

Are Ideologies Negative?

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Introduction

Many years ago, Norman Fairclough and I had an interesting debate on ideologies, a topic that is crucial in our work, and in Critical Discourse Studies more generally. The debate was about whether in general ideologies are, by definition, negative. In this paper, we'll briefly discuss the influence of the classical 'negative' concept of ideology as "false consciousness", introduced by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, written in Brussels in 1845 and 1846, but only published in 1932.

Summarizing *The German Ideology*, a first thesis is that the ruling class not only controls the material force (the 'base') of society but also the production and distribution of the dominant ideas (the 'superstructure') of their age, including religion, philosophy, and morality. Secondly, these ideas may mystify the material conditions of production in society, and when inculcated in the proletariat they may produce *false consciousness* about its material existence (see e.g., Lewy, 1982; Meyerson, 1991; Pines, 1993; Thompson, 2015)

Combating Hegelian idealism, Marx and Engels advocate a bottom-up ("earth to heaven"), materialist philosophy, according to which ideas are formed by "real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process". Thus, if the ideas of the working class are influenced by those of the ruling class, these ideas may no longer correspond to their real experiences, and hence may be called "false". In that sense, the dominant ideology legitimizes the hegemony of the ruling class, as Gramsci (1929-1935/1971) would elaborate nearly 100 years later.

Different from the very general notion of ideology, as a discipline of ideas, introduced by Destutt de Tracy (1801) decades before Marx, it is this 'negative' view of ideology as a misguided reflection or representation of reality that has influenced most theories of ideology until today. Later neo-Marxist authors, such as Althusser (1961, 1991), hold that some aspects of the ideological superstructure of society may be

relatively independent, even when the material base is always determinant “in the last instance”.

Interestingly, Marx and Engels also hold that should the working class become dominant, e.g., through a revolution, the first thesis also holds, so that their ideas will prevail in society. In that case, obviously, we would no longer qualify such an ideology as negative, because it reflects the real situation of everyday life. In other words, already in *The German Ideology* there is a more flexible conception of ideology, a conception that could be applied in contemporary theories of the ideological influence of movements of resistance, such as feminism (Lazar, 2005). Mannheim (1929/1936), in his influential book, of which the English version was published a few years after the publication of *The German Ideology*, retains the negative concept of ideology, and distinguishes between evaluative and non-evaluative ideologies, but uses the notion of ‘utopia’ to refer to positive systems of ideas or wishes. Also for him ideologies are mental fictions that veil the true nature of society. On the other hand, utopias are belief systems of opposition and resistance.

From this very brief summary of a classical debate about the nature of ideology, we may conclude that although the ‘negative’ concept of ideology as mystification or false consciousness has been dominant for a long time in philosophical and sociopolitical debates, but that there also alternative, positive approaches have been discussed. Indeed, as from the 20th century, especially also in political science, ideologies were more generally discussed in terms of belief systems.

Contemporary Approaches to Ideology

Despite the surprising continuity of classical conceptions of ideology, not only in informal discourse, but also in theoretical analyses, contemporary approaches to ideology may take advantage of more sophisticated concepts, theories and methods. Indeed, traditional approaches were largely limited to philosophy and the social sciences, hardly prepared to challenge the vagueness of notions such as “false consciousness” (Augoustinos, 1999). So, what do contemporary disciplines have to offer?

Political science more specifically examines ‘belief systems,’ but does not examine these systems in terms of contemporary cognitive science (Freeden, 1996).

Cognitive psychology and cognitive science may analyze the mental structures of knowledge (see, e.g., Schank & Abelson, 1976), but few psychologists engage in the study of ideologies (but see, Barsalou, 2008). Social psychology has traditionally studied attitudes, and more recently forms of social cognition, but also in this discipline there is no tradition of studying ideologies (but see Augoustinos, 1999). So, to challenge the ‘negative’ classical concept of “false consciousness”, even contemporary disciplines do not offer sophisticated theories of what the detailed mental representations of this form of social cognition.

Despite these limitations in several disciplines, we may nevertheless try to advance theoretically. First of all, more or less explicitly, most approaches to ideology since Marx & Engels, agree that ideology consist of ideas, and more specifically of beliefs. Whatever their social and political functions this means that ideologies are a form of cognition, and hence to be studied, first of all in terms of some kind of mental representation. Secondly, ideologies are generally associated with collectives of people, such as the ‘ruling class’ or the ‘proletariat’ of Marx and Engels, and today also with specific social groups, such as socialists, racists, antiracists or feminists. So, they are not personal, but socially shared, as is the case for sociocultural knowledge or natural languages, and hence to be studied as a form of social cognition. Thirdly, consistent with classical approaches, ideologies as shared belief systems have social and political functions, in that they influence the social practices of the members of these ideological groups, and in particular their discourse (Thompson, 1986). Fourthly, detailed discourse analysis may reveal the ‘underlying’ mental contents and structures of these ideologies (Van Dijk, 1999).

