

# General Introduction to Marxism

**M**ARXISM IS COMPLICATED by the fact that Marx is by no means the only influence on this critical school; indeed, given the various sorts of political movements that have been inspired by this thinker (socialism, Trotskyism, communism, Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, radical democracy, etc.), one despairs at trying to provide a fair and lucid introduction. Add to that the fact that Marx himself changed his mind on various issues or sometimes expressed opinions that appear mutually exclusive, and one is faced with a rather high hurdle. Nonetheless, there are a number of Marxist thoughts and thinkers that have been especially influential on recent scholarly developments (particularly in literary, cultural, and political studies). In short, the goal of this section of the Guide to Theory, as with any of the sections, is not to give an exhaustive account of this critical school but, rather, to give a sense for the major concepts influencing this approach while attempting to stay conscious of the various ways that individual terms have been contested over the last number of decades. The major distinction in Marxist thought that influences literary and cultural theory is that between traditional Marxists (sometimes, unfairly, called vulgar Marxists) and what are sometimes referred to as post-Marxists or neo-Marxists. The major distinction between these two versions of Marxist thought lies in the concept of ideology: traditional Marxists tend to believe that it is possible to get past ideology in an effort to reach some essential truth (eg. the stages of economic development). Post-Marxists, especially after Louis Althusser, tend to think of ideology in a way more akin to Jacques Lacan, as something that is so much a part of our culture and mental make-up that it actively determines what we commonly refer to as "reality." According to these post-Marxist critics, there may well be some hard kernel behind our obfuscating perceptions of reality but that kernel is by definition resistant to articulation. As soon as one attempts to articulate it, one is at risk of falling back into ideology. This understanding of ideology is what Fredric Jameson famously terms the "prison-house of language." The links on the left will lead you to specific ideas discussed by Marx and those "post-Marxists" who have proven to be most influential on literary and cultural studies; however, you might like to begin with a quick overview:



PLAYERS

[KARL MARX](#) is, along with Freud, one of a handful of thinkers from the last two centuries who has had a truly transformative effect on society, on culture, and on our very understanding of ourselves. Although there were a few critics claiming an end to Marxist thought (and even an end to ideology) after the fall of the communist system in the former Soviet Union, Marxist thought has continued to have an important influence on critical thought, all the more so recently after the rise of globalization studies. As protests at recent G7 and IMF meetings make clear, the school can also still have important political effects.

[LOUIS ALTHUSSER](#) represents an important break in Marxist thought, particularly when it comes to the notion of ideology. His Lacan-inspired version of Marxism significantly changed the way many Marxists approached both capitalism and hegemony after the second world war.

[FREDRIC JAMESON](#) is surely the most influential contemporary Marxist thinker in the United States. His own alterations of and dialogue with Althusserian and Lacanian thought have established him as an important influence on the rise of globalization studies, an important critical school of the last few years. In particular, he has attempted to make sense of the continuing staying power of capitalism and the ways that capitalism has transformed since Marx wrote his critiques in the nineteenth century, addressing such issues as multi-national (or "late") capitalism, the power of the media, and the influence of postmodernity on Marxist debate. The lattermost issue is explored in the [Jameson modules under Postmodernism](#).

**KARL MARX** makes different statements about ideology at different points in his career; however, his most straightforward statement about ideology appears in *The German Ideology*, which he wrote with Frederick Engels. Ideology itself represents the "production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness," all that "men say, imagine, conceive," and include such things as "politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc." (47). Ideology functions as the [superstructure](#) of a civilization: the conventions and culture that make up the dominant ideas of a society. The "ruling ideas" of a given epoch are, however, those of the ruling class: "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of their dominance" (64). Since one goal of ideology is to legitimize those forces in a position of [hegemony](#), it tends to obfuscate the violence and exploitation that often keep a disempowered group in its place (from slaves in tribal society to the peasantry in feudal society to the proletariat in capitalist society). The obfuscation necessarily leads to logical contradictions in the dominant ideology, which Marxism works to uncover by returning to the material conditions of a society: a society's [mode of production](#).

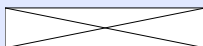
In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels offer up the possibility that one can address the real conditions of human existence, outside of ideological mystification.

