

'Ideology' in educational theory

Ivan A. Snook

Education Department, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses that any legitimate use of 'ideology' in educational theory must stress: (1) its general political and interest serving function; (2) its usual inarticulated and subtle character; and, (3) its tendency to be held dogmatically and defended irrationally and to involve attacks on the motives of opponents. This usage of 'ideology' frees it from the biases of both the liberal and the Marxist accounts. Consequently, the concept of 'ideology' can be a useful addition to educational theory. It can extend the critical attitude which is so central to the practice of education while preserving the commitment to objectivity which gives that attitude its point. It thus becomes a genuine tool to resolve educational problems and not a club with which to beat opponents into submission.

'Ideology' has two main meanings, one stemming from liberal thought and one from the Marxist tradition. Among liberals it is sometimes used loosely to describe any set of directive ideas such as democratic political thought and progressive educational theory. More specifically it is reserved for tightly knit sets of beliefs which are carefully guarded from refutation. Favourite examples are Christianity, Marxism and Freudian psychology. In this sense, the sciences, critical philosophies and vague political theories are not seen as ideological.

In contrast to this liberal meaning there is a Marxist usage which in recent years has begun to find its way into educational theory. This usage is necessitated by certain tensions in Marx's theory:

- a. Marx produced a materialist account of human history but had to allow for the apparent centrality of ideas in human life.
- b. Marx produced a 'deterministic' account of human progress but also believed that the scientific understanding of human affairs is possible.
- c. Marx believed that class interest was the driving force of history but had to face the fact that the proletariat, the largest and potentially most powerful class in capitalism was typically unaware of its own oppression or its power.

The notion of ideology was the result of Marx's attempt to grapple with these tensions. According to Marx, the prevailing mode of production gives rise to certain relations of production and these in turn create systems of thought, which sanction or justify the existing mode of production. In short, the theory of ideology states how general ideas come about and explains (or promises to explain) why particular sets of ideas seem important at particular times. 'ideology' is an explanatory not just a descriptive concept.

Two problems immediately arise:

- a. Marx hoped for a science of human behaviour (an historical science) whose task would be to show empirically the connection between a prevailing economic mode and the ruling set of ideas. Is such a science possible? The answer must surely be: in principle, yes. Just as humans can study the effect of the moon on tides and produce scientific knowledge about it so they could study the causal relationships between the mode of production and theoretical ideas and produce scientific knowledge about that. The problem is, however, that a theory which explains (away) man's ideas as ideology faces the charge that its own 'science' might also be explained (away) as ideology. Marx, and Marxists, need criteria for distinguishing science from ideology.
- b. We are accustomed to believe that there is an important distinction between the reasons why people hold certain beliefs (their schooling, class interests etc.) and the objective grounds for those beliefs (the evidence for them). We like to say that truth is related to the latter and not to the former (four million Frenchmen can be wrong). It would seem that in Marx's account objective truth is either an illusion or of little consequence. If it is an illusion then there is no point in Marx, or anyone else, trying to find it. If it is of little consequence then Marx and his followers are saying, as many people suspect they are saying, that truth (like justice, rights, freedom and other bourgeois notions) must be subordinate to class interests.

Wood¹ argues that no such conclusions follow. This argument, he suggests confuses the individual's grounds for belief with the reasons why a certain belief has become widely known. Thus a person might accept historical materialism on objective grounds, realise he would not have become aware of historical materialism but for certain contingent conditions and recognise that these conditions explain why others also hold to historical materialism.

On this account my second puzzle is transformed into the first and remains unsolved. The particular historical materialist believes he holds his beliefs on objective grounds; but so do lots of other people and these, we are told, are deceived. Might not he too be deceived by personal or class interests? More importantly, should he not if he is both rational and sincere presume that he is? Faced with the massive, time-honoured self-deception which his theory requires would he not stand guilty of the grossest hubris if he adds 'but not I'?

So far I have been assuming that an ideology can be either true or false. On this reading, historical materialism would be ideological but true while other generalised beliefs would be ideological and false. This would entail that a theory could be both scientific and ideological i.e. present a true account and be explicable from the mode of production.

There is, however, a rather different Marxist account of ideology in which ideologies are necessarily false. Ideology is now contrasted with science. Human science, as we have seen, can discover with objective certainty the material laws relating the mode of production to the other social elements. But (a) in any society other than the classless one of the future it will necessarily be the case that most people do not realise this - otherwise they would refuse to act against their own interests. Their view of it cannot then be scientific but ideological, i.e. distorted or false (this is the origin of 'false consciousness'). (b) In a classless socialist society there will be no need for illusory views about social relations - hence no ideology. The scientific view, possible now for a few, will be freely available to all and ideology will be at an end.

