

Ideology in Critical Theory

Ideology is the central concept in critical theory. It describes the system of beliefs, values and practices that reflects and reproduces existing social structures, systems and relations. Ideology maintains the power of a dominant group or class by portraying as universally true beliefs that serve the interests mainly of this dominant group. This is one of the most frequently quoted elements of Marx and Engel's analysis in *The German Ideology* (1970). The universalizing of sectional beliefs happens through acts of commission (as when schools and churches teach as the values of all society those that serve the interests of a privileged minority) and acts of omission (as when alternative beliefs are suppressed so people have no chance to consider them). As Eagleton (1991) writes, a critical theory perspective on ideology "draws attention to the ways in which specific ideas help to legitimize unjust and unnecessary forms of political domination" (p. 167).

Put colloquially, ideology is present when we shrug our shoulders in the face of misfortune and say "that's life". When I was growing up in England a popular phrase was "mustn't grumble". This was sometimes said in response to all manner of inconveniences, setbacks and difficulties. "Mustn't grumble" was the universal salve to ease the pain of illness, unemployment, rising prices, falling wages, food shortages, power cuts, IRA bombings, unemployment, lack of access to decent health care, strikes, and the overall realization that life wasn't going to get any better. When people really believe that they "mustn't grumble" then the system is safe. Grumbling, on the other hand, challenges the system. If enough people grumble they might start to hear each other making the low rumbling sound of protest and decide to seek each other out to do something about a situation. If "mustn't grumble" is ideology in action then "must grumble" is the start of ideology critique.

The Evil Twins of Ideology: Capitalism and Bureaucratic Rationality

To illustrate what might be called the 'classic' tradition of ideology critique in critical theory I want to examine the ideas of three thinkers – Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Louis Althusser. Horkheimer and Adorno worked as researchers in the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and are usually cited as key figures in histories of the Frankfurt School (Jay, 1973; Held 1980). Louis Althusser was a French Marxist who was influenced by Gramsci and who in turn influenced Foucault. In the following paragraphs I review the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, especially the two well known books in which their ideas are most accessibly stated; *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972) and *Eclipse of Reason* (Horkheimer, 1974). Both texts examine the ways in which thought and reasoning have become instrumentalized - disconnected from pondering universal questions such as how we should live and treat each other. When reason is instrumentalized it is made subservient to practical utilitarian ends. Diverting reason from the study of universal questions, and attaching it to the resolution of short term practical problems, serves to maintain capitalism and bolster bureaucratic rationality.

In the preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno write that we live in a world in which “thought becomes a commodity and language the means of promoting that commodity” (p. xii). Thought as a commodity concerns itself with solving problems defined as important by the ruling group such as how to become more competitive and efficient in the global marketplace. The co-option of thought by the dominant order means that “there is no longer any available form of linguistic expression which has not tended toward accommodation to dominant currents of thought; and what a devalued language does not do automatically is proficiently executed by societal mechanisms” (xii). Thought is therefore viewed as being determined by the two central props of dominant ideology – capitalism and bureaucratic rationality.

The ideology of capitalism is analyzed extensively in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Following Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that under capitalism the value of work has been commodified. In other words, labor is seen as being worth what people will pay for it so that well remunerated labor is deemed inherently more valuable. In a commodified world people develop their identity, and calculate their sense of self-worth, in purely economic terms. They write (in masculinist terms common in the 1940’s, itself an example of ideology!) that “the economic mask coincides completely with a man’s inner character” so that people “judge themselves by their own market value and learn what they are from what happens to them in the capitalist economy” (p. 211). Moreover, people have become so seduced by the commodities produced by capitalism that their lives are geared to the pursuit of these. Commodities (or consumer goods) thus become “an ideological curtain behind which the real evil is concentrated” (xv) as people are enslaved by the myth of economic success. Consequently, “life in the late capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belaboring him Everyone can be happy if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness” (153).

