

Lecture 19 Sociology 621
WHAT IS IDEOLOGY?
November 9, 2009

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Multiple uses of the term “Ideology”:

There is a deep problem in the use of the word “ideology”. Several common associations:

- ideology as false ideas: ideology as the other of science
- ideology as systematized gestalts of beliefs: ideological vs chaotic ways of thinking
- ideology as a multidimensional concept mapping all socially-relevant aspects of subjectivity

I do not have a fully elaborated proposal for the linkage between the terminological conventions and the conceptual field we are exploring. This will create more ambiguities than in some of our other discussions. But I will try to use the following convention:

An Ideology = the reference is to a system of beliefs

Ideological **practices** = reference is to the process of producing beliefs incorporated within subjectivity

2. Ideology and Other Aspects of Social Relations/Practices (recapitulation)

2.1 Ideology as a practice, contrasted with political and economic practice.

economic practice = process of producing use values through the transformation of nature as a raw material.

political practice = process of producing social relations through the transformation of social action as a raw material.

ideological practice = process of producing conscious dimensions of subjectivity through the transformation of individual lived experience (raw material) into beliefs.

Ideology = cognitive: content of thinking.

cultural practices = process of producing the *nonconscious* dimensions of subjectivity: personality, dispositions. Cultural practices produce habitus.

theoretical practice = process of producing knowledge of social relations through the transformation of ideology as a raw material.

[Perhaps we can give specificity to **religious practices** in these terms: practices which produce existential meaningfulness, meaning-in-life: Marxism could constitute a religious practice in such terms. This might also underwrite a contrast between spiritual practice and religious practice -- religion as alienated spirituality]

Ideological practice is thus a social process through which (conscious) subjectivity is formed through the real activities of people engaged in social relations in which what happens to them -- experiences -- are transformed into cognitive products

Example: Michael Burawoy's analysis of the labor process. His argument = workers participate in their own exploitation actively -- that is, they consent to their own exploitation -- not by virtue of subjective orientation which they *bring to the shop floor from outside* (through socialization, etc.) but because of *the forms of subjectivity that are produced through the forms of competition and conflict on the shop floor itself*. The heart of his analysis is thus the actual social process through which given forms of subjective orientations are produced and reproduced through the daily practices within the labor process.

2.2 Once again: Type vs Dimension of practice:

- (1). Ideology in this sense should be seen as a **dimension** of practices rather than simply a type of practice.
- (2). When the ideological aspect of a practice is its central intentional goal, we can speak of **an** ideological practice: One can "do" ideology. Education is an ideological practice in this sense: the central task is transforming subjectivity, especially the cognitive aspects of subjectivity.
- (3). Ideology is a contradictory practice: the forms of subjectivity produced by ideological practices are never wholly integrative of capitalism, never purely functional. In Burawoy's analysis while consent is produced, so is resistance/solidarity. The problem is to understand the material conditions for each and the balance between them.

2.3 Ideology, Culture, Consciousness, Nonconsciousness

In a simple way I link **ideology** → **consciousness** and **culture** → **nonconsciousness**. The basic idea can be illustrated if we look at gendered aspects of ideological and cultural practices:

Patriarchal ideology = beliefs in the naturalness of the sexual division of labor, in the desirability of men doing aggressive competitive jobs and women, nurturing, emotional work

Patriarchal culture = socialization of masculine and feminine attributes of personality differentially in men and women so that men are dispositionally more aggressive and women more nurturing

Bourgeois ideology --> belief in the efficiency and of private enterprise and the justice of distributions generated by markets

Bourgeois culture --> unconscious dispositions, habits, personality structures conditioned to participate effectively in markets and competition

A given, concrete practice -- disciplining a child, reading a book, etc. -- may contain both ideological and cultural aspects, of course.

2.4 Fundamental issue for the transformation of social relations = **contradictions between ideological and cultural practices**: many men believe in nonaggressive nurturance (ideology) even though they have been socialized as aggressive, non-nurturant personalities (culture). Changing ideas can lead to changes in behavior which result in changes in dispositions. This kind of contradiction is at the heart of Therborn's analysis of ideology.

