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DEMOCRACY AND THE THEORY OF IDEOLOGY

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> *"Tout système totalitaire prétend ignorer le conflit et plus généralement imposer à toutes les activités sociales un dénominateur commun. Ne peut-on dire que la démocratie se caractérise à l'inverse par son intention d'affronter l'hétérogénéité des valeurs, des comportements et des désirs, et de faire des conflits un moteur de croissance?"*
>
> Claude Lefort

The contributions to this special double issue are centrally concerned with the subject of ideology and power. They appear at a time when there is a deepening sense in Europe and North America that the interruption of the post-war consensus is not a transitory or short-lived phenomenon. Everywhere, it is becoming evident that late capitalist societies produce a surplus of problems, unintended consequences and conflicts which cannot at present be "solved" through the usual administrative-bureaucratic means. Within this interregnum, in which the old consensus begins to be replaced by a definite restiveness, the subject of ideology has come to assume a renewed and vital significance. To a considerable degree, this rebirth of intellectual and political interest in ideology is prompted by the growth of a variety of autonomous social movements. Highly critical of the destructive tendencies of the modernization process, these movements are symptomatic of a process of "desubordination"—of a rise in the level of democratic expectations and resistances to illegitimate modes of administrative-bureaucratic decision-making. The new social movements not only demonstrate a remarkable sensitivity to questions of power and domination; they also persistently criticize existing patterns of command and obedience by invoking the term "ideology". There are frequent references, for instance, to the ideological function of capitalism and industrialism, patriarchy and racism, nationalism and détente.

This proliferation of references to the problem of "ideology" provides the reminder that the concept of ideology is linked closely with matters of power and political struggle. In the perspective of the new forms of opposition to late capitalism, the concept of ideology addresses the problem of the legitimacy or credibility of relations of social and political power. In respect of this usage, the new social movements draw upon a theoretical and political tradition which is strongly indebted to Marx. As is well known, it was Marx who first seized the

concept of ideology from the hands of the official powers. As a consequence of this reversal, the theory of ideology ceased to be immediately identified with the inquiries of the *Idéologues*, and their concern (as Bauman indicates) to develop techniques of attaining "civilized" forms of life guided by knowledge discovered through the laying bare of the mechanisms of the human psyche. Consequent upon Marx's reversal, the concept also ceased to be synonymous (as it had been for Napoleon) with the impractical and unrealistic dithering of quixotic meddlers. According to a central thesis of the Marxian project of ideology-criticism, bourgeois ideology serves to blur and conceal social division; it provides a condition of false unity among potentially conflicting groups, principally wage labour and capital. The ideas of the ruling class are represented by Marx as dominant and dominating ideas, inasmuch as they systematically obstruct a collective transformation of the given socio-historical conditions. Bourgeois ideology functions, albeit unsuccessfully, to render social relations as pseudo-transparent, as beyond question and therefore as outside history. Paradoxically, ideological belief systems directly legitimate the dominant material interests of real-life only by claiming to be detached interpretations independent of those real-life processes and their particular interests. As Mârkus explains, Marx unravels and breaks through this paradox and its corresponding closures of thought by way of a "genetic method of critique". The illusory autonomy of ideologies is criticized by confronting them with their real-life basis; ideological discourses are accused of misrecognizing their own conditions of origin and thereby of locking themselves within systems of categories that justify the domination inherent within these conditions.

Within the present period of crisis, it is true, there seems to be something like a "natural affinity" between this Marxian-inspired tradition of ideology-criticism and the new social movements' opposition to arbitrary state and social power. Whether this alliance is in fact plausible, however, is at least open to serious question. The renewed popularity of ideology as a concept guiding political and theoretical contestation is matched by signs of a loss of confidence in the concept. During the past two decades or so, there have been widespread and growing suggestions that those who oppose ideological deception, who seek to "unmask" and abolish distorted prejudice, are themselves deceived and prejudiced. This is no doubt a difficult and complex development, but three reasons in particular can be offered to explain the seriousness of this controversy over ideology and its "unmasking".