The ideology of bureaucratic rationality is explored in *Eclipse of Reason*. This form of thought is seen in the belief that life can be ordered and organized into mutually exclusive, yet interlocking, categories. Horkheimer argues that adults’ capacity to reason (surely a central concern of anyone interested in adult learning) has been dominated by the shift to what he calls formalized or subjective reason. This is an instrumental kind of reason, one “essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory” (p. 3). Formalized or subjective reasoning displays a dominance of means-end thinking. Reason is applied to solve problems of how to attain certain short-term social and economic objectives. In the scramble to achieve short-term ends the application of reason to abstract universals such as justice, equality and tolerance becomes increasingly impossible. When the habit of linking reason to the consideration of universal questions is lost, then reason “lends itself to ideological manipulation and to propagation of even the most blatant lies” (p. 23). When thinking becomes a tool to attain certain ends it also becomes fetishized; that is, to have an existence and innate worth that exists separately of the thinker. Words become tools that are stripped of layers of meaning and dislocated from their history of social use. Witness the cases of ‘empowerment’ or ‘transformative’. These two words describe the way oppressed people come together to take control of

their lives and change prevailing power relations. Yet colloquial English has defused them of revolutionary or political connotations so that they are now applied to any situation in which people want to change things to their advantage. Horkheimer lamented that “as soon as a thought or word becomes a tool, one can dispense with actually ‘thinking’ it, that is, with going through the logical acts involved in verbal formulation of it” (p. 23).

This kind of short-term, instrumental reasoning is inherently conformist and clearly an ideological creation. Horkheimer writes that “to be reasonable means not to be obstinate, which in turn points to conformity with reality as it is” (p. 10). Mustn’t grumble, in other words. When thought has become instrumentalized then being ‘reasonable’, and by inference being thoughtful and wise, is the same as agreeing with the ideology of the dominant group. This predisposition for reason to be conformist means that thought is “compelled to justify itself by its usefulness to some established group rather than by its truth” (p. 86). Since the majority is the valorized established group in liberal democracies, people come to think that “the principle of the majority is often not only a substitute for but an improvement upon objective reason” (p. 26). So the majority principle (the assumption that if most people agree with an idea or course of action it is probably right – remember how my decision on school choice was right because all of my friends agreed with me?) becomes regarded as an inherently superior form of reasoning. The majority principle is based on the (to Horkheimer) patently false premise that “men are after all the best judge of their own interests” (p. 26). If people accept this premise then it is but a short step to the majority principle becoming “a power of resistance to anything that does not conform” (p. 30).

It is easy to see the relevance of Horkheimer’s analysis of reason for the kind of adult learning that occurs within formally organized adult and continuing education. The majority principle – the idea that people are the best judge of their own interests and therefore will probably request more of what they are already familiar with – plays itself out under the guise of a benevolent needs assessment by continuing education program developers. The mantra taught in graduate courses in adult education is that we plan adult and continuing education programs around learners’ needs, and that the first step of good program planning is therefore to do an assessment of what those needs are. Accepting adults’ definition of their own needs (their ‘felt’ needs as they are sometimes called) is clearly premised on the idea that people are always the best judge of their own interests. In practice, learners often express a desire for programs that are familiar and recognizable, and decide what to learn by reviewing what others in their peer group are learning. Such an approach to program development certainly expresses ‘a power of resistance to anything that does not conform.’

The problem for Horkheimer with the principle of a democratic majority representing people’s interests is that these interests “are functions of blind or all too conscious economic forces” (p. 28). Capitalism invades our psyche as “instinctual life in all its branches is increasingly adapted to the pursuit of commercial culture” (p. 112). This invasion extends even to those groups – labor unions – that might be expected to oppose it. Horkheimer viewed labor unions not as representatives of an anti-capitalist movement

that was trying to establish an alternative way of thinking about, and doing, work, but as ideological agents of capitalism. Labor leaders adopted a business ideology, worked to integrate workers into the social order, and commodified labor by viewing it as something to be managed, manipulated, advertised and sold for the highest price. The union's job was to get the best possible deal for workers that the rules of the capitalist game allowed, rather than destroying the game and creating an entirely new kind of society. Without champions to challenge capitalism on their behalf, workers' minds were therefore "closed to dreams of a basically different world" (p. 150). The spread of instrumental, bureaucratic reason meant that workers "have learned to take social injustice – even inequity within their own group – as a powerful fact, and to take powerful facts as the only things to be respected" (p. 150).

Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses

Building on *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1970) and influenced by Gramsci's notion of hegemony, the French philosopher Louis Althusser deepened the understanding of ideology in his influential essay on "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971). For Althusser ideology was a systematic form of thought control that ensured that people at all levels of the economic and social system accepted the system's basic reasonableness. Ideology intentionally obscured the fact that the system was based on certain values that furthered some interests over others. If ever the possibility of alternative values was seriously countenanced, then the system could be challenged. But if the system was accepted as a natural phenomenon needing no explanation or justification (because its essential rightness was so obvious) then the possibility of resistance evaporated.

