transitions

Ideology

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1 Introduction to 'Ideology'

> **ideology** . . . a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy: *the ideology of republicanism.*
> ■ the ideas and manner of thinking characteristic of a group, social class, or individual: *a critique of bourgeois ideology.* ■ [mass noun] archaic **visionary** speculation, especially of an unrealistic or idealistic nature.   (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*)

What do Adolf Hitler, Bill Gates, and the Spice Girls have in common? Reasonably expecting the answer to this ostensibly irreverent question to contain a sexually oriented punch line, many people might overlook a less obvious – though intriguing – possibility: ideology. Although media pundits of the latter half of the twentieth century tended to pursue a fairly uniform – and pejorative – definition of ideology, the term possesses a rich, contentious history that covers far more terrain than the contemporary sound-bite version suggests. According to this dominant representation of the concept, ideology primarily manifests itself as an unthinking – whether brutal and oppressive or merely selfish – other, whose rigid, irrational adherence to an overdetermined system or policy defies common sense. As characterized by various western media outlets, then, the ideologue sacrifices open debate for a hermetically closed set of values, and, thus, will refuse to listen to – and may attempt to destroy – anyone with an opposing viewpoint. Ideologues prey on weak and hungry nations. Ideologues reject human rights. As CNN and the BBC would have it, ideologues behave quite like Hitler and not a bit like the Spice Girls. Even the most cursory review of dominant media coverage of, for example, Leonid Brezhnev, Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic reveals them as unquestionable ideologues.

As for Bill Gates, he might qualify as an ideologue under a looser, secondary mainstream definition of ideology that refers to an uncompromising position, but not one that would necessarily hurt anyone in the physical sense or one that would deny the right of others to present a counterargument. Margaret Thatcher might cut a job or two, and Newt Gingrich might not really like females in combat, but they would not personally harm anybody, and neither would Louis Farrakhan or Rupert Murdoch. For the commentators on the Sunday morning news shows, common sense dictates that cartoonish 'butchers' and 'madmen' purvey their ideology with crude, broad brush strokes that contrast negatively with the ultrafine artistry of western capitalism and freedom.

Such a dichotomy between common sense and irrational behavior, however, lies at the heart of most modern discussions of ideology. While it may seem easy – if one employs the above 'obvious' definition of the concept – to declare with Daniel Bell that ideology has outlived its usefulness and that the twentieth century witnessed the 'end of ideology,' to do so would ignore the term's more subtle gradations (Bell 2000). Once perceived as a pervasive process rather than as provincial dogma, ideology's impact becomes clearer. While often characterized as the unchallenged rationalizations of suspect political regimes, ideologies rarely – if ever – function in a monolithic way, and they apply to far more than 'traditional' politics. As the dialogic models of M. M. Bakhtin suggest, divergent ideologies often clash at the level of both discourse ('literal' or symbolic) and material action. Conscious subjects thus gain access to both official and unofficial ideologies, which, in turn, help both to reinscribe and undermine a given social reality. Individuals may thus, for example, interpret the Spice Girls' mantra 'girl power' from both the intended ('official') locus – i.e., women's independence is not contingent on male approval – and from a host of competing perspectives – e.g., despite their claims to the contrary, the Spice Girls' collective voice relied on continued certification by male managers and record executives. In the case of the Spice Girls, observers may or may not consciously reconcile the paradox ensuing from the different positionings: the 'inferior' class status of the Spice Girls potentially mitigates the subversive intent of the message 'girl power.' Scary, Sporty, Baby, Posh, and Ginger directly or indirectly produced hundreds of millions of dollars, but they received relatively little, while the CEOs of

numerous international conglomerates reaped huge profits from the sale of concert tickets, compact discs, clothes, dolls, watches, bicycles, decals, and the like (the full list boggles the mind). The 'girl power,' moreover, also failed to extend to the Taiwanese, Mexican and Honduran (again, among others) factory workers who produced the Spice Girls' product line and who received subsistence wages.

