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## THE NOTION OF IDEOLOGY: REVISITING MARX, GRAMSCI & ALTHUSSER

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### Abstract

Ideology plays a significant role in contemporary social and political thinking. It is not always clear what meaning is applied to the term by those who employ it even though it plays a larger part in present-day discussions of various disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, political science, communication. It is essential to trace the historical notion of ideology and how it evolved in the minds of various philosophers and theorists. This paper aims to comprehend the term ideology, its history and primarily the notion through the work of these eminent thinkers. The study uses textual analysis and primarily examines the writings of Karl Marx (1818 – 1883), Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895), Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) and Louis Althusser (1818 – 1990). The close readings the key texts identify that Marx makes diverse statements on ideology at different points in his career; nevertheless, his most straightforward statement about ideology appears in *The German Ideology* where he states Ideology functions as the ‘superstructure’ of a civilization. Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” is rooted in the distinction between coercion and consent as alternative mechanisms of social power. Althusser’s ideology does not then represent the real world, but rules our perception of reality.

**Key Words: Ideology, Marx, Hegemony, Gramsci, Ideological State Apparatus, Althusser.**

### Introduction

Ideology plays a significant role in contemporary social and political thinking. Few concepts play a larger part in present-day discussions of historical and political topics than does that of ideology, and yet it is not always clear what meaning is applied to the term by those who employ it (Lichtheim, 1965). Hence it is essential for us to trace the historical notion of ideology and how it evolved in the minds of various philosophers and theorists.

Understanding the concept Ideology is rooted in the writings of German philosophers Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895). Another crucial extension of the concept stems from Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937). The French Marxist Structuralist Louis Althusser (1818 – 1990) built on this concept which had a significant impact in various fields like sociology, cultural studies etc. This paper aims to comprehend the term ideology, its history and primarily the notion through the work of these eminent thinkers.

## Defining the term ‘Ideology’?

Many theorists across various social disciplines observe that there is no single adequate definition of ideology. The British philosopher and literary critic, Terry Eagleton (1991) in his work titled, *Ideology: An Introduction*, begins with a list of sixteen different definitions of the term. Eagleton refers to the term ‘ideology’ has a whole range of meanings, not all of which are compatible with one another. He recognizes that these definitions may or may not be pejorative, and he notes that these definitions may or may not involve epistemological questions.

John Gerring (1997) in his work “*Ideology: a Definitional Analysis*” identifies various problems less often recognized that are inherent in defining the concept of ideology. He raises number of the queries while developing an operationalisation approach in defining Ideology. Is an “ideological” mode of thought characterized by abstraction, internal consistency, external contrast, endurance through time, rationality, sophistication, a hierarchical ordering of idea – elements, parsimony – or some combination of these characteristics? Is it separate from group affiliation and /or party affiliation? (John Gerring, 1997).

There are number of attributes frequently associated with “ideology” in contemporary social science discourse. John Gerring provides a comprehensive definitional framework arranged in logically related parts. These are primarily self-conscious endeavors, rather than work which merely employ the term. Like, where is ideology located – *in the mind, in behavior or in Language?* What is ideology about – *politics, power or the world at-large?* Who are the ideologists – *social class, any group or any individual?* Whose position it holds on – *dominant or subordinate?* What are its major functions – *explaining, repressing, integrating, motivating, legitimating?* What is its motivation – *interest-based, non-interest based or non-expedient?* What cognitive /affective structures there are commonly applied to ideology? This comprehensive framework certainly provides an orientation before getting into the ideas of the philosophers and theorists to comprehend the concept of Ideology.

