Christopher Norris charts Eagleton's progress

Critical Thinking

In Ideology: An Introduction (Verso, hbk £32.95, 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 - post-structuralist, 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 skirmingish 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/falsehood, knowledge/belief, theory/ideology, etc - has now been revealed as nothing more than a piece of self-serving 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 erst-while 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 nationalistic 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 obscure'. 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 naive 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 guru like Baudrillard, whom truth-talk is the meister of illusions, since we now inhabit a world of free-floating signs without reference.

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, historiography, 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 criticism.

Anyone tempted to adopt this line might do well to consider Baudrillard's latest, sublime fatuous pronouncements on the Gulf war as an instance of postmodern 'hyperreality', a war that perhaps never occurred - since it took place in the fantastic 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 antidote doctrines - a wholesale negative ontology - which treats that condition as a simply inexplicable aspect of the way we live now.
What is Critical Thinking? Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally, understanding the logical connection between ideas. Critical thinking has been the subject of much debate and thought since the time of early Greek philosophers such as Plato and Socrates and has continued to be a subject of discussion into the modern age, for example the ability to recognise fake news. The skills that we need in order to be able to think critically are varied and include observation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, evaluation, inference, explanation, problem solving, and decision making. Specifically we need to be able to: Think about a topic or issue in an objective and critical way. Identify the different arguments there are in relation to a particular issue. The only guide on critical thinking skills you need. Learn what critical thinking is, why it’s so important today, and how to boost your critical thinking skills in no time!

How to Be a Critical Thinker? To become one takes time, practice, and patience. But something you can start doing today to improve your critical thinking skills is apply the 7 steps of critical thinking to every problem you tackle—either at work or in your everyday life. Plus, there are some critical thinking questions to help you out at each of the steps.

Steps of Critical Thinking.

1. Identify the problem or question. Be as precise as possible: the narrower the issue, the easier it is to find solutions or answers.

2. What is critical thinking? Critical thinking refers to the ability to analyze information objectively and make a reasoned judgment. It involves the evaluation of sources, such as data, facts, observable phenomena, and research findings. Good critical thinkers can draw reasonable conclusions from a set of information, and discriminate between useful and less useful details to solve problems or make decisions.

3. Why Do Employers Value Critical Thinking Skills? Employers want job candidates who can evaluate a situation using logical thought and offer the best solution. Someone with critical thinking skills is able to think rationally and clearly about what they should or not believe. They are capable of engaging in their own thoughts, and doing some reflection in order to come to a well-informed conclusion. A critical thinker understands the connections between ideas, and is able to construct arguments based on facts, as well as find mistakes in reasoning.

4. The process of critical thinking is highly systematic. What Are Your Goals? Critical thinking starts by defining your goals, and knowing what you are ultimately trying to achieve. Foresight. Once you know what you are trying to conclude, you can foresee your solution to the problem and play it out in your head from all perspectives. I use critical thinking to decide major choices in life. It helps me break down what I know, what will happen, and if it is worth it in the long run.

5. Depending upon any subject or knowledge domain, it would be reasonable to say that most of us are ordinary thinkers trying to learn about critical thinking. I sometimes remind myself that some persons just know more than I do about some subjects and I must have a little humility about the knowledge level of others.