

Ideology and Harm

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Keywords: Ideology; Social Harm; Capitalist Realism; Ultra-Realism

Abstract

In this chapter, we discuss ideology and suggest an adapted understanding of ideology can allow us to respond productively to what should be a fundamental question for criminologists and zemiologists working today: why – rather than joining with others to pursue our mutual betterment – do we routinely visit harm on one another and the natural environments upon which we depend? Why, when it is possible to live in relative harmony, do we continue to pursue selfish and short-sighted ends? To understand the constraints that have been placed upon our imagination and activity, we must transcend empiricism and idealism and draw upon intellectual traditions currently marginalised in academic criminology.

Introduction

Despite its reputation for boundless analytical obscurantism and ‘difficulty’, ‘ideology’ is a rather straightforward concept. An ‘ideology’ is simply a set of ideas or beliefs that possesses a degree of internal coherence. Usually, when we are talking about ideology, we are talking about ideas that seek to address the fields of politics and economics. The concept of ‘ideology’ is a product of the European Enlightenment. In the decades that followed the Enlightenment – as capitalism established itself as an increasingly global economic system built upon an identifiable set of ideas that appeared to overwhelm the beliefs and traditions of the old world – the study of ideology became associated with critical scholars interested in identifying and deconstructing those ‘ideologies’ that appeared to exert great influence upon everyday life

(see Eagleton, 2007, for discussion). Marx's analysis of capitalist ideology is, in retrospect, rather basic and descriptive, but it established a mode of analysis – 'the critique of ideology' – which, especially during the middle third of the twentieth century, became a key feature of academic accounts of the organisation of everyday life in capitalist societies. Marx was interested in identifying the processes that allowed an economic system that enriched only a tiny proportion of the overall population to continue. Why didn't those cast as expendable and exploitable units of production rise up to overthrow the parasitic elites who had grown fat from the labour of others? Why was such a demonstrably unfair system allowed to stand? Marx's account of class conflict, perhaps the best-known aspect of his work, is closely tied to his account of the ruling ideology – that is, the ideas that in every epoch exert great influence upon the social world – and together they provide a reasonably clear framework for understanding Marx's critical engagement with the work of Hegel and the resulting development of dialectical materialism.

In the rest of the chapter, we will offer a basic description of Marx's critique of the ruling ideology. We will then connect Marx's account, which influenced the tone and style of all critical accounts of ideology in the twentieth century, to the more complex and detailed work of Gramsci and Althusser, who offer the most notable post-Marxist analyses of capitalist ideology. Then, drawing upon the work of Lacan and Žižek, we will offer an ultra-realist interpretation of ideology. Ultra-realists approach the problem of ideology from a different direction. Shifting our focus, ultra-realists argue, allows us to gain greater insight into how ideology shapes the way we see ourselves and the world around us. It also allows us to reconsider the fundamental question that should preoccupy criminologists and those interested in explaining the proliferation of social harms: why, rather than seeking solidarity, do we continue to pursue self-interested ends that negatively impact upon others and the natural environments upon which we depend?

As will become clear, our goal here is not to suggest that ideologies are harmful. Ideologies, properly understood, provide us with a means of interpreting the world around us. The common drive to rid the world of ideology – which came to the fore in the middle third of the twentieth century and lingers still – simply moves us deeper into a dominant ideology that refuses to countenance ideological diversity. Of course, it is always the ideology of the other that is judged problematic. Our own commitments always seem measured, reasonable, ethical and grounded upon truth.

It is, of course, certainly true that ideologies can encourage selfishness, bigotry and hatred, but they can also encourage altruism, selflessness and a commitment to the common good. Our goal is to encourage you to think about how our thoughts and feelings about one another and the world we share are organised, and why it is that we appear unable to enact the genuine change our world so sorely needs.

Marx on ideology

Marx began by looking closely at the ruling class and thinking about how the startling advantages experienced by members of this class were justified both to themselves and to the broader population. He looked carefully at how the ideas associated with this class were popularised and dispersed throughout the social system. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels (1965: 61) succinctly summarise their account of the dominant ideology thus: ‘the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force’. Throughout history, Marx and Engels suggest, ruling elites have been able to justify their privileges and disguise social injustice by shaping popular sentiments. A reality of profound injustice was obfuscated with words and ideas that prevented the working class from seeing the world as it is. The reality of their social position – in which they were rendered mere units of production and deprived of their humanity – could be neither accessed nor understood, because the ruling ideology covered over this reality with its own justificatory ideas and narratives, and its increasingly diverse systems of meaning and interpretation. For Marx and Engels, then, the ruling ideology contained a range of ideas – and ‘false ideas’ (see Eagleton, 2007, for discussion) – that legitimised the domination of the ruling class and the unremitting struggle of the masses.

