

## The Western Marxist Concept of Ideology Critique

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**Abstract.** Louis Althusser's essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", which appeared English in 1971 as a chapter in his book entitled *Lenin and Philosophy*, reinvigorated Marxist literary criticism in the West. Before Althusser's essay was published, most Western critics held the Hegelian view that ideas (including those expressed in literature) drive historical change. Traditional Marxist criticism presented the opposing view. Following the Marxist understanding of base and superstructure, it was assumed that the economic conditions and relations of production (base) were simply reflected in cultural phenomena such as literature (superstructure). Literature, in this view, was inevitably an expression of ideological "false consciousness" supporting oppressive political and economic relations. But Marx himself suggested that the simple "reflection" role was not adequate. If the Greek tragedies of Sophocles were simple reflections of the economic conditions of ancient Greece, he asked, why were they still popular? Building on Marx's materialist account of language and consciousness, Althusser makes two significant advances over the traditional understanding of ideology. First, he rejects as an oversimplification the concept of ideology as merely false consciousness. For Althusser, there is no unmediated access to truth; all consciousness is constituted by and necessarily inscribed within ideology. Second, for Althusser, there is no clear dividing line between base and superstructure. Ideology effectively "produces" social subjectivities and mediates the subject's experience of reality. On the one hand, this theory points to openings for revolutionary change. Since it is a corruptible material phenomenon, the superstructure can never perfectly reflect the base. On the other hand, since language and consciousness are material products, phenomena such as literature have real material effects. Ideology can be a "soft" insidious extension of the power of a repressive state apparatus. Constant, vigilant critique of ideology is required in order to resist reactionary tendencies and promote emancipatory revolution.

*Keywords:* Marxism; Marxist critique; Ideology; Althusser; Discourse.

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The marxist critique of ideology has played an important role in literary studies since the decline of "new criticism" from its position as the hegemonic framework for literary criticism in the U.S. and U.K. beginning in the early 1970's. Marxist critique of ideology was energized then by Louis Althusser's influential essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses". Below, I will discuss Althusser's conception of ideology and its implications for subjectivity briefly. But first, I will summarize the tradition of Marxist thought on ideology leading up to Althusser.

"Ideology" was a relatively new word when Marx and Engels used it in *The German Ideology* in the 1840s. It had been coined by the

French rationalist philosopher Destutt de Tracy, in the 1790's, to refer to the "science of ideas," as opposed to metaphysics. It very quickly took on a pejorative sense, and Marx and Engels use it in that way in *The German Ideology*; there "ideology" generally refers to theory that is out of touch with the real processes of history. The ruling ideas of an epoch, according to Marx and Engels, "are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas". But the relationship between the ruling ideas and the dominant material relationships are instead seen in reverse--people think that material relationships are the expression of the ruling ideas rather than vice versa: "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life process as the inversion of objects on their retina does from their physical life process." (*German Ideology*, "Idealism and Materialism")

This negative sense of ideology as "false consciousness" was the most common usage in the Marxist tradition until the last part of the twentieth century. It was, among other things, a convenient way to account for the reluctance of oppressed workers to rise in revolt. However, there is another sense of the term, in which ideology is seen not simply as false consciousness against which a true, scientific understanding might be opposed, but rather as the general sphere of consciousness of all humans: "The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic -- in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. (*Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "Preface")

While the former sense of the term had been most common, there were notable instances of the latter (for example, in Gramsci's thought--as in his revisionary understanding of Machiavelli) before Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1969; first published English in 1971), which emphasized the relative autonomy of the superstructure on the assumption that it is impossible, or at least nearly impossible, to escape ideology. As I noted above, Althusser's intervention re-energized Marxist literary criticism in the U. K. and U.S., and it is still the starting point for contemporary work, though it has been the subject of several important revisions by subsequent theorists.

Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" makes two significant advances over the traditional Marxist understanding of ideology. First, he rejects as an oversimplification the concept of ideology as "false consciousness," or a distorted representation of reality by which a dominant elite cynically exploits an under-class. This oversimplification implies an opposition of "false consciousness" to some kind of "true consciousness," or an understanding that the subject can transcend ideology, when, in fact, as Althusser shows, all consciousness is constituted by and necessarily inscribed within ideology. Ideology is as inescapable and indispensable as the air we breathe. All that we can have are competing versions of "false consciousness", or understandings of reality which are limited and therefore, at some level, incomplete.

