

Ideology, Illusion, and Material Injustice

1. Introduction

The concept of *ideology* is highly contested and there is no consensus on how, or even whether, it should be used in critical theory. Is there any point in holding onto the notion? If we really care about justice and changing the world, how does it help?

I think the concept of ideology is indispensable. To situate my arguments, I am a materialist feminist and take materialist feminism to be a form of critical theory. So I do not enter debates about social justice from a neutral point of view of an abstract rational agent. I begin with a commitment to certain normative beliefs: sexism is wrong, racism is wrong, our current social institutions are unjust in many ways. I am committed to corresponding normative projects: movements to end oppression. That's the feminist part. The materialist part is more difficult to capture, but as a first attempt (I'll say more later), the idea is that the social world is a material world, and social injustice is, in part, a matter of material deprivations and material harms. (Young 1990). These harms are not just symbolic, though they are meaningful. The starting points for materialist feminism are these material injustices.

However, if ideology is relevant to material injustice, we need a clear idea about how it is related to the materiality of social life. On my view, the core notion is that of a social practice: social practices rely on tutored thought to organize us in relation to the material world, and do so in ways create and sustain structures of domination and subordination. I consider this a "practice first" approach to ideology.

2. The Critique of Ideology (not "Ideology Critique"!)

Let us begin with a rough conception of ideology. Stuart Hall suggests that ideology

...has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation. It has also to do with the processes by which new forms of consciousness, new conceptions of the world, arise, which move the masses of the people into historical action against the prevailing system. These questions are at stake in a range of social struggles. (Hall 1996/2006, 24-25)

The challenge of a theory of ideology is, first, to understand how we, collectively, enact social structures. This is a question about how members of society develop kinds of practical orientations or outlooks that enable them to coordinate their behavior. The more specific, and more pressing question is how, without being coerced, we come to enact *oppressive* social structures. Surely, most of us are not knowingly and intentionally dominating others or allowing ourselves to be dominated.

Yet this happens nonetheless.¹ A rather straightforward example is the division of labor in the household, i.e., women's "second shift" (Hochschild 2003).

There are several sets of questions we might be asking when we undertake a theory of ideology. (i) How do we come to have shared outlooks or "practical consciousness" – what is the causal mechanism by which we coordinate our attitudes. (ii) How do our shared attitudes come to have a particular content: why do the wealthy tend to share a political orientation, etc.? (iii) Why do we consistently act in ways that frustrate our own self-interest? Why do we act in ways that result in injustices we abhor? And not just a few of us, and now and then, but pretty much all of us all the time? What is going wrong? Two sorts of answers to these questions are often found in Marx: economic determinism, and what I will call "ideology as illusion."

a. Economic Determinism

Economic determinism is the view that all social phenomena can be causally explained (ultimately) in terms of economic forces. This is sometimes taken to be the core commitment of a materialist theory. Passages in Marx such as this are suggestive:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx 1859/1977)

This sounds like bad social psychology. It is also generally agreed that taken at face value, this is not a fair representation of Marx's view; the idea that relations of production *condition* (but don't determine) consciousness is the more plausible interpretation. Contemporary materialists adjusted their commitment, e.g.,

I understand a materialist account as one that considers phenomena of "consciousness" - e.g., intellectual production, broad social attitudes and beliefs, cultural myths, symbols, images, etc. - as rooted in real social relationships. This should not imply "reducing" such phenomena of consciousness to social structures and social relationships, nor does it even mean that the phenomena of consciousness cannot be treated as having a logic of their own. Nor should it mean that phenomena like attitudes and cultural definitions cannot enter as elements into the explanation of a particular structure of social relationships, though I would claim that they can never be the sole explanation. This

¹ We can use the term 'ideology' for forms of practical thought that support social formations generally, or we can use 'ideology' only for those that support structures of subordination and domination. In these lectures I will use the term in the latter, pejorative, sense, for our primary concern is how we all become unwitting agents of injustice.

