

Misconceptions of Ideology: A Resolution

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Abstract

Most people believe their conception of the world and their place within it, their ideology, is of their own making. In reality, ideology is a false consciousness that masks the covert operations of the dominant class. Taking a materialistic, Therborn/Marxist perspective this paper addresses two common misconceptions about ideology: i) ideology is completely external to the human experience, and conversely, ii) ideology is entirely conceived by an individual and is distinct for all individuals. In explaining the emergence of ideology, a Foucauldian lens is adopted to analyze the dynamics of discourse and how it governs our actions through satisfying the status quo. This goal is explored further through an examination of how the dominant class within western society continues to shape and disseminate ideology through covert sectors of society. Three major tools responsible for disseminating ideology, *interpellation*, *the state apparatus*, and *second order myth*, are described through case studies. Lastly, the prevalent nature of ideology is discussed in terms of its co-evolution with society.

Introduction

Ideology, as it is most simply understood, is a conceptualization of the world and our relation to that world. There are two predominant misconceptions regarding ideology, which together presuppose two mutually exclusive and contradictory assumptions: 1) ideology is an absolute entity external to the human experience and is therefore unchangeable, and 2) humans are able to disconnect themselves from surrounding ideologies to actively create their own separate and distinct ideologies (Therborn 1980:44). In this paper I argue against these claims,

asserting that ideology is not only dynamic and always changing, but inseparable and interdependent with individuals. I raise this argument to address the two corresponding ramifications that arise from these misconceptions; first, if we believe that we are fully autonomous and uninfluenced agents then we can agree, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said, that “no one is a greater slave than he who imagines himself free when he is not free” (Goethe 1966:191). We can draw a similar conclusion from the second ramification, in which if we believe we have no agency over our lives then we are just as hopelessly enslaved by falsely believing we are entirely

determined. Based on my argument and supporting analysis on the dynamics of ideology, I hope to contribute a more accurate representation of ideology, which liberates individuals from predominate misconceptions and provides a holistic understanding that we both influence ideology and are influenced by ideology.

Taking a materialistic, Therborn/Marxist perspective in my analysis, I will prove that the discourse, tools of deployment and history of ideology are not only dynamic, with the exception of its structure, but also interdependent with human subjects. In supporting my analysis I will use an analogy to assimilate the formation process ideology undergoes in its conceptualization and reformation. Modeled after the famous statement on Western ideology, “the master’s tools will never disassemble the master’s house,” (Lorde 1984:112) the structure of this essay will support my thesis by defining the two key components of ideology in Audre Lorde’s statement: the master and his tools. Each term is inseparable from the other and from human interaction, all of which is continually negotiated in the formation of ideology. I will explore this intersectional rationality in depth to disprove the two misconceptions by showing how each component of ideology is dynamic in itself and contributes to the fluidity of ideology.

In the first section, *Defining and Understanding Ideology*, I will provide several definitions of ideology and briefly summarize the key theorists I will be drawing from, including Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Goran Therborn. The second section, *Embodying Ideology*, will provide two different explanations for how ideology moves from conception to action. Following Althusser’s

theories on the base of which ideology is formed, in the third section, *The Hegemonic “Master,”* I will describe the purpose of ideology in terms of the dominant ruling class. The predominant tools utilized by Western ideology will be discussed at length and described in terms of their interactions with human subjects in the section *Tools and Deployment of Ideology*. In the last section, *The History External to Ideology*, I will focus on Althusser’s assertion that history exists externally to ideology. At this point I will show how the components described in the previous sections work together to produce and reproduce ideology over time and what equation is necessary to produce a stable ideology.

Defining and Understanding Ideology

There are many varying theories surrounding ideology, which makes defining it an ambiguous and unclear task. Traditionally in religion, ideology is viewed as an absolute truth that exists external to the individual, but nonetheless moves the individual and history. Textbook definitions of ideology usually cast it as a common set of ideas or beliefs shared by a social group and less formal definitions define ideology as a false consciousness. However all of these definitions repeat the misconceptions stated earlier. These views only look at the surface of ideology and what is apparent, leaving the functions of ideology a mystery.