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way. (42).

The material conditions existing at a given time period Marx refers to as the [means of production](#). Any given time period's ideology is most clearly revealed by uncovering the material conditions of production: the [means of production](#), as well as the [relations of production](#) (the ways the society structures the relations between individuals, particularly through the [division of labor](#)), which together make up the [mode of production](#): "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself" (48). For Marx, it is the materiality of human production that directly influences ideology: "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (47). As Marx and Engel explain further in *The German Ideology*,

Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will. (46-47)

This belief that one can directly access the real conditions of history (sometimes referred to as "reflection theory" or "vulgar Marxism") is questioned by neo-Marxists, particularly in the wake of [Althusser's Lacanian rethinking of ideology](#). Marx is, in fact, more complicated on this issue, however, since at other times he suggests that some aspects of ideology (for example, literature) can have a semi-autonomous existence; that is, that such cultural products can exert an influence that is at odds with the dominant mode of production. For comparison, see the [Althusser module on ideology](#) and the [Jameson module on ideology](#).



ACCORDING TO MARX, human civilization has manifested itself in a series of organizational structures, each determined by its primary [mode of production](#), particularly the [division of labor](#) that dominates in each stage.

1) the tribal form. Tribal society has no social classes but is structured around kinship relations, with hunting the province of men and domestic work the province of women. The tribal form, according to Marx and Engels, is quite elementary at this stage, "a further extension of the natural division of labour existing in the family" (44). During this stage, it is also possible to see a slave culture established, particularly as the population increases, leading to "the growth of wants" and the growth of relations with outside civilizations (through war or barter). With slave culture, we see the beginning of class society.

2) primitive communism: "the ancient communal and State ownership which proceeds especially from the union of several tribes into a *city* by agreement or by conquest" (44). During this stage, the concept of private property begins to develop: "With the development of private property, we find here for the first time the same conditions which we shall find again, only on a more extensive scale, with modern private property. On the one hand, the concentration of private property...; on the other hand, coupled with this, the transformation of the plebeian small peasantry into a [proletariat](#)" (44-45).

3) feudal or estate property: "Like tribal and communal ownership, it is based again on a community; but the directly producing class standing over against it is not, as in the case of the ancient community, the slaves, but the enserfed small peasantry" (45). In the city, the feudal structure manifested itself in trade guilds. The organization of both the country and the city "was determined by the restricted conditions of production—the small-scale and primitive cultivation of the land, and the craft type of industry" (46), which meant that there "was little [division of labour](#) in the heyday of feudalism" (46). Exploitation functioned differently during stage than during the height of capitalism because each feudal peasant knew exactly what proportion of his labor had to be handed over to the aristocracy and the church; the rest was his or hers to use.

4) capitalism: because of the eventual growth of commerce (and of human populations), feudal society began to accumulate capital, which, along with the increased debt incurred by the aristocracy, eventually led to the English Revolution of 1640 and the French Revolution of 1789, both of which opened the way for the establishment of a society structured around commodities and profit (i.e. capitalism). In such a society, the proletariat is fooled into believing that s/he is free because s/he is paid for his/her labor. In fact, the transformation of labor into an abstract quantity

that can be bought and sold on the market leads to the exploitation of the [proletariat](#), benefitting a small percentage of the population in control of [capital](#). The working class thus experiences [alienation](#) since the members of this class feel they are not in control of the forces driving them into a given job. The reason for this situation is that someone else owns the [means of production](#), which are treated like private property.

