

(Extract from manuscript : "Codes, ideologies and markets .Unrational mechanisms for cultural selection"; further elaborated in the books *Ideologiavsløring som ideologi*, Oslo 1986 and *Ideologi, myte og tro ved slutten av et århundre*, oslo 1999))

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Notes toward a Definition of "Ideologies"

This is not the place for tracing the whole history of the concept of ideology. I have written a doctoral dissertation about ideologies, and refer Norwegian readers to that⁴. Of importance in this connection, is to emphasize the possibilities and the limitations in using a term like ideology in studying relations between culture and social control, culture and power.

The contemporary literature about ideologies can appear quite divided as to whether the authors regard Marx, or a Marxian tradition, as the basis for ideological analysis or whether they regard Marxism itself as an archetype of ideological deception⁷. This may also be one of the reasons why not only the study of ideologies, but also whole areas of sociology of knowledge have had a slightly dubious reputation with regard to scientific standards. Unless we can find analytical criteria for falsifying ideological postulates, the whole business of ideological analysis might be suspected of devising strategies for different groups' own ideological struggle for power and social control.

However, on a certain level of abstraction I think it is possible to postulate analytical criteria for ideologies, covering both the central parts of the Marxist and of the anti-Marxist assumptions about ideologies; these can be separated from ideas that should not be analysed as ideologies. In my book from 1986 I have postulated five such criteria that must all be demonstrated if a set of ideas should be regarded as an ideology.

The first criterion is that ideas, in order to be called ideologies, must constitute a system of comprehension where one assumption supports the creditability of another assumption. The system should also have lasted for some time and been used in different fields if it is to arouse the general interest of ideological analysts.

The second criterion for regarding some ideas as ideologies is that they, at least potentially, should promote a reality deception. This criterion does not necessarily imply that someone has a standard for an absolutely objective overview while others are just prejudiced. The difference is a relative one, and a relativity depending upon testable categories. Many axiomatic and metaphysical positions cannot be judged as ideological just because they are not testable. The reason for the diffusion of various forms of "false consciousness", as seen from both Marxists and anti-Marxists, is not to be found primarily in epistemological misunderstanding, but in the social fact that someone with power has interests in legitimating their own particular interest in social matters as the universal interests of society as such.

This leads on to a third criterion: ideologies must be related to organized social interest. Even if all groups have some sort of interest in social matters, not all have developed ideologies to defend these interests, and not all groups with ideologies have the resources or strength to become generally viable. Usually the most dominant ideologies will primarily interest a sociologist, but this last point is not a criterion for defining a system of ideas as an ideology.

Our fourth criterion refers to the suppressive character of ideologies. Ideas which are in the interests of some groups at one end of social variables will normally have losers at the other end. In the literature about ideologies the losers are seen as those groups and people who supposedly are being suppressed by a dominant ideology, and who should consequently develop a counter-ideology to free themselves. The underlying assumption is that this counter-ideology, or a synthesis of the dominant ideology and the counter-ideology, will promote more freedom for creative forces, and also more reality orientation in society, as the need for suppression and false consciousness becomes smaller. Behind this assumption lies a notion of historical development as progress in human ability to take care of own destiny. A more moderate version of this criterion four would simply be that fixed ideologies are in the long run seldom very functional for a maximum reality orientation and a sustainable adjustment.

The fifth and last criterion to be found in the literature about ideologies is that they should all have a self-immunizing character. If an ideology based upon particular interests, and perhaps contradictory principles, is to remain in power as a dominant power, it has to defend itself against critical analysis. The strategies to achieve this might differ. One of the most common ways of defending oneself against attack is camouflage. In the battle between ideologies one can present own interpretations as directly derived from the order of nature, the order of reason, democracy or of common sense. In addition one can promote all sorts of suspicious symbolization around potential critics.

When indicators of all these five criteria are found, there is reason to analyse a set of ideas as an ideology. This means, among other things, that we should look for what alternative interpretations could have been given on relevant matters. Such contrasting perspectives can reveal the particular status of many ideas, usually taken more or less for granted. The dominance of a particular perspective may also tell something about cultural power and probably also social control in a society. Studies of ideologies may be a central core in the sociology of knowledge, in studies of functional and dysfunctional cultural patterns, and in the study of culture and power.

The concept of ideology can lead to the development of useful methodological tools for the study of cultural dominance, not least in an age of mass media influence and of centralized abstract learning. But the tool has its limitations. In various versions the concept of ideology implies identifiable social interests related to the spokesmen for the ideological interpretations. The actors are assumed to have at least some intentional interests in their choice of interpretations, even if they have not developed the ideological pattern themselves.

If no such social interests can be demonstrated, an ideological analysis might be a bit far fetched, perhaps even appear as part of a counter-ideological attack. Nevertheless, not all ideas falling outside the concept of ideologies can be regarded as individually developed opinions or as convictions falling outside the field for sociological concern.

Language can be an example of a forming cultural structure which should definitely be of interest for sociologists. But a language system cannot normally be described as an ideology or explained by common interests among all individuals who use that particular language. Sociologists should nevertheless be able to analyse language, both in relation to the sociology of knowledge and in relation to social control. A focus on language leads on to the concept of "codes".