Ideology is not simply a disembodied system of ideas; it is contingent upon the human experience. Through continuous struggles people acquire consciousness of their position within the world and with

the people around them (Mouffe 1979:185). That is to say, ideology is the representation of the imaginary relationship individuals make to connect themselves to the real conditions they experience (Althusser 1971:162). Since we have established that ideology does not exist innately in individuals, we can reason that ideology must be passed on from previous generations and thereby deduce that ideology is a process of change made from pre-existing ideologies (Therborn 1980:41).

Essentially every ideology that exists today, and has ever existed, is built upon previous ideologies and non-ideological materials initiate any change. However, ideology should not be confused with other conceptual frameworks like *values*, *views*, *beliefs* or *ideas*. While all of these make up an individual's identity and can be shared with the larger society, ideology remains markedly different. The defining feature that sets ideology apart from these similar terms is that it operates covertly and has multiple guises to mask underlying messages. This particular aspect of ideology will be discussed in length in the section, *Tools and Deployment of Ideology*.

In this respect, it is understood that ideology is functional, meaning it is not innate in every person or external to the human experience, and is generated through an intermediary change, which sparks new knowledge and discourses. For reasons of interdependence and dynamism, I will be describing ideology in historical materialist terms, like that of Marx, Althusser and Gramsci. I therefore define ideology by its function, not appearance. Functioning in conceptually disguised, subtle, and socially acceptable ways, ideology simultaneously interacts with

human subjects, geographical, social, economic and historical factors, to meet the goal of justifying the status quo.

Embodying Ideology

With the understanding that ideology is contingent upon the human experience, this section will describe how ideology is embodied through discourse. I will temporarily adopt a Foucauldian lens to analyze the dynamics of discourse and how a conception, such as ideology, can be embodied in the somewhat "physical" world. This embodiment of ideology, in post-traditional societies, can be traced to a thought or trending notion that emerges within a group of individuals' private consciousnesses, known more concisely as "internal realizations" (Foucault 1978). Unaware of internal dialogues and similar notions running through fellow compatriot's minds, an individual can only become aware and embody these notions by understanding what their internal realizations mean in relation to them and express them accordingly. The first step in this process is performed in what Foucault has termed "technologies of the self" (Gauntlett 2008:125), in which individuals intentionally manage how they think and how they present themselves to others on a continual basis, reconfirming and reinventing what they consider their identity through self-identification and corresponding self-truth. Describing this process in the development of sexuality, Foucault asserted that the religious ideological apparatus, Christianity, actively encouraged individuals in the 17th to mid-20th centuries in Western society to discuss their sexuality in confessionals (Gauntlett 2008:132). Once individuals identified their

internal self-truths, they were then capable of articulating and thus embodying their ideas, bringing them to life in confessionals.

From articulation of internal realizations comes discourse, which I define as a communication, whether verbal, written, or visual, which defines and produces the objects of our knowledge and governs the way a topic can be meaningful and thought about (Gauntlett 2008:133). Discourse in this sense is not restricted to simply written work or conversations between individuals; it is also produced through media, education, religion and other public domains which are routinized by the dominant hegemony (Althusser 1971:143). From this description there are two distinct types of discourse: the first produced by the human subject to convey experiences and internal realizations to others; the second produced by the hegemonic nation-state for the purpose of shaping the human subjects' perception of what is good, what is real and what is possible (Therborn 1980:36). Unlike individual discourses, dominant public discourses circulate for the purpose of defining what are "common" lifestyles and "shared" values (Chun 1996:126-28).