While Terry Eagleton reminds readers that an overapplication of ideology critiques to trivial matters, such as a preference for roses rather than irises, may dilute their effectiveness, the concept of ideology clearly covers more than *Time* or *The Economist* generally suggest. The process of ideology, therefore, refers to the inherent relationships between ideas and material reality, but to avoid the practical limitations of endlessly deferred meanings, Eagleton proposes that 'in any particular situation you must be able to point to what counts as non-ideological for the term to have meaning' (Eagleton 1991, 9). In essence, Eagleton prompts readers to set ideological boundaries, a phenomenon that postmodern theorists would find quite ideological in itself. Nevertheless, although popular usage reduces the word to function, roughly, as a synonym for non-democratic political systems such as totalitarianism, fascism, or communism, one should begin to see that the notion of ideology as process (rather than product) muddles such pat dichotomies. Once one traces the history of ideology from its origins to its current academic incarnations, one will, hopefully, glean a sense of the concept's continuing evolution, and recognize that even reason, that bastion of common sense, may function in an ideological way. Certainly, Hitler fashioned an ideology, but so, too, did Bill Gates.

Although most of the frenetic revelers present at the 1989 dismantling of the Berlin Wall cheered at the imminent passing of Soviet communism, few would have viewed the event as the 'end' of ideology. Indeed, in light of the 29 years of tumultuous history separating Bell's 1960 proclamation regarding the end of ideology from the 1989 demise of the wall, most – if familiar with Bell – would have considered the end of ideology thesis rather naïve and its definition of ideology rather narrow. In Bell's understanding of the term, ideology represents the crude, irrational interests of non-liberal, non-capitalist regimes and the 'conversion of ideas into social levers' (2000, 400). Employing recent memories (and failures) of Nazism and Stalinism as evidence, Bell asserts that ideology lacks political viability and now exists as an unpleasant

reminder of 'apocalyptic fervor' (405). Bell, of course, bases much of his argument on the unexamined assumption that western capitalist nations do not rely on ideology to reinforce their claims to Truth. For Bell, as for many historians weaned on the Cold War, ideology is unequivocally 'other,' a pejorative concept signifying a resistance to the 'Truth' embodied in industrial capitalism and its liberal satellites. Ignoring such internal contradictions as racial segregation, educational elitism, homelessness, and gender bias, Bell depicts Anglo-American culture as the non-ideological realm of freedom, democracy, and justice.[1] With their knowledge of Anglo-American involvement in such indubitably ideological struggles as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the youth movement, the culture wars, and Thatcher's privatization movement, most spectators at the destruction of the Berlin Wall would have rejected Bell's optimistic conception of ideology as too dependent on extreme characterizations and binary rhetoric. Faced with so much material evidence, few such participants would have accepted the notion of an ideology-free West.

If, however, ideology fails to conform to the definition set forth by Bell – a rigid set of beliefs foisted on a vulnerable population by a malicious, self-serving elite – how then shall one define it? The answer to this rather ambitious question is fraught with problems and contradictions.

Most modern theorists of ideology would agree that definitions of ideology typically – perhaps inevitably – risk manifesting the very phenomenon they seek to describe objectively. Ideology, such thinkers argue, penetrates our thought processes so deeply that even the language and actions of would-be social critics betray affinities with the network of ideas that dominates their culture. Writers who would hazard a tentative definition of ideology, then, must self-consciously acknowledge the limitations of their approach. In the present case, readers will encounter many counter-definitions in the pages to come and, hopefully, engage the following definition in fruitful debate. For the purposes of this volume, one might define ideology as a reciprocal process wherein subjective, institutional, and political ideas operate within a power web of both the intended and the unanticipated. Under this definition, no ideology can be entirely conscious, for the concept is

in constant flux as individuals, institutions, and politics influence one another. Ideology is thus – paradoxically – unstable even as it functions to produce power.

Another possible response to the problem of defining ideology – and quite a popular one – involves some version of the concept of 'false consciousness.' Because of its prevalence in Marxist and Neo-Marxist theory, casual readers might assume that the phrase 'false consciousness' originated with Marx; however, according to extant evidence, Marx himself never used the term (McLellan 1995, 16). Rather, Marx's collaborator, Friedrich Engels, outlined the notion of false consciousness in an oft-cited 14 July 1893 letter to Franz Mehrings: 'Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him. … Hence, he imagines false or seeming motive forces. Because it is a process of thought he derives its form as well as its content from pure thought…' (Marx and Engels 1965, 459). According to Engels' pejorative conception – which draws on notions that Marx and he develop in *The German Ideology* but ignores some of Marx's later formulations of ideology – false consciousness represents a situation wherein subjects mistakenly believe that they act autonomously and independently of material constraint when, in fact, the very basis of their mental activity lies in their relation to socially established modes of production. Divorced from an understanding of materialism, ideas reflect not reality but illusion. While subjects may argue that their thoughts are 'common sense' or 'logical,' a false consciousness view of ideology would suggest that their idealism finds its source in the untenable premise that ideas precede things. Although Engels limited his use of the phrase 'false consciousness' to his intriguing letter, later theorists, as we shall see in chapter 2, seized upon the concept and expanded its significance.

