The "end of ideology" again? The concept of ideology in the era of post-modern theory

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Abstract (Document Summary)

If one specific consequence of [Michel Foucault]'s thought is the claim that the concept of ideology is inadequate as an analytical tool, and if post - structuralism and post - Marxism purport to make the concept meaningless and without theoretical foundations, then post - modernism's reformulation of the relations among rationality, interests, and power along neo - Nietzschean lines threatens to render the whole concept of ideology redundant ([Terry Eagleton], 1991: xii). Such a reformulation is not specific to a particular school of thought. It is an impulse widely shared by many theorists in the theoretical development of post - modernism. Marxist theories of ideology are deeply grounded in the Enlightenment tradition, with a belief in reason, rationality, and the possibility of objective knowledge. In the wake of the post - modernist rejection of the Enlightenment tradition and related concepts of rationality and truth, however, the distinction between knowledge and ideology becomes problematic. Since we can only know the world through language and discourse, and as Foucault has suggested, discourse is always power - laden, we end up with a dark Nietzschean vision: all thoughts are ideological because they are all expressions and rationalizations of particular interests. Ideology, then, becomes pervasive and all - encompassing. But if every discourse is ideological in the sense that it is always power - laden, and if ideology explains everything, then it explains nothing. The concept is expanded to the point of meaninglessness. It is redundant and without any sense of critical specificity. The logical conclusion, then, is that one might be better off to simply write off the concept altogether. And this is indeed what some post - modernists have proposed. Richard Rorty, for example, suggests that we follow Foucault's suspension of ideology and focus on detailed historical narratives of the operation of power.

After enjoying a period of resurgence in critical social theory in the 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of ideology has been increasingly contested by critics variously associated with post - structuralism, post - modernism, and post - Marxism. These critics have not only highlighted the limitations and inadequacies of Marxian conceptions of ideology, they have challenged the very theoretical validity of "ideology" as a useful analytical tool in social theory. Yet I want to argue that the theoretical limitations of these criticisms leave open the possibility of renewed theoretical work on the concept of ideology. The study of "ideology" may now exist in a state of crisis, but times of crisis often provide new opportunities and starting points for rejuvenation. I want simply to highlight two tendencies in recent social theory that are noteworthy in this regard. First, there is a remarkable degree of convergence among theorists from quite diverse theoretical traditions who oppose the tendencies that threaten a new "end of ideology" thesis (see for example, [Geras, Norman], 1987; 1988; [Nancy Fraser], 1989; Hall, 1989; [Harvey], 1989; Thompson, 1990; Eagleton, 1991; Fiske, 1991). John Thompson (1990) and Terry Eagleton (1991), in particular, have made important recent contributions in their respective attempts to defend the relevance of some concept of ideology in the "era of post - modern theory." Writing from the perspective of critical hermeneutics, Thompson reconceptualizes ideology as "meaning in the service of domination." In a different vein, Eagleton has written a compelling defense of the necessity of maintaining some sort of a realist epistemology in social analysis -- a defense that seeks to rescue the concept of ideology from the post - modernist rubble of signification.

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It has been argued that in the 1950s Western social sciences were dominated by an "orthodox consensus" formed around a broad "theory of industrial society" (Giddens, 1977). One of the key dimensions of this theory was that class conflict had become "normatively regulated" in the West and that the major ideological struggles characteristic of the transition from "traditional" agrarian
to "modern" industrial societies had essentially disappeared. Most notably, the emphasis on normative consensus and the focus on the mechanisms of the liberal state presented a view of a world where -- to paraphrase the title of Daniel Bell's classic book from the period -- "ideology" had ended (Bell, 1960). But the political polarization and radicalization of the 1960s problematized the assumptions of the "orthodox consensus" and led to a widespread "rediscovery" of the concept of ideology (Hall, 1982). In recent years, however, the concept seems to have once more fallen out of favour in the wake of critical movements associated with post-modernism, post-structuralism, and post-Marxism. Indeed, one hears repeated claims of another "end of ideology."

