
IDEOLOGY AND KNOWLEDGE FROM A THEORETICAL-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In this paper I shall attempt to argue that, from a theoretical-political perspective, the relationship between ideology – as a quintessential form of social imagery – and knowledge is straightforward and it develops both at a general level and at particular levels. Considered from a general standpoint, ideology is virtually identifiable as an important means through which one knows the social-political reality. Nevertheless, if we take into account particular ideologies, such as liberalism, conservatism or socialism, we see that, in their turn, they possess their own episteme, which also serve to know this reality. Far from assuming a positivist perspective, the approach I advance aims to reconfigure the way ideology has been understood until now in political theory.

Keywords: ideology, political theory, knowledge, epistemology, postmodernism

1. Introduction

The emergence of new forms of experience and subjectivity, which, in their turn, modify culture and society in a substantial manner (Baudrillard [1]), the abandonment of the meta-narrations which represented the ‘great expectations’ of modernity (Lyotard [2]) or the ‘conquest’ of the contemporary society by the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson [3]) – all these are various ways of asserting that post-modernity lays claim to a new type of knowing, including with respect to the social. If in the modern age knowledge was rendered legitimate by rationality –which allowed a differentiation between its ‘scientific’ and, respectively, ‘narrative’ forms –post-modernity implies the emergence of a new epistemology, in which the legitimacy of knowledge appears as a result of its technological performances. Not by chance, the separation from modernity, assumed by the postmodern condition, also means the abandonment of the form of knowledge which was specific to it and which is replaced with one in which “scientific knowledge is subject (...) to a wordplay which no longer belongs to it: what is at stake is no longer the truth but performance, meaning the best *input/output* ratio (between investment and plus-value), whose ultimate aim is not to increase knowledge (that modern meta-narrations also linked with emancipation) but to increase power” [4]. Through

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the process of the ‘computerisation of society’, technology and knowledge implicitly become principles of social organisation, an organisation in which cultural diversity becomes a regulating rule. Therefore, as Lyotard says, knowledge itself can no longer lay universal claims since there is an absolute incompatibility between various cultural languages [5]. In this context, what is to be found, as emphasised by some commentators, is a rejection of the foundationalism specific to modern epistemology, an abandonment of the founding entities, configured by modern thought in a ‘totalising’ manner. Thus, it is shown that “this is, first of all, ‘the shock’ or ‘the postmodern challenge’ in the Philosophy of sciences: the idea that the foundationalist paradigm of science’s rationality and of the way of doing epistemology in general are illusions and should be abandoned. It was the result of a metaphysical vision which is definitely compromised today” [6]. On the other hand, it is precisely this approach that is targeted by some of the criticism against such a postmodern view, as it is believed that this is totalising by itself since, in some respects, it features the necessity of a total abandonment of meta-narrations and, in others, it is based on the belief that this necessity dominated the thought of modernity [5, p. 47].

2. The postmodern conditions of knowledge

Obviously, such criticism does not annul the existence of some substantial changes at the level of the social structure which, in their turn, lead to changes in the conditions of knowledge themselves. It is Baudrillard who talks about these changes, and he shows that “since modernity was characterised by the explosion of goods, mechanisation, technology, exchanges and market, postmodern society is the setting of an *implosion* of every border, region and distinction between high culture and subculture, between appearance and reality and between all the binary oppositions instituted by traditional philosophy and social theory. For Baudrillard, this means the end of all positivisms, of all the great references and finalities of the preceding social theory: the Real, the Meaning, the History, the Power, the Revolution and even the Social itself” [7]. As a result, the modern understanding of society can no longer survive the postmodern ‘avalanche’, which seems to ‘blow to pieces’, with the idea of a rational foundation of knowledge, the stability itself which had established, before it, the explanation of social phenomena and relations. In the postmodern world, the social is only ‘simulated’, the illusion of its existence being supported with the help of the theories which claim to understand it [5, p. 82]. Thus, predominant in the postmodern society are only the representations or the copies of the objects, relationships and events, which are instituted in the form of reality. Society is thus constituted as a hyper-reality insofar as the simulacra manage to precede what is real. Therefore, the French theorist’s conclusion is radical: having, virtually, no other object of study than these simulacra (as the social has already disappeared), social theory – and the knowledge it implies – is unable to do anything but witness its own ‘death’. Such a perspective which refers to the