(a) First, it has been suggested that contemporary forms of legitimation of power have abandoned the critical optimism of classical bourgeois ideologies. The "end of ideology" movement (Lane, Lipset *et al.*) served as the techno-bureaucratic version of this thesis. Remarkably, some supporters of the new opposition have provided their own variants of this claim that the concept of ideology is no longer directly relevant to late capitalist systems. In their view, both the theory and phenomenon of ideology—and therefore its transcendent, "utopian" potential—have been victimized by contemporary forms of institutionalized power. What is called ideology has become a phenomenon of the past.

It is proposed that, in a strict sense, one can only speak of ideology as vindicative discourse that emerges out of social processes that have become problematic and therefore require a defense through *justificatory* argumentation—such as that provided by late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century bourgeois ideologies. These classical ideologies functioned "to justify and to mobilize public projects of social reconstruction" (Gouldner).

In the contemporary period, or so it is argued, this type of justificatory discourse is sabotaged and replaced by the uncritical approval of conformist views decreed from above. Nowadays, all that is rebellious and argumentative is weakened and subjected to planned administrative control. This theme of the collapse of norms into reality (as Arato emphasizes) is prominent in East European debates over the exhaustion of the emancipatory potential of Marxism under conditions of "actually existing socialism". Under these conditions, it is claimed that Marxist ideology has lost the respect of the Party, and has degenerated into a "sterile though indispensable ritual" (Kolakowski) whose incantations ("proletarian internationalism", etc.) have only one function: to silence all autonomous public discussion. With respect to late capitalist systems, this first argument is also echoed, for example, in Adorno's famous thesis (in his "Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre") that the glorification and "naturalization" of present forms of institutionalized power is synonymous with the deprivation of all transcendence and critique. Reality and (bourgeois) ideology begin to converge; ideology ceases to be a veil, instead becoming the "threatening face of the world".

Two versions of this "end of ideology" thesis are developed below in the previously untranslated essays by Jürgen Habermas and Claude Lefort. Habermas' early reflections on late capitalism are not merely of historical interest. They also serve to foreground his conviction that the growing cynicism of official consciousness necessitates the substitution of theoretical strategies of immanent critique with inquiries into the universal presuppositions of communication and moral-practical argumentation. According to Habermas, the officially provided vindications of state-regulated capitalism are "less ideological" than classical bourgeois discourses. Whereas the latter at least sustained themselves upon moral-practical argumentation, the new justifications of power rely upon references to scientific-technical "imperatives". Under contemporary conditions, official politics tends therefore to become synonymous with the tasks of crisis-management—with "keeping the system going"—and not with autonomous public discussion of competing norms. Scientific-technical development thus becomes more than a crucial productive force; it also assumes the role of a "glassy background" ideology which no longer projects a vision of the "good life". Scientific-technical consciousness directly threatens the possibility of discursively justifying political decisions.

This thesis is pursued, admittedly from a somewhat different theoretical perspective, in Lefort's classic discussion of "the invisible ideology". This new ideology (evident in consumerism, for example) is seen by Lefort to suppress a sense of the contingency of the present by encouraging the belief that everything is sayable, communicable and that, consequently, the existing social order is

homogeneous, fully reciprocal and unmarked by antagonistic divisions. As a consequence, questions concerning *possible* alternatives to the established mode of social life are continually defused. Lefort proposes that there is a striking contrast between this ideology and its early bourgeois predecessors. Classical bourgeois ideology assumed the form of a "scientific" discourse on the process of institution of social reality. The highly unstable and disjointed character of this ideology derived from its attempts to provide positive knowledge of this social "reality" without relying upon metaphysical representations of a realm of "the beyond". Having questioned such metaphysical claims, bourgeois ideology was forced to vindicate its own claims (concerning science, property, progress, etc.) by referring to the already-divided social order of which it was an aspect—but in so doing, it unwittingly revealed the *contingency* of its own validity claims. By contrast, the invisible ideology proliferated by the new communications media makes a fetish of "science" and "objectivity" and presents itself as anonymous and neutral. *Ipso facto*, it suspends consideration of the process of social institution and division as such. All that is novel, different and subversive within the existing social order is harnessed to the here and now. Late capitalist societies appear to be undivided societies "without history"; they become ensnared within symbolic representations that ensure the eternal return of the similar.