Gramsci on ideology

Gramsci was imprisoned by Mussolini’s fascist regime in the late nineteen twenties, and he remained in prison until his eventual death some ten years later. It was in prison that Gramsci (2005) produced his most popular work, *The Prison Notebooks*. In this posthumously published work, Gramsci offers an account of ideology that was principally concerned with the field of culture. Gramsci eschewed the ‘scientific socialism’ most commonly associated with Engels (2008). He also sought to move beyond Marx’s focus on economic processes that came to the fore in his later works (see for example Marx, 2013. Marx died in 1883. The first edition of his *Capital* was first published in 1886). This did not mean he succumbed to the breathless, appreciative account of ideological struggle commonly associated with the English empiricists

who followed him and occasionally drew upon his work (see especially Thompson, 1975; see Winlow et al, 2015, for discussion). Gramsci's account is far dourer than is often assumed. In a similar vein to Marx, Gramsci's interpretation of ideology and culture begins with a fundamental question: why do the poor not rise up to challenge their oppression? This may seem a simple and straightforward starting point, but even this is disputed by some notable leftist intellectuals. E. P. Thompson (1996), a leftist historian who played a huge role in shaping the humanities and social sciences in post-war Britain, believed that there was clear evidence that the people have throughout history risen up to challenge oppression. The edifice of left idealist criminology, once considered edgy and countercultural but now perfectly mainstream in criminological research and curricula, finds its roots in this tradition. Every unjust power, Thompson assumed, necessarily inspires countervailing popular oppositional movements. Thompson, while on the surface of things a historian given to careful empirical analysis, was in fact a dedicated humanist whose work displays a disavowed commitment to naturalism. Thompson believed that 'the people' would *naturally* take up the fight against oppression, and so his careful empirical work was shaped by a desire to discover what he already believed to be true. The same is true for left idealists working in criminology today. The people, idealists argue, do not meekly accept oppression and injustice (see for example Ferrell, 1995). Every attempt to establish control is met with resistance. Contestation, insubordination and resistance are for them constant features of a diverse cultural field containing endless opportunities for organic expression and creativity in opposition to ruling elites (see for example Hall and Jefferson, 2006). Just as sure as night follows day, every injustice inspires a fight for justice.

While this account, offered by Thompson and so many others, of constant ideological struggle on the field of culture has been hugely influential and allowed idealists the comfort of assuming that ordinary people were on their side, hated capitalism and refused to countenance oppression, Gramsci saw things very differently. Gramsci did not believe that ordinary people were immediately capable of seeing and understanding the totality of capitalism and their place within it. Nor for Gramsci were ordinary people naturally equipped to take on the fight to depose capitalism and establish a more just social and economic system in its place. Resistance, Gramsci understood, would not naturally arise in communities worn down by the injustices of capitalism. Rather, resistance needed to be inspired, created, nurtured and carried forward by endeavour, sacrifice and commitment. The role of leftist intellectuals in this struggle was to educate the masses, make them cognisant of the capitalist system and its effects, and to open up the possibility of change.

By the time Gramsci began to write *The Prison Notebooks*, capitalism was a veteran and increasingly global power. Despite perennial exploitation, the working class in the West had yet to awaken from its prolonged slumber to assert itself as the principal agent of history. Gramsci wanted to explain why this was so, but also how things could change. As the nineteen twenties gave way to the nineteen thirties, Western capitalism again experienced one of its periodic downturns. However, this time the crisis was deeper and more protracted than ever before. The Great Depression of the nineteen thirties ripped through the global economic system and undermined many of the myths that supported it. The commonplace faith that the free hand of the market would, left to its own devices, create growth and popular prosperity was clearly misplaced. A proportion of the inquiring working class could now catch at least a glimpse of a reality beneath ideology, the reality of an economic system that enriched a tiny percentage of the population at the expense of everybody else. And yet, this historic revelation of the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system did not open the way for what was, for traditional Marxists, an inevitable movement toward socialism. The great majority of the population hoped only that capitalism would recover quickly so that pre-crash normality could return. In 1936, at the height of the Great Depression, the Jarrow marchers, venerated at the time by many British leftists, marched not for socialism but for jobs. That is, jobs *within* the capitalist system. Only leftist radicals hoped the system would collapse entirely so that a new egalitarian society could be built. While capitalism's regular conflagrations and crises did indeed appear to open up the possibility of pushing history in a different direction, it also became depressingly clear that these opportunities were not solely the preserve of the political left. Gramsci's imprisonment in Italy during the nineteen thirties resulted in part from the gains that had been made by the political right in the wake of the global economic crash. Gramsci looked at the world around him and at the great tomes written by leftist intellectuals and decided changes needed to be made. Now was not the time for baseless optimism. The comforting assumption that the inherent contradictions of capitalism would lead inevitably to a future socialist utopia was of little use to Gramsci as he watched the fault lines of Europe deepen from his prison window. The left, he believed, must accept the huge amount of work that needed to be done to politicise ordinary men and women and turn them away from the seductions of capitalism. Ideology and ideological domination needed to be rethought and rearticulated for a new era.

