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The Ideological Dimension of the Didactic Knowledge and the Constructivist Model

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a critical analysis of the role of ideology in the knowledge creation and transfer in the educational field. After a brief historical approach to the semantic evolution of ideology, we aim to provide an operational use of this term starting from Paul Ricoeur’s concept. We shall further analyze the changes that occur when making the scientific knowledge didactic and the role of ideology in the creation and transfer of didactic knowledge. As ideology is always present in the knowledge and educational field, this study attempts to analyze both the state of normality and the pathological aspects of this issue. Ideology is inseparable from the educational process; its contents are the result of the ideological options of authors and those who selected it; the method for its selection is also influenced by the value hierarchies and interpretations of the involved persons, i.e. authors of curricula and manuals or teachers. The teacher’s option for a knowledge model or paradigm influences the student’s mentality and attitude towards learning and reality. From this point of view, we consider that the constructivist model improves the critical spirit and reduces the negative impact of the ideology’s interference in the didactic knowledge.

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1. The Concept of Ideology: Semantic Evolutions and Current Perspectives

Few concepts are as hard to define as ideology; McLellan believes that ideology is undoubtedly the most confused and confusing concept in social sciences [1]. The concept itself is seen as having very diverse
perspectives generating ambiguities and semantic contradictions. The French sociologist Raymond Aron affirms that an oscillation is visible in the current use of the word, from the negative perception, critical and polemical, according to which ideology is a false idea, a justification of interests and passions, to the neutral perspective, according to which ideology expresses the attitude towards the social and political reality and reflects the interpretation more or less systematic of what desire is and what is desirable [2]. According to the last meaning, any philosophical discourse may be qualified as ideology, in an appraising and not a negative manner.

A short review of the history of this concept may serve as an explanation for the oscillations in its semantic evolution, from being regarded as a science of sciences to false knowledge and a change of its use in current epistemology. The word ideology was first used in the political and cultural context following the French Revolution. Several sociological and political books, especially from the second half of the XXth Century, are mainly concerned with ideology, often paying special attention to the history of the concept. Therefore, we intend to provide our readers with a brief analysis by identifying points of reference to show the main meanings acquired in time and the context of their appearance.

The term was introduced by Antoine Destutt de Tracy, member of the top group of philosophers of the famous Institut de France, created for the purpose of sharing the illuminist ideas. In Éléments d'idéologie, he intended to create a science for ideas, able to fundament all the other sciences and called it ideology. Naess et al. [3] reveals that Destutt de Tracy makes an interesting mixture between the cognitive intention and the emotional charge of this term, which we consider that it might represent an important point of reference for the often conflicting diversities typical of the subsequent meaning and interpretations of ideology. Nevertheless, Napoleon was the first to give a negative connotation to the semantics of this term, considering ideology to be nebulous metaphysics. Marx emphasized this negative perspective by considering ideology to be an error, a false perception which maintains the confusion between reality and the reflection of reality. The negative perspective of Marx’s ideology refers to two main aspects: 1. associating ideology with idealism (while for Marx a “correct” vision of the world is necessarily materialistic); 2. associating ideology with the unequal division of resources and power within society [4]. The first to state that Marxism itself was an ideology was Eduard Bernstein. In trying to reconsider Marx’s ideas from a philosophical perspective and starting from the assumption that the grounds of Marxism are moral, Bernstein supported the idea that Marxism should be an ideology since it consists of ideas, but ideas are necessarily “ideological”. Therefore, a political programme cannot resist without an ideological base. Although for different reasons, within the context of “sharpening the class fight”, Lenin considered that every social class, including the proletariat must have an ideological opinion. We could not talk now about a negative connotation of ideology itself; only “the class interest” can determine the “positive” or “negative” value of ideas. In What Is to Be Done, Lenin writes that “only one choice” is possible since there is not a third ideology; either a bourgeois ideology or a socialist ideology. Marxism therefore becomes a “scientific ideology” because it corresponds to an objective reality [5]. In Althusser, ideology becomes a constant feature of society and is included in an institutional context, in the daily life. According to Althusser, only an ideological world can imagine society without ideology, by accepting the utopia of a world where the entire ideology has disappeared [6]. Though a utopia in Althusser, the assumption that ideology would disappear, that the ideological era would come to an end, was not unsuccessful. In Ideology and Utopia, Mannheim reaffirmed the sense of the ideology concerning the false knowledge and utopia of the XIXth Century [7], but he who was about to launch the thesis of the end of ideological era was R. Aron, in The Opium of the Intellectuals, which has a very significant title for the sense he was trying to approach with respect to ideology. R. Aron was to return to this idea, making it clear that the discussion regarding the end of the ideological era was followed by a debate on the new age ideology. Therefore, it is hard to assume that we are able to escape from the empire of ideology. Ideology, according to McLellan, can be an “irremediably depreciated” term, but “we all live in a depreciated society and, until we rectify it, we will continue to be involved in ideology. Consequently, if theoretically there may be an end of ideology, it is by no means visible – not even foreseen” [8]. There is much discussion on ideology and the consensus on this issue seems to be impossible; we are talking about the end of an ideological era but we have to also anticipate what R. Aron used to call the new age ideology [9].
Admitting a purely negative or positive perspective on ideology implies the adoption of an uncritical attitude and even an ideological attitude towards ideology. Ideology means adherence and it is based more on belief than on reasoning, without fundamentally excluding, though, reasoning and criticism. The concept of ideology we shall operate with is inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s analysis. He identifies five fundamental features of ideology [10]:

- ideology relates to the necessity of a social group to build a *self image* and to represent itself, to show itself in front of the others;
- ideology is a true theory of social motivation, fulfilling for the social *praxis* the same functions fulfilled by motive for the individual project: *justify and make activity more dynamic*;
- ideology is justifying and schematic, *transforming a thought system into a system of beliefs*. The epistemological level of epistemology is that belonging to opinion (*doxis*); it is expressed by means of sayings, slogans and other concise forms ensuring the social effectiveness of ideas;
- ideology is *uncritical*, which affects and often changes our cognitive relation to the world. We start our thinking from it rather than think of it;
- ideology *does not accept novelty* unless it can be included in the scheme associated to the founding element.

2. The cognitive function of ideology

Ideology is a representation of reality according to a preset scheme which gives expression to the founding ritual that is brought back again into the present moment during each celebration, in order to justify and reinforce the significance of the initial moment. The founding event is hence charged with the sacred and each reference reinforces its power, makes it more effective and fundamentally limits its interpretation which the present and the future (as a group of possibilities) can generate. Fundamentally limiting the action of the possible and often keeping at a distance from the influence of the current reality, ideology is, by means of its reductional feature, concise and generates prejudices, partial truths, deformities and even illusions. Moreover, ideology offers false knowledge. Since it is a meaning which applies to all the socio-humanistic fields, it has also become the most well-known. Ideology cannot be defined without referring to knowledge, not even from this perspective.

True or false, illusional, ideology provides or intends to provide a sort of knowledge. How could anyone argue for this idea? Is there any ideological knowledge or ideology-led knowledge? If so, is there any specific feature of this knowledge? These are several questions which, far from clearing the aspects mentioned above, have generated a new area of issues, marked by tensions and conflicts especially with respect to the relationship between ideology and science/scientific knowledge.

P. Ricoeur believes that, in order to understand the correct purpose of ideology, we should rather distinguish between *the ideological function* and *the ideological content*, regardless of our negative or positive perception of ideology. Even the Marxist meaning of the word, that of false knowledge or reversed knowledge, may have a wider applicability if subjected to this distinction. What Ricoeur believes that constitutes the fundamental base of the Marxist concept is related or not to the relationship between ideology and the dominant class, but by defining it by means of a specific content, religion (inheritance from Feuerbach), and not by its function. Which are the changes brought by this distinction to the understanding of the meaning and role of ideology? Firstly, this distinction brings some order into a semantic universe dominated by confusion. Despite the fact that their content is not ideological, science and ideology can play, in certain contexts, the role of ideologies. This happens when, far from pretending it is scientific, they hide the function of system justification [11]. Consequently, it is rather hard, if not impossible, to find, according to Ricoeur, “an un-ideological spot” where we can place a strictly scientific discussion on ideology. The intent to find such a “spot” aims at the positivist model and the state of exact sciences that put this model into practice. Only from a positivist perspective, the opposed pair science – ideology can acquire a very clear meaning, may become very sharp. But not even now is the ideological function anulled as potentiality. With respect to the contents, the situation is clear: positive sciences are such homogenous and coherent systems that the intrusion of ideology, irrespective of its nature, seems to be
impossible. Regarding its function (mainly justification), Mathematics or Physics can become “Soviet” or “Nazi” sciences or can serve any other type of ideology. Ideology does not affect these sciences in the sense that it does not intrude the system, but can create an “ideological curtain” to protect a group, community or regime, having all the reasons to desire and even “dictate” progress, since it would assume directly the merits. Ideology is, in this case, a mediator, ensuring the propagation of science, a science passed through the censure of ideology.