Second, Althusser's theory challenges the traditional Marxist dialectical model in which a society's base (the economic structure, material relations of production and consumption) inevitably determines the society's superstructure ("state" and social consciousness, including ideology), with a model of social formation that features a relatively autonomous superstructure. By theorizing the relative autonomy of the

superstructure Althusser produces a privileged position for social practices (seen as explicit manifestations of ideology) as mechanisms for producing specific social subjectivities, or ways of being, and for producing and circulating specific understandings of the "real." Literature, in this view, has a productive, (not merely a reflective) role in ideology formation. Thus, Althusser implies a decentering, of the material contexts (the economic base) in which traditional Marxist literary criticism often sought the sources of ideas and concepts "reflected" in literature. Conversely, literature, in its ideological role, is granted the status of a material product.

At first glance these arguments seem to undermine themselves, since they appear to erase all distinctions between ideologies and to leave no ground from which to mount a credible critique. Althusser attempts to address this problem in two ways. First, he makes a distinction between "ideology-in-general" (the commonsense framework of reality in which a society functions and into which subjects are hailed, or "interpellated") and "particular ideologies" (the narrower frames of consciousness inhabited by specific social groups). This latter term corresponds closely to what most subsequent writers have called "discourse," following the usage of Bakhtin and Foucault, among others.

Althusser's second move to refine the concept of ideology reintroduces a form of idealism under the term, "scientific knowledge," which, for Althusser, is knowledge produced by Marxist theory, "from the point of view of class exploitation" (*Lenin and Philosophy, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,"* p. 8). In this way Althusser attempts to lay some claim to what is effectively an absolute "truth", though the idea is inconsistent with the fundamental materialist thrust of his theory.

Althusser has also been criticized for producing a rigidly mechanistic functionalist

subject--a subject which is absolutely and completely overdetermined by the dominant ideology. There appears to be no space for resistance or agency in Althusser's model of subject formation. Nonetheless, his model enabled a much more complex understanding of the workings of ideology than had been previously recognized. The individual subject is faced, it would seem, not with the problem of differentiating the "ideological" from the "real," but with the problem of choosing between competing ideological versions of the "real." Yet, the terms "individual subject" and "choosing" are also problematic. Drawing on (and, in fact, creatively misreading) Jacques Lacan's theory in which human subjectivity is formed through a process of misrecognition of the "I" in the "mirror" of language, Althusser argues that "all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as subjects" (Althusser, 1971, 171). One consequence of this insight is that the conventional conceptions of "author" (authority, originator) and "individual agent" are replaced by the ideologically constituted (or positioned) subject. What historically has been viewed as the unique, original voice of an autonomous individual agent is, in Althusser's theory, an ideological discourse speaking through a discursive subject position.

Althusser's major breakthrough, then, consists in his development of a properly materialist and radically anti-humanist theory of ideology that enables one to think of ideology as productive instead of merely reflective. Subsequent theorists working on Althusser's problematic, on the other hand, have shown the inevitability of contradiction or resistance in the process of subject interpellation. By applying Althusser's theory to the relationship of audience and text in the discourse of realist cinema, several film theorists publishing in the British journal, *Screen*, in the 1970's demonstrated that dominant ideologies are not monolithic. Unlike Althusser, the *Screen* theorists analyzed the production of subjectivity

in a specific signifying practice, implicitly assuming that various discourses interpellate subjects differently. Yet the *Screen* group still tended to equate the subject with the subject position proffered by the discourse in question. For a notion of contradictory or oppositional subjectivity they eventually turned to the work of Michel Pecheux.

The role of subject positions in class struggle can be understood in a framework theorized by Pecheux. Pecheux posits three possible positions for the individual subject in relation to the dominant ideology of his or her society. The first is "identification": the "good" subject who accepts his/her place in society and the social order as it stands. The second is "counter-identification": the "bad" subject who simply denies and opposes the dominant ideology, and in so doing inadvertently confirms the power of the dominant ideology by accepting the "evidentness of meaning" upon which it rests (Pecheux 156-8). The third position is termed "disidentification": an effect which "constitutes a working (transformation-displacement) of the subject form and not just its abolition (Pecheux 159, *author's emphasis*). For Pecheux, that is, disidentification requires a transformation or displacement in the way the subject is interpellated by ideology--it is not just a matter of people changing, but also of changes in power relations, in the ways discourses and institutions produce (define and confine) social subjects.

