
IDEOLOGY AS A MEANS OF INTERPRETATION

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(Received 27 March 2012)

Abstract

Initially launched by Marx, the ideological interpretation turned off to a new track through Karl Mannheim's 'perspectivism' or 'relationism'. The new perspective sought to identify the conditions of knowledge possibility within society and to proceed towards a phenomenological analysis of ordinary life. However, Manheim's theory sparsely resulted into text interpretations as such. Hence, the rediscovery of 'perspectivist' analysis may bring important changes in the ensuing perception of many theoretical constructions: ultimately, these theories are brought back to life and, no longer presented as being written by some shadow hand, they become the answers which flesh and blood individuals gave to the issues that occasionally challenged them.

Keywords: hermeneutics, ideology, interpretation, philosophy, theory, truth

1. Introduction

A means of interpreting the philosophical constructions that became famous since the 19th century is the ideological perspective. It is widely known that, from Marx and Engels' writings, the ideological approach to theoretical outputs has become an effective method to unmask the authors' 'real' interests or to unveil the 'true' meaning of their conceptions; consequently, their works received that precise interpretation that would have built a coherent accusation in order to free the community from these disguised 'class-enemies'. The literature in the field of social sciences and humanities is full of such approaches. In fact, it might be asserted that the ideological method in scanning philosophy carried up a rather rich career, and not exactly a marginal one. Yet, it should be pointed out that the expression 'ideological interpretation' does not designate only the Marxist hermeneutics – whose success we have just mentioned above – but also another meaning which, notwithstanding its Marxist heritage, was not as used as the former. We call here the attention on 'perspectivism' or 'relationism', a method which, after Karl Mannheim's developments, has been framed in the direction of identifying the conditions of possibility for issues such as knowledge in society and the phenomenological analysis of daily life, and less as a means of sheer text interpretation.

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Through a close study of the ideological phenomenon, I discovered that the ideology has been given a great variety of definitions, all of them belonging to one the following three clusters of meaning:

1. „Ideology is a coherent set of scientific and philosophical theories, beliefs and expressions, assumed in mass, through which individuals and communities perceive their identity, their relationships with the world and power relationships (all these objectivations being the effect of socialisation and the binder of any community) in order to pursue their happiness (regardless of the name it could possible bear: emancipation, wellbeing, comfort etc.);
2. Ideology is a tool of political domination (that may take the form of emancipation) whose usage may take on many shapes: either the imposition of a type of rationality (the technical one) or of a symbolic universe as the only valid and desirable one, or the creation of some measures of social engineering, or the explanation and arrangement of facts as the succession of a idea;
3. Ideology is a method of knowledge in social sciences” [1].

Among these, it was the second cluster of meaning that prevailed in the perception of ideology. This is why difficulties to develop it into a research method will arise as long as its negative perception (as a ‘domination’ tool) could still shed suspicions both on the authors who would dare to use it in their discourses. The negative connotation and the evil fame (despite its spectacular career) of the second signification also had an impact on the third cluster of meaning, as the ideological method was thrown into an antonymic relation with the critical competence (highly desirable while interpreting something). Therefore, I strongly believe that such a marginalisation of ideology robs us of yet another possibility to understand the symbolical products of various ages.

My present endeavour to rehabilitate ideology as a means of text interpretation will follow a two-step analysis: in the first place, I shall present a brief history of ideology as a means of knowledge in the field of Social sciences; secondly, I shall draw the attention to the new perspectives of the ‘perspectivism’.

2. Brief history of ideology as a means of interpretation

Initially, ideology was framed as a theory of ideas, as its father, Destutt de Tracy [2], meant it as a science (grounding all the other sciences) consisting of a religiously and metaphysically non-biased investigation of ideas, which would show that these abstract products originate in the human wishes and needs. The resulting knowledge would have accounted for a set of laws, rules and hierarchies dwelling upon natural grounds, and, by promoting the fulfilment of human relevant needs, this was meant to ensure harmony within society. The investigation advanced by the French author (around 1789) was a sort of hermeneutics, yet breaking apart with the abstraction and neutrality level of the

usual philosophical approach. Eventually, its development succeeded to free conscience from what Bacon called *idola*.

