

What is Ideology?

Common sense definition

To claim in ordinary conversation that someone is speaking ideologically is surely to hold that they are judging a particular issue through some rigid framework of preconceived ideas which distorts their understanding. – Eagleton (3)

Classical Marxist definition

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. – Marx, *German Ideology*

Generalized class legitimization

Ideology has to do with legitimating the power of a dominant social group or class. – Eagleton (5)

How legitimization works

A dominant power may legitimate itself by **promoting** beliefs and values congenial to it; **naturalizing** and **universalizing** such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; **denigrating** ideas which might challenge it; **excluding** rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and **obscuring** social reality in ways convenient to itself – Eagleton (5-6)

N.B. Not every ideological utterance is factually false; it's the ideological function that makes it problematic, not strictly the empirical inaccuracy. For instance: "The economy will suffer if there is land redistribution."

People dislike blatant inequality and injustice

The majority of people have a fairly sharp eye to their own rights and interests, and most people feel uncomfortable at the thought of belonging to a seriously unjust form of life. Either, then, they must believe that these injustices are en route to being amended, or that they are counterbalanced by greater benefits, or that they are inevitable, or that they are not really injustices at all. . .

It is part of the function of a dominant ideology to inculcate such beliefs. It is part of the function of a dominant ideology to inculcate such beliefs. It can do this either by falsifying social reality, suppressing and excluding certain unwelcome features of it, or suggesting that these features cannot be avoided. – Eagleton (27)

Ideology of common sense

"Women are naturally good at housework and childcare."

"Men are naturally violent."

So as an ethnographer:

- Notice how people justify prejudice and inequality.
- Notice the effect of ideological statements.

But ideology is not only about power and ideas

Ideology as imaginary relationship

Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.
– Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”

Ideology as recognition

[Ideology] ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects... by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: **‘Hey, you there!’**

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere 180-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was *really him* who was hailed’ (and not someone else). – Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”

Ideology is when you embrace your place in this world

So as an ethnographer:

- Notice how people *embrace* their place.
- Notice why people *explain* their place.
- Notice how people embrace *other people’s place*.

Gender relations are exceptionally ideologized.

If you question one justification for an ideology, another one takes its place.