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Raymie Mckerrow

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Commentary on Radu Neculau's "Normative Validity, Cultural Identity, and Ideology Critique"

RAYMIE E. MCKERROW

School of Communication Studies
Ohio University
Athens, OH 45701
USA
mckerrow@ohio.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

The argument posed by Radu Neculau presents a challenging task. On the one hand, the central issue can be stated rather simply, as he does: are there criteria “available to distinguish between legitimate interpretations and illegitimate ones, and thus to indirectly ascertain the legitimacy of ideological discourse” (p. 4). In short, is ideological critique possible? On the other hand, the development of the response to that central question is anything but simple. The argument moves forward in a complex series of moves, from the historical shift from ideology seen as false consciousness to a hermeneutic/pragmatic orientation, to a Habermasian attempt to ground determinations in the contrast between normative validity and systematically distorted communication, and lastly, to Honneth’s attempt to amend and remedy Habermas’s approach. This is, of course, an overly simplified version of those very moves—in no sense does this pretend to do justice to the richly textured argument that is presented.

In the time allotted, I will attempt to challenge the overall thrust of the argument through three counter-moves. The first will focus on the nature of ideology. My hope here is not to refute the argument as advanced, but rather to place alongside it a contrary perspective, thus enabling a conversation about choices that must be made. The second counter-move is to challenge the Habermasian perspective at its most fundamental foundation. The third is to suggest some cautionary notes regarding the proposed solution. Again, the goal is to pose a position that, if embraced, would provide a positive answer to a central issue that concerns us both—how do we judge between opposite positions when there is no appeal to an external, universal standard of what is true?

2. IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

The rejection of a Marxist interpretation of ideology as false consciousness is a position I’ve held since the early 1980’s. In fact, I’ve embraced a contrary notion—that “an ideology is a rhetorical construct having no existence apart from its expression as a symbol system” (McKerrow 1983, p. 192). Drawing on the earlier work of Michael Calvin McGee (1978, 1980), along with that of Alvin Gouldner (1980) and Goran

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Therborn (1980), I've taken a constructionist approach to the relationship between an ideology and its expression via symbol systems. In particular:

Ideology is not a product or a possession of people. As a process term, ideology both *subjects* people to a particular order and *qualifies* them to assume roles within the society (McKerrow, 1983, p. 200).

This perspective is based on the further premise that an ideology is not simply a set of fixed ideas but rather functions to “unceasingly constitute and reconstitute who we are” (Therborn 1980, p. 78).

The outline of the “traditional view” of ideology, as presented, clearly operates at a far remove from the position I've just all too briefly sketched. What is also clear is that I've not endorsed the Ricoeurian position. While it may be “*constitutive* of social reality” (Ricoeur 1986a, p. 3), as Clark (1990) has noted, “ideology is redefined as the necessary adhesive symbolism of a community, and utopia given a perhaps untenable complementary role as the vantage of the possible” (p. 115). As the sophists of old have reminded us, the “art of the possible” is alive and well in the absence of a theory of utopia to ground its emergence. For Ricoeur (1986b), on the other hand, utopia is the instrument or vehicle through which a dominating ideology can be escaped:

This is my conviction: the only way to get out of the circularity in which ideologies engulf us is to assume a utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis. Because the absolute onlooker is impossible, then it is someone within the process itself who takes the responsibility for judgment. (pp. 172-173).

What is critical in this discussion is to keep in mind that, for Ricoeur, the social imaginary that is ideology is what holds the social order together, and is believed by the people to be true. As Sargent (2008) has recently noted:

From the point-of-view of believers legitimation is probably the most fundamental purpose of ideology; an ideology speaks for a group Ricoeur argues that ideology is the way the memory of a founding event or revolution is domesticated and internalized. In this sense an ideology tells a story, one that justifies the existence and beliefs of the group. At the same time, it fills the second positive role of ideology in giving an identity to the group and an accepted identity is central to pulling together or integrating the group. But, of course, remembering the negative side of ideology, the stories are false or at least falsifications of what actually happened. And, as with Mannheim, it is important to ‘unmask’ the falsification/distortion. But it is also important to remember that for the group the ideology does not falsify; for the believer the stories are true. (p. 268)

Although long, the following from Ricoeur (1984) may be helpful in establishing the relationship:

Every society possesses [...] a socio-political imaginaire—that is, an ensemble of symbolic discourses that can function as a rupture or a reaffirmation. As reaffirmation, the imaginaire operates as an ‘ideology’ which can positively repeat and represent the founding discourse of a society, what I call its ‘foundational symbols,’ thus preserving its sense of identity. After all, cultures create themselves by telling stories of their past. The danger is, of course, that this reaffirmation can be perverted, usually by monopolistic elites, into a mystificatory discourse which serves to uncritically vindicate or justify the established political powers. In such instances, the

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symbols of a community become fixed and fetishized; they serve as lies. Over against this, there exists the imaginaire of rupture, a discourse of 'utopia' which remains critical of the powers that be out of fidelity to an 'elsewhere,' to a society that is not-yet [...] For besides the authentic utopia of critical rupture there can also exist a dangerously schizophrenic utopian discourse which projects a static future cut off from the present and the past, a mere alibi for the consolidation of the repressive powers that be [...] In short, ideology as a symbolic confirmation of the past, and utopia as a symbolic opening towards the future, are complementary; if cut off from each other, they can lead to forms of political pathology. (pp. 29-30)

There is a lot here to agree with in analyzing the legitimation of an ideology. There is also a lot to disagree with. From a Foucauldian perspective, the privileging of the term 'utopia' to describe the world that is possible in seeking freedom from domination is problematic, even though it is not defined by either Mannheim or Ricoeur as a 'perfect universe.' Who is to say that the 'rupture'—the critique of ideology that makes it possible to escape from its clutches—is itself an improvement? This is what Ricoeur is referring to as a possible utopian vision which "projects a static future"—a future that is impervious to change.

What is missing in this analysis is a provision for a continual critique—an analysis that does not privilege the 'next world' as necessarily better, but instead recognizes that any change in power relations will be good for some, and perhaps not good for all. To label the possibilities for change that the sophists saw inherent in rhetoric's contingent nature as 'utopian' is to build toward a positive future that may not materialize. While I realize the sceptical, even pessimistic, nature of this approach, I also think it is a realistic stance that has to be taken toward any social change: it may be good, it may not be. Likewise, any critique of a present ideology may find that all is right with the world as is—there is not a presumption here that change is a necessity, for its own sake, nor that all such critique must necessarily provide a rupture from the present. Nor does it require that we accept or embrace the psychology of pathology in marking any such needed rupture as necessarily pathological. I will deal with this issue more later—but want to go on record in rejecting Ricoeur's labelling of ruptures as potential pathologies. The primary reason is that the term, in its most common meaning, implies that something must be excised before it can do more damage, or otherwise cured: "The word 'pathology' comes from the Greek words 'pathos' meaning 'disease' and 'logos' meaning 'a treatise' = a treatise of disease (MedicineNet.com). My purpose here is to counter the expression of "ideological distortions" as "reducible to pathological" (Neculau, p. 3). This brings us to the second theme in this response—an examination of the 'solution' presented via Habermas and Honneth.

3. COMMUNICATION AS SYSTEMATICALLY DISTORTED.

Stanley Deetz (1992) has provided a clear description of how the Habermasian view of communication as systematically distorted has been interpreted.

Communication is *distorted* whenever *genuine conversation* is precluded or, more specifically, any of the conditions of the *ideal speech situation* are not upheld. In a general sense, all communication is distorted to some degree [...] Some distortions, however, are *systematic*. In these cases there is a latent strategic reproduction of meaning rather than participatory production of it. *Systematically distorted communication* operates like strategic manipulation, but without overt awareness. The latent prejudice, preconception, predefined personal identity, or object

production precludes open formation. (pp. 173-174).

In other words, communication is inherently flawed—people may not say what they really mean (assuming they know what they mean, and that is an issue for another time), or their meaning is wilfully misunderstood by the recipient. And this litany could go on to describe innumerable ways in which communication between people can go “off track.” The important question that is presumed rather than answered in this perspective is: “Is distortion the right language to use? I don’t think so, as it implies that there is a ‘rightness’ that would otherwise exist, were it not for the “noise” that exists in the system, preventing us from seeing truth, or whatever passes for “the right view or meaning as expressed or misperceived.” The question that doesn’t get asked in this analysis is “In whose terms, by whose definitions, is ‘x’ a distortion?” Who gets to decide what is distorted? I can think of multiple occasions where I, as an outsider to a conversation, determine that the views of two interlocutors are, respectively, distortions of the other’s position. But getting in the middle of that dispute to point it out may result in my being ejected by both parties to the exchange—they may actually just talk that way while understanding exactly how the “distortion” in my mind is to be understood. That is, the presence in my mind of an ideological distortion, if I employ that language, is no guarantee that they are in fact distortions in the eyes of others. Thus, who gets to decide is a critical issue. If you are part of the uncivil in society (as determined by the civil), your views are a distortion of the real in their eyes. Who is to say “they” are in the right and you are in the wrong?