(b) Secondly, the classical Marxian critique of ideology is nowadays reproached with having reproduced a certain form of naturalism, inasmuch as it consistently avoided questions concerning language or, more precisely, the crucial importance of signifying practices within social life. There can be no doubt, as Mârkus indicates, that Marx did not deny the decisive socio-political importance of language and inherited culture. Nor should it be considered (as many within and without the Marxist tradition have supposed) that Marx simply conceived ideology as mere veil-like illusions which mask or conceal the brute "facts" of a deeper reality amenable to empirical observation and "correct" theoretical analysis. Social reality for Marx consists of interacting individuals and groups who produce appearances which are something more and else than illusions. These appearances are the modes in which social activities manifest themselves; these appearances have material reality and (under bourgeois conditions, at least) this reality presupposes appearances.

According to Laclau, Hirst, Pêcheux, Gadet and other critics (most of whom are indebted to Althusser), the classical Marxian dénouement of the riddles of ideology rests upon the misleading and untenable distinction between the ideological forms in which "reality" appears or presents itself and a *prior* ontological domain of "reality" which consists of "material" life activity ungoverned by processes of signification. As a consequence of this distinction, ideology is understood as a form of posthumous misrepresentation of a subterranean reality of material life processes; conversely, these material life processes are interpreted as the pre-symbolic point of origin of ideological forms, a point of origin which is also the point of truth that contradicts the "false" dissimulations of ideology.

Marx's retrieval of the Roman myth of Cacus (in the third part of *Theories of Surplus Value*) illustrates his predilection for identifying the "material founda-

tions" of ideology in this way. According to this explanatory metaphor, the bourgeoisie's false, inverted representation of themselves as the source of all wealth resembles the trickery of Cacus, who attempted to conceal his cattle-rustling efforts by herding his prey into his den backwards, so that it appeared they had already departed. This mode of explanation is also strongly evidenced throughout *Capital*. Certain "imaginary" categories of political economy ("value and price of labour"; "wages"; "the fictio juris of a contract"; the "commodity") are seen to arise from the relations of production themselves: those historically specific expressions are interpreted as the mystifying "categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations". These ideological categories and phenomenal forms represent complex relations (or relations of relations, as for instance in the complex, wages-money-value-commodity) as simple and self-evident relations or as properties of things themselves. According to Marx, therefore, these various forms of appearance (which are also called illusions, forms of manifestation, hieroglyphics, semblances, estranged outward appearances) must be systematically distinguished from—and explained with reference to—"real relations", or what he also calls inner connections, essences, real nature, actual relations, the hidden or secret substratum. This mode of explanation and critique of ideology is also evident in the early works. There, Marx (and Engels) similarly propose a distinction between the real and the apparent and, consequently, the need for a rebellion aganst the false rule of the symbolic. The "actual existing world" is contrasted with that which "humanity" says, imagines or conceives, with "the phrases of this world". The materialist conception of history "scientifically" accounts for the latter through recourse to the logic of the former. The formation and pseudo-independence of symbolic appearances is unveiled and explained with reference to the beyond, behind and beneath: material practice itself. The illusions of the epoch are said to be sublimations of the "material life-process", in accordance with whose divisions of labour and class struggles the species produces its own means of need satisfaction and social and political relations. Ideologies therefore have no independent history—in the precise sense that the logic of their birth, rise to dominance and decay is always and everywhere "burdened" by the primordial determinations of the division of labour. Inverted representations of reality, thus, are traceable to the inversions and self-contradictoriness of the actual life-process of "real, active humanity". Conversely, the dissolution of the power of the ruling phrases over the dominated can only be achieved within actual life through revolutions). Liberation is a "practical" achievement and not a symbolic-discursive act.

