

connotations of the concept of ideology in the Enlightenment, both positive and negative conceptions of ideology were situated at the level of discourse. Ideology was considered an ahistorical, autonomous phenomenon which disguised man's perception of reality. Karl Marx was the first to endeavour to surpass the limitations of this tradition.

Any discussion of Marx's notion of ideology must take into account the historical emergence of the concept in his oeuvre (Larrain 1983: 6-45). During the initial stage of his intellectual development Marx did not explicitly develop a theory of ideology, but a positive concept of ideology is implied, particularly in "Die deutsche Ideologie" (1969 [1845-6]), which he co-authored with Friedrich Engels. In this book Marx and Engels discarded the notion of an autonomous consciousness and related the origin of ideas to the conditions of existence.

During the second stage of his development Marx developed a negative concept of ideology, particularly in the section on commodity fetishism in the first chapter of "Das Kapital" (1981 [1867]). Here ideology is understood as a system of illusory beliefs and distorted thoughts, as false consciousness. In Marx's view ideology is a false solution in human consciousness to contradictions which are insoluble in practice. Ideology involves the negation of economic contradictions by means of a sublimation in consciousness of the limitations of practice.

For a long time Marx's negative conception of ideology as false consciousness was considered his exclusive theory of ideology. The neglect of his ideas on ideology as a positive constituent of social thought in his early work followed the lack of access to "Die deutsche Ideologie," which was not published until 1924 (Larrain 1983: 54). Many generations of Marxist scholars were unfamiliar with Marx's earlier, more positive concept of ideology, and it was not until 1970 that the French philosopher Louis Althusser attempted to reconstruct a theory of ideology with both negative and positive connotations from Marx's entire work.

Althusser acknowledged that ideology serves the negative purpose of concealment of social contradictions, of a resistance against the raising of consciousness of the unequal relationships between the dominant and the dominated. However, he rejected the proposition that ideology is merely an illusion originating in a reality beyond its own origin or effect. Alternatively, he emphasized the genesis of ideology in the contradictory character of reality, but added that the representation of the unequal relationships between people and their

conditions of existence in ideology required its own relative autonomy in order to accomplish the positive function of (re)production of the structure of domination.

The publication of Althusser's essay on ideology in 1970 was followed by the release in 1971 of the English translation of "Selections from the Prison Notebooks" by the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci, who had anticipated the innovative contribution by Althusser when he focussed on the relative autonomy of superstructural phenomena such as the state and ideology.² Both contributions caused a revival of the debate on ideology in the 1970s and beyond. At the moment of writing this discussion seems to have reached its peak, although the stream of publications on ideology has not yet come to a halt.³

The concept of ideology remains appealing in spite of the analytical pitfalls which have led other influential theoreticians to reject it. Michel Foucault (1971), for example, has passionately renounced common conceptions of ideology which, he argues, are implicitly always opposed to a transcendent notion of truth.⁴ Foucault strikes at the heart of the debate on ideology, in which the issue of the relationship between science and ideology, often conceived in analogy with the opposition between truth and error, is inadequately addressed or even avoided. Thus the relationship between science and ideology remains quite problematic in Althusser's version of Marxism, in which they are rigorously opposed, while he fails to show how science can be exempt from ideological influences (Althusser 1965: 239-243). In addition, in spite of his pathbreaking work on ideology, Althusser is a classic example of a scholar who advances the concept of ideology to explain why distorted representations of reality are necessary to maintain social contradictions, without explaining how the reproduction of the inequalities takes place (Merquior 1979: 15).

A functional use of the concept of ideology is not restricted to (neo-)Marxist explanations of social inequality, but is characteristic for many other discourses aiming to explain the maintenance and

2 For analyses of the notion of ideology in the diverse writings of Gramsci, see Hall et al. 1977 and Mouffe 1979.

3 E.g., Barrett 1988; Boudon 1989; Mészáros 1989; and Thompson 1988. I will refrain from taking into account the widest possible range of theoretical discussions of ideology, since I feel, as will become apparent, that most writings concerned with ideology fail to tackle the fundamental problems inherent in the concept.

4 Cf. Karskens 1986.