There is now, however, a more formidable problem to be faced. What sense can be made of 'true' and 'false' in the materialist world described? If ideology faithfully represents the prevailing mode of production then to that extent it can be said to be 'in accordance with reality' or 'true'. This suggestion parallels Wood's treatment of Marx on justice. Quoting from *Capital*: 'This content is just whenever it corresponds to the mode of production, is adequate to it. It is unjust whenever it contradicts it', Wood argues that Marx had no transcendental notion of justice: slavery, feudalism and capitalist exploitation are not unjust since they are in accordance with ('correspond to') the relevant mode of production.² Similarly, it could be argued, a set of general ideas is 'true' if it

corresponds to the mode of production. To my knowledge, such an interpretation of Marx is never advanced. The reason, of course, is that while he may not have had an ethic, he did have a theory of knowledge which he believed to be true. The term 'false' usually occurs as we have seen in the expression 'false consciousness'. Consciousness, is false insofar as ideology is apprehended as other than it really is: a reflection of and justification for the particular mode of production. Thus for Marx, 'Ideology' usually carries a pejorative note and contemporary Marxists typically use it in this way.

What is desperately needed, of course, is some non question-begging account of truth and some criterion of truth that is not itself rooted in a dubious theory. Since debate has raged as to whether Marx provided any coherent account it is an appropriate time to move away from Marx to a modern educational exponent who, aware of the crucial problem, has attempted to provide an answer derived from recent work in the philosophy of science.³

Traditionally, there have been two general attempts to define 'truth'. The first, the correspondence theory, sees truth as the correspondence between our beliefs (propositions, thoughts, claims etc.) and the way the world is: 'the cat is on the mat' is true if the cat is on the mat. The other, the coherence theory, concentrates on the relationships between various beliefs (propositions, thoughts, claims etc.). If one of my beliefs (e.g. that I am in my office) is consistent with all or most of my other beliefs (about buildings, scenery, people, etc.) it is true or is likely to be true.

Harris makes it clear that he will have nothing to do with a correspondence theory. He dismisses as the most damaging legacy of Greek thought the view that 'increasing one's knowledge is a matter of coming to know more and more about an objective given existential world'.⁴

Any criteria of truth, then, must rest on a form of coherence. Harris' treatment of theory-dependence reinforces this. He sums up a lengthy discussion with the uncompromising claim that 'facts are established as such only in terms of a theory that constitutes them as facts in the first place'.⁵ There are no facts independent of a theory. Facts cannot be the test of a theory for they exist only in the theory. And truth cannot consist in the conformity of thought with reality for the 'reality' presupposes the thought.

Down this road lies relativism and philosophical idealism for it is a short step to the position that humans create their own reality. It is an irony that Marx himself has been accused of being an epistemological idealist. Harris wishes to avoid idealism and relativism. He must then find a way to reconcile his extreme version of theory-dependence with a commitment to objectivity.

His attempts to do that are best approached through his treatment of ideology. According to him, ideology can be loosely defined as a set of theoretical stances involving attitudes, values and habitual responses which are embodied in definite social practices and which serve to maintain the status quo or to bring about a changed set of social relations and social formations. Its point is 'the rationalisation of value and the legitimation of action' and in this way it differs from scientific theories. Harris believes that the distinction is not a rigorous one and science can be ideological, i.e. be used to guide or legitimate action.⁶ Similarly, according to Harris, an ideology is rather like science as it is viewed by philosophers of science such as Lakatos. So, Harris talks of an ideology being a 'research programme' with a 'core' and a 'protective belt'. Like scientific theories, ideologies can be refined, modified and corrected. Thus, Harris holds out the possibility of judging the truth of an ideology. According to Lakatos, a scientific theory can be favourably assessed to the extent that it generates further findings and Harris suggests that an ideology can be judged in a similar way.⁷

The promise fares badly from the start for Harris says that ideologies can present a distorted picture of the world yet function in an efficient way. Thus the judgement must be made 'with regard to the ideology theory-series itself, and not in terms of how well the particular ideology functions in a particular society. When it comes to ideology, the best theory and the best functioning theory can be two different things'.⁸ This seems decidedly odd. What is meant by 'a distorted picture of the world'? It theories (including ideologies) are to be judged as "research programmes" why renege and judge them in some other mysterious way? What exactly is meant by "ideology theory-series"

and how is it distinguished from an ideology? Is Christianity an ideology and part of an Ideology-series, religion? Or is Roman Catholicism an ideology and a sub-set of the ideology-series, Christianity? What reason have we for accepting that the best theory and the best functioning theory are very different? Finally, why must an ideology be judged overall and not in terms of how well it functions in a particular society?

