

**Göran Therborn**

**The Ideology of  
Power and the  
Power of Ideology**

**Verso**

# Introduction

## Demarcations and Departures

The main concern of this essay is the operation of ideology in the organization, maintenance, and transformation of power in society. From the point of view of a class analysis of social domination, this involves questions about the role of ideology in class rule and class struggle. My aims are basically theoretical in character: to develop some analytical concepts and explanatory propositions about the operation of ideology in power relationships and social change. In a sense, what is presented here is a sequel to *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*<sup>1</sup> — a work that was also concerned with the organization, reproduction and transformation of power, but whose central focus was the state.

These concerns and intentions themselves delimit to some extent my consideration of the almost inexhaustible topic, 'ideology'. But there remain many possible entries to, and paths through, the field of ideology; to give the reader a fair chance to evaluate the particular one taken here, some rationale for it is required at the outset. Above all, there is a need for some rudimentary but motivated definitions of what will be discussed; and the present text should be explicitly situated in a conjuncture of theory and research, in relation to whose questions and problems it is written.

'Ideology' will be used here in a very broad sense. It will

not necessarily imply any particular content (falseness, miscognition, imaginary as opposed to real character), nor will it assume any necessary degree of elaboration and coherence. Rather it will refer to that aspect of the human condition under which human beings live their lives as conscious actors in a world that makes sense to them to varying degrees. Ideology is the medium through which this consciousness and meaningfulness operate. The consciousness of every new-born human being is formed through largely unconscious psychodynamic processes, and it functions in and through a symbolic order of language codes. Ideology, however, is not reducible to either of these.

Thus the conception of ideology employed here deliberately includes both everyday notions and 'experience' and elaborate intellectual doctrines, both the 'consciousness' of social actors and the institutionalized thought-systems and discourses of a given society. But to study these as ideology means to look at them from a particular perspective: not as bodies of thought or structures of discourse *per se*, but as manifestations of a particular being-in-the-world of conscious actors, of human subjects. In other words, to conceive of a text or an utterance as ideology is to focus on the way it operates in the formation and transformation of human subjectivity.

From this perspective a distinction may be drawn between, on the one hand, ideology, and, on the other, science, art, philosophy and law. This distinction pertains primarily to different dimensions of analysis, and only secondarily to intrinsic content. Not all ideology is or can operate as science, art, philosophy, or law, but all these emerge out of ideological configurations and may function as ideologies. Like all human activities, scientific, aesthetic, philosophical and legal practices are always enmeshed in ideology, but their emergence as specific, institutionalized practices in a historical division of labour also involves a

'break' or 'rupture' with surrounding ideologies through the production of specific discourses geared to producing special effects, separate from everyday experience and persuasion.

In the case of science this break meant the discovery-production of patterns of determination and systematic investigation of their operation.<sup>2</sup> However, the constitution of a particular discourse called science means neither that its practice is or will remain immune from the subjectivity of its practitioners, nor that it is incapable of affecting the subjectivity of the members of society, of functioning as ideology. The works of Adam Smith, Marx and Darwin, for instance, constitute works of science and can be studied, evaluated, developed, attacked or defended, as such. But they have also operated as ideologies, as 'economic liberalism', 'scientific socialism' and 'Social Darwinism', and may also be studied, evaluated, developed or resisted, in these senses, in terms of their diffusion, efficacy, and implications.

This essay is not an endeavour of Marxological exegesis, but since I consider myself to work on the basis of historical materialism, a brief clarification of the relationship of my conception of ideology to that of Marx is called for. In Marx we may discern at least two different conceptions of ideology or the ideological. One of them is basically the same as that adopted here. Ideology is then seen as the medium through which men make their history as conscious actors. In this sense, it refers to the 'forms in which men become conscious of this conflict [between the forces and the relations of production] and fight it out'. Within this perspective there are two basic concerns. One inquires how given ideologies are to be explained and involves the problems of material determination. The other has to do with the struggle between different class ideologies and their relationship to non-class ideologies. The former is dealt with

by Marx and Engels in brief theoretical statements, the latter above all in letters of political advice to the labour movement.<sup>3</sup> It is this path, and these concerns, that I follow here.

However, this perception of ideology is linked to and dominated by another, in the works of Marx and Engels. Here 'ideology' refers to a false, idealist approach to and understanding of human consciousness and the motives of human action. 'Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. . . . He works with mere thought material, which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, and does not investigate further for a more remote source independent of thought'.<sup>4</sup> Here the opposition is not between bourgeois and proletarian ideology, but between science and ideology as such, true and false consciousness.

