

Ideology in Marxism

A set of beliefs, convictions or ideas which both binds a particular group of people together and determines the actions they take. For this reason, ideology is often used—particularly in the media—as a pejorative, as though to say only certain types of people have (indeed ‘suffer from’) ideology, and it renders them incapable of thinking for themselves. But, as commentators like Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek argue, this position is itself ideological because it is built on the tacit, but obviously deeply held belief that its own position, i.e. the allegedly non-ideological position, is the ‘normal’ or ‘commonsense’ view of things, while the so-called ideological position is aberrant. The notion of a non-ideological position is thus a myth or better yet a projection. This in turn points to two other characteristics of ideology: it is frequently invisible to its adherents and it serves to create rules or regimes of inclusion and exclusion. Because of its invisibility, ideology is often equated with false consciousness. To escape his censors, the imprisoned Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci used the term hegemony in place of ideology and in doing so explained the invisibility of ideology—it is, he argued, the role of ideology to define and police that which counts as commonsense, that which everybody knows to be so, and insofar as it does that it is invisible. The task of any politics, then, according to Gramsci is to overturn this state of affairs, but not so as to get rid of ideology altogether—impossible, in any case—but rather to make way for a new ideology, one which is clear about interests. Marxists generally refer to this formation of ideology as class consciousness. Perhaps the most widely used definition of ideology is the one given by French Marxist, Louis Althusser who conceived it as an imaginary relation to real conditions.