Gramsci's major contribution to the critique of capitalist ideology can be found in his extrapolation of the much older concept of hegemony. Traditionally, this concept had sought to capture the organisation and nature of leadership and control. Gramsci's use of the phrase is slightly different and focuses for the most part on domination. In *The Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci was concerned with the ways that elites win consent for their rule. How were ordinary men and women encouraged to submit to a system that created huge wealth, but also desperate suffering and diverse forms of injustice? Gramsci looked at the development of the cultural field and argued that values, codes and cultural mores were inevitably shaped by those with social power in ways that encouraged the majority to form the view that the system is more or less permanent and basically just, and that the power held by the elite was for the most part legitimate. The normative culture, Gramsci argued, had a superficial diversity connected to social class. Men from the working class, for example, were encouraged to adopt cultural concerns that contributed to the status quo and benefitted capitalism. The same was true for other social groups, although the cultural concerns of these various groups were often quite different. Each group in its own way contributed to the reproduction of a system that, for Gramsci, served only the interests of the elite.

Gramsci wrote in detail and with great skill about intellectualism and the role of intellectuals in educating the masses and ridding them of their illusions. However, despite the continued popularity of Gramsci's critique of ideology, his thesis contains a number of omissions and simplifications. To cut straight to the heart of the matter, Gramsci assumed that the central problem of ideology is, in essence, cognitive. There is a reality underneath ideology that people cannot see because they are enmeshed in the meaning systems of capitalism. Their lives are filled up with tasks and their brains are filled with normative cultural concerns. They do not think about the forces that shape their experiences, attitudes, hopes and dreams. However, intellectuals can intrude upon the continuous reproductive of everyday life. Their role, as Gramsci saw it, was to educate the people and bring them to the realisation that diverse forms of human suffering have a shared root in the global capitalist system and the asocial exchange relation upon which the whole system rests. With the assistance of intellectuals, Gramsci believed people could move beyond ideology to *see the world as it truly is*. Once they do so, history will begin to move off in a different direction. This is a straightforward and seductive account of how we might change the world, but do people really discard long-held beliefs and cultural preoccupations when equipped with an alternative account of reality? Should we assume that, once the capitalist system and its harms and injustices are fully explained, ordinary

men and women will detach themselves from the myths that sustain the system and commit to the fight for something better?

What is missing from Gramsci's work is an acknowledgement of the truly incisive nature of ideology. Capitalist ideology is complex and much more intrusive than Gramsci and many other leftist intellectuals assume. It moves beyond rationality to shape our dreams and desires. Is it possible to simply give up our desires when we become aware that they led to negative consequences, or that they are not the product of our own rational calculation? Capitalist ideology, especially in its contemporary manifestation, is not simply about covering up reality with myth and popularising accounts of meritocracy, justice and freedom. It contains potent seductions and lures. The hypnotic power of these compelling forces cannot simply be dismissed as soon as we become cognisant of their reality. Knowing that advertisements exist only to sell does not necessarily render them completely ineffective. Becoming consciously aware that the pleasures of consumerism will quickly fade – and that we are all, in various ways, forced along a conveyor belt that requires us to buy, discard and then buy again in an endless, environmentally destructive cycle that enriches a tax avoiding oligarchic elite and immiserates low wage production workers in the developing world – does not necessarily diminish the pleasures of consumerism. Giving up smoking, junk food, alcohol or drugs is not simply a matter of becoming consciously aware that such things are harmful. Gramsci is absolutely correct to note that we live in an illusion. Much that we take for granted is illusory and prevents us from seeing reality. However, he omits the fact that we often *cling on to our illusions*, even when we know them to be so. Familiar illusions, we must recognise, often furnish us with a measure of comfort even when we understand their nature. To move away from what is familiar into an as yet unknown space that appears to hold promise but also appears strewn with a range of snares and pitfalls is not a simple or straightforward task. To move forward, we need to move beyond cognitivism and understand how ideology can shape our internal psychological life.