Althusser believed that people lived naturally and spontaneously in ideology without realizing that fact. He wrote "those who are ideological believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denigration of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'." (p. 175). In Althusser's view we can claim in all sincerity to be neutral, objective and free of ideological distortion when this is really an impossibility. This conviction of their own non-ideological nature extends even to those who "manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words' all the agents of production, exploitation and repression, not to speak of the 'professionals of ideology' (Marx) must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously'" (p. 133). To Althusser it was obvious that ideological managers would sincerely and strenuously deny the ideological character of their work.

How can people be so steeped in ideology without being aware of that fact? Althusser argued that this was made possible because "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" (p. 166) and because "the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions" (p. 168). These actions are then "inserted into practices governed by rituals of dominant ideology" (p. 182). In other words ideology lives and breathes in our

daily decisions, routine behaviors and small scale interactions. This takes into the world of Goffman and the framing of everyday rituals and also to Foucault's emphasis on the inscription of disciplinary power in the practices of daily life. Intimate gestures, routinized professional conduct, conversational conventions, all reflect a wider ordering of power relations which is unconsciously confirmed in these practices. As Giddens (1991) argued twenty years after Althusser's essay, "the most subtle forms of ideology are buried in the modes in which concrete, day to day practices are organized" (p. 23). Ideology thus becomes less a clearly identifiable system of ideas and more a participation in actions, social games and rituals which are themselves ideologically determined. People participate in these practices through what Althusser called ideological state apparatuses.

Althusser posited two types of socialization agencies that ensured the predominance of the ruling ideology: repressive state apparatuses (such as the legal system, police, and armed forces) and ideological state apparatuses (such as the church, mass media, community associations) of which education is the most important. Ideological state apparatuses (his shorthand term for them was ISA's) exist mostly within civil society and ensure that the state reaches into and controls that part of life. His thesis was that "no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the state ideological apparatuses" (p. 146). Education as an ideological state apparatus works to ensure the perpetuation of dominant ideology not so much by teaching values that support that ideology, but more by immersing students in ideologically determined practices. These practices (such as chopping up the curriculum into discrete chunks to be absorbed, measuring students' learning and the quality of teaching by percentage improvement scores on standardized tests, and moving people in streams and age based grades through a system at a pace and in a manner over which they have no control) are perceived as universal, rational and obvious, but actually support certain segmented ways of understanding and ordering the world.

By participating in the kinds of practices mentioned above, pupils learn 'know how' "in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'" (p. 133). Educational institutions become analogs of capitalism in which "the relations of production in a capitalist social formation, i.e. the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited, are largely reproduced" (p. 156). The rules of good behavior, of morality, and of civic and professional conscience learned in school by students "actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labor and ultimately the rules of order established by class domination" (p. 132). Of course, ideology requires that this learning appear neutral so that education is falsely perceived as purged of, or sidestepping, ideology. Teachers believe that they are imparting values of self-determination to students who are making a free choice to accept or reject these. Neither group can see the ideological web in which it is caught.

Although Althusser's work on ideological state apparatuses (ISA's) was directed primarily at schools (as he pointed out the power to compel attendance is a powerful weapon, not always present in adult education) it is possible to view adult educational programs and practices as ISA's, and adult educators as professional ideologists. For

example, while writing the first draft of this chapter I was simultaneously teaching a graduate course on adult learning and adult educational theory. At least half of the course was devoted to an exploration of critical theory and radical adult education. The course was a pass/fail course and used discussion in large and small groups as the chief teaching method. Students were asked to spend approximately one third of class time reading and critiquing each others' work in pairs or triads, and all written work was viewed as first draft work, constantly in process. On the surface, then, a dialogically taught course focusing in large part on ideology critique and hegemony, with Gramsci, Welton, Freire and Horton on its reading list, seems an unlikely venue for the repressive functions of ISA's to play themselves out. Yet, one could argue that in important ways this is precisely what happened.

After all, the course commodified education in that the production of course 'goods' – students' essays – was the focus of a great deal of effort. These goods (students' essays) were then subjected to the educational exchange economy. Students exchanged them with me for a grade I awarded, with their exchange value (the pass, fail or incomplete grade they earned as course wages) arguably overshadowing their use value (the way these essays helped their authors understand their practice better, the theoretical illumination they provided for students, and so on). Students' learning was organized according to a top-down, input-output model of production. The top down input was the reading for the course, my presentations in class, and my comments on students' papers. The output was whatever learning was judged by me to have occurred as recognized by the grade and evinced in students' essays and participant learning portfolios.

