

The paradox of ideology

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ABSTRACT

This text examines definitions of ideology by classic authors and a paradox: if everything is ideological and if ideology conditions everything, how is it possible to understand its functioning and make its denial?

Keywords: Ideology, imaginary, culture, social sciences

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RESUMO

Este texto examina definições de ideologia de autores clássicos e um paradoxo: se tudo é ideológico e se ideologia tudo condiciona, como é possível compreender o seu funcionamento e fazer a sua negação?

Palavras-chave: Ideologia, imaginário, cultura, ciência social

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The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic.
(Debord, 2005, p. 13)

WHAT IS IDEOLOGY?

The history of the term *ideology* starts, according to the tradition, with Destutt de Tracy, which, after being arrested during the French Revolution and released in 1794, created the term in 1796 to name a *science of ideas*. Hence, he had troubles with Napoleon, which called him an “ideologue”, but de Tracy reemerged to the world of intellectuals and published, in 1815, the last of the four volumes of the *Elements of Ideology*. He had an original conception of the matter he was dealing with, which can be seen in the preface of the first edition of his voluminous work:

Ideology is a part of Zoology, and it is especially in man that this part is important and deserves further development: even the eloquent interpreter of nature, Buffon, would have believed to not have completed his history of man, if he had not at least tried to describe man’s faculty of thinking¹. (de Tracy, 1804/2013, p. 3)

¹ In the original: “L’Idéologie est une partie de la Zoologie, et c’est sur-tout dans l’homme que cette partie est importante et mérite d’être approfondie: aussi l’éloquent interprète de la nature, Buffon, aurait-il cru n’avoir pas achevé son histoire de l’homme, s’il n’avait pas au moins essayé de décrire sa faculté de penser”. This and other translations, by the author.

Great project.

We do not have notice until now of animals acting by ideology. However, the man can be described as an ideological animal. Destutt de Tracy wanted to be descriptive. He was not a comedian nor was he anticipating the animalistic clashes around the word ideology, which would become a self-praise and an insult. When people say “my ideology”, they are proud of what they think; when it is the ideology of other, the whole scenario is changed. Praise becomes attack, insult, disqualification. In the extreme, ideology is the thinking of the other; this ignorant submitted to ideas defended without even knowing how much they enslave and condemn him. Ideology, as a dogmatic and powerful entity, does not speak. It makes others speak. It does not silence. It shuts others up. It does not free, it imprisons. It does not enlighten. It darkens.

Marx and Engels, in *The German Ideology* (1846/1998), had other ambitions and made an epistemic leap that would no longer remain unconsidered by their followers or opponents:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same

applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc. of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. (p. 18)

Ideology would be like a gear, a device to regulate the consciences, a tool to conquer hearts and minds. However, if man acts conditioned by his material context, submitted to the limitations of his time and the dominant mode of production, how can we imagine a total revolution, an inversion that would put the very reading of history, which was before upside down, on its feet, highlighting, for instance, that man created God, and not the opposite?

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx & Engels, 1846/1998, p. 49)

If the ruling class controls everything, including or mainly the mind of those who are subjected to it, how can they be conscious of this domination? Where is the breach? Where is the breaking point? Where does the system fail? Marx's disciples tried to make this dimension more operational, tangible, concrete, visible in plain sight. Althusser (2014) proposes two complementary theses about ideology: 1) "Ideology represents individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence" (p. 181); 2) "Ideology has a material existence" (p. 184). The propagation of ideology in its materiality would have its ideological state apparatuses (ISA) as devices:

The religious ISA (the system of the different churches),
 the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private 'schools'),
 the family ISA,
 the legal ISA,

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the political ISA (the political system including its different parties), the trade union ISA,
the communications ISA (press, radio and television etc.),
the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, sports etc.). (p. 243)