HUMAN SOCIETY'S ENTRANCE into capitalism occurred because of a transformation in the understanding of [exchange-value](#) and of labor. In a barter society, goods are exchanged in a way that directly relates one item to another by consideration of the "specific useful and concrete labour" used to produce the object (Marx, *Capital* 150). The objects exchanged are tied closely both to the [use-value](#) of the objects (their immediate usefulness) and to the real, material labor expended to produce the object. In capitalism, that concrete labor tends to get translated into an abstract quantity that can then stand as an [equivalent-form](#) that one can use to determine the exchangeability of all sorts of products. In this way, "concrete labour... becomes the expression of abstract human labor" (150). The differences between different kinds of labor and different sorts of [use-value](#) no longer matter: one begins to think of labor as an abstract, undifferentiated quantity that one can exchange for analogous abstract quantities of labor "congealed" in other products: the labor that creates value "is now explicitly presented as labour which counts as the equal of every other sort of human labour, whatever natural form it may possess, hence whether it is objectified in a coat, in corn, in iron, or in gold" (155). As Marx goes on, "The linen, by virtue of the form of value, no longer stands in a social relation with merely one other kind of commodity, but with the whole world of commodities as well" (155). We thus begin to move towards a "universal equivalent": a single abstract measure by which one can facilitate the exchange of categorically different items on the market. A similar transformation occurs in the value of the given product. In the exchange of goods on the capitalist market, [exchange-value](#) rather than [use-value](#) dominates. As Marx explains, [exchange-value](#) must always be distinguished from [use-value](#), because "the exchange relation of [commodities](#) is characterized precisely by its abstraction from their [use-values](#)" (127). By abstracting value into [exchange-value](#), the stage is set for the eventual dominance of first gold and then paper money as the universal equivalent of capitalist society.

By accepting [money](#) as the universal equivalent, capitalism eventually manages to exploit the laborer upon whom all value ultimately inheres, according to Marx. That is, [money](#) tends to hide the real equivalent behind any monetary exchange: labor. The more labor it takes to produce a product, the greater its value. Marx therefore concludes that "As [exchange-values](#), all [commodities](#) are merely definite quantities of congealed labour-time" (130). However, what happens in a capitalist society is that people tend to believe that power and value really inhere in the [money-form](#) rather in



the labor that actually produces goods and services, leading to what Marx terms "commodity fetishism." (See [the next module on fetishism](#).)

[Money](#) in turn allows for the accumulation of [capital](#). In [commodity](#) exchange, one exchanges a [commodity](#) for [money](#), which one then exchanges for some other [commodity](#). One sells in order to buy something else of use to the consumer; Marx writes this formula as C-M-C (or Commodity-Money-Commodity). [Money](#) allows this formula to be transformed, however: now one can buy in order to sell (at a higher price) or M-C-M, which becomes for Marx the general formula for capital. In this second formula, "the circulation of [money](#) as [capital](#) is an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of [capital](#) is therefore limitless" (253). The aim of the capitalist thus becomes "the unceasing movement of profit-making" (254). Indeed, the formula is reduced even further in the case of usury, when one loans money in return for the same money with interest, or M-M. A similar process occurs on the stock market: money making yet more money without the purchase of a tangible commodity.

Once again, what is forgotten in this process is the [labor-power](#) upon which the whole system of profit relies: the purchasing of a person's [labor-power](#) in exchange for full ownership of the product thus produced. The product is in turn sold on the market at a profit that is controlled exclusively by the capitalist

MARX TURNS TO FETISHISM to make sense of the apparently magical quality of the [commodity](#): "A [commodity](#) appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (163). Fetishism in anthropology refers to the primitive belief that godly powers can inhere in inanimate things (e.g., in totems). Marx borrows this concept to make sense of what he terms "commodity fetishism." As Marx explains, the commodity remains simple as long as it is tied to its [use-value](#). When a piece of wood is turned into a table through human labor, its [use-value](#) is clear and, as product, the table remains tied to its material use. However, as soon as the table "emerges as a [commodity](#), it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness" (163). The connection to the actual hands of the laborer is severed as soon as the table is connected to money as the [universal equivalent](#) for exchange. People in a capitalist society thus begin to treat [commodities](#) as if value inhered in the objects themselves, rather than in the amount of real labor expended to produce the object. As Marx explains, "The mysterious character of the [commodity-form](#) consists therefore simply in the fact that the [commodity](#) reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (164-65). What is,

in fact, a social relation between people (between capitalists and exploited laborers) instead assumes "the fantastic form of a relation between things" ([165](#)).

