IDEOLOGY

Ideology originally referred to a 'science of ideas' proposed by French rationalist philosophers at the end of the eighteenth century. It is now more widely used to refer to any system of beliefs held for more than purely epistemic reasons. Some theories of ideology are neutral when it comes to accounting for the role of ideas and beliefs in social life. Others involve normative claims about how knowledge and belief function epistemologically to reproduce **power**-relations. In this second set of theories, ideology is understood as a distorted, inverted, upside down, or false view of reality. In this usage, ideology is therefore implicitly or explicitly counter-posed to some mode of knowing that sees reality in a true and accurate way. The most influential source for this second type of understanding is **Marxism**.

Despite never having been clearly worked through in his own work, ideology is arguably Marx's most powerful bequest to modern social theory. In the *German Ideology* (1845) Marx and Engels argued against idealist philosophies that saw ideas as the prime movers of historical change, asserting instead that 'social being' determined people's 'consciousness'. This is a basic axiom of materialist analysis. They also argued that in class-divided societies, the ruling ideas would be those of the ruling class, since they owned and controlled the means for producing and circulating the knowledge, beliefs, and values through which people made sense of their own experiences. In Marx's early work, this ideological determination of people's consciousness is theorised in terms of the *alienation* of the working class, who come to see social relations in inverted form. The argument was subsequently later reformulated as *commodity fetishism*. In *Capital* (1867), Marx argued that under generalised capitalist **commodity** production, the social dimensions of human labour and interaction take on the appearance of free-standing objects, and commodities take on apparently magical qualities independent from the labour processes that produce them. Commodity fetishism is a theory of how people come to misrecognise reality through the medium of distorted appearances. This kernel of a mature theory of ideology was further refined by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), with the concept of *reification*, whereby people appear to each other as things rather than active agents of historical processes, which he held to be a form of *false consciousness*.

The epistemological understanding of ideology as a generalised system of misrecognition in the interests of capitalist reproduction was systematised into models of *base-and-superstructure*, in which economic processes are seen to be the prime movers shaping other aspects of social formations, such as law, religion, or general modes of consciousness. The vast Marxist literature on ideology is beset by the recourse to functional explanation, drawing of loose analogies, and imputing of structural isomorphisms between economic patterns and behaviour and belief. Its not too strong to suggest that the Marxist theory of ideology as "partly anecdotal, partly functionalist, partly conspiratorial, and partly magical" (Elster 1982, 199).

Marxist theories of ideology share two features: a formal aspect, in which ideology is understood to be a medium for the inversion or obscuring of reality; and a content, in which ideology is held to function in the interests of particular classes, by presenting their particular interests as if they were the interests of all classes. In both respects, there is a presumption that ideology is politically effective by making social relations and historical processes appear natural, inevitable, objective, or ahistorical. This is the strongest legacy of the Marxist heritage of theories of ideology, which lives on in a widespread assumption that the task of *critical* social science is the exposure of naturalised, de-historized, objectified appearances as historical products and social constructs.

A recurrent theme in Western Marxism from the 1920s onwards was how to understand the means by which capitalist exploitation was legitimised through the active consent of those who were the main sources of economic value and the primary victims of injustice. The prevalence of this problem of *reproduction* helps account for the flourishing of Marxist cultural theory (Anderson 1976). The absence of widespread political upheaval against capitalism was identified as a failure at the level of **culture**, attributed to the operations of ideology. In short, sophisticated theories were developed to explain capitalist reproduction on the assumption that "people must have been got at" (Sinfield 1994, 22). Some of Marxism's most important contributions emerge from this explanation of capitalist reproduction as a problem of culture and ideology. These include a shift away from focussing on false consciousness towards a consideration of the unconscious dynamics of personality formation, in the work of Herbert Marcuse for example; Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's seminal account of the culture industries; Antonio Gramsci's account of cultural hegemony; and V. N. Volosinov's account of the inherently social qualities of the linguistic sign. The development of Marxist theories of ideology relied heavily on non-Marxist traditions such as psychoanalysis, Weberian sociology, and semiotics. For all the sophistication of this tradition, it led to a curious 'blindspot' in Western Marxism, which came to think of cultural mediums like radio, television, or film primarily as ideological devices, neglecting to analyse these practices as sources for the production and distribution of surplus value (Smythe 1978).

