

Language and Ideology

The Significance of Hermeneutics and Semiotics
for the Theory of Ideology

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**The Significance of Hermeneutics and Semiotics
for the Theory of Ideology**

by

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For my parents

I am, of course, greatly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Liberaio Santoro, whose scholarly guidance and encouragement was matched by unbounded patience and wit. Thank you Liberaio. I would also like to thank Professor Dermot Moran, Professor Richard Kearney, Ann O' Dwyer, and the entire staff of the Department of Philosophy at U.C.D.

To my parents I have dedicated this thesis: without their love it would not have been possible. The same must be said of my brothers and sisters, to each of whom I am especially grateful.

I don't know if there are words to express my debt to Martina Browne, but these ones will have to do. She was my companion for six years and shared so much of this thesis, but sadly did not live to see its completion. Thanks Martina. Special thanks also go to Mary Browne and family, who taught me so much just by being themselves.

Finally, there are many others who lightened the burden of this academic undertaking: John and Anna-Laura, Gareth and Niamh, Gerard McCabe, Brian Callagher, Eileen Brennan, Mark Dooley, Peter Darwin, the late Patrick Bastable, and all those whose friendship I have had the pleasure of sharing these past few years.

CONTENTS

Abbreviations .. vi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction .. vii

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Chapter

I would also like to thank Professor Dermot Moran, Professor Richard Kearney, Ann O' Dwyer, and the entire staff of the Department of Philosophy at U.C.D.

Introduction .. 1

The Force

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The Emergence of Ideology .. 2

French Philosophy

I don't know if there are words to express my debt to Martina Browne, but these ones will have to do. She was my companion for six years and shared so much of this thesis, but sadly did not live to see its completion. Thanks Martina.

Ideology .. 10

Special thanks also go to Mary Browne and family, who taught me so much just by being themselves.

Positivist Marxism .. 13

Historicism

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Ideology .. 24

Ideology and Critical Theory .. 26

Summary .. 31

Chapter Two: Hermeneutics and the Situatedness of Understanding

Introduction .. 44

Romantic Hermeneutics .. 45

Phenomenology .. 47

Heidegger's Radicalization of the Hermeneutic Project .. 49

Gadamer and the Recollection of Tradition .. 55

Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Detour .. 67

Summary .. 84

CONTENTS

Introduction	87
Abbreviations	vi
Introduction	vii
Chapter One: A Brief History of Ideology	97
Introduction	1
The Forerunners: Ideology before "Ideology"	2
The Emergence of "Ideology"	8
French Positivism and German Idealism	10
Ideology in Marx	13
Positivist Marxism	24
Historicist Marxism	26
Ideology and Sociology	31
Ideology and Critical Theory	39
Summary	42
Chapter Two: Hermeneutics and the Situatedness of Understanding	140
Introduction	44
Romantic Hermeneutics	45
Phenomenology	47
Heidegger's Radicalisation of the Hermeneutic Project	49
Gadamer and the Recollection of Tradition	55
Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Detour	67
Summary	84

Chapter Three: Semiotics and the Study of Culture

Introduction	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	87
Saussure and Semiology	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	88
Peirce and Semiotics	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	91
Towards a General Theory	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	94
Code and Sign	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	97
Summary	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	112

ABBREVIATIONS

Chapter Four: Ideology and Language

Introduction	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	114
Ideology: The Problem of Definition	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	114
The Gadamer-Habermas Debate	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	123
Depth Hermeneutics and Ideology	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	127
Semiotic Analysis of Ideological Discourse	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	132
Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and the Theory of Ideology	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	136
Conclusion	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	140
Bibliography	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	143

INTRODUCTION

This thesis attempts to assess the implications for the theory of ideology of two regions within the philosophy of language. These regions are, firstly, hermeneutics, and, secondly, semiotics. Each has been chosen because it has, in the course of its respective investigation, encountered the phenomenon of ideology.

ABBREVIATIONS

The question addressed by the thesis is twofold: (1) What, if any, are the implications for the theory of ideology of the respective findings of hermeneutics and semiotics?

BT *Being and Time* M. Heidegger

CI *The Concept of Ideology* J. Larraín

COI *The Conflict of Interpretations* P. Ricoeur

HHS *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* P. Ricoeur

II *Ideology: An Introduction* T. Eagleton

SPL *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* U. Eco

TI *Truth and Ideology* H. Barth

TM *Truth and Method* H.-G. Gadamer

Chapter Two presents a study of hermeneutics. Again the approach is historical, tracing the development of the discipline from Schleiermacher and Dilthey, via Husserl's phenomenology, through Heidegger and Gadamer, to conclude with Ricoeur. In the course of this historical development, hermeneutics ceases to be a regional discipline

ERRATA

The following should be included in the list of abbreviations:

<i>LIU</i>	<i>Lectures on Ideology and Utopia</i>	P. Ricoeur
<i>TS</i>	<i>A Theory of Semiotics</i>	U. Eco

INTRODUCTION

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The question addressed by the thesis is twofold: (1) What, if any, are the implications for the theory of ideology of the respective findings of hermeneutics and semiotics? (2) Are the findings of each region of equal significance, or does one region produce more significant results than the other? The thesis contends (1) that both hermeneutics and semiotics have made discoveries which are significant for the theory of ideology; and (2) that the findings of semiotics are of greater significance. It also contends that this fact is not generally recognised, precisely because semiotics has been a misunderstood project.

The first chapter presents a selective history of the concept of ideology, beginning with the Enlightenment and ending with a contemporary theorist, Jürgen Habermas. The object is to provide sufficient data for a more theoretical discussion of the concept in Chapter Four. We shall see that the history of ideology is characterised by two interpenetrating themes, each of which is significant for an encounter between the theory of ideology, on the one hand, and hermeneutics and semiotics, on the other. These themes concern (1) the confusion of an epistemological definition of ideology with a social or political one, and (2) the related misapplication to the human sciences of a paradigm appropriate to the natural sciences.

Chapter Two presents a study of hermeneutics. Again the approach is historical, tracing the development of the discipline from Schleiermacher and Dilthey, via Husserl's phenomenology, through Heidegger and Gadamer, to conclude with Ricoeur. In the course of this historical development, hermeneutics ceases to be a regional discipline

concerned with the exigencies of textual interpretation, and becomes instead an ontological philosophy with ramifications for the entire sphere of human understanding. In this capacity, it encounters the theory of ideology and, as we shall see in Chapter Four, this produces a particularly significant debate between Gadamer and Habermas. There are also various pointers for an encounter between hermeneutics and semiotics, although this theme is not elaborated until Chapter Three.

The third chapter presents a study of semiotics, and this time the approach is more thematic than historical. The chapter begins by taking up some suggestions made by Ricoeur and apparently concerning the possible role of "semiotics" within hermeneutics. It is Ricoeur's assumption that semiotics is an alternative name for "semiology", a discipline studying certain kinds of signs within the structural linguistic framework developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. As such, he believes it to be circumscribed by the broader interpretive domain of hermeneutics. However, by means of a brief comparative analysis, we attempt to show that semiotics derives its impetus primarily from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, and not Saussure, a distinction of the utmost significance for an adequate understanding of semiotics. Having drawn the comparison, we go on to assess the contribution made by Umberto Eco towards the formulation of a general semiotic theory. Our purpose is to establish a basis for a semiotic approach to ideology, the latter task being taken up in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four brings together the various threads which have emerged throughout the thesis. Using the material provided by Chapter One, it begins by asking if it is possible to formulate a general definition of ideology. This interpretive path leads us into hermeneutics, and the Gadamer-Habermas debate. The debate is taken up by Ricoeur, who explains ideology as a dialectical counterpart to hermeneutics: each is seen to be a limiting case for the other. We then proceed to an investigation of the semiotic approach to ideology, revealing it as a particularly supple tool for the analysis of ideological discourse. Finally, the horizons of the investigation are broadened and we attempt to show how the contribution of semiotics to the theory of ideology exceeds in significance the contribution made by hermeneutics.

Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p. 28.
Spacetime in the Theory of Ideology (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p. 1.

CHAPTER ONE

A Brief History of Ideology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the phenomenon of ideology. We want to know what the word "ideology" means. If we surveyed the contemporary applications of this word, we would probably discover that its popular definition is rather ambiguous, a situation which reflects its chequered history. In the words of John B. Thompson: "When we use the concept of ideology today, we employ a concept which bears the traces, however faintly, of the multiple uses which characterize its history".¹ Therefore, we shall adopt a method of historical enquiry into the origins and development of this term. It is hoped that this enquiry will provide a suitable basis for a more theoretical discussion of the concept in Chapter Four.

It would be impossible, within the scope of the present work, to review *in toto* the copious literature on the subject of ideology. As Thompson points out, since its earliest appearances in post-revolutionary France and in the writings of Marx and Engels, the term has been appropriated by sociologists, anthropologists, and political analysts.² Our concern will be to trace *some* of these developments, and we make no claim to provide a comprehensive account.

Although the word *idéologie* was first used at the end of the eighteenth century, the problematic to which it referred was by no means an unfamiliar one. How far back one wishes to go will depend on how one defines "ideology". For Jorge Larraín,

There have been phenomena related to the intellectual legitimization of social domination and to other sources of mental distortions in the

¹*Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 28.

²*Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p. 1.

knowledge of reality as long as there have been class societies. In this sense ideology is not a new phenomenon in the history of mankind.³

It remains to be seen whether "class society" - or even "social domination" - are essential to the definition of ideology. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that the phenomena to which the word "ideology" has been applied over the last two centuries are not peculiar to this period, and furthermore that they have been familiar to people throughout history, even if it was not until modern times that they became subsumed under a single concept and subjected to rigorous study.

Given that the phenomena were not new, why should they be subjected to systematic study beginning about two hundred years ago? Larrain finds the answer in the social changes attendant upon the disintegration of Medieval society, and he locates two factors of particular significance, one political and the other scientific: the bourgeois revolt against the feudal power structure; and the emerging scientific and critical outlook, which replaced the dogmatic approach to nature with a practical one.⁴

The Forerunners: Ideology before "Ideology"

For Larrain, the thought of the Florentine philosopher, **Niccolo Machiavelli** (1469-1527), provides a starting point in the consideration of ideology. Although he never uses the word, the issues with which Machiavelli is grappling prefigure some of the central concerns in the later development of the ideological problematic. As a representative of the emerging bourgeoisie, he makes some acute observations on human nature, and on the legitimation and use of power in particular.

Larrain pinpoints three aspects of Machiavelli's thought which are relevant to the study of ideology. First, Machiavelli notes that human judgment is often biased, related as it is to "appetites" and "interests": as these appetites and interests change, so does the judgment. Second, he links religion to social power and domination, pointing out that the religious emphasis on humility and contemplation, and the related disdain for the things of this world, have made people weak and consequently allowed the wicked to

³CI, p. 17.

⁴CI, pp. 17-19.

succeed in their own pursuits. Third, he observes that the ruler must of necessity use deceit, in addition to force, in order to exercise power. Fraud is more efficient than pure force, and is based on the assumption that people judge by appearances, since they are unable to discern true motives.⁵

The European Enlightenment also saw the emergence of modern science. No longer satisfied with the speculations of scholastic philosophy, people began to seek a firm foundation for knowledge. Social changes such as the growth of commerce, the emergence of cities, and the secularisation of education played a part in undermining the old world-view. What was needed was an unbiased approach to nature, which the scholastic stress on *a priori* reason did not provide. The emerging empirical science seemed to hold the key.⁶

Apart from the reaction against Medieval philosophy, however, there was also an awareness that the human mind is prone to distortions which impede its grasp of reality. The Enlightenment faith in the power of the intellect was not altogether naive: that the mind could discover the immanent laws of nature was beyond doubt, but the historical lack of progress in this direction was equally obvious.⁷

In his *Novum Organon* (1620), **Francis Bacon** (1561-1626) emerges as one of the first to elucidate the program for the new science. Central to this exposition is the treatment of what he calls "idols" (*idola*): those false notions which obstruct the mind's accurate comprehension of reality. Bacon divides these into four classes: the idols of the tribe, the idols of the cave, the idols of the market-place, and the idols of the theatre. The first two are innate, belonging to the very process of cognition, although they are distinguished from one another by the fact that the idols of the tribe are common to the human species, while the idols of the cave depend on individual character and education. The third class emerges from the social interactions of people. Finally, the fourth concerns the shortcomings of philosophy.⁸

⁵CI, pp. 17-19.

⁶CI, p. 19.

⁷TI, pp. 17-18.

⁸CI, pp. 19-20; TI, p. 23.

Larrain isolates two idols of the tribe as relevant to the study of ideology. The first concerns the tendency to accept uncritically as true, propositions which have become established with time. The operation of this idol is evident in both science and philosophy, and it is also the mechanism of superstition. It is related to the scholastic confusion between philosophy and theology, and Bacon calls for a separation of these distinct modes of knowledge.⁹

The second idol of the tribe mentioned by Larrain concerns the influence of passions. For Bacon, feelings and passions corrupt the proper functioning of the intellect:

The human mind is not a pure light, but is influenced by will and feeling. Consequently, sciences come into being in compliance with desire. Feeling penetrates and infects thinking in innumerable and often unnoticeable ways.¹⁰

On this view, then, feeling and desire are not things which might guide the mind in its search for truth; rather, they are like a disease which "infects" thought, hindering its operation. Barth, quoting Cassirer, refers to Bacon's theory of idols as a "pathology of representation and judgment".¹¹ This opposition between rational understanding and the irrational aspects of the psyche was to have a strong influence on the positivistic conception of science.¹²

The idols of the market-place are formed during the course of social interaction and, consequently, are inseparable from the social function of language. Before they experience things for themselves, people come to know them through linguistic signs, and since these are often badly formed they obstruct the mind's comprehension of the things themselves:

Men associate with each other by means of speech; but words are imposed according to the apprehension of the crowd. And therefore the ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs the understanding . . . Words do violence to it and spoil everything.¹³

⁹CI, p. 20; TI, pp. 23-5.

¹⁰F. Bacon, *Novum Organon*. Quoted in TI, p. 21.

¹¹TI, p. 22.

¹²CI, p. 20.

¹³F. Bacon, *op. cit.* Quoted in TI, p. 23.

Larrain observes that this "identification of those idols which originate in men's reciprocal intercourse by means of language is, implicitly, one of the first acknowledgements of ideology as a socially determined distortion; and it raises, more generally, the question about the social determination of knowledge".¹⁴

Finally, the idols of the theatre concern the assumed authority of former philosophical systems. Just as a play creates a fictitious world, the dogmas of these systems produce a distorted reality, and the distortions must be overcome if knowledge is to be scientific. In opposition to the deductive logic of Greek and medieval philosophy, Bacon proposes induction as the *modus operandi* of the new science; nature would be revealed by the senses, not by concepts and words.¹⁵

Bacon's personal religious beliefs lead him to assume that the mind is inherently capable of grasping the world, and the idols do not present an insuperable obstacle to this. However, it is difficult to see how the innate idols can be overcome, and Bacon offers no explanation. Barth points out that the difficulty resides in Bacon's failure to distinguish adequately the epistemological aspect of idols from their psychological (or social) aspect, and holds that, considering Bacon's thought as a whole, we can only conclude that there is no logical necessity for the operation of innate idols. According to Bacon, even to recognise the existence of these idols is to contribute to their eradication.¹⁶

Larrain also focuses on this ambiguity, although his emphasis is slightly different. For him, Bacon's distinction between external and innate idols prefigures a dichotomy of some significance in the later development of the concept of ideology:

In a way, the dilemma which bedevilled the construction of the concept is already implicitly posed in Bacon's work: should ideology be conceived in the main as a phenomenon rooted in men's social relations and therefore as historically changing in relation to man's material practice; or should it rather be construed as a phenomenon derived from the universal presence of irrational and emotive elements, inherent in human nature, which recurrently assail and perturb science?¹⁷

¹⁴CI, p. 21.

¹⁵CI, p. 21; TI, pp. 19-20.

¹⁶CI, p. 21; TI, pp. 19-22.

¹⁷CI, pp. 21-2.

One conception leads to an emphasis on the social aspect of ideology, while the other leads to an emphasis on its opposition to science, although the two are obviously not mutually exclusive.¹⁸

Bacon himself seems not to have fully realised the significance of this distinction, for he assumes that both classes of idol can be overcome at the level of thought. He does not consider the necessity for social change in the case of external idols and, indeed, appears to be rather conservative in this regard. His concern with providing a valid foundation for rational science leads to an emphasis on the cognitive, rather than the social dimension of knowledge.¹⁹

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) carries Bacon's empiricism one stage further. He holds that since people can conceive only that which has first been perceived by the senses, we can have no knowledge of anything beyond the material and finite. The ignorance and fear attendant upon not understanding the true causes of things leads people to invent supernatural causes, and this is the origin of religion. Whereas Bacon regarded superstition as a debasement of religion,²⁰ Hobbes equates the two. However, the latter, like Machiavelli, is concerned to uphold the status of the absolute monarch, and realising that religious fictions are a useful means of maintaining political stability, he also refrains from carrying his critique into the social domain.²¹

We turn next to a consideration of two thinkers of the French Enlightenment. **Claude-Adrien Helvetius** (1715-71) and **Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach** (1723-89), like Machiavelli and Hobbes, believe that religion is the product of ignorance and fear, and they also see the connection between religion and political power. Unlike those thinkers, however, they do not regard the illusions of religion as a valid legitimization of power, but rather as an unacceptable obstacle to the untrammelled self-determination of enlightened

¹⁸CI, p. 22.

¹⁹CI, p. 22; TI, pp. 22, 27.

²⁰TI, pp. 24-5.

²¹CI, p. 23.

citizens. The critique of specifically religious "prejudices"²² is consequently extended to a thoroughgoing social critique. In the process, the Baconian concern with the obstacles to individual cognitive capacity is transcended by a preoccupation with the problems of collective understanding.²³

Helvetius is most interested in the social determination of ideas. "Our ideas", he writes, "are the necessary consequences of the societies in which we live".²⁴ This does not imply that all members of a given society are in possession of the same ideas, since society itself is divided into various groups and strata, according to profession, rank, and so on; individuals belonging to these subdivisions think, feel, and act in accordance with their position. Furthermore, that ideas are socially determined does not necessarily imply that they are false. On the contrary, for Helvetius society is the objectification of the individual human essence, and this, by nature, is rational.²⁵

At the same time, the rational ordering of society is not automatic. Each individual is ultimately interested in her or his own happiness, and since the achievement of this depends on power, there is a tendency for those who have acquired the latter to dominate those who have not. More important, for our purposes, is Helvetius' recognition that this domination is buttressed by the production and dissemination of certain kinds of prejudices, including religious ones.²⁶ He writes:

Opinion, they say, rules the world. No doubt there are instances where general opinion has overruled sovereigns. But what has this to do with the power of truth? Does it prove that general opinion is a product of truth? No; experience shows, on the contrary, that almost all moral and political questions are decided by the powerful, not by the reasonable. If opinion rules the world, in the long run it is the powerful who rule opinion.²⁷

It is also recognised that the powerful members of society do not need to *impose* their prejudices on the populace; rather, the latter adopt the prevailing opinion and, for some reason, prefer to live in ignorance of their true situation.²⁸

²²Condillac translated Bacon's *idolum* with *préjugé*. See *TI*, p. 18, n. 2.

²³*CI*, pp. 24-5; *TI*, pp. 26-7.

²⁴C.-A. Helvetius, *De l'Esprit*. Quoted in *TI*, p. 33.

²⁵*TI*, pp. 31-2, 33.

²⁶*TI*, pp. 34-5.

²⁷C.-A. Helvetius, *De l'Homme*. Quoted in *TI*, p. 35.

²⁸*TI*, pp. 28-9.

For the Enlightenment thinkers, the solution to the problem of prejudice is education. Behind the socially distorted understanding is a rational essence which can be liberated from its bonds by the power of reason. As d'Holbach writes:

Man is unhappy solely because he fails to understand nature. His mind is so infected by prejudices that one is tempted to think of him as forever condemned to error Reason guided by experience must at last attack at their source the prejudices by which mankind has so long been victimized. The time has come for reason, so unjustly debased, to quit the pusillanimous attitude that has made it the accomplice of lies and madness The truth is one; man has need of it. The crushing chains forged everywhere in nations by tyrants and priests we owe to error.²⁹

Educated citizens would no longer need the threats and promises of religious and political opinion, but would pursue their enlightened self-interest in a rationally ordered society.

The Emergence of "Ideology"

Optimism in the efficacy of public education was reflected in the new laws of post-revolutionary France, and it was in this milieu that **Destutt de Tracy** (1754-1836) coined the term "*idéologie*". An aristocrat who fought as a soldier during the revolution, de Tracy was imprisoned during the Terror that ensued, and in his prison cell he conceived of a new science of ideas. In contrast to the irrational barbarism of his surroundings, the science of ideology would lay the foundation for a rational society. Influenced by the empiricism of Locke and Condillac, his science emphasised the sensory origins of all ideas, and it was by means of an investigation into these origins that prejudices could be recognised and overcome, and society reorganised according to genuine needs. He became one of the leading spokesmen of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, and attained a prominent position in the Moral and Political Sciences division of the *Institut National*, where he began work on his *Eléments d'Idéologie*.³⁰

At its inception, then, "ideology" had a positive sense: as the science of ideas, it was the antithesis of prejudice. However, before long it was to acquire negative connotations, due to the shifting allegiances of Napoleon. De Tracy and his colleagues

²⁹P.H.T. d'Holbach, *Système de la Nature*. Quoted in *TI*, p. 28.

³⁰*CI*, pp. 26-8; *II*, pp. 66-7.

had supported Napoleon in his accession to power, in the hope that he "would turn the republic of their dreams into reality".³¹ Likewise, Napoleon had initially been enthusiastic about the *Institut*, becoming an honorary member in 1797. However, it was soon evident that the First Consul did not share the social ideals of his former allies, and that he saw in their education-oriented program a genuine threat to his authority.

In 1803 he abolished the Moral and Political Sciences division of the *Institut*.³² In the following years he became increasingly bitter in his criticisms, labelling de Tracy and his colleagues "ideologists", by which he meant that they were impractical intellectuals who did not understand the real workings of government. In 1812 he went so far as to blame them for the failure of his Russian campaign. In this way, he imparted a pejorative sense to the word "ideology" and instituted a dichotomy which was to characterise the subsequent development of the concept.³³ In Thompson's words:

One of the basic oppositions that have characterized the history of the concept of ideology - that between a positive or neutral sense, on the one hand, and a negative or critical sense, on the other - had already appeared in the first decade of its life, although the form and content of this opposition was to change considerably in the decades that followed.³⁴

As Eagleton points out, Napoleon's criticism of the *ideologues* was partly justified. Their Enlightenment background led to an over-optimistic faith in ideas as social determinants. However, in the final volume of his *Eléments*, devoted to a study of economics, de Tracy was forced to admit a material limit to the science of ideas. He came to regard economic interests as the final determinants of social life, and recognised in them a recalcitrance which threatened to undermine his rationalist politics. As we shall see, it was left to Marx to draw out the implications of this discovery.

³¹TI, p. 9.

³²TI, pp. 9-10.

³³CI, p. 28; p. 215, nn. 37, 38.

³⁴II, p. 32.

French Positivism and German Idealism

After de Tracy, the concept of ideology became fully developed, although as Larrain points out, the process was not a straightforward one. In fact, the two main streams of modern critical thought, French positivism and German idealism, did not relate their critiques to the emergent concept.

For **Auguste Comte** (1798-1857), knowledge passes through three historical stages: the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive. Comte believes that his own era represents the transition from the metaphysical to the scientific stage. The revolution has already occurred in natural science, and Comte sees his task as that of rescuing social science from the grip of theological and metaphysical methods, and producing a "social physics". Moreover, the task is a practical one: the changing of ideas will bring about alterations in the structure of society. It is Comte's belief "that ideas govern the world, or throw it into chaos - in other words, that all social mechanism rests upon opinions".³⁵

In contrast to Bacon, then, Comte links progress in science to social change. However, his aim is not the revolutionary overthrow of a corrupt order, but the scientific management of the economy. For this, it is necessary to remove disorderly elements by ameliorating the condition of the majority without disturbing the class structure.

So, Comte's critique is levelled at the imaginary and speculative ideas of theology and metaphysics, in opposition to which positive ideas have a secure foundation and are the basis for a scientific understanding, and control, of society. Ironically, as Larrain points out, Comte's own ideas, including his notion of progress, are themselves open to the charge of being inherently metaphysical, and could consequently be described as ideological according to the standards of his own theory. As we shall see, this is a recurring theme in the theory of ideology.³⁶

German idealism continues the critique of religion, although now the framework is overtly metaphysical. Those thinkers whom we have so far considered tended to treat false ideas in a psychologistic manner: as something existing only at the level of thought.

³⁵A. Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*. Quoted in *CI*, p. 29.

³⁶*CI*, pp. 28-31.

Such false ideas were usually the result of something external to the person, whether social inequality or bad education. Consequently, it was believed that they could be overcome at the level of thought, by exposing their falsity, reforming education, and so on.

For G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), religion is one stage in the dialectic of infinite and finite which produces the world of our experience. The Absolute, *Geist* (translated as "Spirit", "Mind", or "Reason"), objectifies itself in its own creation, and thus becomes other than itself (Objective Spirit). The purpose of this process is to allow Spirit to know itself, through its own manifestation, thereby consciously returning to itself. Religion is one stage in the dialectic, though not the final one, as is evident to Hegel in the example of his contemporary Christianity, the authoritarian and dogmatic character of which have alienated human nature from itself. Rather, religion is overcome in philosophy, which raises the inherent truth of the former to the level of pure thought: the concept.³⁷

For Hegel, philosophy emerges in a time of crisis, a time of dissolution. The era represented by religion is one of unity, in which the individual sees himself as part of a communal whole, a moral order whose norms he accepts as self-evident. However, this objectification of Spirit eventually becomes an obstacle to the latter's self-realisation. Henceforth, the truth which religion portrays through feeling and imagery must find expression in reason, wherein Spirit discovers its own essence, and this process is mediated by philosophy.³⁸ Hegel writes: "The task of philosophy is to comprehend what is, for that which is, is reason".³⁹

As Barth points out, philosophy fulfils a dual role in Hegel's thought. On the one hand, as the attempt by Spirit to consciously experience itself in its own manifestation, philosophy represents the urge towards the reunification of thought and world. On the other hand, precisely as one of the manifestations of Spirit under specific historical conditions, philosophy reflects the cultural circumstances in which it emerges. In the

³⁷CI, pp. 31, 33; TI, pp. 40-1.

³⁸TI, pp. 40-2.

³⁹G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*. Quoted in TI, p. 40.

first case, philosophy is the expression of an ideal against which the world must be measured; in this sense it has a critical potential. In the second case, the critical potential becomes problematical, since the norm against which the world is to be measured is itself, in part at least, a reflection of the world. As we shall see, Marx's thought can be understood as an attempt to resolve this difficulty.⁴⁰

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) retains Hegel's notion of religion as a stage, and a necessary one, in human history; but he inverts the Hegelian dialectic by making the Absolute, or God, a projection of the human "species being" (*Gattungswesen*).⁴¹ Human beings abstract their own qualities and project them outside themselves, objectifying them in the form of an infinite entity: God. "Religion abstracts the powers, qualities, and essential traits of man and deifies them as objective entities".⁴²

This alienation is a necessary phase in the process of self-awareness. The human being does not project her or his qualities in their entirety, or even arbitrarily, but only the best qualities, those which represent a perfection of human nature. This projection, which manifests as an infinitely perfect being apparently external to the individual, is actually an objectification of the human essence, an ideal which can ultimately be reclaimed. Feuerbach believed Christianity to represent the ultimate stage of objectification, the time being ripe for the final reclamation of the objective as subjective.⁴³

Although alienation is necessary, it must be transcended. God, as an objectification of human essence, represents that which men and women are not, but which they must become. Philosophy facilitates this movement by revealing theology as anthropology. This has political implications, for the projection of God must now be realised in human society:⁴⁴

⁴⁰*TI*, pp. 49-50.

⁴¹"Species being represents humanity both in extension - as a collective group - and in intension - as a comprehensive nature. Species being is then a collective being, and it is this collective being that has all the attributes of universality, infinity, and so on". *LIU*, p. 42.

⁴²L. Feuerbach, *Samtliche Werke*. Quoted in *TI*, p. 56.

⁴³*CI*, pp. 31-2; *TI*, pp. 55-7.

⁴⁴*TI*, pp. 57-8.

The negation of the other world entails the affirmation of this one. The abolition of a better life in heaven implies a challenge to improve the human lot on earth. A better future ceases to be a matter of idle faith, it becomes an object of duty and human responsibility.⁴⁵

Despite their differences, Hegel and Feuerbach have in common the understanding of religion as something inherent in human nature. For them, religious prejudices could never simply be false ideas which are imposed from without. In this, they differ from their critical predecessors, and also lay the foundation for Marx's development of the concept of ideology. However, although they discern a historical pattern in the development of thought, this is ascribed to an automatic process rather than to human agency. They conceive of the human being in an abstract form, and so share with their predecessors an underestimation of the individual's social and political conditions of existence. It is in Marx that these conditions attain theoretical maturity.⁴⁶

Ideology in Marx

The writings of **Karl Marx** (1818-83) are undoubtedly pivotal in the development of the concept of ideology, although a consideration of his work uncovers a commensurate difficulty. For Marx offers no single, unambiguous definition of the concept which would lend itself to a straightforward appraisal. Rather, he presents us with a whole array of differing formulations, employing the various conceptual frameworks and associated terminologies which mark the development of his thought. Any account of ideology in Marx, therefore, is most obviously an interpretation.

Following Eagleton,⁴⁷ we can isolate four senses of "ideology" in the writings of Marx: (1) as ideas which are disconnected from, and therefore distort, reality; (2) as the ideas of a socially dominant class; (3) as the intellectual products of a society, which belong to a superstructure emerging from an economic infrastructure or base; and (4) as the reflection in consciousness of an inversion in the economic base itself. The first two senses are located in *The German Ideology* (1846), which Marx co-authored with

⁴⁵L. Feuerbach, *op. cit.* Quoted in *TI*, p. 58.

⁴⁶*CI*, pp. 32-4; *TI*, p. 44.

⁴⁷*II*, pp. 70-89.

Friedrich Engels (1820-95). The third can be found in the Preface to his *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859), and the fourth in *Capital* (1867).

Ricoeur⁴⁸ situates Marx's primary formulations of ideology (1 and 2 above) in the context of his early writings as a whole. At this stage his intellectual debt to both Hegel and Feuerbach is notable. Like Hegel, he sees history as a law-governed process, but he re-inverts the Hegelian notion of history as the unfolding of the Idea, thereby avoiding the problem of reconciling Absolute Reason with a manifestly conditioned world. For Marx, human society is primarily a practical affair which gives rise to ideas, and not vice versa. He finds in Feuerbach's critique of religion the model for all critique: the reclamation of essential human qualities, which have been projected outside the human being and become alien powers. However, he goes beyond Feuerbach to locate the cause of this projection in the concrete circumstances of human life. "Species being" ceases to be the abstraction it was for Feuerbach and is now identified with the productive nature of humanity.

For Ricoeur, the early work of Marx represents a progressive characterisation of "the real", and consequently of its opposite, "the unreal". This endeavour culminates in *The German Ideology*, where reality is identified with *praxis*, the creative activity whereby human beings produce the material conditions of their existence. *Praxis* represents the "objectification" of the species being, its outward manifestation in the products of creative labour, both physical objects and social structures. Its counterpart is "appropriation", that is, the reclaiming of that which has been objectified. Through objectification and appropriation, the species being expresses its nature and understands itself in this expression.

However, objectification carries within itself the possibility of "alienation", whereby the products of labour (of *praxis*) assume an existence independent of their creators. Social structures, for example, become institutions which exercise control over the lives of individuals; the origin of such institutions in the life activities of ordinary human beings is forgotten. Alienation is a pervasive phenomenon. The individual is alienated

⁴⁸LIU, chpts. 2-6.

not merely from the product of her labour, but in the very activity of labour itself. Therefore, she is alienated from her "essence" or species nature and, consequently, from her fellow human beings.