To be sure, the ways in which the concept of ideology is said to be obsolete today are fundamentally different from those in the 1950s. If the "end of ideology" argument in the 1950s was made on the basis of a celebration of a presumably achieved, normatively regulated, consensual society, the new critique of ideology during the 1980s has been based on the exact opposite: a celebration of differences and the heterogeneity of discursive positions. Moreover, post-structuralism and post-modernism have not suspended the concept of ideology by simply declaring the arrival of a new sociopolitical configuration in which "ideology" is no longer relevant. Rather, they have challenged the concept by undermining the very theoretical foundations and epistemological categories that have made Marxian conceptions of ideology meaningful. In a uniquely post-modernist twist, it has been argued that the concept of ideology has quietly dissolved into a world of free-floating signifiers and mutually exclusive discourses.

In this essay, I want to outline the main theoretical arguments of the new critique of ideology and examine the ways in which recent critical movements appear to have rendered the concept of ideology obsolete. I will then evaluate the strengths and limitations of the new critique. While recent movements in social theory have made important contributions and offered much-needed correctives to Marxian theories of ideology, I argue that it is premature to write off the Marxian perspective entirely.

Beyond the concept of ideology

Foucault's archeology of knowledge

Definitions of the concept of ideology in the Marxian tradition are diverse and often contradictory. There are, for example, different conceptions of the character of ideology (from formulations that define ideology as systems of ideas and beliefs to Althusserian and Gramscian emphases on the material and institutionally embedded character of ideologies), its nature (from false, partial ideas to naturalized ideas and reified consciousness), and its class belongingness (from rigid, systematic class consciousness to discursive elements without necessary class belongingness) (see Marx and Engels, 1970; Althusser, 1971; Lukacs, 1971; Gramsci, 1971; Williams, 1977: 55-71; Sumner, 1979; Larrain, 1979; Mouffe, 1979; Lovell, 1980; Hall, 1977; 1982; 1985; 1989). But these different conceptions of ideology in the Marxian tradition share some fundamental concerns, for example, the relation between consciousness and being, and the adequacy of ideology as a form of knowledge. One of the key theorists in contemporary social theory to have directed attention away from such concerns is Michel Foucault, particularly in his later work.

First, in contrast to a Marxist concern with the adequacy of ideology as a form of knowledge, Foucault is not interested in evaluating the contents of systems of knowledge. Rather he is concerned with the processes, procedures, and apparatuses whereby truth, knowledge, and beliefs are produced and deployed in particular regions of social management -- that is, to use Foucault's terminology, the "politics of the discursive regime," or the politics of truth (Foucault, 1972). In this way, Foucault suspends the categories of truth/falsity or truth/ideology and dissolves the problematic of epistemological justification. He does this simply by refusing to take up the question of whether the various regimes he has studied provide knowledge that is in any sense true, warranted, adequate, or undistorted (Fraser, 1989).

Second, Foucault's analysis of power goes beyond the domain of consciousness and cognition, which is the traditional focus of various theories of ideology. In Foucault's view, modern power touches individuals through the various forms of constraint constitutive of their social practices rather than primarily through the distortion of their belief systems. Thus, while Marxian theories of ideology generally suggest that the persistence of a particular social order is secured by consent to ruling ideologies, for Foucault, a particular form of social cohesion is achieved by way of practices, techniques, and methods which infiltrate not so much minds, but bodies. In other words, technologies of power operate not so much on the conscious of the subject as on the unconsciousness and on the body object. Tony Bennett's contrast between Foucault and Gramsci is instructive in this regard:

Foucault emphasizes the role of social technologies in regulating the conduct of the populace conceived as objects of social administration. This, in turn, leads to a concern with the body/soul nexus: with how power relations invest the body, train it, force it to perform tasks with a view to effecting a modification of the soul in the production of self-monitoring and self-regulating agents of conduct. For Gramsci, by contrast, the emphasis falls on the role which ideologies play in organizing cultural, moral and intellectual leadership over the people conceived as subjects of political action -- on the struggle, that is, for hearts and minds where ideologies are assessed for their 'psychological' influence in organizing the consciousness of political subjects (1990: 247, emphasis in original).

Proponents of the Foucauldian position have argued that Foucault's emphasis on practices, and his concern with unconscious embodiment in the operation of power, render any attempt to discuss power in relation to systems of beliefs superficial and limited. Even Gramsciian versions of ideology as "common sense" and the articulation of discursive elements become inadequate as tools of social critique. By implication, the notion of ideological struggle in and around consciousness is also no longer sufficient.

