Ideology and the Saturation of Time and Space

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"Time and space are modes by which we think and not conditions in which we live"
Albert Einstein[1]

One of the first political groups that initiated a more complex **critique on ideology** was the Situationist International. They defined it as a doctrine of interpretation of existing facts[2], i.e. certain type of analysis, developed in specific politico-historic context, that have internalized the latter's temporal and spatial characteristics completely. In this way ideologies are meant to present every other contextual reality (no matter how different) in the light of their initial environment.

Thus cultural and racial superiority (based on pseudo-scientific theories from the past) remains as relevant as ever for heavily ideologized fascist trends, despite the immense scientific body of proofs that disband their theories. The **industrial proletarian worker** (of the 18th and 19th century industrial Western Europe) remains the main actor for genuine social change for many of the first-world leftists, despite the fact that their societies have long entered into a post-industrialist era of service-oriented economies. Space and time are thus being saturated by ideology, which prevents the recognition of alterations in temporality and spatiality.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in his work *Dawn of Day*, notes the similarities between Christianity and the radical ideologies of his period, regarding their attitude towards time[3]. According to him many on the Left, just like priests, preach among the oppressed for a future without oppressors. But like

the mythical for Christians “day of judgment”, socialist and other “revolutionary” utopias are eternally delayed. Nietzsche concludes that these ideologies ask you to be prepared and nothing more, waiting for something external, but otherwise you continue to live in the same way as you had lived before.

In similar manner, the situationists proclaimed ideologies to have long been dead[4], since their effect saturates time and space, lacking essentially any vibrancy. The Situationist International maintained a philosophical opposition to every ideology, because it serves to **sterilize everyday life.** For them, ideologies are the despotism of a social fragment imposing itself as pseudo-knowledge of a frozen totality, as a totalitarian worldview.

> *Every ideology, regardless of its philosophical base, tends, like everything else in capitalist society, to rigidify, become fetishised and turn into one more thing to be passively consumed.*

In order for real life activity to continually experiment and correct itself, i.e. to remain vibrant, it must not be ideologized, otherwise it will only have an illusory character that pushes the past and present into a cycle of *déjà vu,* making the notion of future meaningless. In other words, ideology tends to sterilize the present, subordinating it to the past, while excluding the future. This illusory character is evident from Guy Debord’s magnum opus *The Society of the Spectacle*, where he argues that ideology is being *legitimated in modern society by universal abstraction and by the effective dictatorship of illusion*.[5]

Levels of Ideology

There are several levels on which ideology affects social and collective perceptions of space and time. According to the analysis of Cornelius Castoriadis, developed in his critique of Marxism, we can detect two such levels: of the established

power and of the political sect. In both of them he detects problems that arise when one tries to gauge real activities after the mythical standards of a certain ideology:

1. When ideology serves as the official dogma of an established power in a country, it is a tool for this authority to conceal reality and to justify its policies, no matter what its actions are. Socialist states from the past, for example, claimed that they strive towards social equality and classless society, while simultaneously creating an all-powerful class of party functionaries and strengthening the authority of the already existing state bureaucracy. Signs and symbols were placed around public spaces, as a reference to supposedly ongoing Revolution, at a time when authoritarian counterrevolution was actually raging, with temporality and spatiality having been saturated artificially by the socialist ideology of the state.
   The same is happening today with the capitalist system. Its ideological veil presents it as the kingdom of diversity, individuality and freedom, while in practice we witness uniformity on a global scale and the merger of state and private sector. Ideological phrases such as “global village”[6] (neoliberal globalization) and “end of history” (Fukuyama) indicate, in the former case, that all space has become known to us and there is nothing new to be discovered since all has come under the same order, while the latter refers to the inalterable temporal character of the current situation.
2. Ideology, as the doctrine of a multitude of political sects, is the self-evident, self-justifying reason for small groups to act in a certain way. By abiding to a certain ideological purity, such sectarian collectivities voluntarily abdicate from public affairs, as a result of the conception of space and time they have adopted. Their temporality and spatiality has been saturated by their ideology, and new developments in

society are being faced with hostility as they appear foreign to their non-contextual analysis. Due to this, groups that claim to be fighting for social emancipation disconnect their political activity from the ongoing social processes, entrapping themselves instead in a past-without-a-future, thus ceasing to be essentially revolutionary. The attempts to gauge real activities after the mythical standards of a certain ideology most often leads to political inaction.

