

# IDEOLOGY

*David Hawkes*



2<sup>nd</sup>  
edition

*the* NEW CRITICAL IDIOM



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Second Edition

David Hawkes

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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

*The New Critical Idiom* is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary structures.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

## PREFACE

This second edition of *Ideology* contains much new material, written to reflect intellectual and political developments since the appearance of the first edition in 1996. The friends and colleagues at Lehigh University who have assisted me are multitudinous, but I am especially indebted to Gordon Bearn, Betsy Fifer, Scott Gordon, Barry Kroll, Carol Laub, Seth Moglen, Donna Warmkessel, Viv Steele and Barbara Traister. The patient assistance of Liz Thompson has been indispensable. My gratitude to Terry Eagleton, who first taught me about ideology, and to John Drakakis, who first asked me to write about it, has only increased over the years.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Ideology and Globalization

It is only in the world market that money first functions to its full extent as the commodity whose natural form is also the directly social form of realization of human labor in the abstract. Its mode of existence becomes adequate to its concept.

(Karl Marx, *Capital* [1867] 1976, 240–1)\*

When this book was first published in 1996 its argument seemed, even to the author, a trifle Quixotic. My claim was, and is, that the market economy produces a systematically false consciousness: an ideology. Global exchange for profit, and more especially the exchange of money – which is itself the medium of exchange – for profit, is the root cause and prime example of today's ideological errors. While market exchange is obviously present in and necessary to any civilized society, our postmodern society is historically unique in elevating the mercantile principle to a position of complete dominance over the economy and, I argue, over every area of public and private experience. When it attains

\* Dates in square brackets are those of first publication. Those in round parentheses are those of the modern editions listed in the Bibliography and page numbers refer to these.



this degree of power, the market ceases to fulfil its necessary but subordinate function as a means towards the end of civilized life. It becomes, rather, an end in itself, and in consequence it takes on the aspect of a tyrannous, destructive force, whose impact is felt within each of our minds as well as in our material lives. The market becomes an ideology.

In the 1990s it seemed to many that to oppose the market was to oppose life itself. The recent collapse of socialism, which had been the only significant anti-capitalist movement for over a century, appeared to inaugurate a permanent reign of trade and usury. Francis Fukuyama's influential *The End of History* (1992) made a convincing case that market ideology had finally exterminated any viable alternative, and that it therefore constituted the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' (xi). The most extreme claims of libertarian capitalists verged on idolatry; Blair Hoxby (1998) declared that 'the market is a means by which imperfect men may, in the long term, approximate the wisdom of God' (188). In the 1990s, only slightly less bizarre beliefs achieved something approaching orthodoxy among professional economists. As Thomas Frank remarks in *One Market Under God* (2000):

Only when people act within the marketplace, such thinkers told us, do they act rationally, choose rightly, and make their wishes known transparently. Only then could business give us what we wanted, cater to our freely expressed choices. Markets are where we are most fully human; markets are where we show that we have a soul. To protest *against* markets is to surrender one's very personhood, to put oneself outside the family of mankind.

(xiii)

Under such conditions, it seemed that the best that could be done was to remember how perverse and unnatural such beliefs would have looked to every previous epoch of human history. The first edition of *Ideology* tried to show that global capital and its ideology violated the fundamental tenets of Western thought from Aristotle and the Bible on, but it could offer little prospect that capitalism's philosophical falsehood might cause it any practical concern. That situation has now changed, although it would be a hardhearted observer who could take much satisfaction from the fact. In the 1996 edition of this book I observed that '[i]nstitutions

dedicated to the interests of capital, such as the IMF and the World Bank, have become far more important than any national government' (7). Many others had said the same thing before, but in the mid-1990s this was still considered a fairly controversial, or at least a contestable, claim. In 2003 it is regarded as a truism so obvious as to be unworthy of repetition. These organizations, of which many people had barely heard ten years ago, are now unable to convene meetings near major population centres for fear of being torn apart by an angry mob.