Learning was also organized according to a bureaucratic rationality with a clearly designated time (1.00.pm.-4.00.pm. every fourth Saturday) and place (room 212). At times I myself functioned as a professional ideologist; after all, I chose the authors, concepts, theories and readings that served as the official ideology of adult education. I also worked as an agent of domination controlling the course of the classroom conversations and patterns of student participation through nods, smiles, frowns, and direct speech, as well as having the final say on when to switch activities, call a break or call it quits for the day. Also, the course took place in a private college which worked to exclude interested parties by their inability to pay its high level of tuition or by their previous inability to produce the correct cultural capital (master's degrees) with a certain pre-designated exchange value (a GPA of at least 3.00). Clearly, then, subscribing to the surface forms of democratic adult education does not automatically stop particular practices functioning in the manner of ISA's.

Resisting Ideology

Ignoring the possibility that many teachers might not be ideological dupes working uncritically within the educational ideological state apparatus is one of the major shortcomings of Althusser's (1971) essay. Although he does acknowledge the possibility of some 'heroic' teachers working "against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped" (p. 157) he believes that such individuals are 'rare' (his word). To him the majority of teachers are unaware of how their work could serve to nourish and

maintain the ideological function of education. This seems heavily overstated and condescending, not to say empirically wrong. Thousands of committed teachers work within the education system trying to stretch things a little here, challenge conventional wisdom and practice a little there. The vast majority of teachers I know are certainly aware of the ideological dimensions of education, and of these a good many seek to skirt, question or subvert this. At some adult educational conferences one would be laughed out of court for trying to deny the ideological function of adult education.

Reading something like Althusser's essay it is impossible to escape the seductively cosy sense of being offered the chance to become one of the elite few who can see through the ideological fog that has descended on the masses. It is as if critical theory is offered as a set of windshield wipers to sweep away the foggy condensation of false consciousness, myth and distortion. There is sometimes a troubling touch of triumphalist arrogance about all this. It feels like critical theory is portrayed as an exclusive club comprising members who have penetrated an ideologically obscured reality inaccessible to ordinary people. Eagleton (1991) challenges this view of the masses as hoodwinked or duped into accepting patently false ideas. He repeatedly points out that for ideology to work successfully it must possess what its subjects recognize as a core of truth. In his view "deeply persistent beliefs have to be supported to some extent, however meagerly, by the world our practical activity discloses to us" (p. 12). One thinks of Ronald Reagan's 'morning in America' when reading Eagleton's observation that ruling ideologies "must engage significantly with the wants and desires that people already have, catching up genuine hopes and needs, reinflecting them in their own peculiar idiom and feeding them back to their subjects in ways which render these ideologies plausible and attractive" (p. 15). Successful ideologies "must communicate to their subjects a version of social reality which is real and recognizable enough not to be simply rejected out of hand" (p. 15).

Despite their pessimism (understandable after being forced to flee Nazi Germany) Horkheimer and Adorno did admit of the possibility of resistance to ideology. Their reason for writing *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was "to prepare the way for a positive notion of enlightenment which will release it from entanglement in blind domination" (xvi), given that "social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought" (xiii). In *Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer saw a hope for people to reclaim reason as a force for democratic social change if they were able "to interpret accurately the profound changes now taking place in the public mind and in human nature" (vi). He optimistically observed that "there is increasing awareness that the unbearable pressure upon the individual is not inevitable" (p. 160) citing in support of his contention the fact that "the intensification of repression in many parts of the world" (p. 160) testified to the fear those in power felt regarding the imminent possibility of change. Althusser, too, noted that ISA's never functioned completely smoothly as agencies of domination "because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there" (1971, p. 147). As he succinctly put it, "whoever says class struggle of the ruling class says resistance, revolt and class struggle of the ruled class" (p. 184). Even successfully communicated ideologies often contain contradictory elements – freedom, liberty, individuality - that challenge bureaucratic rationality.

So the tale of ideology is not just one of secret cabals of capitalist mind manipulators skillfully selling to gullible masses conspicuously false and distorted ideas which serve to secure the power elite's continuing supremacy. Instead ideology is a dynamic phenomenon. Writers such as Eagleton (1991), Williams (1977), and Zinn (1990) discuss ideology in terms of its being contested, fluctuating, negotiated, recreated and continually redefined. Eagleton (1990) for instance, sees ideology as a "complex, conflictive field of meaning" containing themes that are "'free floating', tugged now this way and now that in the struggle between contending powers" (p. 101). He views the Frankfurt school conception of ideology as too closed arguing that western capitalist societies mix and match pluralistic and sometimes contradictory ideological elements. For example liberal humanism's emphasis on freedom and autonomy makes room for "variousness, plurality, cultural relativity, concrete particularity" (p. 128). In everyday idioms such as 'it takes all sorts', 'take people as you find them', 'we're all entitled to our point of view' he finds a celebration of difference and a rejection of monolithic orthodoxy that provides a fissure in the dyke of mainstream ideology. Also, as Willis (1999) points out, the meanings invested in cultural processes (such as advertising) and cultural commodities (such as T.V. programs) by their producers cannot be rigidly controlled or circumscribed. People create their own alternative readings that sometimes turn the intended meaning on its end.

