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THE HOPE OF IDEOLOGY: REVISING RICOEUR

Dan R. Stiver

Ricoeur published in the eighties lectures he gave in the seventies on ideology and utopia.[1] Perhaps because Ricoeur's main emphasis seemed to lie in other areas, this work on political philosophy has not received as much mention—not anything like his work on phenomenology, evil, metaphor, narrative, religion, and personal identity. With perhaps greater attention focused now on his whole corpus after his death in 2005, this work is receiving more attention especially with regard to how it relates to other themes. One of his particular tendencies was to develop a major work in a certain area without necessarily relating it to other aspects of his work. In fact, he gave extensive lectures at the time on the imagination that are just now being made available that also contain rich connections with this work on ideology and utopia as well as his work on metaphor and narrative at the time. All of them are based on imagination, but Ricoeur never published any extensive treatment of imagination although he had worked out a complex approach as shown by these lectures on imagination. What I would like to do is present to you his basic treatment of ideology and utopia, which I think deserves more attention, partly because it is much more complex than many approaches. Often ideology is not treated in relation to utopia. Ideology is often seen in a rather monolithic way. Ricoeur develops a much more nuanced and dialectical approach. Even though his approach seems like a calculus compared to others, I want to extend it in ways that he did not, showing at one point its promise as well as its limitations. In the process, I will apply it to our current presidential campaign rhetoric to see how illuminating it may, or may not, be.

Ricoeur begins with dissatisfaction with the simple understanding of ideology as distortive. Deconstructing Marx, one might say, he uses Marx against Marxism to point to a broader, more humanistic, view of ideology.[2] Rather than seeing ideology as something that can be contrasted with a Marxist, scientific view of things, or a Habermasian transcendental viewpoint, he sees that we are inextricably entangled with ideology. Yet he also posits an integrative and legitimative function of ideology along with the distortive. He then argues that the dangers of ideology are best countered by utopia. Utopia's imaginative exploration of promising possibilities calls ideology into question, but ideology in its constructive forms cautions against the destructive delusions of utopia. What Ricoeur does not develop, however, is the way that ideology contains within itself a utopian element that can be renewed, such as Abraham Lincoln's appeal to the American ideology of freedom against slavery. He also does not deal with perhaps the most influential form of utopian thinking in the last century, namely, dystopia. I want therefore to bring these elements into play in dialogue with his thought and with the contemporary scene.

Expounding Ricoeur

Ricoeur begins with dissatisfaction with the simple, Marxist understanding of ideology as distortive. He then extends it to three different dimensions of ideology, drawing on the work of Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, and Clifford Geertz. He posits an *integrative* and *legitimative* along with a *distortive* function of ideology.[3] Any society, he argues,

drawing here on Geertz, has a symbolic, cultural dimension that integrates and legitimates it. It is usually idealistic, or we might say, utopian, to begin with. To anticipate the connection with utopia, there is a dialectical relationship with utopia, where utopia functions as the place of criticism of ideology. A new society or new regime usually begins as a utopian criticism of the old. As it gains power and authority, the utopia turns into ideology. In this sense, ideology has a constitutive and potentially healthy function. Ricoeur explains, "Logically if not temporally the constitutive function of ideology must precede its distortive function. We could not understand what distortion meant if there were not something to be distorted, something that was of the same symbolic nature."[4] In an essay on science and ideology, he offers another positive influence of ideology, "Its role is not only to diffuse the conviction beyond the circle of founding fathers, so as to make it the creed of the entire group, but also to perpetuate the initial energy beyond the period of effervescence."[5]

The problem is that ideology always has to simplify, and one could add that its idealistic side also simplifies complex and harsh realities. A gap therefore between reality and the ideology has to be filled in by belief in order to have legitimacy. "My argument," he says, "is that ideology occurs in the gap between a system of authority's claim to legitimacy and our response in terms of belief."[6] This "surplus value," not as in Marxism in the value of capital over the work of labor but in the way that legitimation simplifies and thus goes beyond reality, is where the destructive side of ideology typically arises.[7] In order to defend legitimacy against attack, ideology hardens and is used as a weapon by the dominant class to suppress criticism. Ricoeur adds, "This feature appears to contradict the first function of ideology, which is to prolong the shock wave of the founding act. But the initial energy has a limited capacity; it obeys the law of attrition."[8]

