Ideology — a Static Definition of Reality

IDEOLOGY HAS BEEN APPROACHED from two perspectives, the first treats the concept neutrally as the mode of organisation of perceptual information (external reality, including ideas) while the second treats ideology within the framework of an objective reality that is knowable, ideology being seen as a distortion of this reality.

Weber1 can be approached as a representative of the first school of thought — ideology is viewed as a system of beliefs about reality, ethically neutral, held either individually or by a group. Weber sees ideas coalescing around interests via 'elective affinity' but has no systematic theory of ideology. The relationship of ideas and beliefs to particular social characteristics is placed in a value-free context. Weber identifies particular ideas that are congruent with particular social formations (e.g. the protestant ethic and capitalism) but there is no value judgement placed on the content consciousness (language) and may serve as a brake to consciousness.

1 Although Weber has no explicit theory of 'ideology', because the development of his notion of the interplay between 'ideal and material interests' has been described as a 'dialogue with Marx's ghost' (a dialogue particularly with the ghost's notion of ideology), followers of Weber have regarded him as having reformulated the theory of ideology. Thus Weber's 'theory of ideology' may be found in his discussions of the relation between 'ideal and material interests' in Gerth, H.H. & Mills, C.W. (eds.), From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology. New York, Oxford University Press, 1947 and Weber, M., The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. London, Allen & Unwin, 1930.

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of the beliefs themselves, rather they are treated as social facts and a part of the total social context. On the individual level this approach is characterised by the concept formation notions expressed by Piaget. Piaget\(^2\) holds that the child stamps his spontaneous concepts with his own personality and has his non-spontaneous concepts affected by adults. Again the use to which these concepts are put or the nature of the input is not ethically questioned.

These approaches view the organisation of beliefs about reality as ends in themselves for study, they pass no judgements in relation to the congruence between perceived reality and 'absolute' reality. It is a relativistically oriented study which seeks to explain human action within its own relative frame. Barnes takes this ethically neutral system to its extreme, stating that "an ideology is a belief system that is internally consistent and consciously held".\(^3\)

Marx\(^4\) is the major proponent of the second orientation, an orientation which states that reality is knowable but ideology is a purposive distortion of this reality. This concept of ideology is based on an interest theory of social action which states that the context is not neutral but responsive to a particular formulation of reality ordered and organised by a particular dominant interest group.

From this viewpoint the expression of a total reality is ordered by reference to a partial reality which masquerades as the total and serves to organise reality through a pre-existent frame. Lefebvre\(^5\) suggests six characteristics of this conception. Firstly ideologies start in fragmentary, partial reality; they refract (not reflect) reality via pre-existing representations, that is in 'acceptable form'; ideologies distort praxis by constructing an abstract, unreal, fictitious theory of the whole; ideologies are (a) general, speculative and abstract (b) they represent determinate, limited and special interests; they have some basis in reality but can only be evaluated post facto; finally in this view ideologies mediate between praxis and

Effectively, the partial reality provides the meaning framework within which all new information (in fact all information) is filtered

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\(^4\) The concept of ideology is found in most of Marx's works; a good exposition however, can be found in Marx, K. & Engels, F., *The German Ideology Parts I & III* (trans. R. Pascal), New York, International Publishers Co., 1947.


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and ordered. Ideology is thus the context, ordered and organised by a particular interest in the guise of general interest, of partial reality in the guise of total reality, a totalised totality that integrates meaning under a dominant and pervasive system. In this sense ideology is a reification, an extrapolation of a limited range of values from the total range, an investment of this chosen range with the qualities of the total and a resolving of the total as an expression of the partial. This view does not see ideology as unreal but sees it as the real expression of a biased or unreal content. Individuals and groups can experience reality within this limited context, thus ordering their perceptions of reality on the basis of an untrue and distorted frame.

Mannheim's concept may be viewed as serving an integrative function which at once reorganises and broadens the total concept in such a way that both the above approaches are comprehended. Mannheim makes two distinctions within his approach to ideology. The anterior condition of all ideological expression is formulated as the 'particular' and 'total'. Seen as a historically developing condition the particular relates to one idea within a total context of ideas while the general can be viewed as the total context itself.

This condition is seen by Mannheim to precede that of 'specific' and 'general' formulations of ideas in action. 'Specific' ideology relates to the ideality of a definite group, raised to the status of objective validity and seen by that group as the datum from which views of opponent groups may be assessed as distortions of this reality and consequently labelled ideologies. This view is seen by Mannheim to precede the recognition by all groups of the relativity, of their own reference frames. In this final phase, labelled 'general' by Mannheim, there is a reflexive recognition by each group that not only are its opponents' views ideological but its own are open to the same construction.

If relativism is considered to be the total context, all formulations of the field hold equal validity in terms of the knowing subject, i.e. they are true for him. However, the subject is object for any other's totalisation of the fields so that the relationships within the field are unique to each subject. This means that there is no basis for reciprocal recognition of an identical field and every statement about the field by every subject within the field holds validity only

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7 Ibid., pp. 57-62.
8 Ibid., pp. 67-74.
in terms of the author of the statement. Consequently for explanatory purposes every explanation is of equal value, but this reduces the notion of explanation to idiosyncratic description. Each phenomenon is unique and therefore explanation is impossible.

