

Ideology in Practice

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 it? Does it help to promote social justice? In my previous lecture, I suggested, very briefly, that ideology might be understood as a cultural technē “gone wrong.” In this lecture I will begin to explain what that means in a way that is responsive to arguments against IDEOLOGY as an analytical tool.

I think the concept of IDEOLOGY is indispensable. I will argue for a “practice first” approach. On my view, the core phenomenon is a social practice: social practices rely on a collection of social meanings – what I call a cultural technē – to organize us in relation to the material world. This conception of ideology is *functionalist* and *pejorative*. It is not, however, *doxastic*: an ideology is not a set of beliefs. (I will explain that more fully in the next lecture.)

2. The Critique of IDEOLOGY (not “Ideology Critique”!)

A primary task of a social theory is to understand how we, collectively, enact social structures. This is a question about how members of society develop kinds of “practical consciousness,” or practical orientation, that enable them to coordinate their behavior. Within critical theory, the more specific, and more pressing question is how, without being coerced, we come to enact *oppressive* social structures. Ideology is part of the answer (and thus is used pejoratively). Surely, most of us are not knowingly and intentionally dominating others or allowing ourselves to be dominated. Yet this happens, nonetheless. So we should ask:

- (i) How do we come to have shared outlooks or “practical consciousness.”
- (ii) Why do we consistently act in ways that frustrate our own self-interest, or 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?

Ideology has traditionally been part of the answer. Consider Stuart Hall:

[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. (Hall 1996/2006, 24-25)

But how does ideology function? How and why does it get a grip on us? Two sorts of answers to these questions are often found in Marx: economic determinism, and what I will call “ideology as illusion.” Both of these answers are inadequate.

a. Economic Determinism

Economic determinism is the view that all social phenomena – including our practical consciousness – can be causally explained (ultimately) in terms of economic forces. The problems with ideology lie in its origin and its effects. This passage in Marx is suggestive:

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: we are not merely cogs in an economic machine. It is also generally agreed that this is not a fair interpretation of Marx’s view; more plausibly, he is claiming that the relations of production *condition* (but don’t strictly determine) consciousness.

Contemporary materialists have adjusted their commitment:

...a materialist account [is] 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...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 1990, 33)

Economic/social/material relations *and* culture are relevant to injustice. If ideology is a form of culture “rooted in real social relationships,” then we can dismiss the problem of economic determinism.

b. Ideology as Illusion

A more persistent understanding of ideology takes it to be a form of “common sense” that misrepresents our social conditions and so leads us astray. Ideology’s failure is in our representation of the world: we act in self-defeating/unjust ways because we are led (propaganda, fake news) to adopt false or unwarranted beliefs that mask our true interests. The main problem with ideology is epistemic.

This epistemic approach faces a number of problems:

- *Problem of Accuracy:* Because ideology functions to create social reality, it sometimes “makes itself true.” MacKinnon: “...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) This also helps explain why we persist in forming ideological outlooks. (Though it’s complicated: ideology is often articulated using generics.)
- *Problem of Epistemic Respect:* If ideology is a matter of false or distorted beliefs, then we live our lives under a pervasive illusion. We are self-destructively deluded about the choices we make and the reasons for them. This is implausible, and it doesn’t show respect for our basic epistemic capacities.
- *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 dubious. Ideology has created an unjust world, and knowledge just mirrors it back.

c. Cultural Determinism/Constraint

One diagnosis of the problems raised by an account of ideology as illusion targets the idea of *representation*. Ideology doesn’t misrepresent the world because it doesn’t represent the world at all. On extreme versions of this approach, there is no such thing as “truth” or “knowledge.” I reject this, 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? One answer is that we simply act on habits formed through a process of socialization.

Socialization is a crucial part of the story, but we should not replace economic determinism with cultural determinism. We *choose* to act in ways that perpetuate the structures. On a performative view, we enact social roles not in a deterministic or unthinking way, but by *constrained choice*.

....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)

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 has a similar view. Intentional action involves an ability to represent what one is doing and to situate it within a frame of intelligibility or space of reasons. The intentional dimension of the act depends on the available conceptual resources. We aren’t dupes, but do live with constrained autonomy.

But how do we link such constraint with structures of power and domination? It would be misguided to think culture, in itself, is subordinating. There is no agency at all without the cultural resources that society provides. Such resources constrain *and* enable. (Butler 1990, 148-49) Butler is right that the binary gender scheme is overly constraining and mistakenly considered “natural.” But a further problem is that gender corresponds to a division of labor that unjustly burdens women with caregiving and is central to their subordination.

- *Problem of Materiality:* Subordination involves constrained agency, but that’s not the whole story. Agency occurs in the economy of social relations. On a performative view, we lose sight of the economic and material conditions of agency and the injustice that results.

Let's recap: We started with the question: how does ideology stabilize structures of domination? We rejected economic determinism (ideology is not epiphenomenal). We rejected "ideology as illusion" (not all ideology is false, we aren't dupes, and truth alone cannot free us). We rejected cultural determinism (we aren't cultural robots). We have made progress by considering ideology as a set of cultural constraints: agency is constrained ideologically by "concepts and languages of practical thought." But we still need to capture the systemic interaction between ideology and the materiality of our social relations. This can be captured (I hope!) in my account of social practices.

3. Social Practices

I have sketched an account according to which practices enable us to produce, distribute, and organize, things taken to have value: time, knowledge, status, health, security, commodities. They also distribute things of disvalue: toxic waste, menial work, vulnerability. I call these (+ and -) *resources*. And they do so by providing us a set of social meanings.