3. The relationship between ideology and knowledge

Following the dynamics of the relationship between ideology and knowledge, Foucault [12] identifies two fundamental aspects: on the one hand, ideology, at least in its initial intention, was proclaimed science (science of sciences); on the other hand, ideology casts the entire knowledge in the area of representations. The etymology of the word is, from this point of view, highly relevant (eidos – image), suggesting that the level of cognitive approach where ideology is situated is the level of representation. The epistemological level of ideology is merely the level of opinion, of the Greek doxa. Therefore ideology is mainly expressed by means of sayings, slogans and concise formulas. Ricoeur states that it is the simplifying rhetorics which ensures the social effectiveness of ideas [13]. On the one hand, no science can entirely escape from the ideological condition of practical knowledge and therefore we cannot talk about an opposing relationship between science and ideology, stricto sensu. On the other hand, the total destruction of the opposition is rather risky since it creates the confusing image of the ideological omnipresence reducing all social and political arguments to simple propaganda.

We cannot totally leave the empire of ideology. All perspectives, including those related to ideology, are themselves ideological. Ideology becomes “a vision of the world”, a “reading grid” for it and for the place of the individual/group within history, a “universal code for interpreting all the events in the world” [14]. Philosophy, Ethics, Religion, Arts and even science are ideologically contaminated. Otherwise it would not make possible the argument for a “bourgeois science” and a “proletarian science”. The communist ideology has systematically transformed all sciences, with no exception, into “Soviet sciences”, while the Marxist-Leninist ideology became the “epistemological” fundament for every area of knowledge. Referring to the ideological feature of the scientific representation, also highlighted by Habermas, Ricoeur shows that only one function, of manipulation and control, tends to replace all others: communication, ethical appreciation, metaphysical and religious meditation, etc. He draws attention on the idea that such denigration of ideology should not make us forget the essential positive and constructive role of ideology in its fundamental sense.

Ideology is a continuous presence for knowledge, determining and justifying our interests, preferences, options and cognitive practices. Hence, Gurvitch considers that no type of knowledge can completely escape the influence of ideology, the latter being itself a particular type of knowledge [15].

The ideological discourse is strongly centred on values and shows a vision of the world which has as effect people motivation and the legitimacy of certain practices. While the scientific discourse aims to describe and explain reality, the ideological discourse is rather interested in motivating and justifying certain practices (including cognitive), sometimes even in masking them and strengthening the cohesion of a group (political, religious, scientific, etc.). A sentence, according to G. Fourez [16], can be scientific and at the same time it can have an ideological dimension. The scientific discourse tries to make a clear presentation of its description of the world, thus diminishing the “mask” effect created by the ideological discourse.

As a system of ideas through which an individual or a group defines the sense of reality and existence in the reality, ideology acts like a filter to knowledge, operates selections in the field of knowledge and expresses preferences and interests it justifies. The essence of the ideological fundament of knowledge relates to faith, to a true religion of the cognitive act. Certain discussions on the scientific character of knowledge in the socio-humanistic sciences draw attention on their ideological vulnerability, on the possibility to be subjected to political ideologies, offering them an apparent scientific legitimacy. This vulnerability is generated by the role assumed by the subject in the process of knowledge and, especially by the internalization of this role. Only a critical analysis of the nature of knowledge, of its possibility and limits, of the value of those theories elaborated in many fields of
knowledge, of the relationship between objective-subjective and the role of the subject in the process of knowledge can make us “aware” of the risks of dogmatisation and ideologisation of knowledge. The ideal of absolute knowledge transforms knowledge into dogma. The idea of absolute leads to that of the only truth, to uniform criteria in establishing the value of knowledge, to a Manichaeist and totalitarian vision on the cognitive process. This is a perfectly convenient conception for ideology in every totalitarian regime, since it allows the metamorphosis of science into ideology and its imposing as such.