These formulations have prompted numerous critics to maintain something like the following objection: the Marxian account of the "concealment" function of ideology does not adequately acknowledge that social orders—*including* the forces of production in both their objective and subjective aspects—are historically variable, more or less stable and meaningful orders of subjects and objects structured through definite symbolic schema. The "material life process" is not at all coterminous with the pragmatics of production, for neither escapes symbolic mediation. The supposition that signs are necessarily cognate to the terms of the

deed, that both have a common origin in material utility, must be rejected. A reconstructed theory of ideology must therefore acknowledge that subjects' institution of social and political life is always mediated by meaningful schemes of signification: this signification cannot be conceived as simply a "level" or "dimension" of any social formation. Social and political life is co-extensive with symbolically mediated activity as such. Every experience of the domain of nature or society is constructed throught the production, reproduction and transformation of signifying practices. There is nothing specifically social—not even the labour process itself—which is constituted from an Archimedean point "outside" or "below" these practices. According to Marx's critics, the suppression of this point within the classical theory of ideology produced a serious underestimation of the democratic—or authoritarian—potential of forms of life and struggle "outside" the sphere of commodity production and exchange. The "concealment" theory of ideology also devalued the importance of symbolically mediated traditions and their now well-recognized capacity to exert a profound influence long after their time and place of origin; one symptom of this devaluation of tradition, as Mârkus points out, is Marx's inability to come to terms with his own recognition that certain cultural creations (e.g., Greek art and epic) are endowed with an epochal significance. Finally, the thesis that ideas, language and tradition can be genetically explained through reference to the prevailing relations of production is seen to be linked with that "comfortable metaphysics" (Pêcheux) which considers the possibility of transforming processes of signification into mere instruments of communication of interacting subjects. Dreaming of an "end of ideology", this metaphysics anticipates what can in fact never be attained—future forms of language and life in which subjects can purge their communications of all misrecognition, ambiguity and treacherous density.

(c) A third reason for the loss of credibility of the classical Marxian project of "unveiling" ideology concerns its dependence upon scientific assumptions. Marx's striking reluctance to designate the natural sciences as "ideological" provides one clue to this difficulty. According to a surprising coalition of unorthdox Marxist, philosophic-conservative and "post-structuralist" critics, the Marxian conviction that "the material transformation of economic conditions of production . . . can be determined with the precision of natural science" results in the false assimilation of the critique of bourgeois society to the instrumentalist project of the natural sciences. Several negative consequences are seen to follow from this conflation of science and the critique of ideology. Insofar as ideology is contrasted with natural scientific knowledge which is described in explicitly universalistic terms, the Marxian theory of ideology is seen to be wedded, indirectly, to a conception of scientific-technical progress which is today highly questionable. What is more, the false reduction of the Marxian critique of ideology to natural scientific inquiry implies that the "epistemological" status of the empirical-analytic sciences and ideology-criticism cannot be distinguished. The possibility of a context-dependent and critical *interpretation* of social processes is incarcerated, so to speak, within the categories of empirical knowledge of what is scientifically and technically possible; bracketing those interpretive

and intersubjective processes through which *all* enquiry is preconstructed and organized, the critique of ideology proceeds on a path marked by the "fool's beacon" (Raymond Williams) of empirical-analytic, instrumental science.

Marx's failure to elaborate a critique of ideology distinct from the instrumentalist meaning of natural science is seen by his critics as one reason why later Marxism has been implicated within the danger common to all scientific theories, *viz.*, that these theories faithfully believe themselves to be universal knowledge which is in turn capable of technical implementation. This assumption has justifiably generated the suspicion—expressed by Bauman and others—that the theory of ideology belongs to the rhetoric and tactics of administrative-bureaucratic power. It is as if the strategy of unmasking illusion is capable of generating absolute, technically useful knowledge of a "real" social totality—so to say, the bright gaze of "real, positive science" supposes that it can permanently dispel the darkness of all ideological mystification. The relationship between Marxian science and its addressees is therefore assimilated to the model of scientific learning processes, while the Marxian science itself adopts an overly "negative", even arrogant, disregard for everyday practices which do not conform to its totalizing theoretical presuppositions.