Post-Marxist discourse theory and the critique of epistemology

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Marxist theories of ideology typically presuppose a fundamental epistemological distinction between being and consciousness, reality and thought, object and discourse. Ideology belongs to the domain of consciousness, thought, and discourse which stands in a specific relation to material reality. In addition to Foucault, this fundamental distinction has also been challenged by a radical discourse theory and its concomitant critique of epistemology (Macdonell, 1986). Consider, in this regard, the post - Althusserian discourse theory of Paul Hirst and Barry Hindess, and beyond this, the post - Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantel Mouffe.

In their book Mode of Production and Social Formation (1977), Hirst and Hindess eradicate every trace of a distinction and correlation between discourse and exterior objects. They criticize Althusser (and their own earlier work!) for retaining the concept of the "real - concrete" which can be appropriated by the "concrete - in - thought." In this way, they argue, Althusserian perspectives fall into the trap of all epistemologies based upon a distinction between "a realm of discourse on the one hand, and a realm of actual or potential objects of discourse on the other" (1977: 19). Although Hirst and Hindess do not deny the existence of an external world, they argue that this is a world about which in principle nothing can be said or known, and to which nothing can be referred (1977: 19). Concepts such as "knowledge" and "representation" thus become problematic. In their words:

The rejection of epistemology implies a rejection of the epistemological conception of knowledge as involving a more or less adequate representation or appropriation of some independently existing reality ... it implies that the relation between discourse and its objects cannot be conceived as an epistemological relation of knowledge at all. (1977: 21 - 2)

This critique of epistemology is pushed even further by Laclau and Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985). They not only reject the distinction between discursive and non - discursive practices, but also criticize Hirst and Hindess for retaining the notion that there may be "objects" not "constructed in discourse." In their view, everything is constituted in and by discourse. Society is a "field of discourse" without an "extra - discursive reality." It cannot be conceived as an integrated whole within which every part is fixed in its position and functioning in relation to every other part by virtue of its relations to a central principle (or a contradiction) which underlies the structure of social relationships. It is no longer possible to locate a unifying principle, such as mode of production, for a concept of society which is knowable. The field of the social is better viewed as a network of dispersed differences caught up in a mobile and incessantly changing (and therefore contingent and provisional) set of articulatory relations to one another. To be sure, Laclau and Mouffe formally insist that their argument "has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought" (1985: 108), and they affirm the material nature of discourse. But these caveats do not carry much theoretical weight in their text (Geras, 1988; Witheford and Gruneau, 1992).

This collapse of the distinction between objects and discourses has drastic implications for the concept of ideology and the project of ideological critique. Theoretically, if reality is constituted in and by discourse, and if objective knowledge of reality is impossible, then much of the talk about ideology as false, mystified, partial representation of the real, or as "those theories which take the appearances of social relations under capitalism at face value" (Lovell, 1980: 24), becomes meaningless. Under this epistemological scepticism, the very act of identifying a form of consciousness as ideological entails some untenable notions of knowledge and truth, which are themselves part of the metaphysical baggage of the nineteenth - century thought that should be discarded (Eagleton, 1991). The concept of ideology is thus deprived of its theoretical foundation.

The social and political dimensions of this argument also have profound implications for the continuing relevance of any form of Marxist analysis. In traditional Marxist formulations, the concept of ideology has an irreducible class dimension. It is seen as connected to historically "objective" social and political interests. Indeed, ideology is often identified with the ideas and beliefs characteristic of particular classes or groups. It is said to have the consequence of concealing or mystifying class interests. Despite subtle differences in formulation -- for example, from a view where ideology simply reflects economic interests, to the Althusserian notion of economic determination "in the last instance" -- Marxist theories of ideology maintain the contention that "there exists some internal relation between particular socio - economic conditions and specific kinds of political or ideological positions" (Eagleton, 1991: 210). In this view, specific social and economic situations give rise to a particular form of ideology. An important objective of ideological critique has been to uncover the specific social and economic interests underlying a particular ideological system or particular forms of ideological constructs within an ideological system.