II. THERBORN'S ANALYSIS

1. Basic Definitions:

Goran Therborn takes off from Althusser's central conceptualization of ideology as a **subject-producing practice** (Althusser referred to this as the way ideology interpellates social subjects, which essentially means hails them as subjects or identifies them as subjects).

Therborn's project is essentially to take the generic notion that ideology transforms individuals into subjects and develop it in ways that make possible the concrete historical investigation of ideology. While much of his analysis revolves around clarifying a host of conceptual distinctions -- and thus it reads a little like a dictionary in places -- the discussion is filled with more substantive theoretical propositions and analyses. The analysis revolves around four main objectives:

1. To generate a set of concepts which make possible the **historical investigation of ideology**. This implies moving from the level of abstraction of what Althusser called “ideology in general” to the level of “ideologies” but doing so in a way that draws on the more general conceptual framework.
2. **To expand the concept of ideology to encompass nonclass subjectivities/subjects.** Throughout the analysis Therborn is very insistent upon the importance of grasping the process of the formation of sexual subjectivity as well as class subjectivity (and various other kinds of subjectivity). He sees people as being multiple subjects, interpellated in many different relations with a multiplicity of subjectivities. The problem is to understand the specificity and interconnectedness of these subjectivities, not to collapse them into a unified class subjectivity.
3. To give an account of the **content and specific forms of interpellation** (subject-formation) rather than treat it as a homogeneous unified process. This implies decomposing the general claims about the effects of ideology into a number of intersecting components of subjectivity.
4. To provide a way of grasping the **fundamentally contradictory character of the process of subject-formation**, rather than treating contradictions as simple “disturbances” (as does Althusser). This is essential if the analysis is to avoid the functionalist pitfalls that Althusser sometimes approaches. People are interpellated both as subjects of the ruling class ideology and as countersubjects.

It is impossible to carefully go through all of the steps of his exposition in this section, so I will emphasize the third and fourth of these objectives, although some mention will be made of the others as well.

Before going any further, it would be good to state Therborn’s formal definition of ideology:

ideology = “*The operation of ideology in human life involves, fundamentally, constituting and patterning how human beings live their lives as **conscious, reflecting initiators of acts** in a universe of meaning....In this sense, ideology constitutes human beings as subjects.*”

And elsewhere he states that to study the ideological aspect of a practice is

“to focus on the way it operates in the formation and transformation of human subjectivity”

This is similar to Althusser’s definition, but is somewhat more exhaustive in its specification of the formation/transformation of subjectivity in general, and it posits a more active image of human action in seeing the problem of subjectivity as the patterning of subjectivity of human beings as “conscious, reflecting initiators of acts in a universe of meaning.”

To embark on such an investigation, Therborn proposes a whole series of new concepts and conceptual distinctions. These concepts then form the basis for some general claims about how Marxists should study ideology, ideological struggle and ideological transformation. We will first examine these new concepts and then turn to the methodological prescriptions which follow from them.

2. Conceptual Distinctions on the Terrain of Ideology

Therborn's conceptual innovations can be clustered under two general headings: distinctions in the dimensions of ideology and its effects; and the relationship between the discursive and nondiscursive practices of ideology.

2.1. Modes of Interpellation

1. *meaning of interpellation*: Therborn specifies the Althusserian concept of interpellation in a new and much more precise way as a dual process of *subjection* and *qualification*: subjection implies forming the subjectivity of individuals under a general model of subjectivity, subjecting them to a given standard; qualification implies the suitability of such subjectivity for specific roles (positions within relations) in society.

- **Subjection** thus refers to the effects of ideology on individual subjectivity;
- **Qualification** refers to the effects of such subjectivity on the individual's insertion into social relations.