According to Althusser there are not many breaches. Or almost no breach: all is ideology. We just need to reread the list of ideological apparatuses to reach the crushing conclusion that “everything is taken”. The individual is submitted 24 hours per day to an implacable ideological contamination: at home, church, school, work, leisure, theater, cinema, soccer matches, or any other place. Nothing is done without ideological influence:

The social practices and the ideas men form of them are intimately related. It can be said that there is no practice without ideology, and that every practice – including scientific practice – realizes itself through an ideology. In all the social practices (whether they pertain to the domain of economic production, of science, of art or law, of ethics or of politics), the people who act are subjected to correspondent ideologies, independently of their will and usually in total ignorance of the fact. (Althusser, 1990, p. 256)

If even the scientific practice is ideological and if men act “usually in total ignorance of the fact”, how can an unveiling of ideology or a denunciation of its power take place? The only breach is the *usually* in this sentence about the ignorance about ideological domination. Is there the leaking point? This reading is different from that found in one of the senses listed by Stoppino (1986) as a “weak sense” in the inventory promoted by Norberto Bobbio of weak and strong senses of ideology: “A set of ideas and values respectful to the public order that has the function of guiding the collective political behavior” (p. 585, our translation).

Who would guide? Who defines the public order? Such terms apparently neutral demand a content that can only result from the disputes of ideologically distinct social actors. It becomes a vicious circle: every definition of ideology can only be ideological. If ideology is concealment of the reality, then do the Marxist definitions of ideology also conceal or distort something? How can ideology mean a distortion? And how can an ideological viewpoint without distortion exist, which does not conceal, but unveil, reveal, enlighten, and clarify?

A deadlock? An insurmountable contradiction? A paradox? A conceptual limit of language? Or is ideology as concealment always the worldview of the other while the *good* ideology – mine, ours – is a body of ideas, doctrine, guiding

set of values? Evidently, Althusser's conception is closest to the one adopted in the 21st century by the Slovene Žižek (1994):

'Ideology' can designate anything, from a contemplative attitude that misrecognizes its dependence on social reality to an action-orientated set of beliefs, from the indispensable medium in which the individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power. (pp. 3-4)

Many epistemological problems emerge: if the term ideology can *mean anything*, this and that, this and the opposite, does it still have some conceptual value? If ideology is ignorance of the dependence, values for action, false belief and ideas, does some subject of the enunciation see his/her ideology as a false belief or idea? Or is only false the idea of the other, the opponent, the one that must be informed, emancipated, enlightened? Are there objective criteria to elucidate the true and the false in an ideology or does every ideology deceive the ideologized? If there is an objective criterium, then, it must be concluded that not everything is ideological. In this sense, many theses would collapse.

Each age and each author produce the definition of ideology they need. Or do they generate what the material context requires? Which is the degree, even if relative, of individual autonomy? The concept of social class is constantly updated. The opposition between the owner of the means of production and the one that sells his labor force no longer seems adequate to describe all the possible production relations. Kellner (1995) calibrated his concept for new causes:

Ideology assumes that "I" am the norm, that everyone is like me, that anything different or other is not normal. For ideology, however, the "I", the position from which ideology speaks, is that of (usually) white male, western, middle – or upper-class subject positions, of positions that see other races, classes, groups, and gender as secondary, derivative, inferior, and subservient. Ideology thus differentiates and separates groups in dominant/subordinate and superior/inferior, producing hierarchies and rankings that serve the interests of ruling powers and elites. (p. 61)

If the definitions of Kellner are accepted, by hypothesis, must it be concluded that there is only one ideology where the western white man acts? Without denying the male-western-white dominance, apparently clear, must it be imagined the possibility of social relations without ideology? Or is ideology a system of social hierarchy intrinsic to every human group? If there are ideologies, there are ideologues. Who are they? How are they produced? How do they reproduce? Gramsci (1971) had an idea:

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Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. . . . School is the instrument through which intellectuals of various levels are elaborated. The complexity of the intellectual function in different states can be measured objectively by the number and gradation of specialised schools. (p. 3)