It is this latter conception of ideology that has become dominant in the Marxist tradition, and echoes still in Althusser. I have broken with it here because it has been tied to a view of human motivation that I find untenable. This view of motivation held the two conceptions of ideology together in the works of Marx and Engels. Basically, they tended to regard the 'superstructure' of forms of consciousness as epiphenomena. Human behaviour was determined by 'interest', by class interests. The forms of consciousness either corresponded to these 'interests', as 'true' consciousness, or not, in which case they were illusions, and as such ineffective (at least in the longer run). This alternative is exemplified in Marx's treatment both of bourgeois ideology,<sup>5</sup> and of proletarian ideology, the latter in the form of a firm belief that the working class would develop a true consciousness of its class interests, in spite of

the distorting appearances of capitalist relations of production, in spite of 'reification', 'commodity fetishism' and the 'wage-form' of exploitation.

This notion of motivation by interest assumes that normative conceptions of what is good and bad and conceptions of what is possible and impossible are given in the reality of existence and are accessible only through true knowledge of the latter.<sup>6</sup> In my opinion these are unwarranted and untenable assumptions. They represent a utilitarian residue in Marxism, which should be rejected, explicitly and decisively, once for all.

The broad definition of ideology adopted here departs from the usual Marxist one, by not restricting it to forms of illusion and miscognition, and also from the usual liberal conception, which is not accepted mainly because I think we should refuse to take what it implies for granted — that forms of consciousness and meaning that are not set out in more or less coherent doctrines are either unimportant in the organization of, and struggles for, power, or are self-evident, pragmatic 'common sense' (as in the notorious 'end of ideology' thesis).

Finally, it should be noted that, for all its breadth, this definition of ideology does retain a specific analytical dimension, which makes it distinguishable from, say, political structures or processes, economic relations, or forces of production. In this respect it differs from the almost all-inclusive notion of 'culture' deployed in much British writing on working-class culture,<sup>7</sup> and from François Châtelet's equally inclusive definition of ideology, which covers nearly everything between the 'long duration' of linguistic structures and the 'short duration' of events, such as 'structures of kinship, techniques of survival (and development)', 'the organization of power'.<sup>8</sup> These all-embracing definitions tend either to conceal the fact that a much narrower definition is actually being employed, or, if

taken seriously, to drown everything in the same water.

Raymond Williams, whose great work on culture no student of ideology can afford to ignore, has rightly criticized the idea that 'base' and 'superstructure' are 'separable concrete entities'.<sup>9</sup> What he has made less clear and emphatic, however, is the equally important point that 'indissoluble real processes' may in their actual operation have diverse, analytically distinguishable dimensions, and that an adequate grasp of the former may precisely require these clear analytical distinctions. Even apart from the fact that 'culture' operates as an important figure of discourse, the study of which is fascinating in itself (as in Williams's own *Culture and Society*), the concept of culture may be useful alongside a broad definition of ideology. It may, for instance, be employed either as a shorthand for the ensemble of everyday activities and ideologies of a particular group or class, or as a more general, inclusive concept for ideology, science and art and, possibly, other practices studied from the point of view of their production of meaning.

However, the concept of ideology is not dependent on a concept of culture, contrary to what has recently been argued by Richard Johnson. His position is that 'ideologies never address ("interpellate") a "naked" subject'. And: 'ideologies always work upon a ground: that ground is *culture*'. But the theoretical redundancy of the concept becomes clear when we substitute one of Johnson's own two definitions of 'culture' for the word itself: 'ideologies always work upon a ground': that ground is 'the complex of ideologies that are actually adopted as moral preferences or principles of life'.<sup>10</sup> Althusser said something similar ten years ago: 'ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects'.<sup>11</sup>

*Classes* are here defined strictly in economic terms, denoting the 'bearers' or 'agents' of particular relations of

production. This is in accordance with the classical Marxist tradition but differs from the usage of Nicos Poulantzas, who insists that classes must be defined at the political and ideological, as well as the economic, 'level'. To *define* classes in ideological terms, however, precludes one of the most problematic questions that a materialist theory of ideology must confront: how are ideologies and classes of economic agents related?

'Power' will in this context refer mainly to political power in the usual sense, to the centralized condensation of social power-relationships invested in the state. This is, above all, simply a choice of analytical interest on my part. But in view of the current vogue for Foucault's 'micropolitics' of power, the crucial significance of the state for all societal relations of power should perhaps be underlined.<sup>12</sup>

This essay is situated in a particular theoretical conjuncture — a conjuncture of Marxist discourse on ideology opened by Althusser and his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'. While the most widespread effect of this essay may have been to make fashionable the rather dubious notion of 'ideological state apparatuses' as a handy institutional label, its real, twofold importance lay elsewhere. First, Althusser conceptualized, explicitly and clearly, the operation of ideology in terms of the formation of human subjectivity, thus linking Marxist social theory to psychodynamics and psychoanalysis. Second, he broke with the tradition of viewing ideology as a body of ideas or thought, conceiving it instead as a social process of address, or 'interpellations', inscribed in material social matrices.

