

## Why Does Ideology Still Matter in Social Studies?

### Abstract

This study tries to ask some questions and to underline some points with respect to the study of ideology. Its main objective is firstly to show that the concept of ideology is still a plausible concept, and that an approach to ideology, irrespective of the discipline in which it is developed, entails an understanding that the meaning of the concept of ideology is embedded in language games in which it is utilized, and is partially fixed through an hegemonic operation. Secondly, it is to show that an understanding of ideology in itself needs to reconsider certain philosophical categories such as truth, subject, consciousness, and the misrecognition/distortion of reality, which have traditionally been central to the theories of the formation and nature of ideology itself and have created a conceptual puzzlement. It argues that despite all the difficulties and ideological problems that the concept of ideology causes, it is not justifiable to discard the notion altogether. It suggests that transcending the conceptual blindspot in the theories of ideology doesn't necessarily mean a total abandonment of those traditional philosophical categories either. The third point this paper emphasises is the political character of ideology. Put it differently, its aim is to underline that an approach to ideology entails an understanding of the formation and nature of the political and vice versa.

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## Why Does Ideology Still Matter in Social Studies?

Any attempt to develop an understanding of the notion of ideology has to deal with various difficulties emerging out of historical, theoretical and ideological reasons. All who have grappled with the notion of ideology are aware that it is problematic to develop an approach to the notion of ideology, which has, in its long history, gained different, mostly contradictory and confusing, connotations. In its long history, the concept of ideology has remained undecidable between life and death, positivity and negativity: Some scholars proclaim that we no longer live in an age of ideology, so ideology is dead and this is a post-ideological era, while some others suggest that ideology never dies.

Given all these, this paper does not offer a fully elaborated answer to the question why the concept of ideology matters for social inquiry in general and for media studies in particular. Nor will I offer a fully developed approach to the analysis of ideology, or try to relocate the concept in media studies, which could only be a vain repetition of Hall's attempt to sketch out the main contours of 'the rediscovery of ideology' in the 1980s. Rather, I will try to ask some questions and to underline some points that I think crucial for an approach to the notion of ideology. My main objective here is firstly to show that the concept of ideology is still a plausible concept, and that an approach to ideology, irrespective of the discipline in which it is developed, entails an understanding that the meaning of the concept of ideology is embedded in language games in which it

is utilized, and is partially fixed through an hegemonic operation. Secondly, it is to show that an understanding of ideology in itself needs to reconsider certain philosophical categories such as truth, subject, consciousness, and the misrecognition/distortion of reality, which have traditionally been central to the theories of the formation and nature of ideology itself and have created a conceptual puzzlement. Underlying all the theoretical problems concerning this puzzlement, the proclamations of the decay of the concept of ideology and of "the end of ideology" (a formula which was immensely used at the beginning of the sixties and which has recently been revived) suggest that the concept no longer makes sense, and can be eliminated. I want to argue following Laclau and Giddens that despite all the difficulties and ideological problems that the concept of ideology causes, it is not justifiable to discard the notion altogether. Instead, we should maintain the concept of ideology by breaking up with its traditional content and develop a new theory of ideology that goes beyond such a conceptual puzzlement. I also suggest that breaking with the conceptual blindspot in the theories of ideology doesn't necessarily lead to a total abandonment of those traditional philosophical categories either. Instead, they must be revisited and revised. Thirdly, I want to emphasise that in a new theory of ideology the concept of ideology must be considered in its relation with power, and therefore, with central political structures. I suggest that an approach to ideology entails an

understanding of the formation and nature of the political and vice versa. Finally I must warn the reader that what he/she will encounter in this paper is a rather preliminary and humble way of re-thinking certain problems and questions concerning the theory of ideology, not a fully developed answer to all questions that are posed here in the length of this paper.