Perhaps that is progress of a sort, but in the absence of practical alternatives, popular awareness of the machinations of capital can easily spawn nihilism and social psychoses. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Devils* [1872] tells the story of a group of youthful terrorists who, unable to engage in legitimate politics under Czarist tyranny, resort to increasingly absurd and violent tactics of destruction. They are not idealists who believe in an ideology; they are nihilists who believe in nothing. One of their number, Kirillov, advocates a politics of revolutionary suicide: 'He who doesn't care whether he lives or dies – he'll be the new man' (2000, 121). Their leader, Peter Verkhovensky, proudly proclaims the abolition of traditional culture in his future utopia: 'Cicero's tongue will be cut out, Copernicus's eyes will be gouged out, Shakespeare will be stoned' (442). This kind of dysfunctional but formidable nihilism has infected many opponents of capitalism from Seattle to Kabul, and nobody expects 11 September's assault on the centre of world trade to be the final such atrocity.

It seems that we have reached a stage of history when neither capitalism nor anti-capitalism can any longer be understood as a narrowly 'economic' matter. The rule of money is part of a more general phenomenon, which we might term the dictatorship of representation. It is obvious enough that everybody's economic life is determined by the intricate and subtle coils of purely symbolic money, but it is less immediately apparent that our cultural and psychological lives are also so determined. Spheres of life that were once thought to lie beyond the realm of the 'economy' now clearly exhibit the influence of market ideology. The political culture of the West, for example, is taken up exclusively by discussion of spin, image and presentation. Corporations sponsor everything from art galleries to rock concerts. Psychology must take account of the fact that the consumption of particular brand identities is central to the formation of the personality. The discourse of marketing creeps into diverse areas of

intellectual life. The various academic tendencies collectively known as 'postmodernism' are united by their belief that the media of representation determine our experience of the world. A glance at any popular entertainment confirms that the line between reality and fiction is increasingly blurred, and not just in the minds of overt lunatics.

The most perspicacious contemporary novelists remark pointedly on this tyranny of representation. American works like Brett Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero* (1985) or Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* (1991) provide nihilistic descriptions of a subjectivity reduced to a repository of niche marketing and brand identities. British novels like Martin Amis's *Money* (1984) or Irvine Welsh's *Filth* (1998) offer post-Joycean interior monologues to illustrate the degeneration of the psyche when exposed to the full impact of commerce and media. In Will Self's *My Idea of Fun* (1993), the protagonist comes under the influence of a sinister Svengali known as the Fat Controller. This mentor scorns traditional culture, remarking after a visit to the theatre: 'How risible it is that art cannot provide a better imitation of life, when we know that life itself is so illusory' (86). Instead, he encourages his protégé to take up a career in marketing, which is described as 'the dialectical materialism of the [Thatcher] regime' (143). Self understands that the autonomous, non-referential and self-generating character of postmodern capital chimes perfectly with the constitutive role that postmodern philosophy assigns to representation in general. Finance, in Self's view, has become just another branch of aesthetics:

At this fag end of the millennium money had begun to detach itself from the very medium of exchange. Money was lagging behind. Ian knew – because he had read about it in the press – that there was approximately \$800 trillion that had simply winked into existence. It had never been earned by anyone, or even printed by any government. Everywhere you looked you saw advertisements screaming: 'Value for Money'. That such an obvious *non sequitur* should have become a benchmark of credibility was beyond Ian's, and indeed anyone's, understanding. This 'value' was as insubstantial as the \$800 trillion. It was linked to no commonly perceived variable; instead it was chronically relativised. The merchant banks and brokerage firms that made up the City had long since given up on employing even the

most flamboyant and intuitive of economic forecasters. Instead they had fallen back on the self-styled 'money critics', refugees from the overflowing newsprint sector, who offered their services to provide 'purely aesthetic' judgements on different mediums of exchange.

(223–4)

Money is a language, a system of signs. The material forms taken by these signs can vary; previous ages have incarnated them in the form of conch shells, precious metals or banknotes. In our time, though, it has become clear that money exists only in our minds. It is a medium of representation and, as recent works of economic theory such as Dierdre McClosky's *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics* (1994) have shown, this implies that money can be subjected to the modes of analysis and critique that have been developed by philosophers of language and semioticians. Equally, the theories and methods of economists can profitably be applied to the study of linguistic and visual modes of signification. The school of literary theory known as the 'New Economic Criticism' testifies to this recognition of 'parallels and analogies between linguistic and economic systems' and 'the existence of homologies between language and money' (Woodmansee and Osteen, 1999, 14, 15). The proliferating pupils of this school take inspiration from two philosophers whose seminal work appeared in the 1970s, but whose profound importance has only recently been appreciated: Marc Shell and Jean-Joseph Goux.

