

FOUR THESES ON IDEOLOGY*

Anthony Giddens

The concept of ideology has been debated for some two hundred years within and without the disciplines of philosophy, politics and sociology. If there are such things as contested concepts, and if there were a prize for the most contested concept, the concept of ideology would very nearly rank first. Nobody can even decide how to pronounce it! Given the existence of these traditional debates and problems concerning the ideological content of ideology itself, one might think it best to throw one's hands up in despair, and discard the notion altogether. But I do not think such a reaction would be justified. I want to argue that it is possible to point to some modes of analyzing ideology that at least provide a framework for coping with the issues that the concept raises.

Along these lines, I wish to mention four theses, and to give at least a cursory analysis of them. Briefly, I shall claim, first, that the concept of ideology has to be separated out from the content of *science*; second, that it is *empty of content* because what makes belief systems ideological is their incorporation within systems of domination; third, that to understand this incorporation we must analyze the mode in which patterns of signification are incorporated within the medium of *day-to-day practices*; finally, that we should be critical of the "dominant ideology thesis" elaborated in different versions by such authors as Parsons, Althusser and Habermas.

My first thesis is that the notion of ideology has to be disconnected from the philosophy of science, with which in the past it has almost inevitably been bound up. The term *ideology* was coined as a positive term, meaning something like an all-embracing and encyclopaedic form of knowledge, capable of cutting through the resistance of prejudice to produce a form of certain knowledge upon which social technology could in turn be founded. As is well known, Napoleon is supposed to have reversed this perspective, treating ideology as a derogatory appellation. Ideology became regarded as "that which lies beyond the margins of science"—as the very repository of prejudice and obfuscation. "Ideology", henceforth, is supposed in some way to function as a boundary condition of science. Now I want to *reject* any definition of ideology as falsity, as non-science or as 'poor science'—the concept of ideology should not be formulated by comparing or contrasting it with the achievements of science.

In the space of these brief remarks, obviously, I don't have time to illustrate how such connections with science have been part of the history of the notion of

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ideology. Nevertheless, I take it that the entanglements to which it leads are fairly clear. Compare, for example, the respective views of Popper and Althusser, both of whom wish to demarcate in a clear-cut fashion between what counts as science and what does not. Popper's prime examples of ideologies or pseudo-sciences—Marxism and psychoanalysis—are for Althusser precisely the type cases of sciences, of forms of knowledge which have broken free from ideology. I consider this rather comic opposition to be based upon a false starting point. I want to reject the argument that ideology can be defined in reference to truth claims. And I also want to reject the idea that ideology can be defined in terms of any specific *content* at all. The significance of these points will, I hope, become apparent when I move to my second argument.

My second thesis is this: the concept of ideology should be reformulated in relation to a theory of *power* and *domination*—to the modes in which systems of signification enter into the existence of sectional forms of domination. This can be illustrated with reference to Marx's writings on ideology. Marx wrote a great deal about ideology, and at the same time hardly anything at all. A great deal of his substantive writing, including *Capital*, is a critique of ideology, in the sense that it is a critique of political economy. But if one actually searches through Marx's writings for analyses of a concept of ideology as such—most of them appear in *The German Ideology*—there are very few sources to be found where Marx sets out a systematic exposition of the notion. In Marx one finds only various possible formulations of what the concept of ideology means. In *The German Ideology*, one can distinguish two senses in which Marx uses the term. On the one hand, there are the famous observations, discussed by Kofman and others, about how the ideologists write history upside down. The ideologists are accused of writing history as seen through a *camera obscura*, as if it were an echo of human consciousness. These kinds of comments occur frequently in *The German Ideology* and occasionally elsewhere in Marx's writings, and they imply that the way of demystifying history is to set it right way up again, by studying history as it really is.

In *The German Ideology*, however, there is another celebrated assertion about ideology, namely, that the ideas in any given epoch are above all the ideas of the dominant class. According to this proposition, the dominant class has access to notions which it can in some sense disseminate to legitimate its own domination. This version of the theory of ideology connects ideology to the problem of domination. The German ideologists are seen to write history from a point of view that serves to sanction the existing forms of power in the societies in which they are the intellectual leaders. Drawing upon this second Marxian strand, I therefore propose to interpret the concept of ideology in the following way. I want to define ideology as the mode in which forms of signification are incorporated within systems of domination so as to sanction their continuance. I take it to be the type case of such a notion of ideology that sectional interests are represented as universal interests. This is the basic mode in which forms of signification are incorporated within systems of domination in class societies. In my opinion, this point is exemplified in *Capital*, where Marx tried to demonstrate

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that political economy is ideological insofar as it conceals the operation of capitalism as a class system. The political economists failed to incorporate an account of either the historical origins of expropriated labour or of the nature of surplus value.

