
Ideology as a False Pretence of Universality

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Abstract: The article treats to show how the ideology can be understand how a false pretense of universality or how a case on a fallacy of abusive generalization. For this propose it begin whit the theories of Marx, Engels, Adorno, Habermas, Perelman and Ricoeur. It is intended to recover a critical sense of the concept of ideology that is useful for the critical analysis of discourse, in the broadest sense. The article aims to return to a critical concept of ideology, which is useful for critical discourse studies, and in this sense, opposes the neutral use of the same concept that has been proposed by discourse analysts such as Teun van Dijk and by economists such as Thomas Piketty, among many others. To achieve this purpose, concepts from the analytical philosophy of language (G. Frege), the theory of speech acts (Austin and Searle), the critical theory of the Frankfort School (Adorno), the theory of argumentation or New rhetoric (Perelman-Olbrechts) and the theory of communicative action (Habermas, are used. Likewise, the classic notion of the fallacy of abusive generalization, present from Aristotle to the current theories of formal and informal logic, is used.

Keywords: Ideology, Marx, Critical Theory, Adorno, Habermas, Bakhtin, Voloshinov

1. Introduction

The concept of ideology has, since it was proposed by Destutt de Tracy to describe Condillac's sensualist philosophy, a history from the "ideologues" of the Enlightenment to its introduction as a "technical term" by Marx and Engels, in addition to all the attempts to reformulate it in the s. XX, from Herman Lübbe, Paul Ricoeur, Critical Theory, Althusser, Habermas, van Dijk, Piketti, etc.

The main interest here is the Marxist interpretation of ideology. It is commonly accepted that there are at least two moments in Marx's thought on the subject. In the first, the young Hegelian of the left opposes Hegel's philosophical idealism and confronts "German ideology" with social praxis and materialism. To the mature Marx and in the pedagogical and scholastic interpretation of Engels, ideology encompasses every "conception of the world," philosophy, law, politics, or art, that is, the entire "superstructure" of a given period, and it is in some way determined by the material conditions in which life unfolds, by the ways in which it reproduces itself, that is, by the economic basis of

the mode of production¹. Ideology thus understood is now opposed by the scientific character of the critique of ideologies, to the extent that this critique shows false self-understanding, or false consciousness, on which the dominant ideology is based to justify the *status quo* of society, classes, private property, patriarchy, racism, etc. This criticism would be scientific to the extent that it is based on a scientific conception of the world and a scientific inquiry into history.

2. Ideology, a Confused Notion

Now, if the scientific character of Marx's theory is questioned and the same Marxist criterion is applied to the theory, Marxism is one ideology, among others. Neoconservatives such as H. Lübbe propose a concept of

1 In his celebrated prologue to his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy Marx says:

"The set of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis on which the legal and political superstructure is built and to which certain forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life conditions the process of political and spiritual social life in general. It is not man's consciousness that determines his being but, rather, the social being that determines his consciousness." [10]

ideology, neutral and uncritical, that has been accepted with few variations by sociologists, political scientists and language analysts. For Lübbe, ideology is the “conviction of a truth referring to groups, institutionally conceived, that does not owe its strength to reasons of truth but to practical interests.”

Perhaps the concept that ideologies are beliefs or “convictions” shared by human groups lacks clarity, and thus, it may be necessary to clarify the way in which institutions “conceive” ideologies (or establish the link between institutions and ideologies). However, it is striking that Marx and the opposition between ideology and science is displaced by Lübbe and the opposition between the strength of practical interests and the strength of “reasons of truth”. It is possible to reconcile the two versions because Marx would agree that institutions (and the powerful in general) impose their ideology on the dominated and that their criticism has practical effects of dominance over “common sense”². It is then possible to accept that there is an opposition between ideology and science and that ideology (as a shared belief and to a greater extent than science) has implications on practical life. Before continuing with this review of the conceptions of ideology, I want to return to Marx, but this time in a very indirect way, with a synthesis by Paul Ricoeur of the Althusserian interpretation of Marx’s thought and of the difference between the young Marx and the mature Marx.

If the dividing line, at least in young Marx, runs between praxis and ideology, the subsequent dividing line runs between science and ideology. Ideology becomes the opposite of science and not the counterpart of real life. The importance of this position may have to do with the constitution of the Marxist body of doctrine understood as a scientific body or, at least, with the pretense of being one. That body is contrary to ideology. For the young Marx, this opposition did not exist, so ideology was opposed to real life. However, when Marxism itself becomes a scientific body, it constitutes the opposite of ideology. This change will mark the main modification produced in the history of ideology as a concept. [13]

Previously, Ricoeur warned about the high “price that Althusser must pay for this interpretation: all types of humanism must be situated in the field of ideology.” To that, I add the humanism of the young Marx and all “isms” in general, even scientism.