Again, questions emerge: if school is an ISA, as said by Althusser, and forms organic intellectuals for the ruling power, as said Gramsci, it means that the system of the dominant social hierarchy reproduces itself, as suggested by Bourdieu and Passeron (1982), how can it be emancipatory? Is school only reproductive? Is it only emancipatory? Or does it reproduce and emancipate? How can the same teacher emancipate some students with education and maintain others in ignorance by the ideological concealment of reality? Another deadlock: if education is fundamental for change, but school is reproductive, how can we count on it for transformation? Or is school only emancipatory after emancipation occurred?

The school's period as an ideological apparatus has reached its limit. Press, nowadays called media, was, already for Gramsci (1971), another important device used to mold people:

Readers must be considered from two main point of views: 1) as ideological elements, philosophically "transformable", capable, ductile, malleable to transformation; 2) as "economic" elements, capable of acquiring the publications and make them be acquired by others. (p. 163)

The reader would work as a transmitter, a second level in the dissemination chain. The same could be said, following Gramsci, about television viewers. However, in Gramsci's perspective, there is a potentially positive value: the reader in question would be transformable for emancipation. Ideologically dominated by being ductile, could they also be ideologically freed by being malleable, open to new inscriptions? Would it not be a new submission or domination? In the base of ideology there is the understanding that repression is not sufficient to control the dominated. Chomsky (2007) explains this with a certain clarity:

To dominate, violence is not sufficient. A justification of other nature is needed. Thus, when a person exerts power over other, be him a dictator, a colonizer, a bureaucrat, a boss or a husband, he needs a justification, which always redounds

on the same thing: domination is exerted for the “good” of the dominated. In other words, power always manifests itself as altruistic, uninterested, generous. (para. 16)

There is everything: ideology disguises and justifies domination. In this case, it is negative. But ideology as an action-oriented set of values would be positive. It is a duty of the enunciator to clarify the sense of ideology used and of the interlocutor to perceive the sense in question. To whom does this ambivalence serve? In a sense, it is distortion of reality to conceal dominance; in other sense, a legitimate and proud worldview. The problem is that in general when the enunciator believes to speak from a legitimate worldview, the receptor may think it is a concealment of the reality. The same occurs, in an inverted manner, when the enunciator attacks the other’s worldview as a false idea and the other argues with his ideology as a worldview against the distortion of the attacker. In other words, there is almost always a conceptual mismatch.

IDEOLOGY AS CONCEALMENT

Concepts have history. During the time, they bifurcate, grow, wane; or a sense take the lead and, although constantly referring to its origins for some correction, it triumphs over others. Marx and Engels (1846/1998) gave the roots of the idea of false conscience:

Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third, to knock them out of their heads; and – existing reality will collapse. (p. 26)

Ideology conceals, falsifies, distorts, inverts, naturalizes what is historically constructed, legitimates domination, makes the dominated see in his domination a normal and indisputable state, tranquilizes the dominant, diminishing the necessity of repression, convinces, submits, subordinates, conquers the voluntary submission of the deluded. It works as a one-sided communication act: the deluded receives a ready worldview without power,

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initially, to respond to it, since individuals ignore the ideological situation in which they are dominated.

What permitted Engels and Marx to understand this dynamic? Why did the entrepreneur Engels and the autonomous Marx escape the ideological limitation they were submitted, as everyone, and unveil the working of this gear? Would Engels, the boss, tell Marx how his class worked and deluded the dominated? The intention is not to disqualify Marx and Engels or to make a low anti-Marxist discourse. They revealed pertinent aspects of ideological domination. The question is: how could they reach this point? How did they escape the influence of the creatures that dominated the brains of their contemporaries? Why did no other bosses have the same enlightenment Engels had since they had equivalent information? Or was Engels's experience inseminated by his encounter with Marx? Do biographies explain more about what happened than the material conditions?

