

The Trope as Trap: Ideology Revisited¹

Sebastian Faber

Abstract *This article revisits the theory of ideology, from Marx through Lukács and Ricoeur to Žižek, and proposes to conceive of ideology, at least in some instances, as a 'trope gone wrong'. Starting from five basic questions – what causes ideology, where and how does it come about, what is its function and to what extent is it surmountable? – this essay underscores the problematic status of ideology as a theoretical concept. While the article argues that ideology remains a useful notion, it also concludes that there is no theoretical discourse that can make more than a temporary claim to non-ideological status.*

[T]here is something irrational about excessive rationalism'
Terry Eagleton

The term 'ideology' is a relatively recent invention, but it is safe to say that the concept has been around as long as humanity. It springs, after all, from the old philosophical suspicion that there might be a fundamental gap between reality and the way it is perceived.² In fact, the intuition that there is a more true, more 'real' essence lurking behind the appearances of daily life, and the search for ways to know that essence, might well have been the principal concern in the history of human philosophy. To summarise that history in a few pages is of course impossible, and my aim in what follows is considerably

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² The actual term *ideology* first appeared in eighteenth-century France. It was invented by Antoine Destutt de Tracy to designate the 'science of ideas' which, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, aimed to lay bare the mechanisms of the human mind and liberate it from all mystification in order to reconstruct, from scratch, an ideal society. The first attacks of the *ideologues* were directed against the clergy, which was seen as a cynical social sector that purposely deceived the populace with metaphysical mystifications. Although the ideologues were in principle empiricists – they believed that all human thoughts and ideas were directly determined by the material world – their utopian project was rather idealist in that they 'ascribed a foundational role to ideas in social life' (Eagleton 1991: 68).

more modest. In simple terms, I wish to shed some new light on the concept of ideology through an eclectic review of previous theorisations, and by proposing to conceive of ideology, at least in some instances, as a 'trope gone wrong'. I also want to argue for the concept's continued usefulness. To accomplish this, I will proceed rather didactically, starting from five basic questions: What causes ideology, where and how does it come about, what is its function, and to what extent is it surmountable?

In a very basic sense, the concept of ideology does two things. In the first place, it helps understand the ways in which meaning can be used for maintaining or contesting power. In the second, it tries to say something about the relation between individuals (their ideas, beliefs, and actions) and the social collective to which those individuals belong. More precisely, ideology as a theoretical category tries to determine the extent to which the individual and the collective shape each other; it can help us see how such a collective – a class, a society – might amount to something more than or something altogether different from the sum of its individual members. Needless to say, the two nodes at the centre of the theory of ideology – meaning and power, individual and collective – are closely intertwined; after all, meaning and power only come into being in and through social interaction.

As is well known, the concept of ideology has been a crucial category not only for Marxism but also for the development of the social sciences as we know them (McLellan 1995: 31–43). Over the past 50 years or so, the concept has been defended and rejected for different reasons by theorists from widely different backgrounds and persuasions. Some have argued, for instance, that the problems or phenomena that the concept of ideology was meant to address have by now been overcome, or that circumstances have changed too profoundly for the concept to remain valid or useful. This was, in essence, the argument of those who, starting in the 1950s and mainly in the United States, proclaimed the 'end of ideology'.³ The phrase was meant to signify the triumph of a non-mystified, pragmatic, 'value-free' representation of reality, associated with U.S.-style democratic liberalism, over representations informed by preconceived, rigid, or 'dogmatic' doctrines – notably Soviet Communism.⁴ In later decades poststructuralists – taking their cue from

³The principal authors associated with the end-of-ideology movement include Raymond Aron, Edward Shils, Daniel Bell and Seymour Martin Lipset. As Dittberner explains, the movement was in many ways a Cold War phenomenon, and closely associated with the CIA-sponsored Congress for Cultural Freedom (1979: 127, 206). But even though the movement had clear anti-Communist overtones – in practice, 'the end of the ideology thesis often amounted to a thesis about the end of Marxism [. . .] and its irrelevance to advanced industrial societies' (McLellan 1995: 47–48) – it cannot be reduced to that aspect. See Dittberner (1979) for a detailed narrative account and analysis of the end-of-ideology movement. See also McLellan (1995: 44–55)

⁴At the same time it must be noted that the identification of ideology with totalitarian belief systems, though in itself rather limiting, has nevertheless yielded lucid analyses of Nazism and Soviet Communism, especially in the work of Hannah Arendt. Arendt herself, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, defined ideologies in a narrow way as 'isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise'. For Arendt, an ideology is

Foucault – argued that the Marxist concept of ideology, with its Enlightenment roots, posed insuperable problems of an epistemological, moral, and political kind.⁵ Given these problems, they considered the concept of very limited use, if not outright dangerous (MacKenzie and Malesevic 2002: 4; Malesevic 2002: 92). In today's theoretical landscape, one of the principal opponents of the concept of ideology is Richard Rorty, whose pragmatist 'postmodernist bourgeois liberalism' (Rorty 1983) can be considered a direct heir to the 'end-of-ideology' school (McLellan 1995: 74). For Rorty, ideology as a concept is simply useless (Rorty 1989: 59n); if anything, it is a distraction from the practical problems faced by society today.⁶ From another end of the theoretical spectrum Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari similarly maintain that the Marxist notion of ideology – with its implication that the ideological 'superstructure' is separate from, and secondary to, the economic infrastructure – is a dangerous simplification that fails to acknowledge the way capitalism really organises its domination.⁷

'quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea. Its subject matter is history, to which the "idea" is applied; the result of this application is not a body of statements about something that *is*, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change. The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same "law" as the logical exposition of its "idea". Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process – the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future – because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas' (Arendt 1973: 468–69).

⁵ The proclaimers of the 'end of ideology' rejected ideology as a mystification, contrasting it with the value-free, undogmatic view of the world promoted by 'science', thus constructing ideology in opposition to the Enlightenment tradition ('the spirit in which science works is alien to ideology', Shils wrote [quoted in McLellan 1995: 48]). In this sense it is ironic that the poststructuralists rejected the notion of ideology precisely because of its *debt* to Enlightenment values.

⁶ Intellectuals on the left, Rorty writes for example, should 'start talking about greed and selfishness rather than about bourgeois ideology, about starvation wages and layoffs rather than about the commodification of labor, and about differential per-pupil expenditure on schools and differential access to health care rather than about the division of society into classes' (Rorty 1998: 229; quoted in Hurley). It is important to note that, while Rorty's pragmatism can be related to the 'end of ideology' movement, there is a difference between the latter's thesis that ideology as a phenomenon had been overcome, and the former's argument that the *concept* of ideology is, or has become, useless. The 'end' of ideology is not the same in both cases.

⁷ As they state in *A Thousand Plateaus*: 'There is no ideology and there never has been' (1987: 4). Deleuze explains in an interview: 'ideology has no importance whatsoever: what matters is not ideology, not even the economico-ideological distinction or opposition, but the *organisation of power*. Because organisation of power – that is, the manner in which desire is already in the economic, in which libido invests the economic – haunts the economic and nourishes political forms of repression . . . To say ideology is a *trompe l'oeil*, that's still the traditional thesis. One puts the infrastructure on one side – the economic, the serious – and on the other, the superstructure, of which ideology is a part, thus rejecting the phenomena of desire in ideology. It's a perfect way to ignore how desire works within the infrastructure, how it invests in it, how it takes part in it, how, in this respect, it organises power and the

In the face of these rejections, other theorists continue to defend the concept as an indispensable tool for social and cultural analysis, as well as political change. That is to say, they defend the notion of ideology because they continue to believe in the possibility, legitimacy, and necessity of ideology *critique*. Among ideology's current defenders, most prominent are perhaps Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek, and Paul Ricoeur, who can be roughly considered to represent a Marxist, psychoanalytic, and humanist position, respectively. While there are important similarities in the way these three theorists conceive of ideology, ultimately their understanding of the concept – and their reasons for defending the necessity of ideology critique – are different enough to make one wonder whether they are really talking about the same thing. In the concluding sections of this essay, I will attempt to determine the overlaps as well as the differences among them and present a notion of ideology that borrows from all three, although in the end it is different from all of them.

