

# Ideology: Redefinition

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**Abstract:** The term “ideology”, invented by French Earl Tracy in 1797, was used to refer to the science of concept. Over the past 22 decades, people have been struggling to deconstruct and reconstruct the term. This paper, based on existing theories on “ideology”, tries to come up with a clear and feasible definition on “ideology”.

## 1. Introduction

Earl Tracy published *Eléments d'idéologie* (5 volumes) from 1817 to 1818, inheriting and developing Locke's materialist empiricism and The Sensualist Psychology of Condiac with a view to further define human nature. Tracy divides spiritual life into four levels: perception, memory, judgment and will, and ultimately reduces human cognitive activities to the reflection of the nervous system to the outside world. Although Tracy's ideology is based more on physiology than on pure psychology, as a science of ideas, it is an attempt to get rid of the metaphysical concepts in the past. Later, the ideology theory was developed by Marx, Lukacs, Gramsci, Foucault and Althusser and reached its relatively mature state by Terry Eagleton.

## 2. Existing theories

### 2.1 Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus theory

Althusser insists that philosophy is not a particular realm of knowledge, but all the forms of class struggle in the field of culture; philosophy is not knowledge, but the tool of ideological struggle.[1] According to Marx, the state is a violent instrument for the ruling class to maintain its dominant position. Althusser holds that Marx's theory uncovers the essence of ideology; however, it is not scientific since it only emphasizes the role of repression of state. In order to develop state theory, attention must be paid not only to the distinction between state power and state apparatus, but also to another group of entities that clearly support (coercive) state apparatus, which must not be confused with (coercive) state machinery.[1] These entities, according to Althusser, are ideology. Ideology is a representation system with unique logic and particular structure, which exists in particular histories and functions as history. Althusser distinguishes different productive mechanisms of the components of state power and creatively comes up with the concept of “ideological state apparatus” in contrast to the coercive state apparatus. The state exercises its power through the two forms of state apparatus. The coercive state apparatus includes the government, administration, army, police, court and jail etc. Ideological state apparatus includes ideological state apparatus of education, ideological state apparatus of religion, ideological state apparatus of family, ideological state apparatus of law, ideological state apparatus of politics, ideological state apparatus of labor union, ideological state apparatus of broadcast, and ideological state apparatus of culture. Both the coercive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus are tools of ruling. However, there are substantial differences between the two. First, there is only one coercive state apparatus while there are many ideological state apparatuses; second, the coercive state apparatus functions by violent forces with the assistance of ideology while the ideological state apparatus functions by ideology with the assistance of repression; last, the coercive state apparatus is part of public realm while the ideological state apparatus is part of private realm.

Ideological state apparatus, in Althusser's view, has several functions: practical function(calling for subjects), social function(covering up social contradictions) and essential function(producing

productive relations).

## 2.2 Foucault's discourse power theory

To see history as the structure of discourse is the salient feature of Foucault's theory. He thinks that there are certain rules to define the corresponding objects of the field in the process of the formation of individual discourse so as to construct a basic concept and theoretical framework. What Foucault wants to highlight is: behind the objectivity of discourse (history), there is a sharp ideological nature.[2] That is to say, in a certain historical period, a discipline, by discourse (history), selects an object area, sets up the legal perspective, and thus establishes the changing laws of history as a standard of value choice.

The core conception is cognitive value. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault states that the cognitive value is the whole relations which reflect the general knowledge of an age and basic principles of its composition. A realm of discourse lies between what can be said and what is actually said, which, according to Foucault, is called the archives. What an author wants to say has to go through the filtration by the archives before reaching the readers.

Behind the cognitive value and the archives is the power system. The power system is everywhere and cannot be avoided. It expands with the help of knowledge which is not objective or neutral because knowledge belongs to the ideology of the ruling class. Knowledge is the appearance and power is the essence.

Although criticized by Eagleton as the omnipotence of power, the theory has profound influence because it reaches a broader knowledge domain which involves almost every member of the society. In humanities, he says, the development of all disciplines is inseparable from the exercise of power.[3] In his view, the exercise of power is not a fixed mechanism, but the counterbalance among multi-power subjects or power relations and the never-ending confliction changes and reinforces them.[4] Contradiction is the force of movement, which means that the unstable, imbalanced power system is full of variables. The counterbalance leads to the balance, loss of balance and rebalance of the power system as a whole. However, Foucault views power not only as the hegemony which exerts pressures by negating, but also as a mechanism which runs through matters, generating objects, fun, knowledge and discourse. Power should be regarded as the productive network that permeates the entire social organism, instead of a passive institution that merely exercises repressive functions.

## 2.3 Eagleton's theory of ideology

Eagleton absorbs part of Althusser's theory. However, he thinks that ideology is not a series of doctrines. It refers to the way people fulfill their roles in class society: the way they are restrained to their social functions, which prevents them from realizing the true value, concept and image of the society. He emphasizes the class nature of ideology. Eagleton once said: "To understand ideology, we have to analyze the relations among classes, which entails realizing the status of the classes." [5] In 1990s, he tried to define ideology in his books. One of his books *Ideology: An Introduction* mentions as many as 16 definitions appearing in different books:[6]

- a. The process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life;
- b. A body of ideas characteristics of a particular social group or class;
- c. Ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;
- d. False ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;
- e. Systematically distorted communication;
- f. That which offers a position for a subject;
- g. Forms of thought motivated by social interests;
- h. Identity thinking;
- i. Socially necessary illusion;
- j. The conjuncture of discourse and power;
- k. The medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;
- l. Action-oriented sets of beliefs;

- m. The confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality;
- n. Semiotic closure;
- o. The indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure
- p. The process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality.