Undeniably, scientistic Marxism in this sense exerted considerable influence throughout the whole of the Second and Third Internationals, and may be seen to culminate in the authoritarian rituals of contemporary Soviet Marxism. Opposing and confining those "bourgeois ideologists" who dare, under conditions of "actually existing socialism", to criticize, rebel or simply live differently and in solidarity, this Marxism dogmatically insists upon its role as privileged bearer of scientific insight into the laws of nature and history. It forms an alliance with the anti-political, bureaucratic dream of a future world in which all antagonisms have been transparently resolved, a world where social and political activity has been stripped at last of its contingency and ambiguity.

Other accounts of ideology have evidently not fully escaped the limitations and (potentially) authoritarian consequences of this strong form of scientism. Indeed, one of the remarkable characteristics of contemporary controversies about the subject of ideology is the willingness of many theorists to indict *all* forms of totalizing knowledge, Marxism included. The antagonists of scientism, that is to say, cast the nets of their indictment widely to include not only the orthodox Marxian critique of ideology-as-failed-or-pseudo-science, but also the functionalist-sociological view that ideology manifests itself as a "discrepancy between what is believed and what can be established as scientifically correct" (Parsons) and, most recently, Althusser's thesis that knowledge (of social totalities) is produced in and through an autonomous discourse that both speaks "in ideology", yet tries to break with ideology. As Hirst, Pêcheux and Laclau indicate, Althusser's theory of ideology depends upon a conception of social relations as a totality governed by a single determining principle. The theory seeks to scientifically explain how the system of capitalism is reproduced, that is, why it functions as a "society". This Althusserian formulation, or so they argue, obscures the logic of the mediations between scientific discourse and its ideological object domain.

The dualism between ideology and totalizing, scientific knowledge is supposed to be unquestionable. The "object" of thought is represented as virtually internal to thought. At the same time, scientific knowledge itself is dehistoricized, as if it were prior to all intersubjective processes of discourse and power. Scientific knowledge misleadingly appears to possess a permanent validity in relation to a ubiquitous ideology which tends—by virtue of the allegedly indisputable claims of science itself—to become synonymous with "false consciousness".

There can be no doubt that these three important challenges to the legitimacy of the classical Marxian concept of ideology have generated fresh and unforeseen enigmas and impasses. The contributions to this issue nevertheless indicate that these (and other) challenges have indicated a range of difficult theoretical questions which are of vital political importance in the present period of crisis. Several of these considerations can be mentioned here.

Concerning the *first* challenge to the classical Marxian theory of ideology, further consideration must be given to establishing whether the range and types of legitimation of power have changed qualitatively since the classical bourgeois era. Questions are prompted concerning the extent of evidence for the thesis that the prevailing ("ruling") forms of ideology in late capitalist systems have become cynical and therefore incapable of serving as the immanent reference points from which alternative, "post-modern" insights can be developed. Doubts can also be raised about the degree to which the "end of ideology" thesis persistently underestimated the importance of lived traditions of protest, resistance and solidarity which have survived—and continue to defy—the advance of the modernization process. Following Giddens, Pêcheux, Laclau and others, additional questions must be asked about the extent to which the end of ideology theorists exaggerated the capacity of "official" ideologies (e.g., consumerism or professionalism) to mobilize meaning and achieve a total dominance over the populations of late capitalist countries. Are there not systematic limits upon the capacity of "ideological state apparatuses" and other master Subjects and "discourses" to "interpellate" and reproduce subjects with conceptions and capacities appropriate to their places as "agents" in the exploitative social division of labour? Did not the end of ideology theses underestimate, as Pêcheux says, the constant interruption of this division of labour by a "heterogeneous multitude of resistances and revolts"? Further research must also be given over to the new forms of invisible and technocratic ideology and, in particular, to considering whether they are subject to self-contradiction and therefore (as Lefort suggests) incapable of legitimating the established order of reality. And, finally, the present controversies over welfare state capitalism must be explained. It is not the case that these intense controversies—to which the new social movements actively contribute—indicate the "return of ideology", that is, a renewal of ideological discourse in the classical sense? Does this expansion of justificatory argument therefore signal the renewed possibility of immanent critique of the dominant ideologies, of politically "finding the new world through criticism of the old"?