Althusser on ideology

Althusser's account of ideological control developed in part as a response to Gramsci's comprehensive and widely discussed work on ideology and culture. While a confirmed Marxist, Althusser dismissed Marx's early humanist writing and, drawing upon key currents in French intellectual culture, instead advocated a structuralist reading of Marx. His work drew

considerable acclaim. For Althusser, Marx was, once he had overcome his early youthful dalliance with humanism, principally concerned with objectively appraising the social structures that supported the capitalist system. While Althusser's intellectual influence was considerable, he was also attracted the opprobrium of E. P. Thompson (see especially 1996) – a contemporary of Althusser who we discussed briefly above – and many others. Thompson rejected Althusser's rather baroque high theory and gloomy assessment of humanity, and Althusser rejected entirely the historicism and empiricism of Thompson and other Marxist historians. Althusser considered Marxist humanism – by far the most influential branch of Marxism in Britain – to be philosophically moribund and hopelessly idealistic.

Althusser's account of ideological control centres upon the organisation and power of *ideological state apparatuses* (see especially Althusser, 2014). Althusser's account is more abstract than that offered by Gramsci, at least in part because Althusser sought to introduce elements of psychoanalytic theory – and other elements of continental thought popular at the time – into developing and diversifying Marxist critiques of ideology and political economy. Althusser followed Marx in focusing upon the processes that enabled capitalist society to reproduce itself. Capitalism requires the interminable reproduction of the forces of production, the relations of production and the conditions of production. Of course, actual labour power – the force of production – needed to be available in order to produce goods and services for sale. But this is not enough. Capitalism also requires the relations of production and the conditions of production to be endlessly reproduced. In short, if capitalism is to continue, it needs the social arrangements that surround the labour process to be in place. Workers must accept the wage form. They must be willing to toil for a wage and accept that the capitalist will take the surplus for himself, they must accept their dependence upon these exploitative arrangements, and they must understand the patterning of social life in relation to work to be natural and unproblematic. The social arrangements that allow the injustices of capitalist production to continue are the focus of Althusser's critique of ideology.

Althusser distinguishes between repressive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses. While both work to reproduce the prevailing status quo, repressive state apparatuses are concerned, in a rather direct and obvious way, with the subjugation of the working class and the reproduction of the existing social arrangements that allow the capitalist machine to continue to operate. The criminal justice system, for Althusser, acts to enforce the domination of the ruling class, and the same is true of the broader legal system, the government, the armed

forces, the police and so on. Together these institutions form an expansive apparatus to repress the population and aid the process of capitalist reproduction. Ideological state apparatuses are more concerned with producing, circulating and enforcing a range of narratives that, in a slightly more subtle way, aid the reproduction of the social arrangements that make the reproduction of capitalism possible. Like the repressive state apparatuses, ideological state apparatuses have the ability to respond violently to insubordination, but the violence of ideological state apparatuses is essentially *symbolic*. Ideological state apparatuses do not need to physically repress an individual who challenges the prevailing order of things. Rather, such individuals can be attacked symbolically. Their identities and their perceived value as human beings can quite easily be destroyed through the targeted and strategic use of language.