Contrary to the first misconception, which asserts that ideology exists external to the human experience, ideology only exists through discourses. Without a way of conveying an experience or notion it cannot be perceived by others and thus cannot exist external to the individual experience (Scarry 1985:9). Elaine Scarry (1985) refers to this inability to communicate internal experiences as "hyperindividuation." It is crucial that individuals have the capacity to successfully communicate ideas and

reconfirm dominant discourses in order to be accepted by society and the totalizing ideology. Examples of this hyperindividuation can be found when people undergo traumatic experiences that create a disjunction in their original ideological perception of the world. Often the experiences these people are subjected to contradict or do not fit within the construct of the dominant ideology. While some can adapt to their culture after their experiences, others remove themselves from society because they can no longer relate to their world the same way as once was accorded.

When embodying ideology, Foucault emphasizes that knowledge transforms the self (Gauntlett 2008:128). Ideology is a cyclic relationship where the sum of individual discourses influences dominant ideology and dominant ideology influences individuals (Gauntlett 2008:143). Knowing this will not only help liberate individuals from the stated misconceptions, but also provide a more informed understanding of how ideology is produced.

The Hegemonic "Master"

Ideology, as I have demonstrated, does not exist on a single plane and its function should be viewed in a similar manner. I consider the function of ideology to be a double-edged sword; it allows subjects to make sense of the world they live in and yet, it is disseminated by sectors external to the individual. Its dissemination is achieved through media, education and other public sectors by the hegemonic power for the purpose of serving the interests of the dominant class (Marx 1992). In Western patriarchal societies the bourgeoisie or capitalists who hold the

means of production are the dominant class (Marx 1992). According to Lorde (1984:116), this dominant class is characterized as young, Christian, heterosexual, financially stable, white men.

These dominant classes come to rule allied classes and dominate the oppressed classes, through one of two hegemonic routes. The first route to hegemony is called *transformism*, where the dominant class obtains power through “passive consensus” on the part of the subordinated class, through continual absorption and neutralization of the working class’ interests to avoid opposition (Gramsci 1979:182). This first route is considered highly unstable and considerably less successful. According to Gramsci the second and more successful route to hegemony, *expansive hegemony*, occurs when allied classes actively integrate the interests of the dominant class as their own so the resulting “national-popular will” is genuine (1979:182-83). However, a hegemonic state cannot only function by imposing their interest on others; it must also represent the interests of its allies to produce a collective will, in which ideology acts as the “cement” (Gramsci 1979:193).

This collective will relies heavily on the working class’ consensus because they provide the dominant class with their labour and modes of production. Meaning the dominant class is only as powerful as its alliances allow. For instance, during the post-civil war period in the Mississippi Delta, the economy fell into a recession and plantation owners, or “rich whites,” dependence on liberated “poor blacks” became most evident when plantations collapsed (Adams and Gorton 2006:291). The collapse was triggered by the national-popular ideology for emancipating slaves in

the South, resulting in a reposition of power as the working class grew (Adams and Gorton 2006:290). In this case, national-popular ideology favoring the working class led to the dominant class’ overthrow and, despite the continuation of racial supremacy, a subsequent decline in white class status.

Tools and Deployment of Ideology

So far I have demonstrated that ideology is not self-sufficient, but rather is perpetuated by the simultaneous processes of production and reproduction. In this section I will describe three predominant tools utilized by Western hegemony to maintain ideology: interpellation, the state apparatus, and second order myth. I will then conclude this section with a discussion on the interactions these tools have with individuals.

The first tool, interpellation, is the process in which ideology singles out an individual, and instructs them to act in a prescribed manner (Gauntlett 2008:31). Interpellation has been used as early as the sixteenth century, in a slightly different manner, to describe interrupting someone speaking, or to disrupt an ongoing discourse (Montag 2012). This can be viewed as induced hyperindividuation by the capitalist hegemony, where interpellation interrupts behaviours or discourses that stray from the ideological norm. For example, Lisbeth Berbary’s research within the fictitiously named Zeta Chi sorority in the southern United States found that the young sorority women were continually interpellated by their peers and superiors as prescribed by dominant ideology (Berbary 2012). The ideology of the