These contributions provide the starting-point of the present essay. If it begins *from* them, rather than simply applying Althusser's theory to new areas, this is because they are, in some important respects, still confined within limits from which a developed theory of ideology will have to break free. Althusser's work on ideology has stimulated a

lively discussion, in which a number of questions have been raised or implicitly introduced. The concepts and propositions set out below are my own contribution, but there is no space here for any detailed comments on the discussion so far, or on other recent works on ideology.<sup>13</sup>

To me there seem to be two main flaws in Althusser's conception of ideology. First, there is the problem of what we shall call the mode of ideological interpellation, that is to say, what ideologies tell the subjects they address and constitute. In Althusser's view ideology represents an 'imaginary distortion of the real relations' of individuals to the relations of production, and to the relations that derive from them. This definition is related to two theses, both of which I find untenable: 1. that only scientific knowledge is 'true' or 'real' knowledge, all other forms of cognition (in everyday experience, for example) being distortions or forms of miscognition; 2. that human beings are (significantly) motivated as subjects only by what they know, by true or distorted knowledge. The first of these theses I have rejected in my definition of ideology. But the break with it must also entail a new conception of the material matrix within which the domination of a given ideology is reproduced — a conception that provides room for the (re)production of non-scientific experience and learning. A break with the second thesis requires the development of a conception of different modes of ideological interpellation in the constitution of motivated subjects.

Second, there is the question of the relationship of class to ideology, which was not explicitly raised and still less answered by Althusser. He did posit that the 'ideological state apparatuses' are both a stake and a site of the class struggle, and that the ideology of the ruling class is realized through the class struggle in them. But this is at once too little and too much. Too little in that it neither defends nor

transcends the classical Marxist problematic centred on the material, class determination of ideologies. Too much because it takes as transparent the notions of class ideology (Althusser is mainly referring to ruling-class ideology) and ruling-class ideological domination.

There is a hiatus in Althusser's argument which seems to be determined, not through logical necessity but as a close contingent possibility, by the essential problematic of his text: the mechanisms of reproduction of a given mode of production. On the one hand, Althusser talks of class relations of exploitation, which have to be reproduced, and class struggle, through the mechanisms of which reproduction is asserted. On the other, he discusses individuals, the formation of their subjectivity and of their submission to the given social order. However, he omits the question of how classes are constituted as struggling forces, resisting exploitation or actively engaged in it.

In drawing a line of demarcation from stratification concepts of class, contemporary Marxists, particularly in the Althusserian tradition, have laid great stress on the idea that 'classes exist only in a relation of class struggle'. But this is only a definition, which does not answer the question: how are classes constituted as human forces in struggle? It should be clear, though to many writers it apparently is not,<sup>14</sup> that 'struggle' does not follow logically from the concept of relations of production, from the definition of classes as occupying the places of producers and appropriators of surplus labour. 'Exploitation' does not *per se* imply *resistance* to exploitation, the exploiters' resistance to the resistance of the exploited, or a struggle over exploitation as such. Despite the pejorative connotations of the word, the concept of 'exploitation' in historical materialism refers simply to the separate appropriation of surplus labour; in other words, to the fact that one category of economic agents works more than is necessary for their own

reproduction and that the fruits of their surplus labour are appropriated by another. Instead of trying to confront the problem of the ideological constitution of struggling class subjects, many Marxists have tended to fall back on the crude utilitarian notion of 'interest': it is in the 'interest' of the exploited to resist exploitation and of the exploiters to defend it. But 'interests' by themselves do not *explain* anything. 'Interest' is a *normative* concept indicating the most rational course of action in a predefined game, that is, in a situation in which gain and loss have already been defined. The problem to be explained, however, is how members of different classes come to define the world and their situation and possibilities in it in a particular way. The attempt to confront systematically the problems of ideology and class also requires clarification of the relationship between class ideology and subjectivity, and possible forms of human subjectivity other than those of class membership.

These criticisms of Althusser amount to saying that the further development of a theory of ideology requires a shift or broadening of the object of inquiry from the role of ideology in the reproduction of exploitation and power to the generation, reproduction, and transformation of ideologies. It requires, then, a break from the lingering restrictions of Althusser's problematic of the sixties, most notably the rigid demarcation between science and ideology. And on this basis it is possible to return to the questions raised by Althusser, and to offer more nearly adequate answers.

Finally, with all due respect to Althusser, a discussion of ideology and power cannot confine itself to his formulation of the task: to examine the reproduction of exploitative relations of production, and the problems this raises. Just as pertinent is the Gramscian problematic of historical social formations and the focus on hegemony.<sup>15</sup> There is also the Lukácsian problematic of revolutionary class conscious-

ness as the key to social change. Further, there are important non-Marxist approaches pertaining to the problem, such as Foucault's theses on the 'order of discourse' in society,<sup>16</sup> the Weberian problematic of 'legitimation', recently spreading into Marxist or Marxisant discourse, particularly in the United States and West Germany; and then there is the question of 'consensus'. After outlining the contours of a materialist theory of ideology, I will try to come to terms with these other approaches as well.