German philosopher Karl Marx, recognized as the founder of Marxism, pondered the raw concept of ideology, birthing a method of theory and criticism later named after himself: Marxism. According to his reasoning, the concept of ideology was fabricated from the “ruling ideas of the ruling class” in order to stimulate the working middle-class, the exploitation of a subject by a subject. Perpetuating the idea that, no matter your birth caste, dedication and hard work will eventually elevate you to the ranks of the ruling class, according to Marxism, is ruling class propaganda.

With the evolution of Marx’s idea of a ruling class subliminally manipulating a less-bourgeois social class, the idea of distinctions between castes on society’s hierarchal ladder became known as classism. What the ruling class perpetuated is that admission into their ranks is the ultimate societal goal. Having universal goals in place stresses idealism, also known as majority interest, as well as the notion that as each class progresses, another class will inevitably fill the shoes of its ruling class predecessors (Marx 657). This suggests that society is an organized structure. When one generation ends and a new generation, with a new ruling class and new ruling ideas, comes along, the once thought of “general interest” is no longer represented, instead dismissed in lieu of the current hierarchy’s needs (658).

Louis Althusser was an influential Marxist theorist who expanded upon Marx’s concept of ideology. Fellow theorist and countryman Jacques Lacan, who believed that society’s “lack of awareness”, in terms of recognizing the classist oppression forced on one class by another, was the enabler in such a situation, influenced Althusser. Contrary to Marx’s theory that a subject is born with an uncontrollable, predetermined destiny, Althusser believes that reality is completely unattainable, and that we are free subjects with the ability to live as we wish, the “you are what you produce” concept. To him, the notion of a predetermined destiny cannot exist in something as imaginary and exploitative as ideology.

Throughout his research, Althusser was able to formulate three lines of argument that modify Marx’s original thesis on the concept of ideology. His first argument is that ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence (Althusser 693). He relates ideology to numerous “world outlooks”, mentioning that under the assumption that we do not live by any one particular ideology as an ultimate truth, we are admitting that ideology is discussed from critical points of view, which are largely imaginary and do not “correspond to reality” (693).

His second thesis states “ideology has material existence” (695). Here, Althusser refines Marx’s theory by declaring that, while it cannot be fully proven, ideology is founded on individual ideas, which means that ideology is based on an ideology, which itself is composed of ideas, which themselves are based on an ideology, and so on and so forth (695). Furthermore, on page 697, Althusser writes “ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief”. Therefore, there is no practice except by and in an ideology, and there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects (697).

Finally, Althusser’s central thesis is a summation of his previous points, stating, “ideology interpolates individuals as subjects” (697). Society functioning within the every day ritual perpetuated by the ruling class only enforces Althusser’s point that ideology is
materialistic, tangible even, and that without a subject with an audience consisting of other subjects, it is unrealistic for ideology to exist (699). The pure existence of ideology forces us as subjects to be an involved and active participant in our existence.

Althusser, expanding upon Marx’s thoughts, altered the overall Marxist concept of ideology. Ideology, which Marx opined as the foundation of society, was realized by Althusser to have its own foundation: classism, materialism, exploitation, and imagination. The idea of the “ruling class” is merely a façade, based on the idea that ideology is created by a subject for other subjects, changing Marx’s concept on ideology by expanding the vantage point from which we viewed Marxism.

Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan are two major figures in the school of psychoanalytic criticism and theory. While both were significant contributors to this particular school of thought, the two minds found themselves occasionally agreeing or disagreeing with each other on particular issues. One issue that both theorists argue against is the theory of the cogito, the unified self, or, simply put, the fundamental form of all “wakeful”, or conscious, living (Husserl 139). Living consciously means that you are cerebral of all your surroundings; every emotion, action, decision, and choice has an effect, an effect felt by yourself and others, registering within your conscious. Both Freud and Lacan had interesting arguments against this theory, both validated through their research and discoveries within psychoanalytic thought.

Freud’s standpoint on the unified self is the complete opposite of what Husserl describes in his essay, “Ideas”. Freud argues that one can never be completely aware of consciousness because of the underlying unconscious that plagues us as individuals. Freud defines the subconscious as suppressed feelings or desires that come about only in fantastical mediums. Freud states that there are three parts of self: the Id, known also as the unconscious, the Ego, or the social self, and the Superego, the representation of society’s value system.

The key value in Freud’s three-pronged parts of self is the subconscious, or the Id. Freud characterizes the unconscious as “uncanny”, meaning unfamiliar. We may assume that we are fully conscious of ourselves at all times, but Freud argues that the unconscious is uncanny, in that we are unaware of how and when it operates (Freud 418). In our subconscious lie oppressed memories and feelings that we did not know existed, such as Freud’s Oedipus Complex as well as the theory that children possess sexuality despite lacking prior experience with such an idea. He also discusses the idea that we are molded as people by our subconscious memories, projecting our suppressed feelings onto others, splitting personas (i.e. good father/bad father), and displacement (Rivkin and Ryan 390). Furthermore, if we all possess a subconscious, we can then recognize ourselves as a civilization based on oppression, therefore making us victims of civilization.

Jacques Lacan’s theory differed from Freud’s, but both agreed on the idea that there is no such thing as complete consciousness or awareness of one’s absolute self. Where they differ is on the topic of what form of representation the unconscious takes. Lacan argues that the unconscious is shaped as a linguistic system. Lacan agrees with Freud in that the ego itself can never fully know and master the unconscious (392). Lacan also alludes to the point that our desires are never satiated, only replaced. He does not think we truly desire what we think we do, therefore, when we get what we want, we simply replace it with a new desire (393).

Lacan has the ability to draw such controversial conclusions due to the fact that he immerses himself into the culture of this thinking in order to establish fault-proof Neo-Freudian concepts. Such a concept can be found in his depiction of the Mirror Stage, an experience that, according to Lacan, “leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the Cogito” (441).
Lacan goes on to explain the Mirror Stage as the identification of an image as being you (442). We look for such identification because we are looking to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality (443), a daunting feat considering Freud and Lacan’s belief that absolute reality is unattainable.

Argumentation against cogito is more than prevalent in Freud and Lacan’s writings. Not only do they staunchly disagree with the idea, the theorists molded their own cases against it, logical and reasonable cases at that. Their work and contributions as theorists are large reasons why psychoanalysis became a mainstream method of criticism.
Works Cited