In *The German Ideology*, the "division of labour" takes the place of alienation, or more precisely, it takes the place of alienation in the *activity* of labour.⁴⁹ It is the division of labour which makes the possibility of alienation into an actuality. This is most obvious in the case of physical objects, which are now produced for *exchange*, and therefore become independent of their producers. However, the pre-eminent case of the division of labour is that between mental and physical labour.⁵⁰ Once ideas become separated from real life activity, once they are reified into objective powers, there emerges the possibility of distortion. This is what Marx and Engels call "ideology". This is "the unreal".

The "German Ideology" to which the authors refer is the philosophy of the Young Hegelians, including Feuerbach. They find in this "idealistic" philosophy precisely the sort of distortion which occurs when ideas become separated from their basis in real life. Once ideas are divested of their social and historical origins, it becomes possible to regard them as independent entities and even to grant them priority over material life. This leads to the illusion that society can be changed by replacing "false" ideas with "true" ones - as the Enlightenment thinkers believed - rather than by altering the material conditions of life:

Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute independent existence, as the real chains of men . . . it is evident that [they] have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret reality in another way, i.e. to recognise it by means of another interpretation.⁵¹

⁴⁹LIU, pp. 83-4.

⁵⁰K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. by C.J. Arthur, 2nd edition (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), p. 51.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 41.

In his eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx reveals his revolutionary intent when he writes: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it".⁵²

In opposition to the "fantasy" of the Young Hegelians, Marx and Engels propose an empirical study of "the connection of the social and political structure with production".⁵³ For it is material production, in the last instance, which conditions consciousness:

Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. - real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life process.

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men developing their material production and their material intercourse alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.⁵⁴

The problem with this first formulation of ideology is its ambiguous portrayal of the relationship between the "real life-process" and "consciousness". As Eagleton points out, "'consciousness' here is being pressed into double service".⁵⁵ On the one hand, Marx and Engels use it to refer to "mental life" in general, including those notions which accompany our every activity. On the other hand, they employ it to cover specific historical systems of belief, such as theology, law, politics, and so on. It could only be in this second sense that they hold consciousness to be separable from the "real life-process", since it would be absurd to argue that the life-process can exist without mental

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵⁵II, p. 73.

activity in the more general sense. Indeed, they acknowledge this themselves when they write: "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life."⁵⁶ They elaborate upon this several pages later, by pointing out that it is only after the division of material and mental labour has occurred that an apparent separation of "consciousness" and "reality" can come about:

From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of "pure" theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.⁵⁷

However, Marx and Engels never seem to fully explore the significance of a "language of real life", the way in which meaning and action are ineluctably bound up together. If our actions were not inherently meaningful there would be an unbridgeable gap between thought and world. Although this holds for "mental life" in the general sense, it is also true of the more articulated intellectual products which we have listed. Our activities are *informed* by political, legal, and religious ideas, to mention but a few.

In their critique of idealism, Marx and Engels are in danger of going to the other extreme and embracing a "naive sensuous empiricism". From the perspective of a socio-political philosophy, idealism has two major pitfalls. Apart from leading to the illusion that in order to alter reality we need only change our ideas, it fails to explain how false ideas exist in the first place. If reality is equivalent to consciousness, then what room is there for any sort of distortion? Marx and Engels rightly point to the material aspect of reality, but in so doing they tend to simply invert the idealist emphasis, giving priority to material reality instead of ideas. This certainly leaves room for distortion, but only at the expense of simplifying the thought-world relation. It provides a passive account of consciousness, embodied in the images of "*camera obscura*", of "reflexes", "echoes" and "sublimates", and it thereby neglects the positive contribution of idealism, that is its

⁵⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

stress on the creativity of consciousness, on the fact that the latter is an active participant in the constitution of reality.⁵⁸

This first formulation of ideology could be described as "epistemological". It defines ideology as a distortion which is internal to the process of knowledge itself, even if it exists only in potential form until the historical division of mental and physical labour. However, a little further on in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels provide a second, more political definition of ideology:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas . . .⁵⁹

This definition certainly presents another facet of ideology: the fact that it serves the interests of a particular group, and for Marx and Engels this group is always the ruling class. According to their description, the division of mental and material labour allows a section of the ruling class to become its professional thinkers, "its active, conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood".⁶⁰ One automatically thinks of lawyers, economists, political philosophers - in short, the intelligentsia.

Our authors now introduce a historical dimension into their account. They say that at a time of social revolution the group making revolution must identify with all other non-ruling classes; it must "represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society . . . it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones".⁶¹ Indeed, at such times there usually is a coincidence of the interests of all non-ruling classes. In the new dispensation various sections of these classes acquire power, in addition to the group which makes the revolution. However,

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵⁹*II*, pp. 73-8.

⁶⁰*Op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶²*Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

the ideas of this new ruling class gradually cease to be "universally valid" and they become, once again, an "expression of the dominant material relationships".⁶²

Marx and Engels here create the space for a motivational theory of ideology, a theory which recognises the fact that a system of power always strives to legitimate itself. However, as Ricoeur points out, other intellectual commitments prevent them from elaborating such a theory. Although the ruling ideas are created and sustained by a group of intellectuals in the ruling class, they are also "nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas". The text seems to hesitate between two conceptual frameworks, one of motivation and the other of causation, and the two are at odds with one another. Unlike causation, motivation calls for an explication in terms of meaning, value, etc.⁶³

Elsewhere in the text, Marx and Engels indicate that the ruling ideas "are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out . . .".⁶⁴ Social friction may appear to be a "struggle between democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy",⁶⁵ but this merely conceals the real cause which exists at the level of material production. Here again there would seem to be an opening for ideas as motivating forces, but the reference to "illusion" takes us back to the epistemological definition of ideology as ideas which have become disconnected from their basis in real life. Marx and Engels thus undermine a motivational theory of ideology by denying that ideas have any inherent meaning or value, even if they are the ideas of the ruling class.⁶⁶

As Eagleton points out, it is the peculiarity of the historical situation which Marx and Engels are facing that enables them to run together the two senses of ideology so far considered. The ruling class which they confront is endowed with a "heavily 'metaphysical'" consciousness. Thus, ideas which embody a political interest coincide with ideas which are, for them, speculative illusions. But it is a pertinent question whether ideological ideas need be illusory.⁶⁷

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶³*LIU*, p. 89.

⁶⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶*II*, pp. 79-80.

⁶⁷*II*, p. 80.

If we move forward thirteen years, to Marx's Preface to the *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, we find a third formulation of ideology. Marx writes:

In the social production of their life men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.⁶⁸

The distinction introduced here, between an "economic foundation" (what will later be called the "base") and a "legal and political superstructure", is of considerable significance for the subsequent development of Marxist thought. We may note that priority is still given to the material conditions of production, with consciousness relegated to a secondary and dependent status.

Marx goes on to say that the development of the productive forces (tools, machines, factories, etc.) eventually brings them into conflict with the prevailing conditions of production, those social relations which embody a particular mode of production (tribal, feudal, or capitalist, for instance). The latter become "fetters" on the productive forces and consequently must be replaced. The result is social revolution.⁶⁹ To continue:

In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.⁷⁰

This formulation suffers from the same ambiguity in the treatment of consciousness as we observed earlier. On the one hand, there are "definite forms of social

⁶⁸Quoted in Ernst Fischer, *Marx in His Own Words*, trans. by A. Bostock (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 80.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 81.

consciousness", "the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic - in short, ideological forms". Here consciousness refers to particular historical systems of ideas which are estranged from their material basis and which, presumably, serve to uphold relations of domination. On the other hand, there is consciousness determined by social being. In this case, consciousness would seem to refer to mental life in general. In the first sense, consciousness supports the political definition of ideology, while in the second it supports the epistemological definition.

This ambiguity has very particular implications for the theory of ideology. For Marx, the historical process ultimately resolves itself in the classless communist society. In such a society there would be no need for ideology; therefore, historical forms of consciousness, such as law and politics, should disappear. But the conflation of the political forms of consciousness with the epistemological form renders this disappearance problematical. It is difficult to see what form consciousness would assume in a communist society. Presumably, Marx would argue that it would be an accurate reflection of the communist mode of production, in which private ownership of the means of production has come to an end. But surely this mode of consciousness would be more than mental life in the general sense. Marx's notion of *praxis* as the creative expression of the whole human being certainly points to a richer picture than that.⁷¹

A major flaw in the base-superstructure schema is that it does not clarify which elements of the superstructure are ideological and which ones are not. That the superstructure as a whole is not ideological seems obvious enough. For one thing, if it were then Marx's own theory, as an intellectual product, would be in a rather precarious position. As it is, Marx indicates the possibility of a theory which could analyse "the material transformation of the economic conditions of production . . . with the precision of natural science". We can safely assume that this is a reference to his own work. Furthermore, although Marx lists the "aesthetic" as one of the "ideological forms", Eagleton tells us that elsewhere he speaks non-pejoratively of the "free spiritual production" of the ruling class, and gives art and poetry as examples.⁷² We can only

⁷¹II, pp. 81-2. See Fischer, *op. cit.*, chpts. 1 and 2.

⁷²II, pp. 80-81.

conclude that ideas are not ideological simply by virtue of their belonging to the superstructure. Then what does make them ideological? For an answer we must fall back on the two earlier formulations, with all of their difficulties. Ideological ideas are those which are dissociated from their material conditions, and which distort these conditions; and they do so in the interest of the ruling class.⁷³

In defence of the base-superstructure "doctrine", Eagleton points out that it has a specific role to fulfil. It doesn't deny the reality of politics or religion, for example, but it *does* establish the order of priority of such forms *vis-à-vis* economic production. In the last instance, it is material production which is determinative. The provision of basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter, are generally of greater concern to people than a debate about the pros and cons of parliamentary democracy. Furthermore, unless such needs are met, there *cannot be* any intellectual production. Unfortunately, the base-superstructure model presents the relationship between activity and ideas in almost mechanical terms, and this oversimplification cannot do justice to a theory of ideology.⁷⁴

We might question these remarks by pointing out that the provision of basic needs sometimes has a lot to do with the workings of parliamentary democracy, and debate may be essential. Generalising the point: the separation of activity and thought into distinct spheres, which are then related in quasi-mechanical terms, is not feasible.

In the chapter on 'The Fetishism of Commodities' in Volume One of *Capital*, Marx appears to present another (our fourth) formulation of ideology, although this word is not used:

A commodity, therefore, is a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour It is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order . . . to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world, the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relations both with one

⁷³In an attempt to avoid confusion, Larrain proposes the expression "ideational superstructure" to refer to the non-ideological elements of the superstructure. *CI*, p. 50.

⁷⁴*II*, pp. 82-3.

another and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands.⁷⁵

Marx is here offering an analysis of alienation in concrete economic terms. Men and women are alienated in the products of their labour, which assume objective existence as commodities. A relation between people, between capitalists and labourers, is concealed by what appears to be a relation between things. Social life is thereby naturalised and de-historicised. Elsewhere in *Capital* the analysis is generalised in terms of "essence" and "phenomenon". An *essential* situation presents itself in *phenomenal* form, and the latter is spontaneously reflected in the consciousness of individuals. For example, the wage-form appears, on the surface, to be a fair exchange of wages-for-labour, thereby concealing the surplus labour which the capitalist extracts from the worker.⁷⁶

This latest formulation firmly places ideology within the framework of a scientific analysis of the capitalist economy. Such a *grounding* of ideology removes the connotation of an illusory consciousness somehow separated from reality, and forges an internal link between material practice and thought. For Eagleton, however, "if *The German Ideology* risks relegating ideological forms to a realm of unreality, the later work of Marx pulls them a little too close to reality for comfort. Have we not merely replaced a potential *idealism* of ideology with an incipient *economism* of it?"⁷⁷ In defining ideology in terms of economic distortion, Marx has narrowed the potential usefulness of this term. In what sense can racist, sexist, or other ideologies be reduced to economic production? And if ideology is a distortion at the level of reality, then the superstructural forms of politics, law, etc., would appear to be redundant.⁷⁸

For Eagleton, the *Capital* formulation retains two dubious features of Marx's earlier version of ideology: its empiricism and its negativism. It is empiricist in that it presents consciousness as a passive reflection of an independent world. Distortions are immanent in reality and consciousness is a mirror held up to this reality. Despite his emphasis on

⁷⁵Quoted in II, p. 84.

⁷⁶II, pp. 84-6.

⁷⁷II, p. 87.

⁷⁸II, pp. 87-8.

praxis as the creative activity of the human species, Marx tended to downplay the role of consciousness as a constitutive factor in experience.⁷⁹

Related to this empiricism of the later theory is its negativism. Ideology remains a distortion which conceals the truth of social inequality. It plays no role in constituting subjectivity, but rather presupposes pre-existent subjects who simply fail to grasp the reality of their situation.⁸⁰ As we shall see, this hardly accounts for the real power and complexity of ideological phenomena.

It has been necessary to treat of Marx in some detail, because his elaboration of the concept of ideology set the parameters for much of the subsequent thought on this subject. He certainly advanced the concept beyond the psychologism and rationalism of the Enlightenment, firmly grounding it in the social and historical conditions of active men and women. However, he also bequeathed the various problems attendant upon his evolving conceptual framework, and we shall see how these have marked the history of ideology.

Positivist Marxism

Whatever else Marx may have left to his intellectual successors, it certainly wasn't a homogeneous theory of ideology. The consequence has been a variety of Marxist interpretations of the phenomenon. Generally speaking, these may be divided into two broad trends: the "positivist" and the "historicist".⁸¹ We shall consider some of the historicist thinkers presently, after a brief look at the positivist trend.

The positivists base their interpretation of Marx on three interrelated principles: the determination of the superstructure by the economic base, the lawfulness of historical change, and the scientific character of Marxism. Engels, for instance, retains the ultimately determinative role of the base, even though he criticises simplistic accounts which make it the sole determining influence, and he even allows that the "ideological

⁷⁹*II*, p. 88.

⁸⁰*II*, pp. 88-9.

⁸¹*CI*, pp. 68-77; *II*, pp. 89-91.

spheres" react upon it.⁸² He also adheres to the negative conception of ideology, and describes it as a process of "false consciousness", by which individuals imagine apparent motives for their actions because they are ignorant of the real ones impelling them. By contrast with ideology as false consciousness, socialism emerges as a science which discerns the true laws of historical development.⁸³

Alongside this negative definition of ideology we find another, more neutral sense emerging. The reasoning behind this is as follows: If all thought is socially conditioned then all thought must be ideological, including Marxism. In *What Is To Be Done?* **Vladimir Lenin** (1870-1924) declares that "the *only* choice is - either bourgeois or socialist ideology".⁸⁴ Here, socialist ideology is not the spontaneous consciousness of the working class, but rather Marxist science, produced by ideologues for the very purpose of a creative intervention in the proletarian consciousness. In other words, we have recaptured something of the earlier, Enlightenment sense of ideology as the scientific theory of social change.⁸⁵ The difference is that now we have "ideologies" rather than "ideology", and the falsity of an ideology no longer stems from some fault in the mind, but rather from its bourgeois class origin.⁸⁶

These complexities can be traced to the equivocation in Marx between the epistemological and political definitions of ideology. If the falsity of certain ideas is a function of their political role in sustaining class domination, then the politically functional ideas of the proletarian class can be ideological in a positive sense. The danger is that the epistemological definition of ideology as socially determined thought will undermine the claims of socialism to scientific objectivity. The dilemma would seem to be that it either drops its scientific claims or else denies its social conditioning. The first choice would seem to lead to historical relativism, while the second, ironically, would make socialism itself an ideology in the worst sense outlined in *The German Ideology*.⁸⁷

⁸²CI, pp. 69-71.

⁸³II, p. 89.

⁸⁴Quoted in II, p. 90.

⁸⁵II, p. 90.

⁸⁶II, p. 90; CI, p. 76.

⁸⁷II, pp. 90-91.

Historicist Marxism

The Hungarian Marxist, **Georg Lukács** (1885-1971), attempts to resolve the dilemma posed by a self-contradictory positivist Marxism, on the one hand, and an equally untenable historical relativism, on the other. His solution is to propose a third possibility: the dialectic of thought and world. For the early Lukács at any rate, consciousness can never be a mere reflection of some mind-independent reality. The two are bound up together, and hence an objective positivist science, which denies its own social and historical roots, is a sheer impossibility.⁸⁸ In *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), he writes: "It is true that reality is the criterion for the correctness of thought. But reality is not, it becomes - and to become the participation of thought is needed".⁸⁹ In the same place he remarks:

Thought and existence are not identical in the sense that they "correspond" to each other, or "reflect" each other, that they "run parallel" to each other or "coincide" with each other (all expressions that conceal a rigid duality). Their identity is that they are aspects of one and the same real historical and dialectical process.⁹⁰

For Lukács, then, all thought is ideological, since all thought is socially grounded. However, this doesn't make all thought (or ideology) equally valid. How can one distinguish true from false ideology? Under the influence of Hegel, Lukács locates Truth in the Totality. Partial knowledge, while true in a limited, relative sense - true to a particular situation - is by definition false from the perspective of the Whole. (Wasn't this precisely Marx's point about the bourgeois economists? Their analysis of capitalism was "true" in the limited descriptive sense, but "false" in the broader explanatory sense.) The difference between bourgeois and proletarian ideology stems from the fact that the proletarian consciousness is so positioned historically as to be in principle universal. Only the proletarian consciousness can embrace the truth of the social formation as a whole, socialist science being the expression of that truth. Hegel's Absolute Idea has become the proletariat.⁹¹

⁸⁸*II*, pp. 93-6.

⁸⁹Quoted in *II*, p. 94.

⁹⁰Quoted in *II*, p. 94.

⁹¹*II*, pp. 95, 98-9, 104.

By contrast with this potential unity and harmony, which would be realised in the communist society, the capitalist system remains fragmented and alienated. For Lukács, the ultimate cause of this alienation is the commodity form which, as the prototype of reification, has fragmentary effects which ramify throughout society as a whole, resulting in the mechanisation, quantification and dehumanisation of human experience.⁹²

Lukács' theory of ideology has certain advantages. His dialectical account of knowledge is more satisfying than an abstract positivist science which relies on the mechanistic base-superstructure schema. That thought and world are inextricably intertwined conforms to our ordinary experience. In this way he is able to produce a non-pejorative definition of ideology which yet retains a critical edge. In contrast to positivism, Lukács argues for the "interested" character of knowledge, the fact that it is *motivated* by a desire for social change. Understanding is not separable from the will to transform.⁹³

However, by basing the fragmentation of consciousness on the reification of commodities, Lukács, like Marx, produces an economism of ideology. He thereby fails to do justice to other forms of social distortion.⁹⁴

Elsewhere, Lukács tends towards an *idealism* of ideology. For instance, when he writes: "Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism".⁹⁵ This is a distinct departure from Marx, who always subordinated consciousness to the "real life-process". For Marx, the proletariat becomes the revolutionary class for specific historical and material reasons. Despite paying lip-service to "dialectical interaction", then, Lukács sometimes seems to prioritise the role of consciousness.⁹⁶

This idealism is also evident in his treatment of bourgeois ideology as an insular phenomenon, a direct consequence of the historicist tendency to treat social classes as homogeneous "collective subjects". Although the bourgeois ideology, like Marx's

⁹²*II*, pp. 95, 97-9.

⁹³*II*, pp. 96-7, 99, 100.

⁹⁴*II*, pp. 99-100.

⁹⁵Quoted in *II*, p. 103.

⁹⁶*II*, p. 103.

"ruling ideas", "contaminates" the consciousness of the proletariat, there is no reciprocal interchange. The ideas of the bourgeoisie are simply imposed on the subordinate class from without. There is here, as Eagleton puts it, "too organic and internal a relation between a 'class subject' and its 'world view'".⁹⁷ It seems unlikely that a dominant ideology could succeed, which did not somehow engage with the life experience of the dominated. Marx recognised this when he described how the class making a revolution must represent its interest as the interest of all non-ruling classes.⁹⁸

Finally, turning to the cognitive status of Lukács' theory, it is arguable that it fails to avoid the bugbear of relativism. For how can it be claimed that the proletarian consciousness attains to truth? From what position could such a claim be justified? If it is made from the position of socialist science, which is after all only the expression of proletarian consciousness, then it simply begs the question. If, on the other hand, it is made from a position outside proletarian consciousness, then how can one be certain of its truth?

This question, of how thought can be at once socially and historically conditioned *and* objective, recurs again and again in post-Enlightenment thought. As we shall see in the next chapter, it assumes a central position in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, where its implications for the theory of ideology are made explicit.

In the thought of **Antonio Gramsci** (1891-1937), ideology figures as one element in the phenomenon he describes as "hegemony". Hegemony, which is confined to "civil society" (as opposed to "state" and "economy"), is rather concisely defined by Eagleton as "a whole range of practical strategies by which a dominant power elicits consent to its rule from those it subjugates".⁹⁹ Through the institutions of civil society, such as family, school, media, etc., a dominant power can secure its authority without recourse to coercion. Of course coercion, which for Gramsci is the prerogative of the state, always exists as a final recourse.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷II, p. 101.

⁹⁸II, pp. 100-103.

⁹⁹II, pp. 115-16.

¹⁰⁰II, pp. 112-14.

This is an important development, since it presents us with a more sophisticated concept of ideology. If hegemony provides the general framework for power-struggle, ideology represents this struggle at the level of *signification*. Therefore, ideology is involved in all hegemonic processes, although not always as the predominant factor.¹⁰¹

Central to Gramsci's analysis is the increasingly important role of civil society in the modern capitalist state. When power is diffused in institutions such as education and the media, when it infiltrates everyday life to such an extent that it seems almost invisible, when it becomes, in Eagleton's words, "the 'common sense' of a whole social order",¹⁰² then is there any longer a "target" for the repressed masses?¹⁰³

We find in Gramsci a recognition of the fact that the "ideas of the ruling class" must become the "ruling ideas". That is to say, the ideas of the dominant power must infiltrate society as a whole. As Machiavelli had recognised four centuries earlier, "deceit" is more efficient than pure force. Although this is true of any social formation, capitalism appears to represent a decisive shift in the ratio of consent to coercion; for the use of force, the naked manifestation of power, is only likely to reduce ideological credibility and destabilise the political status quo. Hegemony, in fact, represents the "internalisation" of power. By its means, the individual lives under the illusion of self-government, when she has really become a continuation of state rule.¹⁰⁴

Hegemony, and therefore ideology, is both relational and dynamic. Relational, because ideas are not seen to be the possessions of insular classes. For ideas to become "ruling ideas" they must to some extent reflect the concerns of those who are ruled, but without compromising the authority of the ruling power. Dynamic, because consent is not given once and for all, but must constantly be renewed and maintained.

It is with Gramsci that the crucial transition is effected from ideology as 'systems of ideas' to ideology as lived, habitual social practice - which must then presumably encompass the unconscious, inarticulate dimensions of social experience as well as the workings of formal institutions.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹II, p. 113.

¹⁰²II, p. 114.

¹⁰³II, pp. 113-14.

¹⁰⁴II, pp. 112, 115-16.

¹⁰⁵II, p. 115.

Gramsci distinguishes two senses of ideology. In one sense it is defined as arbitrary subjective speculation, and he rejects this as having no conceptual value. More positively, there is "historically organic" ideology. This is no "false consciousness", but rather consciousness which is true to a particular historical situation. Furthermore, although organic ideology corresponds to a certain social structure, including the economy, it cannot be reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of that structure. Ideology has a certain autonomy as an active organising force, through which individuals live and experience their lives.¹⁰⁶

Gramsci, like Lukács, rejects the objectivist claims of positivist Marxism. For him, Marxism itself is a form of historical consciousness adequate to a particular set of circumstances. To deny this, in the sense that the positivists do, is to turn Marxism into another metaphysical ideology.¹⁰⁷

Marxism is the expression of the organic consciousness of the working class, but this does not mean that the latter is some pure, homogeneous entity. As we have seen, it is infiltrated by the ideas of the ruling power, and is consequently divided and confused in its experience of itself. At this point, Gramsci introduces the category of "organic intellectual". Organic intellectuals are thinkers who have risen to a comprehensive understanding of the social formation, and who can intervene in the proletarian consciousness, acting as a leaven to raise it to a state of coherence and explicitness. They do not do this from without and above, as in the case of positivist Marxism, but rather from within the formation itself. They provide a link between popular experience and theory, between ideology and science; but theory and science must here be understood as being continuous with experience and ideology, and not abstract impositions.¹⁰⁸

Gramsci's thought is vulnerable to the same "epistemological circle" that we observed in Lukács. Since the organic intellectual cannot transcend his historically mediated position, how can he extricate the organic ideology of the proletariat from its heterogeneous background? What criteria does he have? The danger, as Eagleton points

¹⁰⁶II, p. 117; *CI*, pp. 80-81.

¹⁰⁷II, pp. 117-18.

¹⁰⁸II, pp. 118-20.

out, is that "objectivity" can become defined as "whatever happens politically to suit you", and we have seen one result of this in Stalinism.¹⁰⁹

Gramsci has also been criticised by structuralist Marxists for his emphasis on the constitutive power of the dominant ideology. For the structuralists, the ruling class represents only one level within the social formation, and the dominant ideology can only *reflect*, not constitute, the overall structural unity.¹¹⁰

Ideology and Sociology

Ideology has not remained the prerogative of Marxists. As a social phenomenon it has become of increasing interest to sociologists in general. We shall focus on two representatives of this domain, in the belief that both have something to contribute to our history of ideology.

Max Weber (1864-1920) does not write explicitly on the subject of ideology. Indeed, it might be said that he contributes to it in spite of himself. For Weber's main preoccupation is the rational and non-evaluative study of social phenomena. In this he provides a strong contrast to Marxism, which is most explicitly *evaluative*. It is something of a paradox, then, that he inadvertently provides a framework for the discussion of ideology, which in some ways is an improvement on the Marxist one, but having done so he remains outside the debate. Ricoeur attempts to draw out the implications of his work for the study of ideology.

For Weber, sociology is a science of *interpretive* understanding. Causal explanation takes place *within* an interpretive framework. The reason for this is that the object of sociological study, human activity, is the outcome of conscious deliberation on the part of agents. In other words, action is inseparable from motivation; it is inherently meaningful, and in order to elicit the meaning an interpretation is necessary. Already we may note an advantage over the Marxist approach, which tends to neglect a motivational

¹⁰⁹II, p. 121.

¹¹⁰II, pp. 121-2.

account in favour of a straightforwardly causal one. For the Marxists, "explanation" takes priority over "interpretation".¹¹¹

One of the main themes of Weber's *Economy and Society* concerns the legitimation of authority. Human beings associate in groups. This implies a basic level of order. But within a group there is always a further division between those who rule and those who are ruled. Within society as a whole, the ruling body is known as the "state". The question for Weber is: How does this ruling body legitimate its authority?¹¹²

According to Ricoeur, it is at this point that Weber creates the space for a motivational account of ideology, even though he does not provide it himself. For although the state is defined, in Weber's own words, by "the claim to the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of physical force in the enforcement of its order",¹¹³ its authority is not finally sustained by this claim, but rather by the people's belief in this claim.¹¹⁴ We might then ask: Is this belief warranted? Weber writes:

custom, personal advantage, purely affectual or ideal motives of solidarity, do not form a sufficiently reliable basis for a given domination. *In addition* there is normally a further element, the belief in legitimacy.¹¹⁵

And in the following paragraph:

Experience shows that in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. *In addition* every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy.¹¹⁶

As Ricoeur points out, the repeated use of "In addition" shows that, for Weber, belief in authority is not something which can be accounted for within a rational theory of motivation. It does not fit into any of his carefully enumerated categories. Indeed, it is necessarily "experience" which shows that the legitimation of authority ultimately rests on belief. Therefore, Ricoeur argues, what is called for in this instance is another

¹¹¹LIU, p. 184.

¹¹²LIU, pp. 188, 189, 191ff., 199.

¹¹³Quoted in LIU, p. 194.

¹¹⁴LIU, p. 195.

¹¹⁵Quoted in LIU, p. 200; Ricoeur's emphasis.

¹¹⁶Quoted in LIU, p. 200; Ricoeur's emphasis.

concept of “surplus-value”, linked not so much to labour, as in Marx, but to power. For society’s belief in the claim to legitimacy of a ruling power offers *more* than is warranted by a rational theory of motivation. There is more in the belief than there is in the claim, a certain “credibility gap” between claim and assent, and it is in this gap, according to Ricoeur, that there is room for a theory of ideology.¹¹⁷

How do we explain the fact that the legitimation of authority involves a surplus of belief over claim? Is it simply that, rationally accountable motivation aside, a ruling power *deserves* the assent of the people to its claim? We know enough about the realities of political power to reject such a general hypothesis. Unfortunately, Weber does not pursue the topic, so we must rely on Ricoeur for the formulation of a motivational theory of ideology, based on Weber’s framework:

there is always more in the claim of a given system of authority than the normal course of motivation can satisfy, and therefore there is always a supplement of belief provided by an ideological system.¹¹⁸

It is the “ideological system” (however one defines it) that elicits the surplus of belief over claim and fills the credibility gap. This formulation takes ideology out of the sphere of unconscious economic processes and places it firmly within the sphere of consciousness and motivation. It is also a negative conception of ideology, presenting it as something duplicitous, something which offers more than it really has to give. Pre-election canvassing might be a good example of ideology in this sense, but there is no reason why we should limit the concept to such overt practices, or even to politics at all.

The last point brings us to one of the advantages of Weber’s non-Marxist approach. Weber is concerned with social formations in general, and his analysis is transhistorical. Therefore, his account of the legitimation of authority is meant to apply to any society, or any group, at any time. Domination is neither confined to political power nor to any particular social formation. Weber might argue against the Marxists that although in his contemporary society the class structure is an important factor in power relations, it is not central to the question of power as such. Power and its legitimation are constants, and

¹¹⁷LIU, pp. 200-201, 212.

¹¹⁸LIU, p. 202.

would continue to exist even if all classes were eliminated. Indeed, we now know, with the benefit of hindsight, that domination is not excluded from classless societies. Apropos of this, Ricoeur believes that the extended notion of surplus-value (which is Ricoeur's, not Weber's) helps explain what happens in socialist societies, where the surplus-value of labour is suppressed but the surplus-value of power is not.¹¹⁹

Weber's account is useful, therefore, both because it provides a motivational framework for the understanding of ideology, and also because it expands this potential understanding beyond the valid but narrow confines of political power. However, it is by no means impervious to criticism. Its major weakness is its claim to be non-evaluative. One is reminded of the bourgeois economists, whom Marx criticised for merely *describing* the capitalist economy without scratching the surface and *explaining* its underlying causes. It is arguable that despite what it has to offer, Weber's theory fails to integrate this element of critique. Perhaps this is why it could not incorporate an analysis of ideology, because at the very point where this was called for, where there was a gap between claim and belief, it was pressed up against its own rationalist limits and had to admit that *here* was something beyond its categories. Ironically, therefore, although he provides us with a useful motivational framework, Weber does not explore its possibilities to the full. He is not sufficiently "suspicious" of motivation in the way that, for example, a Nietzsche or a Freud might be. In consequence, he can speak approvingly of a rational bureaucracy, with scant regard for its potentially ideological functions.¹²⁰

In contrast to Weber, **Karl Mannheim** (1893-1947) deals explicitly with the subject of ideology and provides us with an important landmark in the evolution of the concept. In his *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), he attempts to formulate a general theory of ideology from the perspective of a sociology of knowledge.

Mannheim acknowledges Bacon and Machiavelli as forerunners in the development of a theory of ideology. However, their conclusions remained *partial* because they

¹¹⁹LIU, pp. 195-6, 201-2.