If the analysis was purely functionalist in character, then there would be a perfect coincidence between these two aspects of interpellation: it would be the requirements of qualification which would homeostatically dictate the forms of subjection. But Therborn insists that the correspondence between these two aspects of interpellation is not by any means guaranteed, that the correspondence itself is a result of struggle, and that a variety of forms of noncorrespondence/contradiction can occur. This is of great importance for understanding the role of ideology in social change rather than simply in social reproduction.

2. *modes of interpellation*. The subjection-qualification of individuals involves three interconnected forms of interpellation. "Ideologies," Therborn writes subject and qualify subjects by telling them, and relating them to and making them recognize:

- a. what exists b. what is good c. what is possible**

These are characterized as three successive lines of defense of a given social order. The investigation of an ideology, then, involves analyzing how the subjective recognition of each of these is formed/transformed, what their content, is, etc.

Note on an ambiguity in the analysis: under the rubric "what is good" two sorts of subjectivities are included: the *cognitive beleif* in what is good, and the *motivational*

orientation of what is good. Thus, it is not entirely clear whether the bourgeois value in competitiveness is being treated mainly as a value/norm or as a personality/character structure, or both. As I indicated, I think it is useful to distinguish ideological and cultural practices precisely in these terms: subjection/qualification thus involves both the creation of a set of **beliefs** and **dispositions** (compare this to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as a cultural embedded pattern of dispositions). This distinction is especially important for understanding the kinds of contradictions which make progressive change possible: the distinction between the character-structure and cognitive-structure aspect of values/norms reveals potential contradictions between the kind of people we are and the kind of people we'd like to be. This is important, for example, in struggles over sexism/male domination on the left, in which men genuinely believe that it is bad to be competitive/aggressive in discussions, but have difficulty in not acting that way.

2.2 Material Matrix of Ideology: discursive and nondiscursive practices, sanctions & affirmations

These interpellations do not occur simply because of the pronouncement of the words reflecting these ideologies. Interpellation -- the formation and transformation of subjectivities -- is the result of a systematic process of *affirmations* and *sanctions*.

Affirmations: In affirming practices, "if an interpellated subject acts in accordance with the dictates of the ideological discourse, then the outcomes predicted by the ideology occurs."

Sanctions: Sanctioning practices constitute the punishments invoked for contravention of the dictates of ideological discourse.

This distinction between discursive and nondiscursive practices is not so obscure, even though every discursive act necessarily has a nondiscursive side to it. As Therborn says, "there is some difference between being pronounced 'dead' by a hostile critic and being assassinated." The point at hand is that **ideologies are affirmed and sanctioned not just by words, but by nondiscursive practices** which back up/reinforce the discursive practices of ideology. (Note Therborn's interesting discussions of excommunication as a form of sanction involving both discursive sanctions--being pronounced excommunicated--and nondiscursive sanctions--being denied various things or being burnt at the stake, etc.).

One crucial consequence of this analysis = going beyond the simple force/consent dichotomy as the basis of ruling class domination: all force presupposes consent at least in the sense of forms of subjectivity which make the application of force effective, and all forms of ideological interpellation presuppose a system of sanctions/affirmations which include elements of coercion.

2.3 The Analysis of Contradictions and Transformations of Ideology

These diverse concepts which decode the complexity of ideology and establish the social processes which affirm/sanction ideology provides the basis for Therborn's account of the transformation of ideologies, the contradictions of ideology and ideological class struggle. The starting point of this analysis is what could be termed an *intergenerational perspective* on ideology, which is then linked to a specific set of theses about contradictions and transformation.

1. Intergenerational perspective on ideology → Transformations of ideologies always presuppose an existing ideology: people are transformed from one kind of subject to another, not from being non-subjects into subjects. To explain change, then, we must understand why a given form of subjectivity is not simply passed on from one generation to another:

“A parental generation will always mould its children according to its own form of subjectivity; and if ecological, demographic, socio-economic and any intersocietal relationships remain the same, the younger generation will face exactly the same affirmations and sanctions of the existing ideologies as the parental one. It follows that the explanation of the generation of ideologies will have to start from processes of change in the structure of a given society.... It is these changes then which constitute the material determination of the rise of ideologies.”