Ideological state apparatuses are for Althusser quite diverse and exist well beyond what we imagine is the usual remit of the state. Schools, churches, universities, the entertainment system and so on appear apolitical but function to reproduce what already exists. They circulate ideas and narratives that sustain the status quo, but they also disseminate a complex range of meanings that sit alongside these ideas and narratives and serve to justify and encourage our commitment to them. If we think about the narratives that surround educational attainment, we can begin to see clearly what Althusser is driving at. We strive for educational success to satisfy our parents, to move onto the next educational level and then into the world of work. We can gain a degree of pleasure from outcompeting our peers and inspiring the envy of others, and we can draw sustenance from a broad range of positive narratives about empowerment, achievement, self-improvement and the generally edifying character of education. We come to believe that, in committing to the processes of education and educational advancement we are committing to processes that will, inevitably, improve our lives and make us free. However, Althusser would be keen to argue that these are small facets of ideology that reproduce the status quo and push our lives forward in a predictable manner. In pursuing educational attainment, we are not freeing ourselves at all. We are forcing ourselves deeper into the realm of 'unfreedom'. We aspire to climb the social hierarchy rather than embrace 'equality'. When we want to avail ourselves of the benefits of prestige and attainment, we have already accepted the system's objects of desire. Attempting to progress personally through the social order lends legitimacy to the system. We accept and subscribe to the standard narratives that tell us upward social mobility is valuable and worthwhile, and that progress is possible for talented and hardworking individuals. Advanced education also equips us with practical and esoteric skills that can be harnessed by capitalists and used in the scramble for growth and market advantage.

The supposed freedoms and personal benefits of educational attainment are, in Althusser's account of capitalist ideology, merely positive associations that act to bond us all to the reproduction of the system as it stands.

Althusser's account of ideology, then, differs from that offered by Gramsci and Marx in a number of important respects. Althusser claims that we are always-already knee deep in ideology. Drawing upon the language of the capitalist system's diverse ideological support mechanisms is inevitable. We are, in effect, *born into* this language. We can do no other than accept the basic rituals and rules of the world as it is presented to us. Simply by responding logically to the world around us, we are inevitably drawn into – or, to use Althusser's phrase, *interpellated* by – the social processes that sustain capitalist reproduction. We are the product of powerful social forces rather than free-willed agents capable of choosing our own abiding concerns and fashioning our own biographies. However, the most important feature of Althusser's work on ideology, for our purposes at least, is his claim that ideology extends well beyond the realm of ideas. Althusser's critique of ideology moves attention from minds to bodies. Ideology, Althusser maintained, is something that is *enacted*. We do not simply think in ways that sustain capitalism, every day we *act* to sustain capitalism. We discuss this crucial shift from mind to body in more detail below.

The reversal of ideology

Ultra-realists (see especially Hall and Winlow, 2015) have drawn on the work of Jacques Lacan, the famous French psychoanalyst, to build their account of human subjectivity. Lacan suggested that, to avoid the horrors of unsymbolisable experience, we attach ourselves to symbolic orders that equip us with the means of interpreting ourselves, our bodily experience and the world around us. Symbolic orders, for Lacan, are not rooted in truth. Rather, they are internally coherent meaning systems that give to us the comforts and pleasures of organised and commonly accepted interpretations of reality. Like others who form our community, we accept the central narratives of the symbolic order as 'truth', and so we are able to live reasonably orderly lives held in place by the existence of these 'truths'. We grow into social roles and accept the meanings and interpretations that form the core of the symbolic order. From this foundation, ultra-realists, influenced especially by the work of Slavoj Žižek (2009), claim that we have hitherto misunderstood ideology. The basic framework of ideology and ideological control, which we can see clearly in the work of Marx and Gramsci, needs to be flipped on its head. For ultra-realists (see for example Winlow and Hall, 2012; Raymen 2018;

Lloyd, 2019; Kotze 2019), standard critiques of ideology present ideology as a *problem of seeing*. In the work of Marx and Gramsci especially, ideology is presented as a system that prevents us from seeing and coming to terms with reality. The reality of capitalism, which concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a small elite, is disguised by an ideology that presents the general order of things as natural, just and the outcome of informed democratic oversight. From this perspective, the ruling ideology encourages us to believe that poverty is the result of laziness, that early death among the poorest results from their self-damaging but independent choices, that the wealth of the elite results from their boundless dynamism and talent, and that the system itself is meritocratic and managed not by elites but by officials given a mandate by the people. And, of course, the ideology of capitalism also contains powerful seductive qualities that allow members of the dispersed and fragmented contemporary working class to imagine themselves not as perennial losers but as potential future winners. Gramsci and Althusser tended not to focus on such matters, but it is clear that the allure of money and prestige, and the drive to have others envy our success, pushes us back towards capitalism's vivid symbolism and interminable competition (see for example Hall et al, 2008). As Althusser knew, telling those at the bottom that anyone can make it to the top reinforces the legitimacy of the system and creates the human energy capitalism needs to reproduce itself. In our hearts we may know that only a tiny number will make the journey, but the fact that some make it from the bottom to the top reinforces the conviction that effort, talent and determination will lead to success. If we display enough fortitude, fight our way free from our backgrounds and transform ourselves into a bona fide member of the elite, we will become perfect representatives of what is achievable and legitimise the system in the eyes of an attentive audience keen to follow in our footsteps. And, of course, popular culture invites us to dream of life among the super-elite, a life, we imagine, in which all our present frustrations will be wiped away and our fantasies will be made real.