Advancing a hypothesis that I hope to justify later, the two oppositions to the concept of ideology (praxis and science) in the two periods of Marx are not contradictory but complementary. From a dissociative perspective, in the first case, what is real is praxis, and what is apparent is ideology; in the second case, the real corresponds to science, and the

apparent continues to be ideology. In the first, the truth of praxis is opposed to the falsity of merely theoretical explanations; in the second, the truth shown by science is opposed by false explanations of the real. The “leap” from praxis to science may be a mere change in emphasis or theoretical framework (and perhaps hasty confidence in the performance of the new science, historical materialism).

Regarding the consequences of opposing science and ideology, which is not so catastrophic if we understand it as the opposition between science and pseudoscience (related to, but different from, the positivist and Marxist critique of metaphysics, which allows other interpretations such as reification and hypostatization, as ways of universalizing the particular or the singular).

For his part, TW Adorno reminds us that if ideology is an appearance of truth, a “necessary social appearance,” there is a dialectical relationship in the concept of ideology:

Even in works that penetrate the most intimate ideology, there can be content of truth. Ideology, a necessary social appearance, is always, even in its necessity, a distorted figure of truth. [1]

As an “appearance,” ideology is opposed to reality; it is a caricature of reality but a caricature that is imposed as “socially necessary.” Necessary for what? Necessary to justify domination, exploitation or injustice in general.

In his *bibliographic review: The philosophical discussion around Marx and Marxism*, Habermas clarifies the Marxist conception of ideology:

Marx calls “ideology” that real abstraction, eminently effective in history, which Hegel had already developed as an abstraction of consciousness in which appearance and essence are always dissociated and the particular does not meet the general to constitute the concrete universal. Ideology is existing falsehood, founded on praxis, carrier of practical consequences and completely suppressible only through praxis [4].

And in a 1973 note on *Marxism and philosophy*, Habermas adds:

Although in *The German Ideology* it is expressly said that the dominant ideas are the ideas of the dominant class, Marx and Engels have not understood the contents of the cultural tradition simply as an ideological consciousness. For them, only those forms of consciousness are ideological that at the same time hide and betray an underlying class structure and thus contribute to legitimizing the existing legal and domination systems. The most important elements of the social integration of the cultural tradition - religion and morality - have been clearly interpreted by Marx and Engels as ideology, while science and technology have seen them, with the same clarity, as part of the potential of cultural traditions and productive forces...³ [5].

Reviewing these quotes, we find that ideology is “real

2 In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels say it in a classical fragment:

The class that has at its disposal the means for material production thus has at its disposal, at the same time, the means for spiritual production, which causes the ideas of those who lack the necessary means to produce spiritually to be submitted to it at the same time, on average. Dominant ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of dominant material relations, the same dominant material relations conceived as ideas; therefore, the relations that make a certain class the ruling class, that is, the ideas of its domination [...]. [9]

3 The paragraph ends like this: “... Less evident was his position with regard to the Fine Arts, especially with regard to classical and bourgeois literature. In relation to art, the ideological critique of Marxism has a double objective: reflection of false consciousness and reconstruction of rational content (despite the outdated terms of its expression)”. [5]

abstraction,” “effective,” and “existing falsehood.” We will return to the fact that ideology dissociates essence and appearance and, specifically, that ideology fails to unite the particular with the general in a “concrete universal.” From the second quote, I want to highlight that ideological “forms of consciousness” are those that, at the same time, “hide and betray” the underlying class structures and legitimize legal and political systems. Morality and religion are models of ideological consciousness, while science and technology remain in the field of productive forces.⁴

Habermas has developed different critiques of the classical concept of ideology, mainly in his essay in homage to Marcuse: *Science and Technology as "Ideology"*. In this regard, Habermas develops the Marcusean thesis that in “advanced capitalism,” science and technology are used as sources of legitimization of power, thus fulfilling ideological functions. With this, the hypothesis is proposed that contemporary states dispense with the need to impose an official ideology to legitimize their exercise of power (except, perhaps, totalitarian regimes), a thesis that Paul Feyerabend has also maintained from another theoretical framework.

Habermas has also identified ideology as a form of “systematic distortion of communication.” In your principal work *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas don't use the word “ideology” but, how show J. Larrain “... despite not using the term ideology, Habermas continues to use its contents in his critical practice against logocentric rationalism, ethnocentrism, relativism and postmodernism” [7] For now, I will pass on to the presentation of other ideas that will complete the theoretical framework from which I want to support the thesis that ideology can be understood as a false pretense of universality.

