Throughout the 1970s and most of the 1980s, only a few scholars in composition studies overtly invoked ideology as a way into discussions of the politics of language and pedagogy (some obvious examples are Wallace Douglas, Carl Freedman, Richard Ohmann, and Geneva Smitherman). Yet, in his 1988 College English article, "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," James Berlin declared that ideology was the central guiding concept behind all of rhetoric and composition. This declaration generated responses that were published in subsequent issues of the journal, indicating that some of composition's leading voices were uncomfortable with certain claims Berlin made. Linda Flower, for
example, argued that Berlin’s “ideological thumbnail sketch” of cognitive rhetoric masks certain complexities that would place it quite in line with the political values of social-epistemic rhetoric. And John Schilb worried about the consequences (theoretical, political, historiographical) of Berlin’s tendency to bring disparate scholars (fourteen by Schilb’s count; some leftists, some centrists) together under the single, very large umbrella of social-epistemic rhetoric. Both Flower and Schilb offered important counterarguments to Berlin’s article, yet (and this is the interesting thing) neither argued against Berlin’s main point: that ideology is the central guiding concept behind all of rhetoric and composition. The “social turn” in composition studies (based on postmodern theories of language and culture) had taken hold so strongly by the late 1980s that Berlin’s claims about rhetoric and ideology seemed, at the time, almost inevitable, inescapable. More recent scholars have also recognized this turn to ideology. Marshall Alcorn notes that “part of the influence of postmodernist theory upon composition theory has been to show how ideological issues are not marginal to the role of composition instruction, but central” (331). Yet, most discussions of ideology in the context of rhetoric and composition treat this “single most unstable term in Marxism” as though its meaning were coherent, stable, and thoroughly describable (Aune 28). Or, put differently, few in composition studies focus their energies on the complexities and contradictions inherent in the concept of ideology or the political and pedagogical problems that arise from the various uses of the term. However, one recent article in JAC critiques such reductive views of the conjunction of ideology and composition studies.

In “Composition’s Ideology Apparatus: A Critique,” Raúl Sánchez offers an insightful challenge to some of composition’s central assumptions about ideology. For Sánchez, it is not ideology itself that is the problem, but the predominant uses of the term in composition studies and the kinds of writing pedagogies that these uses generate. As focal points for his critique, Sánchez pays particular attention to three works: Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” and Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures. Sánchez argues that these works, which have in many ways defined the use of ideology as a guiding concept in composition studies, represent ideology as “nondiscursive and arhetorical.” Within this framework, ideology is the force that dominant cultures use to impose their will on the duped masses; and rhetoric functions either to perpetuate dominant ideologies or to liberate the oppressed from the shackles of “false
According to Sánchez, Berlin situates rhetoric within ideology, and such a view results in reductive theories of language and composition pedagogies that treat writing as a "notation system of thought and culture" rather than as a primary tool for the "production of thought and culture." A better view of ideology, Sánchez contends, pluralizes the concept: there are always multiple and competing ideologies (on the surface rather than in the depths), and the function of rhetoric is to produce ideological discourse, to construct identities and subjectivities through writing.

While I agree with Sánchez that the conception of ideology outlined in his reading of Althusser and Berlin can be problematic in the context of rhetoric and writing pedagogy, I believe that, particularly in Berlin's work, ideology represents more than a powerful false consciousness to be demystified by rhetoric. For example, if we take a broad view of "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," we find three competing ideological positions in composition studies: cognitive rhetoric, expressionistic rhetoric, and social-epistemic rhetoric. Each position outlined in Berlin's scheme is no less ideological than the next, including Berlin's own preferred position, social-epistemic rhetoric; and he does not use social-epistemic rhetoric as an arhetorical base-camp from which to critique the false ideologies of cognitivism and expressivism. Thus, while one cannot deny that Berlin does slip into representations of ideology as false consciousness from time to time, there are other places in Berlin's work where he intentionally avoids this view.

