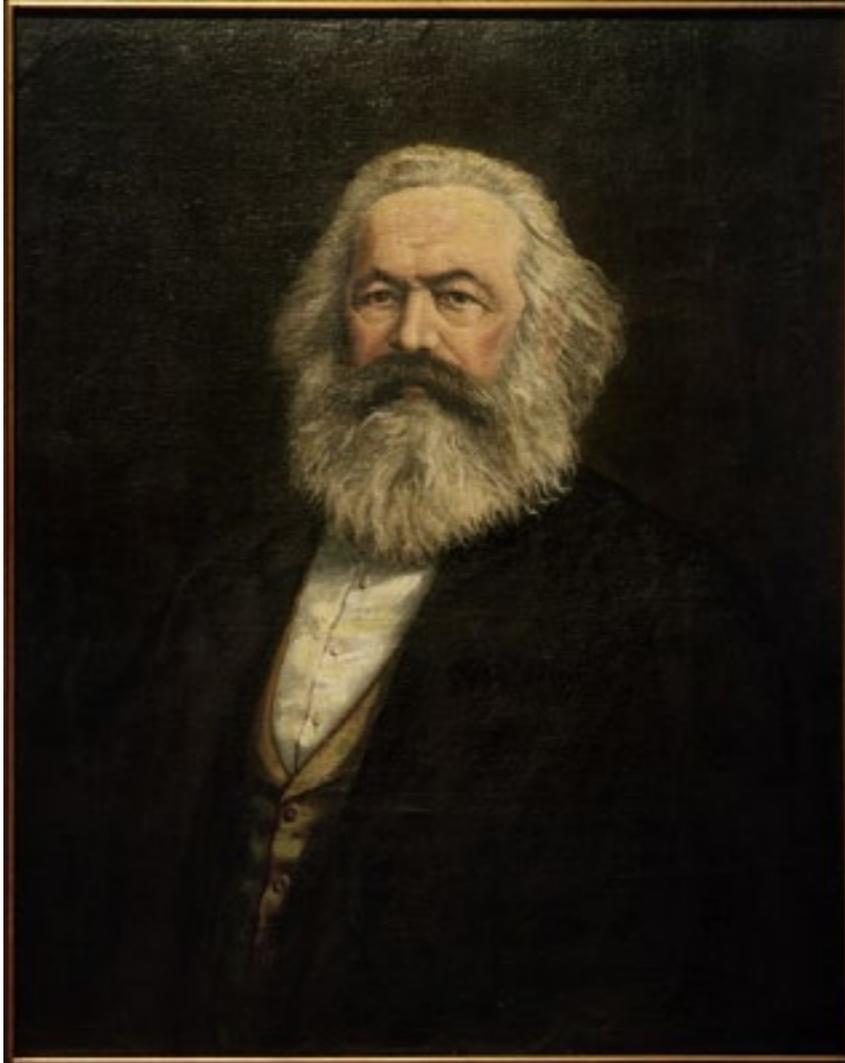


IDEOLOGY AND DEMOCRACY

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The subject of democracy and ideology has deep and fascinating taproots. They extend back to the late eighteenth century, when the neologism ‘ideology’ sprang to life during the bitterly fought opening phase of modern European battles for representative democracy. The first systematic exploration of the subject came almost a generation later, in the writings of Marx. His accounts of ideology and democracy are worth revisiting, if only to expose their weakness and to address some basic philosophical issues – concerning language, science and the political implications of pluralism – that are vitally important to democratic politics in the 21st century.

The Marxian legacy

Why begin with Marx? Simply this: he tried to seize the late eighteenth-century concept of ideology from its inventors, *idéologues* such as Antoine Destutt de Tracy, for the purpose of unmasking the power claims of the rising bourgeoisie. The term ideology was transformed by Marx into a sharp-edged signifier, a weapon in the arsenal of ‘true democracy’, the self-government of the producers. In consequence, the theory of ideology was no longer synonymous with the concern of the *idéologues* to destroy religious prejudice and aristocratic privilege and to develop what they called *civisme*, through top-down state policies guided by empirical-analytic knowledge of the laws governing the human psyche.¹

Marx walloped the anti-democratic political intentions of the *idéologues*. He ensured that the term ideology was no longer synonymous with the quixotic meddling of intellectuals intoxicated with abstractions, *esprit de système* and a naive faith in human perfectibility, which was the pejorative meaning ascribed to the term by Napoleon Bonaparte when denouncing the *idéologues* following Malet’s abortive conspiracy of December 1812.