Meanwhile, the critics of the concept are right to argue that it is far from unproblematic. The theory of ideology has in fact two fundamental difficulties. The first problem is of a practical nature, and it is one that the theory of ideology shares with the greater part of the social sciences and humanities: It is forced to use one of its main objects of study – meaning – as its medium of expression. As a consequence, the theoretical discourse about ideology tends to get contaminated by its subject matter up to the point where that discourse itself degenerates into an ideological specimen. Many well-meant attempts to explain the working of ideology on the collective level, for instance, resort to seemingly innocent analogies with the individual level, drawing on the old but dangerous metaphor that thinks of society as if it were simply a very large person with its corresponding body, consciousness, will and personality. But theoretical discourses that uncritically adopt such a metaphor all too easily slip into ideology themselves. They start out presupposing a certain degree of identity between the individual and the collective, while the theory of ideology had precisely meant to put such an identity into question. As Fredric Jameson points out, the social or collective cannot be seen as a simple extrapolation of the individual. That is why Jameson criticises Durkheim's notion of 'collective consciousness' as resting 'on an unrigorous and figurative assimilation of the consciousness of the individual subject to the dynamics of groups' (1981: 294).⁸ Although in this

repressive system. We do not say: ideology is a *trompe l'oeil* (or a concept that refers to certain illusions). We say: there is no ideology, it is an illusion. That's why it suits orthodox Marxism and the Communist Party so well. Marxism has put so much emphasis on the theme of ideology to better conceal what was happening in the USSR: a new organisation of repressive power. There is no ideology, there are only organisations of power once it is admitted that the organisation of power is the unity of desire and the economic infrastructure' (Deleuze and Guattari 2003).

⁸ As Jameson adds, however, the (post)structuralist backlash which, reasoning the opposite way, starts from the collective to finally abolish the individual subject, is not of much use either. 'What is wanted here [. . .] is a whole new logic of collective dynamics, with categories that escape the taint of some mere application of terms drawn from individual experience [. . .]'. (1981: 294).

essay I will do my best to avoid such fallacies and contaminations, I will be arguing, precisely, that there is no theoretical discourse that can make more than a temporary claim to non-ideological status.

The second problem with the theory of ideology is a political and moral one. The notion that there are 'mistaken' views of reality that can and should be 'corrected' implies a sense of hierarchy that easily slips into a form of elitism. Those who believe themselves to view things the way they 'really are' almost automatically assume a position not only of epistemological but also of moral privilege (Žižek 1994: 3). How to avoid assuming an inherent social division between the 'seers' and the 'blind' in need of guidance – where the former role has all too often been attributed to the intellectuals or, in the former East-European block, to party officials? Problems like these have caused many to abandon the theory of ideology altogether. Those wary of the notion include, as we have seen, the poststructuralists and pragmatists like Rorty; but the reluctance to use the concept has also affected practitioners of cultural studies. Nevertheless, in what follows I will argue that those who discard the notion of ideology, either for its inherent elitism or for its impossible truth claims, are throwing away the baby with the bathwater. More useful than rejecting the notion of ideology on principle is, in my opinion, to conceive of it in a way that minimises the 'elitist' danger, without however rejecting the possibility that at some moments some people are indeed less blinded than others to the way things 'really are'.

Apart from these two problems, there is the issue of the concept's historicity, already alluded to in relation to the 'end-of-ideology' thesis. Put briefly, the question is whether ideology – and its theory – should be associated with a specific historical period, or whether it is an ahistorical, transhistorical, or universal phenomenon. In this sense, it is not hard to apply the theory of ideology to itself: If the concept of ideology is based on the notion that all representations of the social world are limited by, or even dependent on, one's historical moment and social position, then the evolution of the concept of ideology can itself be analysed in terms of those limits. At the same time, it must be noted that this evolution has been largely the result of theorists' conscious attempts to adapt the Marxian notion of ideology to their own social and historical circumstances. The most well-known of these adaptations is probably Antonio Gramsci's, whose concept of 'hegemony' has outgrown Marx's notion of ideology in popularity, although it is in the end no less problematic.⁹ As we will see, Eagleton, Žižek, and Ricoeur all end up historicising the concept; and in their case, too, the notion of ideology that

⁹ 'Hegemony' becomes in Gramsci an important tool for analysing the complex workings of bourgeois power in the capitalist West. The fact that a bourgeois minority could hold power over, and impose its worldview on, a large majority of the population was, he argued, not merely due to the *coercion* exercised by the dominant class through the legal and judicial systems of the State. It was due, rather, to the active *consent* of that majority to bourgeois rule, created through the 'private' institutions which comprise 'civil society'. Although Gramsci's notion of hegemony is generally understood to be this combination of coercion and consent, in practice he used it sometimes merely to signify the element of consent, without that of coercion.

they propose as most appropriate to our own time is in many respects different from previous theorisations.¹⁰ (Of all three, it is Žižek who most explicitly ‘adapts’ the theory of ideology to the contemporary social and political world.) In spite of their historicism, however, for none of the three does there seem to be any ‘end of ideology’ in sight; on the contrary, the concept seems more valid and necessary than ever before.¹¹

How to define ideology, then? Any useful definition should, I believe, address five different questions. In addition to what ideology is and in what form or medium it is manifested – in people’s minds, in their behaviour, or in a combination of the two – it should address ideology’s function. Does it play some fundamental role in human existence, or is it merely a tool that the powerful use to bolster their rule? In the fourth place, it should ask why or how it comes about, particularly whether it is conscious or unconscious, caused or motivated. Does ideology arise spontaneously, or is it intentionally imposed by certain social groups on others? Fifth, it should ask if ideology is surmountable. It should wonder, in other words, to what extent a critique of ideology is possible and how free of ideology this critique itself can be.

What is ideology?

‘The term “ideology”’, Terry Eagleton remarks, ‘is just a convenient way of categorizing under a single heading a whole lot of different things we do with signs’ (1991: 193). To privilege only one of those things and declare it to be *the* definition of ideology would, ironically, be an ideological move itself. Although Eagleton is probably right, I would like to venture a definition in an attempt to cover ideology in at least its most common manifestations. For this it is necessary to consider the phenomenon in two separate aspects: one related to epistemology – that is, questions of truth and falsity – and one related to ‘politics’, that is, ideology as it appears and is *used* in concrete social contexts and to certain political ends, as part of certain power struggles.

As far as the epistemological aspect is concerned, I would argue that most forms of ideology can be defined as a simple *category mistake*.¹² Much of ideology consists in a conceptual confusion in which certain social phenomena are endowed with a false ontological status. We are ‘in’ ideology when, for example, we believe a historically determined phenomenon – let’s say a nation – to be eternal, or when we believe a human, cultural phenomenon – let’s say the unequal division of power between men and women – to be natural. Other typically ideological category mistakes include confusing the particular with the universal; the relative with the absolute; analogy (*A is like B*) with identity (*A is B*); an effect with its cause; a representation of reality with the reality it represents; the name of an entity with its essence; and, finally, confusing opposites: seeing freedom, for example, where there is only coercion.

¹⁰ See for instance Žižek (1994: 8–9, 28–9).

¹¹ ‘[W]e find ourselves [. . .] compelled’, Žižek writes, ‘to accept the unrelenting pertinence of the notion of ideology’ (1994: 1).

¹² Žižek speaks of an *anamorphosis* or ‘error of perspective’ (1989: 99).

The concept of ideology, in other words, is not just a sophisticated way to denote utter delusion. To think that the moon is made of cheese – to use Eagleton’s funny but misleading example – is not typically ideological. To be sure, ideology often constitutes a mistaken view of reality, a ‘false consciousness’, but in order to be considered ideological that mistake must have a certain grounding in social reality. It must be a subtle mistake, one that, so to speak, anyone could make. Ideology is more of an *il*-lusion than a *de*-lusion or, in psychoanalytical terms, more of a neurosis than a psychosis. Ideology is, as Roberto Schwarz has pointedly expressed it, a ‘[necessary] illusion supported by appearances’ (1992: 14).¹³

Forgetfulness and amnesia are typically among ideology’s most faithful accomplices. For a nation to be conceived of as eternal, for example, its historical origin needs to be erased; it needs to be projected back far enough in history for it to coincide with the very beginning of time. This ‘projection’ is what Žižek calls ‘transference’: ‘it consists of the illusion that the meaning of a certain element [. . .] was present in it from the very beginning as its immanent essence’ (1989: 102). Much like a king who alters the historical documents in order to hide his humble origin as an illegitimate farmers’ son, ideology tends to belie its birth and retroactively burn its cradle. Sometimes the forgetfulness is individual and the delusion self-induced – as in the case of the dictator who, after 40 years of authoritarian rule, has forgotten how he came to power and genuinely believes he *is* the God-sent personification of the nation and its people. Most of the time, however, the oblivion is social and spans more than one generation. There is some logic to this: it is indeed a lot harder to remember an origin if it occurred before our birth, and a lot easier to believe a historical structure to be ‘natural’ or ‘eternal’ if it was already there when one came into the world. This is of course the basic paradox of human existence Marx famously pointed to in the first chapter of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx and Engels 1978: 595).