Further, while in his theory of rhetoric and writing Berlin does emphasize the critique of dominant ideologies, he does not do so, always and everywhere, to the complete exclusion of producing language that reflects alternative ideological assumptions. Although in *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*, I identify Berlin's pedagogy primarily with "production criticism," or the critique of cultural values produced in social texts, I also recognize that critique is not the whole story. In *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, Berlin writes,

One conspicuous strength of recent work in rhetoric and composition studies is its attempt to focus on the process of text production. While the dominant paradigms in literary studies have restricted study to text interpretation—and then apart from any influencing context, labeling production an inaccessible function of genius—composition studies has attempted to study and describe the concrete activities of text construction. (173)
Also, in his discussion of two experimental courses ("Codes and Critiques" and "The Discourse of Revolution"), Berlin makes it clear that while critical discourse predominates, the production of texts that reflect writers’ ideologies is still present. In "Codes and Critiques," Berlin’s students produce media representations of their own, such as television scripts and news broadcasts (*Rhetorics* 128–29); and in "The Discourse of Revolution," students produce, among other things, position papers that detail their own views about oppression and resistance (136). Critique *dominates*, it is true, but production is valued nonetheless.

I present these alternative snippets from Berlin’s work not to argue that Sánchez is wrong about Berlin’s view of ideology (indeed, I think that, for the most part, he is right), but simply to say that Berlin’s use of the concept and the consequences of its use are more slippery than Sánchez suggests. Thus, while Berlin does in certain places, without question, represent ideology as false consciousness to be demystified by rhetoric, and while he definitely emphasizes critique over production, there are other places where Berlin’s representations of ideology and its production through writing are perfectly consistent with Sánchez’s own, and such an overlap is, at the very least, important to recognize.

Contested terms such as *ideology* (and *modernism* and *postmodernism* and a host of others) have complicated histories, and we should expect some slippage in their uses. In fact, there may be occasions when slippage is both natural and necessary because a term like *ideology* simply cannot mean the same thing in every instance of its use, just as it does not mean the exact same thing each time that Sánchez uses the term. Note, for example, Sánchez’s reference to Berlin’s use of ideology, first, as false consciousness, in which there must be an ideology-less “space” from which to exercise critique, and, second, as the foundation of all theories of rhetoric, in which no “space” is free from the domination of ideology. In *Ideology: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton highlights the slippery nature of the term and recommends retaining its multiple and contradictory meanings in lieu of a “Grand Global Theory,” saying that the term *ideology* has “a whole range of useful meanings, not all of which are compatible with each other. To try to compress this wealth of meaning into a single comprehensive definition would thus be unhelpful even if it were possible” (1). Eagleton locates within this wealth of meaning two traditions concerning ideology, and these traditions mirror the two conceptions of ideology that Sánchez discusses throughout his essay:
Roughly speaking, one central lineage, from Hegel and Marx to Georg Lukács and some later Marxist thinkers, has been much preoccupied with ideas of true and false cognition, with ideology as illusion, distortion and mystification; whereas an alternative tradition of thought has been less epistemological than sociological, concerned more with the function of ideas within social life than with their reality or unreality. (3)

Unlike Sánchez, however, Eagleton argues that both of these traditions have “something interesting to tell us” (3).

Sánchez argues for a “surface” view of ideology in which there are no neutral spaces from which to compose (Eagleton’s “alternative tradition”) and in which the “(f)act” of writing is itself ideological. Fair enough. However, such a view, taken too far (and I believe Jean Baudrillard, whom Sánchez cites, does take it too far), can result in a kind of paranoia that produces cynicism at best and apathy at worst. If all positions are always equal in the eyes of ideology, then writers (especially inexperienced writers) may find it difficult to argue for or against anything. A better way to approach ideology as a guiding concept in composition studies would be to consider both of Eagleton’s traditions (that is, both Berlin’s and Sánchez’s views) concerning ideology to be at work simultaneously. Such an approach, in the context of rhetoric, would require, first, a self-critical examination of one’s own starting points. Yet, this approach would also allow writers to move beyond self-critique toward critical judgments about other positions and ultimately toward positive articulations of their own positions. As Jane Tompkins points out in “‘Indians’: Textualism, Morality, and the Problem of History,” believing that all positions are equally ideological does not require believing that all positions are equally good. Both the critique of other ideological positions and the articulation of one’s own, however, require placing self-critique at least temporarily on hold, viewing one’s own position as a kind of base-camp from which to proceed.