4. The ideological vulnerability of didactic knowledge

- During the process of didactical transposing of scientific knowledge there are a series of changes which sometimes lead to the dogmatisation of knowledge. M. Tardy identifies the following transformations with respect to the didactics of scientific knowledge [17]:
  - terminological and semantic transformations: the scientist and the didactician do not always use the same lexical repertoires. The pedagogist will always look for new expressions adapted to the addressee, replacing the technical terms in specialized language with quasi-universal words. The success of didactical communication is conditioned by the same fact. Nevertheless, there is a big risk: losing the semantic substance. Tardy speaks in this context of an “unhappy destiny of concepts”. The didactical transposition supposes a simplifying operation, sometimes exaggerated, of the scientific reference model, where there is always a resulting deficit;
  - the disparity of explicit models: the scientist tends to overestimate the audience, the didactician to underestimate it. The latter transforms the scientific model for multidimensional interpretation (which allows retroactions, dissymmetry of causality, a generalized interaction of all factors) in linear and simplified schemes;
  - the elimination of the subject in the sentence: the researcher is always “present” in the text; the discourse is 1st person narrative and does not elude the responsibility of the signature, while textbooks offer mainly the results and less the process itself. The didactical discourse is almost completely decontextualized and depersonalized.

These transformation operations are not only produced according to a single algorithm; there are different degrees of the didactization of the knowledge contents according to the level of the didactical process, the profile and educational level of the student, the teacher’s work style, etc. The sense of the transposition act is not to produce but to avoid the possible epistemological rupture. This means that the epistemology of that field and the pedagogical epistemology shall be carefully handled.

Desincretisation and depersonalisation of knowledge lead to the ignoring of the context and conditions of knowledge emergence, to de-historicisation. Among those who brought into discussion the didactical transposition and the epistemological “losses” of this process are Michel Tardy, Yves Chevallard, Michel Develay, etc.

The didactical knowledge maintains a dogmatising relationship with the scientific knowledge by means of the distance which separates the logics of the exposure of logic results from the ways of discovery. This distance tends to diminish according to the change and generalisation of the new educational paradigm, centred on the student, which implies a constructivist and not an assimilationist perspective on learning. Practically, it can never be equal to zero.

On the other hand, the knowledge didactization and teaching always include an “implicit” with particular scientifically and especially cultural and ideological connotations, which are neglected by the social and institutional control. School knowledge makes reference to values revealing the ethical choices of a society. The learning contents allow us to discover a subjacent philosophy of education. When ethics are substituted with a political ideology able to decide unilaterally what shall be and what shall not be known, the didactical transposition of contents even means their ideological perverting. In this case, apart from “normal dogmatisation” resulting after the transformations produced within the interval of time between the scientific knowledge and the didactical knowledge, the ideological dogmatisation intervenes. Its purpose is to lead to the inculcation of a
system of values, the only one considered valid and the means are specific to political indoctrination by means of education.

5. Epistemology as “bodyguard”. Didactic knowledge in a constructivist sense

The “precariousness” of the theories belonging to the socio-humanistic field and the difficulty in establishing their scienticity impose that epistemology get this “bodyguard” role, as a warning to its ideological use. It was used by Marie-Dominique Popelard and Denis Vernant to draw attention on the criticising role played by epistemology in every circumstance where knowledge can be reinterpreted and used ideologically [18].

The constructivist paradigm fundamentally changes the knowledge paradigm and, implicitly, the didactic object paradigm: the object is not given but it is a construction of the subject. We shall not understand that the object is not attributed a real, objective existence but rather that human beings project on it their intentions, interests, preferences, aspirations, and the knowledge of the object is deeply affected by this negative implication of the subject. This explains both the limits and the possibility of knowledge. First of all, it explains the impossibility of total knowledge, of the absolute knowledge of the world, of the absolute truth and of the absolute elimination of the error in knowledge but explains at the same time the chance and nature of the cognitive process. He who wants by any means to save the absolute truth, according to Ferdinand Gonseth, has already lost the truth.

The claim of the absolute transforms knowledge into a total error; the ideology on which such a claim is founded is absurd. Knowing an object always implies “something less” but also “something more” about the subject: there are certain aspects and details that fail to be perceived by the knowing subject who, on the other hand, gives meanings which are “added” to the object, making it complete, as a whole, in an interpreting context which equals the axiological referential of knowledge. Within the process of knowledge, the object also becomes what the subject assigns by means of interpretation, and the world of objects becomes a hypertext which needs deciphering by practicing a communicative competence which makes possible the continuous signification and resignification of the world. Without such a cognitive involvement of the knowing subject, the world of things may seem inert, uninteresting and un-motivational from a cognitive perspective. On the other hand, knowledge is always partial and incomplete as it is conditioned by the perspective the subject has on the object and by the context of knowledge. Therefore, there is always something of the object that needs to be discovered, which explains the different even opposing theoretical points of view. All debates starting from different hypotheses or interpretations of the same aspects of reality reflect the dynamism of things and knowledge and at the same time the limits of the cognitive act and the unlimited character of the knowledge process, the inherence of errors and the chance that error offers to knowledge.