An epistemological category mistake, however, is not by itself ideological. Equally important is the *social context* in which this epistemological mistake appears, and especially its function in maintaining or contesting relations of power. In a basic sense, of course, power is always already at stake in any epistemological issue. As Paul Ricoeur rightly argues, any attempt to prove someone wrong – any claim to true knowledge, for that matter – cannot help imply some power claim. What is more, all language is tainted with

¹³ ‘An ideology is [. . .] not necessarily “false”’, Žižek argues similarly: ‘as to its positive content, it can be “true”, quite accurate, since what really matters is not the asserted content as such but *the way this content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation*. We are within ideological space proper the moment this content [. . .] is functional with regard to some relation of social domination (“power”, “exploitation”) in an inherently non-transparent way: *the very logic of legitimizing the relation of domination must remain concealed if it is to be effective*’ (1994: 8; emphasis in the original).

power. To avoid stretching the concept of ideology so much as to make it useless, however, some distinction has to be made between the power claim implied in the assertion that Johan Cruyff was the world's best soccer player, and the power claim inherent to the proposition that most immigrants are criminals. I agree, therefore, with Eagleton that epistemological claims should be considered ideological only when they fulfill a function in social power struggles. For the term ideology to be functional at all, then, it has to be defined as a *structural* phenomenon. Ideology is not just any isolated epistemological category mistake, but one which fulfills an essential role in a larger structure of meaning-making that in turn supports struggles conserving or contesting power. The concept of ideology is pertinent insofar as it 'aims to disclose something of the relation between an utterance and its material conditions of possibility, when those conditions of possibility are viewed in the light of certain power-struggles *central to the reproduction (or [. . .] contestation) of a whole form of social life*' (Eagleton 1991: 223; my emphasis).

In what does ideology manifest itself?

It is easy to think of ideology as a phenomenon taking place in people's *minds*; ideology would then simply be a set of mistaken *ideas* – mental images – about reality. But this way of conceiving of ideology has several problems. In the first place, it presupposes a reality constructed on the dichotomy of subject and object. Its point of departure is the idea that cognition is the result of the contemplation, by a knowing subject, of an object-world that is not only detached from the subject, but also unaffected by the subject's act of contemplation. As, among others, Georg Lukács has argued, this presupposition can itself be seen to be ideological: It is as idealist as it is Kantian.

In the second place, to conceive of ideology as merely a set of mistaken ideas would suggest that, in order to dispel ideology, it is enough to refute those ideas. Experience has shown that this method is not very effective. As Žižek rightly points out, for instance, most anti-Semites will not be convinced by statistical data which prove them wrong. This point brings me to a third objection. If ideology were to reside purely in ideas, then it would be impossible for ideology to coexist with self-consciousness. But again, experience seems to indicate that a 'limited degree of ironic self-awareness' is not always incompatible with ideology (Eagleton 1991: 60). There is an affective, unconscious dimension to ideology which makes it to a certain extent immune to rational refutation.

But if ideology does not simply reside in our individual minds, then where *does* it reside? One possible, and at first sight slightly absurd, answer to this question maintains that ideology resides in reality itself – that is, in social reality, the collective reality consisting of human beings interacting with each other. This is in fact the position taken by Marx in the chapter on commodity fetishism in the first volume of *Capital*. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács provides this stance with an epistemological basis. Starting from a dialectical, post-Kantian philosophical position, Lukács argues that our 'ideas' of the world or human society cannot logically be separated from our active role in that world or society. This can be understood if we remember that we are already part of reality far before we start forming ideas about it;

'we are practical beings before we are theoretical ones' (Eagleton 1991: 164). 'Thought and existence', Lukács writes, '[. . .] are aspects of one and the same real historical and dialectical process' (quoted in Eagleton 1991: 94). For Lukács, then, to *know* reality is already to *act* upon reality, in the same way that, once I know myself, I am not any more identical with whom I was before I gained that self-knowledge. And once we accept that we not just *have* ideas but always actively *live* them, it becomes clear how the category mistakes of ideology can manifest themselves as much in our minds as the social world around us – which is, after all, a world we help create ourselves: 'Men', said Marx, 'make their own history'.

Louis Althusser further develops the idea that ideology itself is 'material'. For Althusser, ideology is materialised in the *practices* of social *institutions*. As Jorge Larrain explains, for Althusser 'ideology has a material existence in apparatuses, rituals and practices; it is not spiritual or ideal, it is not subjective, but material and external' (1994: 62). In Althusser's view, heavily influenced by structuralism, it is not even necessary for this material ideology to act on human consciousness to do its work. If ideology is a system of representations, 'in the majority of the cases these representations have nothing to do with "consciousness": they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their "consciousness"' (1971: 233).

Žižek also rejects the idea that ideology exclusively resides in our minds, but his position is more nuanced and more dialectical than Althusser's. Žižek argues that ideology emerges precisely from the *discrepancy* between reality and our ideas about it. This allows Žižek to account for the continuing existence of ideology in our ironically self-conscious, post-modern world. People caught in an ideology might be perfectly aware of the 'reality' behind appearances – realising, for example, that money is really only a representation of value, not valuable in itself. The problem, however, is that 'in reality' they *act* as if they were not aware of this (1989: 31). The mis-recognition lies in the fact that they do not realise the discrepancy between their insight and conduct. Even though their 'ideas' of reality might be correct, their 'ideological fantasy' consists in the 'overlooked, unconscious illusion' that they are acting according to those ideas (1989: 33).¹⁴ To see ideology in this way as rising from the relation between our minds and reality – with the important qualification that mind and reality are inextricably caught up in each other – has the advantage of accounting for the appearance of ideology in many different manifestations: in mental processes, in behaviour, in language, in representation in general – in a thought, a gesture, a text, or a picture.

¹⁴ '[I]deology is not simply a "false consciousness", an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as "ideological" – "ideological" is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence [. . .] "Ideological" is not the "false consciousness" of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by "false consciousness"' (Žižek 1989: 21; quoted in Hawkes 1996: 178).

How does ideology function?

It can and has been argued that the epistemological basis of ideology – the ‘category mistake’ I mentioned above – also happens to be the basic mechanism of what we generally call understanding or comprehension, that is, making sense or producing meaning. It represents a stage – though not the end point – of the hermeneutical process of interpreting reality. Every time we produce a concept, we subsume a series of particular manifestations of reality under a general abstract category. In fact, when Eagleton remarks that the term ideology ‘is just a convenient way of categorizing under a single heading a whole lot of different things we do with signs’, he is pointing out that the very concept of ideology owes its existence to this mechanism (1991: 193). It is this same abstracting move which allows us to recognise two different tables as both being tables or, for that matter, a table seen from different angles or at different times as still the same piece of furniture. In itself, then, the mechanism is no way negative. On the contrary, it is what defines the very possibility of human existence. It introduces a sense of order and permanence into an otherwise chaotic and ever-changing world; it allows us, among other things, ‘to preserve identity through time’ (Ricoeur 1989: 185). To get an idea of what life would be like without this basic conceptual faculty it is enough to read ‘Funes el memorioso’, one of Borges’s mind-boggling stories.

To complicate things a bit further, the mechanism of the category mistake is not just basic to interpretation. It is also the fundamental move or ‘turn’ (trope) underlying figurative language. In the series of typical ideological confusions I listed above, in fact, it is not hard to recognise the textbook definitions of metaphor (to confuse analogy with identity), metonymy (to confuse an effect with its cause), synecdoche (to confuse the particular with the universal) and irony (to confuse opposites).¹⁵ And as far as the two remaining category mistakes are concerned – to confuse a representation of reality with the reality it represents, or the name of an entity with its essence – can they not be said to constitute the very mechanism of language use itself?¹⁶

Now, the fact that understanding and language are based on the same creative, imaginary, symbolic or meaning-making mechanism that underlies most manifestations of ideology, has led some people to conclude melodramatically that, therefore, ‘everything is ideological’ – which, of course,

¹⁵ A good way to demonstrate the relation between ideology and figurative language is to compare ideology to the mechanism of metaphor. A metaphor such as ‘life is a river’ expresses one thing in terms of another; by connecting two disparate linguistic elements it simultaneously poses (creates) and *presupposes* (claiming it is not creating but ‘finding’ it) a degree of identity between those elements. On the one hand, this move results in endowing reality with a greater degree of coherence, establishing ‘internal’ or ‘deep’ connections between elements initially thought to be non-related. On the other hand, however, inasmuch as metaphor upgrades a relation of analogy (life is *like* a river) to one of identity (life *is* a river), it involves a certain falsification of reality.