This effect is caused by the fact that, in a capitalist society, the real producers of [commodities](#) remain largely invisible. We only approach their products "through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products" ([165](#)). We access the products of the proletariat through the exchange of money with those institutions that glean profit from the labor of the proletariat. Since we only ever relate to those products through the exchange of money, we forget the "secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of [commodities](#)" ([168](#)); that is labor: "It is... precisely this finished form of the world of [commodities](#)—[the money form](#)—which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly" ([168-69](#)). In capitalist society, gold and then paper money become "the direct incarnation of all human labor" ([187](#)), much as in primitive societies the totem becomes the direct incarnation of godhead. Through this process, "Men are henceforth related to each other in their social process of production in a purely atomistic way; they become [alienated](#) because their own relations of production assume a material shape which is independent of their control and their conscious individual action" ([187](#)). Although value ultimately accrues because of human labor, people in a capitalist system are led to believe that they are not in control of the market forces that appear to exist independently of any individual person.

The situation differed in [feudal society](#): In such a society, "we find everyone dependent—serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clerics." Because "relations of personal dependence form the given social foundation, there is no need for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality. They take the shape, in the transactions of society, of services in kind and payments in kind" ([170](#)). Transactions in feudal society involve the particularity of labor rather than the abstract [universal equivalent](#) necessary for [commodity](#) production. Marx therefore concludes that "Whatever we may think... of the different roles in which men confront each other in such a society, the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour appear at all events as their own personal relations, and are not disguised as social relations between things, between the products of labour" ([170](#)).

LOUIS ALTHUSSER builds on the work of Jacques Lacan to understand the way ideology functions in society. He thus moves away from the earlier Marxist understanding of ideology. In the earlier model, ideology was believed to create what was termed "false consciousness," a false understanding of the way the world

functioned (for example, the suppression of the fact that the products we purchase on the open market are, in fact, the result of the exploitation of laborers). Althusser explains that for Marx "Ideology is [...] thought as an imaginary construction whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud. For those writers, the dream was the purely imaginary, i.e. null, result of the 'day's residues'" ([Lenin 108](#)). Althusser, by contrast, approximates ideology to Lacan's understanding of "reality," the world we construct around us after our entrance into the [symbolic order](#). (See the [Lacan module on the structure of the psyche](#).) For Althusser, as for Lacan, it is impossible to access the "Real conditions of existence" due to our reliance on language; however, through a rigorous "scientific" approach to society, economics, and history, we can come close to perceiving if not those "Real conditions" at least the ways that we are inscribed in ideology by complex processes of recognition. Althusser's understanding of ideology has in turn influenced a number of important Marxist thinkers, including Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, and Fredric Jameson. (See, for comparison, the [Jameson module on ideology](#).)

Althusser posits a series of hypotheses that he explores to clarify his understanding of ideology:

1) *"Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"* ([Lenin 109](#)). The traditional way of thinking of ideology led Marxists to show how ideologies are false by pointing to the real world hidden by ideology (for example, the "real" economic base for ideology). According to Althusser, by contrast, ideology does not "reflect" the real world but "represents" the [imaginary](#) relationship of individuals to the real world; the thing ideology (mis)represents is itself already at one remove from the real. In this, Althusser follows the Lacanian understanding of the [imaginary order](#), which is itself at one step removed from the Lacanian [Real](#). In other words, we are always within ideology because of our reliance on language to establish our "reality"; different ideologies are but different representations of our social and [imaginary](#) "reality" not a representation of the [Real](#) itself.

2) *"Ideology has a material existence"* ([Lenin 112](#)). Althusser contends that ideology has a material existence because "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" ([Lenin 112](#)). Ideology always manifests itself through actions, which are "inserted into practices" ([Lenin 114](#)), for example, rituals, conventional behavior, and so on. Indeed, Althusser goes so far as to adopt Pascal's formula for belief: "Pascal says more or less: 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe'" ([Lenin 114](#)). It is our performance of our relation to others and to social institutions that continually instantiates us as subjects. [Judith](#)



[Butler's understanding of performativity](#) could be said to be strongly influenced by this way of thinking about ideology.