¹²⁰LIU, pp. 195-7, 200, 205-15.

conceived of ideology in terms of individual psychological distortion. By contrast, Mannheim points out, Marx moved away from this psychologistic definition towards an epistemological definition, which related the consciousness of classes to particular social and historical circumstances. Marx also recognised that ideology thus conceived required a specific method of analysis to unmask it, an analysis which digs beneath its surface appearance to lay bare the conditions of its production.¹²¹

According to Mannheim, then, ideology has developed from a “particular” to a “total” conception. However, Marx’s contribution represents only a “special” formulation of the latter. For Marx failed to pursue his investigation to its logical conclusion; he failed to subject it to the same sort of analysis which he applied to bourgeois ideology. Ideology, Mannheim believes,

cannot in the long run remain the exclusive privilege of one class . . . it is no longer possible for one point of view and interpretation to assail all others as ideological without itself being placed in the position of having to meet that challenge.¹²²

Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge is precisely an attempt to meet this neglected challenge, and the result is the “general” formulation of the total conception of ideology.¹²³

The general formulation holds that all knowledge is ideological because all knowledge is socially and historically situated. There is no non-ideological position from which the ideas of another group can be criticised. No one can claim absolute truth for herself; there are only competing claims to truth, each of which can be traced to particular social structures. The result is a neutral conception of ideology which lays the foundations for a “non-evaluative” sociology of knowledge: “With the emergence of the general formulation of the total conception of ideology, the simple theory of ideology develops into the sociology of knowledge”.¹²⁴

¹²¹LIU, pp. 160-62.

¹²²K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. Quoted in CI, p. 109.

¹²³CI, pp. 108-9.

¹²⁴K. Mannheim, *op. cit.* Quoted in LIU, p. 166.

It is to Mannheim's credit that he faces the danger of relativism inherent in this position. Although he does not embrace such a consequence, neither does he attempt a return to an outdated naive objectivism. Instead, he proposes that ideas can be relative to one another, and to the conditions of their production, without necessarily being illusory. He calls this position "relationism":

This first non-evaluative insight into history does not inevitably lead to relativism, but rather to relationism. Knowledge, as seen in the light of the total conception of ideology, is by no means an illusory experience, for ideology in its relational concept is not at all identical with illusion. . . . Relationism signifies merely that all of the elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelationship in a given frame of thought.¹²⁵

Relativism only arises when we adhere to an old atemporal model of truth, a model to which our actual understanding cannot measure up. Mannheim's historical conception of knowledge, inspired by Lukács and ultimately Hegelian, avoids this impasse. But how, then, does it distinguish truth from falsehood?¹²⁶

Mannheim's answer to this question introduces a qualified and "evaluative" conception of ideology, and relates it to the notion of utopia. The truth of a body of ideas, he tells us, is assessed on the basis of whether the ideas are "congruent" or "noncongruent" with a given historical state of affairs. Ideas which are congruent or adequate to their situation are "true", although only relationally. Noncongruent ideas are false. But ideas can be noncongruent in different ways. They may lag behind the present, perpetuating outmoded systems of thought, in which case they are ideological; or they may jump ahead of the present, anticipating a future state of affairs, in which case they are utopian.

Therefore, ideology and utopia are similar in that they are both noncongruent, but they differ in the manner of their noncongruence. Ideology attempts to assess the present in terms of the past. Mannheim gives the example of the late medieval church's condemnation of interest on loans, an interdiction which could only fail because it was inadequate to the emerging capitalist system. Utopia, by contrast, attempts to shatter the

¹²⁵K. Mannheim, *op. cit.* Quoted in *LIU*, p. 167.

¹²⁶*LIU*, pp. 167-8.

existing state of affairs. Indeed, for Mannheim a utopia is real only if it succeeds in altering a situation. To complicate matters even more, he points out that it is very difficult, in practice, to distinguish ideologies from utopias. Those whose interests lie in preserving the established order will tend to label as utopian (in the sense of “unrealistic”) all revolutionary points of view, while those whose interests lie in transformation will tend to label their adversaries’ views as ideological. Ultimately, Mannheim has to admit that it is only in retrospect that we can say whether a given point of view was ideological or utopian.¹²⁷

Yet this has only pushed the question of truth and falsehood back a stage, since who is to judge whether ideas are congruent or noncongruent? Mannheim’s attempted solution reveals the influence on his thought of historicism and Hegelianism. He claims that it is possible to synthesise ideas into greater wholes, gradually advancing towards a total perspective which is never actually realised. The task of synthesising is carried on by a group which Mannheim describes as the “unattached intelligentsia” or “free-floating intellectuals”. These are individuals who have risen above the partiality of a particular class situation and who are consequently in a position to connect diverse sets of ideas. This process of assimilation is the only “objectivity” available to us in a modern society.¹²⁸

Larrain points out a number of shortcomings in Mannheim’s analysis. Firstly, he presents us with two versions of ideology which are not adequately reconciled. On the one hand, ideology refers to the *weltanschauung* or “world-view” of any particular group. All thought is considered to be ideological because all thought is socially and historically determined. On the other hand, he uses ideology to refer to noncongruent ideas. In this sense, ideology is a distortion produced by individuals. In the former version, ideology is non-evaluative and epistemological; in the latter, it is evaluative and psychological.¹²⁹

¹²⁷LIU, pp. 168-70; CI, pp. 113-14.

¹²⁸LIU, pp. 171-2; CI, pp. 114-17; II, p. 108.

¹²⁹CI, pp. 117-18.

Secondly, with regard to the non-evaluative concept of ideology, it is difficult to see to what use such a neutral concept could be put; it has been over-stretched and its critical edge has been lost. Of course, Mannheim recognises this fact, and sometimes suggests replacing "ideology" with the less contentious word "perspective". However, such lexical substitution does not do away with the phenomenon which the word "ideology" has come to describe.¹³⁰

Thirdly, Mannheim's criticism of Marx is inaccurate. Marx was aware of the social determination of *all* thought, including his own. But he did not equate "socially determined" with "ideological". For him, the ideological character of thought derived from specific material conditions. Ideology was not an unavoidable concomitant of human cognition, but something which would be overcome in a just society. Notwithstanding its situational character, thought *could* be objective, accurately describing social phenomena and unmasking ideology. Marx perceived his own work in just such a role.¹³¹

Fourthly, Mannheim tends towards an epistemological dualism in which the functional aspect of ideas, i.e., their relation to specific social groups, is separated from their intrinsic meaning, and the latter is subordinated to the former. This produces an unsatisfactory view of ideology, the inherent meaning of which is neglected in favour of its function. Mannheim's theory is unable to assess the *content* of ideological ideas, but it is surely this which actually motivates people, which inspires - or conditions - them to live in one way rather than another, or even to give up their lives.¹³²

Fifthly, although Mannheim is very conscious of the danger of epistemological relativism, he fails to avoid it. His notion of totality remains an unrealisable ideal, and his account of free-floating intellectuals contradicts the socially and historically conditioned character of knowledge. He does not consider the possibility that ideas can be both socially determined *and* true, that epistemological absolutism is not necessarily

¹³⁰CI, pp. 111, 118; II, p. 110.

¹³¹CI, pp. 118-19, 121.

¹³²CI, pp. 119-20.

the only criterion of objectivity. Therefore, his work reveals the influence of the Enlightenment ideal of absolute knowledge, even though he rejected such a possibility.¹³³

Ideology and Critical Theory

We turn now to **Jürgen Habermas** (1929-), the final thinker we have chosen for this chapter. Habermas is a central figure in our examination of language and ideology, for he analyses these two phenomena within a single theoretical framework. Of course, this represents only one aspect of his work, but it is an important aspect and the one with which we are most concerned. Our treatment at this point will be necessarily brief, but we shall return to Habermas at a later stage, after we have examined some areas in the philosophy of language.

Habermas' critical theory is an attempt to overcome the epistemological problems which have bedevilled the project of critique since its inception during the Enlightenment. He claims that these problems are rooted in a misunderstanding of the nature of reason and science. He reminds us that science is never neutral, never an end in itself, but always exists for some *purpose*, and that this purpose is rooted in the very type of beings we are. In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), he distinguishes three groups of sciences, each with its own distinctive "interest". For the natural sciences this interest is one of technical control and manipulation. For the historical and interpretive sciences it is communication. Finally, the critical social sciences have emancipation as their objective.¹³⁴

For Habermas, it was one of Marx's great achievements to have elaborated a theory of human nature and society in terms of practical interests. He places Marx within the tradition of critical philosophy stemming from Kant. Both sought the conditions which make possible the synthesis of human experience, but whereas Kant ultimately grounded them in the transcendental ego, Marx found them in *praxis*.¹³⁵

¹³³CI, pp. 116, 120-21.

¹³⁴LIU, p. 219; II, pp. 131-2.

¹³⁵LIU, pp. 216-18.

The main shortcoming of Marx's work, according to Habermas, was that it failed to adequately clarify the notion of *praxis*, and consequently confused the different forms of science, a confusion which Marx bequeathed, as we have seen, to those who followed in his footsteps. For Marx reduced *praxis* to material production, a purely instrumental activity which he believed could be studied along the lines of a natural science. Of course, by distinguishing forces and relations of production he recognised that there is more to *praxis* than physical activity, that labour involves certain institutions and forms of knowledge, but he did not do justice to these at the level of theory. He consigned the productive relations along with the forces to the economic base, the infrastructure.

Thus in Marx's works a peculiar disproportion arises between the practice of inquiry and the limited philosophical self-understanding of this inquiry. In his empirical analyses Marx comprehends the history of the species under categories of material activity and the critical abolition of ideologies, of instrumental action and revolutionary practice, of labour and reflection at once. But Marx interprets what he does in the more restricted conception of the species' self-reflection through work alone. The materialist concept of synthesis is not conceived broadly enough in order to explicate the way in which Marx contributes to realizing the intention of a really radicalized critique of knowledge. In fact, it even prevented Marx from understanding his own mode of procedure from this point of view.¹³⁶

The challenge for Habermas is to understand Marx better than he understood himself, to look at what he *did* rather than simply at what he *said*.¹³⁷

According to Habermas, Marx's tendency to describe his procedure by analogy with the natural sciences is itself indicative of a certain form of ideology. This ideology is rooted in the Enlightenment association of reason and natural science, which resulted in a gradual narrowing of the concept of reason until it was co-extensive with instrumental rationality. Paradoxically, then, the Enlightenment elaborated both critical and instrumental forms of rationality, but in a mood of positivistic enthusiasm it granted epistemological priority to the latter and made the former dependent upon it. The nascent social sciences were infected by this ideology and, consequently, were repeatedly forced to justify their status as sciences. This was why Marx, who was actually engaged in

¹³⁶J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Quoted in *LIU*, p. 224.

¹³⁷*LIU*, pp. 221-4, 240.

forms of historical-interpretive science and critical social science, referred to his work in terms of a natural science.¹³⁸

Habermas regards the reign of instrumental rationality as the predominant ideology of advanced industrial society.¹³⁹ It has become the means by which the ruling power asserts and justifies itself, giving rise to an administered society in which alienation and domination are so pervasive as to be almost inevitable. This form of ideology depoliticises decision-making, removing it from the sphere of public debate and replacing it with mere technocratic calculation. Therefore, although Marx's critique of capitalist society is still relevant, his categories have become redundant. Ideology is at work within reason itself, and it is from here that critique must begin.¹⁴⁰

The critique of ideology begins with a reinstatement of the historical and interpretive sciences. Social activity is meaningful and therefore cannot be reduced to causal explanation, however effective the latter may be in its appropriate sphere. Human beings do not simply interact, but exchange symbols in a constant process of communication, a process which can only be understood through interpretation.¹⁴¹

However, ideology critique is not simply a question of straightforward interpretation. For in ideology communication is *systematically* distorted. Language is not neutral, but bears the marks of the power relations which pervade society. What is required is a form of knowledge which can expose distorted communication and, therefore, the force which lies behind it. This is why Habermas insists that the historical-interpretive sciences must give way to the critical social sciences. Only the latter, with their interest in emancipation, can maintain the necessary *distanciation* required by ideology critique.¹⁴²

Habermas takes psychoanalysis as a paradigm case for the critical social sciences. The neurotic is someone who suffers the effects of a distorted communication system; he is, in effect, "excommunicated" from the community of speakers. Psychoanalysis is the process whereby the neurotic *interprets* the symbols of his dreams, etc., in an effort to

¹³⁸LIU, pp. 224-6.

¹³⁹See also, Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Ark, 1986).

¹⁴⁰CI, pp. 206-8.

¹⁴¹LIU, pp. 223ff.

¹⁴²II, pp. 128-9.

emancipate himself from his conditioned responses. The symbols themselves contain the secret of emancipation. But their interpretation must be mediated by the analyst, who maintains a critical distance and offers an *explanation* of the patient's symptoms in terms of an economy of psychic forces. Thus, psychoanalysis involves explanation in addition to interpretation, and results, ideally, in the patient's emancipation and reintegration into the community.¹⁴³

Ideology similarly involves a process of distorted communication which contains within itself the possibility of emancipation. For Habermas points out that most utterances make an inherent claim to truth and rationality; they *tend towards* an ideal situation of unimpeded communication, in which decision-making is repoliticised. In an effort to provide a theoretical grounding for this thesis, Habermas has evolved a "theory of communicative action", which attempts to elucidate the rational conditions of communication. This represents the moment of explanation which is proper to the critical social sciences, and which takes place within the overall process of interpretive understanding.¹⁴⁴

Therefore, notwithstanding the pervasiveness of technocratic ideology in modern society, Habermas does not believe that it is inescapable. He upholds the Enlightenment ideal of emancipation, which he claims is rooted in our very nature as human beings, and which he finds in the inherent rationality of communicative interaction. His work has been the subject of some criticism. In particular, his views on language have brought him into conflict with Hans-Georg Gadamer, a representative of the hermeneutic tradition which is the subject of our next chapter. We shall postpone discussion of this important debate until Chapter Four.

Summary

In this first chapter, we have analysed the phenomenon of ideology by focusing on a number of stages in its history. On the basis of this study, it is possible to discern certain themes.

¹⁴³II, pp. 133-6; *LIU*, pp. 235ff.

¹⁴⁴II, pp. 129ff; *LIU*, pp. 240ff.

Perhaps the most notable theme is the confusion of the epistemological and social determinants of thought. This is already evident in Bacon, becomes pronounced in Marx and, in one way or another, colours the various analyses of ideology down to the present day. It attains its apotheosis in the work of Mannheim, where "ideology" is used to describe *all* thought simply by virtue of the latter's situatedness. Consequently, Mannheim has to introduce a qualified concept of ideology, in order to cover thought that is not simply situated (the epistemological definition), but also "noncongruent" (the social definition).

Closely related to this confusion is a particular view of knowledge which has its roots in the Enlightenment. On this view, the model for all knowledge is provided by the natural sciences, and it becomes reasonable to speak, as does Comte, of a "social physics". In consequence, the social sciences become preoccupied with the search for epistemological certainty, and ideology comes to represent the antithesis to such certainty. The fallacy at work here is revealed by Habermas, who demonstrates its basis in the overapplication of the methodology appropriate to the natural sciences. There is a certain irony in the fact that "ideology" is born as a "science of ideas", but grows up to be the ideology of technocratic science!

This combination of factors gives rise to various senses of ideology. Sometimes it is positive (the *ideologues*, Lenin), sometimes negative (Marx, Engels), and sometimes neutral (Mannheim). Sometimes it is a science, and sometimes it is the antithesis of science. At certain times it is a structural feature of human consciousness, while at others it is a product of social existence. Sometimes it is a limited phenomenon within culture, and at other times it is coextensive with culture.¹⁴⁵ We shall postpone until Chapter Four a more theoretical consideration of this complexity.

¹⁴⁵See *CI*, pp. 13-14.

CHAPTER TWO

Hermeneutics and the Situatedness

of Understanding

Introduction

Having introduced the concept of ideology, we now turn to our second object of investigation: language. We propose a study of two areas in the philosophy of language. The first of these, hermeneutics, is the subject of the present chapter. The approach is basically historical, and aims to elicit some of the fundamental themes of this discipline as a basis for the encounter with ideology. The second proposed area of study, semiotics, is the subject of Chapter Three.

Firstly, it may be helpful to situate the word "hermeneutic" etymologically. In Greek mythology, Hermes was the messenger of the gods; his task as mediator between divine and human was to bring to understanding that which was unintelligible. According to Palmer¹, the verb *hermeneuein* came to mean three things: (1) to express aloud in words, i.e., to say; (2) to explain; and (3) to translate. In each case there is an element of interpretation involved. This may appear obvious in the latter two cases, but even in the first there is an element of interpretation: after all, in order to express something properly one must first *understand* the nature of that which is to be expressed, and this understanding will itself be an interpretation. Obviously an actress will not read her script as if she were reading the newspaper; but even two actresses will read the same script in a different way, according to their respective understandings.

¹Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 13ff.

The rise of modern hermeneutics is said to have begun during the Reformation, when interpretation - in this case, Biblical interpretation - became problematical. Protestant theologians asserted that the Catholic interpretation of the Bible was, perhaps, not the only possible one. If there were conflicting interpretations, then was it possible to isolate one of them as "correct"?²

At this time, then, there emerged the problematic of a conflict of interpretations and the related idea of the possibility of accurate interpretation. With the advent of the Enlightenment, and the success and growth of the natural sciences, the question of finding a *method* of interpretation naturally presented itself. However, interpretation remained a matter of understanding individual texts and even here no systematic formulation of method was forthcoming.³

Romantic Hermeneutics

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is the first to conceive of a general hermeneutic theory, and he is therefore considered to be the father of modern hermeneutics. Of central importance to this development is Schleiermacher's belief that misunderstanding is more usual than understanding. Rather than being an occasional aid to interpretation, in the case of a particular textual obscurity, hermeneutic procedures might be necessary in any process of communication. In this way, the central place occupied by the truth of an utterance, that common understanding between speaker and hearer, writer and reader, which precedes any possible misunderstanding, is taken over by hermeneutic procedures that presuppose a breach in understanding; *misinterpretation* becomes the *raison d'être* of hermeneutic theory.

For Schleiermacher, the way to overcome misunderstanding lies in a reproduction of the conditions that have produced the object to be interpreted. Of central importance in this reproduction are the intentions of the author; the validity of truth-content is replaced by "divination" of authorial intention, with the consequence that the object is regarded as

²See Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task', in *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. by F.G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1983). See also Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), pp. 5-6.

³See Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 14.

the product of individual genius and thereby aestheticised. Now, although Schleiermacher regards this divination process as an art, he proposes that it should proceed on the basis of two complementary methods, one grammatical and the other psychological. The former method consists in an analysis of the language of a text and its relation to the author's language as a whole, and beyond this to its situation within the broader framework of the language of the author's society. Similarly, the psychological method consists in an attempt to recreate the author's intentions in producing a text, and relating these intentions to the life-context of the author and his society. Despite Schleiermacher's work on the total linguistic background of a text's production, he later gives prominence to the psychological procedure, thus lending further weight to the central position occupied by authorial intention in hermeneutic theory.

Schleiermacher's methodology, with its stress on the linguistic and psychological conditions of a text's production, presents us with an important hermeneutic principle. The text is explained by means of the conditions of its production, but these conditions can only be understood by reference to the text, and others like it. The whole is made up of parts which both explain it and must be explained by it. This "hermeneutic circle" is central for the subsequent development of the discipline.⁴

Following Schleiermacher, **Wilhelm Dilthey** (1833-1911) reinforces the central position occupied by method in hermeneutic philosophy. Dilthey's great contribution, however, is the recognition of the essentially historical character of understanding.⁵ His philosophy is best regarded as a tension between these two tendencies: the empirical objectivity of science and the historical situatedness of understanding.

Dilthey's aim is to establish a firm footing for those disciplines which study the world of human experience - the *Geisteswissenschaften* or human sciences - as opposed to the world of natural science. He realises that the mode of understanding of the human sciences is not one of repeated experimentation, observation and the ensuing

⁴TM, pp. 162-173; Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-96; Warnke, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-15; Bleicher, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-16.

⁵In this, he exercises a considerable influence on Mannheim, and the theory of ideology.

subsumption of particulars under general laws - a mode that characterises natural science. Understanding in the *Geisteswissenschaften* is not a repeatable event because the observer is herself a part of the flow of history; the object of understanding appears in a new light as a result of the understanding itself. Both object and observer are altered in the event of understanding and both are open to further alterations in the course of history. For this reason, Dilthey distinguishes between "explanation" and "understanding", the procedures appropriate to the natural and human sciences respectively.

Dilthey's contribution to hermeneutics lies in his attempt to give theoretical justification to the historical mode of understanding; he describes his work as a critique of historical reason. This description reveals his desire to overcome the Kantian emphasis on atemporal and rational knowledge by supplementing it with those aspects of understanding that derive from our historical and emotional life. He agrees with the Romantic historians' criticism of Hegel's speculative philosophy of Absolute Spirit and he follows them in their empirical approach to history. However, he also recognises the relativism inherent in the historical mode of understanding, a fact that compromises the scientific status of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. In his desire to overcome this weakness, as he sees it, he raises historical understanding to objective status: historical knowledge has a universal aspect because the observer is herself a part of history and shares the experiences of her fellow beings.

Dilthey does not resolve the conflict between historical life-philosophy and objective scientific method. In the end, however, he seems to give priority to method. Hermeneutics, as the foundation of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, remains the application of ahistorical methods to historically determined objects.⁶

Phenomenology

At this point we shall examine the work of **Edmund Husserl** (1859-1938), a philosopher whose thought has a considerable impact on the subsequent development of

⁶TM, pp. 192-214; Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-123; Warnke, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-34; Bleicher, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-24.

hermeneutics. Husserl, like Dilthey, is concerned with a scientific study of our primordial experience of the world, and the claims of this science *vis-à-vis* the natural sciences. However, whereas Dilthey claimed that the human sciences were deserving of a status equal to that of the natural sciences, Husserl gives priority to the former and asserts the derivative character of the latter. He describes this science of the primordial experience of the world as *phenomenology* and that which it studies as the *life-world* (*Lebenswelt*). According to Gadamer, the life-world is

the world in which we are immersed in the natural attitude that never becomes for us an object as such, but that constitutes the pre-given basis of all experience. This world horizon is a presupposition of all science as well and is, therefore, more fundamental.⁷

We are in an immediate relation to the life-world. It provides us with the background of motivations or interests against which we pursue more derivative forms of enquiry, including the natural sciences.

For Husserl, the life world is a common structure of understanding within a culture. The study of this culture involves a “bracketing” (*epoché*) of extraneous questions concerning, for example, the actual existence and nature of phenomena, and a consequent “reduction” of experience to the phenomena as related to a subjective consciousness. In this way, phenomenology should arrive at the *essences* or meanings of experiences that are common to different minds.

We shall not concern ourselves with the intricacies attendant upon the execution of this programme, but rather with the impetus which it provides for the further development of hermeneutics. Two characteristics of the life-world, and Husserl’s treatment of them, are relevant to this development. Firstly, the life-world is not a fixed structure, but a historically constituted one. Secondly, Husserl can’t ignore the fact that the meanings isolated within our life-world have a limited value, that there are alternative life-worlds, frameworks of meaning that are different to our own. Now, if phenomenology is to be a rigorous science, as Husserl intends, then the meanings it is concerned to elicit have to be in some sense *fixed* and *stable*. His proposed solution is to posit a more primordial

⁷TM, p. 218.

structure behind the transitory and variable life-worlds of our experience. The subject of this “universal” life-world is “transcendental subjectivity”. Therefore, due to his scientific intentions, Husserl is forced to compromise his belief in the situational character of our knowledge and take refuge in the idealistic concept of transcendental ego.⁸

Husserl’s notion of the life-world provides us with a useful hermeneutical concept which, as we saw in the last chapter, has since been adopted by Habermas. This is the idea that knowledge (including understanding) is *motivated* or *interested*; it is never arbitrary or neutral, but emerges from the fullness of our being in the life-world. Even the supposedly “objective” natural sciences are motivated by interests arising out of our basic nature. This concept receives further elaboration in the subsequent development of hermeneutics.

Heidegger’s Radicalisation of the Hermeneutic Project

The next major hermeneutic figure, **Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976), combines the circular character of understanding which was central to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, with Dilthey’s concept of historical understanding, and Husserl’s notion of life-world, and he radicalises all three.

The whole drive of Heidegger’s philosophy is towards a recovery of the question of Being, a question which, he asserts, has been forgotten in the history of Western metaphysics.⁹ His project is, from the outset, an *ontology* - a firm rejection of the Cartesian trend which posits knowledge as the starting point of philosophy.¹⁰ In his efforts to uncover the original meaning of Being he resorts to Husserl’s phenomenology with a cry of “To the things themselves!”¹¹ The life-world is the world of immediate experience in which Being reveals itself; the way to an understanding of Being, therefore, must be through a phenomenological investigation of the life-world.

⁸TM, pp. 214-25; Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-7; Warnke, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-7.

⁹BT, p. 21.

¹⁰Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Knowledge*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), p. 53.

¹¹BT, p. 50.

However, in Heidegger's hands, phenomenology takes on a new meaning. It no longer represents the attempt to found a rigorous science. Neither does it need to defend itself against the historical situatedness of the knower. For Heidegger assimilates the historical and circular character of understanding to phenomenology and puts the latter on an entirely new footing. He calls it "hermeneutic phenomenology".

In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger traces the word "phenomenology" back to its Greek roots: *phainomenon* and *logos*. Both terms refer to a "letting appear" of what is, as it is: a "showing". What allows itself to appear is *that which is*, Being. But the phenomenon is not the appearance; it is the *thing itself*.¹² Therefore, phenomenology is fundamentally an ontology: "*Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible.*"¹³ But because of the essential situatedness of the knower (*Dasein* - "there-being") this ontology must proceed on the basis of a gradual *uncovering* of the meaning of Being (*Sein*), of that which allows itself to be seen. This process is one of *interpretation*; only, interpretation is no longer conceived as a methodical or scientific procedure, but as the very nature of *Dasein* itself. In this way, interpretation (*hermeneuein*) is given an ontological foundation: hermeneutics becomes ontology:

Ontology and phenomenology are not two distinct philosophical disciplines among others. These terms characterize philosophy itself with regard to its object and its way of treating that object. Philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, and takes its departure from the hermeneutic of *Dasein*, which, as an analytic of *existence*, has made fast the guiding-line for all philosophical enquiry at the point where it *arises* and to which it *returns*.¹⁴

For Heidegger, "interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us".¹⁵ Because our being is essentially one of "thrownness", because we are always already in a situation which we have inherited from the past, we bring with us to this situation a "fore-having", "fore-sight", and "fore-conception".¹⁶ In any particular situation, we have always already *interpreted*, we have always already *understood*, and the above three terms represent the stages by which we bring this prior

¹²See Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

¹³BT, p. 60. See also, p. 61.

¹⁴BT, pp. 191-2. See also, Gadamer, *TM*, p.230; Warnke, *op. cit.*, p. 38; Bleicher, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-2.

¹⁵BT, pp. 191-2. See also, Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-7.

¹⁶BT, p. 191.

understanding to explicit interpretation: "the mere seeing of the Things which are closest to us bears in itself the structure of interpretation . . ." ¹⁷

Therefore, Heidegger distinguishes two levels of interpretation. The first is that sort of interpretation which we carry out in any situation. It is a primordial understanding which is, in fact, transparent to us. At this level, the objects of our experience appear "ready-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*). This experience may or may not be verbalised: "From the fact that words are absent, it may not be concluded that interpretation is absent." ¹⁸ For example, I may pick up a hammer which is too heavy and immediately cast it aside; or I may exclaim "Too heavy!" or "Hand me the other hammer!" ¹⁹ Either way I have understood, I have interpreted the situation. Heidegger calls this sort of primordial or circumspective understanding an "existential-hermeneutical" mode of interpretation. ²⁰

The second level of interpretation is dependent upon the first. It occurs when one brings the latter to explicit interpretation, through the three stages mentioned above. As such it has the character of "assertion" and it is a derivative sort of interpretation. It is an "apophantic" mode of interpretation. ²¹ In it, things are no longer "ready-to-hand" but "present-at-hand" (*Vorhandenheit*). Furthermore, this interpretation may or may not "be true" to the original understanding. Ensuring an adequate interpretation is a matter of awareness of what one brings to the situation:

our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves. ²²

Therefore, Heidegger inverts the notion of Romantic hermeneutics that interpretation gives rise to understanding, that the latter is dependent upon the former: "In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself. Such interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise

¹⁷BT, p. 190.

¹⁸BT, p. 200.

¹⁹BT, p. 200. See also, p. 195-196, p. 207.

²⁰BT, p. 201.

²¹BT, p. 201. See also, Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

²²BT, p. 195. See also, Bleicher, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

from the former".²³ This also represents a reversal of the primacy accorded to misunderstanding by Schleiermacher, and a reinstatement of the primacy of understanding.

Of course, the foregoing description implies that understanding and interpretation move in a circle. In order to interpret we must already understand, but understanding is already an interpretation. This pertains to the historical character of our being. As we have already seen, *Dasein* is ontologically defined as a hermeneutical being, one whose nature it is to understand Being through a process of ongoing interpretation. This fact was recognised by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Husserl, but was regarded by each of them as an impediment to understanding. Heidegger, on the other hand, undistracted as he is by the need to give a scientific grounding to understanding, sees in this situatedness the very essence of *real* understanding. He reprimands his predecessors for their distrust of the hermeneutic circle: "But if we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just 'sense' it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up".²⁴ Rather than avoid the circle, we must enter more fully into it. Only in this way do we become more fully ourselves. "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. . . . In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing".²⁵

In this way the hermeneutic circle is given ontological status. Just as interpretation has been radicalised to refer, not simply to textual exegesis, but to our very mode of existing, so also is the hermeneutic circle integrated with this primordial interpretation and brought to the level of our being-in-the-world.²⁶

We now come to the question of the position of language in Heidegger's philosophy. We have already touched upon this in our discussion of interpretation above. In the same way that interpretation operates at different levels, so also does language. The language involved in explicit or apophantic interpretation is a derivative form. Heidegger

²³BT, p. 188. See also, p. 195; HHS, p.57.

²⁴BT, p. 194.

²⁵BT, p. 195.

²⁶See Warnke, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40; Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, p. 41.

is critical of the attempts by linguistic science to come to a *real* understanding of language at this level.²⁷ In language as “assertion”, words become *things* (present-at-hand), which are then manipulated by an equally derivative form of thought: scientific thought.

To this, Heidegger contrasts a more primordial sort of language, which exists at the level of understanding, of existential-hermeneutic interpretation. Here, language is ready-to-hand; it is transparent to us. At the same time, it is what makes the more derivative, appropriative form of language possible. It is that which “bears in itself the structure of interpretation . . .”²⁸ As such it is already “meaningful”. It is, in essence, that place where Being manifests itself. Heidegger calls it “discourse” (*Rede*):

Discourse is existentially equiprimordial with state-of-mind and understanding. The intelligibility of something has always been articulated, even before there is any appropriative interpretation of it. Discourse is the Articulation of intelligibility. Therefore, it underlies both interpretation and assertion. That which can be articulated in interpretation, and thus even more primordially in discourse, is what we have called “meaning”.²⁹

Being, as it manifests itself, must already be structured intelligibly, i.e., it must be meaningful. If not, there would be an unbridgeable gap between meaninglessness and meaningfulness. This does not imply that Being becomes totally transparent to us. On the contrary, its intelligibility must be interpreted by *Dasein*. The important point here, however, is that Being reveals itself as language.

Therefore, just as Heidegger inverts the relationship between interpretation and the one who interprets, so that the former becomes constitutive of the latter, so also does he invert the relationship between language and speaker. Primordially, *Dasein* does not use language; it is not something which he has at his disposal. Rather, he is *immersed* in it; it is constitutive of his being-in-the-world. Language is the essence of *Dasein*'s being.

As we have seen, this sense of language as primordial, as the place where Being is revealed, is distinguished from a more derivative form of language. This brings us to

²⁷BT, pp. 211-14. See also, Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 45-6.