Marx gave a wholly new twist to its meaning: ideology as the collectively expressed ideas of the bourgeoisie, which talks democracy, rules the property system of civil society and (note his reductionism) thereby controls the modern state. Marx observed that not all sets of ideas are ideologies in this sense. An ideology is a special constellation of ideas. It comprises dominant and dominating ideas, which function to render 'natural' and invisible the power relations of the property order and its so-called democracy. Ideology protects these arrangements from public questioning and political resistance.

Bourgeois ideology does this by concealing and 'freezing' social divisions. It functions as a condition of false compromise and unity among potentially conflicting social groups, principally the classes defined by wage labour and capital. It performs this legitimating function by portraying the dominant private interests of civil society in grandiose formulations that make them appear, falsely, as universal ways of life detached from particular interests. Ruling ideas that claim to be universal are always those of a particular ruling class. Marx illustrates the point by showing how the class relationships of modern society are seen by bourgeois ideologists to epitomise universal justice, individuality and the democratic rights of man. Yet bourgeois theories of universal democracy, liberty and individualism are ideological in the exact sense that they conceal the property-based interests of civil society, or so Marx says. Despite its appearance of guaranteeing individual and collective freedom, talk of democracy in reality guarantees merely the freedom of private property owners to carry on extracting surplus-value from the mass of impoverished waged labourers. Behind the litany and *maquillage* of democratic liberty there stands, in Marx's view, the harsh reality of market-driven capitalism: a new form of 'slavery' and 'inhumanity' based on the arrogant dominion of private capital. Marx thus tries to explain bourgeois ideology by using methods that critically expose its origins. The illusory disinterestedness and universalism of ideologies is unmasked by confronting them with their actual social basis. Social reality is pitted against its own illusions. Ideologies are accused of mis-recognising their own conditions of social production; they are condemned for trapping themselves within systems of ideas that function as apologies of the patterned exploitation inherent within market-based bourgeois democracy.



New doubts, new horizons

When sketched in this way, the classical Marxian theory of ideology seems to share several points of agreement with most contemporary normative theories of democracy, which emphasise such themes as the (potential) equality of citizens, self-government and public respect for the rule of law and human rights. To speak for a moment in the language of Marx, both are critical of class inequalities and, by extension, the power of private capital to manipulate the outcomes of elections, parliamentary deliberations and state policy-making in representative-democratic form. The two approaches also share a deep reservation about grandly universal political talk. Both suspect that big talk is often in practice a mask for particular interests; they seem to agree, as Marx and Engels put it in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, that ruling power groups typically represent their own conditions of life as ‘eternal laws of nature and of reason’.

The affinities between the two political languages are evident; nevertheless, there remain serious doubts about their compatibility and whether, in particular, the Marxian theory of ideology remains plausible. During the past several decades, for understandably strong reasons, the Marxian theory of ideology has suffered a battering, followed by a marked loss of confidence. Numerous writers have tried to expose its fallacious nineteenth-century premises, arguing that those who follow in the footsteps of Marx’s attempt at unmasking and abolishing ideological deception are themselves deceived. While the counter arguments are by no means simple or consistent, two reasons in particular explain why Marx’s theory of ideology no longer works. Since these reasons bear centrally on any effort to rescue the term ideology as a critical weapon in support of democracy, both merit careful consideration.

Science and ideology

The first line of objection targets Marx’s reluctance to label the natural sciences as ideological. According to many critics, the philosophical status of the Marxian theory of ideology is ruined by its dalliance with old-fashioned empiricism. Marx’s conviction that ‘the material transformation of the economic conditions of production...can be determined with the precision of natural science’² is said to have assimilated the theory of ideology to the assumptions, empirical-analytic methods and

instrumental aims of a nineteenth-century conception of natural science. Marx is charged with embracing the Comtean positivist assumption that absolute knowledge of modern society is possible by adhering to the rules of empirical observation, conceptual precision and methodological exactness. He supposed that this universal knowledge could be used to calculate, predict and control reality. The critique of ideology is thus construed by Marx as a species of technical knowledge in the hands of those who know that others are lost within the fogs of deception.

Several negative consequences are said to flow from this empiricist self-understanding of the critique of ideology. By contrasting the mis-recognition fostered by ideology with the certain knowledge of natural science, the Marxian theory indulged an optimistic bourgeois Victorian conception of scientific-technical progress, which in our times has become highly questionable. It was not just that Marx refused to apply the category of ideology to the modern natural sciences. Because Marx was convinced of the ‘scientific’ status of his own theory of ideology, it fell victim to the dogmatic assumption, common to all scientism, that it was true knowledge capable of technical implementation. Marx’s belief that the theory of ideology produced scientific insights into the laws of motion of ‘reality’ later aroused the suspicion that it was potentially an ally of manipulative power. In the name of the struggle of enlightened scientific reason against arrogant superstition, of true interests against false interests, it preserved rather than terminated the intellectualist bid for power and authority evident in the original ‘civilising’ mission of the *idéologues*. Symptomatic of this flaw was Marx’s failure to consider whether his own theory of ideology might itself function as an ideology. A *tu quoque* question of this kind is surely legitimate, even within the terms of Marx’s own discourse. If ideas are ideological because they justify inequalities of social power by misrepresenting, in grandiose universal claims, the real nature of civil society and the state, didn’t Marx’s own ideas function in this way? And since, as Marx observed of classical political economy, truthful ideas could become ideological due to changes in the class structure of any society, didn’t this possibility apply equally to Marx’s thought?