¹⁶ In a basic sense, of course, all language is already figurative: ‘no rigorous and ultimately valid distinction can be made between the proper and the figurative sense of a word’ (Thompson 1984: 24).

immediately renders the concept useless.¹⁷ In doing so, however, they forget that ideology, though based on category mistakes, has something more to it: to wit, its before-mentioned function in 'certain power-struggles central to the reproduction (or [. . .] contestation) of a whole form of social life' (Eagleton 1991: 223).¹⁸ Not *all* conceptualisation, not *all* language, not *all* meaning is necessarily ideological.¹⁹ Here we could repeat Eagleton's arguments against poststructuralism's anarchic rejection of any form of semiotic closure. Closure in itself is not negative, in fact it 'may be politically enabling rather than constraining'.²⁰ Just as declaring that all closure is intrinsically bad, declaring that all discourse or language use is ideological betrays 'an anarchistic suspicion of institutionality as such, and ignores the extent to which a certain provisional stability of identity is essential not only for psychical well-being but for revolutionary political agency' (1991: 198).²¹ Conversely, 'to

¹⁷ '[F]rom a Marxist standpoint', Eagleton remarks, 'nothing could be more ideological than this view that all thought is ideological' (1991: 161). What could be called the 'ontological' understanding of ideology – the notion that, given the temporal and corporal limits of human existence, all claims to truth or knowledge are bound to be limited – is not very useful either: in McLellan's words, it 'robs the concept of any critical edge' (1995: 82).

¹⁸ Eagleton criticises Mannheim exactly for reducing ideology to this 'interpretative' aspect, rooting it psychologically in the human 'mental structure' and ignoring its *social* function. Mannheim, says Eagleton, 'fails to grasp that ideology cannot be synonymous with partial or perspectival thinking – for of what thinking is this not true?' (1991: 110). Similarly, when talking about *The German Ideology* Eagleton writes: 'Marx and Engels do not of course assume that any old abstract idea is ideological: mathematical concepts are not usually so. But the disconnectedness of thought from practical existence, in ways which serve objectionable political ends, would seem for them definitive of the notion' (1991: 78–79). What follows from this is that to 'cure' ideology is not simply to re-attach ideas to practice (organically 'concretise' them) but to *change* the 'appearances' which give rise to the illusion.

¹⁹ At least, not ideological in a pejorative sense. For Ricoeur, who employs 'ideology' in a neutral sense, 'ideology is not the distortion of communication but the rhetoric of basic communication. There is a rhetoric of basic communication because we cannot exclude rhetorical devices from language; they are an intrinsic part of ordinary language. In its function as integration, ideology is similarly basic and ineluctable' (1989: 259).

²⁰ Meaning-making can be seen as a function of the human *creativity* in so far as we, by 'inventing' tropes or abstract concepts, use our *imagination*. Theoreticians such as Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and Ricoeur, nuancing the narrow-minded, rationalist-empiricist rejection of all that is imaginary or fictional as a 'mere reflection [. . .] of what is already there', propose an principally *positive* evaluation of this imaginary faculty as being *constitutive* of the social-historical (Thompson 1984: 23).

²¹ The same argument can be made for the phenomenon of the institutionalisation of intellectuals. Bruce Robbins refutes the engrained idea of the authentic intellectual as a tie-less, income-less *Luftmensch*, and the corresponding conception of the intellectual's entering an institution as submitting to the 'tyranny of the workplace'. 'In order to take the true measure of the real but relative freedoms we have', Robbins argues, 'we have to stop positing spaces of freedom which [. . .] inevitably mask someone's servitude. And we must look closely at those supposed spaces of tyranny,

imagine that otherness, heterogeneity and marginality are unqualified political benefits regardless of their concrete social content' is nothing but 'pure formalism' (1991: 128). The human capacity to make and destroy meaning is in itself neutral, that is to say, it can be used for purposes of both liberation and repression, in the service of both freedom and coercion. It can produce both insight and mystification. As Claude Lefort argues, the social imaginary is 'both creative and dissimulatory' (quoted in Thompson 1984: 41).

Which is not to say that suspicion is not in order at all times. On the contrary, precisely the fact that mystifying, deceiving ideology and its demystifying, clarifying critique are, so to speak, made of the same 'stuff' – meaning – makes it all too easy for one to transform into the other. It is certainly true that many manifestations of ideology derive from processes of conceptualisation or forms of figurative language that were initially meant to dispel mystification; they are, to put it bluntly, abused tropes, 'metaphors gone wrong'.²² To give a well-known example: When late-nineteenth century social Darwinism justified the social power of the white, Western bourgeois male over women, working classes and non-Western peoples by arguing that his privileged position was a consequence of the 'law' of natural selection, it mobilised exactly those semantic features of uncontrollability, universality, and causality which were *not* covered by the – in principle, insightful – metaphor posing a similarity between the 'laws of nature' (gravity, and the like) and certain regularities in the history of human society. Ironically, the opportunism underlying this ideological use of metaphor was laid bare soon enough. As soon as the 'less evolved' groups showed an ability to climb out of their subordinate position, their 'evolution' was paradoxically denounced as an 'anti-natural' form of 'degeneration' – apparently, nature's laws were less implacable than was first assumed, and could be threatened by the very weakest representatives of humanity.

However, we do not have to go that far to find examples of metaphors gone wrong. The very history of the theory of ideology provides us with many an illustrative instance. Take so-called vulgar Marxism. To be sure, Marx's metaphorical explanation of the economy in terms of architecture – distinguishing a 'base' and a 'superstructure' – is not in itself ideological; on the contrary, it is, as most of Marx's metaphors, both illuminating and aesthetically pleasing. But, as Ricoeur says, 'when taken *literally* to mean something prior to something secondary or derived', this metaphor becomes 'very dangerous' (153). In fact, it becomes distortive, hence ideological. Vulgar Marxism is ideological exactly to the extent that it takes Marx's metaphors literally. Here we see, again, the role played by oblivion: Vulgar Marxists 'forget' that for Marx the idea of the infra- and superstructure was just a metaphor – that is, an image based on partial similarity, on *some* shared

like the professional workplace, which have been seen as antithetic to the intellectual. [...] Not disembodied freedom, but diverse embodiednesses and incomplete servitudes have to become the common sense view of intellectual work' (1993: 10).

²² Or, to adapt Thompson's definition, 'meaning' put to the service of sustaining relations of domination (1984: 131).

semantic features. They mistakenly assume it to *completely* coincide with the structure of economic reality of which it was supposed to be an illustration.²³

A similar example is mentioned by Eagleton in his discussion of post-Marxism. Eagleton rejects the theoretical stance, proclaimed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, that denies 'all validity to the distinction between "discursive" and "non-discursive" practices, on the grounds that a practice is structured along the lines of a discourse'. But to declare two phenomena that are *alike* to be *identical* is a category mistake typical of ideology. As Eagleton puts it, 'A way of *understanding* an object is simply projected into the object itself' – which, still according to Eagleton, is 'a familiar idealist move' (1991: 219). Similarly, Lacan's famous claim that the unconscious is structured *like* language has been appropriated by post-structuralism as another argument in favour of their stance that 'everything is discursive'. One of the points Žižek keeps emphasising, however, is that Lacan was not a poststructuralist: he did *not* believe that everything is discursive. His central concept of the Real designates precisely the *non-discursive*. One could say that Žižek tries to prevent Lacan's relation of *analogy* from slipping into the *identity* in which poststructuralism has tried to collapse it.

Before going any further, something has to be said about the relation between ideology and narrative. Narrative has been rightly described as an extended trope. As such, it is a particular form of meaning-making and an extraordinarily powerful one at that. Like all mechanisms of meaning-making, however, narrative itself is ideologically neutral. It can serve both liberating and repressing purposes; it can be a vehicle for ideology as much as for ideology critique. Like figurative language, narrative produces meaning by casting the conflictive chaos of social experience into a culturally pre-set pattern. In the same way as Freud's 'dreamwork' (Eagleton 1991: 135), the *form* of this narrative pattern allows not only for a formulation of social conflict but also, through the very act of formulation, for its containment. By *staging* conflict, narrative hints at its potential resolution. Here we might recall Hayden White's thesis that 'to narrativise is to moralise': All narratives are supported by a presupposed moral or ethical framework, ultimately based on a notion of good and evil (White 1987: 25). It is precisely this presupposed framework that makes narrative such a powerful tool for defining, containing and imaginarily resolving social antagonisms.