It is surely also the case that institutions and groups deliberately and openly oppose dominant ideology in western capitalism and live to tell the tale. Religious figures earn the opprobrium of political leaders for daring to find a social and political relevance in Christ's teachings. TV companies broadcast programs, and publishers put out books, that criticize the government or cast doubt on contemporary morality despite the efforts of lawyers and fundamentalist pressure groups to put them out of business. Subversion sometimes sells. And sometimes we gain a glimpse of alternative worlds in the most unlikely arenas. I well remember a *Donahue* show in which members of the American Communist party featured in the documentary *Seeing Red* were electronically parachuted into America's living rooms to talk in a direct and unedited way about the commitments and passions that had driven to join the party in the 1930's and 1940's. Additionally, schools, colleges and universities continue to develop programs and hire teachers who encourage students to propose alternative curricula, question prevailing values, puncture authority, organize social action, and think deeply about what the word 'democracy' really means.

So the jury is still out on the extent to which ideology operates as a seamless totalitarian pacifier. On the one hand stands Marcuse (1965) arguing that repressive tolerance allows the expression of just enough dissent to give people the comfortable but misleading impression that they live in an open society. According to this argument an expression of difference perversely ends up confirming the superiority of the norm. As an example of this Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) point out in their essay on the culture industry that "whenever Orson Welles offends against the tricks of the trade he is forgiven because his departures from the norm are regarded as calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system" (p. 129). In the introduction to his

analysis of American ideology Zinn (1990) also presses the case for repressive tolerance in unequivocal terms. He argues that while the expression of some dissident ideas is allowed this dissidence is “drowned in criticism and made disreputable allowed to survive in the corners of the culture – emaciated but alive – and presented as evidence of our democracy, our tolerance, and our pluralism” (p. 4).

On the other hand Zinn himself acknowledges that “we live in a country that, although controlled by wealth and power, has openings and possibilities missing in many other places” and he notes that “there is a long history in this country of rebellion against the establishment, of resistance to orthodoxy” (p. 7). His enormously popular *A People’s History of the United States* (1999), now in its twentieth anniversary edition and an historical best seller, chronicles this rebellion and resistance in convincing detail. Even as Barnes and Noble snuffs out the independently owned small bookstore, traditionally the crucible of alternative presses publishing dissident ideas, it contradictorily sells multiple copies of Zinn’s works. In a Barnes and Noble store I recently visited there were multiple works on the shelves by Marx, Engels and Lenin (and not all in the ‘Used Books’ section!). As I walked in another Barnes and Noble store I was struck by a prominently displayed collection of copies of *The Cornel West Reader* (1999) containing his three essays on ‘Progressive Marxist Theory’. Subversion sometimes sells.

When we turn to the internet we undoubtedly find monopoly capitalism linking the use of this technology to its own ends. Irrespective of which search engine they choose people are exposed to multiple corporate advertisements as soon as they log on. But we also find the internet being used to coordinate mass protests such as the ‘Day Against Capitalism’ demonstration in London and the disruption of the World Trade Organization talks in Seattle and Washington D.C. If we take the case of critical theory as a counter-hegemonic discourse it is hard to deny the truth of Loewen’s (1995) statement that “the upper class has hardly kept critical theory out of education. On the contrary, critical theorists dominate scholarship in the field. Their books get prominently published and well reviewed; education professors assign them to thousands of students every year” (p. 276). As he observes, if we accept the truth of the ideological domination thesis then “the upper class seems to be falling down on the job” (p. 276).

So we are not faced with an unscaleable north face of the ideological Eiger. As Foley puts it, the tale of how ideology helps reproduce a social order is one “of gains and losses, of progress and retreat, and of a growing recognition of the *continually contested, complex, ambiguous and contradictory* nature of the struggle between domination and liberation” (1994, p. 129). A critical theory approach towards understanding adult learning is premised on the possibility of ideology critique and the existence of those contradictions, chinks, fissures and crevices mentioned earlier. It is to the discovery and deepening of those chinks as a form of adult learning and educational practice that we now turn.