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ABSTRACT

Ideology and Interpretation

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Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1
IDEOLOGY AS DISTORTION

Conceptual delimitations
Critique of religion as precursor of the other critiques
The philosophic manuscripts of 1844
The German ideology
The ideological interpretation
Preliminary viewpoints referring to paradox
The Paradox of Mannheim
Viewpoints on the notion of false conscience

Chapter 2
RELATION BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION

The theory of interests and the theory of social tensions
Explanation of the ideological phenomenon within the theory of social tensions
The process of symbolic wording
The symbolic dimension of action
Myth and mythification
Myths as benchmarks
Symbol and ideology

Chapter 3
IDEOLOGY AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF THE POWER RELATIONS

The concept of power within the context of ideology and interpretation
Power relations
Power and knowledge
The sovereign power
The disciplining power and the bio-power
Governing
The notion of shepherding
The concept of force
The human conscience as related to the force
The elements that synthesize the forces. The relation between force and will.
Interpretation as identification of forces

Conclusions

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Introduction

My interest in the ideological phenomenon originates in the studies of power by Michel Foucault. On 27th of April 1978, the French author gave a lecture in Tokyo named *The Analytical Philosophy of Politics*¹. One of the first topics approached was the actuality of the study of power. Foucault addressed the question of a journalist who had written in *Le Monde*: “Why are there so many people who raise the question of power? One day, we will undoubtedly wonder at that issue of power having concerned us to such high extent at the end of this 20th Century”.² Foucault’s response was determined by the actuality, or by the recent history of the events occurred in Europe. Referring first of all to fascism and Stalinism, as maladies of power, the French philosopher remarked that the issue of power is not just an abstraction, but a problem that has imposed itself. We may, however, wonder whether the discourse on power may not be part of a more extended discussion regarding the ideological phenomenon. To put it differently, may not the ideologies determine, by the particularity of the representations they propose with regard to what is real, the conditions of possibility for the functioning, in a certain meaning, of the power relations?

To put ideology under discussion means, in a first stage, to raise questions about the way the material, technologic part of the society ends up in fundamentally determine the theoretical part, having effects on the way we understand our position in society, on our interpretations. Disregarding, for now, the possibility that the process may be inverse or bidirectional, we find the discourse on ideology to be problematical. Considering the fact that a negative connotation (a set of ideas not conform to the reality) is attached, more often than not, to the ideology, when we make assertions on somebody else’s position as being an ideological one, our thesis will be instinctively rejected by the adverse party. Most of the times, our starting premise is that our interpretative horizon encompasses the one of our interlocutor, being thus under the belief that we are not in error positioning ourselves in opposition to the interlocutor’s position. Furthermore, the assertions cannot be backed by facts, most of the times, but refer to our view over the world, to values from which we are not ready to part easily.

Our study regards the relation between ideology and interpretation. We set ourselves to show that the relation between ideology and interpretation is not achieved, more often than not, as an ideological interpretation. Obviously, the ideological phenomenon as well as the interpretation one may be described in multiple ways and, therefore, the interaction between the two is achieved against the background of those conceptual delimitations. What we target above all is whether there is any primary relation between the two phenomena, following which it may no longer be said that any interpretation

¹ Michel Foucault, *Lumea e un mare azil. Studii despre putere*, Ed. Idea Design & Print, Cluj, 2005, p. 151.

²*Ibidem*, p. 25.

involves an ideology or vice-versa, and whether they do not happen to be closely bonded to one another, being complementary.

The approach may be anticipated to be problematic, and in order to ascertain this fact, it is required that we take a squint at the literature referring to the term of *ideology*. The meanings of this notion vary: *a method of knowledge specific to zoology, overturning of the world, placement in a false conscience, a method of sociologic knowledge, self-image of the community, values legitimating a certain interest of power, notion about life, self-image of a community, benchmarks of a negative purpose of power* etc. We are intrigued by the possibility that a large part of such definitions may maintain a common element, a condition of possibility that, should it *allow itself* to be identified, will confer to the entire complex of meanings a certain unity.

