

# Towards a Scientific Critique of Ideologies

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**Abstract.** The paper focuses on explicitly pointing out the openings and limits of ideologies. We start from recognizing “ideology” as an essentially contested concept that has triggered many disputes in philosophy and science. By recognizing the limits of the so-called pre-paradigmatic frameworks of investigations we attempt to sketch a paradigmatic interpretation of ideologies that relies heavily on information processing and its consequences on the social existence of mankind. Instead of conclusions we raise a set of questions for future inquiries on the topic.

**Keywords:** ideology, paradigm, Processual-Organic Theory, critique

## 1. Ideology as an Essentially Contested Concept

The literature dedicated to “ideology” generally begins by crediting the French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) as the first author to use the French term *idéologie*. The newly coined concept was supposed to lay the foundation of a newly born empiric-logical science of ideas [1]. In the same time, and as a consequence of de Tracy’s and his collaborators’ political views, Napoleon used the term in a pejorative sense, expressing the pettiness of his liberal opponents [2].

During the years “ideology” has embraced an abundance of meanings, a fact which could justify the label of “stretched”, applied by Sartori to concepts forced to accept new meanings to the breaking point of analytical rigor [3]. By the extent of the inventory provided for the meaning of the term “ideology” authors like Eagleton [4] or Gerring [5] confirm Sartori’s intuition regarding the lack of precision attributed to “stretched concepts”.

As a consequence of the authors’ various ontological and epistemological perspectives “ideology” has received a tremendous amount of dysfunctional semantics which one may account for as being the normal results of a not so well understood dialectical process. In spite of our ignorance on the matter, in the end, there is the hope for an “invisible hand” that would sum-up the various interpretations and crystallize them into an all encompassing and essence-only concept. These expectations arise from works such as Gallie’s about the essentially contested concepts in social science.

By recognizing that reality is a complex object of study which can only be grasped in time by trial-error attempts and discussions, Gallie argues that cardinal concepts such as “art”, “democracy”, “ethics” or “social justice” cannot be but contestable concepts [6]. In order to make contestable concepts recognizable Gallie offers a set of criteria that in a more concise approach can be listed as follows: evaluative nature, internal complexity, eterogeneity, alterity, conflictuality, exemplarity and progressive coherency.

Following a verifying logic one can easily find confirmations of the above criteria in the disputes around “ideology”. The axiological potentiality that such a term encompasses is sometimes explicit but can also remain implicit. Concerning the first situation Napoleon thought of ideologies as being erroneous and far from the necessities of political reality [7]. In his German Ideology, Marx considers ideology as a source of delusion as people search for solutions from “the skies to earth” instead of the other way around and thus concealing the material problems of life [8]. Following the same line of thought, Engels is the first to attribute to ideology the false consciousness label [9]. In regards to the second situation, Mannheim writes about a particular interpretation of the term which denotes skepticism vis-à-vis the opinions of an adversary that deforms reality, while Minogue describes ideology as a form of theoretical conscription [10].

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Concerning the complexity of the reality designated by the term, Arrendt explains the intention of ideologies to explain existence relying solely on one premise [11] while Boudon draws attention on a process of shrinking ideologies under the pressure of the refutations suffered [12]. The general and all-encompassing ideologies that Arrendt has criticized are slowly becoming particular ideologies with more modest objectives which may seem to the reader as looking more like a collection of discrete principle rather than an elegant worldview. Complexity is also obvious when noticing the multitude of disparate sides that every definition identified by Eagleton or Gerring is signaling.

The alteration of interpretations is superbly shown by Knight who after conducting a statistical analysis of one hundred year (1906-2006) use of the term ideology in the *American Political Science Review*, discerns at list five categories of definitions that cohabited throughout the years [13].

Conflictuality implies that every side is aware of the differences and even incompatibilities with each other's conceptions; still the interpretation supported is used in a defensive or offensive fashion. For instance, if Arrendt denies ideology's correspondence with reality, Althusser admits that some interpretations may prove correct to a certain degree. Thus the validity of ideological processing is sometimes denied while other times recognized, a fact that may contain a potential tension or even a manifest one in the debates around the concept.