Although I have quibbled a bit with Sánchez’s interpretation of Berlin, and I have opened up the possibility that Berlin’s conception of ideology may not be the bane Sánchez claims it is, I am also convinced that the “ideology-as-false-consciousness” position can be problematic when it is the sole basis of classroom practice. Handled in a shortsighted way, with an eye only toward critical discourse, such pedagogies do assume a theory of ideology that limits students’ potential to enact change in their worlds. And this reductive view of ideology-and-rhetoric is quite
common in composition studies: we see it clearly in some of our best journals and in popular edited collections such as *Left Margins*, *Social Issues in the English Classroom*, *Miss Grundy Doesn’t Teach Here Anymore*, and *Reclaiming Pedagogy*. Throughout these sources, assignments are described in which students critique ads in order to understand their manipulative powers, but they do not compose ethical representations of their own; students critique television shows to understand their elitist social values, but they do not compose egalitarian representations of their own. In these classroom activities and pedagogical approaches, *critique* is the sole function of writing, and critical consciousness is its sole aim. I would argue that the ideology-as-false-consciousness position is not *inherently* arhetorical; rather, the problem is that, in critical pedagogies like many of the ones described in the books mentioned above, rhetoric’s critical functions overshadow its productive functions. And herein lies the problem.

In *Postmodern Education*, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux argue for a version of critical pedagogy that encourages production through civic participation in democratic societies. However, not all critical pedagogies are alike, as Aronowitz and Giroux clearly warn us:

> At its worst, critical pedagogy as a form of educational criticism has been overly shaped by the discourse of modernism... in which teaching is reduced to getting students merely to express or assess their own experiences. Teaching collapses in this case into a banal notion of facilitation, and student experience becomes an unproblematic vehicle for self-affirmation and self-consciousness. (117)

But when critical pedagogy is “postmodernized,” this over-reliance on self-liberatory critical discourse fades and a new emphasis on the production of democratic discourses emerges. In *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, John McGowan points out that “postmodernism rejects any reliance on critique’s inherent liberating powers, devoting itself instead to developing new aesthetic, textual, and political strategies to combat or undermine the monolith” (14). In order for critical discourses to effect change in any real way (that is, beyond just a personal change in one’s own attitude), it must, according to Gunther Kress, “move beyond critique as an aim in itself, to the proposal of alternatives as a new and necessary aim” (4). Critique remains important, in other words, yet it must be the beginning, not the end, of rhetorical activity.

In my own teaching, I push hard to move students beyond the “critical aim of discourse” toward constructing alternative proposals and new
representations, and I do this through a three-step process that remains the same regardless of the subjects or genres students choose to engage. These are the steps: first, articulate your own (ideological!) position on the social functions of an institution; second, critique (point out what is good and bad about) this institution's representations of itself; and third, compose alternative representations that solve some of the problems you have discovered through your critique.

This process generates an endless number of assignments. In my most recent advanced composition class, for example, students wrote newsletters for an institution of their choice. But first, through a series of exploratory writings, they articulated the social values they believed the institution should promote, and they also critiqued the social values the institution actually promotes. Students intentionally encoded in these newsletters, through carefully thought out verbal and visual representations, the values that they considered to be best, and these values often contradicted those represented in the institutions' existing materials. Also, in a recent first-year composition class, students wrote viewbooks for their own school, the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), one of the south's largest urban educational institutions. First, however, students wrote about the values they believed UAB should promote, and they critiqued the values UAB actually promotes in its existing materials. In their own UAB viewbooks, students encoded many values, such as urban diversity and opportunity, that UAB's present viewbook ignores (the result of land-grant envy, UAB's most recent recruiting materials intentionally remove references to the city itself and to UAB as an urban institution). The same three steps could be used to generate any kind of document that institutions produce, and through these steps students learn important lessons about rhetoric, ideology, and the politics of representation.

Within this pedagogical framework, critique is indispensable, yet its real function is to generate positive articulations, new rhetorical interventions that encode students' own values, which may be different from those that already exist in institutional representations. Further, what is required here is a complex view of ideology that admits, first, that all positions are ideological and require self-critique, and, second, that writers, at some point, end their self-critical discourse and move on to evaluation and production. If Eagleton is right, and I believe that he is, then we lose something (rigor, perspective) when we limit our uses of the term ideology.

Although I ultimately agree with most of what Sánchez argues in
“Composition’s Ideology Apparatus,” what disappoints me most is that he critiques Berlin for not moving beyond critique, but Sánchez himself engages almost exclusively in critical rhetoric, making only a small effort in the end to move toward production. I am disappointed at this primarily because what Sánchez (following Susan Miller) calls “textual rhetoric” is an intriguing and important contribution to the discussion of ideology and rhetoric. Regrettably, though, there is little theoretical treatment of textual rhetoric and no discussion of what textual rhetoric might look like in a writing class. Sánchez leaves us with a critique of critique, a polemic against polemics, and so the conversation is left to continue into production where, both Sánchez and I would agree, language meets ideology head on.

University of Alabama
Birmingham, Alabama

Works Cited