The magician does the trick. Most people do not understand how this individual or collective illusion works. Marx and Engels unveiled the ideological trick of capitalism. However, did they not perceive that they could also perform tricks? Is Marxism an anti-ideology or an ideology that unveils the others and does not see itself as an ideology in the sense of concealment? Is it a meta-ideology? An ideology without ideology? Such questions have sense as Marxists – and leftists in general – are constantly accused of being “ideological” as an incapacity to perceive reality, allegedly or not, due to a mental matrix, a lens that makes them, voluntarily or not, to prefer an idealized concept than the fact; the theoretical than the empirical.

It is implied in Marx and Engels' text (1846/1998) that it is possible to extirpate from someone's head the creatures that permeate and pervert their worldview. This is commonly called criticism. Such criticism is an alliance between information, observation, experience, and analysis. If this is possible, Althusser (1990, 2014) is mistaken: an analysis capable of understanding and unveiling its own ideology cannot be ideological. Maybe, it could be called scientific or post-ideological. If not, there is a contradiction, a defect in reasoning: if ideology is denounced as distortion, understanding it cannot be another distortion. It can only be unveiling. Thus, it cannot be another concealment. Or does nobody have the capacity to denounce his own ideology? Can it only be deciphered by the other? The magician knows the trick. Cannot the deluded alone study the trick to understand how it is done?

Anyway, the one who deciphers is not deluded. In case of illusion, there is no unveiling. A trick is not revealed by another trick, except if everything is a trick. But if everything is a trick, how can we know what is a trick? When

everything is a trick, by supposition, is there still a trick? If we are all deluded, what sense does it make to speak of illusion and of how someone can know if it is an illusion? Is there a non-deluded sight in the deluded eye? An enlightened elite? Enlightened by whom? Outside of all ideological apparatuses? We enter in the domain of logic. As a consequence, deciphering, if it is in fact deciphering, cannot be another ideology.

Only one aspect remains to be examined, maybe a hypothesis, a cloudy area: and what if what permits the unveiling of ideology is something absolutely individual, a faculty of the thinking subject? And what if the knowledge that is shaped by material conditions of existence demands an intangible – metaphysical – factor to be understood? –, a component that is not chosen or acquired, which depends of some species of existential *lottery*. What would it be?

CATEGORY OF ACCUSATION AND ANTIDOTE

Concepts pass through mutations. Nowadays ideology is, above all, a category of accusation. It indicates that the opponent consciously or unconsciously distorts a reality capable of being proved as such. For Althusser (2014) “1. There is no practice whatsoever except by and under an ideology; 2. There is no ideology except by and for subjects” (p. 91). If ideology only exists through a subject, the question becomes the definition of subject. Can the subject be a mere object? In French, the subject can be the protagonist of action, but also the matter of a speech or a research. Thus, the object of observation. Excluded this ambivalence, subject is the one that has its own subjectivity.

If ideology conditions everything, formats everything, as already seen, nothing happens outside its umbrella, how is it possible that someone perceive, understand, decipher it, and become free from it? More than that: can a subject be a subject while being submitted to something he ignores? It is worth reviewing some points now. If even scientists, as states Althusser (1990), are “submitted to the onslaught of ideologies” (p. 49), how can we explain that someone can break the grid and get rid of the false ideas that keep him in ignorance and in the inversion of reality? If all facts are covered by ideologies, how can we reach the true facts, which may deserve the name of emancipation, freedom, and autonomy?

“Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man”, according to the reflection of Marx and Engels (1846/1998, p. 26). However, how was it possible that someone, as Marx and Engels, perceives that he was being deluded? Debord (2005), in his last thesis, the number 221, did not admit any relativism: “The self-emancipation

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of our time is an emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth. This 'historical mission of establishing truth in the world' can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses" (p. 119). Only the proletariat as the universal subject of history. A class capable of dissolving all classes and also the ideology as inversion of truth and concealment of the reality. Thus, as if it was possible to verify, it is assumed that there is a truth and a reality. Not everything is ideology.

