Ideology in Recent Writings on South Africa

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As with all the other concepts used in everyday and in technical discussions of social practices and our knowledge of them, the notion of ideology has been a contentious one. Perhaps even more so than many others because it deals with the quite fundamental matter of how our thinking may be affected by the constraints of our existence. Whatever answer is given to this question goes far to shape the social theory we use and the explanations we derive from it. So it is easy to understand why the notion of ideology has undergone periods of either neglect or prominence depending upon which epistemological views and procedures were dominant. Thus, at a time when Mannheim had been firmly misunderstood and put aside by both positivistic and critical theorists and when Verstehen had been reduced to a mere source of hunches and hypotheses, it was possible, for a while and in the English-speaking world especially, to regard ideology as no more than a set of beliefs of one kind or another, beliefs which were then contrasted, usually to their disadvantage, with "the realities of the situation."

However, when the long supremacy of the naturalistic scientific method in social theory had begun to pass (by roughly mid-century or soon thereafter) the study of ideology and its consequences became central in the changed intellectual climate. Important elements in this changed climate were Neo-Marxist interpretations of ideology, for example, by Althusser; a shift in hermeneutics from its preoccupation with method to an ontological claim for Verstehen as constitutive of social interaction (e.g. Gadamer and Ricoeur); as well as renewed and new attempts at reconciling being and thinking, meaningful action and institutional structure as, for example, in the work of Habermas and Giddens. In this more recent social theory, the earlier positivist picture of social life as largely determined by various factors external to the individual members of a society has been supplemented by a more historical and interpretative view of the production and maintenance of social practices as the creation of human agents who are continually assessing and modifying the ends and means open to them, while remaining subject to constraints arising from their limited knowledge, their historical situatedness and the natural world. The heavy indebtedness of this paper to Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (1976; 1977; 1979) will become apparent as the discussion proceeds.
The change noted above has, of course, been reflected in the writings on South Africa during the last fifteen to twenty years, a time in which significant gains have been made and earlier shortcomings made good. Among the misconceptions which have been modified or laid to rest one could count these: the notion that South Africa was merely some kind of relic from a colonial and benighted past; the premature expectation that economic development would, before it was too late, bring racial discrimination to an end; and, perhaps most important, the over-simple reduction of South African conflict to single causes such as racial prejudice, cultural differences or "class" and economics. Nevertheless, I want to argue in this paper that, despite these gains and despite a growing awareness of the pitfalls of positivistic theory as a self-fulfilling prophecy, some of the best contemporary writers on South Africa retain traces of naturalistic assumptions of an epistemological kind. These affect their interpretations and explanations, their conception of the tasks of social theory and so, inevitably, their assessment of the effects of social theory on the South African situation. Furthermore, I argue that these traces are the "ideological" element in their writings in that sense of the word which this paper tries to establish.

Since the writings on South Africa that I have chosen to discuss are the subtle and sophisticated products of long and informed study of the matters treated in them, any criticism has to be presented with care and circumspection. For it is not to be expected that writers of this calibre would lay themselves open to large and simple errors. In fact, the best chance I have of being able to make good my case against them is by pointing more to omissions than to errors in what they have done. These circumstances make it necessary that I spend nearly as much of this paper on laying out the ground of my criticisms as I spend on the actual examples drawn from the writings. In giving these grounds, I begin with what I take to be the positivistic assumptions whose lingering effects I claim can still be found in the selected writings. Then, I offer certain interpretative assumptions which I believe have to be incorporated if a more satisfactory account of social practices, and especially of their ideological aspects, is to be attained. This entails spelling out the epistemological implications of these assumptions for the theoretical study of South Africa. With that done, I give examples of what seems to me to be the persistence of positivist assumptions and a neglect of interpretative ones. To end the paper, I pose the question of what difference it made to South Africa that scholars wrote in the way they did.

The Positivistic Assumptions

In what follows, I shall stick to only three characteristic assumptions which I shall detail as fully as seems necessary without attempting a general definition of positivism. To try to do that would subvert the purpose of this paper almost wholly. That positivism as "a certain philosophical attitude concerning human knowledge" (Kolakowski, 1968:2) has had, and continues to have, an