There is much value in the traditional Marxist account of capitalist ideology. At a fundamental level, it encourages us to think about our beliefs and commitments, about where they might come from and who they might serve. But does the traditional Marxist model, even with the slight adjustments and additions we have offered above, still offer a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between the capitalist economy and contemporary social life? Are we really denied access to reality and forced to accept an assortment of inter-connected myths about ourselves and our lives together? Certainly, the world we see around us today is radically

different from that appraised by Marx, Gramsci and Althusser. Shouldn't we build a new critique of ideology more in keeping with the times?

For ultra-realists (see for example Winlow and Hall, 2019), ideology does not *prevent us from seeing reality*. Rather, it 'congeals around our neurological circuits' (Hall and Winlow, 2015) to equip us with a *way of seeing reality*. Ideology is therefore not a cloud that obscures material social processes, but rather the symbolic substance we draw upon to interpret the world around us. Ditching the standard rationalist/cognitivist account of myth and reality and drawing upon more complex and clear-sighted accounts rooted in psychoanalysis and the latest developments in neuroscience allows us to adapt the critique of ideology in important ways. In the work of Marx and Gramsci, the fundamental problem for progressive politics is that the working class don't know that, in their everyday activities, they are contributing to the regeneration of the system that oppresses them. They can't see the reality of this system, and they cannot see how, in their daily labours and leisure pursuits, they are enriching an antisocial, parasitic elite and aiding the continuation of structural injustice. But is this still true today? Do the masses really not know of capitalism's negative effects?

If we are honest with ourselves, we should be able to acknowledge that the population have a general understanding of capitalism's dark side. We know that our attachment to consumerism is environmentally destructive and ultimately fails to yield the forms of satisfaction we might once have imagined. We know that men, women and children in the developing world toil under terrible conditions in order to create the goods that, for a brief time, appear alluring to us. We know that much of consumer culture is crass and driven forward by the grubby business of money-getting. We know that our cultural life has been popularised, consumerised and generally 'dumbed down'. We know that our politicians are often vapid careerists, and that the political elites that appear to manage the economy are either unwilling or feel themselves unable to enact real change. We know that the global capitalist system cares not at all about the people and the natural environment over which it rides roughshod. We know that it is riven by deep injustices and that it inevitably experiences periodic crashes that can shatter lives and communities. We often know, in our heart of hearts, that meritocracy is a myth. We know that the oligarchs who exhort such a powerful influence upon our economy and society did not secure their riches with an irrepressible 'can do' attitude and a talent for identifying a gap in the market. Ultimately, we know what capitalism is and what it does to us. We know, but we

do not want to know. We know, but we do not rise up to demand fundamental change. The crucial moment of realisation has passed, and nothing has changed.

The problem of ideology is not that we do not know what capitalism is, and so continue to act in ways that benefit elites and aid the reproduction of the system. Rather, we are at least partially aware of what capitalism is, and *continue* to act in ways that benefit the system. Ultra-realists take this a step further. The system's core can often seem beyond our understanding and fully independent of our management or control, but in a very real sense at the pulsating centre of the system lies an accumulation of fetishistically disavowed actions that have allowed the system to rumble onwards, despite our knowledge of the deleterious consequences of its operation.

Gramsci argued that intellectuals must educate the masses about the realities of the capitalist system. He assumed that once we knew reality, we would act to change it. However, he did not fully account for the adaptability of the capitalist system and the strange but powerful comfort we can find in illusion. Ultra-realists (e.g. Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2019; Raymen, 2017) have used the concept of *fetishistic disavowal* to illustrate why it is wrong to assume that knowledge always leads to productive action. Fetishistic disavowal is a psychological process that deals with our knowledge of uncomfortable truths. We often disavow knowledge that we find disconcerting, difficult or dangerous, or knowledge that in some way threatens to destabilise the general run of things. For example, we may know in our heart of hearts that our partner is having an affair. We may pick up little indications here and there: a secret phone call, an unexplained trip. However, quite often our knowledge of our partner's infidelity is disavowed; that is, it is forced from conscious and pushed into the unconscious part of our minds where it can be quietly 'forgotten'. We know of our partner's infidelity, but, ultimately, we would prefer not to know. Our knowledge of this infidelity hurts and threatens to destabilise our lives. We immediately register the profound implications of acting on this disturbing knowledge. These implications may include the pains of divorce and child custody hearings. They may also involve leaving the family home, a precipitous decline in our living standards and significant reputational damage. There is also the emotional agony of rejection, the pains of comparison and anguished thoughts of our loved one in the arms of another. We tend to assume that if our partner were having an affair, we would want to know. However, quite often when that knowledge enters consciousness it is so disruptive that *we choose not to know it*. Disavowing our knowledge of the affair allows us to continue onwards.