In the paper, I will first of all dwell upon the kind of "ideological blindspot" or "conceptual puzzlement" as appeared in the attempts to clarify the meaning of the concept of ideology. Following Wittgenstein's arguments, I will try to show that the polysemic character of the concept of ideology does not necessarily lead us to abandon it altogether; for the concept of ideology, like all other concepts in our language, gains its meaning in its both everyday and scholarly usages which are plural, inconsistent and ambiguous. Secondly, I will focus on the dichotomy of science and ideology, a dominant way of conceptualization of ideology. Following from the second one my third focus will be on another crucial dichotomy, that is, the dichotomy of true and false consciousness. Here I will try to discuss whether or not distortion is still plausible for a new theory of ideology and if it is so, then, where we should locate it. Finally, in an attempt to correct a tautology I will try to show that ideology has an inherently political character.

### Conceptual Puzzlement

"If there are such things as contested concepts," says Giddens, and "if there were a prize for the most contested concept, the concept of ideology would very nearly rank first. Nobody can even decide how to pronounce it!" (21) In fact, the long history of the concept of ideology is marked with a disarray and confusion around the meaning of the concept. Despite all vigorous attempts to clarify its meaning and to draw a clear-cut boundary between the concept of ideology and its confusing uses, it ironically remained ambiguous and

undecidable. Thus, the word of "ideology" still connotes more than one concept, bound in various ways to different disciplines.

The study of ideology stands at the crossroad of many disciplines from sociology to politics, from anthropology to psychology. Various disciplines develop various approaches to the concept of ideology. The interdisciplinary character of the study of ideology multiplies the problems of definition, and deepens the confusion and disarray around the concept of ideology.

However, what is at stake here is not only a problem of definition as a result of contradictory or inconsistent usages of the concept of ideology, but also "a blindspot" that is embedded in the ways in which the concept of ideology is used by both scholars and non-scholars. In Freedman's words, "Both scholars and non-scholars have invested in it not only purposive, reflective, and critical thought but strong emotions. Yet it is also the case that the very existence of the facts to which ideology purportedly refers has frequently been denied" (13). In other words, most traditional treatments of ideology render the concept totally blind to itself by reducing it to shared beliefs, "to a corpus of arguments, to the apparatus of beliefs which provides the visible framework of a collective practice" (Lefort, 1991: 47). Similarly, the dominant ideology theses within social sciences also produce a blindspot in the study of ideology by overemphasizing the ideological homogeneity of a certain social class both in capitalist and pre-capitalist societies.

This is, for Claude Lefort, a "misappreciation of the problem of ideology". Lefort points that this misappreciation is embedded in the ways in which the concept of ideology is "employed by sociologists or historians invoking scientific authority, as well as by revolutionary militants" (46-7). Lefort thinks that in different conceptualizations of the concept of ideology "the split between an order of practice and one of representation ... is ignored". For him, this not a question of the

distortion of a concept, but that of the concealment of a fundamental split which must be the focus of the study of ideology. Lefort says, this is as such "an ideological blindspot" which shows itself in a misappreciation of the problem of ideology (47).

From all said so far we could draw the conclusion that the concept of ideology is hopelessly flawed by ambiguity, and that it is a vain attempt to develop a clear understanding of what ideology is; therefore, the concept of ideology should be abandoned. The abandonment of the concept seems inevitable when one starts to reflect on the concept through a set of related concepts like "subject," "consciousness," "knowledge," and "reality." All these related concepts, like many others, suffer from a similar ambiguity. However, it is not easy to abandon a concept, as Kuhn emphasizes, since "we are unable to do so in the absence of a developed alternative" (Pitkin, 1993:113). In other words, we cannot abandon the concept of ideology unless we have a new and better, but necessarily *developed* conceptualisation. Moreover, we cannot develop an alternative *concept* without a *concept* since we always need to have a *concept* to know what we refer to and what we conceptualise of. Thus, Kuhn's paradox becomes ours: the more we try to relinquish the conventional ways of conceptualisation of ideology, the more we find ourselves, as Kuhn did, hopelessly dependent on and surrounded by these kinds of conceptualisations:

*But is sensory experience fixed and neutral? Are theories simply man-made interpretations of given data? The epistemological viewpoint that has most often guided Western philosophy for three centuries dictates an immediate and unequivocal, Yes! In the absence of a developed alternative, I find it impossible to relinquish entirely that viewpoint. Yet it no longer functions effectively, and the attempts to make it do so through the introduction of a neutral language of observations now seem to me hopeless (Kuhn, 1970: 126).*

So one can interpret the meaning of what Kuhn discovers in his attempt to relinquish the conventional views on the

concept of "world" in the following way: We cannot discuss a *problem* or a *concept* without encountering such ambiguities and inconsistencies. "What we say or think about discursively about" a *concept* "must be said or thought in language. And that means that in saying it, we must introduce the assumptions and implications built into our language," and "as soon as we try to say what it is we invoke a conceptual system with all that implies" (Pitkin, 1993: 113-114). Moreover, "a new concept free of these ambiguities will not be a concept" of ideology at all, "will not satisfy what troubles us" (Pitkin, 1993: 113).

What we have at hand here is a "conceptual puzzlement" or a "conceptual paradox" in Wittgensteinian sense, as a result of the ambiguous, inconsistent and diverse uses of the concept of ideology, and of the plurality of its meaning. Wittgenstein teaches us that when we have a conceptual puzzlement "we consider the concept in general, in the abstract" by dismissing the concrete cases as irrelevant (Pitkin, 1993: 92). He suggests, "The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known" (quoted in Pitkin, 1993: 92). Wittgenstein invites us to have an awareness of concepts, and sensitivity to the plurality and ambiguity of their uses in a theorist's language. He also invites us to acknowledge as constitutive qualities of language such plurality, ambiguity and inconsistency. Following his line of argument, I suggest that the study of ideology, in its quest for clarity, must cease to search a new and a better conceptualisation. Rather, it must develop awareness to itself, to its inevitably plural and ambiguous concepts. I also suggest that an understanding of the theories of ideology entails an analysis of continuing theoretical controversies on the concept of ideology with a complete awareness of the significance of conceptual plurality and inconsistency. So, the task is not to refuse a concept, but to understand the ways in which it is used, to understand what kind of language games are played with this concept. This entails an enterprise that is of course beyond the scope of this paper. So, in the rest of the paper I only follow certain paths that

can take us in the depths of the theories of ideology. I will try to underline the questions, controversies, and concepts that a theory of ideology must be aware of and sensitive to.

### Science/Ideology Dichotomy

Giddens tells us that it is not justifiable to abandon the concept of ideology. However, this does not mean that we should stop searching a better conceptualisation. He insists that we should keep the concept of ideology by breaking up with its traditional conceptualisations. He develops his four theses on ideology on the basis of this attempt to break up with the conventional and dominant ways of understanding what ideology is. His criticism firstly attacks on the dominant science/ideology dichotomy. He says, "The notion of ideology has to be disconnected from the philosophy of science, with which in the past it has almost inevitably bound up." (21)

Firstly, the French rationalist tradition of de Tracy made a connection between science and ideology, giving ideology the meaning of the science of ideas that would be capable of demystifying society. The kind of knowledge that formed the content of ideology would rid society of prejudices. As is well-known Napoleon reversed this perspective, and ideology became understood as "that which lies beyond the margins of science" – as the very repository of prejudice and obfuscation" (Giddens, 1991: 21). The same science/ideology dichotomy is present in the empiricist-positivist tradition as well as in the Marxist tradition. The difference between these two traditions "lies in their opposing conceptions of what constitutes the science that excludes ideology: In the work of Althusser, for example, it is Marxism itself (and possibly psychoanalysis) which is that science. For Popper, on the other hand, both are the supreme examples of pseudo-sciences" (Giddens, 1991: 22). For Giddens this is rather a "comic opposition to be based upon a false starting point" that "ideology can be defined in reference

to truth claims" (22). In other words, while science is identified with the Truth, ideology represents the falsity.