Contrast to idealist view which “assumes that just through the power of ideological imagination each new generation of humans can emancipate themselves from ideological formation by their parents, even though facing exactly the same situations as the latter” (=affirmations and sanctions).

2. Key idea = Changes in social structures change the forms of sanctions/affirmations. The emergence of capitalism means that capitalist-subjectivity begins to be affirmed/rewarded; stagnation means that certain subjectivities cease to be affirmed in ways that they once were; late capitalism undermines the relational/material affirmations of the “work ethic;” etc.

3. Contradictions & the temporality of change

These arguments open the way for the systematic accounts of ideological contradictions. Several possibilities:

- a. structural change in modes of production change the matrix of material affirmations and sanctions. This means that old subjectivities no longer constitute the basis for qualification into roles/relations.
- b. class struggle over affirmations/sanctions can set up competing systems of interpellation, competing “material matrices.” Unions impose sanctions on certain kinds of competitiveness among workers, thus counteracting the affirmations of the market. Result = **clashing subjectivities based on clashing affirmations/sanctions.** (i.e.,

coexistence of antagonistic class-alter ideologies.) These are examples how conscious, motivated practice can establish the material framework for the transformation of subjectivities by producing contradictions (or intensifying them).

c. The different interpellations of the same individual may contradict each other: the different/multiple subjectivities may not be congruent with each other. For example: the forms of subjectivity of women within bourgeois/patriarchal sex-gender interpellations are not congruent with the form of interpellation of women as graduate students within competitive bourgeois academic relations. The former demands passivity, gentleness, the latter demands aggressiveness, assertiveness, competitiveness. Such contradiction can motivate a variety of responses: struggles to change the affirmations/sanctions in the academic relations; rejection of the female subjectivity of the sex-gender system (women “act like men”); struggles to transform the sex-gender relations of affirmation/sanction.

d. **Fundamental importance of temporality of change:** the speed of social change as such becomes crucial. If change is very slow, then smooth adjustments are possible (for example, if changes that require new subjectivities take several generations to accomplish); if change is much more rapid -- many dramatic changes within a single generation -- then subjective reconstitution becomes problematic. Life-cycle perspective on the operation of ideology.

2.4 Dimensions of subjectivity/the universe of ideology [Not discussed in the lecture]

A second way in which ideology is structured revolves around what Therborn calls the “universe of ideology.” The precise status of this concept is not clear viz-a-viz the categories of modes of interpellation. One way of thinking about it is that this universe is a way of talking about the kind of subject which is being formed, whereas the modes of interpellation designate aspects of the formation of that subject. In any event, this discussion centers on two axes of distinction:

- i. existential vs. historical ideologies/subjectivities
- ii. inclusive vs. positional ideologies/subjectivities

The heart of the analysis of class ideologies is the investigation of historical-positional ideologies, i.e., ideologies which create social subjects within the social relations of production. But as Therborn emphasizes, such class-positional-historical ideologies always presuppose an inclusive historical interpellation, since classes always exist as common members of historical social formations/modes of production.

Class vs. non-class ideologies

Class is only one of a variety of positional-historical ideologies. Therborn emphasizes that in every society people are multiple subjects, that they are interpellated into multiple relations with multiple “subjectivities.” A male electrical worker is interpellated as a worker in the social

relations of production, as an electrician craft artisan in the occupational structure, and as a male in the sex-gender relations. And in each of these relations, there are different subjectivities -- forms of what exists, what is good, what is possible

Therborn insists on the radical nonreducibility of these diverse forms of subjectivity/interpellations to class interpellations. In particular, sex-gender subjectivities are not derivable or reducible to class subjectivities. But he does argue in a somewhat vague way that “more” of the patterning of subjectivity is structured by class ideologies than by nonclass ideologies in class societies. He thus seems to argue that:

Class interpellation ---limits --> subjectivity <---selects---- Gender interpellation

The important issue here is that class-subject formation does not exhaust ideology, both because positional-historical ideology is only one type of ideology, and because class relations constitute only one--although perhaps the most decisive--basis for historical-positional interpellations. We live multiple subjectivities/identities, and the problem is to understand the structure of their interconnections and contradictions, not to collapse one into another.