Pain can be avoided, or at least held at bay for a time. Years later, when the relationship has finally broken down, we may experience the return of our previously disavowed knowledge. How could we have been so stupid? All the signs were there. Why didn't we act upon evidence of the infidelity? The answer to this question is straightforward but disconcerting. We knew about the affair, but at the time it was easier for us not to know. And so we chose not to know it.

Ultra-realists claim that the same process applies to our knowledge of the diverse harms that are an inevitable by-product of the capitalist system. For example, as consumers we are committed to doing what we can to help the environment. We recycle, avoid aeroplane travel, try to shop locally and things of that nature. We like to imagine that, by undertaking these actions, we are doing what we can to help the environment. However, if we are really truthful with ourselves, we can accept that all of these things mean nothing in the grander scheme of things. We know that without deep structural change nothing of any significance can be achieved. But despite knowing this, we continue to take consolation from our ostensible commitment to helping the environment.

When we recycle, we are engaged in a fetishistic act. We know that this activity is ultimately meaningless, but still it yields a small measure of satisfaction. We imagine ourselves able to say that we are 'good citizens' and that we are doing our bit to help the environment. In following the basic consumerist injunction to limit the negative effects of our consumption upon the planet, we are, in a way, encouraged to believe that we are no longer responsible. We can feel a measure of psychological repose, even when faced with environmental problems of huge scale, as we have done what we could. Like so many others, we know that truly fixing the problem requires more than we can give. And this is what Stan Cohen (2000) gets so wrong in his genre defining treatise *States of Denial*, still lauded as one of the greatest criminological texts ever written. It is not that we deny horror. We know of famine, simmering resources wars, rendition and torture. We know of the wilful destruction of the natural environment for short-term financial gain. We know that our democracies have been corrupted by money. We know perfectly well that even in a country as rich as Britain there are still many who struggle to feed themselves and millions more constantly teetering on the precipice of financial ruin. We do not *deny* the existence of these things. Rather, we tacitly *accept* them. We accept the existence of horror but imagine ourselves not complicit in it. We tell ourselves that we are against such things and that we have done what we can, and measure capitalism's obvious downsides against

what we imagine to be its significant upsides. We have donated to charity, paid our taxes and voted for those who promise to change things. We have done all that can be asked of us. Haven't we?

The broader political context is of course crucial. Our individualised, minor acts of environmental sensitivity by no means challenge the system as it stands. Rather, the opposite is true. Governments, the global energy industry and powerbrokers in the new financialised economy are not shamed into making the changes necessary to avoid catastrophe. The myriad acts of supposedly ethical consumers do not add up to a powerful force that can change our historical trajectory. Our individualised response to the huge threat of environmental change in fact contributes to the profound sense of paralysis and historical inertia that defines the way we live now. We know that our environment is changing at a terrifying pace, we know that buying locally sourced goods and avoiding single use plastics won't really fix the problem, and we grudgingly accept that our political leaders are for now incapable of acting in unison to genuinely change things. We appear locked on to this trajectory and incapable of responding to a threat of such magnitude it is difficult for us to truly comprehend. Within the coordinates of our present way of life, we can do no other than continue to shuffle closer to the precipice, wanting but unable to change. What can we do? Ultra-realists (see Winlow et al, 2015) argue that we await a genuine historical event that will change things, shattering the protocols of our present way of life. This event will reveal the absurdities of our current situation and encourage us to marvel at our refusal to change. Such an event would allow us to see and think beyond the horizon of acceptable knowledge, and act in ways that now appear impossible. A true historical event pushes history in a different direction. It transforms our understanding of what is possible. However, it is now perfectly clear that an event of this magnitude must emanate from a space beyond globalised parliamentary capitalism. We will not vote our way to concerted political action of climate issues, and we will certainly not change things with individualised acts of 'ethical' consumption. Protests will not shame our elected officials into concerted action. Only a true event can return us to history and allow us to act in ways that now seem impossible.

