

The Relevance of Hermeneutics to the Study of Ideology

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This paper concerns the contribution of hermeneutics to the study of ideology. It would be ironic if the hermeneutical paradigm were exhausted in this field, since modern hermeneutics may have begun precisely as an answer to the question of ideology in the form of theological dogmatism.¹ I will briefly discuss the hermeneutical approach to ideology under two rubrics: the ‘hermeneutical circle’ and ‘historical consciousness’. I suggest that hermeneutics not only provides needed correctives to contemporary ideology studies, but also opens paths to deeper understanding. In overcoming the epistemological and ideological blinders of most ideology studies, the hermeneutical paradigm directs us to what Gadamer calls the ‘hermeneutical situation’, which means “finding the right questions to ask.”²

The ‘hermeneutical circle’

Concepts of ideology have a tendency to expand to the conclusion that all thinking is ideological, for reasons having usually to do with the Marxist conviction that thought is a ‘superstructure’ on the basis of the material ‘substructure’ of society, which it must necessarily reflect. In this case any distinction between ideology and philosophy collapses. On the other hand, attempts to rein the concept in may oversimplify the phenomenon. To take one example, limiting the meaning of ideology to a “consciously held set of political beliefs”³ targets critique effectively but elicits scorn from those for whom ideology refers to beliefs and assumptions that remain below the level of conscious thought.⁴ The variety of meanings for the term ‘ideology’ is legion, but two epistemological problems in particular are common to most of them. The first involves objectivity and the second, false consciousness. Both turn on the ‘hermeneutical circle’.

The most common form of the first epistemological problem of ideology studies may be summarized as ‘objectivism’, the belief that ideology can be studied as an objective phenomenon in the way of natural or social science and thereby criticized or unmasked for what it is in ‘truth’. The problem of finding an exterior standpoint or exterior standards by which to judge ideology appears to be unsolvable. Certainly no such objective standard has appeared through science or social science; Clifford Geertz calls this problem the “Sphinx’s Riddle of modern sociological thought.”⁵ This holds equally for neo-Marxism in its many variants. Insofar as it involves a claim to deeper truth, the critique of ideology is vulnerable to the charge of being itself ideological, as Gadamer among others has noted.⁶

¹ Odo Marquard, “To What Question is Hermeneutics the Answer?” in Robert M. Wallace, tr., *Farewell to Matters of Principle: Philosophical Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 120ff.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald C. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), 301.

³ Richard Levin, “Ideological Criticism and Pluralism,” in Ivo Kamps, ed., *Shakespeare Left and Right* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 15.

⁴ Gayle Greene, “The Myth of Neutrality, Again?,” in *ibid.*, 23-24.

⁵ Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 48.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics,” in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, Robert R. Sullivan, tr. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 177.

This problem of the study of ideology is a special case of the general problem of objectivism in social science and the philosophy of consciousness itself. This is not the place to recapitulate Gadamer's critique of objectivism, which is well-known in social science generally, although it has been widely ignored in the literature on ideology.⁷ The hermeneutical paradigm for understanding consciousness and its limits focuses on the overcoming of subjectivity—in language, in the give and take of dialogue, in the moment of understanding, in Heidegger's 'thrownness' and historicity, in Hegel's objective spirit—so that truth is seen not as a correspondence between self and world but rather as an event of the whole. In this way the hermeneutical paradigm is ontological rather than merely epistemological.⁸ The epistemological key to this ontology is the famous 'hermeneutical circle', whereby understanding goes back and forth in self-correcting movement from part to whole to make progressively better sense of the interpretive object. This understanding of understanding is based on a phenomenology of what 'really happens' when we learn, and consequently its own epistemological criterion is intuitive self-evidence. In a seminal essay on the relation of hermeneutics and social science, Charles Taylor argues that there is no way to obviate the circle either through the inner clarity of completed rationalism, as Hegel sought to do, or through escaping interpretation altogether with a social science that only avails itself of empirical facts on the basis of sense experience. Human knowledge of the human things can never attain certainty. Moreover, the communication of understanding through the hermeneutical circle must make an "ultimate appeal to common ground" that likewise can never attain certainty. "Maybe my intuitions are wrong or distorted," Taylor concludes, "maybe I am locked into a circle of illusion."⁹