All these ideas are challenged in the work of Hirst and Hindness. In their slippage from the Althusserian notion of non - necessary correspondence between economic determinations and political and ideological forms to necessarily no correspondence between the two domains, Hirst and Hindness have severed the last link between the social, economic, and the political, ideological (Hall, 1985; Witheford and Gruneau, 1992). Just as objects are ostensibly constituted only in and by discourse, and nothing can be said and known about the real, socioeconomic interests are the products of political and ideological discourses; it is impossible to say "objectively" what politics is actually about. Thus, Hirst and Hindess argue that there can be no justification for a reading of politics and ideology "for the class interests they are alleged to represent . . . political and economic struggles cannot be conceived as the struggles of economic classes" (in Eagleton, 1991: 212).

Laclau and Mouffe endorse this position and extend it. Their post - Marxism goes beyond Marxism not only in the mode of theorizing, but also in the forms of politics. They transport the post - structuralist emphasis on the instability of the relations between the signifiers and the signifieds and on the virtually unlimited "free - play" potential of systems of meaning to the social and political field and sever any necessary link between the economic and the political/ideological. In their view, there is "no logical connection whatsoever" between class position and political or ideological orientations. The signifier constructs the signified, political hegemony constructs the very identity of social agents through the play of signification. Class is just one of the many possible political identities which may or may not be constructed through articulatory practices. In short, the concept of ideology as a system
of representation based on class interests becomes irrelevant. It is replaced by the concept of "articulation" -- the establishment of a relationship among elements (1985: 105). The concept of articulation has a different theoretical status from that of ideology: whereas ideology belongs to the domain of superstructure in the sense that it appeals either to the unifying role of a class (Gramsci, 1971), or to the functional requirements of the logic of reproduction (Althusser, 1971), "articulation is now a discursive practice which does not have a plane of constitution prior to, or outside, the dispersion of the articulated elements" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 109). Since there are no social interconnections outside of an articulatory practice, there is no way of theorizing about determination in the last instance by the economy. The mode of production is only a conceptual construct, it does not exist on its own right, and thus cannot be granted any ontological priority.

Post-structuralism and the end of representation

Much of the theoretical underpinning of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism can be traced back to post-structuralism, particularly Derrida's deconstructionism -- a theoretical orientation which emphasizes the instability of the sign and aims to show how the binary oppositions in structuralism undermine each other in the process of textual meaning (Derrida, 1970: 247 - 64). By dividing the signifier from the signified and by conceiving the linguistic process as the endless play of signifiers, post-structuralism poses a radical challenge to traditional theories of meaning and the idea of representation upon which the concept of ideology has rested. In previous theories of signification, meaning is seen as a function of the sign which refers to either in ward experiences or relations and objects in the real world. It either makes present one's thoughts and feelings or describes social relations and an empirical reality. Structuralism introduces the notion of binary opposition and suggests that meaning in language is a matter of difference, but it still retains the relevance of the referent in its theory of meaning. Post-structuralism presses this notion of difference to infinity, and conceives meaning as the "spin-off" of a potentially endless play of signifiers. Rather than being fixed to a particular signifier, meaning is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers. It cannot be easily grasped and is never fully present in any single sign alone (Eagleton, 1983: 128).

Deconstructionism thus denies the possibility of presenting any coherent view of the world or conceiving it as a totality full of connections and differentiations rather than perpetually shifting fragments. It also denies any possibility of mastering a text and uncovering its underlying meanings and ideological assumptions (the "master code" in structuralist conceptions of ideology and discourse). This critique of representation, therefore, is at the same time a critique and repudiation of interpretation in the hermeneutic tradition. For in this theory,

Writers who create texts or use words do so on the basis of all the other texts and words they have encountered, while readers deal with them in the same way. Cultural life is viewed as a series of texts intersecting with other texts, producing more texts. This intertextual weaving has a life of its own. Whatever we write conveys meanings we do not or could not possibly intend, and our words cannot say what we mean. It is vain to try and master a text because the perpetual interweaving of texts and meanings is beyond our control. Language works through us. (Harvey, 1989: 50 - 1)

Thus, cultural producers merely create raw materials that can be recombined by consumers in any way they wish. The effect of this theory, as Harvey has noted, is to break (deconstruct) the power of the author to impose meanings or offer a continuous narrative and to call into question all the assertions about fixed systems of representation. Knowledge and meaning, therefore, are reduced to a rubble of free-floating signifiers (Harvey, 1989: 350).