²⁸BT, p. 212.

²⁹BT, p. 206.

²⁸BT, p. 190.

²⁹BT, pp. 203-4.

Heidegger's discussion of "idle talk" (*Gerede*), for it is only in the derivative sense that "idle talk" can be described as language.³⁰

In the interpretation of Being, *Dasein* encounters those pre-interpretations which have accrued during the course of history, and which enter into the present understanding of Being. These "deposits" of tradition become the basis of communication, producing a superficial familiarity which poses as a knowledge of Being. This is "idle talk", a "gossiping and passing the word along",³¹ as opposed to a genuine encounter with the thing itself. Idle talk *assumes* understanding where it has only inherited opinion, promulgating itself socially as an "average intelligibility". It is, in a word, "groundless".

This everyday way in which things have been interpreted is one into which *Dasein* has grown in the first instance, with never a possibility of extrication. In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed. In no case is a *Dasein*, untouched and unseduced by this way in which things have been interpreted, set before the open country of a 'world-in-itself', so that it just beholds what it encounters. The dominance of the public way in which things have been interpreted has already been decisive even for the possibilities of having a mood - that is, for the basic way in which *Dasein* lets the world "matter" to it. The "they" prescribes one's state-of-mind, and determines what and how one 'sees'.³²

This assumed knowledge actually "closes off" the possibility of genuine understanding. As Heidegger ironically writes, it does not need the latter "because, of course, it understands everything."³³

The role of language as a constitutive element of *Dasein*'s existence comes even more to the fore in Heidegger's later thought.³⁴ Language is that in which Being is known to us; without it, we would have no "being". At the same time, language is dependent on Being for its own existence. Palmer expresses the dialectic well: "Just as there can be no occurrence of being without apprehending, and no apprehending without being, so also there can be no being without language, and no language without being."³⁵ The decentering of the speaking subject which we noted above is brought to its conclusion.

³⁰BT, pp. 211-14. See also, Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 46-8.

³¹BT, p. 212.

³²BT, p. 213.

³³BT, p. 212.

³⁴See Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-6.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 153.

In *On the Way to Language* (1959), Heidegger remarks: "Language is in its essence neither expression nor an activity of man. *Language speaks*."³⁶

Heidegger's thought represents the turning point in our investigation of modern hermeneutics. Despite the insights into the situated character of our understanding on the part of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Husserl, it is only with Heidegger that the radical implications of this fact are brought to their conclusion. The implicit assumption of Romantic hermeneutics is overcome: the Cartesian ideal of an apodictic knowledge of the human being, based as it was on a notion of self-transparent and self-constitutive consciousness. The ghost of circularity which had haunted the above thinkers is turned to account and shown to be an essential aspect of the understanding process itself. "Explanation" is subordinated to a more primordial "understanding". Hermeneutics, in radicalised form, is no longer to be regarded as a conceptual tool in the hands of a textual exegete. It is co-extensive with existence itself. To be is to interpret, and to interpret is to be. For Heidegger, philosophy, as the quest for the meaning of Being, is ontology, is hermeneutics.

Gadamer and the Recollection of Tradition

Heidegger's existential conception of hermeneutics has been further developed by his pupil, **Hans-Georg Gadamer** (1900-). Gadamer's *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method* (1960), elaborates some of Heidegger's central insights, as well as presenting a coherent hermeneutic theory, which Gadamer has called "philosophical hermeneutics".

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is concerned with the nature of the experience of art; the second, with understanding in the human sciences; and the third, with language. The guiding thread of the work is a critique of the notion of "method", based on the paradigm of the natural sciences, insofar as this has been adopted and applied by the humanities since the Enlightenment. Following Heidegger, Gadamer elaborates a theory of hermeneutic understanding which is ontologically based, and which precedes any methodologically-guided modes of comprehension. We are

³⁶Quoted in Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

concerned with those aspects of Gadamer's work, both in *Truth and Method* and elsewhere, which contribute to our study of ideology.

Gadamer is not concerned to circumscribe the legitimate role of method as it is applied by science, either to the natural or to the social world.³⁷ Neither does he deny a role to methodologically-guided text-interpretation. His interest lies in the existential process of understanding that precedes any such methodologically-guided effort. Understanding, thus conceived, is something that "happens to us over and above our wanting and doing";³⁸ it is an "event".³⁹ Understanding of other people, whether directly (in conversation) or indirectly (through contemporary texts and works of art, or those which come to us through tradition), is a natural capacity of the human mind. Gadamer is concerned to clarify the confusion which arises when this sort of understanding is believed to be the outcome of method.

We shall begin with Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment conception of the work of art. Here, the influence of the scientific attitude resulted in an abstraction, whereby the work of art was regarded as an object which stands before a viewing subject. The artwork was a product of "aesthetic genius", considered in isolation as an aesthetic object by the viewer. Produced by a subject, and appreciated by a subject, the painting, the statue, the literary work, etc., became self-contained objects of aesthetic contemplation, independent of the historical circumstances of their production and life, and of the consciousness of those who encountered them. The "truth" of the work of art, that which it might reveal of the nature of being, was secondary to its ability to aesthetically please.

Gadamer proposes an alternative conception of the mode of being of the work of art, which is of some relevance to the study of ideology; this is the concept of *play*. In playing a game, the player relinquishes her own purposes and adopts the purposes of the game. The rules of the game take precedence over the subjectivity of the player, and her movements are circumscribed by them. In this way, Gadamer speaks of "[t]he primacy

³⁷*TM*, p. xvii.

³⁸*TM*, p. xvi.

³⁹*TM*, p. xiii.

of the game over the players” and the manner in which “the game tends to master the players”.⁴⁰ Thus, the subject of the game is not the player, but the game itself.⁴¹

Now, all play is a *representation*. The game represents itself through the players. This “self-representing” process is characteristic of nature as a whole. Thus, when we speak of the “play” of light, the “play” of waves, the “play” of animals, the “playing” of the game, etc., we use the word “play” analogically rather than equivocally.⁴² People, however, by taking part in the game, also represent themselves through it. The self-representative nature of play enables people to represent themselves in playing.⁴³

Gadamer suggests that play is the clue to the mode of being of the work of art. History is the “game” which surpasses, and yet contains, the subjectivity of the artist and the subjectivities of those who approach his work in the course of time. The artwork itself belongs pre-eminently to this historical process. One does not approach a work of art as a self-contained subject approaching an isolated object. Viewer and artwork belong to a reality that exceeds both: history. The meaning of the literary work, for example, is not simply the product of its author’s intentions. It is inseparable from the recorded interpretations that have accrued to it during the course of its life. Authorial intention, insofar as it can be known, may be an important factor in interpretation, but it is not the only one. The contemporary reader will approach the work, consciously or unconsciously, in the light of its recorded interpretations, as well as of the historical events which have influenced, and continue to influence, its meaning. The words of the prophets, to take an example from Biblical hermeneutics, acquire a richer meaning in the light of the Incarnation. Moreover, the contemporary reader is herself a part of the ongoing historical process, and her interpretation will be influenced by factors of which she may not even be aware.

Gadamer does not believe that this account leads to historical relativism. Interpretations, although always situated and limited, are not arbitrary. They must conform to the truth as it emerges in the work of art. The latter is not simply an

⁴⁰TM, p. 95.

⁴¹TM, pp. 92, 93, 95-6.

⁴²TM, pp. 93-4.

⁴³TM, pp. 94, 97.

aesthetically pleasing object. Once again, the analogy of play asserts itself. In the same way that play is a representation, so also is the work of art representative of the truth of Being. To return to the earlier example, it may be said that the truth of the words of the prophets receives fuller explication in the light of Christ's life. The explication of the truth of a work of art is never complete, but continues *ad infinitum*.⁴⁴

The representative nature of art, as also of the game, receives pre-eminent expression in *performance*. In performance, self-representation becomes "representation for someone".⁴⁵ In the light of the foregoing it may be seen that the performance is not simply a repetition of an original script, but rather an interpretation, both on the part of the actors and of the audience. Once again, interpretation is not arbitrary, but is guided by the truth of what comes to light in the performance. Anticipated meanings may be confirmed or rejected in the light of subsequent events.

The truth that emerges in the performance of a play is the truth of human life. The play is not an isolated event, unrelated to the everyday lives of the members of the audience. The truth of life is not simply *given* as pre-determined meaning, but emerges in the interaction of play and spectator. In the performance, the spectator sees that "this is how it is",⁴⁶ and he lives his life in the light of this experience. He understands the play because it is about human life, but he understands his life because he has seen the play. Speaking of tragedy, Gadamer writes:

it is not an experience of an adventure producing a temporary intoxication from which one re-awakens to one's true being, but the emotion that seizes the spectator *deepens in fact his continuity with himself*. The tragic emotion flows from the self-knowledge that the spectator acquires. He finds himself in the tragic action, because it is his own world, familiar to him from religious or historical tradition, that he encounters . . .⁴⁷

Here we see the dialectic of life and art, or better, of life and *representation*. One understands the truth expressed in art because of one's life experience. At the same time, the experience of artistic truth subsequently informs one's life experience. Gadamer

⁴⁴ See the section entitled 'Play as the clue to ontological explanation', *passim*, in *TM*.

⁴⁵ *TM*, p. 97.

⁴⁶ *TM*, p. 117.

⁴⁷ *TM*, p. 117. Emphasis added.

revives the classical concept of *mimesis* in order to describe the emergence of truth in art. Mimesis is not an *imitation* or *copy* of reality. It does not present the myriad details of life, but selects those events which most fully characterise it, such as love, joy, sacrifice, suffering, and death. It is a highlighting of its truth, "a recognition of the essence".⁴⁸ This truth or essence is as binding on the artist as it is on those who experience his work. In the context of the literary work, Gadamer expresses this as follows:

For the writer, free invention is always only one side of a communication which is conditioned by what is pre-given as valid. He does not freely invent his plot, however much he imagines that he does. Rather there remains up to the present day some of the old basis of the mimesis theory. The free invention of the writer is the presentation of a common truth that is binding on the writer also.⁴⁹

Gadamer describes the process of the raising of life to its truth in art as "the transformation into structure".⁵⁰ Once attained, this truth becomes repeatable in the form of artistic structure, just as a game is repeatable in virtue of its structure (i.e., rules). However, just as the game acquires its real being only in being played, so also is the truth inherent in the artistic structure only actualised in its representation. Structure (the rules of the game, colours on a canvas, words on a page) is an abstraction; it does not exist in itself, but must enter into a relationship in order to acquire its real being. Where is the game when it is not being played? Such, according to Gadamer, is the mode of being of the work of art.⁵¹

Gadamer's discussion of the nature of understanding in the human sciences emerges from his study of the experience of art. Here, the concept of history, which was central to the latter study, receives further elaboration. We shall begin with this concept.

We have already seen that, for Heidegger, history belongs to the very nature of *Dasein*. The human being is "thrown" into a situation. In attempting to understand her situation, she must always begin *within* it. Indeed, she has always already understood, and her attempt to explicate that which is understood, or presupposed, takes the form of

⁴⁸TM, p. 103.

⁴⁹TM, p. 118.

⁵⁰TM, p. 109.

⁵¹TM, pp. 99, 105, 106, 109.

an interpretation. This interpretation contributes towards new understanding, which gives rise to further understanding, and so on. Interpretation is intrinsically historical. In interpreting the present we recollect the past and project the future. Similarly, we can neither interpret the past without an understanding of the present and future, nor the future without an understanding of the past and present. We have understood this to be the ontological constitution of the hermeneutic circle.

Gadamer, following Heidegger, rejects the post-Enlightenment assumption of the human sciences that historical distance is an alienating factor which must be overcome. This was the demand for a Cartesian-like objectivity to which Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Husserl fell prey, despite their intentions. As we have seen, neither the Romantic background of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, nor Husserl's phenomenology, overcame the Enlightenment notion of scientific objectivity. "Objectivity" for this tradition meant a freedom from all prejudice; and the correlate of such an abstract, self-transparent consciousness was an equally abstract, isolated tradition standing over against it.

Gadamer locates the problem in what he calls "the discrediting of prejudice by the Enlightenment".⁵² As we saw in Chapter One, the scientific form of reasoning which came to the fore during the Enlightenment regarded prejudice as an impediment to understanding. Enlightenment reason and the authority of tradition were considered to be mutually exclusive.⁵³

In opposition to this, Gadamer proposes a "rehabilitation of authority and tradition"⁵⁴ in which prejudices, understood in the original sense of "pre-judgments", assume a more positive function. Such pre-judgments are, as Heidegger showed, the *prerequisite* of understanding, rather than an obstacle to it. They are the fore-meanings or presuppositions that we project in interpretation, and that are subsequently confirmed or falsified by the passage of time. We must elaborate upon this last point because in it resides the hermeneutic alternative to Enlightenment objectivity. It is also central to the question of ideology.

⁵²TM, p. 241.

⁵³TM, p. 246.

⁵⁴TM, p. 245.

The Enlightenment ideal of an understanding without prejudice may have been misdirected, but the motivation behind this ideal remains a constant factor in the human quest for knowledge. If philosophical hermeneutics denies the possibility of a self-transparent understanding, then how does it cope with the distinction between understanding and misunderstanding, between prejudices which are conducive to understanding ("true" prejudices) and those which are not ("false" prejudices)? As Gadamer puts it: "What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from all the countless ones which it is the undeniable task of the critical reason to overcome?"⁵⁵ We touched upon this question above, in relation to the nature of art, when it was suggested that artistic interpretation, although situated, was not arbitrary. We may now elaborate upon that discussion with regard to the status of understanding as a whole.

Heidegger described the possibility of both distorted and genuine knowledge inherent in the hermeneutic circle when he said that

our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.⁵⁶

In approaching a situation, in attempting to understand it (and we have no choice but to do so) we always project our prejudices or presuppositions. These constitute a framework, a *Gestalt* (if we may borrow a term from psychology), which allows us to orient ourselves in relation to the ever-changing reality. The extent to which this framework approximates the reality of the situation is the index of truth or objectivity. This does not imply a Cartesian dualism, a Kantian phenomenon-noumenon distinction, with the unknowable reality on one side and human thought marooned on the other. Heidegger, following the Greeks, showed that the *phainomenon* was the "appearance of that which is": Being. Being reveals itself to us, but because we are limited, historically situated, we can never have a complete knowledge of it. Our understanding is always an interpretation. We are never in the position of Hegel's Absolute Spirit, for whom history has come to an end and for whom, consequently, a vision of the whole is possible.

⁵⁵TM, p. 246.

⁵⁶BT, p. 195.

Our prejudices are, therefore, a positive source of knowledge. They are what we have already referred to (in relation to Heidegger) as "that which has always already been understood". They constitute the primordial interpretation of the world. Normally they are transparent to us, and we can only become aware of them in explicit interpretation. This is the point at which we are able to distinguish the legitimate from the illegitimate prejudices. The former are confirmed, and the latter rejected, as the reality of the situation emerges. The legitimate prejudices are considered to be "true" and "objective": "The only 'objectivity' here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out."⁵⁷

However, it is obvious that the question has still not been fully addressed. The presuppositions which inform our understanding of the world, which make knowledge possible at all, come to us primarily through tradition - through education, culture, etc. What we have described as "the reality of the situation", in the light of which our prejudices stand or fall, is itself mediated by further prejudices. If, as our experience suggests, not all prejudices are true, then how do we decide which ones are? Such a decision must itself be prejudiced. Using Heidegger's terms: how do we distinguish between the "idle talk" which is passed on from tradition, and a more primordial knowledge of Being? The hermeneutic circle can give rise - and has often done so - to relativism and scepticism.

The circular character of understanding has risen to a particularly explicit awareness in modern hermeneutics. All we need do here, however, is note Gadamer's treatment of the topic. For Gadamer, *tradition* is the ultimate arbiter of truth and falsehood. Once we admit the reality of meaningfulness and truth (and who can *coherently* deny them?), we must also, according to Gadamer, admit the priority of tradition. Knowledge is by its nature limited, and it must begin with that which is received. It is not possible to build without bricks or cement! This does not imply a blind acceptance of tradition. Such an attitude results from an abstraction, whereby tradition is regarded as something alien to

⁵⁷TM, p. 237.

the enlightened present, rather than as an ongoing process in which the present is involved:

Tradition is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves.⁵⁸

Reason and authority are not mutually exclusive; tradition itself carries the possibility of reason, and that includes critique. Those things which are accepted on the basis of authority, may often be arrived at by means of reason. Notwithstanding the possibility of falsehood, of misunderstanding, if we are concerned with truth then we must accept the ultimate authority which tradition exercises over us. In the end, it is only history which sorts the true from the false prejudices, and even then only in a provisional manner (with varying degrees of "certainty"), as the process extends before us indefinitely.⁵⁹

In fact history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.⁶⁰

In the light of this, Gadamer speaks of "the effectivity of history within understanding itself".⁶¹ The principle of "effective history" is the recognition that we can never be completely aware of all the factors determining our understanding. "To exist historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete".⁶²

As far as understanding is concerned, the only means at our disposal is to become increasingly aware of our prejudices, to appropriate them. The effort of appropriation must overcome the weight of "opinion" (what the ancient Greeks called *doxa*). In opposition to opinion stands the "question", which keeps open the various possibilities of meaning and prevents the dogmatic assertion of truth. The question is the locus of the

⁵⁸TM, p. 261.

⁵⁹TM, pp. 246-50, 266.

⁶⁰TM, p. 245.

⁶¹TM, p. 267.

⁶²TM, p. 269.

conflict between opinion and critique: "It is opinion that suppresses questions. Opinion has a curious tendency to propagate itself".⁶³ However, the question, and hence critique, does not escape the historical situation. Critique is always *from a point of view*; the question is always *motivated*. An *objective* (in the sense of prejudice-free) assessment of tradition is not possible:

historical objectivism resembles statistics, which are such an excellent means of propaganda because they let facts speak and hence simulate an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked.⁶⁴

The situated character of understanding is elucidated by the concept of "horizon".⁶⁵ The prejudices of an individual, a society, or an era, form a horizon within which understanding is possible. But understanding is not limited by horizon in the sense that an enclosure is limited by a fence. A horizon is not a fixed boundary. Understanding of the previously unknown, of what lies beyond the horizon, is mediated by the horizon itself, and the latter is broadened in the process. "In fact the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices".⁶⁶ The continual formation of the horizon of understanding is raised to the level of consciousness by the attitude of openness implied in questioning. This attitude is observed pre-eminently in the encounter with unfamiliar traditions, separated from us in space and/or time. In such cases, the understanding to which it gives rise implies a "fusion of horizons"⁶⁷ whereby the boundary of each horizon mediates the other, and both are broadened considerably.

This activity is most familiar to us as *dialogue*. True dialogue is characterised by openness to what the other has to say; it is not controlled by either party but is, rather, guided by the truth of the object of discussion. The fusion of horizons which characterises the understanding of tradition is then, for Gadamer, a dialogue, and this implies a willingness to learn from what tradition has to say.⁶⁸

⁶³TM, p. 329.

⁶⁴TM, p. 268.

⁶⁵TM, pp. 269-73.

⁶⁶TM, p. 273.

⁶⁷TM, p. 273.

⁶⁸TM, pp. 330-32.

The final part of *Truth and Method* concerns language, and it is here that all of the themes previously discussed converge. As we saw with Heidegger, language is not a dispensable adjunct to human existence, but is *constitutive* of that very existence. Gadamer's thought is an elaboration of this basic position.

The indissoluble relationship between understanding and interpretation, already pointed out with regard to Heidegger, is constantly stressed by Gadamer,⁶⁹ to the point of asserting that "understanding and interpretation are ultimately the same thing".⁷⁰ Now we see that the *medium* of understanding/interpretation is *language*. Language is not a "tool" at our disposal, so much as an element in which we are emersed and in which understanding takes place.⁷¹ We do not "have thoughts" and then express them in language; thought is itself intrinsically linguistic: "speech is contained, in a hidden way, in thinking".⁷² Why "hidden"? Because we are not normally aware of the mediating function of language; we are so immersed in it that it is transparent to us - we think *through* language.⁷³

Our understanding is historically mediated. Our prejudices are those of a *tradition*. This is the principle of "effective history". This concept refers not only to the fact that our own understanding is situated, but also, correlatively, to the fact that the objects of our understanding are historically situated. They are the sum of the interpretations that have accrued to them in the course of time; they are the *history of their effects* on those who have encountered and interpreted them. We inherit these "effects" in the form of prejudices. They constitute our historically-mediated understanding. Finally, language is the universal medium through which they come to us. "The linguistic quality of understanding is the concretion of effective-historical consciousness. The relation between language and understanding is seen primarily in the fact that it is the nature of tradition to exist in the medium of language . . ."⁷⁴

⁶⁹TM, pp. 274, 350, 351, 360, 361.

⁷⁰TM, p. 350.

⁷¹TM, pp. 346-7.

⁷²TM, p. 351.

⁷³TM, p. 366.

⁷⁴TM, p. 351.

Language is universal. Although there is no language without a world, neither is there a world without language. Our world comes to us through language.⁷⁵ Gadamer states this point most succinctly when he says that "Being that can be understood is language".⁷⁶

Language as described here is language in the most ordinary, everyday sense. It is the medium in which we live our lives: conversing, arguing, persuading, questioning, criticising, pleading, reasoning, wishing, desiring, etc. For Gadamer, "sign" theories of language fail to grasp its essence. He claims that they instrumentalise language, petrifying it, and then subjecting the lifeless structure to a "scientific" analysis. Their approach is one of alienating distanciation. At the same time, however, they are themselves *derived* from language in the former, more natural sense.

Gadamer describes other forms of derived language. There are the purely formal languages of mathematics and logic, which depend entirely on natural language for their interpretation. Then there are languages which use technical terms, and which are not so clearly separable from the natural language. In fact, these technical terms usually filter down into the language of everyday life. We are given some interesting examples: "the artificial terms of modern advertising",⁷⁷ and "the use of 'ideology' in a positive, dogmatic, sense which has become general despite its original polemical and instrumental use in more precise philosophical language".⁷⁸

Any derived form of language requires the universality of natural language as the context in which it acquires meaning. We saw earlier how the structure inherent in a work of art must be actualised by entering into a relationship with a viewer. This relationship is a dialogical one, and it takes place within universal language. For Gadamer, the same can be said of the sign theories of linguistic science, and any other formal, theoretical or technical language. Each takes place within the broader framework of language as a "form of life" (to use Wittgenstein's phrase); each is motivated by this

⁷⁵TM, p. 401.

⁷⁶TM, p. 432.

⁷⁷TM, pp. 375-6. See also, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. by D.E. Linge (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 16: "When we hear modern lovers talking to each other, we often wonder if they are communicating with words or with advertising labels and technical terms from the sign language of the modern industrial world."

⁷⁸TM, p. 376.

form of life and is meaningless without it. Ultimately, for Gadamer, language has its true being in conversation:

All forms of human community of life are forms of linguistic community: even more, they constitute language. For language, in its nature, is the language of conversation, but it acquires its reality only in the process of communicating. That is why it is not a mere means of communication.⁷⁹

This would seem an appropriate point at which to temporarily close our discussion of Gadamer. For it is on the issue of the priority of a linguistic tradition that philosophical hermeneutics confronts the theory of ideology. At the end of Chapter One, we referred to this confrontation in terms of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas. With our study of Gadamer, we have laid the ground for an assessment of this debate in the final chapter.

Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Detour

We conclude our treatment of hermeneutics with an examination of the work of **Paul Ricoeur** (1913-). This work is very broad in scope, and we must confine ourselves to those aspects of it which are relevant to our thesis. Ricoeur's writings offer several themes which are very suggestive for the subjects of language and ideology. In addition to an internal development of their own, these themes elaborate on the work of Heidegger and Gadamer. Therefore, we find in Ricoeur an ideal figure with whom to close this chapter and, as we shall see, to provide a link with the subject-matter of Chapter Three.

It may help if we briefly outline the evolution of Ricoeur's thought. Strongly influenced by his teacher, Gabriel Marcel, and by Husserl, Ricoeur has sought to utilise the positive aspects of each, while avoiding what he feels are their shortcomings. Marcel has produced in him a sensitivity to the mystery of Being and a concern with philosophy as "reflection". However, he feels that Marcel lacks a certain rigour, a quality which has been supplied by Husserl. This tension between the reflective and analytic aspects of philosophy, each circumscribing and supplementing the other, runs right down the

⁷⁹TM, p. 404.

middle of Ricoeur's work, and it gives a distinct "flavour" to his studies of language and ideology.⁸⁰

Indeed, the tension between a reflective philosophy of *understanding* and an analytic philosophy of *explanation* is evident in Ricoeur's early project of a philosophy of the will. Here we witness his concern with a *comprehensive* understanding of human nature, and yet an understanding which must be mediated by an explanatory study of the *structural* features of this nature. Although Husserl's method provides the starting-point for his project, in Ricoeur's hands it undergoes a transformation. For he points out that Husserlian phenomenology did not escape the idealistic trend initiated by Cartesian philosophy. By focussing on the will, on our affective nature, Ricoeur attempts to counterbalance this idealistic bias in the father of phenomenology. Ricoeur's philosophy of the will also represents a departure from the existential phenomenology of Sartre. Whereas the latter emphasised the will's freedom, the former attempts to elucidate those structures of willing which provide an obstacle to freedom and which give rise to the experience of necessity.⁸¹

Ricoeur finds the obstacle to the will's free expression in its finitude, and he pursues the implications of this as experienced in the phenomenon of fallibility and, ultimately, of evil. It is in the possibility of choosing evil that the will reveals its limitation. However, according to Ricoeur the movement from *possibility* to *actuality* cannot be made by a structural phenomenology. For the actual *choice* of evil, while based on a structure of fallibility, is not in itself a structural matter. In order to understand the experience of the evil will, we must turn to the *expressions* of that will in the form of symbols and myths. In this way, structural phenomenology is superseded by *hermeneutic* phenomenology, and the task of interpretation.⁸²

As we have seen, the movement from phenomenology to hermeneutics was also made by Heidegger, whose insights were further developed by Gadamer. However, Ricoeur

⁸⁰Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), pp. 8-11; Theodoor Marius Van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning: Ontology and Eschatology in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), pp. 6-7, 19-20. See also, Thompson's Introduction to *HHS*, p. 2.

⁸¹Ihde, *op. cit.*, chpts. 2 and 3; Van Leeuwen, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-17; *HHS*, pp. 2-5.

⁸²Ihde, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-93; Van Leeuwen, *op. cit.*, p. 23; *HHS*, pp. 5-6.

makes an important distinction between his own approach and those of the German thinkers. We may recall that Heidegger's entry into hermeneutics resulted in an ontology. Heidegger did not engage in a dialogue with Romantic hermeneutics, attempting to provide an epistemological justification for the human sciences; rather, he undermined the methodological preoccupations of the latter by demonstrating that interpretation is a *mode of being* of the human entity (*Dasein*). Interpretation is a fundamental feature of existence, in relation to which the interpretive methods of the human sciences remain derivative. Even in his later philosophy, with its characteristic emphasis on language, his concern was not with the linguistic sciences as such, or with the clarification of language for the purpose of exegesis, but rather with language as the manifestation of Being, as pointing to the world. Thus Heidegger "dissolved" (as opposed to resolved) the question of methodology by proceeding directly to an ontology of understanding.⁸³

Ricoeur describes Heidegger's hermeneutics as the "short route" to ontology. It was a valid philosophical enterprise, although it did create certain difficulties. By defining the various human sciences as "derivative" without actually showing how they were to be derived, it cut them adrift, as it were, and undermined any attempt to establish their epistemological status. Having provided an ontology of understanding, Heidegger did not make the "return journey" to the various projects of understanding embodied in the human sciences, thereby rendering problematical their respective - and often conflicting - claims to truth. Furthermore, Ricoeur is sceptical about the ultimate possibility of a direct ontology. For how can *Dasein* understand itself if not through its products? And since the latter do not supply it with a univocal sense, how can it avoid a "conflict of interpretations" and, by implication, questions of arbitration and method?⁸⁴

Returning to Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, we may note that it is also motivated by an ontology, but that this ontology remains a *telos*, a "horizon" for philosophy. A reflective philosophy proceeds towards self-understanding via the medium of the self's life-expressions. This is the "long route" to ontology which

⁸³HHS, pp. 53-9; COI, p. 95.

⁸⁴COI, pp. 6, 10-11; HHS, p. 59.

Ricoeur proposes to undertake, an ontology "by degrees", which proceeds in the opposite direction to that of Heidegger, making a "hermeneutic detour" through the interpretive disciplines of the human sciences. Ricoeur finds some support for this project in Gadamer. For although Gadamer follows Heidegger in subordinating the various interpretive disciplines to an ontology of understanding, he does at least begin the aforementioned "return journey".⁸⁵ Unlike Heidegger, he enters into a debate with the human sciences, and although he ultimately asserts the priority of belongingness which is proper to tradition, and which precedes the attempted distancing implied by "method", Ricoeur finds in his work several openings for a continuation of the debate. In particular, according to Ricoeur, the concepts of "effective history", of the "fusion of horizons", and of "dialogue", each indicate an ineradicable element of distancing, providing the logical space for a methodology of interpretation.⁸⁶

Therefore, Ricoeur retains Heidegger's ontological radicalisation of the hermeneutic circle, although he enters the circle in a different way. Unlike Heidegger, he does not limit interpretation to the existential level, but broadens it to include the "apophantic mode" which the former labelled as derivative. Without this necessary detour, reflective philosophy founders on the rock of epistemology. Ricoeur's solution to the epistemological problems which have, in one way or another, bedevilled the history of hermeneutics, is not to oppose "understanding" to "explanation", but rather to avoid such an impasse by placing the two in a dialectical relation. Henceforth, "explanation is the obligatory path of understanding".⁸⁷ But if understanding must proceed via explanation, the latter is also constrained by the dialectic. Explanation cannot resort to an apodictic method which escapes the situatedness of understanding. Each represents a moment in the process of interpretation, forming a circle which is not "vicious" but more akin to a "spiral", and having a completed ontology as its horizon.⁸⁸

Although Ricoeur's assimilation of the human sciences is important for our investigation, there is another aspect of his detour which bears more directly on the

⁸⁵See *TM*, p. 235.

⁸⁶*COI*, pp. 6-7, 10-11, 16-17; *HHS*, pp. 59-62.

⁸⁷*HHS*, p. 138.

⁸⁸*HHS*, pp. 138, 165, 177-8, 209-10, 221; *COI*, pp. 19, 24.

subject of ideology. He points out that the interpretive path taken by self-understanding is not as straightforward as it might at first seem. It is not merely a question of attempting to arbitrate between the conflicting claims of various interpretive methods, necessary as this may be. The critiques put forward by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have shown that misunderstanding can be motivated as often as it is accidental. The claims of these "masters of suspicion" make it necessary to graft another layer onto the interpretive task of hermeneutics. Self-consciousness must face the accusation of "false consciousness". Ricoeur summarises this double movement of hermeneutic phenomenology as follows:

reflection must be doubly indirect: first, because existence is evinced only in the documents of life, but also because consciousness is first of all false consciousness, and it is always necessary to rise by means of a corrective critique from misunderstanding to understanding.⁸⁹

Therefore, the critique of ideology (here broadly defined as any form of false consciousness) becomes an essential part of the hermeneutic detour.⁹⁰

As we have seen, Ricoeur takes "symbol" and "myth" as the initial foci for a properly *hermeneutic* phenomenology, because it is at the level of the mythical consciousness that the most archaic avowal of evil occurs. The symbol retains its central position when the hermeneutic detour becomes a hermeneutics of suspicion, only now it is related to the dream - an indispensable element of Freudian psychoanalysis. What is preserved in this move from myth to dream is the essential relationship of a repository of meaning (the symbol) to a form of narrative (myth or dream) which utilises some - and *only some* - of this semantic potential. It is precisely because the symbol is ambiguous, and sometimes distorting, that it calls for interpretation. In his more recent work, Ricoeur has turned to an analysis of "sign" and "text", retaining the relationship of a unit of multiple meaning to a form of narrative.⁹¹

Ricoeur's theory of the text occupies a central position in his work on interpretation, meaning, and reference, his ontology and epistemology and, by implication, his analysis

⁸⁹COI, p. 18.