The 'circle of illusion' may also be called false consciousness. The circle without illusion is ultimately philosophy. Intuitive self-evidence is the way they are distinguished. Clearly, then, from the outside the false consciousness characteristic of ideology is in principle indistinguishable from the, so to speak, 'true' consciousness of philosophy. This shows that the problem of distinguishing ideology from philosophy does not merely reflect some kind of ideological assumption, but actually goes to the heart of ideology studies.¹⁰ However, to speak of consciousness as 'true' puts us back into the problematic objectification of consciousness according to *any* given criterion of truth—even 'self-evidence' becomes dogmatic when taken as a standard in this way. The concept of 'self-

⁷ To take only a few examples: Terry Eagleton's popular *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991, 2007) mentions hermeneutics not at all and Ricoeur and Gadamer only in passing; Jürgen Ritsert's *Ideologie: Theoreme und Probleme der Wissenssoziologie* (Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2002) entirely ignores the matter; likewise with Raymond Boudon's *L'idéologie ou l'origine des idées reçues* (Librarie Arthème Fayard, 1986), David Hawkes, *Ideology* (London and New York, Routledge, 1996), etc.

⁸ Paul Ricoeur discusses this point in "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," in Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan d. Schrift, eds., *The Hermeneutic Tradition of Ast to Ricoeur* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 306.

⁹ Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Sept. 1971), 6.

¹⁰ Helmut Kuhn considered the question of ideology "inseparable" from that of philosophy. "Ideologie als hermeneutischer Begriff," in *Hermeneutik und Dialektik: Aufsätze*, Rudiger Bubner, Konrad Cramer, Reiner Wiehl, hrsg. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 343.

evidence' is instead a marker or reference term that cannot be explicated without phenomenological inquiry.

The problem of false consciousness is not only the problem of illusion, but also that of 'unconscious' or 'subconscious' motivation. The hermeneutical paradigm views consciousness not as a given but an accomplishment that is not set against something called the 'unconscious' but rather pulls that which lies outside its ken to awareness. Thus there is a constant experiential interaction of 'conscious' and 'unconscious'.¹¹ Ricoeur's hermeneutics of this interaction combines Freud's derivation of the human from the instinctual, on the one hand, and Hegel's development of the human towards the spiritual, on the other. Although he argues that ultimately these are only different ways of describing the same, the distinction has important implications for transcending psychologistic approaches to the study of ideology. The crux of the matter for Ricoeur is not Cartesian subjective consciousness or the phenomenological correlation of noesis and noema, but rather the development of the self such that the advent of adulthood also makes possible the distance of alienation, false consciousness, and ideological thinking.¹² From Gadamer's less developmental perspective, it is only possible to avoid ideological circles of illusion insofar as there is a "balance between our unconscious drives and our conscious human motivations and decisions."¹³ That balance comes to rest in the question of action. In an article about the hermeneutical concept of ideology, Helmut Kuhn points to the connection of ideology and action as the particularly problematic place of "oscillation between consciousness and unconsciousness."¹⁴ This is the place of language, as Gadamer remarks with reference to Lacan.¹⁵ Here I can do no more than point to this rich tissue of questions.

The most currently active hermeneutical initiative in ideology studies, by Christian Duncker, develops Gadamer's critique of objectivism into a positive working definition of ideology as a "system of ideas that rises from the explicit or implicit claim to absolute truth, that is to say, that comes from an objectivist-deformed consciousness."¹⁶ Duncker stresses that the significance of this definition is not to deny the possibility of objective truth, but rather to uncover distortions in the relationship of consciousness and society. Ultimately the false cannot be recognized for certain without the true, but it is possible to eschew

¹¹ "[W]e must realize that the unconscious and the implicit do not simply make up the polar opposite of our conscious human existence." Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," in Hans-Georg Gadamer, Frederick G. Lawrence, tr. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 108.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, "Consciousness and the Unconscious," Willis Domingo, tr., in Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 109-110.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," in *Reason in the Age of Science*, op. cit., 109.

¹⁴ Helmut Kuhn, "Ideologie als hermeneutischer Begriff," in *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, op. cit., 348.

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and the Critique of Ideology: Metacritical Comments on *Truth and Method*," in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 290.