This flight from representation and the erosion of the referent also lie at the center of Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation (Baudrillard, 1983). Simulation, defined as the creation of copies for which there are no originals, effectively eliminates the distinction between the real and the imaginary, and dissolves the dualities of reality and representation, truth and falsity. In Baudrillard's theory, image and reality -- whether a reality of social relations or of an empiricist universe -- do not have different ontological statuses. There is simply no difference between image and reality. The question of ideology thus becomes a non-issue. The familiar Althusserian conception that ideology represents an imaginary set of relations to our real conditions of existence (Althusser, 1965), for example, no longer has any meaning in the world of simulations. Since signs no longer refer to the real and meaning has given way to a discourse of empty surfaces, the "reality principle" that underlies much ideological analysis of meaning, such as the semiological project (Barthes, 1967; 1973) that attempts to elucidate different layers of meaning and reveal what is concealed in the semiological texts has to be discarded. In Baudrillard's own words, whereas "ideology corresponds to the betrayal of reality by signs; simulation corresponds to the short-circuit of reality and its reduplication by signs. It is always a false problem to want to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1983: 48). Thus, we are now in the "twilight of the real," in a world where "all systems of meaning become confounded," and "ideology as a means of mapping the intersections between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' loses any effectiveness as a critical 'tool'" (Wakefield, 1990: 105). In short, the era of simulation has replaced the era of ideology.

Discourse, power, and interests in post-modernism

If one specific consequence of Foucault's thought is the claim that the concept of ideology is inadequate as an analytical tool, and if post-structuralism and post-Marxism purport to make the concept meaningless and without theoretical foundations, then post-modernism's reformulation of the relations among rationality, interests, and power along neo-Nietzschean lines threatens to render the whole concept of ideology redundant (Eagleton, 1991: xii). Such a reformulation is not specific to a particular school of thought. It is an impulse widely shared by many theorists in the theoretical development of post-modernism. Marxist theories of ideology are deeply grounded in the Enlightenment tradition, with a belief in reason, rationality, and the possibility of objective
knowledge. In the wake of the post-modernist rejection of the Enlightenment tradition and related concepts of rationality and truth, however, the distinction between knowledge and ideology becomes problematic. Since we can only know the world through language and discourse, and as Foucault has suggested, discourse is always power-laden, we end up with a dark Nietzschean vision: all thoughts are ideological because they are all expressions and rationalizations of particular interests. Ideology, then, becomes pervasive and all-encompassing. But if every discourse is ideological in the sense that it is always power-laden, and if ideology explains everything, then it explains nothing. The concept is expanded to the point of meaninglessness. It is redundant and without any sense of critical specificity. The logical conclusion, then, is that one might be better off to simply write off the concept altogether. And this is indeed what some post-modernists have proposed. Richard Rorty, for example, suggests that we follow Foucault's suspension of ideology and focus on detailed historical narratives of the operation of power.

Such narratives would not unmask something created by power called "ideology" in the name of something not created by power called "validity" or "emancipation." They would just explain who was currently getting and using power for what purposes, and then (unlike Foucault) suggest how some other people might get it and use it for other purposes. The resulting attitude would be neither incredulous and horrified realization that truth and power are inseparable nor Nietzschean Schadenfreude, but rather a recognition that it was only the false lead which Descartes gave us ... that made us think truth and power were separable. We could thus take the Baconian maxim that "knowledge is power" with redoubled seriousness. (1985: 173, emphasis in original)

Strengths and limitations of the new critique of ideology

Such are the forces threatening the new "end of ideology" thesis in contemporary social thought. The precise nature of the challenge presented by these forces, however, is more complicated than it appears to be at first sight. Given that there are so many different conceptions of ideology, that Marx's original writings have been taken up in so many different theoretical directions, and more importantly, that the wide range of debates and complicated history of the concept have seldom been dealt with in much detail in this new critique, it seems necessary to clarify exactly what specific conceptions of ideology are being challenged and rejected. Nancy Fraser (1989) has suggested, for example, that what Foucault has suspended is only a crude view of ideology defined as systems of distorted beliefs. It has also been argued that what Laclau and Mouffe have criticized are only the economic and class reductionist tendencies in the Marxian tradition (Geras, 1987). Similarly, Terry Eagleton argues that post-structuralism often sets up ideology in a "straw target" fashion, where it is seen as a static "set of ideas" and it "always and everywhere involves fixed or 'transcendental' signifiers, imaginary unities, metaphysical grounds and teleological goals" (1991: 198). Thus, a case can be made that notions of ideology and representation that have been challenged are mostly empiricist and class reductionist ones. But the new critique of ideology can not be simply dismissed in this fashion. It has made important challenges that need to be confronted and assessed in more substantial terms.