In *Symbolic Economies* (1990), Goux recalls the origin of his project in the revelation that 'Marx's analysis [of financial value] held the lineaments of a general and elementary logic of exchange which far exceeded the sphere of economic value for which it was initially produced' (3). The fertile intellectual ambience of Paris in the 1960s and 1970s, in which structuralism and deconstruction called attention to the constitutive role of signification, produced in Goux the epiphany that Marx's theory of money applied to semiotic as well as to financial value. His work focuses on Marx's view of money as a 'general equivalent' that facilitates the exchange of all other objects. As he traces the historical development of the general equivalent, Goux finds that a similar logic operates in psychology and linguistics: 'what had previously been analysed separately as phallocentrism (Freud, Lacan), as logocentrism (Derrida), and as the

rule of exchange by the monetary medium (Marx), it was now possible to conceive as part of a unified process' (4).

Goux argues that postmodern representation is characterized by 'the inconvertibility of the sign' (7). Until the early twentieth century, it was officially declared and popularly believed that all the money in the world could theoretically be converted into gold. Money was a sign, but it had an ultimate, material referent. In postmodernity, however, money has become an autonomous, self-generating, inconvertible sign – a signifier with no signified. Postmodern linguistics and semiology likewise portray the sign as arbitrary and non-referential, and its meaning as relational rather than essential. The history of money and the history of language are elements within a more general history of signification, and this general history has a logic of development that determines each of its parts. In *Money, Language and Thought* (1982), Marc Shell describes a similar narrative of money's historical development:

Between the electrum money of ancient Lydia and the electric money of contemporary America there occurred a historically momentous change. The exchange value of the earliest coins derived wholly from the material substance (electrum) of the ingots of which the coins were made and not from the inscriptions stamped into those ingots. The eventual development of coins whose politically authorized inscriptions were inadequate to the weights and purities of the ingots into which the inscriptions were stamped precipitated awareness of quandaries about the relationship between face value (intellectual currency) and substantial value (material currency). This difference between inscription and thing grew greater with the introduction of paper moneys. Paper, the material substance on which the inscriptions were printed, was supposed to make no difference in exchange, and metal or electrum, the material substance to which the inscriptions referred, was connected with those inscriptions in increasingly abstract ways. With the advent of electronic fund-transfers the link between inscription and substance was broken. The matter of electronic money does not matter.

(1)

It appears, from the accounts of Shell and Goux, that history involves the progressive detachment of signs from referents and a growing autonomy and determining power of signification. The postmodern era, in which

images of various kinds have attained the power to constitute reality itself, is often said to represent the culmination or *telos* of this process. This is why many postmodern thinkers declare that the concept of 'ideology' has outlived its usefulness. The term 'ideology' usually refers to a systematically false consciousness. But if representation is the only reality, if truth is merely, as such precursors of postmodernism as Nietzsche claimed, a rhetorical device by which the powerful maintain their dominance, then how are we to distinguish between true and false modes of thought? This case is summarized in Nietzsche's famous argument:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.

(1954, 46–7)

This is, in essence, the postmodernist position on truth and ideology. It is impossible to distinguish between these categories because both are constructed out of the manipulation of empty signifiers; truth and falsehood are merely effects produced by non-referential signs. Shell takes up the question of how to identify ideology in *The Economy of Literature* (1978). He describes ideology as undialectical thought: that is to say, thought that seeks to reduce a mutually definitive binary opposition to one of its poles. The first such ideology Shell discusses is materialism:

Those discourses are ideological that argue or assume that matter is ontologically prior to thought. Astrology, for example, looks to the stars, phrenology to the skull, physiognomy to the face, and palmistry to the hand. In the modern world, ideological discourses look to the biochemistry of the brain, sexual need, genes, and social class; they seek to express how matter 'gives rise to' thought by employing metaphors such as 'influence', 'structure', 'imitation', 'sublimation', 'expression', and 'symptom'.

(1)

Ideas and matter form a mutually definitive binary opposition and so it is false, or 'ideological', to claim that one of these elements determines the other. If it is false to reduce ideas to matter, however, it is equally false to reduce objective reality to subjective ideas. Shell therefore goes on to attack the sceptical relativism that characterizes postmodernity:

Finding no salve for the wound of the desire to know, they retreat to comfortably relativistic or uncomfortably nihilistic lookouts, from which, grandly surveying the combatants, they argue that all ideologies are equally valid and therefore equally invalid. Who has not heard the liberal injunction to 'do your own thing', the rule that 'you have your opinion and I have mine'?

