Critical Thinking

Christopher Norris charts Eagleton's progress

In Ideology: An Introduction (Verso, hbk £29.95, pbk £10.95) Terry Eagleton returns once again to a topic that has often preoccupied his thinking. From the high Althusserian rigour of Criticism and Ideology to his recent major work on the history of aesthetics as a surrogate form of ideological discourse.

Eagleton has taken full stock of those challenges to the Althusserian paradigm - poststructuralist, postmodernist, neopragmatist, anti-foundationalist etc - whose effect has been to generate a widespread suspicion of any 'discourse' ultimately wedded to the concepts and categories of marxist ideologiekritik.

In a series of skirmishing polemical rejoinders he has managed to appropriate some elements of this current linguistic turn without giving way on the basic point, ie, the primacy of real-world socio-economic conditions and the role of ideology as in some sense an alibi, a realm of false appearances or illusory knowledge-effects.

To the obvious question - in what sense, precisely? - his books have returned quite a range of differing answers. But he has never gone along with any version of that facile postmodernist wisdom which holds such talk to be hopelessly passe, just a product of the old 'Enlightenment' ethos whose appeal to various categorical distinctions - truth/falseness, knowledge/belief, theory/ideology, etc - has now been revealed as nothing more than a piece of self-serv ing bogus rhetoric.

Postmodernism is simply the latest name for this line of conformist ideology whose uses have tended to become most apparent at times of widespread political retreat among thinkers of an erstwhile left or left-liberal persuasion. The result, as Eagleton observes, is an odd situation where 'radical' theorists are scrambling to vacate the moral and epistemological high ground, while on every hand we witness a spectacular resurgence of ideologies ranging from Christian and Islamic fundamentalism to Bush's vaunted new world order, the rise of various nationalist or militant separatist movements, and, nearer home, 'the most ideologically aggressive and explicit regime of living political memory, in a society which traditionally prefers its ruling values to remain implicit and oblique'. It is time, he suggests, to revisit some of the old arguments and see what is at stake in the postmodern turn against theory and all its works.

In Ideology Eagleton has two main purposes in view. One is to clear away some longstanding sources of confusion by examining the various senses that have attached to the term 'ideology', from its enlightenment origins to its complicated history in the recent context of debate. The other is to show how postmodernists, neopragmatists and others have exploited these same confusions so as to make it appear that any talk of 'ideology' is hooked on a hopelessly naïve set of doctrines about knowledge, reality and truth.

This two-pronged approach enables him to cut through swathes of fashionable nonsense, from the notion that the real is entirely a product of this or that discourse, to the antics of a postmodern guilt trip like Baudrillard's, for whom truth-talk is the me­ rest of illusions, since we now inhabit a world of free-floating signs without referents.

Then again, there is the line of supposedly knock-down neopragmatist argument - 'travelling anti-theory' as it might be called - espoused by philosophers like Richard Rorty and a whole current school of literary critics, among them the egregious Stanley Fish. These thinkers claim to demonstrate the sheer impossibility of advancing any truth-claims save those that make sense by the lights of some in-place set of conventional beliefs impervious to any form of reasoned or principled critique.

Eagleton makes short work of such claims that we might as well junk the belief in a real world of material objects, processes and events that exist quite apart from our current (wholly arbitrary) modes of conceptualisation, together with the end-of-ideology thesis that they are commonly assumed to entail. For they will only seem convincing if one takes it as read that reality just is what we make of it according to the dominant consensus view. If not, then this whole line of argument will appear nothing more than a means of embracing conformist ideas and values while neatly avoiding such old fashioned topics as the political responsibility of the intellectuals.

It is not only postmodernists who are travelling this road, as Eagleton reminds us in some sharply diagnostic pages devoted to those so-called 'post-marxist' thinkers - Laclau and Mouffe among them - who have set about recasting the political agenda through a process that reduces everything to the level of 'discourses', 'subject-positions', and so forth.

The obvious rejoinder, Eagleton writes, 'is that a practice may well be organised like a discourse, but as a matter of fact it is a practice rather than a discourse. It is needlessly obfuscating and homogenising to subsume such things as preaching a sermon and dislodging a pebble from one's left ear under the same rubric. A way of understanding an object is simply projected into the object itself... The category of discourse is inflated to the point where it imperialises the whole world, eliding the distinction between thought and material reality.'

One should not be misled by the joky analogies into thinking that this is just a piece of interventionist polemics which sidesteps all the deeper theoretical problems. Eagleton displays a firm grasp of epistemology, philosophy of language, hermeneutics, sociology of knowledge. Nothing could be further from the narrow-minded orthodoxy that begins with a handful of Saussurian slogans wrenched out of context, and which ends up by endorsing a crudely literalised version of Derrida's cryptic statement that 'there is nothing outside the text'.

That his book has received such a barrage of abuse from right-wing reviewers in the press is one sure sign that it raises questions conveniently shelved by more accommodating styles of thought. 'If a theory of ideology has any use at all', he concludes, 'it is in helping to illuminate the processes by which liberation from death-dealing beliefs may be practically effected.' Postmodernism requires that we treat such claims as a species of quaint left moralism which rests on those same (non-existent) foundations of reality, truth and critique.

Anyone tempted to adopt this line might do well to consider Baudrillard's latest, sublimely fatuous pronouncements on the Gulf war as an instance of postmodern hyperreality, a war that perhaps never occurred - since it took place in the fantasy realm of simulated images, war-game scenarios, hi-tech 'saturation' coverage and so forth. One could hardly wish for a clearer illustration of the current postmodern habit of jumping from a valid diagnosis of contemporary social ills to a set of half-baked antirealist doctrines - a wholesale negative ontology - which treats that condition as a simply inscrutable aspect of the way we live now.