Marx's relationship to the concept – if not the phrase – of false consciousness provides the catalyst for an esoteric, but nonetheless heated, debate among his acolytes. Because Marx wrote at such a prolific rate over an extended period and, perhaps, because many of his texts were published posthumously, many explicators of his work note what they perceive as inconsistencies between Marx's 'early' and 'mature' phases. One such apparent inconsistency involves Marx's conceptualization of ideology. In *The German Ideology*, co-written with Engels in 1845 but not published until the 1920s, Marx refers to 'illusions of consciousness' and discusses

the Young Hegelians' desire to 'put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical, or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations' (Marx 1998, 36). Marx further anticipates Engels' later notion of false consciousness when he argues that 'this demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way' (36). A few pages later, Marx explains ideology via the simile of a camera obscura:

> If in all ideology men and their relations 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. ... The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. (1998, 42)

In the above passages, Marx seems to define ideology quite similarly to Engels. Just as Engels does, Marx attributes ideology to a lack of understanding on the part of a 'subject.' The notion of mental 'phantoms,' moreover, seems to dovetail with the suspicion of idealism evident in Engels' letter to Mehrings. In the camera obscura figure, Marx locates ideology in a privileging of the ideal over the material; for Marx, as for Engels, concrete historical necessity precedes abstract thought. Those who argue otherwise or who only partially grasp historical materialism – for example, Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner, whom Marx severely critiques in *The German Ideology* – practice mystification or rationalization, which blurs the relation between history and conceptualization and, thus, reinforces class divisions.

Nevertheless, despite Marx's apparent early alignment with Engels, many commentators – Theodor Adorno, Antonio Gramsci, and Louis Althusser among them – think that in *Capital* Marx abandoned, or at least radically altered, what they perceive as a limited notion of ideology. In the first volume of *Capital* (1867), Marx develops his theory of commodity fetishism, which many critics argue establishes the definitive Marxian paradigm for ideology. In contrast to Marx's focus on the illusory in the camera obscura trope, commodity fetishism locates ideology in the tangible relations of the marketplace. The transition from product of labor to commodity, Marx writes, yields an 'enigmatic' (1977, 164) situation wherein the 'physical relation between physical

things' (i.e., the workers and the products of their labor [165]) dissolves:

> The mysterious character of the commodity form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.   (164–5)

As a commodity, Marx continues, a product has an assigned exchange-value based not on utility (use-value) but on labor-time: 'the determination of the magnitude of value by labour-time is therefore a secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities' (168). The suppression of this 'secret,' Marx argues, 'conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly' (168–9).

Rather than characterizing ideology as an inverted relationship between consciousness and reality, therefore, Marx in *Capital* grounds ideology in material reality. The ideology inherent in commodity fetishism drives a wedge between workers and their products and obscures the actual energy and time involved in producing those products. Commodity fetishism, moreover, substitutes the figurative (money) for the concrete, and, thus, further erodes the connections among people. Followers of Marx's logic would claim, therefore, that the 'customer' who exchanges a piece of paper for a cut of beef generally sees only a cellophane-wrapped piece of flesh divorced not only from an animal, but from the ranchers, farmers, drivers, butchers, clerks, machine manufacturers, petroleum suppliers, and others who produced the steak. Workers, thus, become alienated from those who will *use* their products.

As will become evident in later chapters, the two main strands in Marx's conception of ideology largely serve as the flash point for academic debate. Although Marx develops other theories of ideology – notably in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) and in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Capital* (1859) – the theories he establishes in *The German Ideology* and *Capital* carry the most influence with later thinkers. The camera obscura/false consciousness and commodity fetishism approaches serve as starting points for most post-Marxian discussions of

ideology. Because Marx never provides a definitive statement of ideology – one that explicitly rejects the camera obscura simile or else integrates it into his later conception of commodity fetishism – later commentators found his ambiguity fertile ground for amplification and academic discussion and irrevocably linked his name with ideology. One may easily forget, then, that Marx himself did not originate the concept of ideology.