Ego and Alter Class ideologies

Individuals are interpellated into class positions through class ideologies. But because a class position is a relation, not just a role, this interpellation involves a double reality:

interpellation with respect to the position itself = ego ideologies = identity
interpellation with respect to the other of the position = alter ideologies = relation to other identities

Ego-ideologies constitute the identity of subjects; alter ideologies relate one class to another as relational subjects. “It is these class alter-ideologies which constitute the subjects of class struggle and class collaboration.”

Bourgeois and proletarian ego-ideologies, thus, can be seen as defining the forms of subjection-qualification necessary for individuals to fulfill the practices of these respective class locations. Thus, for example, Therborn lists as ingredients of proletarian ego-ideology as involving: “an orientation to work, to manual labor, including physical prowess, toughness, endurance, and dexterity. The wage-contract further implies a distinction between work and leisure work being for the purpose of consumption and family reproduction” and so on.

Alter-ideologies, on the other hand, specify the subjective form of domination/subordination within the relations of exploitation. “The crucial aspect of alter-ideology is, in the case of the exploiter class, the rationale for their domination over other classes, and in the case of the exploited classes, the basis for their resistance to the exploiters.”

An essential part of ideological class struggle, then, is whether workers are interpellated into bourgeois alter-ideology or into proletarian alter-ideology, that is, whether the subjective orientation of workers to capitalists is based on the logic/rationale for bourgeois rule or proletarian resistance. Both usually coexist in some uneasy balance.

Using these distinctions, Therborn gives a very interesting account of the emergence of proletarian alter-ideology in early capitalism. He writes that “Proletarian alter-ideology could...draw upon previous peasant and artisan ideology in resisting the march of capitalist commodity relations. But the sanction of defeat compelled the working class-information to abandon peasant and artisan solutions to its proletarianization.”

The emergence of a distinctively proletarian alter-ideology of resistance to capitalism was the result of concrete struggles of workers on the basis of specific subjective orientations. This is crucial: just as ideologies interpellate individuals as specific kinds of subjects with specific subjectivities, the practices of individuals and classes transforms those ideologies/interpellations through the experience of victories and defeats.

APPENDIX: ALTHUSSER'S TREATMENTS OF IDEOLOGY

Althusser's core work on ideology is concerned with three interconnected issues:

1. the functions of ideology;
2. the process of ideology;
3. the mechanisms of ideology in general.

Functions:

The analysis of functions begins with the perfectly intuitive observation that for society to continue to exist, it must produce, and for it to produce the conditions of production must be reproduced. Those conditions consist of forces of production and relations of production.

The forces of production themselves consist of means of production and labor power. The former are reproduced directly within the economic sphere. The latter, however, are reproduced in families, and thus involve a much more complex process. This analysis of Althusser's was very important, if sketchy, because it opened the way for a more systematic analysis of the role of women in the reproduction of labor power in the family and provided a basis for an account of the specificity of the sexual division of labor in the family. The heart of the analysis, however, centers on the reproduction of the relations of production. "How is the reproduction of the relations of production secured?", Althusser asks. The answer = by and through ideology.

The essential function of ideology from a social point of view is thus specified as the reproduction of the relations of production.

Process of Ideology:

This function is performed through apparatuses. It is a material process. Ideology is not primarily understood as ideas in people's heads, but as a social/material practice institutionalized in apparatuses: or as Althusser puts it:

"The existence of the ideas of his belief (i.e. the cognitive form of the beliefs) is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject" (p. 158).

