.

Like Walter Benjamin, Macherey also regards the author as a producer and the text as a product. He writes that [t]o know the conditions of a work is to define the real process of its constitution, to

show how it is composed from a real diversity of elements which give it substance. Nor must we confuse necessity with fatality: The work is not the product of chance, but it does involve novelty, which is inscribed in its very letter. It is this mobility which makes the work possible . . . (56)

He further remarks that “art is not man’s creation, it is a product and the producer is not a subject centered in his creation, he is an element in a situation or a system” (77). The silences and gaps in a text are not an inadequacy but are constitutive of the text: “[T]he silence of the book is not a lack to be remedied, an inadequacy to be made up for. It is not a temporary silence that could be finally abolished. We must distinguish the necessity of this silence” (93).

Hence, the text operates at two levels simultaneously: doubly articulated: at the initial level of sequences (the fable) and themes (the forms) which establish an illusory order; this is the level of organicist aesthetic theories. At another level, the work is articulated in relation to the reality from the ground of which it emerges: not a ‘natural’ empirical reality, but that intricate reality in which men - both writers and readers- live, that reality which is their ideology. (173)

Slavoj Žižek

Slavoj Žižek rejects the traditional conceptions of ideology as ‘false consciousness’. For him, falsity lies in what we do, not necessarily in what we say. It is “reality itself which is already to be conceived as ideological” (Žižek 21). Christopher Kul-want and Piero write:

“Žižek’s philosophy and ideas are from a position on the radical left of politics” (26). According to Žižek, Marx’s most basic definition of ideology is people’s ignorance about their subjection to it. As such, the understanding of reality is viewed as distorted by ideology. Žižek, however, argues that this is not the case today; subjects are aware of their subjection to ideology, yet they go on with it. “They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy” (Žižek 32-33). Thus, people live in fantasy and become ideologues in practice. They already know that just casting votes in a democratic system will not change the political system, yet they cast their votes; religion always teaches them to be pliable citizens but they follow it; the corrupt politician knows that he tells lies and people are aware of it but they oil this existing system by listening to him and casting votes. Žižek calls such subjects “cynical subjects”. Agreeing with Žižek, Tony Myers writes that “[a]s cynical subjects, we know full well that our understanding of reality is distorted” (Myers 65). Myers notes that Žižek argues that it is not possible to see the world properly if you are part of it. Žižek’s argument is that the problem for Marxists is that “without an acceptable theory of ideology they are unable to explain how, in crude terms, the superstructure ensures the perpetuity of the base” (Myers 20).

Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, asserts that “[i]deology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real impossible kernel . . .” (45). He adds: “Ideology is not false because it does not correspond to material reality; it does this all too well. The problem is with material reality itself, which has taken the grotesque shape of an objectified illusion, and this illusion is duplicated in our consciousness” (168). Contributing to our understanding of Ideological State Apparatuses, Žižek argues that people do not become subjects only through interpellation; it is also important how people respond to interpellation at the level of ritualized behaviour.

Myers notes that in Žižek's definition of the 'subject' if an individual's distinctive characteristics, particular needs, interests and beliefs are taken away, whatever is left is the subject. The subject is the form of one's consciousness, as opposed to the contexts of that form which are individual and specific (11). Myers adds that Žižek mentions three modes of ideology: doctrine, beliefs and rituals. Doctrine refers to the ideas, theories and beliefs of an ideology. Belief designates the external/material manifestations and apparatuses of its doctrine. Ritual refers to the internalisation of a doctrine (71). Žižek argues that when we assume a position of truth to denounce ideology, we fall back again into ideology.

Explaining Žižek's theory of ideology, Hawkes writes that “we are living a lie. Because we live it, however, the lie becomes real. The postmodern condition is thus one in which reality itself is false; and not merely false but dehumanizing, destructive and evil in the profoundest sense of the word” (171). But this does not mean that we are living in a post-ideological world or that it does not matter whether we can distinguish ideology from reality. Žižek writes that “at this level, we are of course far from being post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way - one of many ways - to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them” (33). Myers notes that Žižek proposes a “place in which we can distinguish the ideological from non-ideological but it is a place that must remain empty – it is, as it were, a form without context” and “[t]he only non-ideological position available, is, in fact, in the Real – the Real of antagonism” (Myers 72, 76). In fact, Žižek is of the opinion that the distinction between ideology and reality is theoretical, not practical.