Coined by the *philosophe* Antoine Destutt de Tracy in 1796, ideology originally referred to an ostensibly 'neutral' science of ideas that sought to trace how 'sensation' became thought. Nevertheless, ideology's conceptual pedigree begins much earlier than the Institut de France and, indeed, informs the classical split between idealism and materialism. In discussing his notion of Forms, Plato claims that material reality reflects a flawed version of the ideal. He suggests in his *Republic* (375?BC) that, for example, a craftsperson could never create a table – or even a drawing of a table – which fully captures the concept of the perfect (ideal) table. For Plato, ideas such as Truth, Beauty, and Justice preexist their representations, and these representations serve to distract humanity from transcending the material world. As Plato illustrates in his renowned simile of the cave, only the philosopher attempts to escape from the shadows and 'empty nonsense' of the material world and experience the glaring light of the ideal (1987, 318). Because of the powerful attraction of physical evidence – ideas lack matter – most people reject philosophers and deem them insane (one thinks here of Aristophanes' *The Clouds* [423 BC], for example wherein Socrates is described as gravely contemplating the 'intestinal passage of the gnat' [1973, 118]), but Plato ascribes them the highest place in his ideal society. For Plato, philosophers may more freely distinguish between the material illusions that motivate most subjects and the underlying ideal upon which those distortions rest. While Plato, of course, never uses the word ideology, he does critique contemporary Grecian society by highlighting the process whereby rulers and their subjects derive their beliefs. By chasing after shadows, Plato contends, people ignore the ideal and act irrationally.

Plato's representation of a society in which individuals mistake fabulation for 'reality' underscores one of the major philosophical contributions stemming from the study of ideology: the formulation of the subject. Chapter 2, 'Ideology and the Paradox of Subjectivity,'

will explore how a variety of theorists from Plato and Francis Bacon to Sigmund Freud and Louis Althusser employ ideology in constructing their models of subjectivity. Although they reach diverse conclusions, such writers share in common a belief that subjectivity often finds its basis in the mythopoeic. Jean-François Lyotard's 'grand narratives,' Northrop Frye's 'tropes,' Carl Jung's 'collective unconscious': these and other attempts to codify the stories – verbalized or institutionalized – that people tell about themselves and their enemies all focus on the inescapability of cultural myth. Even if individuals fancy themselves 'nonconformists' or even 'revolutionaries,' they nonetheless function within (and react against) the ideological parameters created by the society in which they live. Starting with Plato, several theorists offer ways to avoid such a bleak determinism, but such options (e.g., proletarian revolution or extended psychoanalysis) generally prove difficult at best. Nevertheless, as readers will discover in chapter 2, one value of such formulations of ideology lies in their ability to problematize notions of 'common sense.' It may seem 'natural' for Bill Gates to want to accumulate millions of dollars an hour, but such a phenomenon finds its basis in ideology.

Closely aligned with ideological notions of subjectivity is the concept of culture. In chapter 3, 'Ideology and Institutional Authority,' readers will continue to glean the interconnectedness of subjective and cultural desire. If one subscribes to theorists such as Marx, Georg Lukács, Althusser, and Karl Mannheim, subjective desire mirrors cultural desire. In other words, the 'needs' of an institution (e.g., a religion, government, or family) manifest themselves via ideology and establish a milieu wherein a subject will 'naturally' desire what will benefit the larger institution. Ideas follow the requirements of history. According to this view, therefore, Gates' drive to improve the technological situation of the average citizen finds its root in capitalism's need to find new product outlets. As writers such as John B. Thompson, Marshall McLuhan, and Rosemary Hennessy argue, institutions – beyond their ostensible purpose – exist to perpetuate themselves and their inherent ideologies. Media outlets such as the Internet and television function not only as catalysts for subjective thought, but also as *shapers* of thought. Media 'culture' helps create subjects who – in general – reinforce dominant ideas. The range of ideas, thus, falls within certain parameters. The rise of violence in American schools, for

example, might precipitate debate over the proper interpretation of the Second Amendment to the Constitution, but rarely do citizens challenge the validity of their version of democracy itself. Ideology, such thinkers would claim, embeds itself in various institutions so as to become – paradoxically – at once omnipresent and invisible.