Despite the semantic disputes around the term in question one can identify opinions that a common denominator can be traced in almost all interpretations. It can be argued that the idea of contrast with competing schools of thought and the stability in time can be two major constants of interpreting ideology. The constructive dimension of Gallies's work relies on the possibility that following long discussions each side can better delimitate their stance and thus maybe reach an eventual mutual agreement on a possible protoconcept recognized by all sides and thus a progress in better understanding ideology. Moreover there are some who support the "we must agree to disagree" attitude in the hope that eventually progress will follow [14].

## **2. The Need to Take the Discussion to a Higher Level**

As an alternative to voluntarily adopting one of the interpretations used in the above described "Babel Tower" of significations, we propose to the researcher the possibility of adopting Kuhn's framework for investigating scientific knowledge in tackling the problem [15]. It is an option that permits the analyst to take into consideration not only a definition of the term but also the larger paradigmatic framework in which it was developed. Even though Kuhn admits he hasn't succeeded in defining paradigms very precisely we recognize that their interpretation as *systems of ontological, methodological and axiological options that constitute the common possession of the researchers working in a certain scientific field* detaches by its clarity and importance for future research.

For the purpose of the paper we are mainly focusing on the distinction between the pre-paradigmatic and paradigmatic stages of science. A discipline struggling in the pre-paradigmatic stage is characterized by the lack of standard research methods and a never-ending polemic concerning issues fundamental for conducting research. Culda, on the other hand underlines the fact that in the pre-paradigmatic stage, interpretations refer to disparate facts in unsatisfactorily ways, a situation in which one cannot benefit from an explanations that can overpass all its competitors [16]. When an interpretation is sufficiently elaborated so as to permit integrative, unitary, satisfactory and sufficiently nuanced explanations usable in applicative research, it becomes a paradigm.

In the case of ideology even a surface diagnosis suggests the fact that science is still in search of the good explanation and that disputes around the topic prevents "normal" research to take shape in a more convincing way. Of course, one may wonder if Political Science can be an exception, as the mention objection can be raised for all "softer" disciplines. In order to respond to an issue such as this, one needs to overpass the horizontal level of inquiry and begin questioning the subject in a more historicist fashion. Such an option determines the researcher to ask not "what knowledge is" but "what knowledge can become" in the case of investigating ideology.

For the skeptics we would argue that there is a precedent in the form of a paradigm that has vast applications throughout all fields of science, the General Systems Theory. Our point here is that we can have a paradigm that would serve as a “theory of all things” and that this interpretation should not be rooted in the failures of the present but in the promises of a future plausible success. Second rank, more narrow theories, can produce useful results which can attract attention on disparate issues that deserve to be put in the equation, otherwise, in themselves, they cannot be but insufficient and full of errors. Moreover, the researcher can hardly make a whole out of some disparate pieces and bits borrowed from the multitude of competing theories.

### **3. The Processual-Organic Sketch of Ideologies**

The processual-organic theory of human social existence is a framework of investigation that was developed in the course of two decades of research by L. Culda. In his first book on the matter, Culda points out the necessity to base our study of the social domain on information processing rather than on material aspects [17]. This option led Culda to recognize the processual nature of the human processing capacities [18] as well of those specific to social organizations [19].

Within the processual horizon ideology is a social interpretation framework with a stressed normative and praxiological character derived from an ontology which offers guidance on how to better manage the social existence of man. As a consequence of supporting only one social category’s interests (workers, capitalists etc.) it is a biased way of promoting the “part” in defiance of the “whole”. In spite of this fact, ideologies have proved to be very successful in attracting supports over the years. We may explain this situation as being a consequence of the necessity to vulgarize the root ontology, a direction in which ideology develops tools far more versatile and efficient than the logic of philosophical reasoning.

In what follows we are going to briefly sketch the history of ideological processing.

Throughout history human beings have interpreted cooperation as being favorable to satisfying their needs. As soon as cooperation became more complicated the need to explicitly regulate the interactions between humans was felt. In a first stage the norms were natural, spontaneous, based on experience and they led the way to primitive communities. As communities proved their viability new ways of improving them were searched for. Gradually the need for a systematic intervention in organizing and coordinating interactions began to take shape.