3) "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*" ([Lenin 115](#)). According to Althusser, the main purpose of ideology is in "*'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*" ([Lenin 116](#)). So pervasive is ideology in its constitution of subjects that it forms our very reality and thus appears to us as "true" or "obvious." Althusser gives the example of the "hello" on a street: "the rituals of ideological recognition [...] guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" ([Lenin 117](#)). Through "interpellation," individuals are turned into subjects (which are always ideological). Althusser's example is the hail from a police officer: "Hey, you there!" ([Lenin 118](#)): "Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*" ([Lenin 118](#)). The very fact that we do not recognize this interaction as ideological speaks to the power of ideology:

what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology [...] That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, "I am ideological." ([Lenin 118](#))

4) "*individuals are always-already subjects*" ([Lenin 119](#)). Although he presents his example of interpellation in a temporal form (I am interpellated and thus I become a subject, I enter ideology), Althusser makes it clear that the "becoming-subject" happens even before we are born. "This proposition might seem paradoxical" ([Lenin 119](#)), Althusser admits; nevertheless, "That an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born, is [...] the plain reality, accessible to everyone and not a paradox at all" ([Lenin 119](#)). Even before the child is born, "it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived" ([Lenin 119](#)). Althusser thus once again invokes Lacan's ideas, in this case Lacan's understanding of the "[Name-of-the-Father](#)."

Most subjects accept their ideological self-constitution as "reality" or "nature" and thus rarely run afoul of the repressive State apparatus, which is designed to punish anyone who rejects the dominant ideology. [Hegemony](#) is thus reliant less on such

repressive State apparatuses as the police than it is on those Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) by which ideology is inculcated in all subjects. ([See the next module for an explanation of ISAs.](#)) As Althusser puts it, "the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'*" ([Lenin 123](#)).

LOUIS ALTHUSSER complicates Marx's understanding of the relation between base and superstructure by adding his concept of "ideological state apparatuses." Marx distinguished among various "levels" in a society: the infrastructure or economic base and the superstructure, which includes political and legal institutions (law, the police, the government) as well as ideology (religious, moral, legal, political, etc.). The superstructure has a relative autonomy with relation to the base; it relies on the economic base but can sometimes persist for a long period after major changes in the economic base. Althusser does not reject the Marxist model; however, he does want to explore the ways in which ideology is more pervasive and more "material" than previously acknowledged. (See the [previous module for Althusser on ideology.](#)) As a result, he proposes to distinguish "ideological state apparatuses" (ISAs for short) from the repressive state apparatus (SA for short). The state apparatus includes "the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc." ([Althusser, Lenin 96](#)). These are the agencies that function "by violence," by at some point imposing punishment or privation in order to enforce power.

To distinguish ISAs from the SA, Althusser offers a number of examples:

- the religious ISA (the system of the different public and private 'Schools'),
- the family ISA,
- the legal ISA,
- the political ISA (the political system, including the different Parties),
- the trade union ISA,
- the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.),
- the cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.)

These ISAs, by contrast to the SA, are less centralized and more heterogeneous; they are also believed to access the private rather than the public realm of existence, although Althusser's goal here is to question the bourgeois distinction between private and public: "The distinction between the public and the private is a distinction internal to bourgeois law, and valid in the (subordinate) domains in which bourgeois law exercises its 'authority'" ([Lenin 97](#)). The main thing that distinguishes the ISAs from the SAs is ideology: "the Repressive State Apparatus functions 'by violence,' whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function 'by ideology'" ([Lenin97](#)). To be more precise, Althusser explains that the SA functions *predominantly* by violence or repression and only secondarily by ideology. Similarly the ISAs function predominantly by ideology but can include punishment or repression secondarily: "Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc., to 'discipline' not only their shepherds, but also their flocks. The same is true of the Family... The same is true of the cultural IS Apparatus (censorship, among other things), etc." ([Lenin 98](#)).

Although the ISAs appear to be quite disparate, they are unified by subscribing to a common ideology in the service of the ruling class; indeed, the ruling class must maintain a degree of control over the ISAs in order to ensure the stability of the repressive state apparatus (the SA): "To my knowledge, *no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its [hegemony](#) over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses*" ([Lenin 98](#)). It is much harder for the ruling class to maintain control over the multiple, heterogeneous, and relatively autonomous ISAs (alternative perspectives can be voiced in each ISA), which is why there is a continual struggle for [hegemony](#) in this realm.