These questions were suppressed by the original Marxian theory. As Karl Mannheim observed in *Ideology and Utopia*, the Marxian theses on the relationship between structures of thought and the conditions of social existence were applied sparingly – to the opponents of Marxism and

never to its own structures of thought. They laid claim to correct and politically useful knowledge of the modern democratic state and market economy, which were conceived as a totality governed by a single determining principle of organisation: changes in the forces and relations of production. In this way, Marx's critics say, the science of historical materialism set aside its insistence that only the proletariat can emancipate the proletariat. The so-called science indulged an instrumental relationship to its proletarian addressees. Their 'real historical interests' are known in advance. The Marxian theory plays the tune to which the 'dangerous class' is expected to dance.

The problem of signification

There is a second reason for the loss of credibility of Marx's critique of ideology. This has to do with its neglect of questions concerning spoken language and other (non-verbal) forms of signification. The complaint should be handled with care, if only because there are plenty of passages within his own writings where Marx notes the socio-political importance of language in human affairs. Moreover, it is false to suppose, as Gramsci reminded his contemporaries, that Marx conceived ideology as pure appearance, as an artificial substance draped like a veil over an underlying reality.

Social reality for Marx consists of interacting individuals, groups and classes who produce, by means of language, appearances that are something more than a veil of errors or lies. These ideological appearances are the distorted mode in which social activities manifest themselves in consciousness. As such, they have a material reality for social actors and, under conditions of a class-divided society, this reality generates and pre-supposes appearances.

Many subsequent critics (most of them indebted to Louis Althusser's influential essay on ideology³) acknowledge these caveats. They argue, nevertheless, that Marx's theory of ideology rests upon the untenable distinction between the ideological forms in which 'reality' appears and a prior domain of 'reality', consisting of 'material' activity uncluttered by processes of signification. That is why Marx understood ideology as a posthumous misrepresentation of an underlying reality – the material life processes of market society – which functions as the pre-symbolic point of origin of ideology. This subterranean reality not only operates 'behind

the back' of ideology. It also serves as a foundation that contradicts, as well as explains, the dissimulations of ideology.

Numerous attempts to solve the riddles of ideology by distinguishing a 'surface' or 'superstructure' of ideological representations from a subterranean 'base' of material life activity can be found scattered throughout Marx's writings. A characteristic example is Marx's use of the old Roman story of the cattle rustler Cacus (in the third part of *Theories of Surplus Value*) to identify and explain the material origins of ideology. Just as Cacus concealed his robberies by herding his prey backwards into his cave, so that it appeared that they had already departed, the bourgeoisie, Marx explains, conceals its parasitic role within the production process by picturing itself, falsely, as the source of all wealth, which in reality is produced by the sweat and toil of the working class.

The distinction between material practice and its ideological misrepresentation is also strongly evident throughout *Das Kapital*. Certain 'imaginary' categories of bourgeois political economy (such as the 'value and price of labour'; 'wages'; the '*fictio juris* of contracts'; 'commodity') are seen by Marx to originate within capitalist relations of production. Contrary to the self-understanding of political economy, says Marx, these concepts are neither timeless nor true. They are historically specific and function as mystifying 'categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations'. These ideological categories depict complex relations, or relations among relations, such as the wages-money-value-commodity relationship, as self-evidently 'natural' relations, or simply as properties of things themselves. According to Marx, these mystifying categories (which he also calls illusions, forms of manifestation, hieroglyphics, semblances, estranged outward appearances) must be distinguished carefully from – and explained and criticised with reference to – 'real relations', or what he also calls inner connections, essences, real nature, actual relations, or the hidden or secret substratum.

Much the same 'reality-based' explanation of ideology appears within the earliest writings of Marx and Engels. A fundamental contrast is drawn between the 'actual existing world' and what human beings imagine or say about the world. The illusions of the bourgeois epoch are said to be sublimations of the 'material life-process' of social labour, private property and class struggle: 'Ideologists turn everything upside down.' Thus, for example, believers of religion are accused of failing to realise that 'man makes religion, religion does not make man'. Marx emphasises that

religion is a form of illusory happiness. Therefore, the critique of religious ideology is at the same time a demand to abolish social conditions that require illusions: 'The criticism of religion is...the germ of the criticism of the valley of tears whose halo is religion.'