Although today there is widespread consensus on these basic aspects of ideologies, there is still much we do not know. First a question of terminology that also has theoretical implications. Instead of using different notions, such as ‘utopias’ for the belief systems of dissident groups, it makes sense to use a more general notion of ‘ideology’ as any general belief system of social collectives, but distinguish them whether they use and apply these beliefs to dominate or to resist domination depending on their position in society. Indeed, ideologies may also be used for other forms of social practice or relations between groups, for instance as a form of solidarity, as may be the case for antiracism (Van Dijk, 2021).

The second problem is the precise nature of ideologies as forms of social cognition. Despite hundreds of books and thousands of articles on many forms of

ideology, we still have no idea about how such beliefs systems are represented in the mind (and implemented in the brain), how they are related to other forms of social cognition, such as knowledge, social attitudes, norms and values, and perhaps even more crucially how exactly they influence discourse and other social practices. Let us summarize some ideas that reply to some of these fundamental questions.

Towards a sociocognitive theory of ideology

The first challenge is the mental structure of ideologies. Since decades we have some theories on the structures of socially shared knowledge, for instance in terms of schemas, scripts, hierarchies, prototypes, but the overall organization of the system of knowledge is still largely unknown. For ideologies we have even less insight in the organization of these belief systems.

As is the case for all forms of cognition, we are unable to study mental representations directly, but infer these from observable data, such as experiments, activities and especially discourse. Discourse may be quite explicit about its mental sources, and human being have (limited and hardly perfect) access to their ‘thoughts’ and can report about them in terms of specific discourse structures. Thus, a systematic analysis of the discourse of members of ideological groups, when speaking as a member of such a group, may reveal some contents and structures about ‘underlying’ ideologies at least partly controlling such discourse.

However, we need to be careful about such inferences because discourse is not a direct and reliable expression of our beliefs, but adapted to the social, political, cultural or communicative context, as we know from pragmatics as well as psychological experiences and everyday experience. In other words, discourse not only may express ideological contents and structures but always is context-controlled – and this context is also cognitively represented as a ‘filter’ that makes sure that our discourse is appropriate in the current communicative situation (see below) Our everyday experience of talk in interaction confirms this hypothesis: Racists do not always say racist things, nor do feminists always say feminist things: it depends to whom, when, where, about what and why they are saying the things they do.

But, taking into account possible, context-controlled, ideological discourse, members of ideological groups often do ‘speak their minds’ and say the things they really think. Many studies of political or media discourse, as well as of everyday conversations, thus have shown that such ideological discourse does have structures that are interesting candidates for categories or other properties of ideological structures as part of a broader system of socially shared social cognition, possibly related to the sociocultural knowledge shared by members of epistemic communities.

In such empirical studies of ideological discourse, for instance, we observe various kind of *polarization* in the representation of the members or the opponents of ideological groups, following the well-known social psychological relation between ingroups and outgroups. At all levels of discourse, from phonology, grammar and semantics, to storytelling, argumentation or multimodal structures, we thus observe that ingroups are associated with positive properties or actions, and outgroups with negative one, both possibly emphasized rhetorically. So, given the social organization of conflict, interests, ingroups and outgroups, and the pervasive polarization of their ideological interaction and discourse, we may assume that underlying ideologies are also polarized as belief systems.

In the same way, we may engage in more detailed analysis of discourse and interaction and infer other categories of underlying ideologies. Thus, members of ideological groups, typically may be explicit about who they are, that is about their *identity*, about what they typically *do* as group members, with what *goals*, in interaction with or against *whom*, and following which *norms* and *values*. These very general and fundamental categories, may indeed structure ideologies general, thus forming an ideological schema that may be slowly developed and reproduced each time a social group is formed as part of social relations of conflict, cooperation, domination or resistance (for detail, see Van Dijk, 1998). In this very general sense, then, Marx & Engels were right when they said that ideologies are shaped by the experiences of everyday life – even when they had no idea about the structures of cognition and identified any ideas with ideological beliefs. And indeed, once formed such an ideology it will, let’s say ‘top down’, influence our everyday life, and especially our experiences, interactions, discourse and communication.

This way of representing ideologies and their relation to the practices of our everyday lives, is consistent with a dimension less examined by Marx and Engels and most theorists of ideology after them, namely the constructivist thesis that human beings

do not act as caused by ‘objective’ reality, but as conditioned by their *interpretation* of reality, an interpretation that depends on socioculturally shared, but possibly changing systems of knowledge – and of course ideologies, as Marx & Engels themselves assumed when they speak of “false consciousness”. In that sense, even they do not escape the idealist philosophy they were combating.

Ideologies as Fundamental Belief Systems

Much of what is summarized above about the nature of ideology in terms of contemporary social and cognitive sciences leaves still many questions unanswered. First of all, from the general concept of ideology as any ideas (as Marx & Engels did), any belief system (as do later political science) or a general theory of social cognition, we want ideologies to be more specific and precise.

Thus, first, we distinguish them from other forms of socially shared beliefs we call knowledge, because such knowledge is shared by the whole epistemic community, and hence by all people of all ideological groups of that community (Van Dijk, 2014). Indeed, we all know what immigrants are, even when there are different ideologically based attitudes about them.