The negative sense of ideology is familiar. An example that a colleague of mine and I have used in a class that we were team-teaching recently is from *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* by James Loewen, which is an analysis of the most popular high school American history textbooks. In the chapter on the Pilgrims, he says, "In their pious treatment of the Pilgrims, history textbooks introduce the archetype of American exceptionalism—the notion that the United States is different from—and better than—all other nations on the planet. How is America exceptional? Well, we're exceptionally *good*, for one thing."[9] As he points out, over and over in the textbooks, this belief has been used to contrast intrepid European "settlers" with the native opposition, with bringing civilization to a backward land, with always being on the right side of any conflict. This effort to legitimize then easily leads to destructive consequences for other, not so good, people. The question is, can ideology ever be "good"? Loewen himself, for all of his devastating criticism, points out that one does have to be dishonest to see positive values in founding stories. He says, "The antidote to feel-good history is not feel-bad history but honest and inclusive history."[10] One can admire a vision of democracy and egalitarian freedom, courage and sacrifice in their behalf without denying all of the ways that this vision fell short. Almost any venture begins with high ideals; it is hard to imagine the effort and sacrifice that it takes to begin something directed towards an outcome that one thinks will be disappointing and destructive! Founding myths have a place, but they always have to involve a degree of demythologization. In a smaller way, I think about all the trips I took with Joe Stamey to this meeting and the many stories I heard about it, all of which served to legitimize it for

me and make it attractive. Now Joe did not dress everything up and powder over every blemish. The effect, though, was positive. Interestingly, another example is the founding narrative of the Deuteronomist for the monarchy in the Hebrew Bible. They obviously support the Davidic monarchy, but they reveal the ambivalence about whether it was a good idea, they show that it got off to a very rough start, and they do not gloss over David's great faults. The modern Marxist suspicion of ideology, however, is the dominant perspective on ideology for a reason; the positive functions of ideology, due to their surplus value, easily slide over into negative.

This is where utopia fits in. Ricoeur sees it also as having a three-fold structure that correlates with ideology.[11] In fact, it is a dialectical correlate to ideology. As mentioned, ideology usually begins with the high hopes of utopia. Utopia usually arises as an alternative to an existing ideology. Ricoeur discusses at some length whether they can be separable and decides that they cannot. Utopia, too, can be *destructive*, and as Marx saw, even serve the ends of ideology by being wishful and by thinking unrealistically. It can be dangerous in the minds and hands of fanatics. Where ideology distorts, utopia can be illusory. Ricoeur says in an essay on this topic, "It is as though we have to call upon the 'healthy' function of ideology to cure the madness of utopia and as though the critique of ideologies can only be carried out by a conscience capable of regarding itself from the point of view of 'nowhere.'"[12] At best, however, utopia can provide either a genuine and better alternative to the status quo or serve as continual, constructive criticism. In this positive sense, where ideology legitimates, utopia provides an *alternative*. Its main relationship, as literally the view from nowhere, is to call into question the problems and stress points of ideology. He says, "It is always from the point of view of the nascent utopia that we may speak of a dying ideology. It is the conflict and intersection of ideology and utopia that makes sense of each."[13] The third correlate then is that where ideology preserves identity, utopia explores *possibilities*. Ricoeur states:

> Whether distorting, legitimating, or constituting, ideology always has the function of preserving an identity, whether of a group or individual. As we shall see, utopia has the opposite function: to open the possible. Even when an ideology is constitutive, when it returns us, for example, to the founding deeds of a community—religious, political, etc.—it acts to make us repeat our identity. Here the imagination has a mirroring or staging function. Utopia, on the other hand, is always the exterior, the nowhere, the possible. The contrast between ideology and utopia permits us to see the two sides of the imaginative function in social life.[14]