⁹⁰COI, pp. 18, 148-50; HHS, pp. 6, 34.

⁹¹COI, pp. 12-13, 28; HHS, pp. 33-4.

of ideology. Therefore, we propose to undertake a more detailed study of this aspect of his philosophy, placing it within the context of his detour through structural linguistics.

The hermeneutics of suspicion recognises that the primacy of the subject, of the self-conscious ego, must be questioned. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have shown that the subject can be the victim - or product - of unrecognised motives, whether they stem from unconscious libidinal desires, the will to power, or economic forces. We have briefly noted that Ricoeur already makes the transition to a hermeneutics of suspicion through a study of psychoanalysis. However, another challenge to the primacy of the subject has come from a very different region: structuralism. This term refers to an array of disciplines which owe their impetus to the structural study of language initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure. As its name implies, the most distinguishing feature of structuralism is its concern with the structures of meaning which transcend the individual subject. As Richard Kearney puts it:

Above all, structuralism is a *method*. Its aim is to analyse isolated events or meanings in terms of their underlying structural laws. It seeks to comprehend *particulars* by describing their interrelationship within the totality of *general* codes which govern them. It looks for the deep and often hidden structures beneath the surface manifestations of meaning.⁹²

Thus, structuralism undermines the primacy of the individual consciousness by placing it within a scheme of significance of which it usually remains *unconscious*. Like the critics of ideology, it proceeds by *explaining* (and sometimes explaining away) the subject, although more in terms of meaning than of motivation.

Unlike Gadamer, Ricoeur has entered into a dialogue with structuralism, taking it as a major landmark on the hermeneutic detour. Although he has made studies both of the "structural anthropology" of Claude Lévi-Strauss⁹³ and of the "structuralist Marxism" of Louis Althusser,⁹⁴ our main interest lies in his analysis of structural linguistics.⁹⁵ In a sense, the study of language has a certain primacy in the hermeneutics of suspicion, for it

⁹²*Op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁹³*COI*, 'Structure and Hermeneutics'.

⁹⁴*LIU*, chpts. 7, 8, and 9.

⁹⁵Which he also calls "semiology" and "semiotics", using these terms interchangeably - an important point to which we shall return in the final chapter.

is only in and through language - "the documents of life" - that false consciousness can express itself, and also be "demystified".

In Chapter Three we shall provide a brief exposition of Saussure's structural linguistics. For our present purposes, however, it is necessary to pre-empt this analysis by noting the basic presuppositions of the Saussurean project. In order to isolate an object for linguistic science, Saussure distinguishes between an unarticulated structural system (*la langue* or "language") and the particular utterances (*la parole* or "speech") for which this system provides the conditions of possibility. *La langue* is the object of structural linguistics. Now, since languages are historical phenomena, undergoing constant modification, Saussure must also distinguish between *states* of the system (the system considered synchronically) and *changes* of the system (the system considered diachronically) and, significantly, he subordinates the latter to the former: change is understood in terms of one state replacing another. The basic unit of the system is the "sign", which is defined as a relation between a "signifier" (expression) and a "signified" (content). The "signified" does not refer to an object in the world, some "thing" from which it derives its meaning. Rather, structural linguistics treats the system as a self-contained entity, a closed order in which there are only relationships of "difference" between one signifier and another, one signified and another. In brief, a sign's meaning is a function of its opposition to other signs; there are no absolute terms, only differences.⁹⁶

The task for structural linguistics is one of elucidating the various interrelationships between signs, in order to arrive at the universal structural laws underlying language. Questions of reference and truth, of a correspondence or lack of correspondence between language and world, are consequently suspended by this model, quite simply because, for it, the world does not exist! For Ricoeur, the detour through structuralism (and here we may include the extensions of the linguistic model to the whole cultural sphere) is a necessary and useful stage for a reflective philosophy. Structural analysis unearths meaningful relations which might otherwise escape notice. It represents an explanatory

⁹⁶COI, pp. 31-2, 68, 81-3.

moment in the dialectic of explanation and understanding, a moment of distancing in which the immediacy of the interpreting consciousness is temporarily lost. The result is a "depth semantics" which goes beyond the self-evident "surface semantics" of meaningful phenomena.⁹⁷

However, if Ricoeur acknowledges the advantages of the structural method, he is also quick to delimit its usefulness. In relation to the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss he writes: "The consciousness of the validity of a method is never separable from the consciousness of its limits".⁹⁸ And a little later: "the passage from a structural science to a structuralist philosophy seems to me to be not very satisfying and not even very coherent".⁹⁹ The danger lies in forgetting that the suspension of reference to a world is a methodological procedure and not an epistemological principle, with the consequence that ultimately "everything is sign, everything is language".¹⁰⁰ What is neglected is the primary function of language, which is to *say something about something*, to point to a world: "what is language if not an abstraction of the speaking being?"¹⁰¹

Ricoeur points out that such confusion stems from a failure to adequately distinguish between alternative *levels* of investigation. He reminds us that "language is composed of a hierarchy of levels",¹⁰² to each of which there corresponds an appropriate form of enquiry. A method which may be enlightening on one level, may not be so on another. The structural closure of the "linguistic universe", accomplished by reducing the scale of investigation to that of "small signifying units" (signs),¹⁰³ need not conflict with the aims of hermeneutics, so long as the former's reductive presuppositions are acknowledged:

the risk of conflict that occurs at the same level between a *philosophy* of interpretation and a structural *science* can be averted by a method which places at different levels of realization the meaning effects being considered.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷COI, pp. 30, 37, 57-61; HHS, pp. 217-21.

⁹⁸COI, pp. 30-31. See also, pp. 38-9.

⁹⁹COI, p. 45. See also, pp. 40, 51.

¹⁰⁰COI, p. 265.

¹⁰¹COI, p. 52.

¹⁰²COI, p. 80.

¹⁰³COI, pp. 63, 65, 80.

¹⁰⁴COI, p. 63.

Therefore, while recognising the contributions of structuralism to linguistic interpretation, Ricoeur indicates the necessity for hermeneutics to approach language on another level, the level where it refers to a world. For hermeneutics is concerned with language insofar as it opens up a world: "in hermeneutics there is no closed system of the universe of signs".¹⁰⁵ According to Ricoeur, the level at which language *refers* is the level of "discourse" or "speech", the basic unit of which is not the sign but the "sentence":

We actually change levels when we pass from the units of a language [in the structural sense] to the new unit constituted by the sentence or the utterance. This is no longer the unit of a language, but of speech or discourse. By changing the unit, one also changes the function, or rather, one passes from structure to function. We then have the opportunity of encountering language as saying.¹⁰⁶

It is only in the "event" of discourse that language fulfils its purpose of pointing beyond itself. Language is essentially a form of "mediation". As Ricoeur puts it: "Language seeks to disappear; it seeks to die as an object".¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the structural interconnections discovered by linguistic science would be meaningless if it were not for this role of language as speech.¹⁰⁸

Before turning to Ricoeur's analysis of discourse, we propose to examine an important feature of the linguistic sign, i.e., its "polysemic" character. We very briefly alluded to this above, when we spoke of the ambiguity of the symbol, the fact that it can have multiple meanings. It is this feature which allows the symbol, whether in myth or dream, to "show while concealing".¹⁰⁹ By virtue of its very obviousness, a surface meaning conceals a deeper meaning - or meanings - which are only revealed by interpretation:

¹⁰⁵ *COI*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ *COI*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁷ *COI*, p. 85.

¹⁰⁸ *COI*, pp. 85, 86, 87-8, 252, 256; *HHS*, p. 133. Ricoeur is aware that the structural method has been applied to units larger than the sign. See, for example, his analyses of A.J. Greimas' "structural semantics" (*COI*, pp. 73-8; *HHS*, pp. 280-86). Fruitful as it may be, according to Ricoeur the work of structural semantics retains the essential presupposition of its mother science: "the closed state of the linguistic universe" (*COI*, p. 77). As such, it is unable to say *why* certain literary effects should be produced: "ambiguity, to do what? Or rather, *to say what?*" (*COI*, p. 77) Such questions as these fall outside the province of structuralism.

¹⁰⁹ *COI*, p. 12.

The symbol . . . is constituted from a semantic perspective such that it provides a meaning by means of a meaning. In it a primary, literal, worldly, often physical meaning refers back to a figurative, spiritual, often existential, ontological meaning which is in no way given outside this indirect designation. The symbol invites us to think, calls for an interpretation, precisely because it says more than it says and because it never ceases to speak to us.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, it is this "overdetermination" of symbols which is at the root of the conflict of interpretations. The same symbol may say one thing to the pope, but quite another to Marx, to Nietzsche, or to Freud! The symbol reveals contradictory facets of itself according to the framework of interpretation, and it is the task of hermeneutics to untangle such semantic knots.¹¹¹

The ambiguity of the symbol is only a special case of the more general polysemy of the sign.¹¹² Signs are characteristically polysemic. Structural linguistics registers this fact both in terms of signifiers and signifieds, and in terms of relations of identity and difference between signs. Although this is a useful way of enumerating the various meanings of signs and their interrelationships, it suffers from all of the limitations of the structural method. As a synchronic analysis, it ignores the essential fact (for hermeneutics) that meanings are "cumulative", they accrue in the course of historical change, they are *diachronic*.¹¹³ Furthermore, it is unable to say why one meaning is selected in preference to another, because this a function of reference: "a more rigorous treatment of the problem of double meaning has been paid for by abandoning its aim towards things".¹¹⁴

According to Ricoeur, polysemy is best understood at the level of discourse. It is in discourse that new meanings are attached to a sign, and it is in discourse that one or more meanings are selected to the exclusion of others. In discourse, polysemy is regulated and its potential harnessed for the production of various semantic effects, such as ambiguity, pun, and metaphor. It is the locus of linguistic creativity, the place where a virtual

¹¹⁰COI, p. 28.

¹¹¹COI, pp. 13-15, 28, 58.

¹¹²Ricoeur tends to use "symbol" and "sign" interchangeably (e.g., COI, pp. 65, 257, 264), but he also appears to distinguish them (HHS, pp. 33-4). Properly speaking, the symbol deliberately *conceals*, while the sign does not necessarily do so. For our purposes, however, this distinction is not significant.

¹¹³COI, pp. 68-9.

¹¹⁴COI, p. 73.

infinity of meanings is created and realised. For Ricoeur, however, the most important point is that none of this would be possible if language were not used to *say* something *about* something. As a feature of speech, creativity implies a world. It is only in relation to a particular state of affairs - a "context" - that polysemy is temporarily reduced or eliminated. The context of an utterance acts as a "filter", allowing only the desired meaning(s) of a given sign to attain expression. In structural analysis, by contrast, a sign remains only a potential, an abstract unit which, by virtue of its unlimited polysemy, cannot really *say* anything at all. To state it otherwise: a sign that can mean *anything*, means *nothing*.¹¹⁵

What, then, are the features of discourse, of language as "event"? Ricoeur lists them as four, contrasting each with language as "structure". Firstly, while the system of language is virtual and outside of time, discourse is realised *temporally*. Secondly, language as system is impersonal, whereas discourse has a subject: it refers back to its speaker. Thirdly, the system of language is a closed structure in which signs refer only to other signs, whereas discourse has a *world*: it is always about something. Finally, while language is a structural condition of communication, a "code", it is only in discourse that messages are actually *exchanged*.¹¹⁶

So discourse not only has a world, but it has an other, another person, an interlocutor to whom it is addressed. The event, in this last sense, is the temporal phenomenon of exchange, the establishment of a dialogue which can be started, continued or interrupted. All of these features, taken together, constitute discourse as an event. It is notable that they appear only in the realisation of language in discourse, in the actualisation of our linguistic competence in performance.¹¹⁷

However, the eventful character of discourse is only one of its two constitutive poles, the second being that of meaning: "if all discourse is realised as event, all discourse is understood as meaning".¹¹⁸ "Meaning"¹¹⁹ is here understood in terms of intentionality; it is the purpose of discourse as event, its *raison d'être*. Indeed, the event of discourse is

¹¹⁵COI, pp. 58, 69, 71, 87, 93.

¹¹⁶HHS, pp. 133, 198.

¹¹⁷HHS, pp. 133-4.

¹¹⁸HHS, p. 134.

¹¹⁹For Ricoeur, meaning is not confined to propositional content, but rather includes all those features of the "speech-act" as described by J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle. See HHS, pp. 134-6.

surpassed in the meaning, the latter outliving the former. The polysemy of the sign is one of the tools at the disposal of discourse in its creation of meaning. Finally, event and meaning form a dialectic which is the basis for the transposition of discourse into writing, a matter to which we may now turn.¹²⁰

The fixation of discourse in writing brings us back to the theory of the text, providing us with a rather minimal definition, although one that will suffice for the purpose of our thesis. The question is: What happens to discourse when it is fixed in writing, when it becomes a text? Ricoeur describes the transformation in the case of each of the four abovementioned features of discourse.

As we have seen, discourse is first of all a temporal phenomenon. Unlike the abstract system of language, it has the character of a fleeting event; it appears and disappears. In writing, however, discourse is *preserved*: "writing preserves discourse and makes it an archive available for individual and collective memory".¹²¹ But what precisely is preserved? It is not the event itself, but rather what is said, the meaning or intention of the discourse. Writing represents an "objectification" of meaning.¹²²

Secondly, while spoken discourse refers back to its speaker, in the sense that both speaker and spoken are co-present, this is not the case with the text. The text becomes *independent* of its author, and this has important consequences for its meaning. Ricoeur points out that in speech there is an overlapping of the speaker's intention and the meaning of her discourse, such that what she means and what her discourse means amount to the same thing. This is not so with written discourse, where there is no direct connection between the meaning of the text and the author's intention. The text has "broken its moorings to the psychology of its author",¹²³ and the latter ceases to be the ultimate arbiter of its meaning. Henceforth, the text's "plurivocity" - its capacity to carry several meanings - is actualised, a factor related (though not reducible) to the polysemic nature of signs. As in the case of the sign, the ambiguity of the text creates the necessity for interpretation, as well as being one of its conditions of possibility.¹²⁴

¹²⁰HHS, pp. 132-6.

¹²¹HHS, p. 147.

¹²²HHS, pp. 198-200.

¹²³HHS, p. 201.

¹²⁴HHS, pp. 200-201, 212; COI, p. 70.

Discourse, we noted, has a world; not in the naive realist sense of something “outside” the speaker, but in the sense of a “situation” to which discourse refers. The important point is that this “world” is present to both parties in the interlocution. In other words, in oral discourse reference is ostensive. It is quite another matter with the text, which has both “broken its moorings” to authorial intention, and which can be read in an indefinite number of situations. Is the text devoid of reference then? Not at all. Only now its reference is *non-ostensive*, what Ricoeur describes as a “second order” reference. In fact, it is a function of the text to project its own world, or worlds, to open up for us, in Heidegger’s terminology, new dimensions of our “being-in-the-world”. Whether fact or fiction, non-ostensive reference - in the form of a projected world - is proper to the being of the text.¹²⁵

Finally, we noted that discourse is addressed to someone. It is an exchange, a moment of communication. But just as transcribed speech loses its reference to a speaker and to its immediate situation, so also does it cease to be addressed to its original interlocutor or audience. The text addresses itself to anyone who can read, creating its own audience and sharing its world with generation after generation.¹²⁶

We must now show how Ricoeur’s theory of the text contributes to an understanding of those issues with which we opened this section. We may recall that Ricoeur proposes to assimilate the interpretive methodologies of the human sciences to hermeneutic phenomenology, as part of the detour of a reflective philosophy which has an ontology as its horizon. This detour must include a critique of ideology. Furthermore, Ricoeur finds some justification for this project in Gadamer’s concepts of “effective history”, of the “fusion of horizons”, and of “dialogue”. According to Ricoeur, each of these contains an implicit element of distancing, by means of which he hopes to overcome the explanation/understanding dichotomy bequeathed to hermeneutics by the Romantic tradition.

¹²⁵HHS, p. 131.

¹²⁶HHS, p. 132.

¹²⁵HHS, pp. 144, 201-2.

¹²⁶HHS, pp. 202-3.

For Ricoeur, the text is “the paradigm of distancing in communication”.¹²⁷ He points out that although distancing exists in an incipient form in oral discourse,¹²⁸ it attains its fullest expression only in the text. This characteristic of the text epitomises its nature as *inscribed* discourse, that which differentiates it from speech, what we might here summarise as its independence of the original conditions of production and reception. With this in mind, Ricoeur is critical of the notion that distancing is simply a disabling factor which interpretation must overcome, rather than an integral feature of text and interpretation alike:

distancing is not the product of methodology and hence something superfluous and parasitical; rather it is constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as writing. At the same time, it is the condition of interpretation; *Verfremdung* [distancing] is not only what understanding must overcome, but also what conditions it. We are thus prepared to discover a relation between *objectification* and *interpretation* which is much less dichotomous, and consequently much more complementary, than that established by the Romantic tradition.¹²⁹

Therefore, in contrast to Gadamer’s subordination of distancing to the belongingness or appropriation implied in understanding, Ricoeur makes the former an essential part of the latter: “distancing is the condition of understanding”.¹³⁰

The element of distancing inherent in the text has important implications for the subjectivity of the reader. As we noted in our study of Gadamer, “[o]ne does not approach a work of art as a self-contained subject approaching an isolated object”. Ricoeur now attempts to draw out the implications of this text-reader interaction, of the fact that the text projects a world into which the reader must enter. Rather than imposing her understanding on the text, the reader temporarily *relinquishes* her self-understanding before the “world of the work”. Her appropriation of this world entails a corresponding *disappropriation* of her self. She receives an “enlarged self”, a new level of understanding as a result of her reading.¹³¹ In a sense, the reader is created by the text:

¹²⁷HHS, p. 131.

¹²⁸HHS, p. 132.

¹²⁹HHS, pp. 139-40.

¹³⁰HHS, p. 144.

¹³¹HHS, pp. 143-4, 189.

"if fiction is a fundamental dimension of the reference of the text, it is no less a fundamental dimension of the subjectivity of the reader".¹³²

Ricoeur elaborates on this by recourse to Gadamer's analyses of "play" and "*mimesis*". As we saw, the suspension of subjectivity in play is, for Gadamer, paradigmatic for the aesthetic experience. We also observed that play is a "representation" and, moreover, one which is given pre-eminent expression in "performance". Ricoeur equates the representation¹³³ of play with the "world of the work", that second order reference which challenges the self-understanding of the reader. This brings us to *mimesis*, which is now seen to be an abolition of first order reference, of the everyday reality wherein the truly significant is admixed with all that is "fortuitous and accidental".¹³⁴ Ricoeur restates the earlier account of *mimesis* as that which highlights the truth of reality, and he summarises it as "a metamorphosis according to the truth".¹³⁵ *Mimesis*, in other words, mediates our self-understanding by exposing us to that larger perspective represented by the world of the work:

What would we know of love and hate, of moral feelings and, in general, of all that we call the *self*, if these had not been brought to language and articulated by literature? Thus what seems most contrary to subjectivity [that "alien" object: the text] . . . is the very *medium* within which we can understand ourselves.¹³⁶

The hermeneutics of suspicion can now be redefined in terms of the dialectic of disappropriation and appropriation which is implied in the experience of the text. The suspension of subjectivity, what Ricoeur has also described as the disappropriation of the self, is a moment of distance which creates the possibility of critique. The reader of a text is given "new capacities for knowing himself":¹³⁷

hence understanding is as much disappropriation as appropriation. A critique of the illusions of the subject, in a Marxist or Freudian manner, therefore can and must be incorporated into self-understanding. The consequence for hermeneutics is important: we can no longer oppose hermeneutics and the critique of ideology. The critique of

¹³²HHS, p. 144.

¹³³Actually, he translates *Darstellung* as "presentation". For the sake of consistency, we adhere to the translation in *TM*.

¹³⁴HHS, pp. 183, 186-7.

¹³⁵HHS, p. 187. See also, pp. 179-80.

¹³⁶HHS, p. 143.

¹³⁷HHS, p. 192.

ideology is the necessary detour which self-understanding must take, if the latter is to be formed by the matter of the text and not by the prejudices of the reader.¹³⁸

As the "paradigm of distancing", the text reveals most clearly the path which a self-reflective philosophy must take.¹³⁹

Distancing creates the space for explanatory methods which mediate the process of understanding - both textual understanding and, by implication, self-understanding. The emphasis on method marks the difference between Gadamer and Ricoeur. As we have seen, Gadamer is more concerned with the understanding which *precedes* method, whereas Ricoeur wants to interrogate that pre-understanding *by means of* method. Gadamer subordinates method to understanding, whereas Ricoeur places the two in dialectic.

For Ricoeur, the distancing implied in the principle of effective history, in the fusion of horizons, and in dialogue, is the point at which method gains a foothold. It is precisely because the text presents us with a world which is *not* our own, a world which invites us to broaden our horizon by engaging in dialogue, that we can subject it to explanatory procedures which help - and sometimes force - it to yield up its meaning. But we cannot do this from a position of confident self-possession. The world of the text challenges us even as we challenge it. Different explanatory procedures may yield different meanings, but the text cannot mean just what we want it to mean. It has its own being, its own claim to truth, and it demands our respect.¹⁴⁰

This naturally brings us to the question of accuracy in interpretation. It should by now be obvious that, for Ricoeur, interpretive methods do not produce certainty. The opaqueness of the text is the natural counterpart of the self's lack of transparency. This, of course, is the guiding principle of hermeneutic phenomenology: self-understanding through an understanding of the self's products. Following E.D. Hirsch, Ricoeur describes textual interpretation in terms of a "guess", which is then validated or invalidated by a methodical procedure: "there are no rules for making good guesses. But

¹³⁸HHS, p. 144.

¹³⁹HHS, pp. 144, 183, 190-93.

¹⁴⁰HHS, pp. 61-2, 192-3.

there are methods for validating guesses".¹⁴¹ This implies that textual interpretation is "closer to a logic of probability than to a logic of empirical verification".¹⁴² This is the limit of understanding, and self-understanding, in the human sciences.

We have devoted considerable space to Ricoeur's theory of the text, precisely because it occupies such a central position in his work as a whole. A striking example of this is his attempt to apply the model of the text to the intractable subject-matter of the human sciences (as it is defined by Max Weber): "meaningfully oriented behaviour". As we have seen, this problematic of the human sciences - how to understand human action - is part of the general problematic of hermeneutics. We close this chapter with a brief examination of Ricoeur's work in this area, with a view to its possible implications for the theory of ideology.¹⁴³

Ricoeur argues that "[i]n the same way that interlocution is overcome in writing, interaction is overcome in numerous situations in which we treat action as a fixed text".¹⁴⁴ By treating action as a text, it might be possible to subject it to the same sort of interpretive procedures which are applied to literary works. In this way, sociological interpretation could be *rigorous* while still doing justice to the *meaningful* character of action.¹⁴⁵

Ricoeur attempts to show how meaningful action shares those features of discourse which attend its fixture in writing. He points out that action is embodied meaning, just as the text is inscribed meaning; that the consequences of an action escape the actor's intentions, just as the text escapes its author's intentions; that the significance of an action goes beyond its circumstances of occurrence, just as the text loses its ostensive reference and projects its own world; and finally, that an action is not restricted in meaning to its contemporary audience, but addresses itself to an indefinite number of people throughout history, just as the text is addressed to anyone who can read.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹HHS, p. 211.

¹⁴²HHS, p. 212.

¹⁴³HHS, p. 203.

¹⁴⁴HHS, p. 203.

¹⁴⁵HHS, p. 203.

¹⁴⁶HHS, pp. 203-9.

On the basis of this comparison, Ricoeur proposes to treat action as a text, with all of the implications which such a manoeuvre would involve. Action would be open to a multiplicity of interpretations and would call for explanatory methods analogous to those used in the literary sphere. In particular, he argues, the methods of analysis evolved by structuralism could be fruitfully applied in the human sciences. Since all social activity is meaningful, it could be treated as a "semiological system" and analysed in terms of signs, codes, and messages: "a structural model of explanation can be generalised as far as all social phenomena which may be said to have a semiological character".¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, Ricoeur recognises that such an analysis would not be an imposition, since the "symbolic function" is at the very heart of social life:

Inasmuch as the semiological model holds, the semiotic or symbolic function, i.e., the function of substituting signs for things and of representing things by the means of signs, appears to be more than a mere effect in social life. It is its very foundation. We should have to say, according to this generalised function of the semiotic, not only that the symbolic function is social, but that social reality is fundamentally symbolic.¹⁴⁸

However, Ricoeur does not develop the consequences of this insight. For him, the main advantage of structural analysis is that it might provide a "depth semantics" of social action, a suspension of the "surface semantics" which conceals the "existential perplexities, human predicaments and deep-rooted conflicts"¹⁴⁹ to cope with which the various social structures have evolved. Structuralism remains an explanatory moment which must give way to a depth understanding. At this point, explanation re-enters the hermeneutic circle, and that mutual implication of observer and observed which we have seen is at the basis of all historical understanding.¹⁵⁰

Summary

We have seen how the theory of hermeneutics, which has its roots in classical Greece, receives its modern impetus from a debate concerning biblical interpretation. This

¹⁴⁷HHS, p. 219.

¹⁴⁸HHS, p. 219.

¹⁴⁹HHS, p. 220.

¹⁵⁰HHS, pp. 209-21.

particular "conflict of interpretations" epitomises a general trend which culminates in the outlook of the Enlightenment: a reaction against "prejudice" and a concern with "scientific" objectivity. In consequence, hermeneutics becomes preoccupied with the search for a method which would ensure objectivity in textual interpretation.

The movement from a "regional" to a "general" hermeneutics is begun by Schleiermacher, who is the first to conceive of a general theory of interpretation. He also thematises the circular character of understanding, the mutual implication of "whole" and "parts" which is such an ineradicable feature of our experience. Dilthey sees in hermeneutics the possibility of providing a scientific basis for the *Geisteswissenschaften*; one which would do justice to the historicity of understanding and yet compete with the natural sciences. Husserl inverts this order of priority by showing how science is dependent on a life-world which precedes it, and provides its guiding interests. Yet he, like Schleiermacher and Dilthey, fails to escape the preoccupation with finding a scientific foundation for thought.

With Heidegger, hermeneutics is imported into the mainstream philosophical tradition. He radicalises those features of understanding which have troubled the human sciences and produces an ontology of finitude which undercuts any question of scientific objectivity. He distinguishes two senses of interpretation, one of which is inseparable from understanding and properly constitutive of human nature, the other being a derivative form which attempts to explicate the former and which produces methodologies. Corresponding to each mode of interpretation is an appropriate form of language: a primordial and pre-reflective language which is co-extensive with understanding Being, and a derivative form which is less ontologically transparent and which can be constituted as an object by linguistic science. Although Heidegger is aware of the possibility of *misinterpretation*, he does not tackle this problem directly, being more concerned with the existential understanding which precedes it.

Gadamer attempts to thematise this phenomenon of pre-understanding which underlies the production of methodologies. He shows how historical understanding is akin to participation in a game: in each case, subjectivity is subordinated to an order which

encompasses it. For Gadamer, historicity and prejudice are not alienating factors, but rather preconditions of understanding and self-understanding. Tradition is a milieu in which we interpret our own lives, and it provides the only means of arbitrating between "true" and "false" interpretations. Critique is a moment within tradition itself; it proceeds via the *appropriation* of prejudice in a constant struggle against "opinion". In this way, understanding is seen to be an expanding horizon or an ongoing dialogue. Indeed, the whole process is immersed in *language*, which is primarily a mode of communication and only secondarily a technical object.

Ricoeur adheres to the ontology of finitude which he discovers in Heidegger and Gadamer, but he proposes a longer route to self-understanding. Understanding and interpretation retain their ontological character, but they are also informed by the discoveries of the human sciences. The latter, in turn, must acknowledge their historical situatedness. The possibility of false consciousness calls for explanatory methods which mediate a depth interpretation. Language, the very medium of self-understanding, must itself be submitted to such procedures. The polysemy at the heart of language provides the possibility of both distortion and creativity. Belongingness and distancing are therefore complementary moments within tradition and language alike. The text provides a pre-eminent example of this fact, because it both mediates and challenges self-understanding. Indeed, Ricoeur attempts to take it as a model for the "meaningful action" studied by the human sciences. Action, like the text, can be submitted to a "semiotic" analysis, but this remains a limited procedure within the ongoing task of a reflective philosophy.

We turn, then, to semiotics - the science of signs. The search for a general science of signs has a long history in western philosophy, a study of which reveals numerous highpoints, often separated by centuries of relative inertia.¹ We do not propose to investigate all of those figures who have, in one way or another, advanced the cause of

¹ See Umberto Eco, 'Looking for a Logic of Culture' in *The Open Work: A Survey of Semiotics*, ed. by T.A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1975), p. 9; John Deely, *Introducing Semiotics: Its History and Doctrines* (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1982), Part I, 3PL, chap. 1.

such a science. Instead, we shall briefly focus on two comparatively recent figures, before turning to an attempt by a contemporary thinker to formulate a general theory of semiotics.

CHAPTER THREE

Semiotics and the Study of Culture

As we saw in Chapter Two, the intellectual legacy of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) has been considerable. His linguistic model has been adopted by disciplines as

Introduction ... and psychoanalysis, giving birth to a whole host of

Towards the end of Chapter Two, we noted Ricoeur's tentative recognition that the "semiotic or symbolic function" is the "very foundation" of social life. On the basis of this he advocated a "semiological" approach to the study of social phenomena, although such a task remained beyond the scope of his paper. In any case, a semiological approach would remain one element within a more encompassing reflective philosophy, a moment of structural explanation - and therefore distancing - within the "belongingness" implied in hermeneutic understanding.

The purpose of our present chapter is to do what Ricoeur *didn't*, that is, to develop the implications of a semiotic approach to social life. By so doing, we should be able to assess the semiotic contribution to a theory of ideology, a task which will be postponed until Chapter Four. However, of equal importance to this task, and indeed implied in it, is the evaluation of Ricoeur's definition of semiotics. Is semiotics no more than a structural layby on the hermeneutic detour, an explanatory waystation on the long route to ontology? Or is it something more, something which may even *invert* this putative relation? Our present concern is to lay the foundation for possible answers to these questions.

We turn, then, to semiotics - the science of signs. The search for a general science of signs has a long history in western philosophy, a study of which reveals numerous highpoints, often separated by centuries of relative inertia.¹ We do not propose to investigate all of those figures who have, in one way or another, advanced the cause of important consequences follow from this. First, the linguistic sign becomes paradigmatic

¹See Umberto Eco, 'Looking for a Logic of Culture' in *The Tell-Tale Sign: A Survey of Semiotics*, ed. by T.A. Sebeok (Lisse: The Peter De Ridder Press, 1975), p. 9; John Deely, *Introducing Semiotic: Its History and Doctrine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), Part I; SPL, chpt. 1.

such a science. Instead, we shall briefly focus on two comparatively recent figures, before turning to an attempt by a contemporary thinker to formulate a general theory of semiotics.

Saussure and Semiology

As we saw in Chapter Two, the intellectual legacy of **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857-1913) has been considerable. His linguistic model has been adopted by disciplines as diverse as Marxism, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, giving birth to a whole host of “structural sciences”. While this is understandable, given that Saussure devoted most of his attention to the structural analysis of *la langue*,² it is sometimes forgotten that he foresaw a more general science of signs of which linguistics would form only a part, albeit an important one. This science, which he baptised in advance as “semiology”, would discover the laws governing all social sign processes, laws which would be applicable to linguistics rather than *vice versa*.

