

Beyond Ideology: Rethinking contextuality

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We are indeed conditioned by the contexts in which we live, but we are also the creators of our political and social constructions and we can change them if we are so determined.

[1]

Mary Dietz

In the debate [2] between Simon Springer and David Harvey on what ideological frame the radical geography should adopt, Harvey's proposal for *letting radical geography free of any particular "ism"* seems to make a lot of sense. And although their polemical texts discuss, at first sight, the matter of radical geography, in my opinion, they have also a wider importance for the whole question of the role of ideology in the project for social liberation and emancipation. With small exceptions, the proposal of freeing ourselves from ideology seems highly neglected from the movements for social emancipation, and I think this is a big mistake if we want to actually involve more people in them and act constructively.

We see activists and thinkers being busy with trying to keep their ideological/identical "purity", often engaging in endless discussions on what is "anarchist", "marxist" or whatever. Don't get me wrong, I do not mean to abandon theory as such in the name of direct action. On the contrary, I think that theoretical research and critical thinking are essential for effective action. **But Ideology must not be mistaken with theory.**

Ideology and non-contextuality

The Situationist International defined Ideology as a doctrine of interpretation of existing facts [3], which can be

understood as thinking in a non-contextual way. What this means is that the *ideologue* creates a certain type of analysis, influenced by his local context (social environment, economic development, culture etc.) and constantly tries to fit in it realities, born in different contexts, which often leads to non-understanding. We can see this clearly, for example, in the reactions of certain anarchists and marxists (having purist class analysis based solely on realities of 19th-century industrial Europe), which are judging the events in Rojava, searching there for “proletariat”, that does not exist in the classical Western sense [4].

In this line of thought, Ideology castrates the ideas one has, turning them into sterile/mummified dogmas that cannot exist beyond their initial form. The “ideologized” ideas become incompatible with realities/contexts that differ from the ones that have given them birth, and in a way, they become useless. The ideological non-contextuality obstructs both the theoretical research and the subsequent from it activity. Ideology creates the dogmatic notion of utopia and excludes everything that does not fit in it, even if there are some common principles (as we saw above in the case of Rojava), creating a sort of self-alienating elitist subculture.

Thus Ideology becomes more self-expressive than instrumental. It morphs into specific identity, often serving as an excuse for abdicating from broad social affairs. Instead, it creates its own circle of self-interest, open mainly to like-minded (sharing same Ideology) individuals who remove themselves voluntarily from the institutions and social networks of the society which they potentially could influence [5]. As Jonathan Matthew Smucker points out:

[...] when we do not contest the cultures, beliefs, symbols, narratives, etc. of the existing institutions and social networks that we are part of, we also walk away from the resources and power embedded within them. In exchange for a shabby little activist clubhouse, we give away the whole farm.

We let our opponents have everything.

Because of its non-contextual character, Ideology can be viewed as part of the dominant nowadays imaginary, based on bureaucratic logic, which needs to frame everything into “comfortable” fixed boxes, i.e. strict social and political roles, thus creating and strengthening identity, rather than ideas. In her book *The Emergence of social space*, Kristin Ross describes how during the Paris Commune, Catulle Mendès (representing the pre-commune order) is not really mourning the drop in production but rather his anxiety stems from the attack on identity, since *the shoemakers stopped making shoes, but barricades* [6]. She traces this bureaucratic logic of narrow identity back to Plato, for whom in a well-constituted state a unique task is being attributed to each person; a shoemaker is first of all someone who cannot also be a warrior [7].

One characteristic of the bureaucratic logic is its inherent predisposition towards hierarchy, since some tasks and roles are more important than others. David Graeber, in an interview for the Greek political magazine *Babylonia*, defines Ideology as *the idea that one needs to establish a global analysis before taking action*, which presupposes that the role of intellectual vanguard (narrow ideologues-experts), have to play a leadership role in any popular political movement [8].

Beyond Ideology: Context is all

In order for modern social movements to really challenge the existing order, they will have to overpass the limits of the contemporary imaginary, based on bureaucratic logic and fixed political roles. In practice this means moving beyond ideology, i.e. locating desirable principles and results, and simultaneously making efforts at adjusting them to the local context. This does not mean to leave aside our ideals and to “go with the flow”, but on the contrary, to try to share them with as more people as possible, who most probably don’t share

the same (or any at all) Ideology/dogma/political lifestyle. In so doing questions such as "is EZLN anarchist or not" [9] will become obsolete and replaced by "what do they propose, on what basis and principles, how and do we agree with what they do" and so on.

In the end, it depends on the goals we target with our struggles. If we strive towards social emancipation and direct democratic participation, we cannot but try to link various struggles, movements and as many people as possible and for this to happen, we have to change the way we express our ideas according to the interlocutor we have before us. As Aki Orr suggests: *A society can be run by Direct Democracy only if most of its citizens want to decide policies themselves* since no minority, however positive its intentions, can impose it on society [10].

Steps towards this direction were made by Larry Giddings, who replaced the ideological label "anarchist" with the broader "anti-authoritarian" [11]. He did so after acknowledging that whether he recognizes non-anarchist struggles or not, they still exist, and by ignoring them because they don't reflect his own notion of a "non-nation-state future", he ignores his own desire for such. He reached the conclusion that decentralized social and economic systems, organized in democratic, non-statist manner, will only come through common struggles by various movements and broad social involvement.

So instead of constantly trying to define what "true" anarchism is, he decided to try another approach: to locate the anti-authoritarian characteristics of various already existing social movements and to identify their common enemies (oppressors) and thus to connect them. And in order such connections to be made, narrow ideological narratives had to be abandoned and replaced by general anti-authoritarian culture, which can simultaneously be determined and itself to determine the context in which it was created.

Conclusion

Moving beyond Ideology does not mean abdicating from our ideas and principles but their constant reevaluation and development. To the fears that without ideological identities we will be absorbed by the dominant culture of political apathy and mindless consumerism we can answer with the creation of a broad citizen culture of autonomous individuals who are, before all, *speakers of words and doers of deeds* [12]. Such a broad concept, based, as proposed by Mary Dietz, on the virtue of mutual respect and the principle of “positive liberty” of self-governance (and not simply the “negative liberty” of non-interference), will keep the anti-authoritarian spirit while allowing for interaction with large sections of the society and the implementation in practice of our ideas in different contexts. Only one such approach will help us escape the “sectarianism” (with all the separatism and lifestyliness that stems from it) of the political movements haunting them from the beginning of 20th century until nowadays.

Notes:

[1] Mary Dietz, Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship. in Dimensions of Radical Democracy. edited by Chantall Mouffe.1992. Verso Books. p79

[2] “Listen, Anarchist!” by David Harvey

[3] “There is no such thing as situationis, which would mean a doctrine of interpretation of existing facts.” (Situationist International) from Internationale Situationniste #1, Knabb, p45

[4] Mr. Anarchist, we need to have a chat about colonialism, by Petar Stanchev.

[5] Why We Can't Depend On Activists To Create Change, by Jonathan Matthew Smucker.

[6] Ross, Kristin. The Emergence of social space. Verso 2008 p14

[7] Ibid. p13

[8] Crimethinc: Against Ideology?

[9] Back in 2002, the US journal Green Anarchy published a critical article of the Zapatista movement, named "The EZLN are not anarchist!"

[10] Abolish Power: Politics Without Politicians

[11] "Why Anti-Authoritarian?" an essay by Larry Giddings

[12] Mary Dietz, Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship. in Dimensions of Radical Democracy. edited by Chantall Mouffe. Verso Books. 1992. p75