¹⁶ Christian Duncker, *Kritische Reflexionen des Ideologiebegriffes: Zur Bedeutung der Ideologien für den Menschen* (London: Turnshare Ltd., 2006), 34 (my translation). There is also a website, www.ideologieforschung.de, and journal, *Ideologiekritik Aktuell/Ideologies Today* (London: Turnshare Ltd., 2008), that take their bearings from this definition of ideology.

absolute criteria of truthful recognition in favor of relative criteria of broadening one's horizon of the world.¹⁷ These are criteria of insight that cannot be formalized.

Duncker's formulation has the merit of taking into account the hermeneutical solution to objectivism, and thereby represents progress in ideology studies. However, it is open to the objection that, being itself a formalization of the concept of ideology, it fails to capture the term's fluidity of meaning, or historicity, and so runs the risk of limiting or distorting research into the phenomenon. Since the definition can be taken as doctrine, it potentially engenders dogmatic interpretation in a way that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics does not. One could in fact argue that on Duncker's definition Hegel was an ideologue, since his thinking was systematic and he made a claim to absolute truth. Gadamer himself did not take this step to definitional fixation, as Duncker remarks, and perhaps he had good reasons. He has observed that there are terms in philosophy whose meaning takes shape through usage rather than definition,¹⁸ and the plethora of definitions for 'ideology' suggests that it is such a term.

Historical consciousness

The second rubric of this paper is historical consciousness. This refers both to our own historical being or 'historicity' and to awareness of the historical nature of our concepts or objects of study. In regard to ideology, what Gadamer calls the *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* or 'consciousness of the history of effects' is complicated by the fact that the term 'ideology' is a relative neologism. It might be argued that this is only a terminological distinction and that, especially as tied to the concept of false consciousness, its meaning goes back to illusion and error as discussed by the Greeks. However, the term normally means at least a special kind of illusion and error that is tied to peculiarly modern political phenomena, such as the development of society as an impersonal system and a concomitant need for rulers to maintain hegemonic control in more subtle ways than in the past. In a secularized world where political life has become increasingly autonomous, ideology serves if not the spiritual, certainly the political purposes of religion. The concept of 'secularization' is undeniably important to modern ideology. However, I would suggest that the globalization of the Enlightenment is no less relevant, especially in terms of fundamentalist ideologies such as the Islamicist. I do not accept the Marxist reduction of religion to the status of ideology, which is itself ideological, but it would be difficult to deny that religion itself increasingly becomes 'ideologized' in a post-Enlightenment world where adherents feel compelled to provide some sort of consciously systematic justification for their beliefs and practices. Insofar as experience gives way to theory, ideology distorts worship. It would be interesting to explore changes in the nature and role of theology in various religions in this regard.

This consideration points to a deeper sense in which 'ideology' may be viewed as a modern phenomenon. Gadamer distinguishes Hegelian from ancient dialectic with a quotation from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to the effect that while the ancients were concerned to reach the universal from the manifold of existence, the moderns have the opposite problem of

¹⁷ See Duncker, *Kritische Reflexionen des Ideologiebegriffes*, op. cit., 46-47.

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Phenomenological Movement," in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, David E. Linge, tr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 165.

regaining that manifold by “dissolving the fixed determinations of thought.”¹⁹ The difference between theory as abstract thought and philosophy is precisely the failure of the former to regain its existential connection. Thus the ‘consciousness of the effects of history’ has to do as much or more with our own historical being as with objects of study. This gap between theory and philosophy is everywhere apparent in professional philosophy, where theory dominates. ‘Theory’ is not yet ideology but it does imply objectifying thinking and therefore, I suggest, may represent a degeneration of philosophy in that direction. Without self-reflection the relations among philosophy, theory, and ideology remain opaque. “Dialectic,” says Gadamer, “must retrieve itself in hermeneutics.”²⁰ This need is, then, a peculiarly modern problem that is addressed by hermeneutics. The ideological direction of the concept of ‘theory’ takes us to Heidegger’s description of ‘system’ as unity of world-picture in the modern way of thinking.²¹ Perhaps, then, ideology can be seen as the epitome of modern consciousness.