The focus of our work will fall on the term *ideology*. This is the one we track, in the first chapter of our work, in the early writings of Karl Marx, in the *Introduction to Hegel's Criticism of the Philosophy of Law*, in the *Philosophic Manuscripts* and in the *German Ideology*. In the first two texts, the term of *ideology* fails to appear, but they anticipate the conceptual framework that will make it possible to develop the notion that we regard in our study. The meaning that begins to take shape in those texts is that of *ideology as opposed to reality*; where the reality is understood as a practice of the individual. We must specify that Marx does not count out the possibility of a *neutral* meaning of ideology, one which is of particular interest in our work. Ideology should be, first and foremost, a vision of a society, to be afterwards an upturned, distorted view or a view placed in a false conscience. Moreover, in the *German Ideology*, also a further meaning of the term starts to take shape: the ideology placed in the area of a supra-structure, discussed in parallel with the production forces, production ways etc., is prefigured as opposed to a science, developed subsequently in *The Capital*. We must specify that our study took as a benchmark, that is to be maintained throughout many parts of the work, Paul Ricoeur's interpretations in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, including those of the mentioned texts of Marx.

The following section of the chapter views the relations between ideology and interpretation, which, in this context, is achieved as ideological interpretation. Eventually, we will not exclude some other meanings that it may take, to refer then to the ideological interpretation as a method of knowledge that Karl Mannheim intended to develop along the lines of the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim's approach follows the development of the Marxist meaning of the term *ideology* until the moment when he refers exclusively to the point of view of the one who discusses about ideology. In this context, an issue occurs, named by Clifford Geertz *the Mannheim's paradox*, when any discourse on ideology may be labeled also as ideology.

In the second chapter, we focus on the way in which the mentioned paradox maybe overrun, making reference to Geertz's study *Interpretation of Cultures*. The solution for overrunning Mannheim's issue may be glimpsed via a more radical approach of

ideology, that is to be understood, before being false conscience, denaturation etc., as a cohesive element within a community.

Geertz's merit is to have placed the studies on ideology, from the sphere of the theories of social interests, or from the sphere of the theories of social anxieties, in a hermeneutic context. The approach is not valueless, as the theories conceptualizing the notion against the background of a purpose of power or the background of getting free of the social anxiety put, more often than not, in parallel certain material or social conditions with one ideology or another. Although the association between a certain historical context, certain conditions etc. and a certain vision may be possible, the modality by which this dependence, transformation, link takes place is nowhere explained. Geertz's suggestion is that the study of ideology targets at *the process of symbolic wording*, namely the way in which a symbol emerges within a social context, the way it is transferred, the way it gets the *force* to transform, at a certain framework-moment, into what we name ideology.

Further, we investigate the modality in which the ideology may be analyzed within a hermeneutic context. The act of interpretation preserves certain particularities, referring, more often than not, to texts, to the way in which they may obtain a certain meaning. Ideology, although providing a view of the world, also suggests, in an aware way or not, a modality of action. Among those modalities of action, to which we will not assign a fundamental nature as in Marx's context, but only ascertain that they happen sometimes, we find some that have a symbolic dimension or propose a certain meaning. Therefore, both the text and the action may have a symbolic dimension, fact that is the condition of possibility for investigating the ideology in a hermeneutic context.

The next sections of the chapter take into account Geertz's previous proposal, which allows an approach not necessarily of the material conditions within the context of the discussion on ideology, but also of myths and symbols. It is assumed that the ideology, before being a denaturation, maintains the fundamental character of self-image of a community. The myths and symbols may be, among other things, modalities by which this self-image occurs, in a natural way, being perpetuated by means of tradition, constituting eventually the condition for all the other meanings of the ideology.

The myths may be understood as paradoxical structures. In a certain sense, they constitute signs of a context to which we are aliens. When re-evoked and re-contextualized, they may get a meaning different from the one they probably had at their origin. It may happen that the re-contextualization of the myth takes place against the background of a certain relation of power. In such a case, the myth becomes the tool of an ideology, understood as a legitimation of such relations. However, what is of interest to us is whether the myth may be fully emptied of significance by re-contextualization; because, if it preserves, regardless the way in which it is *used*, traces

of the former meaning, then, regardless of any interest of power, it will still contain information on the basis of which it may still be recovered by the act of interpretation.