Pecheux links disidentification specifically with the Marxist-Leninist tradition stemming from the epistemological break with idealist philosophical discourse which Marx achieved by occupying a materialist, proletarian position. But the concept is useful in analysing the relationship of discourse and ideology to class struggle and in accounting for subjectivities which are situated contradictorily across class, race, gender, and other sociopolitical divisions. Disidentification is possible, according to Pecheux's theory, because "meaning is

determined by the ideological positions brought into play in the socio-historical process in which words, expressions, propositions, etc. are produced (i. e. reproduced)." "This thesis," Pecheux continues, "could be summed up in the statement: *words, expressions, propositions, etc. change their meaning according to the positions held by those who use them*, which signifies that they find their meaning by reference to those positions" (Pecheux 98-ff; 112, *author's emphasis*). In Pecheux's materialist linguistics, that is, it is the subject's position within a particular discursive formation that determines meaning, rather than the subject's intent (the ideological and discursive formations supply the assumptions about intent which appear to determine meaning) or, even, necessarily, the conventional meanings valorized by the dominant ideology. In my view, Pecheux's concept of "disidentification" provides a satisfactory way around the problem of absolute overdetermined subjectivity in Althusser. Change, and some degree of discursive agency, can be identified precisely because no ideological discourse can monolithically interpellate a subject, and because different discourses within a particular social formation will intersect at various points to produce a range of sometimes conflicting subjectivities.

The search for some form of "individual" agency continues, however, and it will no doubt engage us in our discussions. In order to spur the discussion, it may be useful for me to outline my position against individualism by examining one such effort here--Paul Smith's book, *Discerning the Subject*. The title of the book involves a pun on two obscure verbs: "to cern," meaning "to accept an inheritance or a patrimony"; and "to cerne," which means "to encircle" or "to enclose". In most recent work on the problem of subjectivity, Smith complains, the "subject" is conceived as completely "cerned" or dominated by forces beyond one's control--whether these forces are those of the dominant ideology (in the Marxist

paradigm) or those of the textualized (and hence restricted) unconscious (in the psycholinguistic paradigm). In their emphasis on the "subjection" of the subject, the author finds, recent theorists have left "little room to envisage the agent of real and effective resistance" (39). Against this trend, Smith sets out to reintroduce a concept of individual agency into political and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity.

At the outset, Smith defines a special purpose term--the "subject/individual"--which is to be distinguished from the concept "individual subject": The "individual" is that which is undivided and whole, and understood to be the source and agent of conscious action or meaning which is consistent with it. The "subject," on the other hand, is not self-contained . . . but is immediately cast into a conflict with forces that dominate it . . . . The "subject," then, is determined... whereas "the individual" is assumed to be determining. (xxxiii-iv)

On this account, the familiar term "individual subject" is revealed as self-contradictory. But Smith sees this contradiction as a useful way of theorizing agency--agency can be located in the dialectical tension between the singular experience of the subject and the subject's social subjection. Or, the opposition can be thought in terms of an incompatibility between the discourses of Marxism, which "subsume the human person under society," and those of psychoanalysis, which "promote a view of the `subject' as a kind of `beginning and end of theory and practice..." (22). Smith proposes the term "subject/individual" as a way of recognizing that there is always some "individual" aspect of subjectivity which falls outside the sphere of interpellation by the dominant ideology. Thus, a British subject "is subject to particular forms of state control and hortation," but also to other, potentially conflicting discourses such as ethnic and gender status, regional identification, one's family, and "to particular modes and languages of

advertising which will place the 'subject' as a consumer" (xxxiv).

Here Smith seems to understand resistance as the product of a limited ideological conflict within a given ensemble of discourses. But at several subsequent points he abandons this strictly discursive model of subjectivity to locate resistance (and, implicitly, agency) in the singular (hence, ultimately, extradiscursive) history of the subject/individual. If it may be granted that the singular history of the subject is a source of resistance, some conscious focus of that resistance is still required for a useful concept of agency. But the point at which any subject can lay claim to a unique, singular experience is exactly the threshold of political and theoretical irrelevance. The unique experience cannot generate the power or meaning required to motivate subjects for coherent political action. Thus, in my view, Smith's identification of the subject's singular history as a "positive" source of agency which can withstand the negative power of ideology leads no further than essentialist claims of individual autonomy.