In such analyses, Marx and his co-author insist that ideologies have no independent or *sui generis* logic of development. Their birth, rise to dominance and decay is always determined by the logic of development of material exchanges with outer nature rooted in the social labour process. It follows that the grip of ideologies on the minds and lips of the powerless can be broken only through revolutionary changes of the 'actual existing world'. Life is not determined by consciousness; rather, consciousness is determined by life. Emancipation is not a matter of thinking and speaking differently. It is a 'practical' act, a matter of abolishing the material conditions of civil society and its pseudo-democracy.

These formulations understandably aroused strong reactions. Many have observed that the Marxian theory of ideology, resting as it does on the fundamental distinction between material activity and its apparent forms, fails to acknowledge that all social and political life, including the forces and relations of production in both their objective and subjective dimensions, is structured through codes of signification. The 'material life processes' of civil society do not comprise 'naked' productive activity. Whether in spoken, written or visual form, signs are not cognate to deeds, since deeds are themselves always 'saturated' by signs. Social and political life, to put the point differently, is coextensive with symbolically mediated activity. It is not a 'level' or 'dimension' of social and political life. There is nothing specifically social or political – not even the labour process – which is constituted from an Archimedean point 'outside' or 'below' signifying practices.

Marx's failure to recognise this elementary but fundamental point, his critics argue, produced a number of undesirable consequences. For instance, the theory of ideology could not provide a convincing explanation of how traditions can and do exert a profound influence far beyond their time and place of origin. Symptomatic was Marx's inability to come to terms with his own recognition of the way that classical Greek poetry and art came to be endowed with 'eternal' significance, at least for European civilisations. Linked with this problem of how to understand tradition was Marx's failure to explain the possibility (as he put it in *Theories of Surplus Value*) that 'free spiritual production' within any society

can and often does conflict with politics, law, religion, morality and other 'ideological component parts of the ruling class'.

Finally, Marx's thesis that ideologies can be explained genetically, by referring to the prevailing 'real' forces and relations of production 'underlying' the surface forms of ideology, implied that ideology could be abolished. The elimination of commodity production and exchange and, hence, the abolition of the representative democratic state, would rid the world of illusions. Ideology would wither away. Forms of thought would become attuned to the 'real material conditions' of communist society. Processes of signification would become mere instruments of communication among free and equal subjects. According to Marx's critics, this communist dream of abolishing ideology is now better described as a totalitarian reverie – as a dangerous fantasy of building a future society whose subjects, fully transparent to one another, would be burdened no longer by problems of misrecognition, misunderstanding, rhetoric and all the other paraphernalia of communication.⁴

Reconstructing the concept of ideology

The Marxian theory of ideology is sometimes criticised for its conceptual imprecision, ambiguity and incompleteness. These are important weaknesses, but they pale before the two challenges described above. At a minimum, the crudely realist bias of the theory of ideology and its reductionist treatment of signifying practices pose some basic questions about the overall plausibility of the Marxian approach. Of central importance is the whole issue of whether or not the concept of ideology still has a legitimate place in the theory and practice of democracy. I believe it does, but I shall argue that in order to retain a critical concept of ideology it must be reconstructed fundamentally: dismantled and reassembled in a new form, in order to unlock its democratic potential.

From science to pluralism

How can this be done? Let us begin with the first objection to the Marxian theory of ideology criticism, for it raises the significant question of whether the theory of ideology can be rescued from its arrogant and outdated nineteenth-century empiricist presumption that science and ideology are diametrically opposed entities. More precisely, the issue is

whether a critical theory of ideology can be rid of its empiricist bias, whether it can restrain itself from making absolute truth claims, minimally by acknowledging its own historicity, its contingent embeddedness within any given socio-political context. Can a critical theory of ideology come to understand itself as an *interpretation* and as therefore subject in principle to self-contradiction, unforeseen social and political developments, drastic revision or even open rejection by its public addressees, without at the same time being reduced to bland and apologetic propositions that kowtow to the status quo? In other words: can the term ideology become more than a bland descriptor, a mere synonym for a particular way of seeing the world? Is there an alternative to definitions of ideology that have no sting in their tail – for instance, those which regard ideology as a mere ‘system of political and social beliefs’ that embodies ‘values and ideals’ and ‘principles of action’ based on ‘general beliefs about man, society, and the state’?²⁵

Such questions concerning the possibility of a ‘post-scientific’ but socially and politically engaged critique of ideology and power are topical and of great importance for democratic politics. The trouble is that during the past couple of decades, the epistemological self-confidence that fed the Marxian theory of ideology has flagged. In its place there has developed a challenge to ‘truth’, a strong revival of cognitive and ethical scepticism of the kind anticipated in Pascal’s maxim: ‘What is truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other.’ The spirit of recent times is something like, ‘No privileged truths, only interpretations!’ and it is a key reason why critical theories of ideology, à la Marx, have become so scarce.