My third thesis is that the analysis of ideology must come to terms with recent developments in the philosophy of language and action. Very briefly, these developments mark a transition from a philosophy of language based upon the notion that language is above all a medium of describing the world, to an interpretation of language which emphasizes language as praxis or as the 'other face' of action. Language is intertwined with everyday practices. If one acknowledges the significance of this philosophical shift, it has immediate implications, I think, for the problem of ideology. Most traditional treatments of ideology have exaggerated the importance of propositional belief claims as components of ideologies. This point can be illustrated with a mundane example. Researchers visit a factory and ask workers questions like: What do you think of the Queen? What do you think of the Royal Wedding? Do you believe that management and workers work together like a team? The researchers then imagine that they have uncovered key features of ideology by virtue of their finding that there is some agreement about the continuing importance of the role of the monarchy, etc. Now while I do not wish to deny the possible significance of this kind of finding, it does seem to me to be highly important not to limit the notion of ideology to such formulations. This is because the most subtle and interesting forms of ideology are those incorporated within day-to-day practices. While not necessarily propositional beliefs, these forms of ideology are very often the modes in which signification is incorporated as part and parcel of what one does in daily life. If I may again pursue the previously mentioned example: more important than whether or not workers agree that they and management are a team are the ways in which modes of signification serve to produce a daily world in which the work situation and economic life are treated as essentially separate from political life, from their lives as citizens. The insulation of the economic from the political I take to be one of the major mechanisms of class domination. The most subtle forms of ideology are buried in the modes in which concrete, day-to-day practices are organized. If one simply treats ideology as the content of propositional belief systems, a vast area of human action which is ideologically relevant is excluded.

My final thesis derives from the first three. I think it imperative to accept the broad line of argument which writers such as Abercrombie and Turner have suggested in attacking what they call 'the dominant ideology conception' within the social sciences. In their view, both Left and Right have greatly exaggerated the degree to which there is an ideological consensus among the majority of people in different classes, both in contemporary societies and in societies prior to capitalism. They indict Parsonian functionalism and its emphasis on the significance of a common value system as a co-ordinating mechanism of order. But they also criticize its left variant, the Althusserian characterization of 'ideological state apparatuses'. To this list I would add, somewhat provocatively, Habermas' discussion of legitimation. I think one should be as skeptical of the

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claim that legitimation is a fundamental mode in which the coherence of class-dominated societies is secured as of these other theories of consensual ideology. It is particularly important to be cautious about the thesis that crises of legitimation are the main sources of tension which threaten the stability of Western capitalist societies. Such a view presumes—in company with Parsons and Althusser—that social order rests upon normative consensus—that normative consensus, mixed with a little police power and coercion, is the main mechanism whereby sectional interests are held together in a class society. But there is good reason to question just such a presumption.

King's College
Cambridge
England

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SOCIETY

Ernesto Laclau

In these brief remarks I should like to refer to several problems which are central to the contemporary Marxist theory of ideology. In discussing these problems, it is evident that we presently live at the centre of a theoretical paradox. The terms of this paradox could be formulated as follows: in no previous period has reflection upon 'ideology' been so much at the centre of Marxist theoretical approaches; at the same time, however, in no other period have the limits and referential identity of 'the ideological' become so blurred and problematic. If the increasing interest in ideology runs parallel to a widening of the historical effectivity attributed to what was traditionally considered as the domain of the 'superstructures'—and this widening is a response to the crisis of an economic and reductionistic conception of Marxism—then that very crisis puts into question the social totality constituted around the base-superstructure distinction. As a consequence, it is no longer possible to identify the object 'ideology' in terms of a topography of the social.

Within the Marxist tradition, we can identify two classical approaches to the problem of ideology. These approaches have often—but not always—been combined. For one of them, 'ideology' is thought to be a *level of the social totality*; for the other, it is identified with *false consciousness*. Today, both approaches appear to have been undermined as a consequence of the crisis of the assumptions on which they were grounded: the validity of the first depended on a conception of society as an intelligible totality, itself conceived as the structure upon which its partial elements and processes are founded. The validity of the second approach presupposed a conception of human agency—a subject having an ultimate essential homogeneity whose misrecognition was postulated as the