²³ Since we are forgetful beings, ideology is, in a sense, the result of a spontaneous process. We are creatures of habit, and a 'second nature' is quickly acquired – although, as Aristotle already pointed out, it is also extremely hard to eradicate. How easy it is to slip into this sort of ideological oblivion is demonstrated by cases of self-distortion, in which theorists start taking their own metaphors literally, thus popularising or 'vulgarising' their own theory. A nice example of the relation between theory, vulgarisation, and the media was the 'Sokal-affair' that occurred a couple of years ago. Partly fuelled by media reports, the two camps in the polemic ended up assuming the ideological, caricatural, 'vulgarised' versions of themselves that the media and their adversaries had constructed of them.

Narrative, of course, appears in many guises, and not all are necessarily textual. In the context of the theory of ideology, it might be useful to distinguish between *fiction* and *myth*, a distinction made by, among others, Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*. Fiction, to be sure, is as ideologically neutral as narrative in general; that is, it can serve mystifying as much as demystifying purposes, either providing ideologies with a grounding or blasting the ground away from under them. Nevertheless, one could argue that there is something about fiction that makes it harder to sustain ideology in a pure and unambiguous way. The fundamental mechanism by which fiction functions is itself, after all, highly ambiguous. One would almost say it is schizophrenic: The reader is asked simultaneously to believe and not believe, assuming the narrative is referential without completely abandoning a sceptical distance as to the value of that referentiality. This built-in scepticism implies that even the most naïve fictional gesture is always to a certain degree self-conscious (Eagleton 1991: 191).

In fact, fiction not only requires Coleridge's famous 'suspension of disbelief' – that is, the reader's willingness to give the fictional world described a certain referential 'benefit of the doubt'. It also necessarily invites the reader to suspend his *belief*. By having her take the fictional referentiality for true, it has the reader *doubting* the referentiality of the non-fictional discourse from which the fiction explicitly deviates. To the extent that all fiction depends on this imagining a different world and the necessary questioning of the present one, then, all fiction contains a potential ideology critique, or what Jameson would call a Utopian impulse (1981: 293). Fiction, while partaking in, and feeding on, ideology – it needs to display some level of correspondence with the world as the reader knows it – also *exposes* the ideological as such by making the reader put that world into question.²⁴

The category of myth – as used by Kermode, Barthes, and others – works quite differently. While fiction forecloses a complete, uncritical surrender of the reader to the referentiality of the narrative, myth invites precisely such a total, unambiguous submission. If, as Ricoeur argues, narrative fiction functions on the basis of *time*, that is, on the generation and celebration of difference, myth by contrast presupposes timelessness and an annulling of difference. As Barthes writes, 'the end of myth is to immobilise the world' (1972: 155); myth 'draws its power from the exaltation of sameness. It adheres to a pattern of discourse that eschews equivocation and ennobles all that is fixed and unvaried' (Herzberger 1995: 33–4). In the words of Kermode, myth is 'a series of radically unchangeable gestures' (1967: 39). To the extent that

²⁴ This is really the view of the relation between art and ideology as formulated by Macherey and Althusser: 'I do not rank art among the ideologies', writes the latter, 'although art does have a quite particular and specific relationship with ideology [. . .] What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives us in the form of "*seeing*", "*perceiving*" and "*feeling*" [. . .] is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes' (Althusser 1971: 221–22, quoted in Hawkes 1996: 130).

myth works against change and self-consciousness, assuming itself to be timeless, it is the narrative form par excellence for carrying ideological meaning. According to Kermode:

Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. [. . .] Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were [. . .] Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs for sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. (1967: 39)

Why or how does ideology arise?

Theorists have, *grosso modo*, resorted to two conceptual models to explain the phenomenon of ideology. One, which could be called structuralist, behaviourist or empiricist, grants primacy to the power of the determining force of the *collective* and sees ideology as being *caused*. The other, which could be called humanist, grants primacy to the relative freedom of the *individual* and sees ideology as being *motivated*. These two different models already coexist in Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology*, and have since then continued to divide the field. Since the structuralist model conceives of ideology as a process which ultimately remains outside of the control of the human individual, it tends to have had a markedly pessimist thrust. The humanist model is generally more optimistic because it tends to allow for human agency, and thus for a way out of ideology. As I will argue in the next section, the humanist model is logically more consistent: It is able to account for the epistemological position of the theoretician formulating it. This is generally not the case for the structuralist model, since its tendency to determinism – its insistence on the *inescapability* of ideology – appears paradoxically to preclude the ideology-free position, the claim to truth, of the theoretician himself.

Although Marx himself hesitates between the two models, chronologically speaking he seems to evolve from a humanist to a structuralist perspective. Whereas *The German Ideology* still predominantly places the human individual at its theoretical centre, *Capital* describes ideology in terms of collective, historical processes on which individual agency has very little influence. Orthodox Marxism has privileged this structuralist reading, bending it to a determinist extreme, seeing ideology as a phenomenon ultimately *caused* (i.e., determined) by the economic structure of society.

Without abandoning the 'economism' of orthodox Marxism, Lukács made a courageous, unorthodox attempt to combine the humanist and the structuralist model. While, on the one hand, he emphasised that human beings actively transform reality, even through the very act of knowing, on the other hand he continued to think, 'structuralistically', in terms of collective processes. Thus, the proletariat's coming to self-knowledge (which for Lukács amounted to its acquiring insight into the totality and hence reaching objective truth), though in itself an *action*, is ultimately brought about by the dialectical *process* of history. Another clue to Lukács' ultimately structuralist standpoint is his apparent inability to account for his own epistemological

position. As Eagleton puts it, 'if the working class is the potential bearer of [some "true" class] consciousness, from what viewpoint is *this* judgment made?' (1991: 97).

Althusser's theory of ideology signals the triumph of the structuralist model. For Althusser, ideology plays a fundamental role in the survival of the social system; it is the apparatuses of this supra-human system that, from the very moment of our birth, wrap us tightly in an ideological blanket. Everything we think of as human existence is already ideological; in fact our very *thinking* is caught within ideology. Total escape is impossible. All that Althusser grants us are short, temporary glimpses of the non-human world outside the ideological prison-walls, by peeking through the skylight he calls 'science'.

Ricoeur, in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, resists the structuralist model and resorts to anthropological and sociological paradigms to explain the phenomenon of ideology. For him, ideology's primary function is positive because it is the very fundament of social life. Ideology helps us constitute ourselves as subjects with a stable identity and as members of a community. In a more political context, ideology fulfills a basic need for *legitimation*, a need that automatically arises in any form of society where, through a political 'division of labor', some members come to rule over others. In politics, then, ideology justifies the power of the rulers by bridging the gap between the rulers' *claims* and the *belief* of the ruled. Ricoeur emphasises that, prior to becoming distortive and functioning to justify illegitimate power structures, ideology has a legitimate and constitutive function.²⁵

Žižek, the maverick disciple of Jacques Lacan who fiercely resists poststructuralism's appropriation of his master, explains ideology on an individual level by taking recourse to psychoanalysis. For Žižek, ideology is in essence a fantasy which helps us hide the trauma that was inflicted upon us in our becoming social subjects. Ideology screens off the never-healing wound caused by our violent, and ultimately arbitrary incorporation into the 'symbolic order' of human society. This terrible trauma, which Lacan calls 'the Real', needs to be continuously hidden from sight. In order to divert our never-ceasing attraction to, and simultaneous repulsion of, this non-symbolisable core of the Real, we resort to psychological lightning rods. In a strategy of *diversion* – one would almost call it entertainment – we produce ideological fantasies that put other objects at the spotlight of our desire. From this strategy of diversion we derive enjoyment, and it is this enjoyment – itself pre-symbolic, non-ideological – that ultimately keeps the ideological fantasy in place. Although Žižek's background is Althusserian, it is not entirely clear whether his explanation of ideology can be seen to belong to the 'structural-

²⁵ This constitutive, neutral kind of ideology comes close to what today is designated by the term 'culture'. In fact, one advantage of reserving the term culture for the inevitably symbolic base of all human existence is that it 'frees up' the term ideology for a more fruitful political use. On the other hand, to the extent that 'culture' carries certain naturalising overtones, it also provides ideologies with a new disguise: no better way for an ideology to hide its unnatural, political motivations than to dress in the essentialist clothes of culture.

ist', no-escape model. For this, we would have to investigate whether Žižek believes ideology to be surmountable – which is the topic of the next section.