In the sections about myths and symbols, we follow the hypothesis that they have a character that is constitutive to the human psychic. Therefore, they may be re-contextualized via an ideology belonging to a dominant group, but they do not lose completely their primary meaning, as it is constituted due to a fundamental need inherent to the psychic. In order that an ideology, as legitimation of power, be efficient to its highest degree, it has to substitute itself to the myths and symbols already present within a community, re-signifying them to the effect of legitimating its own power. More often than not, however, such an ideology tends to present itself as the *natural* result of history, but, at the same time, based on its own inertia, in an attempt to preserve permanently the configuration of power which it promotes, it ends up in denying eventually the dynamic nature of myths and symbols, that is due to the human psychic. The myths and symbols re-configure themselves continuously depending on the historical context, in a natural way. Their freezing in a certain shape, when they legitimate *in an artificial way*, makes them fail to respond to this need of the psyche, leading, eventually, to overrunning an ideology that legitimates. The main references in these sections are to Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Roland Barthes and Karl C. Jung.

In the third chapter we follow the relations of power, as they are understood by Michel Foucault. The way in which the power relations are constituted provides hints of the way in which an ideology may be created. The approach, in that part of our study, follows a direction that is inversed to the one used so far- if the ideology was understood rather as an *in itself*, within the sections dedicated to the relations of power the ideology is suggested in an indirect way, it is constituted as a consequence of the particular relations of the power caught in various hypostases. In this context, the association of the relation between *power/discourse* with the relation *ideology/interpretation* is not implausible. We do not wish, however, to impose a certain meaning to the concept of *power* by abusively associating it to the one of *ideology*; we only present them as an analogy; the same applies to *discourse* and *interpretation*. Otherwise we would detour the very approach that Foucault initiates, avoiding the term of *ideology* because it embeds a range of meanings that constitute themselves either as due to the Marxist discourse, or in opposition to it.

In the last section of the chapter, we stop at Friedrich Nietzsche. Without taking explicitly of ideology, he talks about the European culture in terms of illusions, idols etc. These notions seem to get close to an understanding of ideology as denaturation. However, I don't find it appropriate to associate the way Marx understands, in his early writings, to identify religion or politic economy with ideology and the way Nietzsche discusses about illusions, idols, difference of perspective etc.

The first concept on which we will dwell here is that of *force*. We attempt to follow the way the *force*, by its features, is synthesized by a will of power, which, by its affirmative or negative character, relates by various perspectives to what we call ideology. The act of interpretation must, within this context, be constituted as an identification of the *current force* behind a value. When the value *is not backed* by a force, it turns into an illusion, into an empty idol.

In Nietzsche context, the conscience falls under the incidence of reactive forces. This aspect of conscience does not render it false, as in Marx's discourse. The parameters as well as the data of the issue are different. The affirmative power will construes the values discriminating accurately the active forces that lay behind them. But the active forces act *from behind* the conscience. The relation between interpretation and ideology is achieved as an opposition. The interpretation of the affirmative power will fails to take into consideration empty values. Only the negative power will fall under the incidence of ideology. At Nietzsche, the interpretation is not only primary in relation with ideology, but the real interpretation, the one that actually affirms the life, destroys the ideology.

Conclusions

The texts referring to ideology may be divided into three large categories. On one hand, we deal with the writings attributing a negative connotation to the term; ideology turns into distortion, is the inversed image of the world, false conscience, legitimation of a dominant interest of power, superstructure. Usually, such negative connotation of ideology emerges against the background of Marx's writings. An exception to this effect is the pejorative connotation given to the term by Napoleon, who names *ideologists* the supporters of the Illuminist project proposed by Destutt de Tracy. This ridiculing appears against the background of certain power relations as well and is a manipulative method by which the discrediting of them is attempted. We certainly cannot trace a link between Napoleon's pejorative connotation and the one resulted from Marx's writings.

In the context in which the ideology receives a pejorative connotation, the interpretation has to take place as a consequence of that ideology. The interpretation act should aim at the very unmasking of the hidden interest of power. It is the duty of philosophy that the world of illusions be passed through until the sphere of real things is reached. We may assert that the interpretation is primary as related to the ideology, but any interpretation disrespecting the ideology, not undertaking to unmask the latter one, is an almost primitive approach, something in the sphere of pre-history. The attempts of any hermeneutic are puerile actions as long as they fail to highlight the fact, by the self-conscience acquired by a class, that the world of real things should be regained, that the human beings should be restored back to themselves, without the illusions of religion, of politic economy, in order that they retake their own history in their own hands.