## The Origin of the Concept “Ideology”

Historically, the term "Ideology" made its first appearance at the time of the French Revolution, its author, Antoine Destutt de Tracy, being one of the group of savants whom the Convention in 1795 entrusted with the management of the newly founded Institut de France (Lichtheim, 1965). The creation of this Institute in France was part of an initiative to provide a countrywide system of higher education committed to the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

For De Tracy “Ideology” was the name of the new science which he was in the process of inaugurating. He intended his new science to give a correct and universally comprehensible explanation of politics, based on an equally clear natural science. 'Ideology', in its author's intention, was to replace opaque disciplines such as metaphysics, theology and political philosophy (Drucker, 1972). In the scientific sense, Ideology was used in epistemology and linguistic theory until 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Napoleon Bonaparte opposed the advocates of Democracy – ‘*who misled the people by elevating them to a sovereignty which they were incapable of exercising*’ - he attacked the principles of the Enlightenment as ‘ideology’. He attributed ‘*all the misfortunes which have befallen our beautiful France... to the doctrine of the ideologues... which in a contrived manner seek to find the primary causes and on this foundation would erect the legislation of peoples, instead of adapting the laws to a knowledge of the human heart and of the lessons of history.*’

Raymond Williams (1985) states that this usage reverberated throughout 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was very common in conservative criticism of any social policy which is in part or in whole derived from social theory *in a conscious way*. It is especially used of democratic or socialist policies, and indeed, following Napoleon’s use, ideologist was often in 19<sup>th</sup> Century generally equivalent to *revolutionary*. But ideology and ideologist and ideological also acquired, by a process of broadening from Napoleon’s attack, a sense of abstract, impractical or fanatical theory. (Williams, 1985) This leads to move further in understanding how Marx and Engels used Ideology.

### **Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels – Ideology**

Karl Marx, in his early days had strong influence on the work of Georg Hegel (1770 – 1831), the most valued German philosopher of that time. Marx utilized the main themes of Hegel’s thought, including development through contradiction (the dialectic), the eventual establishment of an ideal society, and the realization of freedom. Furthermore, he adopted Hegel’s description of man as “alienated,” and the solution for the problem of alienation came to be the evident motivation of Marx’s work. Hegel’s position on the ultimate nature of reality is known as ‘Absolute Idealism’. It refers to the philosophical position which says that it is ideas or more broadly our minds, our thoughts and our consciousness, that constitute ultimate reality.

The crux of Marxist theory is a transformation of Hegelian philosophy from Idealism to materialism. This transformation owes a great deal to the development of anti-religious, anti-God trend that gained strength in the Enlightenment and reached the high point of expression in the thought of German Philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804 – 1872). What Marx meant by "ideology" was obvious enough from the *Theses on Feuerbach (1845)*, where the latter is blamed for not having carried through to the end his inversion of Hegel's system. He says, for example:

Feuerbach sets out from the fact of religious self-alienation, the duplication of the world into a religious and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But the fact that the secular basis deserts its own sphere and establishes an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavage and self-contradiction within the secular basis (Marx, 1845, p. 157).

German Socialist George Lichtheim (1965) says this radicalization of Feuerbach's naturalist starting-point left intact the rationalist principle which Marx shared with Hegel: namely, the belief that cognition gives access to universal truths not present in immediate experience. He further states that the Marxist conception of world history as a process of human self-alienation draws on Feuerbach's impassioned protest against the sacrifice of nature and of real, living, human beings, whose activities and whose sufferings Hegel had obscured. But Marx retains the Hegelian conviction that in the final analysis "history makes sense". Lichtheim finds Marx to this extent always remained a Hegelian, for all the emphasis upon "the real history of real people" which occupies so prominent a place in his polemics against his former associates.

Marx makes diverse statements on ideology at different points in his career; nevertheless, his most straightforward statement about ideology appears in *The German Ideology (1845)*, which he wrote with Frederick Engels. Ideology itself represents the "production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness," all that "men say, imagine, conceive," and include such things as "politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc." According to Marx, Ideology functions as the 'superstructure' of a civilization: the conventions and culture that make up the dominant ideas of a society. The "ruling ideas" of a given epoch are, however, those of the ruling class. They state:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force... The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of their dominance (Marx & Engels, 1968, p.39).