With respect to the *second* objection to the Marxian project of ideology-

critique, there is evidently a growing consensus—strongly expressed in this issue—that it is now imperative to reconstruct the theory of ideology so as to engage contemporary developments in the theory of signification. This consensus undoubtedly helps demolish a number of worn-out shibboleths. It becomes evident, for example, that ideology is not merely a veil-like substance draped over the surface of real relations, and that, therefore, there can be no "end of ideology" in the sense of a future society finely tuned to a "reality" freed from the effects of signifying practices. Contrary to certain orthodox Marxian accounts, this consensus has also correctly emphasized that power is not a "class-determined" entity but, rather, a ubiquitous relationship indissociable from its symbolic representations. Beyond the limits of these advances, however, a range of difficult questions attends any attempt to reconstruct the theory of ideology. Is the theory of ideology once more—reluctantly—thrown back onto some version of Mannheim's thesis of *Ideologiehaftigkeit*: that all signifying practices are ideology-bound, tied to the prevailing modes of being and, more particularly, to definite locales of social and political action? More fruitfully, consideration might be given to the important attempt (of Pêcheux and others) to elaborate an empirical theory of "discursive semantics". Does this approach constitute a decisive advance beyond the limits of the Althusserian framework, such that ideology must now be considered not as the dissimulation of a more fundamental level of "reality", but as an indispensable condition of subjects' living their social relations *as if* they were subjects? In other words, are questions concerning ideology more adequately analyzed with reference to the often unstable complex of discursive formations which provide each subject with its "reality", that is, with a system of self-evident truths and perceived-accepted-submitted to significations? Or is ideology better conceived—as Lefort proposes—as a kind of *repli* (a crease, or fold) of social discourse upon itself, that is, as a certain type of hegemonic discourse which (not always successfully) functions to mask both the conditions of its own engendering and the divisions within the established socio-political order of which it is a vital aspect?

Concerning the *third* challenge: Under pressure from a widespread rejection of scientism, doubts emerge as to whether the project of ideology-criticism is capable of saving itself by abandoning its traditional fetishism of empirical-analytic science, its arrogant presumption that ideology "lies beyond the margins of science" (Giddens). That is to say, can a reconstructed theory of ideology from hereon restrain itself from absolutizing its results by acknowledging its own ambiguous historicity and embeddedness within relations of power? Is it possible for accounts of social and political life provided by such a critique of ideology to understand themselves and *interpretations* (in the sense of contemporary hermeneutics), as open to revision and difference, to the possibility of self-contradiction, unforeseen consequence and the contingencies of historical creation—without at the same time succumbing to an uncritical deference to existing relations of power?

These latter kinds of theoretical questions concerning the possibility of a "post-scientific" critique of ideology are undoubtedly of direct and pressing