Althusser then goes to great pains to identify this material apparatus as a state apparatus--the I.S.A.s. The reason for this is, I think, primarily to establish ideological apparatuses as locations of domination and class power, and to reject all empiricist definitions of the state (in which the state is defined by its formal, manifest "public" status). Althusser wants to develop theoretical concepts in which the unity of the concept is a consequence of the unity of real effects in the world, and in such terms the juridical boundaries for the state are clearly inadequate. This is what pushes him towards a functional definition of concepts, such that the state becomes all apparatuses of social reproduction, regardless of their form. I would argue that since the character of the unity of ideological apparatuses and the way in which they produce their effects

are so different from the state in the normal sense of the word, that more is obscured than clarified by calling both “state” apparatuses.

Mechanism of Ideology

This is undoubtedly the most famous of Althusser’s formulations on ideology, and I think the aspect of his analysis which constitutes the most important breakthrough, opening up an extremely interesting terrain of new work. The essential mechanism by which ideology functions to reproduce social relations through the material process of the ideological apparatuses is by “*transforming individuals into subjects.*” The basic logic is as follows:

In order for a social system to function in a stable way, to be reproduced, it is essential that the individuals who occupy places in that structure be able to perform their duties/practices “by themselves,” “on their own,” that is, that they be formed in such a way that they are able to act as appropriate subjects within the structure. “Subject” in this context has a double meaning, both of which are intended: subject as author of one’s acts; and subject as subjected to an external rule authority (as in “a subject of the King”). Ideology is the process by which subjects in this double sense are formed. They are “interpellated”--hailed as specific subjects--in the sense that they are given an identity that inserts them into a structure of social relations, and that in one way or another they “recognize” this identity.

When Althusser adds that “ideology is eternal” or that “ideology has no history” what he means is that this mechanism is constitutive of all human society, that the process of transforming human individuals into subjects is a panhistorical process. He does not mean (emphatically) that the specific content of this transformation is eternal: ideologies do have a history, and thus different kinds of subjects are formed in different kinds of societies.

Althusser then proposes a specific way of conceptualizing this mechanism in his discussion of interpellation and imaginary relations. He contrasts two images of the cognitive effects of ideology on individuals:

- a. ideology is an imaginary representation of reality
- b. ideology is an imaginary representation of the relationship of the individual to reality

In the first instance, ideology is simply distorted perception of the real; in the second, ideology represents the relation of the subject to the real. This latter kind of imaginary (=in the imagination) representation constitutes the process of interpellation since it makes possible the subjective insertion of the individual into social relations: ideology tells you your place in relations.

Althusser adopts an extremely complicated metaphor in his discussion of Christian theology when he refers to the Subject with a capital S and the subjection of subjects to the Subject as being the universal form of interpellation. This just an elliptical way--I think--of saying that

interpellation as a social process is structured around a unifying principle, which in class societies is subordination to the rule of a ruling class: that is, interpellation is always to a structure of social relations dominated by a mode of production and a given class's domination.

Criticisms of Althusser's Argument:

1. There is really one a perfunctory lip service given to contradictions in the process of the formation of subjects/subjectivity: using the metaphor of ideology as a concert, Althusser writes: "This concert is dominated by a single score, occasionally disturbed by contradictions (those of the remnants of former ruling classes, those of the proletarians and their organizations)..." (p. 146). But there is no systematic character to the contradictory formation of subjectivity.

This underdevelopment of the contradictory character of the process is reflected in the functionalist tendencies in Althusser's argument. He begins by positing certain requirements for the reproduction of production relations--conditions of existence of those relations. And he derives the functions of ideology from the necessity of fulfilling those conditions. But he does not ask how it come to pass that the functions are forthcoming--why doesn't society just collapse? Why are functions fulfilled? And he doesn't provide us with a way of comprehending the variability in the forms of fulfilling functions or the effectiveness of requirements of reproduction are fulfilled simply by virtue of being requirements. The way out of this is hinted in various claims that class struggle transforms relations and apparatuses, but this is clearly an underdeveloped line of thought in the analysis.

2. The transformation of individuals into subjects is seen as a purely class-subject process. There is no discussion of nonclass subjectivities/subjects.