So far relativism has been posed as the mutually exclusive alternative to absolutism. This separation is in the frame of Aristotelian logic and in these terms is not possible to resolve within itself. Resolution of this dilemma is only possible by recourse to an alternative form of reason—dialectical thinking. This provides a transcendent synthesis which retotalises both absolute and relative frames of reference within a new epistemology which is designed to avoid the rigidly oppositional thinking of the Aristotelian system. If the initial assumption is one of change rather than stasis then the law of identity does not apply. From the assumption of change, reality must be viewed as in constant process, i.e. it is at all times, becoming other than it is. Consequently reality is seen as a becoming totality.

From this approach epistemology is concerned with the meaning of expressions — the way expressions are ordered in their changing context. Each act of ordering the context in a particular way provides at once a partial and transitory formulation of reality. This act of ordering is a totalisation of the field in such a way as to invest it with particular meaning. Because of the basic assumption that change is the condition of the environment, the particular totalisation is one moment which has no continuity — the act of totalisation is at the same time providing the conditions for de-totalisation and thus necessitating a retotalisation if meaning is to be continued. On the other hand, a totality is a finality, the process of which is frozen into a unitary, objective frame. Given that the basic assumption is change then a totality is inevitably a distortion of process and a false representation of reality as object. This formulation of reality corresponds to Marx's concepts of reification.

Marx identifies reification as the result of a projection of


11 The following account of Marx’s notion of ‘reification’ draws on Lefebvre, H. Op. Cit., pp. 48-49.
object qualities onto what is essentially a voluntary human construction. Thus categories are given the qualities of things; they become in-itself-others and are viewed as possessing individual existence beyond their construction. That is they are viewed as entities of themselves. From this point of view the notion of say, ‘consumer’ is reified if the concept is invested with qualities that provide it with an existence of itself, divorced from the context of the category. ‘Consumer’ as a concept is essentially only the form that an abstracted series of qualities takes and is hypothetical construct. To then view the people who may be subsumed under this category as ‘consumers’ and to act towards them as interchangeable units, each a perfect substitute for the other, is to abstract the people and relate only to the category.

The whole concept of reification retains the implications of distortion which are characteristic of the Marxian notion. For the analysis of society it is necessary to retain the distortion component in any conception of ‘ideology’. Weber, and those theorists who view ideology in an ethically neutral context, divest the concept of any explanatory power and reduce it to mere description of concept formation. From this point of view there is no necessity to have a concept of ideology at all.

In the Marxian tradition ideology is used to debunk alternative conceptions of reality in terms of their divergence from that definition of reality posed as objective within the Marxian frame. This necessitates an approach which assumes an objective reality which may be known and is based in an absolutist epistemology oriented towards the discovery of the truth. In effect this approach turns the concept of ‘truth’ into a reific object, with a particular formation being expressed as an absolute. Truth is regarded as timeless, independent of context, contained within itself, an absolute formulation of a static reality.12 As soon as the concept of ideology is introduced however, the ‘reality’ of all formulations must be assessed as ideological, thus introducing a relativistic content to the apparent absolutist frame. The Marxian reality may be assessed as a partial reality masquerading as total and consequently made to appear as an arbitrary choice in the same manner as any other ideology. This is an inherent problem in the traditional Marxian analysis of ideology. Weber’s approach may be justifiably criticised by Marxists as pure description while the Marxian approach may be criticised by Weberians as avoiding the inherent problem of relativism; consequently a new synthesis is required to transcend

both these problems.  

With an epistemology that is concerned with meaning (i.e. the subjective context placed on object formations by an active other) relativism is built into the framework and both the absolute and relative context are apprehended as constituents of one becoming reality. This formulation also includes the assumption of change as the systematic context of social reality. In terms of meaning there is no single timeless reality: it is the apprehension of an object’s expression in a context which invests the object with meaning. An epistemology concerned with this has relativism at its basis; that is, it is concerned with the definition of an object via its relation to a particular context—the way in which meaning is ascribed.

Taking this view of epistemology, it is still possible to analyse society within the framework of ideology as distortion. Thus while relativism is retained, the analytic value of the concept of ideology has not been sacrificed. Ideology may be viewed as reification — which is the static principle of order through which all information is processed — so that a partial formulation of reality is raised to the status of an eternal comprehensive system. Reality takes the form of totalisation, detotalisation and retotalisation where the knowing subject actively comprehends his environment by projecting a system of order. In effect the author invests the external environment with a subjective condition and at the same time re-introjects this project as understanding. This operates to provide a context of meaning whereby the subject ascribes external objects with particular values and orders the perceived field in terms of the relationships of these values as a method of comprehension. This process involves activity on the part of the knowing subject who thus totalises his field. At the same time this particular ordering of the field adds a new element to the field — the projected meaning — and consequently a new integration of the field is required. This is the process of detotalisation which necessitates retotalisation. Thus totalisation, detotalisation and retotalisation are inextricable moments of a single praxis and underly the concept of the becoming nature of reality.

Ideology is a denial of the becoming nature of reality and is the imposition of a single static framework which is a totality that freezes the process of totalisation, detotalisation and retotalisation. Being a static reality, ideology distorts the real process.

13 From the references above it is clear that Mannheim was aware of the validity of these counter-criticisms and unsuccessfully attempted synthesis of the two schools. While he recognized the need for a frame of reference with in-built propensity for change, he never employed such a frame nor did he realise its full implications.