Zeta Chi sorority was to maintain a flawless reputation of “ladylike” behaviour, good academia, and philanthropy, so whenever a member dated too many men or acted in ways that were considered “unladylike,” peers would hail that member to behave as ideologically prescribed (Berbary 2012:619). Foucault also suggests that with the constant surveillance deployed by peers and authoritative powers in neoliberal societies, individuals come to monitor their own behaviours in accordance to what is deemed proper, in what he calls “subjectification” (Foucault 1975:184). In reflecting upon one’s own behaviour and identity, individuals come to compare and contrast themselves with the “norm” as marked by the dominant hegemonic class, and thereby creating oppressive “-isms” that empower the hegemonic class. Drawing on this concept, Audre Lorde creates an “-ism” template, demonstrating how “-isms” in ideology normalize characteristics of the hegemony: “Racism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (Lorde 1984:115). Lorde (1984) specifically constructed this template to apply to all axes of identity, so racism could be replaced with sexism, ageism and the like. The result of these ideological constructs is that individuals who do not fall into the norm either strive to be as close to the norm as possible, or are marginalized for not following the ideological parameters of what is acceptable.

The second tool, working simultaneously and complimentary to ideology, according to Marxist theory, is the state apparatus (Althusser 1971:137). This apparatus can be broken down into two parts; the repressive state apparatus

and the ideological state apparatus, both of which explicitly subject individuals to ideology. The *repressive state apparatus* is found in the public domain, such as in the Government and the prison system, where the ruling class controls the working class through coercion (Althusser 1971:144). In contrast, the *ideological state apparatus* functions in the private domain through specialized institutions such as the Church and education system, where the ruling class indoctrinates the working class through methods of expulsion and punishment (Althusser 1971:144). In Capitalist societies the ideological state apparatus is the predominant tool used to infuse ideology into every aspect of citizens’ lives. This particular tool is deployed through church, school, family, communications, and culture (Althusser 1971:145). The most appealing apparatus within the ideological state apparatus is the education system, because it is portrayed as a neutral environment, where it is believed that teachers respect their pupils’ freedom of conscience (Althusser 1971:156). The neutrality of schools might be true in theory, but in practice teachers are often unaware that they are reproducing dominant ideologies as prescribed through curriculums to their students.

From her field work in Japan, ethnologist Anne Alison (1991) affirmed that the school system may have been accepted by citizens as an educational apparatus, but also served another covert purpose of meeting an unstated objective. This double function of ideological state apparatuses allows people to be unknowingly immersed in ideology, yet believing the world view they hold is one they created themselves (Alison 1991:196). Through Barthes’ *second order myth*, the

third tool of ideology, Alison (1991:197) asserts that this double function can be understood as a first order language (education system) which is emptied of its meaning and replaced with a new, additional second order of meaning (vessel for ideology), while the initial meaning remains to mask the second meaning. In this sense the first order language, ideological state apparatuses, stands as an alibi for the ideological purpose it serves. This directly pertains to the second misconception of ideology, where individuals believe they are completely free and self-determining agents whose ideology is unaffected and uninfluenced by external sources.

Another instance where ideology was masked by an ideological state apparatus is detailed in Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (1992) field work in the Brazilian slums. While working as a Peace Corps volunteer in the slums, Scheper-Hughes noticed that mothers did not weep or mourn the death of their young children, which she mistook as lack of maternal instinct. Scheper-Hughes later learned that this phenomenon was rather the result of an ideology that explained infants' suffering as an incurable ailment rather than a product of insufficient nourishment. Whenever mothers sought help from health institutions, doctors merely tranquilized the infants claiming they were just upset, thereby masking their malnourished suffering. Orphanages turned away infants from the slums, asserting the child would not live even if they were given care. What they really meant was the orphanage would be overwhelmed if it accepted all the malnourished infants. Even the Church refused to baptize infants until they reached a certain age, because it was

assumed they likely would not survive until then (Scheper-Hughes 1992). These ideological state apparatuses appeared as places of sanctuary for children and other citizens, as was their first order language, but the masked meaning behind these institutions was the ideology that poverty is inescapable.