Symptoms of this individualist agenda are perhaps most evident in Smith's brief treatment of Pecheux (32-3). In Pecheux's model, the space for resistance opened by the notion of "disidentification" is clearly produced (and limited) by the play of conflicting discourses in a social order, rather than by the discontinuity between ideology and the subject, where Smith attempts to locate resistance and agency. But, in describing--and dismissing--Pecheux's work, Smith mentions only the concept of "identification," omitting Pecheux's other terms. This omission, I think, is a symptom of Smith's concern to locate resistance at the level of the subject/individual rather than at the level of discourse. Pecheux's theory of disidentification allows only a fairly narrow scope of agency, but it does offer a way of theorizing conscious resistance and social change completely within the bounds of discourse. In Pecheux's theory resistance results from the conflict of

interpellations (as in Smith's example of the British subject cited above); the subject's singular (and extradiscursive) experience is deemphasized.

Smith is generally critical of theories which resist thinking of subjectivity outside of language. For example, he criticizes Derrida for trying "to establish a kind of subjectless process which is in all essential ways given over to the force or forces of language" (49). This "subjectlessness" is identified as the source of deconstruction's apolitical tendencies, "a patent eschewing of responsibility" (50). Here Smith's notion of subjectivity (the subject/individual) depends upon a particular understanding of the unconscious as essentially extralinguistic. He elaborates this later in a reading of Lacan which yields a distinction between the "subject" and the "subject/individual": "a difference . . . between the actual construction of the "subject" in the realm of the symbolic and the ability of a given subject/individual to read ideological signs and messages" (70). What Smith goes on to argue is that Lacan's placing of the unconscious at the mediating edge between the subject and the symbolic order effectively protects some area of subjectivity from ideological subjection. Thus, the unconscious, in Smith's understanding of Lacan, effects an "interference . . . in relation to both 'subject' and Other, or to both being and meaning" (74). This "interference" is another way of expressing what Smith has elsewhere described as the gap between ideological interpellation and the subject/individual's singular history. But, at this point in the book it becomes clear that the sort of agency which can emerge from this gap between ideology and the subject is much more nebulous and negative than expected. Agency or resistance begins to look like nothing more than the "power" of the subject/individual to be imperfectly interpellated.

From the other side of the discourse/subjectivity couple--work aimed primarily at understanding the workings of ideology at the level of discourse--there are

similarly idealist tendencies to be found. In this case, it usually involves retaining some privilege for "literary discourse" as a special kind of discourse. For example, In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson provides a model for literary-historical analysis which emphasizes the function of literary genres in ideology production and which places genres in their contemporary social formations. Jameson asserts an inevitable interrelationship between the aesthetic value and the specific historicity (seen in terms of ideological function) of the literary text. As an indication of the universality of relationship between aesthetic value and ideological power he cites Levi-Strauss's interpretation of the body art of the Cadaveo indians of South America. The Cadaveo facial tattoo is described as a "visual text [which] constitutes a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm." From Levi-Strauss's model, Jameson constructs a productive role for literature: "We may suggest that from this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions. (Jameson 79; reprinted in *Marxist Literary Theory*, p. 354-5).

Thus, in suggesting ways in which literature helps to constitute the world-views of societies, Jameson represents literature as producing (rather than simply reflecting) ideology. But, in locating the source of aesthetic value in the text's power to articulate and resolve social contradictions, Jameson seems to privilege a certain kind of text. He implicitly devalues literary texts which confirm and/or reproduce existing aesthetic/ideological formulations without exposing their hidden contradictions. And, though he assumes that literary texts are especially significant, he does not provide a basis for distinguishing literary texts from ostensibly "non-

literary" texts that also formulate new ideologies and resolve social contradictions.

John Frow's book *Marxism and Literary History* offers a more rigorously anti-aestheticist model for understanding literature as discourse. Calling for a radical rethinking of literary studies-- "the self-abolition of poetics and its transformation into a general rhetoric" (235) Frow redefines formalism as a sort of refined, highly specific branch of discourse theory capable of analyzing the particular complexity of literary texts. As Frow demonstrates, the methods of close, careful analysis of literary texts practiced by formalists can be extended productively to the analysis of larger textual systems and discourses. Yet, at several points, Frow's incorporation of formalism into discourse theory results in a reification of the literary which inevitably would prevent the "self-abolition of poetics" and the transformation of literary studies. This occurs because Frow assumes that "literary" texts have immanent formal properties which specifically mark them (either in terms of identification or of difference) as "literary" in relation to other texts and systems.

Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, Halliday, Pecheux, and Foucault, Frow theorizes a concept of ideology in semiotic terms: "...ideology is thought as a *state* of discourse rather than an inherent quality (a truth status or a particular thematic structure); it is defined in terms of its appropriation by a hegemonic class, but because language is the point of intersection of a network of power relations this involves no necessary, motivated, or stable class correlations; and utterances are thought of as being governed by the structures of the *genre* of discourse and the discursive *formation*, structures which are more or less specific and which delimit certain possibilities of use and certain semantic domains. Effects of truth, representation, and subjectivity are thought to be functions rather than causes of discourse (83).

Literature, as Frow goes on to assert, is not to be conceived as an essential category; it is a complex, historically specific, highly institutionalized discourse. Most importantly, the effect of essentialism itself is discursively produced: "the concept of the relative autonomy of the literary system must be understood as the result of particular historical conditions and a particular articulation with other systems, not as an inherent quality of literary discourse" (84).

Frow then turns from discourse theory to construct an overlapping genealogy of Formalism. The most important achievement of the Formalists, Frow argues, was to establish the unity of the conceptual level at which extraliterary values and functions become structural moments of a text, and at which, conversely, the "specifically literary" function acquires an extra-aesthetic dimension. Holding on to this principle is perhaps a question of being *sufficiently* "formalist"--that is, of being willing to relate literary discourse to other discourse (to the structured order of the semiotic field) rather than to a reality which transcends discourse; to relate literary fictions to the universe of fictions rather than to a nonfictive universe.

This rescues Formalism from the conventional critique of historical and political naivete, but the transcendental tendencies of Formalism reappear when Frow goes on to specify the gains of his conflation of Formalism and discourse theory. Since his method gives "as much weight... to formal linguistic and rhetorical structures and to positions of enunciation and reception as to thematic features," he states, it can attend to "all of the interrelated and overdetermined levels at which signification is constructed, *although without assuming that textual structure is in itself ideologically significant*" (my italics).

That is, despite the fact that Frow's theory specifies the levels at which the category of the "literary" functions in relation to other texts, it results in what seems to be an uncritical privileging of the "literary" in exempting formal

textual structures from ideological significance. Frow, in fact, asserts that literature functions on a meta-interpretive plane: "...the possibility of discursive contradiction or resistance means that literary discourse can be thought of as metadiscourse which is continuous with and yet capable of a limited reflexive distance from the discourses it works (although the conditions of this working are themselves not external to power)... theorizing the relation between ideology and discourse in this way also allows us to think the movement of the literary system (its production and reception) in terms of reaction and discontinuity rather than in terms of a correspondence or homology between literary discourse and social structure" (100).

The problem with this conception of the literary is that it could as easily be applied to any discourse. Discursive contradiction or resistance cannot be seen as identical with literary quality. That, in effect, is what the Russian Formalists did by defining estrangement as the essential characteristic of literary language. An important strength of discourse theory is that enables one to treat literary discourse as merely one of a complex ensemble of discourses in a particular social formation. Frow ultimately forfeits that gain.

Though this aestheticist privileging of the "literary" dies hard, other theorists--notably Terry Eagleton and Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey--have questioned the acceptance of aesthetic value as a proper concern of Marxist criticism. They acknowledge Althusser's breakthrough in freeing Marxist criticism from the "reflectionist" problematic, but they reject Jameson's assumption that literature has a universal function which is the source of aesthetic value. Macherey sees this notion as an unnecessary concession to bourgeois ideology. Aesthetic value is not universal; it cannot always be traced to a particular function of the text, even if that function is conceived within Marxist-oriented problematics, such as defamiliarizing ideology, or resolving social contradictions. As Balibar and Macherey state



most simply, "literariness is what is recognized as such" (*Balibar and Macherey* 82).

Like Frow, Jameson looks to genre criticism as the most promising locus for literary historicism: "the strategic value of generic concepts for Marxism clearly lies in the mediatory function of the notion of a genre, which allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life" (Jameson 105). Jameson's strategy of emphasizing the mediatory function of a genre is useful. It allows one to push beyond the boundaries of formalism and traditional literary-historicism in understanding how and why genres change and how socio-cultural factors are related to aesthetic production.