disappearance of the *real* functions of the social – but from their position and thus by preserving them within its content – cannot avoid the requirements of the non-contradiction principle [5, p. 82]. But it is precisely this contradictory character that seems to be the ‘foundation’ of post-modernity, which makes the process of knowing develop in a ‘fragmented’ manner, within a framework in which various points of view are in abundance and in which the ‘puzzle’ technique is preferred to a step-by-step and progressive heuristic incursion. Under these circumstances, the ‘end of knowledge’ preached by contemporary theories, an annotation of the perspectives referring to the ‘end of ideology’ or the ‘end of history’, seems to be nothing more than a new way of approaching the issue of knowledge, which also supposes resizing the field with which it had traditionally dealt. In the latter approach we are not dealing with, as one may notice, with an attempt emerging for the first time, since the abandonment of epistemology because it was presumably overcome by socio-historical changes, is also to be found – from other standpoints than those specific to post-modernity – as early as in Karl Mannheim’s writings [8]. In their turn, postmodern authors have suggested its finality, but, just as in the case of history or ideology, they mainly referred to the signification given by modernity to these terms. Therefore, just as ‘the end of knowledge’ means nothing more than a reconsidering of knowledge, the finality of epistemology itself cannot be but a repositioning according to the requirements of the postmodern condition. As shown by some commentators, “(...) epistemology has not ‘died’, it has only transformed; a given image of science can also be built in the absence of those general, totalising concepts specific to modernity, in the absence of some universal criteria and norms, based on the description of the scientists’ cognitive behaviour in particular, specific situations” [9]. In other words, the particularisation of knowledge, in its attempt to answer the actual problems entailed by the social transformations which took place in the postmodern age, needs also a particularisation of the epistemological direction, the latter being mainly concerned with the effectiveness of knowledge at the socio-historical level. It is precisely for this reason that social theory itself is forced to reconsider its position, alongside other fields of knowledge, so that it would be able to provide that which Fredric Jameson calls ‘cognitive maps’ [3]. In what regards this issue, the theorist suggests that “de-alienation in the traditional city implies the practical reconquest of a sense of space as well as the construction or reconstruction of an articulate ensemble which can be preserved in memory and which the individual subject can shape and reshape along mobile and alternative trajectories” [10]. Being dependent on the context, these ‘maps’ represent, ultimately, an expression of the dissemination of a type of knowledge which up to now has been deemed to be universal and which is now challenged to adapt to a logic which seems to favour the particular both socially and historically.

Thus, the postmodern rethinking of knowledge also entails a challenge to ideology, because it involves the social space. Since, according to the coordinate of its positivation, ideology can be understood as an instrument of social and political knowledge, the question which emerges refers to this concept’s