(1)

Shell's dual definition of ideology echoes Hans Barth's statement of some thirty years earlier: 'The principle of ideological interpretations of cultural and intellectual life is to deny the autonomy of mind and the existence of universal truths' [1951] (1976, 162). This kind of materialist relativism, which reduces thought to matter in order to deny the possibility of identifying any mode of thought as systematically false or 'ideological', is indeed prevalent in postmodernity. Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) is a devastating critique of contemporary ideology that has gone largely unrecognized as such because it is perceived as having come from the political 'right'. But people of all political shades should hear a chord striking when Bloom identifies relativism as the postmodern form of false consciousness:

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question  $2 + 2 = 4$ . These are things you don't think about. . . . The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so they see it.

(25)

To say that a certain kind of consciousness is 'false', to speak of 'ideology', is thus to violate the most fundamental tenet of postmodern society. As Bloom puts it: 'The true believer is the real danger' (26). Bloom's attitude recalls that of the literary critic F.R. Leavis, who dedicated his career to exposing the degeneration of moral and aesthetic taste which, as he saw it, a commercial society must produce. In *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), Leavis notes the kinship of authentic, essential aesthetic value to the financial gold standard: 'The accepted valuations are a kind of paper currency based upon a very small proportion of gold. To the state of such a currency the possibilities of fine living at any time bear a close relation' (4). There is, however, a 'psychological Gresham's law' (8) whereby, under market conditions, bad taste inexorably drives out good. This is more than a metaphor. The deterioration of essential value into relativism is *the same thing* as the unmooring of money from its physical referent.

For Shell, like Leavis and Bloom, relativism is just as reductive as materialist determinism, since it reduces objective truth to subjective preference. In contrast to both forms of reductionism, Shell proposes 'to understand dialectically the relationship between thought and matter by focussing . . . on economic thought and literary and linguistic matters' (1982, 2). The shifting relationship between thought and matter is made manifest in the development of signification, whether financial or linguistic. The various stages through which the history of representation passes can thus be evaluated according to the criteria of ideological criticism. There can, in other words, be a false and a true mode of representation, and a good and an evil deployment of signs. The absence of such an ethics of representation has hampered attempts to critique the free-floating money of global capitalism. As Werner Bonefeld and John Holloway observe, 'money has too often been treated as an aspect of "economics", as an element of the framework within which class struggle takes place rather than as being a form of class struggle itself' (1995, 3). Money is not merely a convenient vehicle for exchange; money has significance, it *means* something. In short, money talks, and it speaks the language of ideology.

If money has grown progressively more abstract and less material over the course of its historical development, the same might be said of the things people buy with it. For millennia, most things that people exchanged were simple means of subsistence. With the beginnings of



a global market in the sixteenth century, it soon became possible to conceive of almost any thing as a commodity. And with the complete triumph of the market in our own time, the most valuable commodities traded are not things at all, but ideas, images and brands. This dematerialization of the economy gives it unprecedented power over the minds of individuals. As Naomi Klein observes in *No Logo* (2000):

The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multinational corporations over the last fifteen years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980's: that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products . . . this corporate obsession with brand identity is waging a war on public and individual space: on public institutions such as schools, on youthful identities, on the concept of nationality and on the possibilities for unmarketed space.

(16)

My main argument in this book is that the postmodern sign, whether financial or linguistic, is epistemologically false and ethically degenerate. Postmodernism is thus the veritable apotheosis of ideology. I ended the Introduction to *Ideology*'s first edition with the contention that 'postmodernism is nothing more than the ideology of consumer capitalism' (12). Many postmodernists consider themselves to be political radicals, and my statement provoked howls of protest. Today, however, a burgeoning awareness of the repressive political power of financial representation, and of its kinship with the modes of autonomous linguistic and semiotic representation that postmodernism promotes, has provoked many investigations of the complicity between global capitalism and postmodernist philosophy. Peter Burnham points out that academic trends towards multiculturalism and philosophical relativism suggest that 'the phenomenon of "globalization" was absolutely compatible with post-modernist ideology' (2000, 9), but the word 'compatible' seems unnecessarily weak. It would be more accurate to say that postmodernism *is* the ideology of globalization. In *Empire* (2000), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri observe that:

Many of the concepts dear to postmodernists and postcolonialists