Marx explains the "mode of production," which refers to the elements that gets into producing material life, such as natural resources, tools and technology (i.e. the production forces) and the ways in which material life is organized, the ways in which production would be justified and the means by which the fruits of the productive process would be distributed (i.e. the forms of intercourse). According to Marx, the productive forces were always outpacing and causing a strain on the forms of intercourse, creating the possibility for development.

Marx and Engels offer the concepts of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the classes that confront each other at the end of history. The bourgeoisie, for Marx and Engels, own the "means of production," the tools, resources, technology that goes into and products that come out of the productive process. In their terms, the bourgeoisie own "private property," these elements and outcomes of production. The proletariat, on the other hand, only owns their ability to labor (their "labor-power") and their personal property, which amounts to little. The proletariat sells its labor-power for wages, and the bourgeoisie uses this labor-power to increase its holdings. As such, this is a necessary, yet antagonistic, relationship.

## Antonio Gramsci – Ideology & Hegemony

Gramsci begins by arguing “Ideology” was an aspect of “sensationalism” i.e. 18<sup>th</sup> century French Materialism. He traces the meaning of the word from “the science of ideas” to “the analysis of the origin of ideas” to a specific “system of ideas.” He further adds “Ideas had to be broken down into their original “elements”, and these could be nothing other than “sensations”. While Idea derived from sensations, he associates sensationalism with religious faith and with the most extreme beliefs in the “power of the Spirit” and its “immortal destinies” without any difficult. Gramsci argues that the term “ideology” within Marxism, takes a “negative value judgment” because of its perceived relationship to the superstructure. He writes:

Indeed the meaning which the term Ideology has assumed in Marxist philosophy implicitly contains a negative value judgment and excludes the possibility that for its founders the origin of ideas should be sought for its sensations, and therefore in the analysis, in physiology. “Ideology” itself must be analyzed historically, in the terms of the philosophy of praxis, as a superstructure (Gramsci, 2006, p.35).

Gramsci senses a potential element of error in assessing the values of ideologies. This is due to the fact that the name ideology is given both to the necessary superstructure of a particular structure and to the arbitrary elucubrations of particular individuals in a formal way. However, Gramsci argues a distinction should be made between those ideologies that are arbitrary and those that are “historically organic”. The historically organic ones are more useful because they create a greater organized response as opposed to individual “movements” though even these, he admits, are not completely useless.

Gramsci finds worth recalling the frequent affirmation made by Marx on the “solidity of popular beliefs” as a necessary element of a specific situation. What he says more or less is “when this way of conceiving things has the force of popular beliefs”, etc. Another proposition of Marx is that a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force or something of the kind, which is extremely significant. He writes:

The analysis of these propositions tends, I think, to reinforce the conception of historical bloc in which precise it material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, through this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces (Gramsci, 1971, p. 377).

Gramsci’s study of the role of intellectuals in society led him to break down the superstructure into two great “floors,” which he described as “civil society” and “political society.” Civil society is composed of all those “private organisms” – schools, churches, clubs, journals, and parties - which contribute in molecular fashion to the formation of social and political consciousness. Political society, on the other hand, is composed of those public institutions – the government, courts, police, and army - which exercise “direct dominion.” (Gramsci, 1966) It is synonymous with the “state.”

The ruling class exerts its power over society on both of these "floors" of action, but by very different methods. Civil society is the marketplace of ideas, where intellectuals enter as "salesmen" of contending cultures. The intellectuals succeed in creating hegemony to the extent that they extend the world view of the rulers to the ruled, and thereby secure the "free" consent of the masses to the law and order of the land. To the extent that the intellectuals fail to create hegemony, the ruling class falls back on the state's coercive apparatus which disciplines those who do not "consent," and which is "constructed for all society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command ... when spontaneous consensus declines." (Thomas, 1995)

Hegemony is 'organized' by those whom Gramsci designates 'organic intellectuals'. According to Gramsci, intellectuals are distinguished by their social function. That is to say, all men and women have the capacity for intellectual endeavor, but only certain men and women have the function of intellectuals in the society. Each class, as Gramsci explains, creates 'organically' its own intellectuals:

one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic sphere but also in the social and political fields. The capitalist entrepreneur [for example] creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organisers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc (Gramsci, 2009, p. 2).