One can conceive therefore a science which studies the life of signs at the heart of social life; . . . we shall call it *semiology* (from the Greek *semeion*, ‘sign’). It would teach us what signs consist of and what laws govern them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say what form it will take; but it has a right to existence, its place is marked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of this general study. The laws that semiology will discover will be applicable to linguistics, which will thus find itself assigned to a well-defined area within the totality of human phenomena.³

Although Saussure situated linguistics within a broader study of signifying processes, it is no less true that he made it “*le patron général de toute sémiologie*”. The reason for this is not difficult to find, and stems from the essentially “arbitrary” and “conventional” nature of the sign, as he conceived it. The virtue of semiology, for Saussure, would be its capacity to lay bare the conventions underlying the correlation of signifiers to signifieds, thereby revealing hitherto unsuspected features of social life; and the signifying system which demonstrates *par excellence* the sign’s arbitrary and conventional character is none other than the object of linguistics: language. Three important consequences follow from this. First, the linguistic sign becomes paradigmatic

²See *SPL*, p. 33.

³Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. Quoted in Deely, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

for signs in general. Second, the non-linguistic signifying processes are limited to very formalised, conventional systems *within* society (the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rituals, forms of etiquette, military signals, etc.) Third, semiology is reduced to "a part of social psychology".⁴

Hence, for an understanding of semiology as it subsequently emerged and developed, it is necessary to turn to Saussure's analysis of the linguistic sign. We may recall the general features of this analysis as outlined in the preceding chapter.

In order to isolate an object for linguistics, Saussure distinguished the abstract, atemporal system of *langue* from the particular instances of *parole* for which it provides the conditions of possibility. *Langue* is a "methodological fiction", allowing the linguist to study structural relationships apart from the contingencies of historical change, reference, truth conditions, and so on. It is a system correlating signifiers to signifieds, an expression plane to a content plane, in a way that is almost always arbitrary and conventional. As such, the only way to distinguish one signifier from another or one signified from another is by means of differences: signs are oppositional in nature. To state it otherwise: both expression plane and content plane form continua, each of which is divided into discrete units by language. For example, "stream" is a signifier which is identified by its opposition to "dream", "steam", "steal", and in fact every other signifier in the system. Similarly, the signified with which "stream" is usually correlated - the concept of a body of water flowing in a bed - is identified by its opposition to other signifieds, an opposition based on factors such as size, swiftness of flow, etc. Since different languages divide the expression and content continua in different ways, thereby revealing the arbitrary nature of such divisions, linguistics becomes the investigation of conventions governing sign processes, and therefore of the unarticulated structures which govern a society's conceptual life.⁵ As Culler puts it:

It is one of the virtues of Saussure's theory of language to have placed social conventions and social facts at the centre of linguistic investigation by stressing the problem of the sign. What are the signs of this linguistic system? On what does their identity as signs depend? Asking these simple questions, demonstrating that nothing can be taken for granted as a unit of language, Saussure continually

⁴Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (London: Fontana, 1976), pp. 19-23, 51-2, 91-3; Deely, *Basics of Semiotics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 114-15; TS, pp. 14-15.

⁵Culler, *op. cit.*, chpt. 2.

Therefore, stressed the importance of adopting the right methodological perspective and seeing language as a system of socially determined values, not as a collection of substantially defined elements.⁶

Now, when various theorists from diverse disciplines began to define their methods as “semiological”, it was to Saussure’s linguistics that they were indebted, and not the non-existent science of signs which he had prophesied. This is not to devalue such methods, which have provided interesting analyses of phenomena ranging from kinship relations and culinary conventions to clothing fashions and the unconscious. Problems arise when this well-defined method overreaches itself, disregarding Saussure’s cautionary remark concerning “semiology” that “one cannot say what form it will take”.⁷ To recall Ricoeur’s criticism: “the passage from a structural science to a structuralist philosophy seems to me to be not very satisfying and not even very coherent”.⁸

Ricoeur’s criticism becomes even more significant, however, when seen in the light of the censure which “semiology” has unwittingly invoked from another quarter: semiotics. The latter comprises a substantial body of theorists which traces its intellectual pedigree through an entirely different lineage to that of structural linguistics. Semiotics also takes the sign as its point of departure, but its understanding of this entity owes more to C.S. Peirce than it does to Saussure. While recognising the important contributions of semiology, it denounces those proponents of the latter who would make of it the *generic* science of signs. As Deely writes:

Starting from Saussure’s observation that human language provides the most important and best known area of signification, certain authors manage to turn this observation into the far different claim that only a linguistic model of semiosis is viable for the understanding of any human experience . . .⁹

Deely points out that this “pars pro toto fallacy” is promoted as much from outside semiology as from within, and he names Ricoeur as one of those who “mistook some part of semiosis for the whole of semiotics”¹⁰ and who is partly responsible for “the persistent confusion . . . of *semiotics* with *structuralism*”.¹¹

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

⁷See Deely, *Basics*, p. 4.

⁸*COI*, p. 45.

⁹*Introducing Semiotic*, p. 195.

¹⁰*Basics*, p. 75.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 16. See also, pp. 1-8, 75-6; *Introducing Semiotic*, p. 195-7.

Therefore, although Ricoeur's criticism of structuralism is legitimate, it acquires a certain irony in view of his tendency, as we have noted, to conflate structuralism, semiology, and semiotics - the last named actually being a distinct science of signs with a very different basis to the other two. However, the full significance of this confusion, as far as our own thesis is concerned, will emerge only in the next chapter. Before that, we must undertake a more detailed investigation of semiotics, and we may begin by turning to Peirce.

Peirce and Semiotics

What is it that makes **Charles Sanders Peirce** (1839-1914), in Deely's words, "the true contemporary founder of a systematic foundational doctrine of signs . . ."?¹² The answer lies in his essentially *dynamic* conception of the sign, which latter he defines, in contrast to Saussure, in terms of a relation between *three* entities. Indeed, for Peirce the subject matter of "semiotic" - a term he borrows from Locke¹³ - is not the sign, but the *activity* of signs: "semiosis".

By semiosis I mean an action, an influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in anyway resolvable into actions between pairs¹⁴

This triadic relation is important because it does not reduce semiosis to intentional sign production.¹⁵

Peirce sees well enough that *anything can become a sign of anything else*, on the basis of the mediating function provided by an interpretant. The interpretant is the "ground" of the signifying relation, that which forms the basis of this relation in a particular case. Hence: "A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity"¹⁶ And again:

¹²Introducing Semiotic, p. 7.

¹³Basics, pp. 113-14.

¹⁴C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*. Quoted in TS, p. 15.

¹⁵TS, pp. 15-16; Basics, pp. 115-17.

¹⁶Peirce, *Ibid.* Quoted in John J. Fitzgerald, *Peirce's Theory of Signs as Foundation for Pragmatism*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 42.

A sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen¹⁷

For example, a person sees a dog standing guard on its owner's doorstep. The dog may become for her a *sign* of fidelity. The dog is the sign and fidelity is the object, but the relation can only occur because the sight of the dog produces in our observer the "idea" of fidelity, the latter becoming the interpretant of the sign. If the dog comes bounding down the drive, growling and baring its teeth, with ears flat and pointing back, it will most likely become a sign of danger, that is, it will come to stand to her in a different "respect or capacity". Furthermore, both "fidelity" and "danger" can, in turn, become signs of something else, on the basis of other interpretants, which can also become signs, and so on *ad infinitum*. This is what Peirce describes as "unlimited semiosis", the process whereby one sign refers to another, which refers to another, and so on in an unending chain of signification.¹⁸

Therefore, although both Saussure and Peirce conceive of the sign in relational terms, and although neither seeks the meaning of signs in some extra-linguistic reality, the similarities remain superficial. Semiosis is not a static system of dyadic relations, as is *la langue*. Neither is it distinguished from actual instances of signification. It isn't even restricted to intentionally produced linguistic or non-linguistic signs. It is, in fact, the signifying activity which is co-extensive with cognitive life. It is the relational process in which human beings are immersed at every moment of their existence: seeing things in terms of other things. Peirce's triadic conception of the sign captures this process perfectly. A sign is always referring to a potentially indefinite chain of other signs. The correlational definition of the sign does not describe its essence, which is actually of an *inferential* nature, as Eco points out: "the interpretants . . . can be complex discourses which not only translate but even *inferentially* develop all the logical possibilities suggested by the sign".¹⁹ Therefore, the sign involves *interpretation*: "the semiotic process of interpretation is present at the very core of the concept of the sign".²⁰ It is this concept of the sign which is at the basis of the modern development of semiotics.

¹⁷Peirce, *Ibid.* Quoted in Fitzgerald, *ibid.*

¹⁸TS, pp. 68-72.

¹⁹TS, p. 70.

²⁰SPL, p. 1.

Before we turn to the main subject of this chapter - the attempt to formulate a general theory of semiotics - we are obliged to point out that there are differences of opinion concerning the form which such a theory should take. We have deliberately avoided this subject in our foregoing discussion of semiotics and semiology, precisely because it remains secondary to the real distinctions between these two areas. Therefore, it also remains secondary to our main purpose in drawing attention to this distinction, which is to assess the contribution of semiotics to a theory of ideology. However, with this purpose still in mind, it may actually be helpful to point out one of the abovementioned "differences of opinion", as a means to situating our proposed discussion.

We have chosen the work of Umberto Eco as the focus for our study of semiotics. Eco has developed a sophisticated semiotic framework within which it is possible to formulate a semiotic definition of ideology. John Deely, on the other hand, has a somewhat broader conception of the scope of semiotics, and he expresses some reservations about the various boundaries and limitations which Eco imposes on his own project. In his review of *A Theory of Semiotics*, Deely claims that Eco's work should more accurately be classed as "a special treatise in anthroposemiotics",²¹ a classification which is intended to distinguish it from the more wide-ranging activity in which Deely is involved.²² We accept this classification: as we shall see, Eco is principally concerned with signs as culturally-coded units. Deely is in no doubt about the merits of Eco's project on this score: "The theory of codes at the heart of Eco's analysis is a marvellously powerful and supple tool for analyzing the more typically cultural elements at work in human experience . . ."²³ For our present purposes, then, Eco's framework would seem to be the most suitable: ideology is, after all, a *cultural* phenomenon. Deely confirms us in our choice, pointing out that it is "in explaining the structures of rhetorical and ideological discourse . . . that the power of the theory of codes fully reveals itself".²⁴ We shall return to Deely in the next chapter, but first we must study Eco's project of a general semiotics.

²¹Deely, 'The Doctrine of Signs: Taking Form at Last: À propos of *A Theory of Semiotics* by Umberto Eco' in *Semiotica* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 18:2, p. 178.

²²See Deely, *Basics*.

²³'The Doctrine of Signs', p. 181.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 183.

Towards a General Theory

We begin with Eco's preliminary distinction between "specific" and "general" semiotics: specific semiotics (for example, medical semiotics, which is concerned with symptoms as "signs" of particular illnesses) have existed for centuries; a general semiotics, on the other hand, does not yet exist. Eco not only proposes that a general theory *should exist*, he also attempts to outline its structure.²⁵

For our present purposes, the key terms of a general semiotics are those of *sign*, *code*, *signification* and *communication*. The understanding of one term requires an understanding of the others. Let us begin with a preliminary definition of "sign". According to the classical tradition, a *sign* is something which *stands for* something else (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*).²⁶ We shall call that which "stands for" the *sign-vehicle*, and that for which it stands the *content* or *meaning*. Properly speaking, the sign is neither one nor the other, but the "standing for" relation itself; it is a dynamic entity, a function, the two functives of which are the sign-vehicle and the content. The functives of a sign function²⁷ are correlated by a *code* and any particular correlation is an instance of *signification*. *Communication* is the passage of information on the basis of the possibilities provided by signification. In theory, signification and communication can be considered separately; in practice they are always intertwined.²⁸

We are now in a position to define Eco's aim. It is

to explore the theoretical possibility and the social function of a unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication. Such an approach should take the form of a *general semiotic theory*, able to explain every case of sign-function in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more codes.²⁹

Such a task faces many problems - indeed, it has its critics³⁰ - and these considerations move Eco to formulate various boundaries of research for a general theory. The three primary boundaries are "political", "natural", and "epistemological". We are primarily

²⁵TS, pp. 9-16; SPL, pp. 5-6, 8.

²⁶SPL, p. 14.

²⁷The terms "sign" and "sign function" will be used interchangeably.

²⁸TS, pp. 8-9.

²⁹TS, p. 3.

³⁰See, for example, D.S. Clarke, *Principles of Semiotic* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 48-9. See SPL, pp. 8ff.

interested in the natural and epistemological boundaries. The political boundaries concern the status of the proposed general semiotics as an intellectual discipline, and its relationship to the various disciplines which compose its "field".³¹ These boundaries have little relevance for our present purposes, although we shall return to them in the next chapter.

The natural boundaries delimit an area beyond which semiotics cannot go. Such boundaries are vague and the area between semiotic and non-semiotic phenomena is a shadowy one. In the first place, the very definition of a general semiotics will provide a basis for the inclusion or exclusion of various phenomena. Since Eco has defined the object of a general semiotics as the sign, and since a sign is defined as anything which can be taken as standing for something else, then natural events (including symptoms) and non-intentional behaviour must be regarded as semiotic phenomena, i.e. as signs, insofar as both participate in this standing-for relation. Thus, smoke can be a sign of fire, spots a sign of measles, and my trembling a sign of fear. The necessary condition for such phenomena to become signs is that they *be seen* to stand for something else on the basis of a pre-established cultural rule or code.³²

The natural boundaries have both a lower and an upper threshold. We shall consider the lower threshold first. Signals (including stimuli, genetic information, and other physiological activities) are not signs. Pavlov's dogs salivated when they heard the ringing of a bell - the latter acted as a stimulus, not as a sign. However, signals can become signs for someone else, as when the psychologist regards the bell as a sign of salivation by a dog, or salivation by the dog as a sign that a bell has been rung.³³

Of greater interest for our purposes is the upper threshold. At this threshold Eco situates the three primary cultural phenomena of production and employment of objects, kinship relations, and the economic exchange of goods. In each case, something is either physically produced and employed or exchanged. These phenomena, *qua* physical, do not fall within the sphere of semiotics. But can any cultural phenomenon be studied from a purely physical perspective?³⁴

³¹TS, pp. 5-6, 9-14.

³²TS, pp. 16-19.

³³TS, pp. 19-21.

³⁴TS, pp. 21-2.

If we consider the production and employment of goods, we shall see that even the most elementary example of such activity is permeated by the semiotic. If - to take Eco's example - an australopithecine uses a stone to split the skull of a baboon, and then on a later occasion recognises that stone (or any stone) as a token of that function of "weapon", then the stone becomes the sign-vehicle of that function, whether our irate friend chooses to give it a name or not. It is enough that the object becomes a sign of its own function and, as Barthes has said, culture exists once this has occurred.³⁵

The semiotic nature of culture becomes more evident in the example of kinship relations. Even in so-called primitive societies, where marriage is regarded as the exchange of a woman between two parties, the woman is never merely a physical body in the exchange. If the latter were the case then every man would enter into relations with every woman. Rather, the woman has symbolic value which places her in opposition to other women within a system.³⁶ Similarly, in the economic exchange of goods, commodities are never (merely) exchanged as physical goods but rather as significant objects which obtain their value both by being opposed to other goods in an oppositional system, and by being related to other goods in other systems. Thus, commodities are signs.³⁷

We may say, therefore, that culture and language (in this case conceived as a system of signs) are co-extensive. As we saw in Chapter Two, this is the basic assumption of philosophical hermeneutics. Even thought is linguistic, as Peirce recognised when he said that ideas are signs.³⁸ We can now state one of the central hypotheses of Eco's work: "the whole of culture *should* be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on signification systems".³⁹ That is, culture both can and should be studied as a semiotic phenomenon.⁴⁰

Finally, the epistemological boundaries concern the nature of semiotics as a discipline. As a human science, semiotics cannot avoid exerting an influence on its subject matter. As such it is ruled by a sort of indeterminacy principle:

³⁵TS, pp. 22-4.

³⁶TS, p. 26.

³⁷TS, pp. 24-6.

³⁸TS, p. 24.

³⁹TS, p. 22.

⁴⁰TS, pp. 21-2, 26-8.

in so far as signifying and communicating are social functions that determine both social organization and social evolution, to 'speak' about 'speaking', to signify signification or to communicate about communication cannot but influence the universe of speaking, signifying and communicating.⁴¹

Therefore, semiotics must be aware of what Eco describes as its "ideological" character; it must recognise that all knowledge is motivated, is a means to an end, and that in its description of the world it cannot but alter the nature of that world, thereby continually altering the nature of its own object.⁴²

Code and Sign

We have already seen that Eco makes an essential distinction between signification and communication. Signification is always carried out on the basis of a code, while communication concerns actual instances of sign production which rely on the possibilities provided by the code. Eco consequently divides his labour between a semiotics of signification, which entails a theory of codes, and a semiotics of communication, which entails a theory of sign production.⁴³ In this chapter we shall limit ourselves to the theory of codes. The theory of sign production concerns us only insofar as ideology is a matter of communication, and we have already postponed treatment of this until the Chapter Four.

Various equivocal senses are generally attributed to the term "code".⁴⁴ Eco distinguishes between codes as systems (s-codes) and codes proper, the latter correlating the elements of one s-code with those of another (or several others).⁴⁵ The typed words on this page combine the elements of one s-code (the semantic system) with those of another (the syntactic system). If these pages were being read aloud at a lecture then we could add a further s-code (the phonological system). Thus, codes allow communication by combining the elements of one s-code with those of another (or others).

In a real-life communication process, the situation is further complicated by the fact that communication takes place on many levels. A lecturer speaking to her audience

⁴¹TS, p. 29.

⁴²TS, p. 29.

⁴³TS, p. 4.

⁴⁴See the "Watergate Model", TS, pp. 32ff. See also, SPL, pp. 164ff.

⁴⁵TS, p. 38.

communicates not only verbally but also by means of her vocal intonations, facial expressions, bodily position and gestures, her clothing, and so on.⁴⁶ According to various recent semiotic studies⁴⁷, each of these forms of communication is governed by a code (which, as we have seen, can be further divided into s-codes).

We have already described a sign-function as the standing-for relation between two elements or functives. We shall further elaborate upon this by defining the funtive which "stands for" as the *expression unit* and that "for which it stands" as the *content unit*. As Saussure pointed out, any process of signification involves an expression plane (a syntactic system) and a content plane (a semantic system), each of which is an s-code. Several expression units may be correlated with one content unit (synonymy); or one expression unit may be correlated with several content units (equivocation, univocity, or analogy). Each of these possibilities is allowed by the structure of the code.⁴⁸

We have seen that a code involves a combination of s-codes. We have also seen that in any given act of communication there may be several codes at work: a verbal code such as that of the English language, a code governing gestures, a code governing bodily position in public space, and so on. However, even within these various codes there may be different levels of communication, based on alternative significations. For example, the lecturer's position on a platform facing her audience may signify "teacher" and, hence, "authority". However, it may also signify "corrupt system which must be overthrown" or even "role model which must be emulated". The latter significations are secondary or *connotative* and they rely on the primary or *denotative* significations. Thus we may speak of denotative and connotative codes or, better, *subcodes*.⁴⁹ Just what it is that a sign signifies, just what is communicated in any given situation, depends on the interpreters' codes (or subcodes).

Therefore, signification and communication are rightly regarded as complicated processes. Any given signification and/or communication process depends on a

⁴⁶See Eco, 'Social Life as a Sign System' in *Structuralism: an Introduction - Wolfson College Lectures 1972*, ed. by D. Robey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 57-9.

⁴⁷TS, pp. 9-14.

⁴⁸TS, pp. 8-9, 48; SPL, pp. 171-2.

⁴⁹TS, pp. 55-7. The use of denotation and connotation in a semiotic context must be distinguished from their use in the context of classical logic. In the latter, for example, "woman" denotes all existing women, while it connotes "adult female human being". In semiotics, "woman" denotes "adult female human being" and connotes a whole variety of things (protectiveness, jealousy, etc.) depending on the interpreter.

multiplicity of codes. The problem facing a general semiotic theory is to account for this heterogeneity in terms of a single theoretical framework. In order to see how it attempts this we shall examine the semiotic approach to some problems in the philosophy of language.

Perhaps the central problem for a philosophy of language is that of *meaning*: how does a word or a sentence *mean*? It is not necessary for us to examine the various theories and debates which this problem has aroused in philosophy; however, two terms are particularly relevant to us: *reference* and *extension*. According to the analytic tradition, the referent of a term is its denotation,⁵⁰ that to which it refers. Extension is a property of the sentence or proposition; the latter have extension if there is a state of the world corresponding to what they express. Therefore, *truth* is a correspondence between language (and thought) and world. Eco describes these positions as the “referential fallacy” and the “extensional fallacy”.⁵¹

There are many problems with reference and extension as described above. Firstly, reference does not explain how syncategorematic terms (such as “if”, “then”, “because”, etc.) acquire meaning: to what do such terms refer? Secondly, there are nouns in our language which do not appear to have any referent (or for which the referent would appear to be problematical): “unicorn” is an old example, as is Russell’s “Golden Mountain”. We might add “yeti” or “ghost” or “soul”. Most people would agree that such terms have meaning, but many would be doubtful about their reference. A third problem arises if we extend our inquiry from linguistic meaning to other sorts of meaning. It seems evident that bodily gestures and facial expressions have meaning, but what is their reference? Furthermore, what is the reference of a Picasso, a Monet, Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, or a poem by Beckett? Semiotics would be saying little if it simply pointed out these problems. What is novel is its proposed solution to them.

In order to understand this solution we must slightly modify our definition of the sign. A sign is not (or not simply) something standing for something else, but more

⁵⁰See preceding footnote.

⁵¹TS, pp. 58ff. Robin Ridless mistakenly interprets Eco on the issue of reference. Cf. *Ridless, Ideology and Art: Theories of Mass Culture from Walter Benjamin to Umberto Eco* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), pp. 148, 151.

accurately, anything *which is taken* to stand for something else.⁵² Signs are only signs if that for which they stand is in some sense absent; the code is a correlation of present entities (sign-vehicles) with absent ones (content units). This is why Eco defines semiotics as “a theory of the lie”,⁵³ because the “gap” between sign-vehicle and content means that signs can be used in order to lie. They can also be used to utter meaningless or nonsensical statements; but the nonsensical character of the utterance does not derive from a lack of correspondence with an external state of affairs; it derives from the fact that a contradiction exists in the code.⁵⁴

Meaningfulness, meaninglessness, truth and falsity are properties of the code. Truth is that which has been encoded. For thousands of years it was “true” that the sun moved around the earth. However, with a growth in knowledge (that is, a growth in the structure of the code), the sun’s revolving around the earth was seen to contradict other facts which had come to belong to the code. Therefore, the sign-vehicle “earth” (using the modern colloquial English) could no longer denote “centre of the world” or connote “apex of creation”.

This is not to deny that words can be used to refer to states of the world.⁵⁵ It is not to deny that the present scientific description of the universe is more accurate than preceding descriptions. Neither does it affirm it. It is merely to say that the *meaningfulness* of such a description does not derive from a reference to “real” things in the world but from the various interrelationships within the code. As Peirce clearly demonstrated, if we are asked to describe a so-called “real” object, we can only use words (or signs of some kind) to do so. The “object” is a sign and it is described by means of signs.⁵⁶

What, then, are the nature and status of the sign and the code? From what has been said, signs must be seen as *cultural units*, and their combination is carried out, not according to the laws of traditional logic,⁵⁷ but according to cultural laws. The sum of the cultural laws of a given culture is the code. The code is a set of (usually implicit)

⁵²We have already hinted at this above when we said that in order for something to become a sign it must *be seen* to stand for something else.

⁵³TS, pp. 6-7, 58-9.

⁵⁴TS, p. 64.

⁵⁵How they do so is a separate problem and not our concern here.

⁵⁶TS, pp. 61, 65.

⁵⁷TS, p. 300 n 4.

instructions allowing the correlation of certain sign-vehicles with certain content units, the latter being (connotative and denotative) cultural units. This explains how a particular culture could assign the cultural units "centre of the world", "apex of creation", etc., to the sign-vehicle "earth". Similarly, the Loch Ness Monster is a cultural unit and we can make meaningful statements about it; whether there is something green and scaly at the bottom of Loch Ness is not the point (as far as semiotics is concerned): the monster exists as a cultural unit. Obviously, the same goes for the "Yeti", for "ghosts", and even for the "soul", the "Milky Way", and so on. We have never seen the Milky Way, but it belongs to our code, along with all of the properties (cultural units) attributed to it. Moreover, as regards the Milky Way, the subcode of the layperson will differ from that of the physicist. Finally, we may extend the term "cultural unit" to cover all signs - gestures, paintings, etc.

Signs, then, are cultural units, and the code is a collection of cultural rules governing sign-functions (and communication processes). A general semiotics is the study of these rules. Thus, Eco writes: "*Semiotics is mainly concerned with signs as social forces.*"⁵⁸ That signs can be powerful social forces is made evident by the following example given by Eco:

It is only because one can understand them that signs and statements act as social forces. A logician, in connection with the necessity of verifying a statement in terms of truth or falsity, may say that the term /transubstantiation/ has no extension, that is, no referent, and therefore has no meaning. But, from a semiotic standpoint we are compelled to recognize that the enormous amount of *intensions* the term has possessed have made it the cause of theological battles, military conflicts, social changes, hope and death, salvation and fear.⁵⁹

The Cross, the "Stars and Stripes", a picture of Lenin, an excerpt from the *1812 Overture*, a photograph of a starving child, the word "peace" - all are examples of signs which act as strong social forces. But *all* signs are social forces, the words "Milky Way" as much as the air raid siren. Perhaps now we are in a better position to understand how it is that semiotics can study the whole of culture as a process of signification and communication.

⁵⁸TS, p. 65.

⁵⁹"Social Life as a Sign System", p. 69.

Now we come to two interrelated questions. Question One: If a code is a set of cultural rules on the basis of which units from an expression plane are correlated with units from a content plane, that is, sign-vehicles are correlated with content units, why does culture attribute certain content units to a particular sign-vehicle and not others? Question Two: Why does the code allow certain combinations of sign-vehicles (or cultural units) and not others? Stated otherwise: Why is it normal to say : "I am writing with this pen", but not "I am murdering this pen" (except in poetic contexts and meta-contexts such as the present one)?

In answering these questions, Eco combines the oppositional aspect of the sign with its inferential aspect, the respective insights of Saussure and Peirce. The answers take us to the very core of Eco's semiotic theory and reveal its essential flexibility.

A sign is a cultural unit to which we attribute other cultural units. The latter are also signs, to which we attribute further cultural units. Thus, signs are interpreted by means of other signs, the latter being interpreted by means of further signs, and so on. We have seen that Peirce referred to this activity of signs as "unlimited semiosis". The word (sign-vehicle) "red" is a cultural unit to which - if we are asked to interpret it - we attribute further cultural units: for example, "colour", or we might instead point to a red object. But "colour" and the red of an object are simply other cultural units which, as we have seen, can only be defined in terms of further cultural units.

Now, to claim that "colour" is a definition of "red" is very dissatisfying. Not only because "colour" must itself be defined, but because "blue", "green", "yellow", "turquoise", and "purple" are also defined as colours. However, from this emerges a second approach to the meaning of a sign-function: "red" obtains its meaning - at least partly - by being *opposed* to other colours in a system of oppositions. As we have seen, it is the assumption of structural linguistics that *all* meaning is structured as a system of positions and oppositions, each position being defined by its opposition to other positions.

It may be useful to consider an objection. A realist might object that even if the colours of the spectrum exist as oppositions, this does not eliminate the possibility that

their meaning comes from something outside the system. After all, hasn't science shown that the colours correspond to very exact wavelengths?

Now, the semiotician does not wish to deny the existence of an extra-semiotic reality. But she would claim that once we speak of *meaning* then we are in the semiotic realm; things only have meaning for us insofar as they obey semiotic laws, i.e., insofar as they are encoded. Reality, including thought, is semiotically structured. This is not a dualistic position; it does not assert the existence of a noumenon beyond language. It does not imply that there is no "objectivity"; merely that there are no extra-semiotic means of arriving at "objectivity". Reality is the code.

To return to the objection that colours correspond to particular, "objective" wavelengths. We may respond by pointing out that science has not found colours that correspond to wavelengths but has, rather, found wavelengths that correspond to colours, colours which were already culturally (semiotically) organised on the basis of oppositions. As Eco points out,⁶⁰ other cultures have divided the colour-continuum in different ways. Thus, for the portion of the continuum that we call "blue", the Russians have two cultural units; and the Hindus have a single cultural unit corresponding to the red-orange portion of the continuum. Similarly, the Eskimos have several cultural units corresponding to our single cultural unit, "snow". Eco describes this arbitrary nature of the division of the semantic field as follows:

The choice based on naive experience *was not arbitrary*, in the sense that the exigencies of biological survival probably forced that unit to be termed pertinent rather than another (just as the fact that the Eskimos divide the continuum of experience into four cultural units in place of the one which we call /snow/ is due to the fact that their vital relationship with snow imposes distinctions on them that we can disregard without suffering any notable damage). But it *was arbitrary* in the sense that another culture divided the same continuum in a different way, which means that the continuum is a content-stuff which can be cut into different formal systems.⁶¹

This paragraph seems to point to a *dialectic* of semiotic and extra-semiotic (in the form of "biological survival"), a dialectic which is at the very root of culture. As we noted above, Barthes points out that once culture exists, every object becomes a sign of itself.

⁶⁰TS, pp. 76-8.

⁶¹TS, p. 77.

Eco comments: "This is possible once culture exists. But culture exists only because this is possible."⁶² The chief characteristic of the dialectic is the impossibility of finding a first term.

To return, once again, to the question of the spectrum. On the basis of our description of reality as semiotically structured, we might reasonably inquire into the status of the "wavelength" and the theory which supports it. Is not this theory itself a code, a collection of cultural units? It already represents a structuring of experience; but what claim to "objectivity" does it have? The medieval cosmologists were able to elaborate a theory of the universe with the earth at its centre. It based its concepts and its laws on cultural beliefs (units) which pre-existed it. Science is a cultural activity which works with material that has already been semiotically structured.

Another example provided by Eco is that of the Medieval "*Mus*", which corresponds to our two cultural units: "mouse" and "rat". It seems that where we see two things the medievals saw only one; just as we may see varieties of rat (a single cultural unit) which, one day, will be considered as separate cultural units. Now, a zoologist might tell us that "mouse" and "rat" can be analysed in terms of different properties and functions. However, Eco advises that we should proceed with caution, bearing in mind Foucault's description of the "epistemes" of different epochs.⁶³ We need go no further with this question, since we are not here concerned with referents but with cultural units:

it should be enough to confirm that there exists in English a semantic field governing rodents, which is more analytic than its equivalent in Latin, and that therefore for the speaker of English there exist two cultural units where for the speaker of Latin there exists only one.⁶⁴

Another important consideration at this point is that of the nature of perception itself. When our medieval ancestors looked at mice and rats did they not actually *see* a single entity, just as we now *see* two? When the Hindu looks at (what we call) red and orange, does she not *see* one colour with different shades, just as an artist in our culture may *see* several colours where most of us see one?⁶⁵ It would seem that perception cannot be

⁶²TS, p. 24.

⁶³TS, p. 79.

⁶⁴TS, p. 79.

⁶⁵TS, pp. 78-9.

considered apart from language, i.e., that perception itself is semiotically structured. When considering the various levels of communication, we spoke of bodily position. Bodily position in relation to other people is studied by proxemics.⁶⁶ One person's position in relation to another can be taken to signify a particular content: "keep your distance", or "let's be friends", and so on. Such positions are cultural units which vary from culture to culture (from code to code). Our *perception* of spacial relations, then, would appear to be meaningfully structured from the very start. We cannot experience a "pure" perception, i.e., one which is unmediated by culture. A *gestalt* is not only a perceptual category, but a linguistic one also. *Perception is learned*; it is culturally acquired, and semiotics studies the rules which govern its functioning.