It is also worth mentioning that, according to Althusser, "what the bourgeoisie has installed as its number-one, i.e. as its dominant ideological State apparatus, is the educational apparatus, which has in fact replaced in its functions the previously dominant ideological State apparatus, the Church" ([Lenin 103-04](#)). Through education, each mass of individuals that leaves the educational system at various junctures (the laborers who leave the system early, the petty bourgeoisie who leave after their B.A.s, and the leaders who complete further specialist training) enters the work force with the ideology necessary for the reproduction of the current system: "Each mass ejected en route is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfill in class society" ([Lenin 105](#)). Other ISAs contribute to the replication of the dominant ideology but "no other ideological State apparatus has the obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven" ([Lenin 105](#)). The very importance of this function is why schools are invested in hiding their true purpose through an obfuscating ideology: "an ideology which represents the School as

a neutral environment purged of ideology (because it is...lay), where teachers respectful of the 'conscience' and 'freedom' of the children who are entrusted to them (in complete confidence) by their 'parents' (who are free, too, i.e. the owners of their children) open up for them the path to the freedom, morality and responsibility of adults by their own example, by knowledge, literature and their 'liberating' virtues" ([Lenin 105-06](#)). So pervasive is this ideology, according to Althusser, that "those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they 'teach' against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped... are a kind of hero" ([Lenin 106](#)).

FREDRIC JAMESON builds on the work of previous theorists in his understanding of ideology. He is particularly influenced by Jacques Lacan and those post-Marxist theorists who have made use of Lacan's distinction between reality and "[the Real](#)" in order to understand ideology (Louis Althusser, Chantalle Mouffe, and Ernesto Laclau). (See the [Lacan module on the structure of the psyche](#).) At one point, Jameson quotes Althusser's Lacanian definition of ideology: "the representation of the subject's [Imaginary](#) relationship to his or her [Real](#) conditions of existence" ([Postmodernism 51](#)). Those "Real conditions of existence" remain, by definition, outside of language. History therefore functions for Jameson as an "absent cause," insofar as, in its totality, it remains inexpressible; however, it nonetheless does exist as that which drives real antagonisms in the present (for example, between social classes). We may not be able to get out of ideological contradiction altogether; however, Jameson asserts the importance of attempting, nonetheless, to acknowledge the real antagonisms that are, in fact, driving our fantasy constructions.

Jameson also makes it clear that there is not one ideological dominant in any period. In this, Jameson follows Raymond Williams' useful distinctions among "residual" ideological formations (ideologies that have been mostly superseded but still circulate in various ways); "emergent" ideological formations (new ideologies that are in the process of establishing their influence); and "dominant" ideological formations (those ideologies supported by what Louis Althusser terms "ideological state apparatuses"; e.g. schools, government, the police, and the military). Jameson insists on the value of such a model because "If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable" ([Postmodernism 6](#)).

By determining the dominant of our age in his book, *Postmodernism*, Jameson hopes to provide his reader with a "cognitive map" of the present, which then can make possible effective and beneficial political change. The problem with our current postmodern age, according to Jameson, is that "the prodigious new expansion of

multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity" ([Postmodernism 49](#)). Any effort to contest dominant ideology threatens to be reabsorbed by capital, so that "even overtly political interventions like those of *The Clash* are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it" ([Postmodernism 49](#)). Given such a situation, Jameson argues that what is needed is a "cognitive map" of the present, one that reinjects an understanding of the present's real historicity. Jameson compares the situation of the individual in postmodern late capitalist society to the experience of being in a postmodern urban landscape: "In a classic work, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch taught us that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves: grids such as those of Jersey City, in which none of the traditional markers (monuments, nodes, natural boundaries, built perspectives) obtain, are the most obvious examples" ([Postmodernism 49](#)). The notion of a "cognitive map" enables "a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" ([Postmodernism 51](#)). Jameson expands this concept of cognitive mapping to ideological critique, suggesting that his task is to make sense of our place in the global system: "The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale" ([Postmodernism 54](#)).