The Gramscian model of hegemony departs significantly from the Marxist notion of ideology, while retaining Marxist foundational categories of class, the capitalist mode of production, and the distinction between the economic base and the cultural superstructure. The notion of "hegemony" is rooted in Gramsci's (1992) distinction between coercion and consent as alternative mechanisms of social power. Coercion refers to the State's capacity for violence, which it can use against those who refuse to participate in capitalist relations of production. By contrast, hegemonic power works to convince individuals and social classes to subscribe to the social values and norms of an inherently exploitative system. It is a form of social power that relies on voluntarism and participation, rather than the threat of punishment for disobedience.

Hegemony appears as the "common sense" that guides our everyday, mundane understanding of the world. It is a view of the world that is "inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed" and which tends to reproduce a sort of social homeostasis, or "moral and political passivity" (Gramsci, 1971). Whereas coercive power is the exclusive domain of the State, the institutions of "civil society," such as the Church, schools, the mass media, or the family, are largely responsible for producing and disseminating hegemonic power (Gramsci 1996). In industrial capitalist societies, hegemonic power is the prevalent form of social power; the state relies on coercion only in exceptional circumstances.

Gramsci also asserts that hegemony has a material dimension. It is not only a system of ideas, floating above economic structures. Rather, the social action of everyday life produces hegemonic effects. Gramsci describes how the interplay of our cultural and material surroundings constructs hegemony as follows:

The press is the most dynamic part of the ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and the names of streets (Gramsci, 2006, p. 36).

### **Louis Althusser – Ideology & Ideological State Apparatuses**

Louis Althusser begins by agreeing with Marx view “every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produced would not last for a year (Althusser, 1971, p. 142)”. To be specific, if the existing social relations of production within each social formation (i.e. its class structure) are to be perpetuated, that social formation must seek to reproduce the means of production, i.e. what he calls the “material conditions of production” (the raw material, the machines, etc.), by reinvesting profits in fresh capital outlays; and the forces of production, i.e. what he calls the “productive forces” and “labour power”, by paying wages that not only ensure the worker’s physical survival but also increase his productivity through skills-training and education. Althusser argues, however,

The reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to 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.’ (Althusser, 1971, p. 143).

In other words, the schooling system and also other state institutions like the church or even the army do not only seek to pass on “‘know-how’” but also to ensure “*subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its *‘practice’*”.

This raises the question: the question of reproduction of the relations of production. Althusser finds this as a crucial question for the Marxist theory of the mode of production. (i.e. what is ideology) To answer this question, He argues that he must first “re-raise his old question: what is a society?”

Althusser reminds that Marx offers, in so arguing, a “spatial metaphor: the metaphor of a topography” whereby society is compared to an “edifice” in which the “upper floors [superstructure] could not ‘stay up’ (in the air) alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base”. Althusser stresses on the questions arise within the Marxist tradition, concerning the nature of the relationship linking these two levels of society: some posit the “relative autonomy” of the superstructure and others go so far as to argue that there is a “‘reciprocal action’ of the superstructure on the base”

Althusser states his intention to “think what characterises the essential of the existence and nature of the superstructure *on the basis of reproduction*”. In other words, his emphasis will be less on the cause (or source) of these various instances or levels than on their effect (or function). When viewed from this perspective, “many of the questions whose existence was indicated by the spatial metaphor of the edifice, but to which it could not give a conceptual answer, are immediately illuminated” (Althusser, 1971, p. 144)”.

Althusser turns his attention to a critical analysis of the key social concepts which Marxists deploy (the Law, the State and Ideology) from two perspectives: “from the point of view of practice and production . . . and from that of reproduction on the other”. The State is defined in the Marxist tradition as a “force of repressive execution and intervention ‘in the interests of the ruling classes’ in the class struggle conducted by the bourgeoisie and its allies against the proletariat”. This is its basic “function”. It is, in that sense, an apparatus or instrument by which the ruling class cements its hold on power. A distinction must be drawn, therefore, between the “use of the State apparatus” and “State power”.

