**Critical Theory and Practice: Ideology and Materiality**

**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. This uncertainty leads to doubts about the possibility of *ideology critique.* Is there any point in holding onto these notions? If we really care about justice and changing the world, how do they help?

I think the concept of ideology is indispensible. However, there are two lines of criticism I would like to take up in these lectures. To situate my arguments, it is important to know that I am a materialist feminist. This means that I do not enter debates about social justice from a neutral point of view or from the vantage point 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. They include economic injustice and exploitation, but also systematic violence (domestic, sexual, police brutality), marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism (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 (Lecture 1) and the moral/political evaluation of social structures (Lecture 2). On my view, the core notion is that of a social practice: social practices rely on ideology to organize us in relation to the material world, and do so in ways create structures of domination and subordination. How social practices connect ideology to the materiality of our lives is the first question to consider.

**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]](#footnote-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. And how do our shared attitudes come to have a particular content: why are some groups generally theist, or homophobic, or why do the wealthy tend to share a political orientation, etc.? (ii) 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. One might rely on economic determinism to answer our questions about ideology: we are (somehow) caused by the economic structure of our social milieu to have attitudes that result in unjust and self-defeating behavior. 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 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)

So assuming that we are genuine agents acting with some degree of rational self-interest, economic determinism fails and the problem of ideology remains.

*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 “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 usually 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 is 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, it seems that either we should give up the notion of ideology or we need an alternative account of what it 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.

OK, but 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.

Admittedly, socialization avoids some of the problems of representation, but it is not a great improvement over economic determinism. The faint glimmer of hope is that we can overcome bad habits. But not all of our participation in social structures is habitual. We choose to act in ways that perpetuate the structures.

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

If one becomes a woman, according to Beauvoir, then one is always in the process of becoming a gender...In this sense, then, 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 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. One might intentionally eat a slice of leavened bread, and unintentionally violate kosher law. One might not know the laws of kosher for Passover; one might not know it is Passover. 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. However, this is also a site of disruptive potential. 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 power and 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 socialized to think and behave in certain ways. But this seemed overly deterministic. Butler and Hacking have offered a way to locate a kind of agency 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 would like to suggest that this is the problem of materiality for Butler (and the broader tradition she represents). Subordination may involve culturally interpolated subjectivity and constrained agency, but that cannot be the beginning or the end of the story. Subordination occurs in the economy of social relations. 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. Is there a way to retain some of the insights from Butler and Hacking and incorporate them into a materialist account of ideology?

**4. Social Practices**

Social structures are networks of social relations. These include relations *between people*: being a parent of, being an employee of, being a spouse of; they also include relations *to things*: cooking, owning, occupying, driving, eating, herding. Social relations, in turn, are constituted through practices. Consider cooking:

Cooking rice is an instance of a more general practice of cooking, and regular engagement in the practice is constitutive of a social role: cook. Being a cook relates one in specific ways to other persons (not only the customer or family, but also the farmer, grocer, garbage collector, sources of recipes, including traditions, cookbooks, etc.), and also relates one in specific ways to things (foodstuffs, sources of heat, water, utensils). Cooking is only possible within a social structure that provides the ingredients, skills, tools; the norms for taste, texture and ingredients; the distribution of labor of cooks and consumers, etc.

What, then, is a practice? Social *practices* are, in the central cases, collective solutions to coordination or access problems with respect to a *resource*. The solution consists in organized responses to the resource. E.g., Traffic management, food distribution. Borrowing from contemporary practice theory (Sewell 1992), I have proposed this hypothesis:

*Practices consist of interdependent* ***schemas*** *and* ***resources*** *“when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time.” Sets of interdependent practices constitute social structures.*

* *Schemas* consist in clusters of culturally shared concepts, beliefs, and other attitudes that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect. Both concepts and beliefs, in the sense intended, store information and are the basis for various behavioral and emotional dispositions. Although schemas are variable and evolve across time and context, their elements are sticky and resist epistemic updating.
* *Resources* are things of all sorts – human, nonhuman, animate, or not – that are taken to have some (including negative) value (practical, moral, aesthetic, religious, etc.). Valuable resources are a source of power.

In social reality, schemas and resources are interdependent.

A factory is not an inert pile of bricks, wood, and metal. It incorporates or actualizes schemas….The factory gate, the punching-in station, the design of the assembly line: all of these features of the factory teach and validate the rules of the capitalist labor contract…In short, if resources are instantiations or embodiments of schemas, they therefore inculcate and justify the schemas as well… (Sewell 1992, 13)

Resources change – California is running out of water. This requires new practices, new schemas. Schemas evolve – memes emerge enabling us to recognize new resources or form new responses to old resources. Our thinking and acting evolve along with the object/artifact. Moreover, the practices may become congealed and dissociated from the interests and functions that were their original impetus.

So where does ideology fit into this picture of social structure? Do we have a better model for agency within self-defeating and unjust structures? I propose that ideology consists in those schemas that organize us either (a) in relations of domination and subordination or (b) to resources whose value is misconceived. This gives us two dimensions of ideology critique: we are valuing the wrong things, or the terms of access to things of value are unjust. Let’s now reconsider the problems raised above.

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

Progress can be made on the failures of ideology by considering the *conceptual* rather than the *attitudinal* aspect of schemas. If we assume that ideology consists of propositions that we (typically) believe, then we will have to rely on traditional epistemic critique. However, we can also undertake a critique of concepts. How do we evaluate concepts? Concepts, themselves, are neither true nor false, e.g., *loud*. Instead, the question is whether it is *apt* or not. Is the concept apt when applied to a particular object, say, someone’s singing? Or: Should we have this or that concept in our repertoire at all? If so, how we should construe it? E.g. *race*. Now consider:

* *Accuracy:* Beliefs framed with inapt concepts may still be true. However, we may not be fully justified in what we believe for our concepts may be inapt, our way of understanding the world is distorted, incomplete. (Hall, Anderson)
* *Respect:* Critique need not attribute false beliefs to those who are engaged in a practice (though sometimes false beliefs play a role). Rather, critique offers a different way of understanding the practice, often a fuller story that makes different features salient. 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.

**Response to the *Problem of Materiality:***

My proposal is sympathetic with the idea that ideology should not be evaluated primarily in terms of truth and falsehood, and embraces the suggestion that agency is possible (and only possible) within a discursive frame. However, there are two points to note especially in contrast to the Butler/Hacking model:

1. 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.
2. 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**

It would be helpful now to show how the theory works by providing some examples. *Very* briefly, let’s return to the second shift. Family life is structured around gender: We organize access to leisure, carework and housework through gendered schemas.

In increasing numbers women have gone into the workforce, but few have gone very high up in it. This is not because women cool themselves out by some “auto-discrimination.” It is not because we lack “role models.” Nor is it simply because corporations and other institutions discriminate against women. Rather, the career system inhibits women,...by making up rules to suit the male half of the population in the first place. One reason that half the lawyers, doctors, businesspeople are not women is because *men do not share the raising of their children and the caring of their homes.* Men think and feel within structures of work which presume they don’t do these things. (Hochschild 2003, )

Interestingly, those women who are successful in the workforce are those who can afford to outsource housework and childcare. It isn’t men who take up the slack. Women burdened with these chores are more likely to quit school or work and become more socially and economically vulnerable. This is ideology at work, organizing us in relation to the material realities of laundry, dishes, and diapers.

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1. Terminological choice: We can use the term ‘ideology,’ generally, 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 concern is how we all become agents of injustice. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)