capability of also displaying its epistemological valences in the conditions of post-modernity. Otherwise put: is ideology usable as a tool for knowing an area in which there have emerged, especially in recent decades, such deep and complex social changes? In order to answer such a question we believe it necessary for us to understand, first of all, the manner in which postmodern theory has carried out the reconsideration of ideology. To begin with, from this point of view, it should be said that the cultural movement itself which is given by post-modernity a space to develop, i.e. postmodernism, underlies an ideological conceptualisation. From this viewpoint, it is believed that “(...) *postmodernism* answers a fundamental ideological need, i.e. that of aligning the new forms of practice and mental and social habits with the new forms of production and social organisation determined by the changes in the nature of capitalism – the new global division of labour – of the past years” [4, p. 191]. By positioning itself within this logic, of economic relations extended at a global scale, postmodernism manifests itself culturally in an ideological form, aiming at legitimating a discourse in which the market – now global –, through its interconnections with the social and the political, plays a particularly important role. Understood, in the analyses developed as extensions of the Marxist tradition, as a determining factor of the new world order, the market thus delimits a logic specific to ‘late capitalism’ whose meaning is preponderantly ideological [11]. Of course, the rejection of such an interpretation does not abolish the more and more obvious reality of a global market, within the context of a socio-historical process whose elements are also, among others, those relative to the political rhetoric and the institution of power relationships. Yet, from the standpoint from which we have analysed the concept of ideology in this paper, we believe that it is more important to delimit the manner in which ideology may serve to the adaptation of individuals and groups to these social changes, by maintaining that which Giddens calls the ‘ontological security’ in the scope of identity. The British theorist links ‘ontological security’ to ‘confidence’ as follows: “The expression refers to the security experienced by most human beings in what regards the continuity of their own self-identity and the consistency of the social and material media of action. A sense of authenticity of people and things, so crucial for the notion of confidence, is fundamental in the construction of a sense of ontological security; as a result, the two are closely related from a psychological perspective” [12]. And this is all the more so under the circumstances of the postmodern world, in which the ambition of rejecting the meta-narrations of modernity also credited the questioning of a series of concepts which had given a meaning to social bonds in a previous historical stage. As we have seen, in this case we are dealing with the radical side of postmodernism – with its meaning as a cultural movement – whose aims are “(...) to deconstruct apparent truths, to destroy dominant ideas and accepted, sacralised and authoritarian cultural forms and to engage in a genuine war in order to undermine close and hegemonic system of thought” [13]. All these objectives assumed by most postmodern thinkers and, following their steps, by the social theorists of the ‘new wave’, should be correlated with the structural

changes which have occurred at the level of social practices and arrangements. Thus, postmodern theses may be rather understood as normative approaches which attempt to offer empirical explanations – and, based on these, practical solutions to actual problems – and not as mere conjectures lacking any finality. In our opinion, they should be interpreted in relation to what the social space has to offer and thus it would also be easy to understand the postmodern rethinking of ideology. This is because, if such theses are taken as *dicta*, we risk placing ourselves, in our turn, in a system of thought closed in its own totality.

3. Ideology, social knowledge and identity

Indeed, in the postmodern age, the social finds itself in a situation in which it has to overcome its limitation to the modern kind of society. Normatively and empirically, the latter has become an object of social theory which lacks validity. From a theoretical viewpoint as well as from a practical viewpoint, we can no longer speak about ‘society’ since, from the local to the global level, this form of community is subject to pressures which articulate discernible influences at the level of groups and individuals. When it talks about the ‘impossibility of society’ [14], postmodern thought must find a way to resize the social and its elements and it is at this level that the role of ideology as integration-identity is visible again. In such a context, we see that society cannot function as a wholesome reality [15], as modern thought would let us believe. On the contrary, in the postmodern world the social articulates society as a space of differences. Although there are some theorists who give to ideology the role of integrating these differences in a complete, homogeneous form, the changes configured by the social evolutions from recent years seem to impose given limits to such an enterprise. In other words, in the social theory of postmodern times, it seems there is nothing wrong with ideology in its positive meaning but rather with the attempts to give it a status which is not claimed by the concept itself. From our viewpoint, as a tool of knowing the social, ideology is able to answer the postmodern challenge insofar as it orients itself, through its integration-identity function, towards those aspects of the social which need solutions capable of preserving community bonds in an age of global mutations. Despite the fragmenting tendencies occurring at the level of identities, or, rather, precisely because of them, the concept of ideology may become useful in explaining social change and the need shown by various socio-cultural groups to assert their particular characteristics. As Mihaela Constantinescu shows, “from a postmodern perspective, as the modern society’s pace of development and complexity speeds up, identity becomes more and more unstable, more and more fragile. In this situation, the discourses of post-modernity question the notion of identity, seen as a myth and an illusion. (...) For postmodern theorists, this fragmented, unarticulated and discontinuous mode of experience is a fundamental feature of postmodern culture; for them, the culture of the mass-media is the venue where identity implodes and the subject is fragmented” [13, p. 75]. In a social setting whose ‘principle’ seems to be ‘what sets us apart is