We assume that acting prompts change, or at least that acting is orientated toward bringing about change. However, just like the spurned husband, we are all entirely capable of acting with great energy and purpose to ensure that *nothing changes*. Our small acts to help the environment are *fetishistic* in a precise psychoanalytic sense because they avoid fundamental

issues, work to maintain the basic coordinates of our present way of life and generate a modicum of pleasure as we oscillate around our object of desire. The same is true of many progressive political movements today. They are not movements for fundamental change. They are movements that demand minor changes so that no fundamental changes need to take place (ibid). Why?

Negative ideology

Capitalist ideology today has an obviously negative aspect. It continues to seduce us with images of individualised success, but it can no longer pull the wool over our eyes or blind us to suffering that follows in its wake. It's most vocal ideologues these days tend not to deny capitalism's worst effects but instead pitch them as a price worth paying for capitalism's mythologised benefits. Very few politicians, academics or businesspeople claim that capitalism can be positioned entirely within the category of 'the good'. Rather, they pitch capitalism as the 'least bad' (ibid; see also Badiou, 2013). Capitalism, they acknowledge, is replete with problems, but at least it doesn't kill people in the way that fascism and communism do. Capitalism concentrates wealth and power in the hands of the few, sure, but at least there are no concentration camps or gulags. Capitalist societies tend to involve a commitment to electoral democracy, and sure, there are problems with electoral democracy, but at least people are given the chance to vote. At least they don't have an authoritarian dictator imposed upon them. Be careful what you wish for, political radicals are told. You may want to dispense with capitalism's negative effects, but don't let your desire for change drive you to abandon the basic precepts of Western civilisation. You are the beneficiaries of panoramic freedoms that will be quickly wiped out were we ever to abandon parliamentary capitalism.

We are now living through an age that can be defined as 'capitalist realism' (see Fisher, 2009). We know very well of capitalism's problems and injustices, but we cannot imagine a preferable system that might be created in reality. Even strident oppositional movements tend to be *against* particular aspects of our present way of life, rather than *for* something that can be clearly named and understood. Capitalism's diverse, incisive and potent ideological systems no longer attempt to peddle the myth that capitalism is just, fair and inclusive. Rather, these systems work incessantly to convince us that *nothing better can be brought into being*. While capitalist ideology was once, in essence, *positive*, telling us of the great benefits of capitalism, now it is increasingly *negative*, in that it focuses upon the task of convincing us that any attempt to make things better will inevitably make things worse.

Conclusion

Why should criminologists and zemiologists be interested in ideology? At the most obvious level, an account of ideology allows us to catch sight of the forces that encourage ordinary people to engage in practices that harm others and the natural environment and feel justified in doing so. If we apply the adapted account of ideology suggested by ultra-realists, we can also begin to come to terms with the forces that prevent us from joining with others to take urgent action to prevent or delay the most pressing dangers of our time. To move forward as a discipline, we must jettison the stolid empiricism of the mainstream and accept our role as intellectuals. We must get comfortable with abstract thought and dip into those aspects of our intellectual life we thoughtlessly discarded as postmodernism and the marketization of higher education drove us to abandon the search for truth and instead focus on data collection and grant income. We must reject entirely our subservient relationship with liberal sociology and develop the confidence to dip in and out of diverse fields before developing and exporting our own ideas and intellectual frameworks. And perhaps most importantly, we must accept the burden of thinking and acting anew. We must accept that the answers we need are not always to be found in the dusty old texts that form our disciplinary canon. It is up to us. We must produce the forms of knowledge we need to live well with others and with nature now and in the future, and we must have hope that those who follow will do the same.

Further reading

Terry Eagleton's *Ideology: An Introduction*, published in 2007, is a wonderful place to start. Hall and Winlow's (2015) *Revitalizing Criminological Theory* is the foundation text for ultra-realists, and it contains a detailed account of the ultra-realist account of ideology. Zizek's edited collection, *Mapping Ideology* (Verso, 1995), contains work from some of the foremost commentators on contemporary ideology. Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (2005) are perfectly readable. Winlow et al's (2015) *Riots and Political Protest: Notes from the Post-Political Present*, offers a more detailed investigation of the issues and ideas raised in this short chapter.

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