But before continuing it is interesting to note that Žižek and Ricoeur coincide in viewing ideology, at least in part, as a positive, or at least a functional, phenomenon. For both, one of ideology's functions is to comfort, to soothe bothersome contradictions. Ideology is, in a way, an existential pain reliever. For Ricoeur, ideology resolves the contradictions of society through a process of identification and communion; for Žižek, it resolves the contradictions of subjecthood through a process of constant diversion which in turn produces enjoyment, much like a suffering hospital patient who is able to forget about his terrible pain by watching a movie or playing a game.

In this sense Žižek is truly Freudian. For Freud, after all, neurosis not only expresses a psychological problem but also constitutes an attempt to resolve it. In Freudian psychoanalysis, as Eagleton explains, '[n]eurotic behaviour is a *strategy* for tackling, encompassing and 'resolving' genuine conflicts, even if it resolves them in an imaginary way' (1991: 135). In this sense, then, neuroses and ideologies work in the same way; as we already suggested when talking about ideology and narrative, ideologies 'are no mere inert by-products of social contradictions but resourceful strategies for containing, managing and imaginarily resolving them' (Eagleton 1991: 135).

Indeed, as Žižek points out, 'there is a fundamental homology between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud' (1989: 11). Both agree on granting importance to the *form* of these imaginary resolutions over their specific *content*. The Freudian analysis of the dream, for instance, is not so much interested in the 'story' of the dream as in the 'dreamwork'. The same can be said for Marx's analysis of commodities: 'the real problem is not to penetrate to the "hidden kernel" of the commodity – the determination of its value by the quantity of the work consumed in its production – but to explain why work assumed the form of the value of a commodity' (Žižek 1989: 11). For both Freud and Marx, the form of ideologies and dreams already contain the possible solution to the problems in which they originated (Eagleton 1991: 135).²⁶

Is ideology surmountable?

We finally arrive at what is probably the most problematic issue in the theory of ideology. If ideology generally consists in a category mistake put to work

²⁶ Eagleton mentions a number of essential differences between psychoanalysis and the Marxist theory of ideology: '[A]s Russell Keat has pointed out, the emancipation wrought by psychoanalysis is a matter of remembering or "working through" repressed materials, whereas ideology is less a question of something we have *forgotten* than of something we never knew in the first place' (1991: 136). Against this argument, however, a counterargument can be made. In psychoanalysis, as in ideology, what is most important is that what we 'learn' must *seem* like something we once knew but had forgotten; whether this is really the case is not important. The experience must be something of an *Aha-Erlebnis* or a *déjà-vu*.

in relations of power, who has the authority to call that mistake? And on what is this authority based?

In an ideological irony, more than one theoretician has been enslaved and defeated by the reified form of this epistemological dilemma, falling victim to the logic that was supposed to empower him. It seems logically impossible simultaneously to (1) maintain that ideology involves false consciousness, (2) argue that ideology is insurmountable, (3) be theoretically rigorous and (4) maintain a certain degree of intellectual honesty. If ideology is indeed inescapable, how does one account for this true, non-ideological insight into ideology's inescapability? 'If the critique of ideology sets out to examine the social foundations of thought', Eagleton writes, 'then it must logically be able to give some account of its own historical origins' (1991: 106). This aporia, which basically repeats the famous one of the Cretan who said that all Cretans are liars, has been baptised as 'Mannheim's paradox'.

Althusser, confronted with this very dilemma, was forced to give up the negative interpretation of ideology, and switch to a neutral one.²⁷ Ricoeur circumvents the problem by seeing ideology as a *relational* concept. Ideology can be recognised as such when an alternative can be *imagined*: when an ideology critique can be formulated. Conversely, as soon as an alternative – which Ricoeur calls a 'utopia' – can be imagined, the existing order needs to bolster its authority; suddenly the existing belief system has to legitimate itself vis-à-vis its competitor. This is what happened, for instance, when the nations of Western Europe started colonising the rest of the world: 'Imperialism need[ed] to assert the absolute truth of its own values at exactly the point where those values [were] confronting alien cultures' (Eagleton 1991: 107).

For Fredric Jameson, ideology is a name for designating the *limits* put to individual freedom and agency by the social, collective character of historical reality. Following Althusser, Jameson argues that the individual subject is fundamentally constituted in and through the social. Jameson believes that, for the subject, these limits are ultimately insurmountable: It is impossible for any individual subject ever to be completely aware of his own determination by the social reality through which she is constituted. Jameson therefore rejects the 'myth' of an *individual* 'cure' from ideology, 'the vision of a moment in which the individual subject would be somehow fully conscious of his or her determination by class and would be able to square the circle of ideological conditioning by sheer lucidity and the taking of thought'. If ideology is to be overcome, it can only be on a collective level. Jameson concedes that this insight of our own social determination or limitation is unbearable: 'It would be a mistake to think that anyone ever really learns to live with [it]' (1981: 283–84).

In all conceptions of ideology, its critique derives its epistemological authority from ideology's opposite. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels

²⁷ 'In December 1976 [. . .] Althusser altered his conception and seemed definitely to abandon the negative concept of ideology. [. . .] Hence he can speak of a proletarian ideology, upon which the Communist Party constitutes itself, which interpellates individuals as militant subjects against the system' (Larrain 1994: 64).

find their epistemological support in the 'real life conditions' of human individuals; in the Marx of *Capital*, the realm of the non-ideological is assumed to coincide with the science of historical materialism. For Lukács, the basis for ideology critique is ultimately located in the subjective/objective insight into totality which will come about when the consciousness of the proletariat has reached its full potential (its 'imputed consciousness'). Althusser in turn grounds his epistemology in a non-human sort of 'science'. For Žižek, the only 'science' capable of undoing, unmasking ideology – of helping us 'go through the fantasy' – is Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In Žižek's view however, as in Althusser's, ideology can never be completely conquered: It is impossible for human subjects exclusively to inhabit the realm of the non-ideological because that would mean they would cease to be subjects. Still, Žižek is less pessimistic than Althusser: he does seem to believe in the possibility of gaining a more true understanding of ideology's functioning. The 'cure' of psychoanalysis consists in the patient's learning to live with his ailment. Again, Žižek coincides here with Freud: 'Perhaps', as Eagleton remarks, 'the most we can hope for, in Freud's eyes, is to establish some *modus vivendi* with the sublime wrath of the superego, negotiating what more creative relationships we can within this forbidding framework' (1990: 281).

For Eagleton himself, finally, the way out of ideology seems to be a level-headed pragmatist attitude based on a non-ideological, *ethical* core.²⁸ Eagleton consistently refuses to let 'logic', theoretical rigor, take the upper hand. If reasoning is able to prove the impossibility of truth, then the reasoning is faulty, not the truth. I would argue that ultimately Eagleton's position is very close to that of Ricoeur. Both are convinced humanists; both are wary of epistemological arrogance; and for both the final touchstone of all theory – including the theory of ideology – is ethical: What matters is its usefulness as a tool for improving life as we know it. For Eagleton, an important antidote against the epistemological uncertainties of the *hic et nunc* is the passage of time and the perspective it provides. This is clear, for instance, from his defence of the notion of 'objective interests' against the relativist attacks of post-Marxism. Eagleton defines his objective interest as:

a course of action which is in fact in my interests but which I currently do not recognise as such. [. . .] [T]he phrase just alludes to valid, discursively framed interests which do not exist for me right now. Once I have acquired such interests, however, I am able to look back on my previous condition and recognise that what I believe and desire now is what I would have believed and desired then if only I had been in a position to do so. (1991: 217)

For Eagleton, emancipatory critique can take hold in the 'structural gap between the actual and the possible'. This gap is inherent to our historical

²⁸ It is important to note that for Žižek, too, the ultimate motivation to continue to believe in the necessity of ideology critique in spite of its epistemological problems is an ethical one. See Porter (2002) for a detailed analysis of this point.

existence: 'An historical being is one ceaselessly "out ahead" of itself, radically "excessive" and non-self-identical, able within certain definite constraints to pose its own existence as problematic' (1991: 170).