what binds us together', so, in a multicultural setting, ideology offers guarantees for identity and possibilities of integration. While shaping a new field for the postmodern approach, social philosophy and theory cannot overlook the mutations occurring at the social level as they also entail, in their turn, changes in the discourse specific to these fields of thought. Thus, there emerge considerations according to which "postmodern social philosophy may be temporarily characterised as a social philosophy which maintains that modern social philosophy is not suited to a world whose shape is given by the progress of science and technology and which shows that, now, the main request is relative to contemporariness, a period connected to that which may be called the emerging post-modernity" [15]. Yet, what happens with ideology when this world emerges, since the concept is indelibly 'embedded' in modern thought? Another argument in favour of the idea put forth before, referring to the ideology's epistemological capacities of answering the challenge of post-modernity from within it, comes from the area of the theorists who claim that it is possible to rethink the concept so as to question even more assumptions of modern thinking. By reiterating the conceptual positioning of ideology at the crossroads between the issues belonging to the field of knowledge and those specific to the exercise of power –and, therefore, to the socio-political field – the latter emphasise the need to abandon the illuminist criticism against this concept. On this occasion, that which was the land of 'the negative' starts being understood in different terms. For instances, it is accepted that error – with which ideology was often connected – is morally heterogeneous and that some forms of error are not only irremovable but they should also be defended when they are the object of given procedural constraints [15]. The issue of interest is approached in a similar manner, as it is believed that it no longer implies the compulsory need to criticise ideology since it is no longer related to social status and, thus, signifying practices – implicitly those ideological in nature – are no longer necessarily reduced to it. Moreover, it is shown that such practices cannot wipe out the presence of interest, regardless of their nature, because "(...) what is at stake cannot be entirely accounted for in terms of truth and error as it is an illusion for one to imagine that interest-related signifying practices can be completely eliminated (...)" [15]. Not in the last place, issues such as those related to the differentiation between historical temporality and supra-empirical, utopian, orientations are also questioned [15]. Following such an endeavour, the reconsideration of ideology as a positive form of the social imagery, able to ensure individual and group identity (and integration) under the circumstances of a fragmentation imposed by the tendencies of contradictory change specific to the postmodern world cannot be denied, in our view. On the contrary, ideology reorients its resources, just as knowledge, towards a present that encompasses various ways in which socio-cultural differences manifest themselves and thus it becomes a symbolical binder which can legitimate, within the particular contexts of the postmodern society, various types of identity. Yet, as social processes receive a global signification now, there is the tendency to place ideology – even implicitly – in the role of an instrument of

cultural homogenisation at the worldwide level. Prefigured by Fukuyama's prophecy regarding the 'end of history' (which asserted the supremacy of democrat-liberal ideology at the global level) [16], such a tendency is also to be found, from a socio-cultural perspective, in the writings of other contemporary theorists. The latter insisted on the homogenising character of the globalisation process, which they associate with post-modernity, without necessarily giving it a fragmenting nature. On the contrary, the critics of this vision have attempted to highlight the idea that globalisation itself, including in the cultural field, is characterised by a logic of contradiction and that, as a result, the 'universal' scope implied by it in what regards economic, political or socio-cultural issues cannot but be one of differences, but one of differences which are in a relationship of interconnection. It is precisely this 'universalisation of differences' that requires, even in the age of globalisation, the preservation of the identity of individuals and social groups. As a matter of fact, it is precisely what the presence of ideology continues to require.

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