As Deetz (1992) goes on to note, the derivation of systematically distorted communication is drawn from psychoanalytic theory. Nick Crossley (2004) makes the same point in noting that, for Habermas, the intent was to draw what psychoanalysis uses to remedy consistent misapprehensions of “the real” into the social world, and perform a similar analysis. To do so requires that one start from the premise that there is always more to discourse than is revealed through its saying—there is always a ‘truth’ that is either ambiguously, unintentionally, or intentionally distorted on the part of a communicator. That people may “talk past each other,” as implied above, is a given with respect to everyday communication. The question is whether a psychoanalytic model can be so uncritically advanced in a way that identified pathologies? Deetz believes it can:

[C]ommunication is pathological to the extent that it (1) endangers the survival of the human and other species by limiting important adaptation to a changing environment, (2) violates normative standards already freely shared by members of a community, and (3) poses arbitrary limits on the development of individualization and the realization of collective good. (p. 177).

What would discourse of this nature look or sound like? If it both limits individuality while hindering the creation of a collective good, what of the natural tension that exists between what I believe to be the right way, and that of the majority of my fellow community members? Am I to be called pathological when I point out the difference between our positions? If I do so in a way that I believe is necessary, but is not within social standards, am I pathological simply because the social standards preclude my ability to say what needs to be said? The problem I am having with this kind of language is that ‘distortion’ and ‘pathology,’ as suggested earlier, are terms with a decidedly negative connotation—placing the person guilty of such discourse into a deviant role.

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As Crossley notes:

Habermas, however, fails to consider how the concept of ‘distorted communication’ might be implemented in empirical analyses of actually existing publics. Indeed, his work positively hinders such implementation on at least two counts. First, the concept of ‘systematically distorted communication’ is never properly established and remains overly dependent upon a psychological frame of reference. In *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas claims that he wishes to extract the form of psychoanalytic criticism for his critical theory but not its content. He wants to establish a form of social analysis and criticism which can achieve a similar type of critique at the social level, as psychoanalysis, in his opinion, achieves at the psychological level; a process which would involve removing the psycho-biological baggage of psychoanalysis and replacing it with sociological equivalents. His account of systematically distorted communication, however, particularly in the seminal paper of that name, remains tied to the content of psychoanalysis, portraying systematically distorted communication as psychopathology. There is therefore a theoretical gap to be filled before we can implement an analysis of distorted communication. (p. 89).

While this is a longer than perhaps necessary citation from Crossley, and is open to argument, my use here is, as noted earlier, to enable a conversation. Note that the task is not to ask, “Is everyday communication systematically distorted?” Rather, the task is to introduce social terms that would, if applied adequately, unmask distortions. The contrary to pathology is “genuine conversation.” When and where, one might ask, has it ever existed, or if so, for how long? And who gets to determine when it is indeed genuine? These are the questions that are not being asked.

A corollary assumption is that, within genuine conversation, the commitment to consensus reigns supreme. While time does not permit a full development of the argument, consider this alternative: replacing consensus as the operative aim with dissensus—the sense that a democracy functions best when it starts from an acceptance of disagreement—a sense that also allows those without voice a better chance of being heard, especially as they may express ideas in ways that violate normative standards. When that happens, why not ask: why would they talk that way? What within our normative standards might produce such alien ways of reacting to the dominant discourse? I realize that the normal reaction is to disown the argument as well as the arguers. It requires a very different sensibility to actually consider, for example, what in discourse toward social others might produce alienation on the part of those others. A claim that “their rhetoric” is systematically distorted does not advance the cause. It will never, in itself, get us to an understanding of why it might be—why the violation of normative standards is so easily adopted by the social other as a means of communicating their dissatisfaction with the dominant group. Calling it pathological, likewise, doesn’t get us at an understanding of the ideological discourse that appears, to us, illegitimate. Telling the social other to “talk like us” also doesn’t get us there. Neculau indicates, following Habermas’s analysis, that a “false consensus is maintained by tacitly violating the validity claims that are mutually recognized” (p. 8). Within the frame of the analysis above, who determines it is false, and is it really the case that validity claims are held mutually? Underlying this analysis is the sense that personal identity—who am I as an arguer—is at stake.