political significance in the present conjuncture. For it is becoming evident that the disenchantment with the epistemological confidence of the classical project of ideology-criticism is once again producing a strong revival of the tradition of cognitive and moral-practical relativism first generated in the second half of the nineteenth century. "No privileged truths, only interpretations!" might be taken as the watchword of those currently disillusioned with ideology-criticism. According to this challenge, the struggle to demystify and "unmask" domination produces new and more subtle forms of mystification; freely indulging its suspicion of "illusions", the project of criticizing ideology arrogantly clings to its (misguided) belief in the innocence of critique. Precisely because the critique of ideology fails to examine its *own* authority, it may be seen to belong to the tradition of eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its "excessively negative concentration on error" (Hudson). Bauman expresses this point most forcefully: "the concept of ideology belongs . . . to the rhetoric of power". In the view of such critics, the search for the certainty of knowledge outside mystification must now be abandoned. No longer can ideology be conceived as a distorted representation of reality. Conversely, the critique of ideology must give up its traditional claim to totalizing truth—it must embrace the logic of particularity and context-dependent polytheism. The real world (cf. Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*) is as such only a fable and a struggle between competing fables; religion, science, democracy, familialism, socialism, liberalism, theories of society and politics are so many diverse interpretations of the world or, rather, so many variants of the fable which has no ultimate reference point or existence outside itself.

Does this third challenge to the critique of ideology constitute a welcome liberation from old prejudices? Or must this challenge be seen to directly threaten the democratic-emancipatory goals typically associated with the tradition of ideology criticism since the time of Marx?

A response to these awkward questions cannot be summarized easily, although one proposal deserves some mention here. Beginning with Hans Barth's *Wahrheit und Ideologie* (1945), it has sometimes been argued that relativism does indeed jeopardize the project of social and political emancipation and that, consequently, the theory of ideology must renew its endeavour to distinguish between false (ideological) and true consciousness. According to Barth, for example, the very possibility of human association is dependent upon agreement, and the essence of agreement, whether in the domain of everyday action or scientific investigation, is the idea of truth. Thompson's defense of the model of rational argumentation stands within this tradition initiated by Barth. It is Thompson's thesis that a theory of ideology must account for the ways in which processes of signification serve to induce and sustain the servile dependency of speaking actors upon each other. He sketches a model for the "depth interpretation" of ideological discourse and domination. This model evidently raises questions about the truth status of depth interpretations and exactly how conflicting interpretations can be adjudicated within intellectual and political life. Guided by this problem, Thompson defends a version of the justificatory analysis of truth; this theory of truth in turn depends upon the limiting notions of

self-reflection, rational debate and consensus formation among subjects interacting within idealised conditions of argumentation.

This proposal (as Thompson acknowledges) draws upon a modified version of Habermas' provocative theory of universal pragmatics, and it is therefore uncertain whether it can escape from the latter's unresolved difficulties. In addition to its failure to consider such ideology-related topics as utopia and metaphor, the theory of universal pragmatics systematically avoids the above-mentioned challenge of cognitive and political relativism. Habermas' version of communication theory evidently underestimates the possibility of subjects' *refusal* or *inability* to enter into action oriented to reaching understanding. This deficiency arguably restricts the ability of the theory of universal pragmatics to generate a politically sensitive critique of ideology. According to the most recent versions of this theory, for instance, communicative action which is guided (implicitly or explicitly) by the common conviction that certain "validity claims" are being honoured can be analyzed as *the* fundamental form of communicative and strategic action. The universal pragmatics theoretically privileges "consensual action", that is, communication in which speaking actors *already* co-operate on the basis of certain mutually acknowledged presuppositions. Habermas' explication of the logic of communicative action thus sidesteps the very problems raised by relativists; in accordance with its analytic preference for "clear-cases", it *presumes* the existence of competently speaking and acting subjects who are (a) already in explicit agreement about the necessity to cooperatively reach mutual understanding; (b) already capable of distinguishing between the performative and propositional aspects of their utterances; and who (c) already share a tradition and, therefore, a common "definition" of their situation.