We need to look more carefully at the relation of theoretical philosophy and the phenomenon we call ‘ideology’. Gadamer has remarked that the problem with ideology critique is its failure to recognize that it does not stand over against the social conditions and structures it connects to ideology, but rather belongs to them in a dialectical relationship, an inescapable dependence that also applies to, and limits the applicability of, psychoanalytic theory.²² The relata cannot be separated from the relationship. Moreover, if the accomplishment of consciousness implies self-consciousness and is hence reflective, the problem of the self is how its experienced unity can consist of the dichotomy of reflection and reflected. The problem of consciousness then becomes the philosophical problem of identity.²³ Ideology would in this case be constituted from the alienation of the self. Thus the dialectic of both social thinking and consciousness means that abstract ‘theory’ must be balanced with self-examination in the rationale for theory, its application, and its relation to experience. With reference to Hegel, Gadamer calls this the “self-mediation of reason” that goes beyond “argumentative formalism.”²⁴ In the contemporary literature, even when ‘post-Marxism’ challenges systematic theory as such, it remains within the formalism of “theoretical frameworks” with “logical structures” based on “axioms,” as one commentator describes the matter in regard to Laclau.²⁵ From this point of view the complex argumentation of Slavoj Žižek’s well-known book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* shows its theoretical abstractionism even as it traces abstract conceptual thinking itself to commodity exchange and ultimately the institution of money.²⁶ This

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hegel and the Dialectic of the Ancient Philosophers,” in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel’s Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, P. Christopher Smith, tr. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 8.

²⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The idea of Hegel’s Logic,” in *Hegel’s Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, op. cit., 99.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in William Lovitt, tr., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), Appendix 6, 141.

²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, “What is Practice?” in *Reason in the Age of Science*, op. cit., 79.

²³ See Manfred Frank, “Identity and Subjectivity,” Peter Dews, tr., in Simon Critchley and Peter Dews, eds., *Deconstructive Subjectivities* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 128-129.

²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., 345.

²⁵ Michèle Barrett, “Ideology, Politics, Hegemony: From Gramsci to Laclau and Mouffe,” in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 244-245.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 16-21.

argument about history is profoundly anti-historical in that it makes no attempt to trace the effective-history of conceptual thinking to historical evidence; the ‘evidence’ is all suggestively ‘logical’.

I do not mean by this example to take historical consciousness as resting on historical study. The contrary is rather the case because the questions asked of history depend on our hermeneutical situation. When Žižek goes on to argue that the false consciousness that used to characterize ideology has been replaced by a cynicism that leads one to act in accordance with the hegemonic powers while not being taken in by them, he points to a valid question of contemporary history among a segment of European intellectuals.²⁷ He generalizes from this observation to a theory of the ‘ideology of the act’, however, which opens him to the refutation of events at the World Trade Center two years later, where the act was clearly not the ideology but its result.

Žižek also argues that ideology is not false consciousness about social reality but rather that reality itself which is always already conceived ideologically.²⁸ This returns us to the collapse of the distinction between ideology and philosophy with which I began this brief discussion. I have argued that that collapse is mediated by abstract theory, which constitutes neither but is part of both. This is one way, although certainly not the only way, in which hermeneutics has a contribution to make to the study of ideology: ‘theory’, as opposed to ancient *theoria*, has lost its connection to the self-understanding that accompanies all hermeneutical inquiry.²⁹ In a prescient 1931 study, Helmuth Plessner traced the history of the notion of ideology through various constellations of the originally Marxist substructure-superstructure correlation, and warned that the universal—if unconscious—adoption of this abstract schema would lead to impasse in the study of the phenomenon.³⁰ To put the point more generally: Without the hermeneutical paradigm the study of ideology is at something of a philosophical dead end, caught between empirically-based social science that confuses explanation with description and ever more intricate theoretical inventions motivated by their own ideological agendas. In both cases historical consciousness and philosophical depth is lacking, even when history is invoked and philosophical theories are exploited.

²⁷ Ibid., 28-30.

²⁸ Ibid., 21.

²⁹ See for example Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Praise of Theory,” in *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, Chris Dawson, tr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 31, where he traces ancient *theoria* to participation in religious festivals or “being present” as opposed to merely “seeing.”

³⁰ Helmuth Plessner, “Abwandlungen des Ideologiedankens,” from Lieber, hrsg., *Ideologien Lehre und Wissensoziologie*. Rejection of this schema is one of the three reasons Foucault resists the notion of ideology, the others being the reliance of the concept of false consciousness on “the category of scientificity or truth” and the grounding of ideology in the concept of the subject. Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 60.