Althusser argues that there are in fact two kinds of State apparatuses: the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The RSA includes the “institutions” of the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc. The ISA includes the “religious ISA (the system of the different Churches)”, the “educational ISA (the system of the different public and private ‘Schools’)”, the “family ISA”, the “legal ISA”, the “political ISA”, the “trade-union ISA”, the “communication ISA (press, radio and television, etc.)”, and the “cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.)” .

The Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) “function massively and predominately *by repression* (including physical repression)” while Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) “function massively and predominately *by ideology*”. Althusser’s particular interest here is in the functioning of the various ISAs which, although diverse (they are, he says, “multiple, distinct, ‘relatively autonomous’ and capable of providing an objective field to contradictions which express . . . the effects of the clashes between the capitalist class struggle and the proletarian class struggle”), are unified by their common function: subtending the dominant ideology and, thus, the interests of the ruling class.

Althusser’s notion of ideology is extremely broad, implicit and absolute; it exists in language and all structures, representations, myths, images, and it always seeks the maintenance of the ruling class in society. Ideology in Althusserian sense is therefore not a structure that hides reality like in the classic Marxist idea of “the false consciousness”, but rather a system that represents an imaginary reality; it “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence”. Ideology does not then represent the real world, but rules our perception of reality. This is a huge difference, and helps to explain the power that the ruling ideology has on our thoughts. He states:



It is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that 'men' 'represent to themselves' in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there. It is this relation which is at the centre of every ideological, i.e. imaginary, representation of the real world. It is this 'cause' which has to explain the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world (Althusser, 1971, p. 166).

Althusser theorizes that ideology "has a material existence", arguing that "'ideas' or 'representations,' etc. do not have an ideal or spiritual existence, but a material existence". Althusser contends that each ISA is the "realization of an ideology" as a result of which an ideology "always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material". Arguing that the "material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving-stone or a rifle", Althusser suggests that an individual's beliefs are derived "from the ideas of the individual concerned, i.e. from him as a subject with a consciousness which contains the ideas of his beliefs" (Althusser, 1971, p. 162).

Althusser moves to his central thesis that is the "category of the subject (which may function under other names: e.g., as the soul in Plato, as God, etc.)" He contends that the subject is the "constitutive category of all ideology, whatever its determination (regional or class) and whatever its historical date – since ideology has no history" in so far as "*all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*". Arguing that ideology performs the two-fold function of "recognition" and "misrecognition", Althusser contends that "you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects". In a famous assertion, he argues that "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*".

The ideology interpellates human beings into subjects through any of its apparatuses. It then "*subjects* the subjects to the Subject" i.e. directs the subjects to the core of the ideology. Third and most important, the Subject allows a place for the subjects to recognize themselves and *freely* find their part in the whole. This recognition in the ideological Subject, like the Self recognizes itself in Lacan's mirror image, will make the subjects part of something they believe in. By finding the place assigned for themselves in ideology, the subjects uphold ideological structures, support the "mirror-structure of ideology" and even go so far as to police other subjects to follow them. Finally, the subject is "*guarantee[d]* that this really concerns them and Him" and because of that will be saved. Recognition and salvation are thus what make the individual *freely* choose their submission to the ruling ideology.

## Conclusion

Ideology has several centuries of established usage and has been turned up under almost every academic stone. Whatever one might sense about the efficacy of the term, it is firmly deep-rooted within lay and scholarly discourse. Many theorists feel maybe because of its parsimony, its long-established position in popular and academic discourse, or because of some set of associated traits which are deemed useful – and not sufficiently conveyed by neighboring concepts. Thus, Ideology holds a permanent position in the work of political scientists, political anthropologists, social psychologists, sociologists, and historians.

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