Fairly clearly, Harris is oscillating between a pragmatic and a correspondence criterion. The contradiction continues:

While there are conflicting social interests, and struggle, there is no escape from ideology; the best one can hope for is to live in the ideology that provides the best representation of the world.⁸

He elaborates this idea and its significance as follows:

If [a particular ideology] arises from, or is determined by social relations and social conditions that work against our best interests, and that serve to distort and misrepresent the world to us, then clearly it is in our interest to break out and away from that particular ideological perspective.⁹

This is very confused. It is clearly in our interests to get rid of ideologies which operate against our interests but it is not at all obvious that it is in our interests to get rid of ideologies which distort or misrepresent our world. Harris has already conceded that the ruling class are often themselves unaware of the distortion of the reigning ideology. They may genuinely believe, for example, that property is in everyone's interests. Since the ruling Ideology is by definition in the interests of the dominant class it cannot be in their interest to break out of that ideology no matter how much it distorts reality. If 'true' means 'serving my interests' then a particular ideology would be both true and false: true for one class and false for the other.

Since Harris apparently does not want to say this he must provide criteria for assessing the truth value of ideologies. He makes four main attempts:

1. The ideology must be falsifiable and satisfy the requirements of a progressive 'research programme'. The latter recalls the analogy with Lakatos' view of science and will be discussed later. The falsifiability requirement poses several problems for Harris. (a) Falsifiability has its home in the positivist school, a prime target of Harris and other Marxists. Falsifiability requires the separation of facts from theory and Harris has denied the possibility of this. (b) Even if descriptive statements and explanatory theories are falsifiable, it is unlikely that an ideology could be. The essential function of an Ideology according to Harris is to 'legitimate value and guide practice'. For this, some conception of the good (perhaps a non-moral good) is required. It is difficult then to see how a total ideology could be falsified. Individual factual propositions within an ideology can be falsified but one of the real problems with an ideology is that the 'falsifications' have little effect. Galileo did not bring down the Roman Church, massive unemployment and poverty does not lead to the abandonment of capitalism, and the fate of Polish workers does not seem to bother academic Marxists.
2. The second strategy is to look at ideology (or theory - Harris has by this stage come to use these terms interchangeably) in terms of interests. Looking, for example, at the 'theory' that a person's place in the social structure is a reflection of God's will, Harris suggests that we can see immediately that the theory, and what it generates, has been used continually throughout history to serve the interests of particular ruling classes.¹⁰ This is undeniably correct but the force of the argument comes from the particular example. It is a theological claim and is scarcely a genuine empirical statement at all. If we replace it with a more obviously empirical statement such as 'a person's position in the social structure is highly correlated with his measured I.Q.' the logic of Harris' argument is revealed. For this statement has also been used to serve the interests of ruling classes. The point is, of course, that this does not make it false: a true theory can serve class interests. Unless 'true' is to have the cynical meaning 'serving the right interests' there seems little chance of producing truth criteria from the notion of 'interests'.

3. The third strategy involves showing that the ideology is false in the standard sense of false. Thus, claims Harris, the ideological claim about wealth being related to natural ability has been shown by evidence to be false or at least suspect. This to me is reasonable but, unfortunately, Harris cannot consistently adopt this strategy either. He holds that 'facts are established as such only in terms of a theory that constitutes them as facts in the first place'.¹¹ Thus there cannot be any appeal outside an ideology to 'the facts'. Harris almost recognises his problem: 'the production of evidence, in the form of either confirming or falsifying instances, is not in itself sufficient to judge a theory'.¹² I say "almost recognises" for he does not seem to notice that his view quoted above goes far beyond the grudging concession that 'evidence ... is not in itself sufficient to judge a theory'. It logically cannot touch a theory except the one which generated it. It cannot have any bearing on the truth or falsity of any other theory (or ideology).
4. Harris then turns to a different criterion: consistency. Tackling again the ideological thesis that wealth is determined by ability, he shows how unlikely this is in a hierarchical society. With the polemical skill which Marxists, like their mentor, display so brilliantly, he exposes liberal rhetoric as riddled with inconsistencies. With his strategy here and his particular case I am in full agreement. Two things must however be noted: (i) he still has to plug in his evidence and this is inconsistent with his position and also question-begging if we are comparing ideologies; (ii) what he is doing is no different from what is done by conventional teachers of social sciences and philosophy. 'One does not have to be Marxist' to expose inconsistencies and cultural myths" At this point and elsewhere Harris shows clearly that he retains his 'liberal' commitment to truth and an antipathy to dogmatism. It is a pity that his own theoretical position makes that commitment difficult to sustain.