The History External to Ideology

As ideology is only an embodied mental construct, it is understood that ideology has no history in itself and its history can only exist externally, through individuals (Althusser 1971:160). In this section I will explore the state apparatuses' historical transition from traditional to post-traditional societies in Western civilization. Traditional societies are marked by predetermined identities and roles for citizens as prescribed by their traditions, whereas post-traditional societies allow citizens more involvement in forming their identities and roles (Gauntlett 2008:102). Traditional societies rely heavily on the church apparatus for priests to indoctrinate individuals with sermons describing what is proper, what is good and what is real.

The key to what makes these discourses particularly more binding than post-traditional societies is that these discourses refer to what is supposedly inherent in these individuals, so ideology is seen not only as a way of viewing the world, but also as a part of the individual, and therefore inseparable. As Western civilization shifted towards post-traditionalism there was a parallel transition from the church apparatus as the dominant ideological vessel to the education apparatus. The education apparatus, like the post-traditional society,

is more flexible, granting individuals more agency in their decisions and its initial meaning of neutrality allows individuals more freedom in determining their own perceptions of the world. From the previous section it was discovered that this neutrality found in the education system was a ploy for the dominant class to manipulate individuals' perceptions, thereby allowing individuals to think of them as self-generated and gaining consensus without direct intervention. Indirect intervention, or *responsibilization*, is one of Foucault's technologies of self and a characteristic unique to neoliberalism which has developed in the last decade in the West (Lemke 2002:53). Foucault attributes this transition of navigating away from traditional societies towards responsibilization, to confessionals of the Church, which embodied new ideas and knowledge through self-generated discourse (Gauntlett 2008:137). Individualized discourse, as discussed in the second section, was the turning point in ideology. No longer preached through priests and sermons, ideology was now generated by the individual, leading to an individualized society (Gauntlett 2008:136). Despite being individualized, capitalist societies uphold a common ideology by exposing citizens to similar experiences and subjecting them to the same discourses, such as through the media.

As stated in the first section, these transitions of ideology through history are the result of preexisting ideologies passed from one consecutive generation to the next. With every generation there is a new adaptation to the inherited ideology according to ideological and non-ideological factors. For instance, ideology held in the nineteenth century in Canada

and the United States commonly accepted that the only social power available to women was maternity (Lorde 1984:111). With feminist movements gaining momentum through the twentieth century, each new generation of individuals was exposed to new social conditions, which led to each new adaptation to the social conditions and generated a new variant of the previous ideology. From one generation to the next this might not seem significant, but after several generations the impact is quite substantial, as seen in today's ideology concerning women, which portrays them as free and equal human beings with the same rights and responsibilities as men.

Up until this point it has been understood that ideology is not static, but always changing and adapting to new circumstances that arise. However, there is one exception in which ideology remains relatively the same over time, but it requires the ideal circumstance where the "parent" generation's ideology is uninterrupted by social, geographical, economic, non-ideological changes, when passed on to the younger generation (Althusser 1980:41). For a society's ideologies to remain this stable they would need to be isolated from external factors. However, with increasing globalization, particularly in Western civilization, this is not feasibly possible.

Conclusion

From my research I have disproved the following two claims: first, ideology is an absolute entity external to the human experience and second, that individuals are capable of disconnecting themselves from their surrounding ideologies to create their

own. This was supported by a description of the dynamic process in which ideology is embodied and how it adapts to new circumstances. Primarily for the interests of the hegemonic state, ideology is utilized in interrupting discourse and deployed through state apparatuses and second order myths.

Knowledge is power. From these insights I hope to liberate and empower those who are enslaved by false beliefs of being wholly determined or free. The power of ideology is not exclusive to “the master,” as some may believe, but rather, the power to influence ideology resides within us, because the hegemonic system is only as powerful as its alliances allow.

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