3. The structure of subjectivity that constitutes an "interpellated subject" is completely unspecified, and when it is discussed it is almost entirely cognitive. Great stress is placed on such things as nationalism, moralism, etc. This is also reflected in the emphasis on educational ISA's. Ironically, then, the upshot of the analysis is really a stress on consciousness/conscious aspects of subjectivity.

The cognitive bias has two aspects (emphasized by Theborn in his critique of Althusser): a) only scientific knowledge counts as "true" knowledge; all other forms are distortions of one sort or another (practical experience cannot count as knowledge); b) human beings are motivated as subjects only by what they know (true or imaginary) = patently false. Human beings are motivated by fear, resignation, love, etc., as well as by knowledge of situations, etc.

4. No concepts for the analysis of ideologies are given, only for the analysis of ideology-in-general. This is an explicit restriction on the discussion, but it greatly reduces its usefulness, since for political and historical purposes the important problems are the decoding of specific ideologies.

5. Finally--and to many critics most importantly--Althusser's analysis risks seeing human actors as being purely passive recipients of ideology. Babies are born into relations in which their future-interpellation is already inscribed. They somehow or other absorb various inputs/experiences in the material practices and rituals of the family ISA which transforms them from baby-individuals into baby-subjects. But no discussion is presented at all of the baby's role in the process. But, if babies are to be formed/constituted as subjects, they must have certain capacities, capacities which enable them to engage these practices, recognize themselves, and form themselves in their interaction with the practices of their parents. And to say all of this is to suggest that there may be psychological structures, capacities, needs, drives, etc., that characterize human individuals and make them able to be interpellated in specific ways by ideology but which have a distinct autonomy in the process of interpellation itself. Ian Craibe has put this problem this way: "If it is the case that we can talk about psychic structures which are as it were, 'put to use' by the social formation to produce appropriate subjects, then the implication is that these structures have a real and not just epiphenomenal autonomy, and that they can outlast any particular social formation." There is no reason to assume a perfect correspondence between these two orders or domains of structure, and this--as we shall see in our discussion of Marxism and Feminism--opens the way for the thesis that the struggle for transformation of male-female relations and subjectivities is radically irreducible to the struggle for the transformation of class relations.

A note on Althusser's concept of Ideology and the theory of Alienation

Althusser goes to great lengths to distance himself from theories of alienation. Indeed, he sometimes goes so far as to say that Marxism has absolutely nothing to do with the conceptual terrain discussed in terms of "alienation." This is his famous or infamous thesis about the radical "epistemological break" between Marx's early works and his later works.

While there are real differences between Althusser and so-called "humanist" Marxists, I think that in fact much of the theory of alienation is attempting to conceptualize parallel processes to Althusser's (and perhaps especially Therborn's) account of interpellation in class societies. Let me briefly try to establish that claim:

Alienation is a process by which human capacities are appropriated from human actors and turned back against them as an "alien" power: activities of self-creativity are transformed into self-domination. In these terms alienation can be viewed from two angles: (a) as a way of talking about a relation of domination (domination = appropriated human capacities); (b) as a way of talking about the formation of human subjectivity under relations of domination (human subjectivities are formed in such a way that such capacities can be appropriated). In either case, there is a close link between Althusser's theses about interpellation of subjects and theses about alienation: alienated subjectivity is the necessary form of subjectivity of human individuals interpellated into alienating social relations. The various ways Marxist-humanists have discussed such subjectivity--Marcuse's "one-dimensional man" and "repressive desublimation;" Sartre's "serialization;" etc.--can then be seen as specific accounts of such interpellation.

Where Althusser decisively does differ from these “humanist” accounts is in the thesis that in all societies there is a social process of the formation of subjectivity, not just class society. While the form of subjectivity in capitalism may be a distortion/alienation of “species being,” of human natural capacities, this does not imply--in Althusser’s account--that in Communism human natural being is directly formed into subjectivity without the intervention of social practices. Those social practices may form a type of human personality and subjectivity that is liberating, actualizing, corresponding to certain innate capacities and potentialities, but it is nevertheless a social product. Subjectivity can never be a process entirely of undetermined, free self-creation.