

Ideological Genealogies

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In his 1970 essay “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*”, Louis Althusser states that ideology **has no history**. He sees ideology as a mechanism viz. an apparatus. “Its history is outside it, where the only existing history is, the history of concrete individuals” (Althusser 15). If we take ideology to be “*a pure dream*” as Althusser puts it, how does it continue to dictate many of the accepted beliefs and values in society while preserving chimeras for the proletariat to endlessly chase? What constitutes this idea of ideology in its “immobile” form? If ideology has no history in and of itself, what is its grounding? This ‘pure dream’ interpretation of ideology that Althusser has put forth is conceptually compromised and undermines the direct influence ideology has on the subjective experience felt in a capitalist society. In this paper, I will put forward an alternative theory to explain ideology’s behavior and how factors like ego-development and symbolic motors both preserve and push forward ideology, constituting its genealogy.

Part I

Genealogy, Ideology, and the Lacanian “Subject”

Usage of the Term Genealogy

It is first important to define the way in which ‘genealogy’ is being implemented in this paper. Genealogy within this framework does not align with the Foucauldian genealogy analyzing epochs through a historical lens, nor does it align with Nietzsche’s usage of genealogy to analyze morals or virtues. Genealogy is here used to analyze how ideology is begotten and gestated through the formation of the subject and preservation of the symbolic order.

The Nature of Ideology

Ideology can be broadly defined as the shared beliefs, ideas, and values that shape how an individual, and society as a whole view the world. Ideology then functions as a framework for society, but mainly as sentiments held in the preconscious. If the beliefs and values of an ideology become constricting on an individual, the ideology shifts towards dogmatism. The ideology upheld by the State often tends towards strictness, and as a result it is also disposed to be dogmatic, to some degree. The dominant ideology, often the one upheld by the State is referred to as the *ruling ideology*. Any alternative ideologies are referred to as *dissenting ideologies*. Ideologies are arguably an intrinsic quality of the formation and upkeep of society, this is due to the fact that beliefs, ideas, and values are what unite society. Even the most devout skeptic, whose aim is to avoid dogmatic attitudes, is united with other skeptics in this shared decision, that being a characteristic of the skeptics ideology.

Cynical Ideology

In Marx’s *Capital*, he refines the definition of ideology into, “*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es,*” in other words, “**they do not know it, but they are doing it**”. This definition emphasizes the unawareness of the individual’s actions. Positing that they adhere to a set of rules unknowingly, as it is inherently laced into the social fabric of society through various means. However, this definition does not hold up in modern times. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* by Slavoj Žižek, he argues for a cynical lens of ideology,

implementing ideas from Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*. As Žižek puts it, "The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he nonetheless still insists upon the mask" (Žižek 25). If we were to reevaluate Marx's definition of ideology, we would now instead say, "**they know what they are doing, and yet they still do it**". This refined lens of a cynical ideology then begs the question, "if they know what they are doing, why are they still doing it?"

Lacanian "Reality"

The French psychoanalysis Jacques Lacan believed human experience could be structured through three registers, the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Many of Lacan's theories stem from his register theory. To understand the telos of ideology, it is first important to understand how (according to Lacan) our trajectory as individuals in society determines the extent to which ideology influences us.

Reality as Lacan puts it, is in fact not the same as his concept of the "Real Register". Reality, according to Lacan, is the combination of the Symbolic and Imaginary registers. In Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, he posits that once a child views itself in a mirror for the first time, it (**mis**)recognizes itself as an independent subject. This moment is crucial for the child in their development of the ego. The child begins by forming imagos of the mother and other pertinent figures, attempting to replicate them as their own image. Eventually, the child begins to separate themselves from imagos and formulate their "ideal-ego", which Lacan describes as not their true self, but the way in which they want to perceive themselves, often in line with the "ego-ideal". All of our past and present efforts to formulate a sense of self, according to Lacan, are rooted in the Imaginary Register. All the ideas we formulate of how we want to be perceived are fictitious, and coincide within the subject alongside perception.

The Symbolic Register, in contrast to the Imaginary, is the collection of institutions, laws, languages, norms, traditions, and so on, that formulate our idea of culture and society. Symbolism is thus an act of signification viz. the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The way we ascribe meaning to all things is as a result rooted in this process of signification. However, Lacan believes that since a signifier only gains meaning through its relation to other signifiers, meaning is relative, and as a result always deferred through these *signifying chains*.