Nevertheless, how, before this dissolution, were isolated individuals, such as Marx and Engels (1846/1998) and Debord (2005), capable of understanding this dynamic of ideology and perceiving the truth behind the falsification? How can a class stop being a class after the elimination of the opposite class? Can a party still be a party when there are no parts, but only a single party? Is it truth or the persistence of ideology? How could there be a part if there is only the whole? Hall (2003, pp. 267-268) defines ideology as the mental referential, the system of representation that each one uses to interpret the functioning of societies. Is it a software attached to the hardware (the organism)? Has the subject autonomy to change the software? How can someone achieve this autonomy if it works from a software? If the software is imposed throughout the life and formation of someone, what can *glitch* the device?

Was Hall saying that ideology is the ideas that guide the actions and interpretation of individuals, classes, and groups? Would this not mean a return to idealism? Or, if these ideas derive from the dominant materiality, how can we explain why they are abandoned? The traditional escape to this deadlock is the use of an opening category such as the relative autonomy (Poulantzas, 1977) of the political regarding its structures. It is the return, through other means, to the "usually" conceded by Althusser (1990, 2014) in his deterministic flight. Thus, how does the acquisition of consciousness occur? It might be imagined that someone conscious wakes up the conscience of others. However, how this consciousness become conscious of its situation if it was submitted to the same unconscious software? The most probable hypothesis is that, as in science, everything derives from a series of possibilities: insight, systematic observation of concrete experiences, reflection, discussion, comparison, analysis.

And what if the decisive element is the observer's intelligence? And what if the cerebral capacity, for instance of a Karl Marx, is the element that makes possible the deciphering of the enigma and the discovery of what is concealed? Intelligence is responsible for many things, but not everything. Why did two *geniuses* exposed to existential conditions equivalent reach opposed conclusions? Why does one bet in the liberal solution and other in the Marxist one? Maybe the answer is the same of scientists facing unresolved problems, which is the

title of a popular physics book: *We have no idea* (Cham & Whiteson, 2019). Is it a simple-minded answer?

It is still interesting to verify that intelligence is not treated as serious, dense, respectable, operational category recurrent in debates about complex phenomena. It does not pass the mind of an intellectual to explain an interpretation due to the interpreter's intelligence. Althusser, as a good structuralist, looked for an explanation for ideology outside the subject with his alleged subjectivity. He looked in the structure i.e. there where the subject is the object. Did he fall in the scientism ideology's trap of an objectivity external to the observer?

Ideology conditions and limits, but does not conditions and limits everyone in the same manner. Some are more vulnerable than others. Obtaining information does not explain everything. Adam Smith and Karl Marx were both well-informed. The ideological filter, the lens imposed by ideology, can distort the sight of many, but not of everyone. The sight of those who do not submit to one of those lenses can, however, view different panoramas within the same class. Engels may be a good example of that. Non-rational factors seem to matter in choices supposedly rational. The lack of information can, without a doubt, as previously indicated, explain much of the ideological blindness. But not everything. Even the most rigid structures have infiltrations and present fissures. Dengue fever is transmitted by a mosquito, not by an ant. This is a scientific truth, not a perspective conditioned by ideology.

In vulgar terms, ideology nowadays is what prevents the other from perceiving the reality, the lens that blinds instead of enhancing the sight. At the same time, self-ideology is the worldview of those who see what they see how they see and are proud of this. Between the category of accusation and profession of faith, ideology means to see badly, see little, do not see, cease to see, or, in the opposite sense, to see clearly everything that the other cannot see. In humanities, more than in the so-called hard sciences, it is much harder to say: we have no idea. It is easier to state that we only have ideology. It is best to perceive the form than what forms it, the limitation than the freedom, the structure than the infiltration. After all, who does not see is always the other that can be reduced to an object. ■

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