The social processing capacities in which the first reflections on the well being of communities began to emerge were particularized inevitably by the geographical context that supported them. These reflections were still weak, empirically limited and when over passing the senses, speculative. When social existence organized itself to still higher levels political thinking became more and more autonomous. The limits of the first attempts of political speculation are obvious when considering their alteration throughout the centuries. Even so, philosophy has produced some usable results for the sovereigns sensitive to their advisers. The moment when explicit frameworks of interpretation were explicitly adopted as “guidelines” for the state policy, one may speak about the emergence of ideology.

The relation between philosophy and ideology is a genetic one as the former provides the ontological explanations, the goals to be reached while the latter gains its autonomy by developing practical ways of attaining the goals prescribed by philosophers. The delimitation is of cardinal importance as the means used by speculation are totally different from the means of ideological action.

Regarding the above mentioned distinction we support the acknowledgement of the powerful symbolic nature of ideological processing. In fact, most ideologies seem to count more on flags, anthems and parades to generate solidarity rather than on the coolness of arguments provided by the philosophical mind. This reality seems to be justified in light of the ideology’s need to address the masses and their unwillingness to engage in speculative thinking.

Moreover, one must take into account the diversity of issues that ideology should tackle and the necessary, even though deforming, simplifications made in order for the message to get through.

The simplifications specific to ideologies are better understood when considering the “black and white”, “us-them” philosophy that encourages hasted generalizations and very often confrontation and conflict.

Conflict is in fact intrinsic to ideology as the partisan way of understanding things cannot lead to anything but confrontation with other parties involved. The interactions that emerge are of the dominant type, explicit or sometimes hidden.

The language of ideologies deserves a special interest as by it ideology controls not only the conclusions of the individual but the entire process of reaching them. The signaled mechanism seems to rely heavily on stereotypes, the so called “wooden language” and slogans.

Despite their symbolic nature ideologies are remarkably pragmatic, a trend that can be noticed by considering the numerous reconsiderations of initial positions, criticizing the past, all for the sake of not being left behind by other social representations engaged in the struggle for power. Even science is sometimes used to justify ideological purpose, however this use cannot be but incidental and lacking in rigor or even flawed.

The results of systematically applying ideologies can be hinted by analyzing the state of security that characterizes nowadays world. States, alliances or corporations still try to dominate one another as narrow interests prevail over the general good with consequences such as the spreading of conflict, poverty and disease.

The good news is that within democratic ideologies a certain degree of access to information is tolerated. Through these channels public opinion can become aware of the perverse consequences of applying ideologies and exert pressure on decision-makers. Through successive corrections ideology may produce from within the conditions for its own self-dilution leaving room for scientific processing.

#### **4. Landmarks for a Processual Critique of Ideologies**

By the critique of ideology we understand the submission to evaluation of its information processing capacity and, ultimately, of the results and consequences whether they are already produced or potential. The task would be much simpler if science was capable of providing an alternative which could be more suited for satisfying the needs of human beings and their communities. Unfortunately we are not aware of such an alternative, so the comparative analysis is out of the question.

The alternative we propose is to use the scientific method of systematic inquiry in the hope that while explicitly pointing out the flaws of ideology the process will trigger the interest of analysts towards scientific solutions to the issues in question. Of course, the analysis may show some good aspects of ideology and this should be taken into account as provisional “lessons learned”.

From the processual-organic perspective, a number of relevant questions arise when evaluating ideology:

- What are the social necessities that support ideology?
- What are the characteristics of the social capacities of information that sustain ideology?
- What are the features of the interactions that support the emergence and resilience of ideology?
- What are the results of ideological processing for the managers? What about the others participating in the interactions? What about the whole social existence?
- What are the derived consequences of ideological processing for the managers? What about the others participating in the interactions? What about the whole social existence?
- What is the degree in which necessities are satisfied?
- What are the limits of ideologies and of ideology in general?
- What are the relations between ideologies?
- Which ideologies open to correction?
- How do corrections of ideology occur?

If taken seriously by the scientific community, questions like the ones listed above and quite possibly other, may generate a critical mass of answer seekers that can eventually provide better alternatives for mankind. Realism is an ideology; therefore, judging by its speculative premises, it must be wrong. The world’s possibilities are not just the ones observable in the past and present but also the ones that reside in the sphere of potentials and, with the proper knowledge, humankind can choose to activate the constructive ones.

## 5. Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0849.

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