Ideology moved to another connotation in Marx and Engels' system of thought, whose views centred on the idea that "the whole ideology shows people and their relationships upside down, like in a darkroom [m. t.]" [3]. The insights of the two socialist thinkers was a turning point in the concept's history, leading to the separation of two main directions: the first betted on this narrow meaning, which pins down a strategy to forge reality in order to support the domination of the ruled by the rulers; the second direction, more widely known within some circles of sociologists, puts forth ideology as a research method of social reality, and is usually called the 'sociology of knowledge'.

Although it is less known by wider audiences, the second direction is almost a century old, with an ascent in three phases: Max Scheler's philosophy [4] was continued by Karl Mannheim's theorisations on ideology [5], and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's attempts to sketch a vision cleansed from ideology. As Berger and Luckmann show [4, p. 14-18], the sociology of knowledge originates in the Marxist idea according to which human consciousness is determined by social life. Scheler, the architect of the expression 'sociology of knowledge', considered that its purpose was to "to frame a philosophical anthropology which would transcend the relativity of historically and socially localised points of view [m. t.]" [4]. In his mind, the relationship between 'real factors' and 'ideal factors' (concepts which actually expressed the Marxist couple infrastructure-superstructure) is an adjusting one: real factors adjust the conditions wherein the ideal factors appear even though they cannot influence their content. Thus, the sociology of knowledge would be "the method by which one would study the socio-historical selection of the ideal content, being inhered that the latter is independent from socio-historical causality and thus impervious to sociological analysis [m. t.]" [4, p. 17].

Karl Mannheim would turn out with an opposed perspective as he believed that society determines not only the presence, but also the contents of human ideation, except for the field of Mathematics and some branches of Natural sciences. By carrying a historical study, he tracked down the change of ideology from a class instrument (with the meaning given to it by Marx and especially the Marxists) to a perfectly honourable research means: "what was once the intellectual armament of a party is transformed into a method of research in social and intellectual history" [5]. In Mannheim's view [5, p. 49-62], there are two types of ideological interpretation: a *particular conception*, which focuses only on some of the adversary's actions and "makes its analysis on a purely psychological level" [5, p. 50], and the *total conception*, whose purpose is "the reconstruction of the systematic theoretical basis underlying the single judgements of the individual" [5, p. 52]. If the former perspective places the adversaries in a relationship of exclusion, the latter allows them to coexist with their perspectives and to carry on a dialogue on the basis of the same theoretical frame of reference: "If it is claimed for instance that an adversary is lying, or that he is concealing or distorting a given factual situation, it is still

nevertheless assumed that both parties share common criteria of validity - it is still assumed that it is possible to refute lies and eradicate sources of error by referring to accepted criteria of objective validity common to both parties. The suspicion that one's opponent is the victim of an ideology does not go so far as to exclude him from discussion on the basis of a common theoretical frame of reference" [5, p. 50]. In a nutshell, Mannheim says, "we begin to treat our adversary's views as ideologies only when we no longer consider them as calculated lies and when we sense in his total behaviour an unreliability which we regard as a function of the social situation in which he finds himself" [5, p. 54].

Here above there is a fact that I believe to be crucial: the "total conception" does neither neglect the intentions of the interpreter, being the means to have "the courage to subject not just the adversary's point of view but all points of view, including his own, to the ideological analysis" [5]. Thus, the research outcome will not incriminate anyone, because, on the whole, the resulted total conception is *non-evaluative*. In this case, class affiliation comes to be nothing more than one of the several determinations taken into account by the social researcher. Although non-evaluative, 'the total conception' does not save the adversary from its particular disreputable aspects. In the latter he will be blamed of either conscious or unconscious forgery, whereas in the former the entire structure of his consciousness will be discredited: "this simple observation means, in the light of a structural analysis of thought, that in earlier attempts to discover the sources of error, distortion was uncovered only on the psychological plane by pointing out the personal roots of intellectual bias. The annihilation is now more thoroughgoing since the attack is made on the noological level and the validity of the adversary's theories is undermined by showing that they are merely a function of the generally prevailing social situation" [5, p. 61-62]. As it can be assumed from the quoted fragments, a complaint of 'false consciousness' comes into play again.