requirement mainly calls for a methodological priority to concrete social institutions and practices along with the material conditions in which they take place. (Young 1980/1990, 33)

Economic/material relations *and* culture are relevant to injustice. How do we locate ideology within a (neo)-materialist model?

b. Ideology as Illusion

An alternative Marxian strategy has been to focus on the epistemic failures of ideology: those in the grip of an ideology have *false* or *distorted* ideas. Ideological thought is often contrasted with scientific thought. But even if science is not our paradigm of knowledge, the alleged source of the problem is a failure in our representations of the world: we act in self-defeating/unjust ways because (somehow or other) our social milieu leads us to adopt false beliefs that lead us astray from our true interests. This approach has faced several related criticisms:

- *Problem of Accuracy*: Because ideology functions to create social reality, it sometimes “makes itself true.” As MacKinnon says, “...the more inequality is pervasive, the more it is simply “there.” And the more real it looks, the more it looks like the truth.” (MacKinnon 1989, 101) So “successful” ideology isn’t always false. (This is, in fact, how we often end up forming the “ideological” beliefs in question – we look around us. Though this must be qualified, of course. See Haslanger 2012, Ch. 17)
- *Problem of Epistemic Respect*: If ideology is a matter of false or distorted beliefs, then we live our lives under a pervasive and systematic illusion. We are self-destructively deluded about the choices we make and the reasons for them. But this is not only implausible, it doesn’t show respect for our basic epistemic capacities. Again, Hall puts it well:

‘Distortions’ opens immediately the question as to why some people—those living their relation to their conditions of existence through the categories of a distorted ideology—cannot recognize that it is distorted, while we, with our superior wisdom, or armed with properly formed concepts, can. Are the ‘distortions’ simply falsehoods? Are they deliberately sponsored falsifications? If so, by whom? ...[The alleged epistemic failures] make both the masses and the capitalists look like judgemental dopes. They also entail a peculiar view of the formation of alternative forms of consciousness. Presumably, they arise as scales fall from people’s eyes or as they wake up, as if from a dream, and, all at once, see the light, glance directly through the transparency of things immediately to their essential truth, their concealed structural processes. (Hall 1996/2006, 29-30)

Hall’s last point introduces a third problem with “ideology as illusion”:

- *Problem of Emancipation*: If the power of ideology lies in its falsehood, then what’s needed to make the world more just is access to the truth. The truth shall set us free. But given the problem of accuracy, this is highly dubious.

To avoid these problems, we need an alternative account of what ideology is and how it works.

3. The Problem of Materiality

One diagnosis of the problems posed in the previous section targets the idea of *representation*. Ideology doesn’t misrepresent the world because it doesn’t represent the world at all. This strategy is connected with a broader linguistic-cultural-postmodern “turn” that rejects many of the traditional philosophical “dualisms,” e.g., truth/falsehood, subject/object, mind/body, individual/society. We might as well, according to this strategy, just set aside the concept of ideology as outmoded.

I reject this broad approach, but even if we accept it, our original problem remains. How do we explain our ongoing and yet unintended participation in structures of domination and subordination? We aren’t all stupid or self-deluded. A simple suggestion would be that we enact social structures simply out of habit formed through a process of socialization. We don’t “represent” what we are doing at all. In fact, it is even a stretch to describe our participation as action rather than behavior.

Socialization is crucial and avoids some of the problems of representation, but we should not replace economic determinism with cultural determinism. Moreover, not all of our participation in social structures is habitual. We choose to act in ways that perpetuate the structures. Consider instead Althusser’s (1970) conception of social structures and practices as *hailing* or *interpellating* subjects: ideology is not descriptive (so not true/false), but prescriptive. Our actions are responsive to culture.

Judith Butler’s notion of performativity helps here. On Butler’s view, we enact social roles or identities, not in a deterministic or unthinking way, but by *constrained choice*.