Once outside of one's *own* culture, however, ideology often makes itself almost comically obvious, and the external observer cannot but help to notice the ideological scaffolding supporting institutions such as schools, families, religions, and governments. Analyzed in such a naked way – and implicitly compared to competing ideologies – most ideologies will appear crude, overt, dogmatic. In many cases, onlookers will accuse the leaders of alien institutions of propagandizing, social engineering, or worse. Chapter 4, 'Political Ideology,' then, will examine those theorists who consider ideology as a form of direct social manipulation. This perspective gained currency almost from the beginning of ideology's formal history, and most histories of ideology generally credit Napoleon with initiating this pejorative – and by now almost universal – meaning of the term when, upon the occasion of his retreat from Moscow, he chided de Tracy for his 'diffuse metaphysics' (qtd. in Eagleton 1991, 67). Later, thinkers as different as Marx, Bell, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas appropriated Napoleon's usage and ascribed the term 'ideology' to specific socio-political modes of thought. Despite such a philosophical pedigree, however, the mass perception of ideology generally lacks even a modicum of self-reflection and fails to ground its understanding of the concept in the rigorous historical paradigms of the aforementioned writers. Cut loose from the academy and its ideologies, the idea – reinforced by what Althusser refers to as ideological state apparatuses – loses much of its nuance and assumes a more slogan-like character. In this nearly ubiquitous redaction, ideology manifests itself in the extremist sound-bite. Any non-centrist position, whether it regards taxation or grammar school curricula, will likely find itself severely critiqued, if not lampooned, as 'ideology' by the moderate media. Such media will commonly saddle non-capitalist cultures, in particular, with descriptors meant to convey tacit disapproval of an ideology that forsakes their own agendas: 'Muslim extremist,' 'Nicaraguan strongman,' 'cult leader.' Rarely, if ever, though, do such outlets refer to Enron, Nike, Exxon, Texaco, and other ethically dubious corporations as 'capitalist extremists.' In practice,

then, ideology effectively doubles back on itself, reinforcing its principles by reifying socio-political alternatives with an ideological label. By calling attention to the ideology undergirding non-moderate, non-capitalist social practices, the media avoid contemplating the ideologies that drive themselves. One may, in fact, apply with profit Jonathan Swift's definition of satire to ideology and declare that the concept 'is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own' (1973, 375).

For students of literature, ideology offers some intriguing interpretive possibilities. As Eagleton observes in his *Introduction to Literary Theory* (1983), the very idea of 'literature' is ideological, but, as he earlier asserts in *Criticism and Ideology* (1978), 'the literary text is not the 'expression' of ideology, nor is ideology the 'expression' of social class. The text, rather, is a certain *production* of ideology' (64). According to Eagleton's theory, students of literature should not consider the text as a transparent rendering of an author's – or an institution's – viewpoint, but should instead avoid simple dichotomies by examining a host of variables and exploring the ways in which text, author, history, and audience converge and contradict one another. Literary representations of history produce ideology as much in their lacunae as in their palpable selections, and the same text can produce quite different ideological effects in different audiences. Chapters 5 through 7 will engage a variety of texts in a series of ideology critiques that will attempt to heed Eagleton's advice and steer clear of mistaking the reflection for the flesh. Hopefully, students will discover how ideology critiques allow readers to navigate between intention and contradiction.

By now it should be fairly clear that ideology contains its own paradox: any attempt to describe ideology necessarily finds itself rooted in ideology. An individual's own historical moment and position will blind her or him to ideology both within a given text and within a particular interpretation of a text. Such a phenomenon may potentially lead either to an endlessly refracting series of interpretive disclaimers or else to a faux (and dangerous) relativism that blithely asserts that Hitler and Tony Blair possess ideologies – or 'grand narratives' – that are no better, or no worse, than one another. Of course, finding an unmitigated relativist would prove quite difficult, and even Lyotard might balk at being the target of cannibalism. The question of positionality, then, becomes paramount here. How can one critique ideology from inside

ideology? Can one ever 'escape' from ideology and pursue a purely 'scientific' or 'historical' mode of analysis? In the face of the Holocaust, is it possible to claim that all ideologies are neutral? The final chapter, 'The "Post-Ideological" Era?' will focus on this hermeneutic bind and discuss how a variety of writers, including Raymond Williams, deal with it.