Since his discussion depends on the analogy between Ideology and 'research programmes' I shall now discuss the legitimacy of that analogy and the adequacy of that position.

As has been already mentioned, 'research programme' is a term used by Imre Lakatos to describe and explain the development of the natural sciences. A naive inductivism focuses on particular propositions which can be verified. Popper's account deals with theories which can be falsified. Lakatos argues that neither of these strategies succeeds. Rather there are research programmes which have a 'hard core' which cannot be falsified and a 'protective belt' which can. Research programmes cannot, therefore, be judged against 'the real world'. They can be evaluated only as progressive or degenerating: they are progressive if they consistently yield new data; they are degenerating if they do not.

Harris attempts to use this to explicate the role of ideology. He uses it in two ways (i) He suggests that each ideology is a research programme which can be evaluated in ways similar to scientific programmes, as progressive or degenerating. (ii) He uses Althusser's own 'theory' ('knowledge as production') as a research programme which 'surpasses even Lakatos in that it provides workable tools and criteria' for making these evaluations. Thus in the trial of ideologies historical materialism is one of the defendants and also a member of the jury: Harris, captivated by the term 'research programme' does not seem to notice the essential ambiguity. For the moment I shall ignore it too and concentrate on the analogy itself. There are three levels of criticism:

1. Even in the natural sciences the notion of 'research programmes' is problematic. The most decisive objection it seems to me is that there is no obvious way to differentiate one 'research programme' from another. Each 'research programme' is made up of several theories and the problem of differentiating one theory from another is compounded by the necessity of distinguishing one research programme from another. One can, perhaps, suggest examples but it is far from clear what the criteria are for accepting the examples. And yet, if research programmes are to be assessed and compared for their fruitfulness, their differentiation is crucial.

2. Even if the problem can be solved for science it is doubtful if the analogy will work for ideology. Since an ideology exists to 'legitimate values and guide practice' it is difficult to see how notions like 'progressive' and 'degenerating' can operate at all. For as Dewey was reminded, the ends as well as the means have to be evaluated. Value judgments are inescapable in assessing 'fruitfulness'. Objectivity does not seem remotely possible here unless 'fruitfulness' itself is made normative.
3. Even granted the viability of the analogy Harris' conclusion does not follow: 'the best one can hope for is to live in the ideology that provides the best representation of the world'¹³ But why should we do that? Lakatos admits that in science theories which seem progressive falter while those which seem to be degenerating revive. Feyerabend, indeed; draws the opposing conclusion: that in science the existence of competing 'research programmes' is healthy and necessary for scientific progress. Might not the same be true for ideologies?

For these and other reasons I am convinced that the growing use of the term 'research programme' in contemporary philosophy of education is an aberration. More particularly it obscures rather than clarifies the vexed question of ideology. We need to sharpen (not remove) the distinction between science and ideology. The obvious way to do that is to take the correspondence theory of truth seriously. An adequate discussion of that would require more extended work than is possible here but a beginning can be made.

Intuitively we tend to accept the correspondence theory. We believe that our statements refer to an external world and are true when they 'correspond' to it. Of itself, however, that is not an argument. Conversely, there are arguments against it, most notably those which stress that we have no access to the world other than through our senses, perceptual equipment, conceptual schemes etc. We cannot as it were, 'take a peep' and check our beliefs against a world; for the checking presupposes the equipment which led to our beliefs in the first place. This is a powerful consideration but there are, I believe, two lines of argument along which progress is possible in reinstating a tenable correspondence theory:

1. The first line is suggested in a paper by Bush.¹⁴ He argues that the original source of beliefs is reinforcement. Beliefs are reinforced when expectancies are realised and expectancies are realised when they are in harmony with the real world. Thus. animals and primitive peoples have many true beliefs and a few false ones. Their beliefs are constantly facing a form of 'natural selection'. False beliefs, on the other hand, generate expectancies which are thwarted. The beliefs are not reinforced and are rejected. (It would follow, I would argue; that the notion of a theory is inappropriate here: the animals do not have theories and primitives do not need theories. The claim that 'all observation is theory laden' is false.)