...gender is a project, a skill, a pursuit, an enterprise, even an industry, the aim of which is to compel the body to signify one historical idea rather than another. Instead of claiming that one is a man or is a woman, it is necessary to substitute a vocabulary of action and effort for the reified vocabulary of self-identical nouns. Hence, one does one's womanhood, one executes it, institutes, produces and reproduces it, wears it, flaunts it, hides it, but always stylizes it in one way or another. For gender is a corporeal style, a way of acting the body, a way of wearing one's own flesh as a cultural sign. (Butler 1989, 256)

One does not become a gender through a free and unconstrained act of choice, for gender identity is governed by a set of stringent taboos, conventions, and laws. There are punishments for not doing gender right. (Butler 1989, 256)

And yet, on Butler's view, the agency that is constitutive of gender is also a source of transformative potential:

Gender is a mundane drama specifically corporeal, constrained by possibilities specifically cultural. But this constraint is not without some moments of contingency, of possibility, of unprecedented cultural confusion that will invariably work to destroy the illusion that gender constraint is a dictate from nature. (Butler 1989, 261)

Ian Hacking provides one way to understand the "grip" of culture on agency. Intentional action plausibly involves an ability to represent what one is doing and to situate it at least within a frame of intelligibility, and often also within a space of reasons. The intentional act (or intentional dimension of the act) is linked to one's cognitive repertoire. Navigation of social life not only depends on an understanding of social norms but cognitive resources for apt intentions. A critique of the available concepts and recognition that they are artificially limited opens space for new forms of action and new identities.

So where do we stand? How is performativity related to the questions of ideology that we are trying to address?

- We started with the question how ideology – understood roughly as “concepts and languages of practical thought” – stabilizes structures of domination.
- We considered the suggestion that ideology consists of a false representation of the world, e.g., a set of false beliefs, and found it inadequate. We also considered the idea that we are simply culturally determined to think and behave in certain ways. But this seemed overly deterministic.
- Butler and Hacking have offered a way to locate how agency is constrained by “concepts and languages of practical thought” that have social origins. So we have made progress.
- But how do we link this ideological constraint with structures of power and domination? As Butler notes, it would be misguided to think culture, in itself, is subordinating. First, there is no agency at all without the conceptual resources that society, through our language, provides. Second, such resources are not only constraining, they are enabling. (Butler 1990, 148-49)

I consider this the problem of materiality for Butler (and the broader tradition she represents).² Subordination may involve culturally interpolated subjectivity and constrained agency, but that cannot be the beginning or the end of the story. Agency occurs in the economy of social relations. On a performative/prescriptivist view, the

² There are two different criticisms of Butler here. First, the problem of materiality; second, the problem of normativity. A materialist feminism links the two. Later, Butler (1997) takes steps to address the issue of materiality, but the problem of normativity remains.

economic and material sources and consequences of agency are occluded; this limits our explanatory and normative resources for critique.

Recall that the moderate materialist gives “a methodological priority to concrete social institutions and practices along with the material conditions in which they take place” because this is the primary site of injustice. Can we retain some of the insights from Butler and Hacking and incorporate them into a materialist account of injustice?

4. Social Practices

Socialization shapes our “practical consciousness,” or practical orientation, so we are better able to coordinate and communicate. E.g., ostension requires being able to narrow the range of possible referents. Coordination requires that we attend and respond appropriately to the right signals, filtering out the noise, and do our part in the plan (in the best case, fluently). (Zawidzki 2013)

Jack Balkin (1998) uses the term “cultural software” for these “tools culture provides us.” Hardware and firmware alone aren't enough. Culture provides an operating system and task-specific programs that are shared amongst members of our social group. The tools are both public, internalized by individuals, and malleable:³

To be sure, beliefs can be tools of understanding and can be used to create new tools. But more important objects of study are cognitive mechanisms that produce beliefs [and other attitudes?]. Examples include the tendency to structure experience in terms of narratives, psychological methods of categorization, varieties of metaphoric and metonymic thinking, strategies for reduction of cognitive dissonance, heuristics and biases employed in making judgments under uncertainty, and understanding by means of networks of conceptual oppositions in the form "A is to B as C is to D. (102)

Note that beliefs and other propositional attitudes may be tools, but they are downstream from the tools Balkin cares most about. By the time we form beliefs, our practical consciousness/orientation has already been shaped by culture: We live and think within a cultural frame.