Obviously, science/ideology dichotomy, as Giddens and most others emphasize, has been a controversial issue for theorists of ideology. It is of course problematic to take ideology as a margin concept whose function is limited to define what science *is*, or what science *is not*. However, I also believe that we cannot simply ignore or reject what have been said on the issue, and carry on towards a new concept that has no trace of all that have been said in the history of philosophy or social theory. Rather, I suggest that despite all contradictions, inconsistencies and even absurdities we find in conventional theories of ideology, we must focus on what have been said, how they are said, and why they are said. The enterprise, then, is not to reject or abandon a concept or its certain uses, but to locate it in its context. That is necessary, I believe, not only to understand the theories of ideology, but also to understand the problems of contemporary human condition, and also to make a revolutionary departure from traditional ways of conceptualizing ideology.

### True/False Consciousness Dichotomy

Under this heading we have to deal with another dichotomy: The dichotomy of true/false consciousness, through which misrecognition of reality or an illusion is located in knowledge. In relation to this dichotomy two questions seem crucial: How can we assert falsehood to the consciousness of the subject? And, if by maintaining the concept of ideology we also keep the notion of misrecognition or distortion of the social reality, yet we still insist that ideology cannot be understood as false consciousness, then where is this misrecognition/distortion to be located? The Marxian formula well defines the illusion: 'They do not know what they are doing, but they are still doing it.' The notion of ideology as false consciousness,

which is based on this formula, implies that the ontological consistency of the social reality is possible only on condition that its participants are *not* aware of its proper logic. This classic approach to ideology has been contested by a number of theorists like Giddens, Laclau, Lefort, Freedon, Sloterdijk and Žižek. Giddens rejects any idea that links ideology with truth claims. He also rejects to think ideology through a given content. He suggests that the concept is an empty one, which allows it to incorporate the forms of significations within systems of domination in its own formation and to represent particular forms of signification as universal ones (22).

Laclau claims, "the theoretical ground that made sense of the concept of 'false consciousness' has evidently dissolved" (1991: 26). His argument is based on the idea that the identity of social agent can no longer be fixed at the basis of objective class interests. It is only when the identity of the agent is recognized as positive and non-contradictory, it becomes possible to attribute falsehood to the consciousness of the subject. However, since "any social subject is essentially decentred" and since "her identity is nothing but the unstable articulation of constantly changing positionalities" we cannot assert that her consciousness is 'false' (Laclau, 1991: 26).

Sloterdijk is another writer who attempts to reverse the classic Marxian formula of 'false consciousness'. For him in today's society the actual problem is not 'false consciousness', but 'enlightened false consciousness'. The formula is no longer read as "they do not know what they are doing, but they are still doing it". It has now become "they know what they are doing, but they are still doing it". This new formula implies that we are living in a post-ideological society: We keep a cynical distance between the ideological truth and ourselves. We no longer believe in ideological truth; we do not take ideological propositions seriously, but what we have is only an enlightened false consciousness since we are still doing things in which we no longer believe (Sloterdijk, 1987).

Sloterdijk's cynical reason cannot represent a total break with the traditional understandings of ideology, from whose perspectives too today's society appears post-ideological. The illusion remains located in the side of knowledge. The prevailing ideology, as Žižek suggests, is that of cynicism:

*Even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them. (...) For example, they know that their idea of Freedom is making a particular form of exploitation, but they still continue to follow this idea of Freedom (33).*

The question to ask again is: If it is not on the side of knowledge where is the illusion? The answer is obvious: The illusion is not on the side of *knowledge*, but on the side of what people are *doing*. Another question follows up the first one: How should the illusion be understood? Both Žižek and Laclau give similar answers to these questions. Žižek directly asks the same questions and answers them by identifying ideology (the ideological) with the individual's social reality. He emphasizes that the illusion guides and structures the individual's relationship to reality, or in other words the individual's action:

*What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy (32-33).*

Similarly Laclau points to the constitutive role of the ideological. The illusion is not the misrecognition of a positive identity of the social, but that of the impossibility of the society. The ideological can be understood as the will to totality, in the sense that it is constitutive of the social because "the social only exists as the vain attempt to institute that impossible object: society" (Laclau: 1991: 27).