The condition of possibility for the emergence of and for ascertaining an ideology that *enchains* the proletariat, is its very acquiring the self-conscience. Only after having reached this point may philosophy become a weapon and employ the entire arsenal available to it in order to construe the adverse ideology as a reactive force as related to history, that places itself in opposition to the actual evolution. This type of targeted interpretation constituted the motivation for some of the greatest murders and persecutions to have ever taken place in the history of humanity.

On the other hand, we have the ideology understood as method of knowledge in sociology. In this framework, an overcoming of the negative connotation of the term is attempted. The literature aiming at understanding ideology in this way is based, partly, on the Marxist concept of the notion. The reason for aggression, assumed by the ideological interpretation as being specific to Marx, is put between brackets in order to transform the ideology into interpretation specific for the sociology of knowledge. This is not to be understood as discrediting the adverse position, but should have in view the modality in which the ideas are determined by the material and historic context but maintaining as a guideline of the thought the conscience of the fact that also he who discusses about ideology is placed, in turn, into a material and historical context which

determines essentially his/her point of view. As in the context of Marx's interpretations, the interpretation maintains a nature more primitive than the ideology does. There may be *non-ideological* interpretations, to the effect that they refer to a sphere different from the one of sociology of knowledge, however, when referring to its sphere, we deal with an ideological interpretation.

The association between ideology and sociology of knowledge is made by Mannheim. The problem of that approach is, even when setting aside the principle of aggression, the fact that it cannot avoid a certain type of circular thinking due to the assumed premise of the studies about ideology, i.e. that any modality of thinking is determined by a certain social, material context. For instance, any ideology is tributary to a social context, therefore those who discuss about ideology, placing themselves, in turn, into a certain context, speaks about this also from the perspective of an ideology. This circularity of the discourse is named *Mannheim's paradox*.

Another category of studies about ideology aims at an exoneration of the term. A neutral or even positive connotation is associated to that concept. Ideology is understood as an element of cohesion of the social life, self-image of the community. The character of cohesion, of self-image is the primary one, meaning that, in order that the ideas be illusions, they have to be, first, produced by a community in which a certain way of being, of thinking, of expressing is shared. We may affirm that this character is the premise for the Marxist significance, which is taking into account most often than not. The circularity of the discourse about the ideology that we notice at Mannheim is dissolved by this positive concept of ideology.

In this context, we find the most interesting relation with the phenomenon of interpretation. The interpretation does not burst ideological illusions anymore, but finds that it is part of the ideology. As for the latter one, we find it to consist of multiple, successive interpretations of the life phenomena that regard the community and that provide it with the self-image, cohesion, thinking benchmarks. The two phenomena are constitutive.

We find further that this position in relation to the ideology puts into perspective an issue with the studies that see an absolute connection between the material context and a certain type of thinking. The context is put in analogy with a certain conception. Repeated analogies induce the idea that, actually, the thinking is tributary to material conditions, but the explanation for the way in which this process takes place is never provided. The process remains obscure. If the fact is ascertained, however, that the action, like the text, holds a symbolic dimension, then the possibility occurs that the ideological phenomenon be discussed in a hermeneutic context.

The understanding of ideology in a positive key that no longer makes a weapon out of philosophy by means of interpretation, but leaves a space to it in which the speculation is no longer brutally clashed by the real, is a welcome relaxation. The ascertaining of

the importance of myths, of symbols, of the fact that not every single time may the categories of reason be applied to life, that, most of the times, this application may lead to abuses, could guard us, as long as we keep our eye on the recent history of Europe, from extreme attitudes.

In the last part of the work we see that the relations between the ideology and interpretation may be paralleled with the one between power and discourse. Making reference to the latter one, we cannot affirm that the power, the concept upon which we have mostly dwelled, is primary as related to the discourse. The power is complementary to the discourse. On the basis of the analogy, even if this is a weak relation, we find that also the ideology is complementary to the interpretation.

Finally, the relation between ideology and interpretation may be conceived also as an irreclaimable difference. The interpretation does not serve to an ideology anymore and, similarly, it does not have the role to unmask an ideology, a hidden interest of power anymore. When, as Nietzsche suggests, an interpretation which affirms life is performed, we cannot talk about ideology in its negative meaning any longer. It finds itself in an impossibility of existence. The benchmarks provided by an ideology are actually ignored by the affirmative power will that permanently reinvents the values.

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