Both the Symbolic and Imaginary registers come together to structure our conception of reality. Our fictitious beliefs intermingle with the symbolic nature and relative meaning ascribed within society. It is through the symbolic register that the aforementioned "ego-ideal" arises in tandem with the "Big Other". These two help the subject actualize their ego and have it align with society's values. These decisions made by the subject are direct influences of not only the symbolic order, but the **ruling ideology** as a whole.

The Desire for Recognition

Lacan's account of ego formation, stemming from the mirror stage, bears resemblances to Hegel's analysis of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In his section "Lordship and Bondage", Hegel asserts that one's initial desire to have their 'self-consciousness' affirmed, and to be recognized as a subject rather than an object, can only be done through their recognition from another self-consciousness. Both Lacan's mirror stage and Hegel's self-consciousness argue for the development of one's perceived sense of self, both necessitate a secondary subject to affirm one's individuality. For Lacan, it is one viewing and misrecognizing themselves, and for Hegel it is one being viewed by another. **Regardless of who exactly they are viewed by, this secondary presence is essential in both scenarios**. No matter the scenario, the subject in question as a result develops their individuality in the form of the Lacanian "ego" or Hegelian "I". This recognition is essential and unavoidable in the development of society, and since ideology is a fundamental

element of society's formation and upkeep, this recognition is the basis for the ideological thoughts that will go on to help structure society.

Even though Lacan believes it is the child's **misrecognition** of themselves which serves as the basis for their "self-alienation" and ego formation. I think it is the very fact that it is a "misrecognition" plays an important role in the correlation to Hegel's self-consciousness. In his section Lordship and Bondage he states,

"Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness ; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance : first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being ; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self" (Hegel, 179).

Here, Lacan and Hegel agree that the subject both identifies with an 'other', while simultaneously seeing itself in that very other. Perhaps Jean-Paul Sartre's quote "existence precedes essence" is preserved under this framework, for if the the subject temporarily exists in a "pre self-conscious" state before their acknowledgement of the other and subsequent ego formation, then it could be argued that the "post self-conscious" state would be where the subject in tandem with their ego would assert their values and beliefs, serving as the core of their ideological thoughts. A piece of an individual 'essence' is then defined by their ideology. This relationship can be refined further using Hegel's idea of *universals*. Ideology as a universal resides within each particular subject, each particular subject is determined by their relation to the whole. As a result, ideology can be asserted as a concrete universal in society.

Supposing this Lacanian-Hegelian framework for ego and ideological development within the individual, the next step would be to understand the subsequent role of Lacan's symbolic order. **In the symbolic register, language, laws, institutions, norms, and more are upheld within society, represented through signification.** It is here that those ideological values cultivated within the individual are compared and refined with the pre-existing ones. This aligns with Lacan's belief that the child inevitably enters a "pre-structured" world. Thus restricting its subjectivity as it is forced to adhere to what already is in place, while trying to develop its own sense of (albeit alienated) self. The individual refines their ideal-ego to best match the symbolic order and 'Big Other' which resides within it. If not anything else, the Big Other represents the expectations placed upon the individual. As Žižek argued earlier, these ideologies are inherently cynical, we know what we are doing, and yet we still do it. We are aware of the 'Big Other' and still willingly adhere to it. **This relationship elucidates ideology's nature, as something begotten within the individual, reinforced in accordance with the symbolic order, and projected onto other individuals through the process of recognition.** This is why it is hard to accept Althusser's claim of ideology being a "pure dream". While it can be understood that ideology is preserved more so in the individual (I would argue for such), it is anything but a pure dream, illusion, or nothingness.

Part II

Language and the Hidden Kernel

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, another notable experience the individual undergoes alongside the mirror stage is their subsequent acquisition of language. Lacan, being a scholar of Saussurean linguistics, would implement Saussure's, among other theories of structural linguistics into his ideas of the development of the "*barred subject (S)*" and utilize it to explain concepts like lack, desire, and drive.

Synchrony

Saussure's concept of "synchrony" aims to look at language in its immediate form. In this way, language is a structured system that we interpret and value for what it signifies *now*. Saussure's own analogy of chess highlights this distinction by explaining that in a game of chess, a piece's value is understood through its relation to other pieces **at a given moment**, it is not necessary to understand the opening of the game to evaluate a position at the later stage. In the same way, the value of language arises from its place in the overall linguistic system and its contrast to other words. Language is relational in nature as a result. Jacques Lacan would later adapt this concept of synchrony and utilize it to expose an issue with language, that being since it is purely relational in nature, meaning is abstracted due to this process of *signification*.