Secondly, the type of beliefs of ideologies may be evaluative, and controlled by underlying norms and values, about who or what is good or bad, or what may or should be done.

Thirdly, ideologies are generally conceived, developed and used as fundamental systems of beliefs, not beliefs that are changed in each situation. They are shared by all or many members of a group, though with variable differences between experts (ideologues, teachers, leaders, etc) and ordinary members of ideological groups. Indeed, ideologies are not acquired or changed overnight. They must apply to many relevant everyday situations and experiences of all or many group members. This requires that they must be fairly general and abstract. A formal metaphor to define them would be appropriate here: they are like mental axioms of an ideological group and serve as the basis for more specific theorems and finally the specific proofs that guide everyday life, interaction and discourse of social actors *as* group members. Indeed, at this abstract level group members may not always be actually aware of them. They may only know their practical application in everyday life situations, and only some aspects may be

become conscious and explicit in big debates and conflicts. Hence, as basic systems of beliefs, ideologies are about the fundamentals of the structure of society, about political power, about gender relations, about the environment, sexuality, life and death, and not about the specifics of whether or not we should respect the restrictions of the current Covid epidemic.

From Ideology to Discourse

Even when we know a bit more about ideology as fundamental belief systems of ideology groups, we still need to show how such ideologies influence, or even control our everyday lives, interaction and discourse at the meso and local levels of society. Our insights here may partly be developed with theories of contemporary cognitive and social psychology and microsociology on the one hand, and discourse studies, on the other hand.

First, we need to introduce more specific notions of social cognition. Indeed, ideological debates and conflict seldom take place at the general and abstract level of ideologies. Rather, ideological debate is usually about more specific issues, such as the death penalty, abortion, immigration, global warming or gay marriage. The sociocognitive structures underlying such debates have traditionally been called *attitudes* in social psychology (Eiser, 1986), even when we barely know what the mental structures are of these attitudes, besides being controlled by underlying ideologies. Indeed, attitudes on immigration may be controlled by racist or anti-racist ideologies, but also by neoliberal or liberal ideologies. Such attitudes may apply the polarized structure of ideologies, as we know from the overall evaluation as being For or Against such issues, and applying general norms or values, e.g., about equality, freedom, autonomy, independence or diversity, and the relations between groups, our relations with the environment, and our actions and interactions. These attitudes are still forms of social cognition, that is shared by the members of groups, and hence show many variations, e.g. as when feminists may have different attitudes on gay marriage.

Secondly, ideologies and attitudes need to be used and applied in the concrete situations, experiences, interactions and discourse of the individual members of ideological groups. Variation may become even more specific, as we also know of the personal variation in the use of languages and dialects, adapted to specific situations on

the one hand, and the autobiographical experiences of individual group members. Such variation may be so pervasive that empirical research, e.g. by observation or interviews does not seem to confirm the presence of shared ideologies. These personal experiences may feature instantiations of ideologically controlled attitudes of a group, but always specified and represented in terms of mental representations of situations, experiences and action, that is by personal *mental models* (Johnson-Laird, 1983; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). also featuring personal opinions and emotions. These mental models of personal experience are the basis of everyday conversations and storytelling, on the one hand, or of news reports in the media. Thus, the influence of ideology on text and talk is mediated by specific group attitudes and personal mental models. And as we have briefly mentioned above, such is finally controlled by our mental models of the communicative situation, context models because we tell a story differently to our ideological friends in an informal conversation, or when we speak in the classroom, in a political debate, in court or when writing an opinion piece in the newspaper (Van Dijk, 2008a, 2009).

We see that ideological discourse is controlled at several levels of generality and specificity, and in different situations, and hence may show underlying ideologies more or less explicitly. As we have assumed above, however, more explicit ideological discourse typically exhibits the polarized structures of ideologies, attitudes and mental models, such as many forms of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation at all levels of discourse, from general topics, to the details of intonation, syntax (actives vs passives) lexical choice (such as freedom fighters, rebels or terrorists) or metaphor (such a when talking about the arrival of many refugees in terms of WAVES) – which are the well-known features of discourse studied in critical discourse analysis.

It is this kind of critical discourse analysis also engaged in the work of Norman Fairclough, for instance by showing the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideologies, for instance in the political discourse of New Labour, in government discourse of the economic crisis, austerity, globalization, and many other topics (see, e.g., Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2006; Fairclough & Fairclough (2012). The details of these analyses show how dominant ideologies operate at the level of text and talk, and presupposed and combated by dominated groups.

Concluding Remark

So, finally replying to the question of the title of this article (Are ideologies negative?) the answer should now be obvious: It depends on who is in power and who is talking. A racist ideology is negative for antiracists, and positive, while 'obvious' or 'natural' for racists. The same for feminist ideologies of resistance, which are positive and 'normal' for feminists but hated by male chauvinists. For critical discourse analysts, all ideologies underlying and legitimating and abuse of power resulting in inequality, misery and suffering, will obviously be negative, and all ideologies resisting such domination will be positive. And such polarization will always be shown or implied by their critical discourse analysis.

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