According to Marx’s critics, the struggle to unmask ideological illusions fails to examine its own presumed authority. The critique of ideology clings dogmatically to the misguided belief in the superior innocence of its own premises. In the view of these sceptics, the (Marxian) search for truth, free of illusions, must be called off. Theoretical inquiry must travel light; it should relinquish its traditional claim to absolute knowledge. It must instead embrace the logic of particularity, context-dependence and scepticism in the face of presumed certainties. The so-called real world is said to be only a fable, a struggle among competing fables. Religion, science, democracy, socialism, nationalism and liberalism are so many diverse interpretations of the world or, rather, so many variants of different fables that must be taken at face value, since they have no ultimate reference point or standard of truth outside themselves.

Does this ‘post-truth’ challenge to the critical theory of ideology constitute a welcome liberation from traditional socio-political and philosophical prejudices, particularly of an empiricist kind? Or is scepticism better seen as a scurrilous attack upon the democratic potential of the classical theory of ideology? There is no straightforward response to these awkward questions, although one influential line of reasoning begins with Hans Barth’s *Wahrheit und Ideologie*. It is an interesting effort, both because it redefines ideology in linguistic terms and because it insists that scepticism is a political dead end. For Barth, the form of government and way of life known as democracy functionally requires the distinction between false (ideological) and true descriptions and universal normative claims. According to his way of thinking, a basic condition of human association under democratic conditions is agreement, and the essence of agreement, whether in scientific investigation or daily life, is the idea of universal truth.

In recent years, Barth’s point has been taken up by Jürgen Habermas and other deliberative democrats. These democrats emphasise the vital importance of rational argumentation. They defend the possibility of a communication theory of ideology that is critical of unequal power relations. They do so by insisting that such a theory must question dominating language claims, processes of signification that serve to induce and sustain the servile dependency of speaking actors on the powerful. Among these democrats, there is talk of the need for ‘depth interpretations’ of ideological domination. The approach evidently raises questions, which are often left unaddressed, about the specific institutions and procedures through which conflicting interpretations of what counts as ‘domination’ can be adjudicated openly and fairly within social and political life. The approach also prompts questions about the truth status of depth interpretations. Given that ideology is a strongly evaluative term, whose use implies criticism of unequal power relations, how can any instance of communication plausibly be deemed ideological? How can ideology critics pretend to stand above the fray, aloofly assessing the discourse of others, when their interpretation is but another interpretation, no different in principle from the interpretations of those whose discourse they seek to assess by way of ‘depth interpretations’?

These are good and provocative questions. In effect, they force consideration of whether or not it is possible to avoid the twin pitfalls of empiricist ‘science’ (as the saviour of truth against the deceptions of ideology) and a wistful, wishy-washy scepticism that has a limited sense of the

importance of politics and the dangers of deception. Justificatory theories of truth are one possible response to these searching questions. These theories embrace such principles as self-reflection, rational debate and consensus formation among subjects interacting freely within independent public spheres. They see ideology as a mode of signification that serves to sustain relations of domination among speaking and acting subjects who are situated within a social and political framework of asymmetrical power relations. Their view of ideology usually draws upon some or other version of Jürgen Habermas's theory of universal pragmatics, which is why it is doubtful whether the whole approach can escape unscathed from the latter's unresolved difficulties.

Particularly telling is the failure of theories of universal pragmatics to address directly the challenge of cognitive and ethical scepticism. In the versions presented by Habermas and his colleagues, a normative theory of ideology-free communication implies the political possibility of building public spaces guided by a fundamental principle: action oriented to reaching understanding and 'truthful' agreement, freed from the clutches of ideology. Ignoring the way many forms of communication have little or nothing to do with 'agreement' or 'truth', the theory of universal pragmatics presumed, without further argument, that seminar-style communication or 'deliberation' is, or could become, central in human affairs. The rationalism at work here, the belief that free speech is the enemy of ideology, is less than convincing and it helps explain why the theory of universal pragmatics failed in the end to formulate a plausible critical theory of ideology. The basic reason for this failure is traceable to its privileging of one particular type of communicative action known as 'consensual action': a form of communication among speaking and acting subjects that is guided, implicitly or explicitly, by their common conviction that certain 'validity claims' are in operation.