According to the dominant model in analytic ethics and social ontology, the social world consists of psychologically sophisticated individuals who form intentions and/or commitments (conscious or unconscious) to act. Sometimes they act together, or at least coordinate, under conditions of common knowledge. We design practices for particular purposes and enact them for reasons. When problems arise, we must have made a factual error, or been wrong about our reasons.

³The term “cultural software” is not ideal. William Sewell (1992) uses “cultural schemas,” for the same phenomena, and I have/will too.

I don't want to deny that this is part of what goes on in the social world, but on the account of social cognition we are exploring, in order to engage in the mental activity required for this common picture we must already be encultured. As Balkin says:

People become people only when they enter into culture, which is to say, only when culture enters into them, and becomes them, when they are programmed with and hence constituted by tools of understanding created by a culture at a certain point in history. (1998, 18)

If the very possibility of having attitudes depends on culture, there must be forms of sociality that don't require us to share intentions to take a walk or paint a barn.

When we are socialized and internalize a set of cultural schemas, we are becoming participants in a practice. What, then, is a practice? Practices can be more or less explicit, transparent, rule-governed, intentional. On the less explicit...intentional end, practices are certain regularities or patterns in behavior that are guided by shared schemas acquired through primitive forms of social mentality (including cognition, affect, experience), i.e., thinking and feeling that has been shaped by contact with others who are tacitly taken to have goals and to pursue them.⁴ Infants engage with adults, non-human animals engage with each other, and humans engage with non-human animals in social practices. (Gruen 2015) On the rationalistic end of the spectrum, the patterns in behavior are guided by highly sophisticated forms of social cognition and intentional agency, but this depends on the more basic shaping of interaction. (McGeer 2007)

5. Ideology and Social Structures

This gives us a sketch of how culture, material conditions, and agency relate. Very broadly, there is a loop:

- Culture provides schemas for interpreting and responding to material conditions;
- Agents internalize the schemas as practical orientations in order to coordinate and communicate;
- Practical orientations guide us to act on material conditions and to produce and distribute resources in accordance with the schemas;
- This shapes the world to facilitate our coordination and also to fit the schemas;
- Changes in the material conditions and in agents' responses to (including critique of) culture provide opportunities for social and cultural change.

⁴ Following Zawidzki (2013), I assume that for this it is sufficient to take what he calls an "enhanced teleological stance" (which is a version of Dennett's intentional stance), and does not require "mindreading" but only an ability to read behavior as directed. (Even dogs can tell if they are kicked intentionally or not, without ascribing full-blown beliefs, i.e., propositional attitudes that represent the world through a distinctive mode of presentation, to the kicker.)

So the social world is constituted and stabilized by the looping effects of schemas and resources (Hacking 2004; Sewell 1992) in social practices. This forms homeostatic systems, equilibria, that are then difficult to disrupt (Mallon 2003) and roles become kinds (Bach 2012). These systems of interdependent practices are social structures. However, not all such systems are intentional (Tilly 2002). As I see it, this a form of Young's moderate materialism (see §2). Culture is a response to the material conditions and coordinates us to interpret, produce, and distribute resources; agents, in diverse and sometimes disruptive ways, enact culture. (See also figure on last page.)

How does ideology fit into this picture? Do we have a better model for agency within self-defeating and unjust structures?