Direct democracy versus Ideology

French philosopher Claude Lefort argues that *[w]hile ideology emerges from within the social order, ideology dissimulates and conceals the conflicts that ensue from the internal divisions of the social. The discourse on the social can maintain its position of being external to its object only by presenting itself as the guarantor of the rule which attests, by its very existence, to the embodiment of the idea in the social relation.*[7]

Direct democracy on the other hand, as a non-hierarchical project that is antithetic to the oligarchic order of political representation, breaks with the symbolic closure that is typical of modern ideologies (which seek to incarnate rationality and appear to be immanent in the social order) and pre-modern religions (that present the social order as deriving from some extra-social source, or as german-american historian Ernst Kantorowicz puts it – monarchies were *the embodiment of two orders of reality: the transcendent (or divine) and the immanent, that is, the king 'gave society a social body*[8]).

Direct democracy is a political form that creates public space and time, since it allows for **constant interrogation and self-instituting** to take place. Instead of concealing internal clashes within society, as ideologies do, direct democracy is based on what Jacques Ranciere calls *dissensus* – an activity

that cuts across forms of cultural and identity belonging and hierarchies between discourses and genres, working to introduce new subjects and heterogeneous objects into the field of perception.[9] This does not mean that such democratic project is nihilistic or institutionless; on the contrary, it is essentially the constant self-institution of society itself which allows to wide deliberation and exchange of ideas and opinions to be constantly taking place.

In other words, direct democracy is the creation of a different relation of society with its past, present and future, a new relation with its traditions based on critical reflection and re-creation, and, as Castoriadis suggests, *the emergence of a dimension where the collectivity can inspect its own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as domain for its activities*. [10] It creates a new public space of social deliberation and political decision-making, where power belongs to all, while also establishes a temporality that is grounded in the present, but also directed at the collective creation of the future, without metaphysical reassurances of a religious or ideological eternity.

Direct democracy is incompatible with ideology, since the social order and the conflicts that may emerge from the grassroots of society are interlinked. There is not a separated source of power that can conceal itself. This is due to the democratic contradiction observed by Lefort, according to which democracy is the power of the people and the 'power of nobody', because power cannot be identical or 'consubstantial' with a particular individual or group.[11]

Conclusion

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has said that:

A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. *Nothing ever happens but there is*

immediate publicity everywhere. In the present age a rebellion is, of all things, the most unthinkable. Such an expression of strength would seem ridiculous to the calculating intelligence of our times. On the other hand a political virtuoso might bring off a feat almost as remarkable. He might write a manifesto suggesting a general assembly at which people should decide upon a rebellion, and it would be so carefully worded that even the censor would let it pass. At the meeting itself he would be able to create the impression that his audience had rebelled, after which they would all go quietly home—having spent a very pleasant evening.[12]

His words are, more than ever, abreast with our times. Populist ideologies have created the illusion for whole nations that they are rebelling through their vote for far-right or far-left parties and leaders: from Trump in the USA, through Victor Orban in Hungary, until the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) in Greece. Such new governments dress the **old normality** in certain ideological mantle, leading in turn to increased popular cynicism. Unfortunately, among the enemies of the current capitalist nation-states there is still the tendency of embracing ideologies. The groups they form tend to prefer to relive historical events instead of daring to attempt to alter the future and rethink the past.

For the renewal of a truly revolutionary project, there is the need to rethink our perception of time and space: to not be afraid to live in the present and participate in the formation of the future, but also drawing on the lessons from (and rethinking) the past. For this reason the project of direct democracy appears to be truly revolutionary, unlike the pseudo post-ideological discourse of neoliberalism, which still draws heavily on ideological concealment of boiling social conflicts. Only by incorporating the project of direct democracy into our struggles and visions we can go beyond the current saturation of time and space.

References:

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