In the case of human beings, argues Bush, language and conceptual thought bring significant changes. By thought we are able to acquire beliefs which are not directly functional or easily testable and by language we can hand these on to others:

The store of beliefs is thus swelled substantially, making us possessors of information, or misinformation, whose testable consequences are not easily met with in daily affairs, and indeed some of which the testable consequences are not easily imaginable.¹⁵

Thus we acquire an added source of true beliefs and a potent source of false beliefs which, because of their remoteness from experience, are not easily dislodged.

I find Bush's account very suggestive in re-instating truth as correspondence. It also leads us back to the distinction between science and ideology. Both, of course, are highly abstract and hence susceptible to being false. Science, however, is the institutionalised awareness of just this problem. It attempts (often perhaps unsuccessfully) to make our higher level beliefs conform to the selective criteria of primitive beliefs.

The whole point of experimental science is to render theories testable, devise crucial experiments and carry them out.¹⁶

So, for all the problems with science we can fairly speak of the scientific attitude and compare it to the ideological. We are all fallible, truth is never assured but we can try harder.

Further confidence can be gained from the second strand in the argument for a correspondence theory of truth.

2. David Papineau argues¹⁷ that within a scientific theory there is no way except coherence for checking the truth of particular claims or generalizations. When, however, we think of our theories as wholes we are justified in seeing them as more or less successful attempts to picture reality.¹⁸ Unless this were the case it is impossible to understand what our theories are about or to explain why some generate new data (i.e. are 'progressive') while others don't (are 'degenerating').

Because Harris is opposed to a correspondence theory and over-impressed with certain doctrines in contemporary philosophy of science he finds himself unable to resolve the issue of the role of education in ideological criticism. He supports a materialistic account of the origin of ideas but wants to leave some scope for the criticism of ideas. While not placing too much faith in such criticism, he affirms towards the end of his book that the strategies he has outlined 'offer us some hope'.¹⁹ He wants, in other words, to create a place for the 'critical thought' espoused by liberal educators. The problem is that he has cut the ground from under his own feet by linking ideology and science and insisting that even in science facts are created by theories.

It cannot of course be claimed that these criticisms will apply to all uses of the term 'ideology' in Marxist educational theory but the general problem is endemic. In Marxist thought the dominant ideology arises from the mode of production and can change only when the mode of production changes. Formal education, if it has any role to play at all, can simply hasten the day - questions of truth and falsity do not arise. But educators, by and large, are professionally committed to the power of ideas and the importance of truth. Thus they are forced to reconcile their Marxist feelings with their liberal convictions (or vice versa).

To do that they must temper the Marxist account of ideology with aspects of the liberal account. Ideology is a system of ideas which legitimises and guides social practice. It tends therefore to be self-protective and to resist falsification: too much is at stake for an ideology to be easily abandoned. Hence the liberal notion discussed earlier is important despite the way in which the Marxist understandably rejects it. Any legitimate use of 'ideology' in educational theory must stress:

(1) Its general political and interest serving function (to discourage talking of schools and educational theories in isolation from the political and social context). (2) Its usual inarticulated and subtle character (to enable it to skewer the barely perceived ideologies which underlie our so-called liberal society). (3) Its tendency to be held dogmatically and defended irrationally and to involve attacks on the motives of opponents (to enable its use against radicals as well as against conservatives and liberals).

Freed in this way from the biases of both the liberal and the Marxist accounts, the concept of 'ideology' can be a useful addition to educational theory. It can extend the critical attitude which is so central to the practice of education while preserving the commitment to objectivity which gives that attitude its point. It thus becomes a genuine tool to resolve educational problems and not a club with which to beat opponents into submission.

References

1. Wood, Allen (1981) Karl Marx, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul) 121.
2. *ibid.*, 131
3. Harris, K. (1979) Education and Knowledge, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul)
4. *ibid.*, 5.

5. *ibid.*, 35
6. *ibid.*, 47
7. *ibid.*, 49
8. *ibid.*, 65
9. *ibid.*, 94
10. *ibid.*, 111
11. *ibid.*, 35
12. *ibid.*, 113
13. *ibid.*, 65
14. Bush, E. (1977) 'Berkeley' Truth, and the World' *Inquiry* 20, 205-225.
15. *ibid.*, 211
16. *ibid.*, 213
17. Papineau, David (1979) *Theory and Meaning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
18. *ibid.*, 128
19. Harris, *op. cit.* | 84.