- A cultural *technē* of a social structure is the web of cultural schemas that are the constitutive parts of the structure's practices. In the primary case, *an ideology is the cultural technē of an unjust/bad social structure*, allowing for structures of various sorts.
- A social *practice* can be ideological if the practice itself is bad/unjust; its ideological dimension are the schemas that guide the practice. However, often practices can only be evaluated relative to their part in a broader structure. (Swimming pool example.)
- An ideology can be bad in several ways: (a) because it prevents us from valuing things correctly. For example, one problem with certain capitalist ideologies is that they treat all value as exchange value, i.e., value to be assessed by the market (Anderson 1993; Satz 2010). (b) because it produces, distributes, and maintains what is valuable unjustly.
- There are, however, cultural *technēs* that are not ideological, at least in principle, e.g., an egalitarian *technē* (Cohen 1997).

This view focuses on ideology as the cultural contribution to practical consciousness or practical orientation. Although practical consciousness can include propositional attitudes, it also includes psychological mechanisms or processes – cognitive, conative, perceptual, agentic – that sort, shape, and filter what can be the objects of our attitudes.

Explicit ideology is both an expression and rationalization of our practical orientation; often religion is taken to be a paradigm example in Marx (Marx 1843-44). On the whole, explicit ideologies, as rationalizations of our unjust practices, are systematically false, or at least distorting; they attempt to present our practices in ways that obscure or mystify them and their consequences; this makes them apt targets for critique. But explicit rationalizations are not an essential part of what enables or motivates a practice, and that's why a critique of such rationalizations is so often ineffective in promoting social change.

Those unjust practices and institutions guided or formed by an ideology are *ideological formations*, e.g., racism, sexism, etc. are ideological formations. They are constituted by an interconnected web of unjust social *practices* that unjustly disadvantage certain

groups, e.g., residential segregation, police brutality, biased hiring and wage inequity, educational disadvantage, etc. These are not random practices, but are connected by a racist technē.

6. Responses

...to the *Problem of Ideology as Illusion*:

- *Accuracy*: Beliefs framed with inapt concepts may still be true; however, our concepts may be inapt, our way of understanding the world is distorted, incomplete.
- *Respect*: Critique need not attribute false beliefs to those who are engaged in a practice (though sometimes false beliefs play a role). Rather, critique arises out of consciousness raising and offers a different way of understanding the practice, often a fuller story that makes different features salient. “This critical distance does not occur on the basis of some previously discovered rational ideas of the good and the just. On the contrary, the ideas of the good and the just arise from the desiring negation that action brings to what is given.” (Young 1990, 6) Moreover, the problem is cultural, not individual: we ask what our social meanings prioritize and, importantly, what they leave out, distort, or obscure.
- *Emancipation*: Achieving social justice is not just a matter of “seeing the truth,” but trying new conceptual resources and/or confronting existing material realities.

...to the *Problem of Materiality*:

There are three points to note especially in contrast to the Butler/Hacking model:

- i. Material conditions – not just my attitudes and the attitudes of others – are factors in my choice architecture, e.g., what *food* I prepare is constrained by the foodstuffs and tools available. E.g., idli.
- ii. Oppression is not just a matter of having to live within rigid and naturalized cultural frames, e.g., of gender, but also concerns how those frames construct and distribute material goods, privileges, opportunities for well-being.
- iii. Social change can be achieved either by disrupting resources or schemas (or both). E.g., curb cuts, occupying a building.

My account of ideology is materialist because the source and structure of a discursive/conceptual frame depends on the complex network of social relations that organizes our relationship to things of (assumed) value. In the broadest sense, this is the economy: "economic" relations should not be understood simply in terms of the market. The economy is the system that manages a community's resources, and if resources are what has value within that society, then the economy also involves the distribution of power, status, health, leisure, education, etc. These are managed through the interplay of schemas and resources that constitute "social relations."

5. Conclusion

My discussion has been located within a project of critical theory. However, I take it to have broader implications for moral theory.