For Habermas and his colleagues, consensual action serves as the empirical and normative standard for deciding in practice what counts as 'truth' in opposition to ideological delusion. Free speech is the antidote to ideology. For whenever speaking actors engage publicly to debate and decide matters of public importance, they do so by presupposing several things. They suppose the practical importance of reaching mutual understanding. They presume that they are capable of distinguishing the performative and propositional aspects of their utterances. On that basis, above all, they imply that they can reach agreement about the 'truth' of their situation.

Language games

The line of reasoning is unconvincing. Put simply, the chief difficulty of a deliberation theory of ideology and democracy, one which is based on the premises of universal pragmatics, is that it sidesteps the frontal challenge mounted by scepticism. The whole analysis is tautological and impractical. It rests upon the supposition that speaking actors are already in agreement about the possibility of agreements guided by 'truth'. Yet people typically don't agree. They see no need for agreement. Often they actively resist agreement – which is another way of saying that the theory of universal pragmatics and deliberative democracy presupposes what cannot be taken for granted.

The impasse forces us back to the unanswered question: can the term ideology be rescued from its sceptical critics? Is there an alternative and politically more fruitful way of dealing with the twin challenges of scientism and scepticism? And can we go beyond the flawed theory of universal pragmatics, by reviving and redesigning a critical concept of ideology that does not suppose the possibility of rational agreement, or puts it on a pedestal? In other words, is it possible to recast the term ideology so that it both retains the sting in its tail and sits more squarely within a 21st-century understanding of democracy as the ongoing political effort by citizens and their representatives to chasten and humble power, wherever it is exercised? For the sake of democracy, can the old troublemaking term ideology be rescued from its old weaknesses? If so, how can this rescue operation happen?

One fruitful way of proceeding is suggested in the influential essay by Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. Of special interest to Lyotard is the problem of legitimacy. By this, he means the processes through which every particular language game tends to authorise its own truth, rightness and efficacy – and, therewith, its superiority over other, rival language games – through utterances which specify, more or less explicitly to the agents of that language game, rules covering such matters as the need for narration, internal consistency, experimental verification and consensus obtained through discussion. Lyotard follows Wittgenstein in thinking that these rules are always context dependent. They comprise guidelines concerning how to form denotative utterances (in which the true/false distinction is central). These rules also cover notions of *savoir-entendre*, *savoir-dire*, and *savoir-faire*, that is, they encompass the ability to form and understand 'good' evaluative and prescriptive

statements and, thereby, the capacity to speak and interact with others guided by certain norms. It is precisely consensus about these pragmatic rules, Lyotard argues, that permits the participants within any given language game to identify each other as interlocutors, as well as to circumscribe their language game, distinguishing it from other, possibly incommensurate language games.

From this neo-Wittgensteinian perspective, Lyotard forcefully argues that every utterance within a particular language game should be understood as an activity, as a 'move' with or against players of one's own or another language game. Utterances may, in addition, be understood as moves in opposition to the most formidable adversary of all: the prevailing language game itself. This is Lyotard's 'first principle': to perform speech acts involves jousting, adopting agonistic or solidaristic postures toward other players, or against the prevailing language game.

It follows from this principle that players within language games are always embedded in relations of power. Power here is understood not as communication unconstrained by 'truth' and 'free communication', as it was for Barth and for Habermas and other deliberative democrats. Power is rather the capacity of actors wilfully to block or effect changes in the speech activities of others within the already existing framework of a language game, which itself always pre-structures the speech activities of individuals and groups.

This point about power and language games is highly relevant to the subject of ideology and democracy. For it implies – this is Lyotard's 'second principle' – that language games must be considered as definite social practices. To perform rule-bound or rule-breaking utterances is, at the same time, to participate in the production, reproduction or transformation of forms of social and political life. Political orders cannot be understood as organically arranged functional wholes (as Talcott Parsons and other systems theorists supposed). Nor can they be understood as class-based and class-divided totalities (as Marx's theory of ideology supposed). Rather, the social and political bonds within any society typically resemble a complex labyrinth of many different, sometimes hostile, slipping and sliding language games. These language games are structured by contingent rules that cannot be understood or 'grasped' by means of some or other 'neutral' meta-discourse. Lyotard quotes Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, section 18) to drive home this point concerning the thousands of language games, trivial or not so trivial, that

normally weave the fabric of our societies: 'Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.'

In Lyotard's view, the ultimate aim of postmodernist analyses of language games is to expose and highlight the ungraspable and splintered character of social and political orders. Practically speaking, this means that postmodernism is committed to the task of dissolving the dominant and dominating language games that cement together and render 'natural' hierarchies of power. Contrary to the Marxian theory of ideology, Lyotard admits that the multiplicity of language games circulating within any society cannot be redescribed and evaluated through 'neutral' and all-knowing meta-discourses, such as a 'science' of ideology based on the rules of 'historical materialism'. Lyotard instead recommends what he calls paralogism (*paralogie*), that is, intellectual and political efforts to throw into question any given intellectual and political consensus. Since all language games are contingent, the point is to change the world by producing dissension and preventing any single language game from dominating others by smothering them in its pseudo-universal rules.