4. THE SHIFT TO IDENTITY

Neculau presents a review of Honneth's remedy; although this simplifies the complex analysis presented, it could be said that Honneth (and Neculau) argues from a position that adopts signs of "social misrecognition" (p. 11):

The experience of misrecognition undermines any ideological claim to social integration through the adoption of cultural or value-based identities that either ignore or misinterpret needs which agents deem essential to their 'flourishing' (self-realization). (p. 11).

Three cautions are in order in responding to Honneth's remedy. First, the retention of an overtly psychoanalytic orientation (even without the attendant critical vocabulary), is troublesome. For example, the claim "The physical maltreatment of a subject [...] does lasting damage [...]" (p. 12) may be true, or it may not be. There is an "allness" sense here that is at odds with experience. The same is true of "the experience of being denied rights is typically coupled with a loss of self-respect...." (p. 12). That may be true, but how do we know it is typical? Perhaps more typical is the anger that results from one's being denied. It is not that Honneth's (or Taylor's) sense of misrecognition is not possible. Rather, it is that the nature and extent of misrecognition is not always as complete as portrayed. In addition, it is also possible that it isn't mis-recognition, but instead a very clear claim to a reality that is unrecognized by the social other. Sometimes we know ourselves the impact our claims to attention may have on others; at other times, we may not. Calling us out is not necessarily a sign of misrecognition, even if it is interpreted in that fashion in our refusal to see ourselves in the other's language.

Second, misrecognition assumes a true recognition that is missed, either on purpose or by accident. Who determines whose recognition is the "true one?" Why does that person or persons get to make the call?

Third, and most important, the sense of ideology that is derived from this analysis is equally problematic. Neculau claims:

Ideology signals a rhetorically induced shift in agent identification from one level of recognition to another that on the one hand ignores or covers up ego-needs and interests that cannot be accommodated at a particular level of identity formation and on the other hand reinforces one type of identification at the expense of others by selectively prioritizing those identity claims that are consistent with cultural traditions. (p. 14).

If we consider this as part of a minimalist theory of ideology, it is not necessarily an objectionable claim. Ideology can mis-present itself, or the identity of the other, in ways that do harm. Ideology can also present itself as consistent with the cultural norms of the dominant group. In so doing, it can also marginalize those who are not recognized as participants within the dominant group. This does not necessarily imply that the social other has been "misrecognized." It may, to the contrary, simply mean that we know who they are, and what their identity presents, and have decided to exclude them. Some times this is wrong (we remain a racist society in far too many respects). What I'm not sure of is whether Honneth's attribution of "moral injury" (p. 16) as the ground on which ideology critique might function is sufficient. Neculau claims that "Ideology often

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supplies the meaning [with respect to moral injury] by exacerbating cultural discomfort or by inventing misrecognition where there is none; but it cannot make suffering, and its sources in misrecognition, disappear” (p. 17). However, if ideology is itself a rhetorical construct, the challenge is to find, via language, the expression that relieves the moral injury, whether in the form of apology, altering the conditions of existence such that identity is re-valued, or through some other means. The point is that ideology critique has the requisite power to re-craft the conditions of existence. Foucault offers (1997) a possible avenue for continual exploration:

[C]riticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but, rather, as a historical investigation in the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, think, saying [...] [This critique] will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events [...] [I]t will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think [...] to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom. (pp. 315-316).

The process of permanent critique provides the possibility for answers, both to those situations in which we seek freedom from constraints that preclude our ability to be other than we are, as well as those in which we seek freedom to become that which we are not.

5. CONCLUSION

This response has, admittedly, not done justice to the complex, richly textured argument that Neculau has presented. As noted at the outset, my goal was to present a counter-position that, however, briefly advanced, would seek to (1) advance a rhetorical conception of ideology that moves us beyond the strictures of a Marxian false consciousness, (2) challenge the language of “distortion” and “pathology” that dominates the Habermasian approach to the critique of socio-political discourse, and (3) provide some cautionary notes with respect to an acceptance of Honneth’s remedy. I can only hope, ironically, that my analysis has not so distorted Neculau’s argument as to cause moral injury through inadvertent misrecognition.

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[Link to paper](#)

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