To begin, it is instructive first to consider the strengths of this challenge. Discourse theory and the post-Marxist turn to the politics of signification have made a contribution by reinforcing the recognition of the constitutive nature of language and discourse. These theoretical movements have offered a deserved critique of any theory of knowledge that claims to escape the reflexivity of language (Wakefield, 1990: 36). In the area of media and popular culture, these theoretical movements call for the analysis of "media beyond representation" (Angus, 1989) and a rejection of the mechanistic division between media and society, a division characteristic of mainstream media research. They also serve as an important (although hardly new) corrective to economic determinist and class reductionist tendencies in Marxist theories of ideology -- tendencies that are at least partly responsible for a failure on the part of the Left to recognize the importance of cultural politics. Post-modernism's emphasis on discourse and the politics of signification has led to

A recognition that the production of images and of discourses is an important facet of activity that has to be analyzed as part and parcel of the reproduction and transformation of any symbolic order. Aesthetic and cultural politics do matter, and the conditions of their production deserve the closest attention. (Harvey, 1989: 355)

Second, Foucault's broad understanding of power demonstrates the limitations of state-centred and economic-political oriented critiques of ideology in the Marxian theoretical tradition. It makes an important correction to what Thompson (1991) calls state-organized, and ideologically secured theories of social reproduction. In suspending the nearly insoluble epistemological questions of truth and determination, Foucault has made possible a welcome return to the concrete analysis of particular ideological and discursive formations, their historical conditions, their effects, and their connection to particular forms of power relations (Hall, 1986). His wide range of work on sexuality, bodily discipline, and bureaucratization has also made it possible to offer a powerful critique of domination outside traditional ideological and class lines. Beyond the conscious and the cognitive, there is a domain of the body object, where technologies of power are also deployed. Ideology not only works along class lines, but also along other axes, for example, sex, race, and nation-state. To be sure, there is no reason why Marxist analyses, especially those based on the Gramscian conception of hegemony, cannot be extended to non-class areas, if not to the domain of literal "unconsciousness" embodiments. But traditionally, Marxian perspectives have indeed overprivileged ideological analysis along class lines to the relative exclusion of gender and other social cleavages. The new critique of ideology makes a much needed corrective. It contributes to an understanding of the importance of difference and "otherness" "not as something to be added on to more fundamental Marxist categories, but as something that should be omnipresent from the very beginning in any attempt to grasp the dialectics of social change" (Harvey, 1989: 355).

Third, the post-Marxist conception of articulatory practices producing subjects has led to an understanding of the importance of the ideological and symbolic as a process, rather than a static set of fixed ideas or end products. It must be noted again, however, such
a contribution is not necessarily original. The role of ideology in the construction of subjects has been important both in Althusserian and Gramscian traditions. Gramsci, for example, has argued that people never experience dominant ideologies in the raw and that once ideologies become "organic" to historical development and to the life of society, they acquire "a validity which is psychological; they organize human masses and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc." (Gramsci, 1971: 377). Laclau and Mouffe's earlier contribution in elaborating the Gramscian conceptions of hegemony and ideology have been very important in this regard (Laclau, 1976; Mouffe, 1979). Their notion that ideology has "no necessarily class belongingness" has played an important role in removing vestiges of class reductionism in Marxist theories of ideology.