Lyotard tries to illustrate the fecundity of his approach by interrogating and doubting the rules of various types of language games. Examples include the Platonic dialogue, with its patterns of argument oriented to reaching a consensus between communicating partners; the popular narratives that define what may or may not be said and done in traditional societies; modern scientific discourse, which depends upon techniques such as didacticism, denotation, argument and proof-based methods of falsification, and rules of diachronic rhythm; and German Idealism, with its concern to synthesise the various sub-branches of knowledge through a totalising meta-narrative that understood itself as a moment in the becoming of 'spirit'. In each case, Lyotard aims to underscore the wholly conventional quality of these and other language games. He thereby raises vital doubts about their 'imperialist' claims to be absolute.

This method of questioning language games does not lead Lyotard down the path of self-contradiction, for instance, by privileging his own language game over other, possibly incommensurate language games. Lyotard covers his flanks by rehabilitating the logic of occasion as it is found, say, within the writings of the Greek Sophists. The striking feature

of this logic is its claim to give the lie to supposed universal truths by analysing them as merely particular cases of the logic of the particular, of the special case, of the unique occasion. In contrast to the Cretan Epimenides, who contradicted himself by truthfully declaring that all Cretans were liars, the logic of particularity upon which Lyotard relies does not see itself as based on more universal foundations, on a 'truer truth'. Lyotard consistently embraces the logic of occasion and for that reason, or so I would argue, he makes a vital contribution to a revised understanding of ideology that is no longer burdened by past theoretical mistakes.

Think of things in this way. From the perspective of language games, ideologies cannot be understood, nor their riddles explained and their effects criticised, from within the reductionist schemas of either the *idéologues*, or of Marx. A language-games approach suggests that ideology is not a form of posthumous misrepresentation of a prior 'reality' of class-divided material life processes, which function (as Marx thought) as both the pre-linguistic, Archimedean point 'outside' and 'below' language games and as the point of 'truth' that contradicts and exposes the 'false' dissimulations of ideology. Language games are not a 'level' or 'dimension' of any social and political formation. Whenever they take root, they are coextensive with social and political life as such. It follows that ideology (in the most vulgar Marxian sense) is not a veil-like substance draped over the surface of 'reality'. Ideology operates *within* language games, which also means that ideology is not tied to any particular social entity and that it can spring up within many and varied and often surprising locales. Seen in this way, there is no necessary reason why the concept of ideology should be tied exclusively to class-based power relations. Ideology is not only a market-produced phenomenon (as Marx supposed). It may be generated and sustained by intellectuals, churches, social movements, political parties, armed forces and other power groups operating within the multiple fields of civil society and government.

This language-games approach has other implications. Its emphasis on language as a medium of social and political life implies that there can be no 'end of ideology', if that means a future society finely tuned to a 'reality' freed from the rules and effects of language games. Yet it does not follow from that proposition that ideologies are inevitable, or irremovable from political life. From the revised perspective of language games, the term ideology refers to a special type of *hegemonic* language game, one which functions, not always successfully, to mask the conditions of its

own engendering by stifling the pluralism of language games within the established socio-political order in which it plays a vital part.

Ideological language games are those which try to command general obedience to their own particular claims. In practice, ideologies always have silencing and exclusionary effects. They are threats to pluralism. They imply the marginalisation or elimination (the 'terrorising', as Lyotard harshly puts it) of every other particular language game. It follows from this way of thinking that the whole project of ideology criticism can and must be rethought. The old arrogance of the Marxian theory of ideology needs to be ditched. Its attempt to devalue the false universality of an opponent's language game by presenting its own language game as empirically true and ethically justified, hence as unassailable, is implausible and, in practice, dangerous. That old way of criticising ideology was presumptuous. It thought of itself as a privileged language game, standing high above the rough and tumble of social and political life, in order better to manipulate it. The new way of ideology criticism gives the lie to *all* particular language games posing as universal. It sees itself as only a particular case of the logic of the particular, as a specific language game which tolerates other language games just so long as they remain humble and self-limiting and, hence, particular. The criticism of ideology thus becomes an effort to highlight the intimate but inverse relationship between ideology and democracy. It takes aim at ideologies because they stifle and potentially undermine the multiple language games upon which democracy in practice always depends.