In this course, however, I will argue for a more productive role for the ideologically formative power of literature. In this emphasis I will diverge from traditional literary-historical approaches--both Marxist and Humanist--which treat literature as primarily reflective of something outside of the text. And my assumptions are also at odds with those implicit in the formalist tradition, which tends to ignore the ideological dimension of literature and to insist that literary value is an immanent and ahistorical category. My approach is grounded rather, in recent poststructural literary historicism; both the American New Historicism and the Cultural Materialism which has developed from the work of Raymond Williams and others in Great Britain. In its initial break with traditional historiography and New Criticism, this scholarship has been characterized by an interest in the socio-political contexts of literature, by an awareness of the problematic nature of historical contexts, and by a rethinking of the traditional, positivistic assumption that literary texts merely reflect their historical contexts.

Traditionally, whether in the case of Humanists reading literary texts in the light of the history of ideas, or of Marxists reading them in the light of the history of class conflict,

literary texts too often have been treated as simple, unproblematic reflections of external contexts. But recent scholarship has challenged this assumption. For example, historians such as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra have pointed out that the modern reader never can completely escape the limitations of his or her own perspective. The historian inevitably superimposes some sort of narrative framework onto his or her factual data, thus creating a kind of fiction. The recognition of this element of subjectivity in the reconstruction of historical contexts also calls into question the traditional privileging of so-called "objective" historical treatises as more "true" than literary texts. Even the documents upon which historical contexts generally are based are suspect. History is written by the victorious; subversive and marginal voices are stilled in the process. Furthermore, which kinds of historical records survive depends upon the changing ideological biases and values of the society.

Historians regularly, though silently, reshape texts, making them conform with super-imposed "historical" contexts (LaCapra 56). Such interpretations ignore or smooth over elements of the texts which challenge or contest the dominant ideas or ideology assumed to be embodied in the historical context; these are elements which call into question the work's unity, and, therefore, according to classical aesthetics, its aesthetic value. Further, the assumption that literature passively reflects a simple, transparently discernible historical context leads to a premature closure of the critical investigation: the investigator discovers what appears to be a suitable "original pattern" external to the work, and the work is bent to fit that pattern. As LaCapra argues, the causes or origins of ideas in complex (including literary) texts are not likely to be found in any one particular context: "...one never has--at least in the case of complex texts--*the* context. The assumption that one does relies on a hypostatization of "context," often in the service of misleading organic or other overtly reductive analogies. For complex texts one has

set [sic] of interacting contexts whose relations to one another are variable and problematic and whose relation to the text being investigated raises difficult issues in interpretation. (LaCapra 57)

LaCapra proposes to address the problem of oversimplification by reading the text in relation to multiple interacting contexts, rather than assuming that it reflects just one context. He suggests six possible contexts for interpreting complex texts: the author's intentions, his motivations, society, culture (elite culture), corpus (of the author's works), and structure (genre). Of course, each of these contexts is a complex text in its own right. Thus, reading a text in its relation to multiple interacting contexts is not a "final" solution to the problem of the indeterminacy and conditionality of meaning. But it is a way of acknowledging the problem, and it produces a more rigorous, openly "argued-for" articulation of the contextual frame in which the historian will read the text.

In some recent works, New Historicists and Cultural Materialists are pushing beyond the first stages of rethinking conventional historiography and developing programs of ideology critique. Ideology critique takes a variety of forms and uses a variety of methods including deconstruction, structural and post-structural Marxism, Feminism, and psychoanalytical criticism. In my practice, ideology critique means subjecting texts to an analysis that actively asserts the critic's radical, contestatory position (1) against traditional "sedimented" interpretations of the text in order to resist the pull of critical orthodoxy and institutional hegemony, and (2) against the dominant ideology of the social formation in which the text was produced. Ideology critique encompasses the Althusserian concept of "symptomatic reading" as a practice which

strives to reveal and examine the discursive conditions which enable texts to be (re)produced at particular historical moments (Althusser 1982, 253-4). But the concept of ideology critique also acknowledges the specific subjectivity of the critic. The critic must adopt a perspective which is radical and contestatory, I would argue, in order to produce a true critique of existing scholarship. Otherwise, the critic is bound to reproduce existing scholarship, a repetition of existing knowledge.

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