Knowledge is at the same time a process and the product of that process. Human knowledge, according to E. Morin [19], is the knowledge accomplished by individuals who are at the same time product and producer of a cognitive process. No matter how much it tends to objectivity, human knowledge is still marked by subjectivity and uncertainty. There are many sources of uncertainty in knowledge. They are related to the cognitive context, the nature of the cognitive process, the cognitive relationship (uncertainties and errors present in the process of knowledge communication). As many uncertainties are offered by a theory, this issue will never be completely eliminated; it will always be an error risk. Uncertainty is a risk, but also a chance for knowledge, as long as its presence is recognized and understood. Ignoring uncertainty would obviously lead to error whereas knowing it leads to a strategy.

What used to be a limit therefore becomes a chance for the process of knowledge, for understanding it as a conscious acceptance of a perfectible system of ideas. Such a view on knowledge has a different relevance in the didactical field. The change of perspective on didactical knowledge decreases the risk of dogmatisation and ideologisation of knowledge. From the constructivist perspective, knowledge is not a given that needs to be assimilated, but is built within the process of intellectual confrontation between the individual and the environment. The confrontation generates adaptation instabilities which make individuals make use of all resources of adaptation in order to accede to a more stable form. A cognitive instability to a new problem which cannot be solved using previous procedures and knowledge now becomes a potential factor for the cognitive progress.
From the constructivist perspective, the didactical act is no longer a process of knowledge transmission – assimilation. Teaching is not linear in transmitting information from an addressor (teacher) to an addressee (student), as teaching shall not be mistaken with the assimilation of a large amount of knowledge. Giordan starts from the assumption that getting knowledge shall not mean direct transmission, from teacher to student: “the strictly necessary factor in accumulating knowledge is not that the teacher followed all the curricula and was very serious when teaching” [20]. Knowledge does not totally pre-exist but is built and re-built by means of the active and critical involvement of certain subjectivities, with expectations and motivations which implicitly influence the cognitive interpretation of the world. The student’s involvement shall mean more than assuming pre-manufactured knowledge. Giordan believes it is important that students shall master and apply a “science of knowledge” allowing them to understand the subjacent “logics” of their effort since the real obstacle in learning is not, most of the times, related to knowledge itself but to the image or “intuitional epistemology” of the student on the mechanisms producing knowledge [21]. Students must be trained in testing the operational feature of the new knowledge and also in perceiving the limits of the process of knowledge.

In understanding the cognitive relationship from a constructivist perspective, the knowing subject may be regarded according to two complementary circumstances: as epistemic subject (formally or logically individual) and as a psychological subject (real individual). The epistemic and universal subject matches the structural invariants of development whereas the psychological subject matches the individual variables [22]. The constructivist perspective does not reduce children to the epistemic subject but situates them in a double dimension: universal and individualized. Consequently, the constructivist approach of knowledge implies an individualising process which takes into account the intentions and values of the knowing subject, the motivation of the participation in the cognitive act and self-evaluation.

6. Conclusions

In the break of dawn of modern sciences, Francis Bacon stated that science is power and his words did not cover only the explanatory value of a system of ideas but also its force to change the world, to better or worse. Therefore, we have brought into discussion in this study the ideological dimension of knowledge in general and of didactical knowledge in particular. As long as it determines and justifies our interests, options and cognitive practices, ideology is a natural presence in the field of knowledge and education. As long as it justifies and legitimates political practices by means of knowledge, ideology becomes abusive, monopolizing and dangerous. The authoritarian and totalitarian political systems are confronted with a similar ideologisation of knowledge, transforming the didactical discourse into a means of political propaganda.

The ideological vulnerability of knowledge imposes the critical presence of subjects involved in the didactical process. The constructivist paradigm contributes to the development of criticism and to the decrease of the negative effects of ideology infiltration inside the didactical knowledge. This fundamentally changes the perspective on knowledge and, implicitly, on the didactic act: the object is no longer a given one but a perfectible continuous construction of the subject. The constructivist approach favours the development of a democratic perspective on knowledge whereas each candidate to the cognitive act expresses personal opinions and confronts them with others. The student therefore understands the importance of the diversity of ideas and learns how to defend personal opinions. Hence, the former “perspective” of the student changes its status: from a simple affirmation to a hypothesis which needs to be verified, in different manners, according to the cognitive act: congruence with reality, logical coherence, etc.

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