The nemesis of Marxist theories of ideology came in the figure of the avowedly Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser. Combining Lacanian **psychoanalytical theory** is with Gramsci's account of **hegemony**, Althusser (1971) re-cast the concept of ideology in ways that still resonate in a range of cultural theory. He argued that ideology was not something that people could be liberated from, but was rather a constitutive dimension of all social formations; ideology was the mechanism through which individuals were made into subjects. The formation of **subjectivity** worked through the practices embodied in institutions such as churches, schools, and Universities. These he called Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). For Althusser, ideology referred to the 'representation of the imaginary relationships to their real conditions of existence'. *Imaginary* in this formulation does not mean false or unreal. It refers to the idea that this relationship is always, necessarily, mediated by way of images. In short, Althusser claimed that misrecognition was the constitutive mechanism of subjectivity in *all* societies, not just under capitalism; therefore it was not something that people could be liberated from.

Althusser's account of ISAs laid the basis for a generalised analysis of cultural practices in terms of practices of subject-formation rather than consciousness. The notion of ideological subjectification in ISAs served as a crucial way-station for the development of feminist theories of subjectivity, psychoanalytical theories of sexuality, and for the

eventual supervention of 'ideology' by concepts of 'discourse', 'discipline' and other notions drawn form Michel Foucault's work (Barrett 1991). The class content of ideology that Althusser took for granted was filled by other identities; ethnicity, gender, race, and sexuality. The assertion that subjectivity was formed in ISAs was instrumental to the recognition that that struggles within civil society were a crucial dimension of counter-hegemonic political struggles (it also tended to flatter academics' sense of their own centrality to these struggles).

The traces of Althusser's account of ideology are still evident in contemporary theories of **culture**, **discourse**, **governmentality** and **hegemony**, even if the concept of ideology is rarely used in a strong analytical sense anymore. There are three such traces of ideology in cultural theory, **post-Marxism** and **poststructuralism**: an emphasis on practices of subject-formation; an emphasis on the cognitive dimensions of this process, understood in terms of the naturalising or de-historicising of contingent relationships through the medium of representations; and an emphasis on how macro-level processes of subordination, exploitation, and oppression are reproduced through this micro-level process of subject-formation. These related conceptualisations are given a geographical inflection by analysing the ways in which spatial forms (such as boundaries, scale relations, or place identities) are inscribed in the representations that are supposed to function as mediums for subject-formation. The primary emphasis of post-Marxist, poststructuralist theories of discourse and hegemony remains on the ways in which people's subjectivities are *socially constructed*; geographers have largely ignored the more productive turn towards analysing 'ideology' in terms of **rhetoric**, focussing on the relationships between active, *socially constructing* human subjects negotiating various argumentative dilemmas in everyday situations (Billig 1996).

Marxist theories of ideology have not fared well in recent social theory. Abercrombie *et al* (1980) challenged the idea that ideology was a crucial factor in the reproduction of capitalism, calling attention to the degree to which this assumption depended on a functionalist view of society as a tightly integrated totality whose parts contribute to the better operation of the whole. Criticisms of this sort have led to the revival of more neutral accounts of ideology. Thompson (1994) defines ideology as any system of signification which facilitates the pursuit of particular interests by a social group. Mann (1986) defines ideology as one of four sources of social power (along with economic, political, and military sources), involving the mobilisation of values, norms, and rituals. In this sense, ideology is not false, although it does involve holding beliefs that surpass experience. These sorts of definitions see *ideology in general* as a ubiquitous feature of human affairs, while *particular ideologies* can be analysed for their practical effects and normative implications. Nevertheless, all concepts of ideology remain dogged by the problem that, while it may be plausible to assume that ideas are produced with certain intentions to influence and effect people, it is conceptually and empirically very difficult to account for just how these intended purposes actually come off successfully at all.

Theories of ideology, and their successors, are faced with two fundamental limitations. Firstly, they emphasise the cognitive and epistemological dimensions of knowledge and belief, and assume that non-cognitive grounds for belief are at least suspect, if not false. This is an impoverished view of what it is to be a functioning human being, and it leads to a deeply problematic understanding of the politics of critique (Hanssen 2000). Secondly, theories of ideology and their analogues face a persistent problem in justifying and accounting for their own epistemological claims. The persistence of modes of 'ideological' problematisation in academic analysis might even be interpreted as a

symptom of scholasticism – the process by which the untheorized conditions of separation, distanciation, and detachment that enable academic reflection are projected onto objects of critical analysis (Bourdieu 2000).

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Suggested Reading
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