Laclau, together with Žižek, offers a way of understanding the ontological dimension of ideology. They conceive ideology not as the distortion of reality, but as the construction of reality through distortion. The distortion (the illusion) they are discussing is "not the distortion of a pre-constituted identity, but rather a discursive operation that constructs a constitutive closure of social and political identities" (Torfing, 1999: 216). Distortion conceals the dislocation and undecidability of any identity. This point is emphasized even more strongly in Laclau's later article "The Death and Resurrection of Ideology": "The notion of distortion involves something more than mere dislocation: Namely, that a concealment of some sort takes place in it. Now, ... what is concealed is the ultimate dislocation of what presents itself as a close identity, and the act of concealment consists in projecting on to that identity the dimension of closure that it ultimately lacks" (1996: 4).

I want to conclude this part of the paper by suggesting that it is important for the social theory to recognise that there is no extra-ideological reality, and that "ideology is a dimension which belongs to the structure of all possible experience" (Laclau, 1996: 9).

### A Tautology: Political Ideology

In this part of the paper, my main objective is to correct a tautology: It seems quite common to use the adjective 'political' before the word 'ideology' to specify certain forms of political thought and separate them out from 'philosophical' ones. This distinction between philosophical and ideological implies the science/ideology dichotomy once again, and overlooks the political character of ideology and the ideological character of philosophy. I will dwell upon the political character of ideology. There are three reasons for this: First, ideology is a political practice because it is constitutive of the social. Secondly, ideology articulates some discursive forms (social identities) in

its totality by hegemonizing the social, which means acting over the social in order to limit the infinite play of differences that characterise it. One of Laclau's central assertions can be repeated here: "The constitution of a social identity is an act of power and that identity as such is power" (1990: 33). Thirdly, the uses of ideology in various disciplines including media studies are associated with the sphere of politics and those uses specify power relations as central to the concept of ideology. As Fairclough reminds us, "ideologies are closely linked to power, because the nature of the ideological assumptions embedded in particular conventions, and so the nature of those conventions themselves, depends on power relations which underlie the conventions" (2). An understanding of the relations of power in modern society entails awareness to its ideological nature, or vice versa.

I want to emphasize that neglecting the political character of ideology is itself an ideological enterprise, which can be taken as one of the versions of 'the end of ideology' theses. It is ideological, like different versions of mentioned theses, in the sense that it associates itself with the impossible "ideal of pure, non-political, administrative practices" (Laclau, 1996: 15).

### Conclusion

To conclude this paper I will content with repeating my initial position: We should retain the concept of ideology. The constitutive role of the ideological can justify my position not to discard the notion of ideology and not to consider today's society as a post-ideological society: Because ideology is a permanent and structuring phenomenon, the end of ideology would signal the end of social reality itself; and the abandonment of the concept of ideology would leave us in an abyss.

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## How To Straighten a Crooked Timber

**Abstract**

The dream of a peaceful world order has occupied minds of many great thinkers. Recently, Jurgen Habermas has offered a new version of it. This paper will attempt to investigate what Habermas has been elaborating on the relevant features of deliberative democracy since the publication of his *Between Facts and Norms*. The analysis will specifically focus on his formulation of mutual relationship between public and private autonomy as the fundamental base for his cosmopolitan scheme. This will be tied to his new concept: Constitutional patriotism arguing for the necessity of a shift from national to a cosmopolitan constitutional order based on institutionalisation of human rights on a global scale.

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