An alternative, and perhaps politically more fruitful way of proceeding beyond the relativist impasse—of regaining a theoretical framework for criticizing and resisting contemporary forms of institutionalized power as *domination*—is to "radicalize" this relativism by asking after its unspoken or implicit presuppositions. This "counterfactual turn" might take the form of a careful reflection upon those institutional grounds or conditions necessary for the theoretical and political realization of relativism as such. Consider, for example, the conclusion of the critique of Althusser provided in Hirst's *On Law and Ideology*: "Discourses . . . become interpretable and intelligible only in terms of their own or other discourses' constructions and the categories of adequacy which they apply to them. One has in the absence of a privileged level ('experience', or 'reason' which imposes form on discourse) to accept the *difference* of the referents of discourse, the potential infinity of referents." If this type of cognitive-political relativism—the conclusion that discourses may be non-identical and incapable of reduction to each other's terms—is to be plausible, and if it is to avoid sliding into an uncritical deference to existing relations of subordination, it must engage in further reflection upon its own tacitly presupposed conditions of possibility. For instance, the relativist thesis that one must accept the non-identity or incommensurability of discourse implies an opposition to all claims and contexts which deny this thesis; so to say, relativism is forced to commit itself to the task of

liquidating all stubborn Truth claims and rendering smaller residual prejudices "even more liquid". In this respect, conversely, cognitive and political relativism rests upon the claim that, in principle, a minimal agreement or consensus *can*, indeed *must* be reached in order to facilitate the permanent coexistence or contestation of *different* discourses. Actors' recognition that their own discourse is limited or incommensurate with that of others presupposes that they have already "agreed to disagree". This implied or tacit agreement to disagree in turn *supposes* the need for institutional conditions in which this agreement and disagreement can *permanently* and *unrestrictedly* be renewed. Securing the recognition that the referents of discourses are variable and potentially infinite is always and everywhere conditional upon the securing of public spheres of discussion, decisionmaking and disobedience. Only under conditions of unrestricted debate and a plurality of institutional mechanisms to ensure this debate could individuals and groups proficiently, competently or even mimimally defend their particular "ideals". Thus, the relativist critics of ideology-criticism become ensnared within a self-destructive paradox: the principle of relativism (of which the important polemic against the science-ideology dualism is one aspect) contains the *imputation* of democratic, public life. This principle presumes a special type of institutional form about whose *validity* actors must already and always have come to agreement—it presumes, in other words, the availability of forms of public life, to which individuals and groups can have recourse, and only by means of which they can express their opposition to (or agreement with) others' "ideals". Spheres of autonomous public life, in short, serve as a counterfactual, as a condition which must be established if cognitive and political relativism is to obtain. This condition is not a substantive "ought", which takes the form of a heteronomous principle "recommended" to social and political actors. It is not just one condition among others, in the sense that actors struggling to defend or realize their "ideals" could decide to satisfy the condition for a while, only later to reject it. The counterfactually anticipated condition of democratic, public life, on the contrary, cannot be renounced without contradicting and wholly rejecting the relativist principle as such.

If the trajectory of this argument is plausible, then it suggests the possibility of reconnecting the theory of ideology with the problem of domination. From here on (as Giddens and Laclau suggest, although from somewhat different perspectives), the concept of ideology might be applicable to any and all sectional forms of life which endeavoured to represent and secure themselves as a general or universal interest; ideological forms of life are those which demand their *general* adoption and, therefore, the exclusion and/or repression of every other *particular* form of life. So understood, the *critique* of ideology breaks decisively with the traditional political aim of the theory of ideology, namely, its attempt to devalue the false universality of an opponent's position by presenting one's own form of life as universally true and ethically justified, hence unassailable. To criticize ideology in this revised way is to emphasize that there is an inverse, but nevertheless intimate theoretical and political relationship between democracy and ideology: to tolerate ideology is to stifle the very pluralism and autonomy

which is essential to democratic, public life.

From this new and admittedly tentative perspective, the theory of ideology would move beyond the antiquarianism of the traditional history of ideas approach to the subject of ideology. It would instead engage questions about power and its legitimacy, and therefore enter into the concerns, threats and intellectual and political choices posed within late capitalist societies. To reconstruct the theory of ideology in this way is to engage the concerns of the new social movements, who also strive to prevent a petrification of social and political life by initiating democratic reversals of power. To criticize and struggle against ideology, in sum, is to defend and anticipate a differentiated and pluralistic system of public spheres, wherein decisions of interest to whole collectivities are formulated and administered autonomously by all their members.

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