



Ideological Violence and the Construction of Colonial Order: A Critique of Colonist Narrative Logic in “Across the Big Water”

Baihan Bi

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 999077, China

Abstract: “Across the Big Water” is selected from the autobiographical narrative work “Black Elk Speaks” by John G. Neihardt, which records the oral accounts of the Indian prophet Black Elk. This chapter takes the experience of black elk crossing the Atlantic to participate in the “Bison Bill Circus” as its main thread, presenting the fate of indigenous culture being plundered and performed during the colonial expansion at the end of the 19th century. This article takes the Marxist theory of “ideology” as the analytical framework and points out that the ideology of the colonists achieved systematic conquest of the “other” through economic interests, cultural display and discourse control. The plundering and display of “Wasichus” in the text not only reflect the cruelty of capital logic, but also reveal how ideology packages exploitation as a symbol of civilization and progress. This article holds that “Across the Big Water” reveals the ideological violence behind the colonial order through the tragedy and disillusionment of narrative. It shows how the ruled gradually internalize the value system of others in oppression, thereby losing the center and spirit of the “ring of the nation”.

Keywords: Marxism, ideology, colonialism

1. From false consciousness to power structure

In “The German Ideology”, Marx pointed out that the ideology of the ruling class is the dominant ideology in every era. Ideology is not merely a system of ideas, but a power structure that maintains the ruling order through social systems, language and cultural dissemination mechanisms[1]. Its function lies in making the dominated believe in the rationality of the existing social relations and naturalizing this belief through the reproduction of daily life.

In the colonial context, this ideology not only centers on economic exploitation but also, under the guise of cultural superiority and moral mission, rationalizes colonial behavior as a “civilized task”. In “Across the Big Water”, the colonists (Wasichus) constructed a complete ideological discourse system through violent conquest, material plundering and cultural performances, forcing the conquered to accept and internalize this “logic of civilization” at the spiritual level in addition to physical oppression.

2. From the “Madness of Metals” to the religiousness of capital

The text begins by presenting a typical picture of capitalist ideology: “The Wasichus did not kill them to eat; “they killed them for the metal that makes them crazy.” Here, “metal” symbolizes the materialized power of money and capital, which drives humanity into madness and the loss of morality and rationality[2]. The colonists’ slaughter of bison was not driven by the need for survival, but by the blind pursuit of profits. Just as Marx said in “Das Kapital” : “When capital comes into the world, from head to toe, every pore drips blood and filth.”

This kind of crazy production and plundering is a religious manifestation of capitalist ideology. The behavior of the colonists was regarded as a symbol of progress, development and civilization in their cultural context, while the way of life of the indigenous people was defined as “backward”. In the text, “they just killed and killed because they liked to do that” not only reveals the irrationality of economic greed, but also exposes the “immoral rationalization” of ideology when driving violence: Plundering has been rationalized as control over nature and utilization of resources, while the suffering of the plundered has been erased.

In the context of capital ideology, land, animals and even life itself have all been alienated into tradable objects. Just as the black elk described: “When there was nothing left but heaps of bones, “the Wasichus came and gathered up even the bones and sold them.” — the logic of capitalism does not allow for abandonment; even the bones must be part of the profit. This is a complete commercialization of nature and a complete negation of the life system of the indigenous people.

3. Cultural Performance and Spiritual Conquest: The Second Level of Ideology

In the colonial system, economic conquest was only the first step; deeper control came from the cultural and spiritual

levels. When the black elk was taken to “Across the Big Water” and entered the European stage, colonial ideology turned to the mechanism of display and gaze. The so-called “show” is the stage-based and materialized transformation of other cultures at the center of the empire: the indigenous people are no longer a nation with subjectivity, but have become “activated cultural relics” for the empire to admire and define.

The text reads: “We stayed there and made shows for many, many Wasichus all that winter... the statement “I liked the part of the show we made, but not the part the Wasichus made.” reveals the rift between “self-expression” and “being expressed by others”. The colonists redefined the way indigenous people existed through performance. They no longer narrated in their own language but were forced to represent themselves through the symbolic system of the colonists[3].

Marxist ideological criticism points out that cultural performance is precisely the concealed form of ideology - through the packaging of aesthetics and entertainment, it conceals power relations within pleasant experiences. The indigenous people were admired, praised and sympathized with, but lost their right to speak in the silent gaze. Just as the black elk felt in London: “We liked Grandmother England... “maybe if she had been our Grandmother, it would have been better for our people.” This “favorable impression” is essentially the partial internalization of the ruling ideology by the dominated: The oppressed begin to long to be part of the oppressor in pursuit of meaning and the legitimacy of existence. This is precisely the deepest success of ideology - when domination becomes faith.