Signification

For Lacan, this relational nature of language is an issue. He expresses this problem through his idea of signification. While Saussure may have been assessing the value of language through its structure, it is important to understand that for Lacan, language structures our subjectivity. The value we ascertain from language is not derived from its inherent value, but value through the signification system. Lacan's infamous quote "the signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier" emphasizes this problem.

The Barred Subject (S)

Lacan states that the individual is born into a pre-existing structure of language. The individual's role as a result is one of adherence and acclimation. In doing so, the nature of language and its issue of synchrony and signification 'divides' the individual, and creates the split (barred) subject. Language cannot represent all that is meant. Lacan believed its limited nature constitutes the 'subject of the unconscious'. The individual is split between what is said (*signified*), and what is meant (*implied*). An example of this dilemma would be sarcasm. The tone with which "I hope you have a great day" is said greatly influences the way it is received. A sincere tone may imply kindness while a condescending tone may serve as a reflection of the speaker's own emotional state. This dilemma of meaning, brought about by language, informs many phenomenological troubles the subject endures.

Part III

Human Behavior, Symbolic Motors, and Chimeras

Belief

Ideology under this framework is no longer just the shared beliefs and ideas of a certain collective consciousness, it is equally an unconscious mechanism that informs and structures human behavior and shapes propensities. The insufficiency of language, constituting the subject of the unconscious, is nurtured by the symbolic order as the individual attempts to find the grounds of their beliefs in a system that is purely relational in nature. How then are the narratives that inform beliefs driven forward? By what means is ideology channeled into 'real-world' action? It is through **symbolic motors** viz. the means by which language, norms, culture, and hegemonies all can be implemented (and often weaponized) to push forward a narrative which supports a certain ideology through means like propaganda. Beliefs are mere rationalizations, attempting to assert understanding in a relational system of signification and symbolism. **Symbolic motors are the mechanisms of mediation between symbolism and action.**

Symbolic Motors

Symbolic motors are the mediating mechanisms within the symbolic register that operationalize ideology into beliefs and desires, harnessing and organizing signification to produce the appearance of a 'truth.'

Consumerism, the socially driven desire for goods, creates a demand that is satisfied by mass production. Goods that are signified in the symbolic register are not assigned value intrinsically, but in their relation to other signified goods. This artifice creates a societal alienation of value, as there is no intrinsic material cause present. The meaning we ascribe to all that is around us is purely relative. Pairing this with the perceptions we formulate in the imaginary register gives us an unstable understanding of 'reality' viz. The symbolic and imaginary registers. Ideology functions through the symbolic register and is upheld in the imaginary register. It influences how we determine (the arbitrary) meaning of goods in our capitalist system, all through approximation to one another.

Althusser argues that ideology has no history, or at the very least, its history is outside of it. If this is to be taken as a truth, how then can the teleological nature of ideology be understood? The answer to this question could be found in Lacan's conception of the symbolic order. The "Big Other" that Lacan posits as the driving ego-ideal of the masses, could then serve as the "**symbolic motor**" of the ruling ideology of the state. Constantly in accordance with the ruling ideology as it operates as the dominant symbolic ideal. However, a multitude of minor symbolic ideals are also in constant opposition with the dominant symbolic ideal. These **alternative (minor) symbolic ideals** are the driving motors of **dissenting ideologies**.

Propoganda

To put it plainly, symbolic motors reinforce ideology, which structures human behavior. Propaganda is a key example of symbolic motors churning away, producing media and narratives that reinforce a particular viewpoint. The weaponization of narratives go hand-in-hand with the deferral of signification. An event, act, or story can be signified to reinforce a narrative and thus ideology. By doing such a thing, our beliefs and furthermore behavior are compromised.

Chimeras

A possible stronger interpretation of Althusser's claim of ideology being a 'pure dream' or 'illusion' which instead of casting this claim aside, rather reintegrates it back into the framework of ideological genealogies could be in the form of the concept of chimeras. The term chimera denotes an illusory fantasy, or a mental projection that shifts or dissolves upon pursuit. As previously stated, the symbolic motors which drive ideology structure not only our beliefs, but the subject of the unconscious through the symbolic order. But it is here that the imaginary register comes back into play. Our fictitious fantasies, being structured by ideology through symbolic motors, constitute the chimeras for which we feel the need to pursue. It is not simply the Marxian idea of alienation which causes the individual to struggle in their journey of selfhood, but a fundamental alienation of the subject of the unconscious, that constitutes the individual's sense of lack and subsequent desire. The individual is attempting to pursue the chimeras of their desire in a 'reality' which has been fundamentally compromised by the actions of symbolic motors promoting ideology, alienating the individual's inherent unconscious.

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