Terry Eagleton

Terry Eagleton admits that there is no single definition of ideology. He lists sixteen definitions of it in his book *Ideology: An Introduction*, but finds that even these most important definitions are not sufficient to define ideology. At the same time, he does not reject any definition. He observes that both the wider and narrower senses of ideology have their uses (*Ideology* 7). According to him, the

political left thinks of dominant modes of ideology, but “[a]re socialism and feminism ideologies, and if not why not? Are they non-ideological when in political opposition but ideological when they come to power?” (6). He also states that movements such as socialism may also emerge in distortion and mystification, such as when slogans are raised: ‘Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but you chains’. We can study such slogans as a distortion of reality also because workers may actually lose their lives in acts of political militancy (26). He concludes that “by no means all ideologies are oppressive and spuriously legitimating” (6). He stresses that the term ideology should not be confined only to dominant forms of social thoughts; rather, a broad definition of ideology is required.

Eagleton argues that “ideology is a matter of ‘discourse’ rather than ‘language’. It concerns the actual uses of language between particular human subjects for the production of specific effects” (9). These specific effects may not compulsorily produce ‘false consciousness’, so it will be wrong to reduce ideology only to ‘false consciousness’.

Hence ideological discourse, Eagleton argues, may be false at one level but it may also be true at another. To support his argument, Eagleton gives the example of a comment: “[I]f we allow Pakistanis to live in our street, the house prices will fall”. This statement may be true but it may involve the assumption that Pakistanis are not good people or they are inferior, which is false (16-17). Eagleton points out that empirical truths and rhetoric are interrelated; rhetoric uses empirical

truths according to its requirements. In other words, ideological discourse is a complex network of empirical and normative elements (23).

Eagleton analyses the mother text of the theory of ideology, *The German Ideology* (1846), in which Marx and Engels famously state that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas. Eagleton explains: "This . . . suggest[s] a more 'internal' relation between ideology and material life than the 'illusion' model perhaps permits" (79). He further argues that there are different forms of social consciousness, some of which can be called ideological but some are non-ideological. There are some forms of social consciousness which do not help to legitimate the dominating class and there are some which are not particularly central to any power struggle (81). Echoing Žižek, Eagleton states that “ideology is now less a matter of reality becoming inverted in the mind, than of the mind reflecting real inversion . . . if this is so then ideology has been, so to speak, transferred from the superstructure to the base, or at least signals some peculiarly close relation between them” (85).

Eagleton offers significant insights on the origin of the concept ‘ideology’. If the critique of ideology sets out to examine the social foundations of a thought/idea, then logically it must be able to trace its own origin:

The concept of ideology, it can be argued, arose at the historical point where systems of ideas first became aware of their own partiality; and this came about when those ideas were forced to encounter alien

or alternative forms of discourse. It was with the rise of bourgeois society, above all, that the scene was set for this occurrence. (106)

Commenting on Antonio Gramsci, Eagleton cites Perry Anderson's observation that Gramsci is mistaken when he locates hegemony only in 'civil society'; rather, it is also located in the state (112).

Eagleton argues that capitalism does not always use ideology in order to dominate. If it were so, this system of exploitation and domination could not have survived so long. Moreover, "[c]apitalist society no longer cares whether we believe in it or not; it is not 'consciousness' or 'ideology' which welds it together, but its own complex system operations" (37).

Raymond Geuss's distinction between 'descriptive', 'pejorative', and 'positive' definitions of ideology is useful, according to Eagleton. The first refers to ideology as belief systems of certain classes or groups; the second means these views or beliefs can be viewed critically; and the third refers to a set of views or beliefs which inspires a specific group or class in the pursuit of political interests judged to be desirable (44).

Eagleton thus concludes that there is a wide range of meanings of ideology. General meanings are inadequate to sum it up because it is a complex concept. Summing up the power and limitations of ideology, Eagleton notes:

The relations between ideological discourses and social interests are complex, variable ones, in which it is sometimes appropriate to speak of the ideological signifiers as a bone of contention between

conflicting social forces, and at other times a matter of more internal relations between modes of signification and forms of social power. Ideology contributes to the constitution of social interests, rather than passively reflecting pre-given positions; but it does not, for all that, legislate such positions into existence by its own discursive omnipotence. (223)

The concept of ideology is meant to disclose the relation between an utterance and its material conditions of possibility (223). Talking about the relation of art and ideology, he remarks conclusively that it springs from an ideological conception of the world (Eagleton Marxism 15-16).

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