Social practices are patterns of learned behavior that enable us (in the primary instances) to coordinate as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing, maintaining, and eliminating a resource (or multiple resources), due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resource(s) in question, as interpreted through shared meanings, i.e., a cultural technē.

a. Culture

What exactly is a cultural technē and how does it organize us? Culture defines the terms of coordination for a social group. William Sewell captures the idea: 'Culture may be thought of as a network of semiotic relations cast across society...' (Sewell 2005, 49). Social meanings include (this is just a jumble at this point):

- i. *Simple meanings*: pink means girl, red means stop and other forms of signaling (greeting rituals, clothing choices, logos);
- ii. *Narrative tropes*: "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage" and material signals and prompts for one's place in them (wedding rings, "gender reveal" events and associated paraphernalia);

- iii. *Default assumptions*: "Marriage is between one man and one woman" "The US Constitution protects liberty and justice for all."; Concepts (*bachelor, marriage, sex, gender, race, water, justice*) and alleged analytic truths about them;
- iv. *Elements of architectural design*: brick and ivy, toilets designated for men and women only, spaces only accessible by stairs, façade columns (Bell and Zacka 2020; Chwe 2001);
- v. *Heuristics*: imitate-the-majority, or imitate-the-successful (Hertwig et al 2013, 7; Gigerenzer et al 1999);
- vi. *Familiar patterns of metaphor and metonymy*: "God is love," "The pen is mightier than the sword," (Camp 2006);
- vii. *Entrenched conceptual homologies*: reason : passion :: man : woman (Balkin 1998, Ch. 10; Balkin 1990).
- viii. *Explicit public declarations*: "Black Lives Matter," "Blue Lives Matter".

On this account, culture is not a hegemonic system. It is as fragmented as the multiple practices that coordinate us in different contexts for different purposes.

- *A cultural technē is a set of tools*: Ann Swidler (1986) suggests that '[c]ulture influences action...by shaping a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills, and styles...' (p. 273). The fragmentation of agency in different practices provides resources and opportunities for critique.
- *Vectors*: Social vectors provide 'forms of causality that are conduit-like rather than strictly cause-effect, directional rather than distinctly determinative, and relational rather than cleanly linear.' (Richardson 2014, 221) Social practices and structures provide, in effect, a topography upon which specific causal factors interact to produce probabilistic effects; cultural scripts and narratives create valleys in the topography along which agency easily flows. Although it may be easier to flow in the valley, we have choices to climb the peaks instead.

b. Looping

Culture, material conditions, and agency can create stable loops.

- Culture provides tools for interpreting and responding to material conditions;

- Agents internalize the tools as practical orientations in order to coordinate and communicate;
- Practical orientations guide us to act on material conditions and produce/distribute resources in accordance with the schemas,
- This shapes the world to adapt to our tools and so facilitate coordination.

We rely on social meanings not only to interact with each other, but also the world; and the world changes to conform to the tools we bring to it. This has significant epistemic effects: the meanings we employ to interpret the world are confirmed by the world they have shaped. (This is the *accuracy problem* redux.) Thus it becomes difficult to even see that meanings/practices are problematic, for they appear to be warranted, e.g., we allow Nestle to drain local springs in order to bottle water, leaving a less potable public water supply, giving people reason to engage in the practice of drinking bottled water; thus reinforcing the decision to grant water rights to Nestle.

4. Ideology (a better view)

How does ideology fit into this picture?

- An ideology is a set of tools – a cultural technē – that we use to coordinate in practices. *a cultural tool is ideological relative to a practice that relies on it, when, and insofar as the practice is unjust/harmful.*
- A cultural technē can misshape a practice (a) because it prevents us from valuing things correctly (it distorts or occludes what is valuable); (b) because it guides the practice unjustly/harmfully.
- A social *practice* can be bad/unjust itself. However, often practices (and their social meanings/schemas) can only be evaluated relative to their part in a particular socio-historical system. (I talked about this in the previous lecture.)
- Unjust practices and institutions guided or formed by an ideology are *ideological formations*, e.g., racism, sexism, etc. The web of unjust social practices is held together by a racist technē, e.g., residential segregation, police brutality, biased hiring and wage inequity, educational disadvantage.

The view I've sketched focuses on ideology as the cultural contribution to practical orientation. Why do we act in ways that frustrate our self-interest and reinforce oppression? Because the cultural tools available to us create a choice architecture for engaging with each other and the world that systemically entrenches morally problematic relations, e.g., of domination/subordination.

Explicit ideology (articulated propositions) is both an expression and rationalization of our practical orientation. On the whole, explicit ideologies present our practices in ways that obscure or mystify them and their consequences. 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.

Does this account face the same challenges we discussed above?

Problem of Materiality: Because ideology is embedded in practices that distribute things taken to have value, it gives apt attention to the “concrete social institutions and practices along with the material conditions in which they take place.”

Problem of Accuracy: Ideology is not always false because (i) not all ideology is propositional, and (ii) through looping effects, it can “make itself true.”

Problem of Epistemic Respect: We are not dupes driven by false beliefs. We are seeking coordination using the tools available. Sometimes the tools are inadequate, but we aren't necessarily incompetent or ignorant of our interests. We may be acting rationally, given the material and cultural constraints on our agency.

Problem of Emancipation: The truth will not set us free. Truth is not enough because the world we have created through our practices is the problem. Adequately describing how things are is important; but to achieve justice we must use imagination to think beyond how things are and establish new practices to get us there.