Session 7: Ideology, Mystification, and Fetishism
What are ideologies and what do they do?
Do ideologies mystify members of a society?
Are ideologies like myths?
What does fetishism achieve? How about commodity fetishism?
If people can be duped, how does change ever happen?
Ideology: Ideas, Words, and Much More

→ ideas and meanings
→ do words create reality?
→ Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, 1929: linguistic determinism
→ Post-modern anthropology: ethnographies as fictions

→ a system of meaning used to justify and uphold domination
→ beliefs and values that ultimately benefited a dominant class;
→ naturalization → normal
→ legitimation & disqualification
→ obscures the nature of social reality (misdirection)
→ “common sense,” taken for granted, doxa
→ orthodoxy—heterodoxy.
→ Antonio Gramsci, hegemony: consciousness of the subordinated reflects that of the dominant class
Are oppositional, heterodox forms of thought themselves ideologies?

Problem of studying ideology ideologically


“The term ‘ideology’ is vague and often abusive. Its main usefulness as an alternative to ‘doctrine’ is that it usually incorporates a reference to a social location which is thought either to have originated or at least to sustain the set of ideas composing the doctrine. The description of a set of interrelated ideas as an ideology consequently carries the aggressive implication that the ideology is a rationalization of various political interests; for which reason there is a strong *prima facie* suggestion that many of the assertions of an ideology are false. The conception was first extensively developed by Marx and Engels. ‘Every ideology,’ Engels wrote, ‘once it has arisen, develops in connection with the given concept-material, and develops this material further; otherwise it would not be an ideology, that is, occupation with thoughts as with independent entities, developing independently and subject only to their own laws’. Here the source of error in ideologies is seen in the original concept formation, when distinctions arose in accordance with the distorting activity of social conditions. Of what intellectual use is the theory? The value it had for Marx and Engels is perfectly clear. It was a superb debunking tactic”.
all ideologies are by definition oppositional

Minogue:

“An ideology may...be defined as a set of ideas whose primary coherence results not from their truth and consistency, as in science and philosophy, but from some external cause; most immediately, this external cause will be some mood, vision, or emotion. The psychological mark of ideological entrapment is the feeling of despair which accompanies the prospect of defeat in argument. Ideologies seek to avoid such painful experiences by framing their key utterances in a vague or tautological form, in order to make these propositions impregnable. The intellectual mark of ideology is the presence of dogma, beliefs which have been dug deep into the ground and surrounded by semantic barbed wire. In addition, ideologies incorporate some kind of general instructions about behavior – ideals or value-judgments, as they would commonly be called”.
ideology as an intersection between ideas/beliefs/values and power

Martin Seliger (The Marxist Conception of Ideology; Ideology and Politics):

“sets of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social action, and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order”.
Terry Eagleton:

(a) the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life;
(b) a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class;
(c) ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;
(d) false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;
(e) systematically distorted communication;
(f) that which offers a position for a subject;
(g) forms of thought motivated by social interests;
(h) identity thinking;
(i) socially necessary illusion;
(j) the conjuncture of discourse and power;
(k) the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;
(l) action-oriented sets of beliefs;
(m) the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality;
(n) semiotic closure;
(o) the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure;
(p) the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality.
→ How can we assume they ("the Natives") have been duped by the dominant ideology of their society? If we are not duped, why are they?

→ Reductionism

→ the thing to be maintained is also doing the maintaining
→ attribution of human or supernatural qualities to objects
→ does fetishism misdirect attention away from reality? (myth, ideology, falsehood—Marxist approaches)
→ Marx: *commodity fetishism*
→ *Das Kapital:*

“As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities”.
→ “the fantastic form of a relation between things”.

→ Michael Taussig: *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*

→ social relations and political power become *mystified*

→ commodities are *reified*

→ van Velzen: “in capitalist societies reification and dehumanization blow life into inanimate things and obscure social relations”

→ Is fetishism a way of “duping” people?