4. The fragmentation of Order, Rationality and the “ring of the nation”

Symbolic images appear many times in the text: “the nation’s hoop was broken,” “the sacred tree no longer blooms.” This is a symbol of the disintegration of the national community - not only a geographical exile, but also the collapse of the cultural and spiritual structure. Colonial ideology, through the binary opposition of “rational - irrational” and “civilized - barbaric”, places itself on the side of legitimacy and forces the indigenous people to accept the logic of its “order”. The disillusionment of the black elk stems from this double violence: he attempts to understand the colonists’ “better way”, only to find that it is merely a pseudo-rationality based on deprivation.

He observed: “They would take everything from each other if they could... “They had forgotten that the earth was their mother.” In the system of colonial ideology, the relationship between nature and human beings was overturned: the earth was no longer the mother but a resource that was infinitely demanded. The connection between the spirit and nature has been severed, replaced by production, accumulation and competition. The despair of the black elk is precisely a rejection of this ideology - he realizes that the so-called “civilization” is a destruction of the integrity of life[4].

the “line to keep them in” of the colonists was not only a geographical cage, but also an ideological boundary: it demarcated the identity order of “us” and “them”, civilization and barbarism, masters and the ruled. The confined “grey houses” symbolize the trap of modernity - being forced by colonizers to imitate their way of life but losing their own souls. Here, ideology transforms into a self-domesticated structure, enabling governance to no longer be maintained by violence but to be sustained through a “rationalized lifestyle”.

5. Speak out again from the cracks in ideology

Although the text is full of oppression and pathos, the narrative form of “Across the Big Water” itself constitutes a kind of resistance. The narration of the black elk exists in the form of oral tradition, which rejects the Western logic represented by written civilization and transforms personal experiences into witnesses of collective memory. As he put it: “The life of the people was in the hoop, and what are many little lives if the life of those lives be gone?” This sentence transcends personal sorrow and becomes a philosophical inquiry into the meaning of life for the entire nation.

From the perspective of ideological criticism, the reproduction of this narrative is an effort to de-ideologize[5]. It reveals the pseudo-universality behind the narrative of capitalism and reawakens the memories of the community, nature and the sanctity of life. Although the voice of the black elk has been translated and edited, it still retains the reverberation of “the discourse of the other” in the crevices of language - this is precisely the most difficult part of colonial discourse to completely erase: the historical testimony of the oppressed.

6. Conclusion

“Across the Big Water” is not only a narrative of colonial history, but also a profound reflection on how ideology shapes human relations and reconstructs cultural identity. From the perspective of Marxist “ideology” theory, we can see that the colonists, starting from economic plundering, extending with cultural performances, and concealing with civilized discourse, constructed a complete system of domination. The power of this system does not lie in force, but in its ability to make the ruled unconsciously accept its logic and even yearn to become a part of it.

However, ideology has never been completely closed. The narrative of the black elk itself is an action of re-speaking through the cracks - he resists forgetting with narrative and confronts concealment with memory. The “civilization” of the colonists might have conquered the land, but it could not eliminate the historical consciousness of the oppressed nation. When the plundered start to realize the ideological structure they are in, the legitimacy of their rule begins to waver.

As Marx said, “People make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.” The story of the black elk is a difficult inquiry into its own existence in the imposed history. “Across the Big Water” ultimately tells us with a tragic sobriety that ideology is not only the mask of power, but also the wound of history. The mission of literature lies precisely in revealing this veil and allowing the silent voice to echo once again.

References

- [1] Yi W, Liping L. Review on the Construction of the Subject of Ideological and Political Education in the Last Decade[J]. Teaching & Research[2025-10-14].
- [2] Pablo P. Politics and the Technology of Honor: Dueling in Turn-of-the-Century Mexico[J].Journal of Social History, 1999(2):331-354.DOI:10.1353/jsh.1999.0072.
- [3] Zou N, Zhang L. The Construction of the Improvement System of Ideological, Political and Educational Effects of College Physical Education Courses Based on Data Discovery[C]//EAI International Conference, BigIoT-EDU.Springer, Cham, 2024.DOI:10.1007/978-3-031-63130-6_29.
- [4] Kun W, Guozhuang C. The construction of content system of ideological and political elements in public physical education courses at universities and its application of project group -- Taking Shanghai Jiaotong University as an example[J].Journal of Physical Education / Tiyu Xuekan, 2024, 31(1).
- [5] Yuchen L I. A Study on the Construction of the Ideological and Political Teaching Model of Business English Curriculum under the Context of the New Liberal Arts[J].Studies in Literature and Language, 2023, 27(3):4.DOI:10.3968/13225.