One "cognitive map" Jameson for example turns to is Algirdas Greimas' semiotic square, which he calls "a virtual map of conceptual closure, or better still, of the closure of ideology itself, that is, as a mechanism, which, while seeming to generate a rich variety of possible concepts and positions, remains in fact locked into some initial aporia or double bind that it cannot transform from the inside by its own means" ("Foreword" xv). Using Greimas' semiotic square, Jameson seeks to find the dominant ideological contradictions of a given text or cultural work. (For more on the semiotic square, see the [Greimas module on the semiotic square](#).)

AS JAMESON EXPLAINS in *Postmodernism* (1991), the term "late capitalism" originated with the Frankfurt School (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, etc.) and refers to the form of capitalism that came to the fore in the modernist period and now dominates our own postmodern culture. (On postmodernism, see [my introduction](#).) The Frankfurt school



stressed two essential features: (1) a tendential web of bureaucratic control..., and (2) the interpenetration of government and big business ('state capitalism') such that Nazism and the New Deal are related systems. ([xviii](#))

As Jameson explains, the term "late capitalism" now has "very different overtones from these" ([xviii](#)); indeed, Jameson dates the emergence of "late capitalism" in the 1950s, so that late capitalism for Jameson is ultimately coincident with and even synonymous with postmodernism: "the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950s, after the wartime shortages of consumer goods and spare parts had been made up, and new products and new technologies (not least those of the media) could be pioneered" ([Postmodernism xx](#)). In turn, the psychic break that made possible the cultural (rather than merely economic) emergence of late-capitalist sensibilities occurred, according to Jameson, in the 1960s. Finally, the 1970s allowed the economic and the cultural side of postmodern late capitalism to come together: the economic system and the cultural "structure of feeling" "somehow crystallized in the great shock of the crises of 1971 (the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, for all intents and purposes the end of the great wave of 'wars of national liberation' and the beginning of the end of traditional communism)" ([Postmodernism xx-xxi](#)). In general, Jameson understands "late capitalism" as the pervasive condition of our own age, a condition that speaks both to economic and cultural structures: "What 'late' generally conveys is... the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive" ([Postmodernism xxi](#)).

According to Jameson, the new elements that postmodernism adds to the Frankfurt School's version of late capitalism include:

1) "new forms of business organization (multinationals, transnationals) beyond the monopoly stage" ([Postmodernism xviii-xix](#)). Lenin's concept of the "monopoly stage" of capitalism now expands out beyond any national border.

2) an internationalization of business beyond the older imperial model; in the new order of capital, multinational corporations are not tied to any one country but represent a form of power and influence greater than any one nation. That internationalization also applies to the division of labor, making possible the continued exploitation of workers from poor countries in support of multinational capital. Jameson refers to "the flight of production to advanced Third World areas,

along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale" ([Postmodernism xix](#)).

3) "a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt)" ([Postmodernism xix](#)). Through such a banking structure, the First World's multinational corporations maintain their control over the world market.

4) "new forms of media interrelationship" ([Postmodernism xix](#)). The media constitutes one of the more influential new products of late capitalism (print, internet, television, film) and a new means for the capitalist take-over of our lives. Through the mediatization of culture, we become increasingly reliant on the media's version of our reality, a version of reality that is filled predominantly with capitalist values.

5) "computers and automation" ([Postmodernism xix](#)). Advances in computer automation have allowed for an unprecedented level of mass production, leading to ever greater profit-margins for multinational corporations.

6) **planned obsolescence**. As Jameson puts it, "the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" ([Postmodernism 5](#)).

7) **American military domination**. As Jameson writes in *Postmodernism*, "this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror" ([5](#)).

Some synonyms for "late capitalism" include "'multinational capitalism, 'spectacle or image society,' 'media capitalism,' 'the world system,' even 'postmodernism' itself" ([Postmodernism xviii](#)). Jameson however rejects the synonym "postindustrial society" because that term suggests that what we are seeing is a radical break from the forms of capital that existed in the nineteenth century (and thus, by implication, a break from Karl Marx's understanding of capital). Jameson is more interested in perceiving a continuity from earlier forms of industrial society (even as

he acknowledges the differences) and in affirming the continuing relevance of Marx's theories.