To return to our original questions. Question One: Why does a culture attribute some contents to a sign-vehicle and not others? Following Eco, we have examined two approaches to the sign-vehicle: one in terms of the chain of interpretation, the other in terms of oppositions. Now we shall attempt to combine them. The semantic space is divided into opposing positions on the basis of *pertinent traits*. Two things are never completely opposed; only a certain number of their traits are. Moreover, each pertinent trait belongs to an alternative system of oppositions. One semantic axis opposes "man" and "woman", but another opposes "man" and "boy", another "woman" and "girl". In each case alternative pertinent traits are considered. Why do particular traits become pertinent? At this point semiotics must recognise its lower threshold. As we have seen, the exigencies of biological survival would seem to have imposed on the Eskimos the necessity of recognising (and, therefore, opposing) a greater variety of pertinent traits of snow than has been the case in other cultures. These biological factors appear to be extra-semiotic. However, we should guard against the danger of taking them as some sort of "absolute" which ultimately *determines* the semiotic. Rather, we should posit a *dialectic* of semiotic and extra-semiotic.

The chain of interpretation proceeds according to pertinent traits. Let us postulate that in the Middle Ages there existed a semantic field governing rodents, having the pertinent traits a, b, c, d, e, f, and g. Within this field, *Mus* had traits a, b, c, d, differentiating it

⁶⁶See 'Social Life as a Sign System', p. 59.

from, say, squirrel (which had traits c, d, e, f) and beaver (which had traits a, b, e, f). A further segmentation of this semantic field led to a division of *Mus* into the semantic units of mouse and rat (the former having, let us say, traits a, b(i), c, d; and the latter, a, b(ii), c, d). Thus, we define "mouse" as the rodent having pertinent traits a, b(i), c, d; and "rat" as the rodent having pertinent traits a, b(ii), c, d. Furthermore, each of these traits, and "rodent" itself, will belong to other systems of oppositions according to other pertinent traits; and the chain of interpretation continues.

We may summarise by saying that cultural units are opposed on the basis of pertinent traits, i.e., *some* traits of a cultural unit are emphasised, and others de-emphasised, in order to oppose it to another cultural unit; *alternative* traits are emphasised and de-emphasised in order to oppose it to a further cultural unit; and so on. For example, certain biological traits are emphasised in the opposition of "man" and "woman"; whereas the trait "age" is made pertinent in the opposition of "man" and "boy". Accordingly, the definition of a cultural unit (i.e., its interpretation as a sign) proceeds according to pertinent traits.

We may now propose an answer to the Question Two: Why does the code allow certain combinations of cultural units and not others? The combination of cultural units (or its prohibition) is carried out on the basis of pertinent traits. It is possible to say "I am writing with this pen" because "writing instrument" is one of the pertinent traits of "pen". It is not normally possible to say "I am murdering this pen" because one of the pertinent traits of "murder" is "perpetrated on living being" and "living being" is not a pertinent trait of "pen".⁶⁷ Such an utterance may be possible in a poetic context, and this reveals that the code, rather than being restrictive, is open-ended. Indeed, the aesthetic experience may break and remold the code, thus revealing another dialectic.⁶⁸

Two important consequences follow from what has been said.

(1) There can be no simple definition. "Man" may be defined (according to the classical model of genus, species, *differentia*) as a "rational mortal animal", but "rationality" and "mortality" are not the traits made pertinent when a boy says to his mother: "Mummy! There's a *man* prowling around the back garden!". Traits such as

⁶⁷TS, p. 91; SPL, p. 22.

⁶⁸TS, pp. 261ff.

"criminal", "dangerous", etc., are more likely to be made pertinent.⁶⁹ Therefore, the definition of cultural units involves an *encyclopaedic* competence which far exceeds the power of a dictionary;⁷⁰ and this encyclopaedic competence is based on the instructions provided by the code.⁷¹

(2) The possibility of emphasising and de-emphasising (or "blowing up" and "narcotising")⁷² particular semantic properties means that the semantic space will have a *contradictory* character.⁷³ "Man" as "friend" and "man" as "foe" are contradictory. The code will thus allow for contradictory messages to be communicated. Later we shall examine the factors of *context* and *circumstance* which are involved in this process.

At this point it should be clear that a *universal code*, covering the entire semantic field, remains a regulative hypothesis governing the formulation of a general semiotics.⁷⁴ This implies a recognition of the epistemological boundaries of semiotics. Indeed, any code is a hypothesis which facilitates the interpretation of particular messages:

It is clear that from our standpoint systems are not previously given - they do not have a sort of ontological consistency - but are posited at the moment in which semiotics supposes a structure in order to render understandable a given set of performances.⁷⁵

Having clarified the nature of "the code" we may now turn to a more detailed analysis of the sign.

The definition of the sign has gradually been emerging during the course of the present section. In fact, the thread of this description could be seen as a practical endorsement of what we have said above about definition. "Sign" could be "indefinitely defined" (if we may use such an expression). What limits our definition of it is the postulation of a particular frame of reference (or subcode): in this case, the subcode of semiotics. In this way we may speak about local dictionaries within the encyclopaedia.⁷⁶

According to the local dictionary that we have been tracing we may describe the sign (or sign-function) as follows. A sign-function occurs when something is taken to stand

⁶⁹SPL, p. 42.

⁷⁰See 'Dictionary Vs. Encyclopaedia' in SPL; also, TS, p. 113.

⁷¹SPL, p. 184.

⁷²SPL, p. 79.

⁷³TS, p. 80.

⁷⁴TS, pp. 128-9.

⁷⁵'Social Life as a Sign System', p. 65.

⁷⁶SPL, pp. 80, 84-5.

for something else. That which "stands for" (the sign-vehicle) can be a spoken or written word, an intonation of the voice, a gesture, a picture, a piece of music, a telephone, a car, a footprint, a symptom, a cloud, etc. In fact, anything can enter into a signifying relationship. A sign-function is a cultural phenomenon, a social force, which attributes to a certain cultural unit (taken as the sign-vehicle) other cultural units (taken as the content or meaning). The latter are the pertinent traits of the former and they serve to oppose it to other cultural units. The sum of the cultural rules governing sign-functions is the code, which in reality only ever appears as a series of interconnected subcodes; several subcodes may be applied to a single sign-function, often producing contradictory interpretations.

If the chain of interpretation leading from a sign-function can follow alternative (and often contradictory) paths, and if this process is in principle unlimited,⁷⁷ how then can we ever settle on a single, determinate interpretation? Not only does the unlimited nature of semiosis make a final interpretation impossible but, in practice, we only ever actualise a number of the total interpretive possibilities provided by the codes.

The answer lies, partly at least, in the fact that contexts and circumstances serve to make one interpretation more plausible than another. If this is the case, then these contexts and circumstances must be regarded as part of the *meaning* of a particular sign-function and, in principle, *subject to codification*. As part of the structure of a general semiotics, then, Eco proposes a *compositional analysis* of sign-functions which will enable contexts and circumstances to be codified.⁷⁸

In compositional analysis, what we have called sign or cultural unit is termed *sememe*; and the cultural units attributed to the sememe on the basis of a particular reading (i.e. the pertinent traits) are termed *semes* or *semantic markers*. Contexts or circumstances are coded by means of *contextual and circumstantial selections*, the latter performing a sort of "switching function",⁷⁹ making some interpretations possible and others impossible.

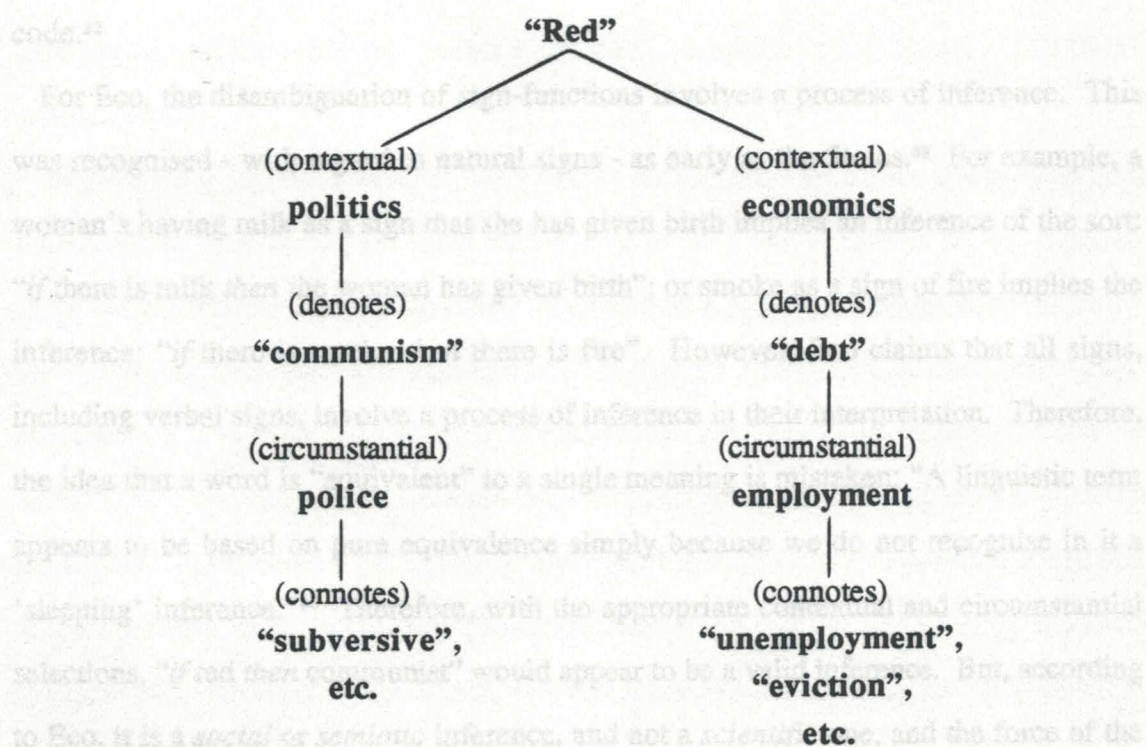
To return to our earlier example of the verbal sign-vehicle "red". "Red" always denotes "colour" but this would not be very helpful if we were presented with a message

⁷⁷TS, pp. 71ff.

⁷⁸TS, pp. 110ff.

⁷⁹TS, p. 105.

like "John is in the red". In this case it is necessary to perform a contextual selection of *economics* which will allow us to attribute a semantic marker "debt" to the sememe "red". If, on the other hand, the message were: "Well it's not surprising that Paul voted for X. He's always been a bit red", then a contextual selection of *politics* would attribute the semantic marker "communist" to the sememe "red". "Debt" and "communist" in the above examples are *denotative markers*. However, further contextual and/or circumstantial selections would allow us also to attribute *connotative markers* to the sememes. For example, if John is circumstantially my boss then "red" may connote "unemployment"; and if Paul is circumstantially a member of the police force then "red" may well connote "subversive". This compositional analysis may be graphically represented as follows:



Therefore, the meaning of a sememe is constituted, in part, by the context and circumstances in which it is used. For example, a picture of a skull placed on a bottle (i.e., with a circumstantial selection of *bottle*) denotes "poison"; but if the skull is circumstantially on a flag then it denotes "pirates". Moreover, if the bottle with the skull

on it is circumstantially located in one's drinks cabinet then the amount of information conveyed is even greater.⁸⁰

However, if the meaning of a sememe is partly constituted by its context and circumstances then we may reasonably assert that the semantic structure of the sememe is such that it is *possible* to use it in a given context and given circumstances. That is, a sememe has been conventionally associated with particular contexts and circumstances, the latter becoming part of its semiotic composition and thus allowing it to be meaningfully inserted into these contexts and circumstances on any occasion. Thus, a sign is a *set of instructions* for its possible employment and interpretation.⁸¹ These instructions are encyclopaedic, varying from individual to individual, age to age, culture to culture. On the other hand, the unusual attribution of semantic markers to a sememe (e.g., metaphorically) involves an aesthetic process and may lead to an enriching of the code.⁸²

For Eco, the disambiguation of sign-functions involves a process of inference. This was recognised - with regard to natural signs - as early as the Stoics.⁸³ For example, a woman's having milk as a sign that she has given birth implies an inference of the sort: "if there is milk *then* the woman has given birth"; or smoke as a sign of fire implies the inference: "if there is smoke *then* there is fire". However, Eco claims that all signs, including verbal signs, involve a process of inference in their interpretation. Therefore, the idea that a word is "equivalent" to a single meaning is mistaken: "A linguistic term appears to be based on pure equivalence simply because we do not recognise in it a 'sleeping' inference."⁸⁴ Therefore, with the appropriate contextual and circumstantial selections, "if red *then* communist" would appear to be a valid inference. But, according to Eco, it is a *social* or *semiotic* inference, and not a *scientific* one, and the force of the inference depends on the strength of the coding convention governing it: "if they have children then they are married" may be a valid inference in one society but not in another;

⁸⁰TS, pp. 111, 114, 139.

⁸¹SPL, pp. 26, 68.

⁸²TS, pp. 261ff.

⁸³SPL, p. 31.

⁸⁴SPL, p. 35; see also, p. 44.

consequently, children will be a sign of marriage in the former society but not necessarily in the latter.⁸⁵

We saw above that contexts and circumstances can be coded and enter into the disambiguation of a message. However, there may also be uncoded factors which determine the interpretation of a message. Given that "John is red" may be disambiguated as "John has communist tendencies", we may still wonder whether the sender of the message is trying to tell us that it is *good* to be a communist sympathiser or, rather, that it is bad:

Faced with uncoded circumstances and complex contexts, the interpreter is obliged to recognize that the message does not rely on previous codes and yet that it must be understandable; if it is so, non-explicit conventions must exist; if not yet in existence, they have to exist (or to be posited). Their apparent absence postulates their necessity.⁸⁶

This process of inference that posits a subcode and interprets accordingly, Eco terms *extra-coding*.⁸⁷

Extra-coding (or *abduction*, to use Peirce's term)⁸⁸ has two forms: *overcoding* and *undercoding*. Overcoding proceeds on the basis of pre-existing rules or codes, applying them to the uncoded situation and thereby producing a rarer application of the rules or a more analytic subcode. For example, if it is already coded that to have communist tendencies is a negative trait, then the message "John has communist tendencies" may be abductively interpreted by an addressee as a negative statement about John on the part of the sender. In the case of undercoding, however, there are no pre-established codes and tentative codes must be posited. Aesthetic texts often require undercoding for their interpretation. Usually, the processes of overcoding and undercoding are intertwined in an interpretive context.⁸⁹

Extra-coded messages usually become conventionalised in the course of time; society accepts them as a part of the code. However, at their inception such inferences are at most probable and may or may not lead to a successful interpretation. It is with this in

⁸⁵It is specifically on the point of inference that Clarke criticises Eco. See Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁸⁶TS, p. 129.

⁸⁷TS, p. 129.

⁸⁸TS, p. 131.

⁸⁹TS, pp.133-6.

mind that Eco says: "Abduction is, therefore, the tentative and hazardous tracing of a system of signification rules which will allow the sign to acquire its meaning."⁹⁰

The complexity of the combined processes of signification, communication and interpretation leads us to conclude that a message is not a fixed entity with a determinate meaning. It is, rather, according to Eco, "an *empty form to which can be attributed various possible senses*. . . . The multiplicity of codes, contexts, and circumstances shows us that the same message can be decoded from different points of view and by reference to diverse systems of conventions."⁹¹ The implications of this for a semiotic account of ideology will be reserved for the following chapter.

Summary

In this chapter we have noted an important distinction between "semiology" and "semiotics". This distinction has been neglected both from within the semiological tradition and from outside it, the most significant example of the latter, so far as we are concerned, being Paul Ricoeur.

Semiotics conceives of the sign as a dynamic entity. A sign is not interpreted in terms of a static coded equivalence, but rather by means of an inferential process. Signs refer to other signs, and interpretation must follow this chain of signification. Therefore, semiotic analysis is not an abstraction from the common experience of spoken language. Its subject matter is not a system of formal rules which governs instances of speech, but the very activity of signification in which we are immersed, including speech but by no means limited to it. This is the activity of semiosis.

On the basis of this distinction, we proceeded to examine Eco's attempt to formulate a general theory of semiotics. Such a theory should be able to encompass all instances of signification and communication within a given culture. Signs are seen to be social forces, their defining characteristic - the fact that they *point beyond* themselves - being an essential component of the cultural arrangement of the code.

Eco provides a framework which combines the oppositional and inferential characteristics of the sign. This framework shows that a sign is differentiated from

⁹⁰SPL, p. 40.

⁹¹TS, p. 139.

others on the basis of the semantic markers that are attributed to it, and that the interpretation of the sign proceeds via its chain of semantic markers. It also shows how context and circumstance may be encoded, and reveals the forms of extra-coding involved in disambiguating particular significations and reducing the contradictory nature of the semantic space.

Language and Ideology

Introduction

It is time to redeem our promissory note and bring together the various strands of our investigation into language and ideology. In the preceding chapters we noted a number of "points of intersection" between these two areas, postponing further discussion until the groundwork had been fully laid. In this chapter we shall return to each point, attempting to situate it within an overall picture. Only then can we draw our conclusions.

Ideology: The Problem of Definition

Our first task concerns the definition of ideology. In Chapter One we presented a selective history of this phenomenon, noting such a variety of apparently incompatible features that one might wonder how they could all be subsumed under a single concept. Fortunately we are not alone in the task, having at our disposal a venerable tradition from which to derive clarification, and perhaps consolation!

Therefore, we begin by reminding ourselves of Aristotle's caution concerning the degree of clarity to be expected in the sciences of politics:

Our account of this science will be adequate if it achieves such clarity as the subject-matter allows; for the same degree of precision is not to be expected in all disciplines, any more than in all the products of handicraft. Inquiry of morally fine and just conduct - which is what politics investigates - involves so much difference and variety that they are widely believed to be such only by convention and not by nature. Therefore in discussing subjects, and arguing from evidence, conditioned in this way, we must be satisfied with a total outline of the truth . . . for it is a mark of the trained mind never to expect more.

CHAPTER FOUR

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¹ *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by J.A.K. Thomson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966), pp. 64-5. See also p. 212.

² *Constitution*, trans. by E.S. Spence (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1996), p. 264.

³ *Principles of Political Economy*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of that subject permits . . .¹

Given such an auspicious precedent, need we flinch in our own task of clarification?

The general problem of "definition" has a long and complex history. Confusion may arise from the failure to distinguish a concept from the instances which comprise it, or which are covered by it. Thus one may speak of such and such an "ideology", or of a particular statement being "ideological", without necessarily being very clear about what else this concept might cover, even though one knows quite well what one means in this particular instance. Indeed, if the use of a word involves some sort of familiarity with a corresponding concept, then every time we speak we are quite successfully employing concepts which we might be hard put to it to define, if asked. This is especially true of the most abstract concepts, as St. Augustine well knew: "What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled".²

If Augustine had met the later Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher may have suggested to him that the meaning of a word is a function of its use³ (a very semiotic notion incidently). It is doubtful whether this would have satisfied the saint's Platonic mind, but it might be worth considering for own purposes. Just as Gadamer will after him, Wittgenstein uses the analogy of the "game". He speaks of language as a "multiplicity of language-games"⁴ To use a word is to enter into a particular language-game and to submit to its rules, and this use of the word will rarely match its use in other language-games. "Ideology" may mean one thing in politics, another in sociology, yet another to the person in the street, and so on. We might then ask if there is anything common to these instances of use, a guiding thread which might provide the "essence" embodied in the "concept" of ideology? Or could it be that this thread has no single fibre running right through it, only a multiplicity of fibres which continuously overlap, thereby

¹*The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. by J.A.K. Thomson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986), pp. 64-5. See *HHS*, p. 222.

²*Confessions*, trans. by R.S. Pine-coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986), p. 264.

³L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), § 43.

⁴*Ibid.*, § 24.

creating a semblance of unity? Are the various uses of "ideology" akin to a set of "family resemblances", where no single feature is shared by the family as whole?⁵

Even if this were so, it would not, of course, imply that there is no sort of order among the uses of a word, an order which may be elucidated upon closer examination. Indeed, this is precisely what is called for: a thread is still a thread, family resemblances are still resemblances. Therefore, having noted some of the difficulties involved in definition, we may proceed with our investigation.

Ricoeur provides a useful framework with which we may be able to accommodate the heterogeneous features revealed by our history of ideology. This framework defines "ideology" in terms of three concepts, with a particular relationship of dependence between them such that the second is constructed on the first, and the third on the second. Beginning with the most neutral conception, the analysis uncovers a progressively critical sense of the word, with the most pejorative sense coming at the end. The three concepts reveal ideology's "integrating", "legitimizing", and "distorting" functions respectively.

Ricoeur describes five features of ideology as integration. The first concerns the necessity of a social group to provide an *image* of itself, to establish an initial identity. The image fills the historical gap between the community's present and its "founding act". The founding act - for example, the American Declaration of Independence or the French Revolution - must be interpreted and reinterpreted so as to provide a living self-representation for the group.⁶

Whence the second feature of ideology's integrating function: its *dynamism*.⁷ By providing a community with a sense of identity, ideology endorses its activities. Therefore, it is not simply a "reflection" but also a "justification and project". In this regard, Ricoeur speaks of "the second-order foundational power that it exercises with respect to enterprises and institutions, which receive from it the belief in the just and necessary character of the instituted action".⁸

⁵*Ibid.*, § 67. See II, pp. 193-4.

⁶HHS, p. 225.

⁷HHS, p. 225.

⁸HHS, p. 226.

Thirdly, ideology preserves its dynamism by providing a "simplifying and schematic" code of interpretation. It must mediate thought, so that the latter is reduced to "opinions". Ricoeur describes this as the "doxic character of ideology", the fact that it is "readily expressed in maxims, in slogans, in lapidary formulas".⁹ This is still not necessarily a pejorative definition, since such schematism is the necessary price to be paid for "the social efficacy of ideas".¹⁰

The fourth feature, then, concerns the fact that people think *through* ideology rather than about it. It is impossible for *everything* to be simultaneously an object of thought; some things can be thought only because others are not. Ideology is uncritical, non-transparent.¹¹

Finally, the fifth feature of ideology as integration is its *temporal* character. "It signifies that what is new can be accommodated only in terms of the typical, itself stemming from the sedimentation of social experience".¹² Novelty is a threat to the identity of a community, and ideology attempts to assimilate it to the latter by means of the interpretive code. Once again, this is a necessary fact of consciousness, and only potentially ideological in the negative sense.¹³

It is from ideology's integrating function that the concept of ideology as legitimation emerges. This is the second, and more familiar concept. In this sense, ideology is the means by which an authority legitimates its power, its claim to rule over others. It is a necessary recourse because, as Weber showed, there is no rational means for securing legitimation. This function is dependent on ideology as integration in two ways. Firstly, because the question of authority only arises once a community is established. Secondly, because in order to legitimate itself authority must utilise the means by which the community sustains its integration: the promulgation of images, and the maintenance of identity and motivation on the basis of an interpretive code. It is at this level that ideology becomes dissimulating, and it can only do so because there is a prior integration

⁹HHS, p. 226.

¹⁰HHS, p. 227.

¹¹HHS, p. 227.

¹²HHS, p. 227.

¹³HHS, pp. 227-8.

at its disposal. Even so, integration is broader than dissimulation and can never be entirely reduced to it.¹⁴

The third concept brings us to the purely negative definition of ideology - as distortion. Now we are speaking about the *content* of an ideology, and not simply about its function. This content may vary, but the fact that it is a distortion remains constant. Furthermore, it is only because there is a prior integration and legitimation that ideology can fulfil its distorting role.¹⁵

It is evident that much of the confusion surrounding the concept of ideology stems from a failure to adequately distinguish these different senses of the word: integrating, legitimating, distorting. With his hermeneutic background, Ricoeur is able to give due weight to the symbolic constitution of social life, a necessary foundation if the other functions of ideology are to be understood. Indeed, Ricoeur's analysis reminds us that hermeneutics and the theory of ideology share some common ground: both have been influenced by the historicism which can ultimately be traced back to Hegel - through Dilthey in hermeneutics, and through Mannheim, Gramsci, and Lukács in the theory of ideology. As we have seen, both traditions have also shared, at times, the Enlightenment concern with overcoming prejudice and attaining objective knowledge through science.

Using Ricoeur's framework it is possible to understand many of the ambiguities which we have discerned in our study of ideology. As Ricoeur shows,¹⁶ these ambiguities are related to the Enlightenment conception of science which is at the very root of modern ideology critique. Even as early as Machiavelli we noted a mistrust of the "interests" and "appetites" which were seen to bias the faculty of judgment. The obstacles to knowledge were further elaborated in Bacon's theory of idols, the latter term being translated by "prejudice" and becoming an object of critique for the thinkers of the French Enlightenment. The important point, however, is that these thinkers were influenced by a paradigm of scientificity derived from the emerging natural sciences. The striking success of the latter resulted in a prevailing optimism concerning their application in the

¹⁴HHS, pp. 228-9.

¹⁵HHS, pp. 229-31.

¹⁶HHS, pp. 231-9.

social world. Hence de Tracy's "science of ideas" and Comte's dream of a "social physics".

Of course, the notion that society could be subjected to the same kind of scientific methods as those which had been so successfully applied to the natural world, failed to take into account the fact that social products are not objects in the natural sense. The social observer does not approach his object in the manner of the natural scientist, because the social world is already pre-structured symbolically and consequently demands an interpretive approach, as Weber recognised. In terms of Ricoeur's framework, the Enlightenment thinkers had not yet come to an understanding of ideology as integration. The conflation of different types of science - a conflation which neglected Aristotle's warning - had its counterpart in a conflation of the varieties of "idol" and "prejudice", so that the obstacles to social knowledge had the same status as the obstacles to empirical knowledge.

With Hegel there emerged an appreciation of the historical nature of understanding and, with it, of the integrative role of thought. Social products were seen to be a manifestation of the outworking of Reason in history: objective spirit. Despite this insight into human historicity, Hegel shared the Enlightenment faith in a purely objective knowledge, which he believed was an imminent prospect as *Geist* completed its historical odyssey.

The integrative role of the conscious subject passed through Feuerbach and into Marx, where it was purged of its idealist tendencies and located instead in material *praxis*. As we have seen, however, in his reaction to idealism Marx threw the baby out with the bathwater and left unexplained the relation of consciousness to world. Therefore, while recognising the social determination of thought he could only render this in terms of a consciousness which passively reflected reality, and ideology became the passive reflection of a contradictory reality (i.e., one where social relations were reified, and things assumed the characteristics of persons). The fact that a "contradiction in reality" makes little sense unless reality is constituted symbolically was not sufficiently considered, despite his reference to a "language of real life".

Therefore, although Marx replaced a psychological concept of ideology with an epistemological one, he could not pursue the implications of the latter, since it made ideology a *reflection* - rather than a constitutive element - of *praxis*. In turn, the political or social definition of ideology (Ricoeur's "legitimizing" and "distorting" stages) became problematical. How could the ideas of the ruling class become the ruling ideas, if the social world was not inherently symbolic?

Once again, perhaps it is to the Enlightenment conception of science that we must look for an explanation. For Marx, the laws governing the economic base could be "determined with the precision of natural science". In other words, social activity had to be conceived as analogous to the workings of nature. In Marx's view, the suggestion that social activity might comprise a dialectic, in which consciousness could have a determining role in material practice, not only came dangerously close to idealism but also compromised the scientific status of historical materialism.

The result, which was inherited by Marx's successors, was an ambiguous epistemological definition of ideology, ambiguously related to a problematical political definition. The positivist Marxists responded by equating ideology with all socially determined thought. Overlapping this epistemological definition was a political one, since an ideology was positive or negative depending on its class origin. The outcome was a paradoxical situation in which they had to assert, with even greater vigour, the scientific status of Marxism. The historicist Marxists, by contrast, attempted to meet the paradox head on, by admitting the historically situated character of Marxism. However, the Enlightenment assumptions were still operative: Marxism had to be rescued from its quandry by becoming progressively totalised, in contrast to the partial and fragmented ideology of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, both positivist and historicist Marxists conceived ideology in the three senses outlined by Ricoeur: it was integrating, legitimating, and distorting. However, whereas Ricoeur describes the integrating function in neutral terms, prior to its adoption for the purposes of legitimation and distortion, neither positivists nor historicists could accept such a neutral role: despite their differences, they both shared an Enlightenment notion of absolute - and therefore unmediated - knowledge.

Outside Marxism, and without using the word "ideology", Weber posed the problem of legitimation. Of course, without "ideology" he was unable to solve it, and once more the root of the problem lay in a conflation of two distinct scientific frameworks. For although Weber recognised that the social world was symbolically mediated, and therefore in need of an interpretive enquiry, he yet believed that such an enquiry could be "value free". But the attribute of value neutrality was putatively one belonging to the natural sciences, its importation into social science only serving to reinforce the perception of the latter as subordinate. Weber did not adequately pursue the implications for social science of the symbolically mediated character of all human activity.

The concept of ideology as integration perhaps attained its clearest expression in Mannheim, whose "general formulation of the total conception" simply made ideology co-extensive with thought. The reasoning behind this was as follows: If all thought is situated, then absolute knowledge is impossible, and therefore all thought is ideological. Despite his attempts to avoid the relativism inherent in this position - using notions such as "relationism", "congruence" and "incongruence", and a qualified concept of ideology - his Enlightenment assumption that only an absolute knowledge could be objective doomed such efforts to failure from the beginning. For relativism and absolute knowledge appear to be two sides of the same coin, and both ignore the more difficult task of separating the true from the false in that area which lies in between.

Therefore, what Ricoeur's framework reveals is a confusion of different levels of "ideology". The general trend has been a movement away from the pejorative or critical sense of the word towards a more neutral sense, especially in sociology. At the same time, the application of an inappropriate model of scientificity has resulted in a failure to fully appreciate this constitutive sense of ideology. It is at this point that the theory of ideology must learn from the experience of hermeneutics. As our study of hermeneutics has shown, this discipline also misappropriated the Enlightenment conception of scientific method, the difference being that the hermeneutic preoccupation with method was cut short by the Heidegger's radical ontology. Heidegger showed that situatedness is a precondition of understanding, not an insuperable obstacle to it. Moreover, situatedness reveals itself in the linguistic character of our being: it is in and through

language that we interpret and understand our existence. Gadamer continued this line of reflection, to the point of explicitly reversing the Enlightenment's "discrediting of prejudice" - the very point of departure for ideology critique. Gadamer followed Heidegger in subordinating "method" to a prior understanding which is linguistically mediated by the authority of tradition.

This, then, appears to be the lesson of hermeneutics for the theory of ideology. There is no "Archimedean point" from which an ideology may be unmasked and exhaustively described. There is no scientific method which would allow a definitive interpretation of ideological products. Rather, the critique of ideology can only take place within a set of presuppositions which are never themselves the object of a "total reflection". In other words, ideology critique cannot jump out of the hermeneutic circle. The meaning of ideology is erected on a prior meaning which is inseparable from the linguistic nature of human existence.

Although these general remarks help to clarify some of the confusion surrounding the concept of ideology, they by no means settle the question concerning its relation to language. Ricoeur is right to stress the meaningful constitution of the social world, the symbolic pre-structuring without which the legitimating and distorting functions of ideology would be impossible, and by virtue of which a "total critique" of ideology would be equally impossible. However, he does not help us to understand what makes certain meaningful constructions ideological, what turns a "prejudgment" (in the hermeneutic sense) into a "prejudice" (in the ideological sense). It might even be asked in what sense it is useful to speak of ideology as "integration". Granted that the critical definition of ideology presupposes a symbolically mediated social world - but why call the latter "ideological"? What does this contribute to an understanding of ideology? Might not such usage be a source of confusion, failing as it does to adequately distinguish thought which is unavoidably situated from thought which is purposefully distorted? A consideration of these issues brings us to the debate between Gadamer and Habermas.