Mannheim understood that this approach might easily slip into pan-ideology; therefore he tried to avoid the danger, arguing that he did not take out entirely the truth's conditions of possibility, but rather brought off a contextualisation for it. As a matter of fact, Mannheim suggests that, while proceeding to the analysis of social phenomena, it is necessary to take into account not only the abstract but also the existential determinations. The proposal did not mean falling into relativism, on the contrary, Mannheim did not mean by 'relationism' a lack of criteria in the analytical process, but the assumption that, given the individual's historical involvement, some assertions cannot be formulated in absolute terms: "Once we recognize that all historical knowledge is relational knowledge, and can only be formulated with reference to the position of the observer, we are faced, once more, with the task of discriminating between what is true and what is false in such knowledge. The question then arises: which social standpoint *vis-a-vis* of history offers the best chance for reaching an optimum of truth?" [5, p. 71] In other fragments, Mannheim shows that 'relationism' can be equated to the fact "that all of the

elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelationship in a given frame of thought. Such a system of meanings is possible and valid only in a given type of historical existence, to which, for a time, it furnishes appropriate expression.” [5, p. 76] Following Dilthey’s system, we acknowledge here a certain resistance to the application of a specific, inherent method in the approach of social sciences (the so-called “spiritual sciences” [6], as Dilthey coined them).

Although the existential determination affects everyone, Mannheim truly believed that intellectuals – the “socially unattached intelligentsia” (*freischwebende Intelligenz*) [5, p. 137], as he used to call them – were the most authorised to carry out the movement toward the “total conception”, as their education and the specific of their activities would have allowed them to acquire skills of “non-evaluative” understanding [5, p. 167]. However the intellectuals’ ‘dwelling’ in the absolute truth is not taken for granted. They detain a rather historical truth out of which, due to their self-reflection ability, intellectuals can distinguish and take apart what really belongs to them.

3. New perspectives of the ‘perspectivism’

The most vocal of Mannheim’s critics was Clifford Geertz, who pointed at the paradox contained in the ‘relationist’ theory: first, the term ‘ideology’ has itself become ‘ideologised’, “by becoming a part of the problem to which it refers” [7], and secondly, Mannheim’s vision ultimately supports the fact that each and any approach is an ideological one (and in this case, Mannheim too should reckon that his own approach is largely ideological). Moreover, the assertion that only “the socially unattached intelligentsia” could have access to the truth is an overtly ideological statement.

In Berger & Luckmann’s opinion [4, p. 21], the most important attempt to go beyond Mannheim belongs to Werner Stark. The Austrian socio-economist considers that the main task of the sociology of knowledge should not be to discover of social distortions, but to study systematically the social conditions of knowledge. Therefore, in Werner’s view, the sociologist should not look for the errors, but for the general truths. I would raise an objection to this theory by acting upon Mannheim’s question: *which social standpoint vis-a-vis of history offers the best chance for reaching an optimum of truth?* I believe that Mannheim’s perspective does not take into account only the conceptions deemed to be errors (even if the thinker calls into debate mainly the situations where two parts are not in agreement), and that his ‘relationism’ does not put aside the study of the extrinsic determinations of truth.

Finally, Berger and Luckmann claim that the sociology of knowledge should be concerned with anything that is related to knowledge within society. ‘Knowledge’ is not supposed to be reduced only to ideas (because they are dealt with only by a small group of people), and any member of society should take part, to a certain extent, to it: “The sociology of knowledge must deal first of all with what people ‘know’ as ‘reality’ in their everyday life, in their non- or pre-

theoretical life. Otherwise put, the sociology of knowledge should focus its interest more on ordinary 'knowledge' (commonsense) than on 'ideas'. It is precisely this 'knowledge' that constitutes the mechanism of understanding in the absence of which no society could exist [m. t.]” [4, p. 24-25]. Thus, the sociology of knowledge becomes a phenomenological analysis of daily life: the authors advance the hypothesis that the “world of daily life” is both a reality given by the individuals' subjective-significant actions (whose cause is not checked out by the individual and so he comes to acknowledge it as objective) and a reality “which emerges from their thoughts and actions and is hitherto held as real [m. t.]” [4, p. 30]. As a consequence, the two sociologists consider this world to be quite non-ideological.