3. Pretense of Universality

In the analytical tradition that comes from Frege, it has been maintained that a proposition can be evaluated as true or false, to which GE Moore has added the notion of pragmatic implication, understood in the sense that affirming something supposes that it is believed or considered and that what is stated is true (hence, it is a pragmatic contradiction to say “P is true, but I do not believe it”). That is, we associate with the propositions a claim of truth. It has also been said that some statements and speech acts are presented with the pretense of being true and can be evaluated as true or false. Austin and Searle have even shown that every act of speech, whether a warning signal, a plea, a promise, a threat, etc., has an aspect in which it affirms or supposes that certain things must “be the case,” so that the speech act is successful or acceptable to the listener or audience.

In the New Rhetoric of Perelman-Olbrechts, two key concepts are postulated for our topic: the premises of the argumentation and the types of audience. The new rhetoric

distinguishes the premises related to the real (facts, truths, and presumptions) from the premises related to the preferable (values, hierarchies of values and common places of the preferable). The concept of audience, understood, from the perspective of the speaker, as group of people whom a speaker intends to convince or persuade of some thesis, can be reduced to two variants: the universal audience and the particular audience.

The authors of *Treatise on Argumentation*, prone to a certain type of cultural relativism, associate the premises related to the real (which would be typical of science and philosophy) with the attempt to convince the universal audience and link the premises related to the real, preferable with the attempt to persuade particular audiences, which involves questioning the possibility of proposing universal values or, with the pretense of universality, values that hardly fit in his theory as “confused notions”. For now, I am interested in retaining the idea of truth (scientific, philosophical or everyday) as a notion directed to the universal audience (understood as the ideal set of “adult, competent and reasonable” human beings).

Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action postulates five validity claims that are controversial in the argumentation:

1. The truth of propositions (and the effectiveness of teleological actions) in the cognitive-instrumental emissions of theoretical discourse (of science, technology and philosophy);
2. The rectitude of the intersubjective norms of action in the practical-moral emissions of the practical discourse (which concerns the entire universe of social normativity);
3. The authenticity of the standards of cultural value in the evaluative emissions of the “aesthetic critique” (in the broadest sense, which includes everything that is of value for each culture or cultural group);
4. The veracity of the manifestations or expressive emissions, which are debated in the “therapeutic critique” (in the sense of agreement and coherence between thought, discourse and action on the part of the subjects); and
5. The intelligibility and correctness of human symbolic products (which refers to hermeneutics with pretensions of universality). [6]

Of these five validity claims, the first, second and fifth are argued in discourses whose theses claim universality, i.e., theoretical discourse, practical discourse and explanatory discourse, while the remaining two (3 and 4) refer to arguments that take the form of criticism (aesthetic criticism and therapeutic criticism) and are related to specific cultures, groups or individuals. In Perelmanian terminology, speeches are aimed at convincing the universal audience, i.e., they have universality claims, while criticisms are relevant for persuasion in the framework of particular audiences.

It is possible to combine both perspectives and determine that there are some types of arguments and reasoning that are expressed in speeches (or in fragments of speeches) that

⁴ This ambiguous position of science has been discussed in the thought of Marx and Engels, for thus science is not understood as a theoretical system but is consistent with the ideology/science opposition.

present to the interlocutor a claim, the claim that they are, or aspire to be, valid (true, correct) for all humanity (or for every human being who is concerned with the subject), that is, arguments that have a claim to be accepted by the universal audience. There are other arguments and reasoning (“critiques”) that are only presented to persuade specific audiences, who differ culturally in their assessments and are part of the innumerable group of particular audiences.

The dissociation that is at stake here is that which opposes universal to particular (or general to singular). However, the Hegelian-Marxist notion of the concrete universal suggests a possibility of mediation that converts the opposition into a difference of degree. The concepts and arguments presented to an audience can be weighed by the audience (in what Habermas calls the rhetorical process) by their degree of approximation to universality. This procedure seems to be implicit in the Aristotelian overcoming of the Platonic opposition between doxa and episteme by converting conviction into a degree of maximum persuasion (hence, the dialectical debate from plausible premises can lead to the establishment of a truth). What then is there to say about the classical opposition between science and ideology? Between the claim of universality of science and the particularity of ideology? Does this not lead to the opposition between the true and the false?

Remember Adorno, that is, even works that “penetrate even the most intimate of ideology” can harbor some truth, even if it is a “distorted figure of truth.” Austin also, in his attempt to demystify the true/false pair, brings to the fore the idea of the degree of approximation that allows evaluating different descriptions of something as more or less approximate to the real object of reference. Popper also seems to support this when he speaks of the degree of approximation to the truth—as the scientific community conceives it at all times—as a criterion for choosing between rival theories. Regardless of the way in which truth is conceived (for Perelman-Olbrechts, this is relative to the audience), Habermas, as already mentioned, conceives of propositional truth (and its technical complement, efficacy) as one of five criteria of validity. How can this pluralism of validity criteria be reconciled with the critique of ideology, conceived as opposed to praxis or science or, as I intend here, with the conception of ideology as a false pretense of universality?