Finally, post-structuralism's decentering of the author and its emphasis on the polysemic nature of cultural texts and their interpretation by active audiences serve as an important corrective to notions of ideology implicit in such theories as the critique of mass culture by the Frankfurt School and in post-WW II radical political economy, where both meaning and reception are under-theorized (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Miliband, 1973; Clement, 1975; Dorfman and Mattelart, 1975; Schiller, 1976; Smythe, 1981). In these theories, particularly in some political economy analyses, dominant ideology is often seen as flowing directly from corporate control of the media and as unambiguously inscribed in media texts -- texts which in turn produce immediate, and uncontested, ideological effects on the audiences. The new critique of ideology has led to a welcome turn to studies of audience decoding and the interpretation of ideological constructs. But the post-modernist turn has also resulted in a celebration of the plurality of discursive positions and the virtual free play of signifiers that implies a liberal vision of abstract agency and an inflated sense of individual autonomy. As Gruneau (1988: 26) argues, this emphasis on the radical disarticulation of hegemonic conventional relations between signifiers and signifieds in the media has taken us "far beyond any sense of a truly engaged response to relations of power anchored in a specific historical bloc."

Many of the problems with this new critique of ideology go hand in hand with its useful insights and correctives. First, while the emphasis in post-structuralism and post-Marxism on the indivisibility of symbolic and material elements in human practices is a useful corrective to empiricist notions of ideology and representation, their complete rejection of any form of epistemology and the possibility of knowledge has led them into a highly problematic position. It results in a complete abandonment of the idea of truth and leaves one in the limbo of relativism, where one can no longer make any claims about the veracity or accuracy of analytical statements. Rather than attempting to outline some form of an organic unity between language and reality, this new critique of ideology seems to have simply inverted empiricism and vulgar Marxism. Whereas the mediating role of language and discourse is totally ignored and overlooked both in the empiricist tradition and in Marxism, in which political/ideological discourses simply "reflect" or passively represent pre-constituted social interests, the political/ideological now assumes primacy. Social and economic reality is just what political and ideological discourses define it to be, or worse, is something that one can no longer make reference to and have knowledge about. In this way, post-structuralism and post-Marxism have committed a fatal semiotic confusion between the signified and the referent (Eagleton, 1991: 209; Geras, 1988: 54). They have collapsed the world into the word. The rejection of any hierarchy of determination and any connection between socio-economic and political ideology thus potentially leads to absolute political voluntarism (Rustin, 1988) and reduces politics to the politics of rhetoric (Bennett, 1990). If nothing else, such an excess seems to be one more recent manifestation of the mechanism and dualism that have long been characteristic of Western social thought.

Second, underlying much of the post-modernist critique of meta-narratives, epistemology, and representation is a form of cultural relativism which undermines any normative standard for the critique of domination. In extending power and interests to every discursive practice and therefore making every discourse "ideological," post-modernism conflates different forms of power and different kinds of interests and ultimately deprives the concept of ideology its critical edge. It makes the critique of domination impossible, without any normative ground. And such a position has negative political implications. As Eagleton points out:

The postmodernist move of expanding the concept of interests to encompass the whole of social life, while valid enough in itself, then serves to displace attention from these concrete political struggles, collapsing them into a neo-Neitzschean cosmos in which throwing off an overcoat is secretly just as much a matter of conflict and domination as overthrowing the state. If all thought is 'interested' to its roots, then -- so it can be argued -- the kinds of power struggles to which, say, socialists and feminists have traditionally drawn attention have no very special status. A 'scandalous' vision of the whole of society as one restless will to power, one irreolvable turmoil of embattled perspectives, thus serves to consecrate the political status quo. (1991: 167, emphasis in original)

Similar criticisms have also been voiced against Foucault's conception of power, which leaves little ground for distinguishing more repressive forms of power from less repressive ones (see, for example, Fraser, 1989). Similarly, while Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism is politically a different project from Foucault's, their radical relationalism leaves no ground to distinguish which "articulation" is preferable and to define relations of oppression positively. It is in this sense that the post-modernist and post-structuralist critique of ideology has conservative overtones. It unwittingly removes any normative ground for the critique of existing forms of domination.

Third, in its definition of the political - ideological as the domain of the constitution of the subject and in its attempt to avoid economic reductionism, post-Marxism remains silent on "the whole classical Marxist case about the 'infrastructural' bases of ideology, along with the centrality of political institutions" (Eagleton, 1991: 199). It offers no basis for the critique of what traditionally has been called the "ideological apparatuses" in society, as well as the concentration of wealth and power. Tony Bennett has criticized Laclau and Mouffe's politics of consciousness and subjective positions as that of "recidivist individualism," because, in
their theory, the only possible social agents are individuals or groups of individuals ideologically forged into collective subjects. There is no account of institutions or social organizations as social agents or the activities of individuals not as ideological subjects, but as functionaries of such institutions and organizations (Bennett, 1990: 267 - 68). In this way, Laclau and Mouffe fall into the paradoxical position of undermining the relevance of ideology strategically, while tactically inflating the role of the "ideological" in society.