Democracy and ideology

To see ideology in this revised but unfamiliar way spells trouble for the long-standing presumption that democracy is itself a higher first principle.⁶ There is, today, widespread and often smug agreement that democracy stands for respect for ethical pluralism. Understood as the self-government of citizens considered as equals, democracy is presumed to stand for toleration of differences. It is said to be incompatible with political attempts to clothe people in one-size-fits-all ethical systems, such as the nation and state, history, Christianity, Islam, Marxism, social democracy and the market. The line of thinking appears to be convincing; its reasoning seems perfectly reasonable. It is nevertheless plagued by a string of troubling questions: isn't the history of democracy peppered with

examples of the abuse of its own language and ideals in support of particular dominant or ascendant interests (as Marx complained)? Surely democracy rests upon the fetish of the 'sovereign people', a principle that is thought to be timeless, but which has the effect of destroying its own historicity? Philosophically speaking, we may ask, isn't democracy itself an absolute ethic, a cut above other ethics, a necessary, non-negotiable and superior 'common faith', as John Dewey once claimed? Isn't democracy therefore bedevilled by a double standard? Didn't George W Bush prove by his speeches and actions during the past decade that democracy is hypocrisy, as two-faced as the fabled Protestant minister who preached in his Sunday sermon that peace in the Middle East could happen only when Jews and Muslims come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Not necessarily so. From the perspective of a reinvigorated critical theory of ideology, democracy is a language game and a political ethic whose universality, its applicability everywhere on the face of the earth, stems from its commitment to 'pluriversality'. Democracy should stand for the robust protection of peoples and their biosphere against ideological language games, including its own. It questions all bogus first principles. It doubts arrogant grand ideologies and their claims upon power. But this does not mean that democracy is a first principle. It rather keeps watch and stands guard against pompous universals, including, for instance, the ideological imaginings of those champions of liberal democracy and Western democracy who ignore its non-liberal and non-Western forms. Democracy is the organised suspicion of ideology. It embraces institutional pluralism. It cultivates visions of complex equality and a variety of mechanisms of public accountability that ensure, in the face of complexity and diversity, that pompous power can be checked and undone.

From this perspective, democracy is the indispensable friend of humility. It seeks to humble the arrogant and it adopts a certain reserve towards the world. It nurtures public criticism of the ideologies that come clothed in metaphors: every woman needs a man, as the herd needs the shepherd, the ship's crew a captain, the proletariat the party and the nation a moral majority or saviour; scientific evidence is the most rational form of knowledge; market capitalism is the chief guarantor of choice; the end justifies the means; doctors know best; whites are superior to blacks; mankind is the master and possessor of nature; climate change is natural, not man-made; and so on. These and other ideologies are threatening of the spirit and institutions of democracy, for they each contain potentially a bossy

and fanatical core. Fortified by their own truth, they seek to break loose from their own contingency, to crash into the world, damaging everything that crosses their path. To defend democracy against ideologies is thus to welcome indeterminacy, controversy and uncertainty. It is to fight against false universals in the open and with a generous contempt for big talk, which contends for the souls of citizens and their representatives. Democracy stands for the equalisation of power. It stands against manipulation, bossing and violent rule. This is not because democracy is 'true' and 'right'. It is rather because democracy as a way of life is the opponent of the powerful, especially when their lust for power is bathed in the ideological presumption that 'true' and 'right' are on their side.

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- 1 The best study of the idéologues is Brian William Head, *Ideology and Social Science: Destutt de Tracy and French liberalism* (Dordrecht, 1985). According to Head, the term *civisme* (like its opposite, *incivisme*) was coined during the early years of the Revolution to denote appropriate sentiments for the citizen who cheerfully performs his duties. ‘Under the Jacobin regime the need to demonstrate one’s *civisme* was increasingly identified with support for current policies and became part of an inquisitorial procedure of popular committees.’
 - 2 Karl Marx, ‘Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, in *Selected Works*, volume I, (Moscow, 1970), p 504; cf ‘The German Ideology’, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (Garden City, NY, 1967), pp 408–9, where Marx and Engels write that the premises of historical materialism are not arbitrary, but ‘actual premises’ which can be substantiated ‘in a purely empirical way’.
 - 3 Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London, 1971).
 - 4 See the satirical treatment of this Marxian fantasy in one of the best-known plays of Václav Havel, *The Memorandum*. Office workers are expected to learn a new ‘strictly scientific’ language, Ptydepe, which is said officially to banish the confusions of natural, unscientific language. It aims to maximise precision in communication by maximising the difference between words, so that no word can be mistaken for another, the length of the word being proportional to its frequency of use (the word for wombat has 319 letters). In fact, Ptydepe baffles everybody who tries to learn it, producing a condition of administrative paralysis and absurdity.
 - 5 Bernard Williams, ‘Democracy and Ideology’, *The Political Quarterly*, volume 32, 4 (October–December, 1961).
 - 6 This point is analysed at length in John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (Simon & Schuster, 2009).