- Ideology frames our practical consciousness and enables/constrains agency. These constraints are constitutive of social identity. Differently situated agents do not face the same choices and their choices have different meanings. This is relevant to moral evaluation.
- “Good reasons” are situated within social practices, and unless/until we attend to the practices and the structures they form, we will be limited in our ability to evaluate reasons.
- Theorizing itself, particularly moral theorizing, is enabled/constrained by ideology. What questions we ask, what looks plausible/improbable, is conditioned by our practical orientation.

Unless we attend to the social constitution and embeddedness of agency, then under conditions of injustice, moral theory will be in danger of not just missing, but replicating the harm.

Works Cite

- Althusser, Louis. 1970. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>
- Anderson, Elizabeth. 1993. *Value in Ethics and Economics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- _____. 1995. “Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology.” *Philosophical Topics* 23(2): 27-58.
- Bach, Theodore. 2012. “Gender is a Natural Kind with a Historical Essence.” *Ethics* 22(2): 231-272.
- Balkin, J. 1998. *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1989. “Gendering the Body: Beauvoir’s Philosophical Contribution.” In A. Garry and M. Pearsall, eds. *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman), pp. 253–62.
- _____. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. 1990. New York: Routledge.
- _____. 1997. “Merely Cultural.” *Social Text* (Queer Transsexions of Race, Nation, and Gender) 52/5: 265-277
- Cohen, G. A. 1997. “Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26(1): 3–30.
- Gruen, Lori. 2015. *Entangled Empathy*. Herndon, VA: Lantern Books.
- Hochschild, Arlie, with Anne Machung. 2003. *The Second Shift*, 2nd edition. London: Penguin Books.
- Hacking, Ian. 1986. “Making Up People.” In T. Heller, M. Sosna and E. Wellberg, Eds., *Reconstructing Individualism. Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 161-171.
- _____. 2004. *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996/2006. “The Problem of Ideology.” In Chen, Kuan-Hsing, and David Morley, eds. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. (NY: Routledge), pp. 24-45.

- Haslanger, Sally. 2012. "Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground." In *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacKinnon, Catharine. 1989. *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mallon, Ron. 2003. "Social Construction, Social Roles and Stability." In *Socializing Metaphysics*. Ed. F. Schmitt. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. 327–53.
- Marx, Karl. 1843-44. *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>
- _____. 1859/1977. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers). Preface.
- McGeer, Victoria. 2007. "The Regulative Dimension of Folk Psychology." In *Folk Psychology Re-Assessed*, ed., Daniel D. Hutto and Matthew Ratcliffe. Springer.
- Satz, Debra. 2010.
- Sewell, William H. Jr. 1992. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation." *The American Journal of Sociology* 98(1): 1-29.
- Tilly, Charles. 2002. *Stories, Identities and Political Change*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1980/1990. "Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory." *Socialist Review* 10(2/3): 169-88. Reprinted in: *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).
- _____. 1990. "Five Faces of Oppression." In *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 39-65.
- Zawidzki, T. *Mindshaping*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Handout with full references can be found here: <http://sallyhaslanger.weebly.com/>

An earlier version of this talk was given as the first Spinoza Lecture in 2015 at the University of Amsterdam. These lectures will be published as *Critical Theory and Practice*, Koninklijke Van Gorcum, forthcoming.

I owe thanks to many people. I would like to extend special thanks to the following: Lucy Allais, Katya Botchkina, Alice Crary, Robin Celikates, Robert Gooding-Williams, Lyndal Grant, Hilkje Haenel, Jerome Hodges, Rahel Jaeggi, Abby Jaques, Daniel James, Katharine Jenkins, Rae Langton, Rachel McKinney, Mari Mikkola, Beate Roessler, Susanna Siegel, Jack Spencer, Lucas Stanczyk, Jason Stanley, Asta Sveinsdóttir, and Stephen Yablo, all of whom have given me feedback along the way and had a substantial impact on my thinking about the issues.

Practices, Schemas (Cultural, Psychological), and Resources