I would say that these matters depend on the meaning of ideology that one adopts. Antonio Gramsci warned us that “we are all *conformists* of some *conformism* or other, always man-in-the-mass or a collective man” [8], and that it is important to acknowledge the historical type of conformism to which we belong.

I have sketched this brief history of ideological thought (called either ‘the sociology of knowledge’, ‘relationism’ or ‘perspectivism’) in order to show that, once the biased reference to the other is let aside, ideology could be advanced and assumed as a method in the investigation of a wide array of subjects, starting from ideas and getting to daily actions. However, the present research is less interested in the potential of ideology to investigate social facts. It is the ideological interpretation of philosophical or political constructions that I seek in this study. Therefore, while interpreting such productions, I proceed to the analysis by determining what aspects are relevant in the application of the ideological/'perspectivist' method:

1. even though a 'hermeneutics of doubt' subsides in any text interpretation, it should go beyond the feeling of 'calculated lies' and open the way to the adversary's determinations; it should not fracture, but make possible a dialogue with the opponent;
2. any intellectual product depends on the socio-historical reality in which its author produced it; this is the reason why its existential determinations should be analysed;
3. the interpreter of a text should identify his/her own interests and determinations in order to state clearly his/her own position;
4. the ideological interpretation preserves the paradox observed in Mannheim's theory on 'ideology and utopia', but I do not see it as a serious drawback to knowledge, as long as in the field of social sciences 'the objectivity' of research builds upon the researcher's struggle to acknowledge his/her own assumptions and determinations.

Bearing upon these aspects, I take them as the necessary principles for advancing an ideological interpretation inspired by Karl Mannheim's 'perspectivist' or 'relationist' manner.

4. Conclusions

Carrying on this research, I could observe that an *ideological interpretation* consists of two meanings: the first is a Marxist one; the other, which unfortunately was not developed according to Mannheim's premises, resumes to the successful interpretation of social facts and less to the text interpretation as such.

The first meaning has been having a brilliant career because it has allowed and still allows disputes between thinkers (most of the times, in those circumstances when the accused is quite unable to defend himself). This is why, to give an ideological interpretation means, for most of those interested, to find reasons to contest someone, to accuse people of evil things so as to proclaim oneself as the positive part of the conflict. Such a practice resorts to reductionisms designed to give some coherence only to the interpreter's thought, leading in turn to the annihilation of interpreted things. Such presumptions are counteracted from two directions: the *traditionalist line*, the one attempting to ignore the evil highlighted by the ideological interpretation in order to save the theoretical construction (thus means looking for a good answer to a crooked problem) and a direction which tries to save the work by giving in to the ideological dispute with the other interpreters, and thus becoming the prey of the foretold method. However, there is also a *third line*, which does not fall into these sins: the '*perspectivist*' or '*relationist*' approach, which starts from the premise that the human creations are marked by choices, encounters, social-historical contexts and so on; it does not mean that the individual is no longer personal or genuine. It is precisely the way in which he responds to these challenges that proves his undisputed originality. Any other thinker's works cannot be 'saved' by passing their political or otherwise experiences exclusively to the biographical paraphernalia or footnotes, or by declaring their relevance only when these disclose spices and anecdotes; there is no solution either in going with an ideological quarrel against the supporters of the Marxist meaning of ideology.

The reason why *the ideological interpretation in its positive form* (perspectivist or relationist) did not turn out spectacular developments is the enforcement of the first meaning, with which those who do not act upon the conflict between interpreters and things interpreted do not want to be associated. The disdain of the first acceptance diminished the development perspectives of the second. I do believe that a re-discovery of the *perspectivist interpretation* may enrich and even bring important changes in the perception of many theoretical constructions. Ultimately, it brings them back to life and no longer presents them as being written by a shadow hand, but as answers that flesh and blood individuals (having private histories, affinities and idiosyncrasies) gave to the issues that occasionally challenged them.

Acknowledgement

This paper was made within The Knowledge Based Society Project supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU ID 56815.

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