A significant element of Ricoeur's approach is to note the distinction between ideology and utopia in terms of both being works of the imagination. Utopia is more literary, individual, and related to a particular context, ideology more anonymous and general. Utopia can represent the productive imagination in a way that transcends the situation, reminiscent of the way Ricoeur sees creative metaphor as involving a semantic shock that reconfigures reality. Narrative also can project an imaginative new world in which we can live. For Ricoeur, one of the best examples is Jesus' parables that reorient by disorientation.[15] Interestingly, he hardly makes these connections himself in the text.[16] Ideology also in its more integrative sense is a work of the imagination itself, but posed in a defensive, legitimizing mode rather than a contrary one.[17] Ricoeur further

distinguishes between literary utopias and practical utopias, that is, utopias that are exemplified in experimental communities, often communes. Another distinction is between utopias that are so "un-real" that they are virtually impossible of fulfillment, utopia as nowhere, and utopias that are, eu-topias. Interestingly, Ricoeur as a Christian thinker prefers the latter even though the Kingdom of God idea seems much more like the former.

A notorious example of harmful utopia was Münster after the Protestant Reformation. Very quickly, some saw the implications of Luther's revolution far more than he. My own Baptist tradition is related to the Anabaptists that soon emerged. At Münster, however, the utopian enthusiasm led to notorious excess. In 1534, Jan Matthys with his followers entered the city that he saw as the New Jerusalem and soon re-baptized around 1000 people with plans to move out to conquer the whole world. They soon instituted community of goods and polygamy, with Jan Bockelson, the later leader taking sixteen wives, beheading one of them in the marketplace. Münster became a synonym for the dangers of radical utopianism, the term "Anabaptist" also an epithet of opprobrium. On the other hand, the Reformation itself came about at a certain point due to the imagination of an alternative, as did the French, Russian, and American revolutions. Moreover, each one of them has been measured by how well they measured up to the original vision.

Expanding Ricoeur

This is where a major modification of Ricoeur's thought comes in. Even though his conception of ideology and utopia is rather involved, it hardly does justice to some of the most significant ways that they interact. Ideology is obviously related to the past, usually an idealized one, and thus involves memory. Ricoeur mentions celebrations such as the Fourth of July in the United States, the fall of the Bastille in France, and Lenin's tomb in the Soviet Union.[18] It can be misused, as already noted, in a defensive way to appeal, for example, to the promotion of democracy as a pretext to impose by force "freedom" on another nation or to appeal to the Revolution for the workers to keep a small bureaucratic elite in power. Ricoeur prefers to speak of utopia as the key to criticizing these abuses, but one can see that sometimes it is "the utopian element," one might say, in the ideology that can be used against it, for example, when Abraham Lincoln appealed to the idea of equality in resisting slavery. Of course, he was opposed by Stephen Douglas who appealed to democracy and the rights of self-determination by voters (white males) in the new states to determine if they would be slave or free states. It is also true that Southerners could see Lincoln's appeal as a use of destructive ideology in preserving the hegemony of the North over their economic way of life. One could also easily construe Lincoln's appeal, as one could later Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, as utopian in bringing criticism of the present. Ricoeur, however, only hints at the possibility of a continuing utopian element in the ideological, and, in fact, seems to rule it out by his larger architectonic.

What is missing from his view, apart from tantalizing hints, is the possibility of utopian stirrings within an ideology that are stronger than the past-oriented, integrative elements of ideology. This dimension allows for renewal from within the city, so to speak, rather than lobbed from outside the walls. In fact, Ricoeur acknowledges in his discussion of Henri de Saint-Simon concerning utopia, "The spiritual location of utopia is between two