This distance- and difference-producing time lag, then, appears as a crucial weapon against ideology. Ideology critique always involves a certain *looking back*. But how does this help us to identify and denounce ideology where it really matters, here and now? This is where Ricoeur's concept of *utopia* offers a helping hand. For Ricoeur, to exercise a contemporary ideology critique amounts to the critic's *imagining* a future vantage point from which to judge the present. Eagleton's argument implies an interplay of continuity and difference: my future-I will still be me, while at the same time I will be different than I am now because my view, my circumstances and my interests will have changed.²⁹ Ricoeur's concept of utopia repeats this mode of reasoning on a collective level: Utopia is the *collective* imagining of a different state of affairs *within* the imaginary/conceptual/symbolic framework of the identity/community.³⁰ Utopia is, in other words, 'ideological' insofar as it is symbolic and thus incongruent with a non-symbolic reality, but instead of being a distortion of reality it offers a weapon *against* distortion. In this respect it works in very much the same way as fiction: Utopia also 'suspends belief' to unsettle the legitimacy of the status quo.³¹

Of course, we should not exaggerate the parallels and overlaps I signal here between Žižek, Eagleton and Ricoeur. One might seriously wonder, for instance, whether the three really refer to the same thing when they are talking about ideology. For Eagleton, a Marxist after all, ideology is ultimately about one part of society's exploiting another part by distorting the whole society's view of the world. Ricoeur is mostly interested in Marx as a humanist, and in ideology critique along humanist-Enlightenment lines. Žižek's relation to the political and theoretical tenets of Marxism is not clear-cut either, given the strong dose of Lacan in this thinking. On the one hand, Žižek's attempt to nuance and complicate the Marxist (and Althusserian) theory of ideology via Lacanian psychoanalysis is welcome and fruitful, because it enables him to adapt the notion of ideology to the changed

²⁹ If an individual caught in ideology needs an 'I-which-is-not-I' to liberate him from it, one could say that in psychoanalysis this role is fulfilled by the analyst.

³⁰ 'For Marxism', says Eagleton, '[rationality] seeks to occupy the categories of bourgeois society from within, in order to highlight those points of internal conflict, indeterminacy and contradiction where its own logic might be led to surpass itself'; Marxism for example 'takes with the utmost seriousness bourgeois society's talk of freedom, justice and equality, and enquires with *faux* naivety why it is that these grandiloquent ideals can somehow never actually enter upon material existence' (1991: 171–2).

³¹ Žižek, in his introduction to *Mapping Ideology*, concludes something very similar. One of the tasks of the 'postmodern' critique of ideology, he writes, is 'to designate the elements within an existing social order which – in the guise of "fiction", that is, of "Utopian" narratives of possible but failed alternative histories – point towards the system's antagonistic character, and thus "estrangle" us to the self-evidence of its established identity' (1994: 7).

circumstances of the contemporary social world. In this sense, Žižek does for the theory of ideology what Gramsci's notion of hegemony did for it in the 1930s: he develops, updates, and nuances it in order to account for the increasingly cunning ways of contemporary capitalism.

Still, Žižek's debt to psychoanalysis at times tempts him to describe ideology in purely intra-individual terms, which in turn leads him to lose sight of the collective dimension. As James Hurley wrote in a review of Žižek's *The Plague of Fantasies*, the problem is not that 'Žižek insists on addressing the ways in which ideological forces operate at the level of the intrapsychic; Žižek's tracing of these operations is in fact one of the appeals of his theory, providing a component that is missing from, say, Foucault's theory of power, in which the subject's interior life is elided almost entirely'. The problem is, rather, the

implication that it is ultimately the intrapsychic where the ideological action is, including, presumably, the action that can problematise and constructively modify ideology's interpellative precepts. In reframing the larger structural questions he has so frequently and provocatively raised in *Plague of Fantasies* in terms of the individual subject's ethical choice, Žižek achieves a position [. . .] that is, curiously, a kind of 'Lacanised' existentialism: what is imperative for the subject is a self-constitutive choice in the face of a spiritually impoverished and politically disempowering life-world; but unlike the autonomous, self-identical subjectivity that is the Sartrean ideal, the Žižekian subject's self-constitution results from an act of willing self-destitution, an acceptance of the primordial splitting that is subjectivity's necessary condition of existence. (Hurley 1998)

And in that way, Hurley argues, Žižek himself ends up falling prey to his object of critique, inasmuch as his 'theorisation of postmodern subjectivity may finally accord even better with the privatizing logic of postmodern capitalism and liberal democracy than does the neo-Gramscian model of left-alliance politics he criticises' (Hurley 1998).

For Žižek, ideology is the mechanism by which we deceive ourselves; it allows us to continue to do something even though we know it is misguided. Eagleton, on the other hand, never abandons the basic Marxist notion that ideology is the mechanism by which one class reduces or eliminates the agency of another class in order to continue its dominant position. Given this fundamental difference, Eagleton's notion of ideology *critique* is not quite the same as Žižek's either. The crucial issue here, of course, is that of agency: who does the deceiving or distorting, and therefore who is able to undo it. As Eagleton explains in his conclusion to *Ideology*, for him the ultimate aim of ideology critique should be political practice, and it is primarily practice that will help individuals caught in ideology to break free from it: 'No radical who takes a cool look at the tenacity and pervasiveness of dominant ideologies could possibly feel sanguine about what would be necessary to loosen their lethal grip. But there is one place above all where such forms of consciousness may be transformed almost literally overnight, and that is in active political

struggle' (1991: 223). For Žižek, by contrast, the 'cure' from ideology is much less clear. As he presents it, truly breaking free from ideology might imply that we have to face the terrifying, unbearable Real.

As we have seen above, the next question concerns the precise role of the theorist as ideology critic vis-à-vis his or her audience. Is the theorist a psychoanalyst – that is, someone whose role it is to interpret the patient's problems and facilitate a 'cure'? Or is the theorist, rather, a political leader, someone who leads others into activism and who is therefore a promoter of concrete social change? In other words, is he or she just a 'seer', or does that seeing ability imply an ethical imperative of 'doing' as well? To put it in more practical terms, for whom exactly does the theorist write, with what purpose, and what does this mean for her relation to her audience? These questions bring up complex issues of pedagogy, language and style, which are of course too vast to adequately address at this point. Nevertheless, I would like to close this essay with a couple of reflections in this direction apropos the work of Eagleton and Žižek, with the aim of pointing out a couple of possible inconsistencies in their positions.

As we have seen, language – linguistic form – is closely tied in with ideology. Ideology happens when language petrifies or solidifies into 'myth'. At the same time we saw that theorists, much like immunologists using a vaccine to combat a disease, are condemned to perform their ideology critique with the same dangerous material that ideology itself is made of. It is therefore no coincidence that the question of *style* – how to use this dangerous material in a safe and effective way – has been a hotly debated issue within the theoretical field. This has been especially true for the polemics between the defenders of the concept of ideology and their poststructuralist detractors.

For Eagleton, the fundamental problem of most postmodernist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial theory is its lack of political direction and its resulting political impotence. In fact, Eagleton maintains that the very demise of the notion of ideology among these theorists is a telling symptom of this impotence (1991: xii). Another important symptom in this respect is theory's writing style, or rather its *lack* of concern for stylistics. In a scathing and well-known review of Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason* in the *London Review of Books*, for instance, Eagleton jokingly suggested that there must be a secret manual for post-colonial critics, one of whose main rules reads, 'Be as obscurantist as you can decently get away with'. 'Post-colonial theory', he continued,

makes heavy weather of a respect for the Other, but its most immediate Other, the reader, is apparently dispensed from this sensitivity. Radical academics, one might have naively imagined, have a certain political responsibility to ensure that their ideas win an audience outside senior common rooms. In US academia, however, such popularising or *plumpes Denken* is unlikely to win you much in the way of posh chairs and prestigious awards, so that left-wingers like Spivak, for all their stock-in-trade scorn for academia, can churn out writing far more inaccessible to the public than the literary élitists who so heartily despise them. (Eagleton 1999)

In Eagleton's opinion, Spivak's 'endless digressions and self-interruptions [...] belong, among other places, to a politically directionless Left': 'For Spivak to impose a coherent narrative on her materials, even if her title spuriously suggests one, would be the sin of teleology, which banishes certain topics just as imperialism sidelines certain peoples'. However, cultural theorists' apparent freedom from stylistic or structural constraints in their writing also signals that 'they are free from the inevitably constricting claims of a major political project' (Eagleton 1999). In the end, Eagleton concludes, the kind of theory Spivak represents is hopelessly defeatist, all too ready to admit to the impossibility of any radical alternative to the status quo.