Finally, as a more general critique, the epistemological nihilism of post - modernism and post - structuralism may have a self - contradictory and, indeed, self - defeating character. It is very difficult for post - modernists to live up to their theories in practice. In the real world of politics, post - modernists have found it necessary to appeal to truth statements that lie above the melee of interest groups and language games (Harvey, 1989). They deny the possibility of valid knowledge of the world, and yet they themselves make unequivocal claims about the nature of the world; they reject any possible correspondence between language and the real, yet use language in a way which itself expects to be taken seriously. Few post - modernists would, like Richard Rorty, take their own positions to their logical conclusions and declare that the political opinions of great philosophers do not have to be taken any more seriously than philosophy itself and that any relationship between ideas and reality, moral positions and philosophical writings is purely contingent. Such a position, as Harvey (1989) has pointed out correctly, is a form of irresponsibility.

Whither the concept of ideology?

After enjoying a period of resurgence in critical social theory in the 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of ideology has been increasingly contested by critics variously associated with post - structuralism, post - modernism, and post - Marxism. These critics have not only highlighted the limitations and inadequacies of Marxian conceptions of ideology, they have challenged the very theoretical validity of "ideology" as a useful analytical tool in social theory. Yet I want to argue that the theoretical limitations of these criticisms leave open the possibility of renewed theoretical work on the concept of ideology. The study of "ideology" may now exist in a state of crisis, but times of crisis often provide new opportunities and starting points for rejuvenation. I want simply to highlight two tendencies in recent social theory that are noteworthy in this regard. First, there is a remarkable degree of convergence among theorists from quite diverse theoretical traditions who oppose the tendencies that threaten a new "end of ideology" thesis (see for example, Geras, 1987; 1988; Fraser, 1989; Hall, 1989; Harvey, 1989; Thompson, 1990; Eagleton, 1991; Fiske, 1991). John Thompson (1990) and Terry Eagleton (1991), in particular, have made important recent contributions in their respective attempts to defend the relevance of some conception of ideology in the "era of post - modern theory." Writing from the perspective of critical hermeneutics, Thompson reconceptualizes ideology as "meaning in the service of domination." In a different vein, Eagleton has written a compelling defense of the necessity of maintaining some sort of a realist epistemology in social analysis -- a defense that seeks to rescue the concept of ideology from the post - modernist rubble of signification.

Second, there are signs suggesting that post - modernism is now in a more self - questioning "mood" with regard to issues such as value, truth, and principled position. The inherently self - stultifying relativist logic of post - modernism has reached a point where it is no longer possible to simply suppress traditional analytical categories that have been seen as metaphysical and obsolete. Kate Soper (1991: 128), for example, has suggested both the need for and the possibility of a more synthetic approach, "one which combines alertness to the deficiencies and crudeness of much traditional value - discourse with alertness to the self - defeating quality of the attempt to avoid all principled positions in theory." Such an approach is also urgently needed in the area of ideology and discourse.

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Footnotes

1. "Post-modernism" is a rather ambiguous term. In a narrow sense, it refers to a certain constellation of styles and tones in cultural works. The concept, however, is also associated with a broader conception of an allegedly emergent new sociopolitical and cultural configuration that has been termed "post-modernity." In this paper, "post-modernism" refers to a particular body of contemporary political, social, and cultural theory (see Huyssen, 1984; Jameson, 1984; Harvey, 1989; Gitlin, 1989).

2. There is, in recent years, particularly in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Soviet Union and communist regimes in East Europe, a new "end of ideology" argument that is very similar to Daniel Bell's argument in the 1950s. This argument celebrates the alleged global triumph of Western liberal democratic consensus and claims the end of history for the reason that, with the triumph of liberalism and capitalism as the only possible human future, there is no more room for large ideological battles. See Francis Fukuyama (1992) for a version of this new "end of ideology" argument. See also Alan Ryan (1992) for a critique of this argument. This new "end of ideology" argument on the political right, however, is rather different from the one we are examining in this article, and it will not concern us here.