The Gadamer-Habermas Debate

Notwithstanding their similarities, hermeneutics and ideology critique stem from essentially different impulses. Modern hermeneutics is inseparable from the Romantic tradition, with its emphasis on the *recovery* of meaning. Its initial task was to overcome the *misunderstanding* which was seen to be such a prevalent feature of interpretation, especially in cases involving a large spatial and/or temporal distance between production and reception of artifacts. The emphasis on recovery of meaning was not diminished by the ontological turn of hermeneutics, only now the task was not a methodological inconvenience but actually constitutive of human existence. Misunderstanding was subordinated to pre-understanding, and as such it could not be eliminated once and for all; rather, it became the object of an ongoing critique and clarification within a linguistic tradition.

Ideology critique, on the other hand, originated in the Enlightenment ideal of *emancipation*. Its *raison d'être* was the *distortion of understanding* which served to uphold relations of domination. Like hermeneutics, it was influenced by a particular model of science, resulting in a thoroughgoing confusion concerning the epistemological status of its procedures and discoveries.

It is only with the arrival of Jürgen Habermas that the implications of hermeneutics for the theory of ideology are made explicit. As we saw at the end of Chapter One, Habermas clarifies the epistemological problems surrounding the Enlightenment project of critique by distinguishing both the historical-interpretive sciences and the critical social sciences from the empirical natural sciences. In thus separating the various sciences, along with their respective "interests" and "procedures", he acknowledges not only the autonomy of hermeneutics but also its role in undermining the imperialistic tendencies of positivism.¹⁷ However, if Habermas realises the significance of hermeneutics, he is also quick to expose its dangers. Steeped in the Enlightenment project of critique, he cannot

¹⁷See J. Habermas, 'On Hermeneutics' Claim to Universality' in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. by K. Mueller-Vollmer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 298-9.

accept the hermeneutic claim that tradition is the ultimate arbiter of truth and falsehood. It is on this point that he enters into debate with Gadamer.

It is unnecessary to rehearse this much-publicised debate in its entirety. Our concern is only to clarify the issues, which are central to the question of language and ideology. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer affirms the historically mediated nature of human existence as an ontological principle:

In fact history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.¹⁸

Furthermore, tradition is constituted linguistically, and therefore understanding is inherently linguistic. Gadamer goes so far as to say that "Being that can be understood is language".¹⁹

This is not to say that the individual uncritically accepts the prejudices passed on by tradition. On the contrary, the latter must be subjected to ongoing criticism, a process exemplified in "dialogue" and the "fusion of horizons"; the weight of "opinion" (*doxa*) is never immune to reflective critique. But critique can only take place *within* a tradition; the distancing implied by critique is always founded on an ontologically prior *appropriation*.

Habermas accepts "hermeneutics' claim to universality" in this sense, acknowledging that a reflective subject is always socialised within a particular linguistic tradition. Using Wittgenstein's terminology of the "language-game", he writes:

Anyone who wishes to modify a language game must participate in it first. That, in turn, is possible only through internalization of the rules which define the language game. Acclimating oneself to linguistic traditions thus demands, at least potentially, the kind of effort that is involved in a process of socialization: the "grammar" of language games must become a constituent part of the personality structure.²⁰

¹⁸TM, p. 245.

¹⁹TM, p. 432.

²⁰Op. cit., p. 297.

So far so good. However, it is on the question of how this pre-understanding should be defined that Habermas parts company with Gadamer.²¹ For the consensus represented by tradition is as much the locus of domination as it is of dialogue. Hermeneutics finds one of its limits in the case of "systematically distorted communication", a phenomenon which "cannot be overcome by the exercise, however artful, of naturally acquired communicative competence".²²

Therefore, Habermas defines ideology as a type of "systematically distorted communication" and differentiates it from the sort of prejudices which it is the task of hermeneutics to overcome. By contrast with the latter, ideology calls for "explanatory" procedures which transcend normal linguistic competence.²³ As we saw in Chapter One, Habermas takes psychoanalysis as a model for such explanatory procedures.²⁴ The equivalent for critical theory would be a discipline which could explain distorted communication on the basis of the universal principles of all rational discussion. The elucidation of such principles is a matter of ongoing research, but this does not prevent us from positing an ideal speech situation in which communication would be undistorted, and on the basis of which we might assess ideological products:

Only the formal anticipation of the idealized conversation as a future way of life guarantees the ultimate, contrafactual standing agreement which unites us provisionally, and on the basis of which any factual agreement, if it be a false one, can be criticized as a false consciousness.²⁵

Such an explanatory procedure would form part of a "critically self-aware" or "depth-hermeneutics".²⁶ Even here, Habermas acknowledges the basic hermeneutic insight into situatedness:

To be sure, critique, too, remains bound to the traditional context which it reflects. When it comes to monological self-certainty, which critique merely arrogates to itself, Gadamer's hermeneutical objection is valid. There is no corroboration for depth-hermeneutical interpretation

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 313.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 302. See also, pp. 313-14.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 301, 305.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 302-12.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 315.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 314.

outside of the self-reflection of all parties involved - a self-reflection which is found in and carried out through dialogue.²⁷

In reply,²⁸ Gadamer reaffirms the primacy of Aristotle's *phronesis*, or "practical reason", as the form of thinking appropriate to moral and political life. On the basis of this he rejects the analogy of psychoanalysis.²⁹ In social matters there is no one in the position of the psychotherapist, capable of explaining communication to unenlightened citizens. Likewise the "ideal speech situation" remains an abstraction and does not provide us with criteria for interpreting the present speech situation. The goal of political life, the Good, comes to us in glimpses, in response to the needs of a particular situation, and cannot be anticipated in absolute form.³⁰

This is not to say that Gadamer denies the ideological possibilities inherent in tradition and language. Indeed, as early as *Truth and Method* he locates the roots of the modern administered society in the tradition of the Enlightenment: "It is the ideal of a science of society that is programmatically developed here, and which has been followed by research with success in many fields".³¹ In later writings, obviously influenced by the debate with Habermas, he strongly criticises the "technocratic society, in which one has recourse to the expert and looks to him for the discharging of the practical, political, and economic decisions one needs to make".³² It is a world of technological control, where lifestyle, consumption, and public opinion are manipulated.³³

However, for Gadamer it is not language as such that is ideological, even if language is the medium for ideology. The experience of social control can only be *through* language, but this does not make it an experience *of* language: "every linguistic experience of the world is experience of the world, not experience of language".³⁴ The

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 317.

²⁸Here we rely on Graeme Nicholson, 'Answers to Critical Theory' in *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, ed. by Hugh J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 151-62.

²⁹See *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, pp. 41-2.

³⁰See Nicholson, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-62.

³¹*TM*, p. 6.

³²*Reason in the Age of Science*, p. 72.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 3, 6, 12-13, 72-3; *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 40.

³⁴*TM*, p. 495.

corollary of this is that the distortion of language has its counterpart in the critical ability with which it equips us:

The fact that it is in the midst of a linguistic world and through the mediation of an experience pre-formed by language that we grow up in our world, does not remove the possibilities of critique. On the contrary, the possibility of going beyond our conventions and beyond all those experiences that are schematised in advance, opens up before us once we find ourselves, in our conversation with others, faced with opposed thinkers, with new critical problems, with new experiences. Fundamentally in our world the issue is always the same: the verbalisation of conventions and of social norms behind which there are always economic and dominating interests. But our human experience of the world, for which we rely on our faculty of judgment, consists precisely in the possibility of our taking a critical stance with regard to every convention. In reality, we owe this to the linguistic virtuality of our reason and language does not, therefore, present an obstacle to reason.³⁵

According to Gadamer, then, the “critique” sought after by Habermas cannot stand apart from the prejudices of its own linguistic tradition, although the latter has the possibility to critically reflect upon itself, not in a total sense but still one informed by a “practical reason” and a glimpse of the “good life”.

In his recent two-volume *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987), Habermas has attempted to elucidate the rational conditions of communication.³⁶ However, he says little about the contentious “ideal speech situation”³⁷ and appears to have eliminated the concept of ideology.³⁸

Depth Hermeneutics and Ideology

A further contribution to the Gadamer-Habermas debate has come from Paul Ricoeur. As we saw in Chapter Two, Ricoeur incorporates the critique of ideology as a moment in his “hermeneutic detour”, thereby producing a “depth hermeneutics” - a hermeneutics which interrogates the surface meaning of its subject matter. The encounter between Gadamer and Habermas is naturally of great interest to such a project. Therefore, Ricoeur poses two questions:

³⁵TM, pp. 495-6.

³⁶See Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, chpt. 9.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 296.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 300-301.

(1) Can hermeneutic philosophy account for the demands of a critique of ideology? and if so, at what price? (2) On what condition is the critique of ideology possible? Can it, in the last analysis, be detached from hermeneutical presuppositions?³⁹

The first question has already been partially answered in our second chapter. We shall now attempt to supplement what was said there, without too much repetition.

We noted that, according to Ricoeur, neither Heidegger nor Gadamer succeed in clarifying the epistemological status of the human sciences. But this is the level of methodological distancing and explanation, and consequently the level where a critique of ideology might be accommodated. Therefore, Ricoeur returns to the founding problematic of hermeneutics - the interpretation of texts - in an attempt to counterbalance the ontology of understanding which has eclipsed it. Four themes emerge from this return.⁴⁰

The first theme concerns the rehabilitation of the distancing proper to the text, in virtue of which it achieves a threefold autonomy: with respect to authorial intention, to its sociological conditions of production, and to its original addressee. "The emancipation of the text constitutes the most fundamental condition for the recognition of a critical instance at the heart of interpretation; for distancing now belongs to the mediation itself."⁴¹

Secondly, hermeneutics must overcome the "ruinous dichotomy" which Dilthey instituted between "explanation" and "understanding". Here Ricoeur refers to the non-causal form of explanation to be found in "semiological models". Such explanation is not opposed to hermeneutic understanding, but is rather a necessary critical moment on the way to understanding:

It is necessary to have gone as far as possible along the route of objectification, to the point where structural analysis discloses the *depth semantics* of a text, before one can claim to 'understand' the text in terms of the 'matter' which speaks therefrom. The *matter* of the text is not what a naive reading of the text reveals, but what the formal

³⁹HHS, p. 88.

⁴⁰HHS, pp. 87-91.

⁴¹HHS, p. 91.

arrangement of the text mediates. If that is so, then truth and method do not constitute a disjunction but rather a dialectical process.⁴²

Thirdly, the fact that the text opens up its own world, its second order reference, grants it the power, in principle, of redescribing the world of our immediate experience. The text projects the *possible* and thereby subverts the *given*. "The power of the text to open a dimension of reality implies in principle a recourse against any given reality and thereby the possibility of a critique of the real".⁴³ In this sense also, then, a hermeneutics of understanding potentially incorporates a critique of ideology.

Finally, the "matter of the text" undermines the naive subjectivity of the reader. In approaching a text, the reader must suspend her self-understanding and undergo "imaginative variations of the *ego*", in which Ricoeur finds "the most fundamental possibility for a critique of the illusions of the subject".⁴⁴

Having sketched a place within hermeneutics for the critique of false consciousness, Ricoeur turns to his second question, concerning the hermeneutic presuppositions of ideology critique. Once again, there are four points of contact.

Firstly, it is only on the basis of a hermeneutics of finitude that Habermas can undertake a critique of the ideologies of transcendental phenomenology and positivism. Consider his thesis of the threefold division of the sciences, each guided by its own interest. This thesis is not *empirically justifiable*; if it were, it would be the prerogative of only one branch of the sciences: the empirical-analytic (i.e., natural) sciences. For the same reason it is not a *theory*, since then it would be reduced to a regional thesis within one of the sciences. In other words, this thesis can attain universal application only by being *posited* on the basis of a philosophical anthropology, similar to Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein*. Hence, Habermas' analysis of interests cannot be "meta-hermeneutical" when hermeneutics is understood in the ontological sense initiated by Heidegger.⁴⁵

⁴²HHS, p. 93.

⁴³HHS, p. 93.

⁴⁴HHS, p. 94.

⁴⁵HHS, pp. 95-6.

Secondly, Ricoeur rejects Habermas' "dogmatic" separation of the critical social sciences from the historical-interpretive sciences. Habermas seems to regard all distortion as a distortion of communication, and the emancipatory interest of the critical social sciences as an interest in undistorted communication. But communication is the level of the historical-interpretive sciences, and it is only at this level that an ideal of undistorted communication can be given any meaning. Without such content it would remain an empty and abstract formula. In fact, it is only because we have some experience of a communication that overcomes distance, i.e., in the reception of texts from the past, that we can project an ideal of undistorted communication as a future possibility:

The task of the hermeneutics of tradition is to remind the critique of ideology that man can project his emancipation and anticipate an unlimited and unconstrained communication only on the basis of the creative reinterpretation of cultural heritage.⁴⁶

The third point is similar, although it is given more concrete expression. For it is when Habermas turns from the abstract analysis of ideology to a description of *the* modern ideology that he confirms his dependence on hermeneutics. As we saw in Chapter One, for Habermas the modern ideology is one of technocratic reason, in which the sphere of specifically *communicative* action is reified and subject to the sort of manipulation proper to *instrumental* action. In other words, the sphere of political debate is repressed in favour of technocratic management. Now, Ricoeur points out that unless the emancipatory interest is to remain a "pious vow" it must be embodied in a reawakening of communicative action itself; and this can only be achieved on the basis of a hermeneutic recovery of our former cultural heritage.⁴⁷

Finally, then, Ricoeur describes as futile the "apparent antithesis" between a hermeneutics which emphasises the "*consensus* which precedes us" and an ideology critique which anticipates a future of undistorted communication. For ideology critique itself speaks from a tradition - the tradition of the Enlightenment. Indeed, for Ricoeur it

⁴⁶HHS, p. 97.

⁴⁷HHS, pp. 97-9.

is the tradition of emancipation itself, which can be traced back to the Biblical Exodus:⁴⁸ "If that is so, then nothing is more deceptive than the alleged antinomy between an ontology of prior understanding and an eschatology of freedom . . . as if it were necessary to choose between reminiscence and hope!"⁴⁹

Ricoeur's aim is not to conflate hermeneutics and the critique of ideology, but to do justice to each within a dialectical framework. The claims of each are circumscribed by those of the other. The differences between them must be preserved without falling into a deceptive antinomy. For once the interest in reinterpretation becomes separated from the interest in emancipation, "then hermeneutics and critique will themselves be no more than . . . ideologies!"⁵⁰

So far we have focussed on the hermeneutic aspect of the language-ideology relation. What our study suggests is that ideology is a specific distortion which relies on the fact that the social world is pre-structured linguistically. Ideology would appear to be a particular use of meaning within a set of meaningful relationships. It is not simply an illusion, but somehow constitutive of the self-understanding of individuals. The critique of ideology then becomes a necessary detour for self-reflection. At the same time, critique can never attain a total perspective but is itself constrained by the situatedness of understanding.

Therefore, hermeneutics provides a general framework of interpretation which is relevant to the theory of ideology. It shows that the critique of ideology can only ever be an *interpretive* critique. Critique is situated within the broader sphere of understanding and self-understanding which it is the proper task of a philosophical hermeneutics to investigate.

However, our study of hermeneutics has not revealed the nature of ideological *meaning* itself. What is it that makes a particular instance of meaning ideological? In asking this question, we are not concerned with the various political, economic, sociological, and other factors which are involved in ideology. We are concerned with

⁴⁸HHS, pp. 99-100.

⁴⁹HHS, p. 100.

⁵⁰HHS, p. 100.

ideology as a meaningful event, because this is the one thing common to all ideological phenomena. For the same reason, some theorists have taken to investigating ideology at this level. More specifically, ideology is seen to be a matter of "discourse", because it is only in discourse that meanings are produced and received. This would explain how utterances which are empirically true can at the same time be ideological, and also how an utterance can become ideological and cease to be ideological at different times and in different contexts. As Eagleton puts it: "there is no piece of discourse which *could* not be ideological, given the appropriate conditions".⁵¹ Ideology, on this view, is not a static phenomenon, not something that can be "read off" a piece of discourse; it is "less a particular *set* of discourses, than . . . a particular set of effects *within* discourses".⁵²

This brings us to the second linguistic focus of our thesis: semiotics. If, as Eagleton tells us, "[t]he term 'ideology' is just a convenient way of categorizing under a single heading a whole lot of different things we do with signs",⁵³ then semiotics should have something to tell us about this phenomenon called "ideology".

Semiotic Analysis of Ideological Discourse

We concluded Chapter Three by noting the complexity of any given act of communication, and how this is a function of the multiplicity of codes, contexts, and circumstances in which communication occurs. Let us return to the notion of "code". The code is an encyclopaedia or a labyrinth, within which it is possible to follow a great variety of interconnecting paths. Eco metaphorically likens it to a box of marbles,⁵⁴ each marble representing a cultural unit and the totality representing the Global Semantic Universe. The box is charged in such a way that there exists a system of attractions and repulsions between the marbles. We may think of this as *the* Code, which always remains an abstraction, a hypothesis, because the semantic universe is continually changing. The sender of a message utilises some of the possibilities provided by this abstract system of attractions and repulsions. In so doing he applies a subcode.

⁵¹II, p. 9. See also, pp. 15-16, 22-5.

⁵²II, p. 194.

⁵³II, p. 193.

⁵⁴TS, pp. 124ff.

However, the information of the message is always greater than that intended by the sender and it is only reduced by the addressee's interpretation.⁵⁵ In order for the addressee to interpret the message according to the sender's intentions he must share the latter's subcode. The fact that this is often not the case explains why one message can give rise to multiple - and often contradictory - interpretations. This is especially evident when the sender and addressee belong to divergent cultures and/or eras. "Sometimes the addressee's entire system of cultural units (as well as the concrete circumstances in which he lives) legitimate an interpretation that the sender would never have foreseen."⁵⁶

The contradictory nature of the semantic space allows not only for the possibility of multiple interpretations but also for *ideological discourse*. In fact, the latter represents a negation of the former insofar as it suppresses the fact that more than one interpretation is possible. This may be done consciously or unconsciously.⁵⁷ In semiotic terms, therefore, ideology would seem to represent a process of raising the part to the status of the whole.⁵⁸

Now, ideology may reasonably be described as a form of *persuasive* discourse. Persuasive discourse has traditionally been the preserve of rhetoric, which may be defined as the study of forms of argumentation that proceed on the basis of *probable* premises and which are not, therefore, susceptible to treatment in terms of the apodictic syllogism. The study of the movement from probable premises to probable conclusion must take into account the extra-logical factors (e.g., appeals to listeners' emotions) which help to effect this movement.⁵⁹

Persuasion would seem to be a part of normal human interaction, and need not be considered an underhand device.⁶⁰ "But very little is needed to turn a straightforwardly

⁵⁵TS, p. 140.

⁵⁶TS, p. 141. Compare R. Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), on the issue of text interpretation.

⁵⁷TS, p. 278.

⁵⁸See SPL, p. 84.

⁵⁹See TS, p. 277.

⁶⁰TS, pp. 277-8.

persuasive argument into an 'ideological' one."⁶¹ As we have seen, this occurs when the contradictory nature of the semantic space is covered up:

I mean by ideological discourse a mode of argument that, while using probable premises and considering only a partial section of a given semiotic field, pretends to develop a 'true' argument, thus covering up the contradictory nature of the Global Semantic System and presenting its own point of view as the only possible conclusion.⁶²

According to Eco, both rhetoric and ideology are susceptible to treatment in semiotic terms.

If the intended meaning of a given message is the result of the subcode governing its production, then an ideological message is one which privileges one subcode while concealing the others. Eco calls this process *code-switching*.⁶³ An ideological statement would be one which attributes to a sememe particular semantic markers while concealing the fact that contradictory markers may be attributed to the same sememe.⁶⁴ Eco gives the example of an advertising campaign carried out in 1969 by the American dietetic food industry. Sugar, as a cause of obesity and its related diseases, had been replaced in dietetic foods by cyclamates. However, a medical research team discovered that cyclamates were a possible cause of cancer. Therefore, dietetic foods advertising cyclamates as an ingredient had to be withdrawn from the market. They were replaced by cyclamate-free dietetic foods which further stressed the elimination of the undesirable element by carrying the label: "with sugar added". In this case sugar acquired a positive marker when compared to cyclamates, but its negative marker as a cause of obesity and other diseases was suppressed. Thus, the message produced was factually true but ideological.⁶⁵

Therefore, semiotics would seem to provide a theoretical framework which allows for an analysis of ideological messages, and ideology may be considered as a semiotic

⁶¹TS, p. 287.

⁶²TS, p. 278.

⁶³TS, pp. 288ff.

⁶⁴TS, pp. 292-3.

⁶⁵TS, pp. 287-8, 290.

phenomenon. However, semiotics does more than this: it also provides the possibility of a critique of ideology and a pragmatic method of undermining it.

The fact that the sender of a message does not have complete control over its interpretation by the addressee, and that this interpretation is consequently carried out on the basis of an overcoding operation, implies that the meaning of the message is as much a function of the overcoding operation at the destination as it is a function of the sender's intention:

If the circumstance helps one to single out the subcodes by means of which the messages are disambiguated this means that, rather than change messages or control their production, one can change their content by acting on the circumstances in which the message will be received. This is a 'revolutionary' aspect of a semiotic endeavor. In an era in which mass communication often appears as the manifestation of a domination which makes sure of social control by planning the sending of messages, it remains possible (as in an ideal semiotic 'guerilla warfare') to change the circumstances in the light of which the addressees will choose their own ways of interpretation. In opposition to a *strategy* of coding, which strives to render messages redundant in order to secure interpretation according to pre-established plans, one can trace a *tactic* of decoding where the message as expression form does not change but the addressee rediscovers his *freedom of decoding*.⁶⁶

The reference to "mass communication" is of interest here. Thompson speaks of the unprecedented growth of mass communication in contemporary society as "the mediatization of modern culture"⁶⁷ and he believes that it has expanded the scope for the operation of ideology to an extent not appreciated by most theorists. It is, of course, appreciated by semioticians, who have at their disposal a particularly flexible tool for analysing the products of the mass media. However, Eco's point here is that the interpretation of messages is ultimately decided at the point of reception. Therefore, in order to combat ideology it is not necessary to take control of the source of the message and to shape its structure. Even if this could be accomplished, it would not guarantee the desired interpretation. Rather, the task facing tomorrow's revolutionary leaders and educators is one of reaching the *recipients* of potentially ideological messages, helping them to re-open the semantic space and to produce interpretations which subvert the

⁶⁶TS, p.150.

⁶⁷*Ideology and Modern Culture*, pp. 10-20, chpts. 4 and 5.

monological message intended by the source. This is the semiotic guerrilla warfare to which Eco refers.⁶⁸

This aspect of the semiotic endeavour brings us back to the epistemological principle stated at the beginning of Chapter Three, whereby semiotics is forced to recognise the motivational character of all knowledge and, therefore, its own ideological nature. In undertaking a critique of ideology, semiotics does not occupy some non-ideological vantage point which would provide a comprehensive view of the total semantic space:

There is no theory of the ideologies that would be able to test and to improve them. There is a semiotic technique of analysis that allows one to destroy an ideology by opposing to it another ideology, the latter showing the falsity of the former (and vice versa). The choice of the right or of the correct bias is not a semiotic matter. Semiotics helps us to analyze different ideological choices; it does not help us to choose.⁶⁹

Semiotics, Hermeneutics and the Theory of Ideology

The general theory of semiotics, as outlined by Eco, does indeed provide a flexible tool for the analysis of ideological discourse. It shows how signs act as cultural forces, how their "polysemic" character is a function of the code applied to them, how their interpretation involves an inferential process which traces - by means of contextual and circumstantial selections - a particular path through the "semantic space", how this process can be manipulated so as to de-emphasise certain paths and emphasise others - creating rhetorical and ideological messages - and how such manipulation can itself be subverted by educating the addressee as to his or her interpretive freedom. Therefore, semiotics reveals, in a very precise manner, how ideological meaning is created at the level of discourse.

However, there is another sense in which semiotics is significant for the theory of ideology. For this we must return to a more general, theoretical consideration of its nature. As we noted at the beginning of Chapter Three, the subject matter of semiotics is semiosis, the activity of signs. *Semiotics is concerned with any sign process*

⁶⁸See Eco, 'Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare' in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Picador, 1987).

⁶⁹TS, p. 312. See also, p.296.

whatsoever. But since *all* of our experience is mediated by signs, since thought itself is a semiotic process, in principle there is no aspect of our mental life which cannot be subjected to semiotic analysis.⁷⁰

Consider the implications of this for the sciences. All sciences, natural and human, deal with signs. That is, they explain one thing by means of another; they interpret some signs by means of other signs. In interpreting signs they produce *other signs*. In this sense, the subject matter of semiotics is coextensive with the subject matter of the sciences.

Such a claim has been described, pejoratively, as semiotics' "imperialism".⁷¹ However, it does not imply that the theoretical elaboration of semiotics makes all other sciences redundant. It simply means that the procedures and products of any science can be usefully subjected to semiotic analysis. Semiotics can help to clarify a science by showing what sort of signs it uses, what it means by them, and how it relates them to other signs. Semiotics can also show how one science is situated in relation to others, what sort of evidence and logical procedures are proper to it, and what degree of "certainty" it is capable of attaining. In Deely's words, it is "a matrix for all the sciences":⁷²

For the first time in perhaps three hundred years, semiotic makes possible the establishment of new foundations for the human sciences, foundations making possible in turn a new superstructure for the humanities and the so-called hard or natural sciences alike. Such a framework has been often dreamed of, but semiotics for the first time puts it within our reach, provided only that we have an understanding of the sign and its essential functionings sufficiently rich to prevent closing off semiotic research within the sphere of constructed signs.⁷³

The last clause of this quotation reminds us that semiotics is *neither* semiology *nor* structural linguistics, and we are now in a position to understand more fully the significance of this distinction. We can see that it has implications not only for semiotics' own procedures, including the analysis of ideology, but also for the status of semiotics within the sciences. Semiotics has a claim to universality which is neglected when it is

⁷⁰See Deely, *Basics*, p. 13.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁷²*Ibid.*, pp. 74-7.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 3. See also, p. 31.

confused with structuralism. This is particularly significant in the case of Ricoeur's misrecognition, precisely because of the strong inner connection between hermeneutics and semiotics:

One of the richest and fullest contemporary approximations to the semiotic point of view is the movement that is known today as hermeneutics. Springing again from the Continent (like rationalism and phenomenology, which it extends), this movement has come to challenge within philosophy the dominance of so-called linguistic analysis or linguistic philosophy in our universities. Important as it is (and I think it is very important), it yet belongs to . . . the "minor tradition" within semiotics proper.⁷⁴

Semiotics actually shows *what* the hermeneutic philosopher does when he interprets, and *how* he does so. It incorporates questions of context, reference, polysemy, conflicting interpretations, historical change, and so on. It has no need of a "structural detour" because it already incorporates and expands the insights of structuralism. It need not treat action as a "text" because it already possesses a versatile procedure for the interpretation of action as semiosis. "A truly 'radical' hermeneutics", as Deely puts it, "must first of all come round to the semiotic point of view".⁷⁵

What are the implications for the theory of ideology of semiotics' potential universality? As we noted at the beginning of Chapter One, ideology has been studied by a number of disciplines - sociology, anthropology, political analysis, etc. What semiotics should enable us to do is produce a unified framework for the theory of ideology, which would incorporate the findings of each of these disciplines, showing how ideology functions as a sign within them, how it is interpreted by means of other signs, and so on. This would not dispense with the need for such disciplines; rather, they would become "specific" semiotics within the broader "general" semiotics. In this way, we see that the "political boundaries" of semiotics are not rigid, but must constantly expand in keeping with advances in research.⁷⁶

We return to the question with which we opened this chapter: How do we define "ideology"? It would seem that semiotics provides the framework within which such a

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁷⁶See *TS*, pp. 5-6, 13, 26-7.

question *should* be pursued. The history of "ideology" can be re-written by means of semiotic analysis, revealing all of the semantic markers which have been attributed to this sign-vehicle, in various contexts and circumstances, since its creation during the Enlightenment, and which are even now attributed to it as it continues its semiotic journey in the academic books, political pamphlets, pubs, and newspapers of our day. And semiotics is under no compulsion to give a single meaning to "ideology". Rather, following Wittgenstein it tells us: the meaning of "ideology" is its use.

understanding, it circumscribed the pretensions of any ideology critique to total reflection. At the same time, hermeneutics was itself seen not to be immune to critique. The hermeneutic ontology became a way in which the subject had to undergo a "critique of illusions", a hermeneutics of suspicion.

CONCLUSION

We proceeded to an investigation of semiotics. The first task was one of clarifying the We began our Introduction with a twofold question: (1) What, if any, are the implications for the theory of ideology of the respective findings of hermeneutics and semiotics? (2) Are the findings of each region of equal significance, or does one region produce more significant results than the other?

During the course of our thesis we have attempted to provide the material for an answer to both parts of this question. We believe it has been shown that the findings of both hermeneutics and semiotics have definite implications for the theory of ideology, and also that their findings are *not* of equal significance, that one of them produces more significant results.

We began with a brief history of ideology, showing that in spite of its complexity this history reveals certain themes. Two interconnecting themes were singled out as being of particular significance. Firstly, we noted that the history of ideology was characterised by a recurring confusion of two broad definitions of the term - one epistemological, and the other social or political. The epistemological definition tended to find the roots of distortion in the very *process* of knowledge itself, while the social definition located them at the level of the creation and propagation of ideas. Secondly, this confusion was related to another, which arose from the Enlightenment misapplication to the human sciences of a paradigm borrowed from the natural sciences. The latter confusion created a mistaken view of the cognitive status of the human sciences.

Beginning in the second chapter, we saw that the early development of modern hermeneutics was hampered by a similar preoccupation: the search for a *method* that would guarantee certainty in interpretation. However, hermeneutics soon overcame these teething problems and came of age as a fully developed ontology. As such, it actually cut the ground from under the debate between the human and natural sciences, by revealing a more primordial experience preceding both. In demonstrating the situated character of all

understanding, it circumscribed the pretensions of any ideology critique to total reflection. At the same time, hermeneutics was itself seen not to be immune to critique. The hermeneutic ontology became a horizon, on the way to which the subject had to undergo a "critique of illusions", a hermeneutics of suspicion.

We proceeded to an investigation of semiotics. The first task was one of clarifying the exact nature of this intellectual sphere. Semiotics was shown *not* to be an outgrowth of structural linguistics, but an independent field which could incorporate the insights and procedures of the latter. In the context of a general semiotic theory, we saw how the categories of sign, code, inference, contextual and circumstantial selection, etc., provided a model for the analysis of a broad range of signifying processes. It also revealed how ideology manifests at the level of discourse, and how it can be undermined using the basic semiotic competence at everyone's disposal, without having to make absolutist epistemological claims. But semiotics was also seen to have a potentially greater significance. As the science dealing with semiosis - the very medium in which we experience anything at all - it was seen to have a certain priority *vis-à-vis* the other sciences, both natural and human. This was a further significance for the theory of ideology, because it meant that any study of ideology can be subject to semiotic analysis.

To answer our questions:

Hermeneutics contributes to the theory of ideology by revealing the essentially situated character of our understanding. There can be no radical critique in the sense of an escape from the hermeneutic circle. The unmasking of ideologies is itself an interpretive process, with its own presuppositions concerning distortion, emancipation, and so on. In other words, ideology critique always speaks from some *place*.

Semiotics contributes to the theory of ideology by revealing the ways in which signs act as social forces in an unending process of production and interpretation, during the course of which this semiotic activity can be manipulated for the purpose of ideological discourse. It also reveals how this same activity contains within itself the potential for critique.

Therefore, both hermeneutics and semiotics are concerned with interpretation, but semiotics reveals *how* interpretation proceeds on the basis of the inherent capacities of

semiosis, and how such capacities can be encoded. Semiotics is, in a sense, a rigorous hermeneutics. For this reason, it has a greater significance for the theory of ideology.

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