In one of the many letters to the editor this review elicited, Judith Butler retorted that Eagleton's characterisation of Spivak's style as 'inaccessible' ignored the fact that Spivak's work had 'reached tens of thousands of activists and scholars' and changed 'their thinking [...] profoundly'; in the end, Butler suggested, Eagleton might simply be jealous of Spivak's 'well-earned popularity'. 'Surely', she concluded,

neither the *LRB* nor Eagleton believes that theorists should confine themselves to writing introductory primers such as those that he has chosen to provide. The wide-ranging audience for Spivak's work proves that spoon-feeding is less appreciated than forms of activist thinking and writing that challenge us to think the world more radically. Indeed, the difficulty of her work is fresh air when read against the truisms which, now fully commodified as 'radical theory', pass as critical thinking. (Butler 1999b)

Interestingly enough, a couple of months before Butler herself had received the annual 'Bad Writing Award' from the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, and in turn formulated a defence on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times*. '[W]hy', she had asked on that occasion, 'are some of the most trenchant social criticisms often expressed through difficult and demanding language?'

No doubt, scholars in the humanities should be able to clarify how their work informs and illuminates everyday life. Equally, however, such scholars are obliged to question common sense, interrogate its tacit presumptions and provoke new ways of looking at a familiar world. Many quite nefarious ideologies pass for common sense. [...] If common sense sometimes preserves the social status quo, and that status quo sometimes treats unjust social hierarchies as natural, it makes good sense on such occasions to find ways of challenging common sense. Language that takes up this challenge can help point the way to a more socially just world. (Butler 1999a)

Butler, in other words, argued that there tends to be a close link between plain language, 'common sense', and ideology, so that ideology *critique* needs to employ a more demanding, difficult language to reveal the ideological, repressive nature of what passes for common sense. In support of this argument, Butler invoked the Frankfurt school and in particular Adorno.

Still, Butler's need in her defence of Spivak to resort to an *ad hominem* attack on Eagleton shows the weakness of her arguments. Her simplistic reduction of all clearly written critical prose to 'introductory primers', and her suggestion that a truly radical critique can only be written in a challenging style, provide an all too easy excuse for theorists to neglect stylistic clarity altogether (Roney 2002). In fact Butler's naïve conflation of medium and message (clarity equals ideology, complexity equals ideology critique) is an ideological move in itself. In spite of the feebleness of Butler's arguments, however, the question of style does open up room for a critique – an ideology critique – of both Eagleton and Žižek. I would argue that there is, indeed, something suspicious about the apparent ease and virtuosity with which both tackle complex political and theoretical issues, especially that of ideology.

To be sure, Eagleton and Žižek are, each in their own way, accomplished stylists. They possess a degree of stylistic charisma that has earned them a wide following and something akin to star status. But their style, while being one of their most attractive features, is also one of their most problematic aspects. From the very form of their texts it is clear that they are out not only to educate their readers, driven by a 'burning desire to make [themselves] understood' (Yuram 2003), but also to impress and seduce them.³² The way they play to the audience, however, brings them dangerously close to a form of populism and therefore to ideology itself. As we have seen above, many times the slip into ideology occurs when one ceases to distrust the power of language; when simplifications, summaries or short cuts take the place of the complexities that inspired them. Ideology occurs when language, in a Frankensteinian way, 'takes over' from its producers and consumers – which is a way of describing what happens when a trope stops being conceived as one. For gifted stylists like Žižek and Eagleton, who are producers of exceptionally powerful language, it is not hard for their stylistic talent to get the better of them. Like José Zorrilla's Don Juan who at one point, while in the act of seducing a woman, remarks that he himself has trouble resisting the enchanting powers of his own words, charismatic writers all too easily fall under their own spell. And when they do, their self-critical sense is paralysed; it is at this moment that they themselves are likely to slip into ideology. Eagleton and Žižek are not immune to this process.³³

Needless to say, the question of style is also tied in with that of pedagogy and, therefore, that of agency. Eagleton writes in a clear and accessible way not only because he can, but also because he believes that is the most politically responsible way of writing. His mission is to point out the

³² And, like most seducers, those not sensitive to their overtures end up finding them insufferable.

³³ Eagleton is of course infamous for his use of hyperbole – "Stanley Fish [. . .] is about as left-wing as Donald Trump" (2000) – as well as his love of alliterations and neat oppositions; and as Colin Wright has recently argued, these stylistic virtuositities lead Eagleton to simplifications that fail to do justice to the objects of his polemics (2002: 70). In Žižek's case, the almost permanent emphasis he adds to his writing – his frequent use of 'very', the many italics – also point in the direction of a risky infatuation with his own arguments.

relevance of complex theory for daily social and political life, to as many people as possible. He ultimately aims to open up a space for his readership to retrieve its political agency. That is why he believes that the stylistic abstruseness of Spivak's brand of post-colonial theory robs it of its political relevance and emancipatory potential. Žižek's style, to be sure, is not exactly as accessible as Eagleton's; nor is it clear that his ideology critique is as directly tied to political activism. Žižek's charisma is more that of the virtuoso than of the pedagogue. Yet, like Eagleton, he makes ample use of humour, wit and irreverence; and like Eagleton he firmly believes in the importance of the concrete example drawn from his readership's daily life experience.

However, for all its clarity and sense of purpose, the work of both Žižek and Eagleton is plagued by a pedagogical and political paradox. Their witty style, their self-assuredness bordering on smugness or arrogance, their desire for transparency and simplicity, and the correspondent pedagogical relationship established in the text itself between author and reader, in the end all threaten to undercut the authors' theoretical arguments. The authors' stylistic advantage not only makes it easy for them to dismiss others out of hand as hopelessly caught in ideology, but also to put and keep their readership 'in its place'. Their texts invite the reader to admire the authors, but they do not necessarily invite her to submit the authors themselves to the same kind of ruthless critique they apply to the rest of the world.

My own text, whose style perhaps owes more to Eagleton than to Žižek, is of course susceptible to similar charges. The best way to deal with those charges is, in my opinion, to return to the matter of ethics, politics, and elitism in relation with the concept of ideology. As I noted at the beginning of this essay, rejecting the notion of ideology for fear of elitism – for fear of establishing precisely the kind of pedagogical hierarchy I signal in Žižek and Eagleton – is throwing away the baby with the bathwater. The same goes for rejecting pedagogical clarity or political expediency for fear of ideological contamination. Without wanting to resort to a discourse – or an ideology – of puritanical morality, I would suggest that the key defence against this form of elitism, as well as the self-seduction and self-blinding that lead to ideology, are a modesty and self-consciousness of the kind displayed by, for example, Ricoeur. As we have seen, no defeat of ideology is more than temporary, and there is nothing easier for ideology than to draw former critics into its fold.³⁴

³⁴ Žižek writes along similar lines: '[W]hen we denounce as ideological the very attempt to draw a clear line of demarcation between ideology and actual reality, this inevitably seems to impose the conclusion that the only non-ideological position is to renounce the very notion of extra-ideological reality and accept that all we are dealing with are symbolic functions, the plurality of discursive universes, never "reality" – such a quick, slick "postmodern" solution, however, is ideology par excellence. It all hinges on our persisting in this impossible position: although no clear line of demarcation separates ideology from reality, although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as "reality", we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive. [. . .] [I]deology is not all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality – the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology' (1994: 17; emphasis in the original).

The ideology critic, therefore, should be ruthless when slaying the enemy, but resist the temptation to gloat over her victory. In Eagleton and Žižek, one suspects there is, at times, a bit too much gloating going on.

Furthermore, it should be clear by now that it is one thing for the ideology critic to claim a non-ideological status, but quite another to claim disinterestedness. Since ideology is, per definition, always about social power, ideology critique can never be gratuitous either. It is always *interested*, that is, caught up in questions of legitimacy and ethics. An honest and consistent ideology critique therefore needs to account for its own epistemological claim to truth. Not to lapse back into idealism, however, this claim needs to be made, again, in a modest way, with enough self-suspicion to concede that, while one is, for the moment, pragmatically claiming to be ideology-free, one's discourse will probably not escape the fate of slipping into ideology itself at a later moment. That is the consequence of an historicist belief in truth and a relational conception of ideology: A discourse becomes ideological at the exact moment that there is an ideology-critical or 'utopian' discourse refuting it.

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