Based on the definitions above, Eagleton defines ideology from 6 perspectives:

- (1) Ideology is the universal production process of ideas, beliefs, and values in social life. This definition is close to culture in a broad sense.
- (2) Concepts and beliefs that represent the conditions and life experiences of a particular group or class of social significance. It is close to the concept of world view
- (3) Ideology is the term used to improve and legitimate its interests when a social group is faced with confrontation. The “interest” here must be related to maintaining or challenging the mode of political life as a whole.
- (4) Ideology aims at improving the interests and legitimation of the dominant social power.
- (5) Ideology refers to the ideas and beliefs that help legitimize the interests of ruling groups and class by distorting and masking conceptual practices.
- (6) An ideology is a false or deceptive belief that is rooted in the material structure of society as a whole rather than in the interests of the ruling class.[6]

In *Ideology: An Introduction*, Eagleton points out: Roughly speaking, among Hegel and Marx to George Lukacs and some later Marxist thinkers, there is a center for clues: to pay more attention to the right or wrong, to pay attention to ideological distortion is a fantasy and mystification. However, there is another conception which is a social one rather than recognition. It pays more attention to the function of the concept of social life, rather than their being true or not.[6] The above conclusion indicates that Eagleton's understanding of ideology has two dimensions: epistemological dimension: focusing on whether ideology is correct or not, and relating to the relationship between ideology and false consciousness; Sociological dimension: it focuses on the social function and function of ideology, and involves the relationship between ideology, power discourse and interests.

### **3 What is ideology?**

In order to identify ideology, several issues need to be settled:

- (1) What is the nature of the ideology?
- (2) Who makes the ideology?
- (3) Is there only one ideology?
- (4) What does the ideology do?
- (5) What is the ideology for?
- (6) Why does one follow the ideology?
- (7) How does it work?
- (8) What would happen if one does not follow it?

A video shows that on May 11, 2017, a mid-aged man spitted on the subway in Shanghai and an old lady tried to pervade him to clean the floor. The man ignored her and spitted again arrogantly. At last, he was “invited” off the subway and the old lady cleaned the floor. Most people who watched the video spoke highly of what the old lady did and criticized the man in the video. Because she demonstrated the high standard of morality but he violated it.

Ideology, from Earl Tracy, Althusser, Foucault to Eagleton, refers undoubtedly to something subjective rather than objective. It refers to a series of notions, ideas, concepts, belief: something inside human mind which takes shape of morality, culture, literature, regulation, law... that others are aware of. People adopt it not only to behave himself/herself, but also to regulate the behavior of others. The morality standard dates back to Confucius in the ancient time. From Han Dynasty on, Confucianism has been adopted as the national guideline. That is to say, ideology is made by the power system. However, there are various ideologies with variations of standard, which means that those who have the final say in a social group or class shape the ideology because ideology is always closely related to the power or authoritativeness although it seems that ideology takes shape by itself. Ideology works through discourse and those who have the power of discourse have the

final say and other members of the social group have to obey the rules so that the power of the group can maintain its power of discourse or authoritativeness. Other members follow the rules to maintain his or her status in this group or he/she might be exiled like the man in the video.

There might not be only one ideology since there are different standards of morality in the video. According to Eagleton, one mistake of Althusser is that he views ideology as a national ruling apparatus because there are various social classes with different standards of ideology leaving space for ideological confrontation but Althusser did not realize it.

Then, how does it work? Apparently, the old lady is not a powerful authority or at least we cannot see that in the video. But she is a loyal believer and practicer of morality. One has been educated to be a good person since birth. The majority of social members are absorbed as the subject of morality. They learn to follow the rules of morality and some of them are upgraded from followers to supervisors who follow the rules, observing and correcting the behavior of others at the same time. Ideology cannot work successfully unless it is accepted non-forcefully and voluntarily. It tries to absorb others into its system by showing them the advantage of the ideology and they would be accepted as a member of the social group and enjoy the interests for members only which those who do not follow the rules cannot access to. Ideology takes effect by absorbing others as subjects who accept, follow, practice ideology and supervise other members, granting interests to those followers and punishing those violating actions.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Based on the discussion above, it is clear that:

- (1) Ideology is set of concepts, beliefs, ideas taking shape of “objective” rules;
- (2) Ideology is a social discourse;
- (3) Ideology exists in social groups or classes with variations from group to group;
- (4) Ideology is closely related to the power system(authoritativeness);
- (5) Ideology is action-oriented;
- (6) Ideology is coercive(visibly or invisibly);
- (7) Ideology is featured with expansion, immersion, penalty;
- (8) The ultimate objective of ideology is gaining, maintaining and amplifying interest.

In short, ideology is a set of “objective” rules closely related to the power system in a social group or class, forcefully immersing itself to its members, regulating the thought and behavior of its members, penalizing those who violate it, with interest as its ultimate objective

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