4. Ideology and Language

In *Appendix: Ideology and Language* of his book *Principles of Philosophy of Language*, José Hierro S. Pescador reviews the book *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* (attributed to M. Bachtin and V. Voloshinov), whose authors state “every sign is susceptible to an ideological assessment, and everything ideological has semiotic value”, where ideological has a generic meaning. Each social class will endow language with a certain “value accent”, and given that language is not a neutral medium, because more than reflecting reality, language “refracts it”, it expresses the differences in the “capacity and autonomy” of the dominant and dominated

classes: “The dominant class strives to impart a supraclassist and eternal character to the ideological sign, making it unaccentuated and extinguishing or repressing the struggle between different social value judgments that take place in it”. [2] I highlight for my next comment this idea of the “supraclassist and eternal character” of the ideological sign and its “repression” of the difference in value judgments.

Hierro Pescador distinguishes between a neutral sense and a critical sense in the concept of ideology. In the *neutral sense*, used by Bachtin-Voloshinov and in some texts of Marx and Engels, ideology refers to “any doctrine, idea or opinion merely by virtue of its connection to the interests of a class, whatever it may be” [7]⁵. In the *critical sense*, ideology refers to “those doctrines and cultural forms that serve the dominant class to ensure its domination, in thus far as they serve” [7]. This sense is also defined as ideology in the “value sense”: “As a deformed view - by the interests of the ruling class - of things” that are manifested in the ideological use of language by the ruling class to prevent the dominated class from “adequately expressing their own interests through it”, which causes the “true conditions of social communication” to be refracted and deformed “because language is prevented from expressing free and equal class conflict;” at least, this is what the ruling class intends with its “manipulation of language”, which leaves the dominated class “in a linguistically alienated situation” [7].

Recap some of the ideas expressed.

1. With the analytical tradition, the new rhetoric and the theory of communicative action, we attribute to truth (moral rectitude and the intelligibility of shadowy products) a claim of universality.
2. The critical (evaluative) concept of ideology assumes that something particular (or singular) is usually presented with a false pretense of universality (disguised as objectivity, scientificity or ahistorical necessity).
3. This same critical concept of ideology also supposes that when arguing ideologically, one seeks to hide or repress the expression of something (either the very particular character of which is presented as universal, the subjective character of what is presented as objective, or the contingent and historical character of what is presented as necessary and ahistorical).
4. Ideological argumentation supposes a distortion of communication, either because the true is presented as false (betraying the claim of veracity that we assume to our interlocutor), because it presents the particular interest as a general interest or because the expression of different points of view is repressed.

⁵ This neutral sense of ideology is used too by authors how T. van Dijk: “Ideologies are the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members.” [3], “... ideologies are the fundamental beliefs that form the basis of the social representations of a group “. [3] y Thomas Piketty: « Je vais tenter dans le cadre de ce livre d'utiliser la notion d'idéologie d'une façon positive et constructive, c'est-à-dire comme un ensemble d'idées et de discours a priori plausibles visant à décrire comment devrait se structurer la société... Une idéologie est une tentative plus ou moins cohérente d'apporter des réponses à un ensemble de questions extrêmement vastes portant sur l'organisation souhaitable ou idéale de la société » [12]

5. Conclusion

In conclusion: ideology manifests itself mainly as a false pretense of universality. In this sense, it almost always coincides with a fallacy recognized by logicians (and epistemologists) since classical antiquity, i.e., the fallacy of abusive or hasty generalization, fallacy to which the logical invalidity of the induction corresponds, although it is usually presented as an enthymeme (or rhetorical syllogism) that hides the universal premise, which is what would justify the validity of the conclusion.

From this point of view, most ideological statements can be analyzed as abusive generalizations. Thus, racism would be the defense of the universal validity of the thesis that there are superior and inferior races (justifying the dominance of some human groups over others); machismo would be expressed in the claim of universal truth of the thesis that males are superior to females, in all or some aspects (which would also justify the dominance of men over women); and the ideology of liberal free trade would be based on the thesis that such a form of economic exchange guarantees the economic well-being of all (hiding the exploitation and the unequal nature of the conditions of exchange).

Other cases would be slightly more complex, for example, religion. When and why is religion an ideology? First and from the point of view of atheistic materialism, religion is based on a falsehood: the existence of a creator, omnipotent and righteous god. Second, religion involves moral rules presented as good or correct for all humanity and at all ages. Thus, monotheistic religion not only presents a certain image of God as the only true one but also moral commandments as the only correct morals in any time and place. The same could be said when the mythical accounts in sacred books are considered in opposition as expressions of historical truth and scientific truth.

The criterion of ideology as a false pretense of universality and, therefore, as a fallacy of abusive generalization can be tested in the daily arguments in which we usually make this type of generalization or in which, in

an enthymematic way, we assume unconfessed or unspeakable universal premises.

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