religions, between an institutionalized religion in decline and a more fundamental religion that remains to be uncovered."[19] If one can see that the latter is a return or renewal of the first utopian vision, an even more dialectical relation can be seen at times, where utopia emerges from within ideology. In his later discussion of Charles Fourier and utopia, Ricoeur even more suggestively comments, "The religious overtone of Fourier's proclamations raises an issue about utopia as a whole: to what extent is utopias' futurism fundamentally a return? Fourier comments quite often that what he advocates is not a reform but a return, a return to the root. He has many pages on the topic of forgetfulness."[20] One could easily point here to Ricoeur's last major work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* concerning the significance of the past for moving forward to the future.[21] And in respect to religion, he adds in this context, "In a sense all founders of philosophies, religions, and cultures say that they are bringing forth something that already existed."[22] Although Ricoeur does not develop these fleeting ruminations, they open the door to a more nuanced picture of the relation of ideology and utopia. Utopia may not then always be "the exterior, the nowhere." It is not always thus the view from nowhere but the view from somewhere, perhaps the somewhere of a return to an original utopia buried within an ideology. Like ideology in general, this type of utopia conserves an identity but only through renewal and transformation.[23]

It is this sense of a latent hope within ideology that makes more sense of the current political debates. The candidates obviously appeal to utopian elements within the U.S. tradition. I have heard Hillary Clinton appeal to the "can-do" spirit of America. If there is a problem, we can solve it. Barack Obama similarly appeals to the egalitarian dreams at the beginning, later continued by Lincoln and especially King to say, "Yes, we can." John McCain also appealed to the spread of democracy to Iraq and to the spirit of finishing what has been started there as a characteristic of the American spirit. These are not criticisms that come from outside the U.S. tradition. Most politicians at one time or another appeal, as Obama does in his *The Audacity of Hope*, notably subtitled *Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, to "the fundamental decency of the American people"—which does not include their opponents when they really get after them! As we saw in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, this assumption of "goodness" can become destructive ideology, but it can also fund appeals to do better for one another in terms of education and health care. These kinds of appeals do not come from radically different Communist, Socialist, or even radical libertarian visions. They appeal to the past for the sake of criticizing the present in order to secure a better future. Against Ricoeur, the critique of ideology often comes from ideology. If ideology can be positive, it does not only critique utopias, it can criticize its own current manifestation. It is the same surplus value that allows room for critique just as it allows for sclerosis. This is what Ricoeur failed to recognize, but it is extremely significant. One can see it as the way present practice falls short of the original utopian dream that lies behind any ideology. One can see it in the current presidential campaign just as one could see it in internal critique of Communist countries that did not live up to their billing.

Yet another surprising lacuna in Ricoeur's elaborate treatment is "dystopia." More than utopias, which were prevalent before the twentieth century, dystopias have dominated the last century. One thinks especially of George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. One can also think of numerous films like *Serenity* and even *The Matrix*. The last century has seen plenty of suspicion of utopias as well as of ideologies, reflected in

Marxist critique of both. Dystopias are manifestly criticisms of utopias, but in effect, they are criticisms of ideologies. *1984* and *Brave New World* are patent, powerful rebukes to the dominant two ideologies of the time, Communism and Capitalism. Ricoeur saw ideologies being most effectively critiqued by utopias, but dystopias do not clearly fit. On the one hand, they do not represent the imagination of a positive alternative but the problems inherent in the present ideologies. On the other hand, they are not totally inconsistent with his point in that they are works of the literary imagination by individuals, marks of utopias, that provide a critical perspective on ideologies, even though they themselves are not so much alternative positive utopias as much as the logical extensions of current ideologies. They show us where we are heading, perhaps in time to allow for reform rather than revolution. A fascinating case where dystopias play out in more restricted ways is in the debate over universal health care. Liberals play out the apocalyptic implications of continuing down the present path and trusting the free market. Conservatives point to countries that have universal health care, the ideologies of those countries, so to speak, and likewise spell out the catastrophic outcome of applying those systems to the U.S.

In these two senses, then, constructive criticism can be brought to ideologies in addition to the criticism that comes from u-topia, nowhere, from a clear alternative. The latent utopian dreams within ideology can boomerang back on it, and the dystopian imagination can bring to the surface the destructive tendencies, both taking advantage of the gap or surplus value that Ricoeur identifies to make room for their criticism. This reformulation of Ricoeur helps us extend the point that he already made about ideology not always being negative and destructive. Its positive potentialities not only allow for integration and identity but often contain the latent utopian impulses from which it sprang. The imaginative basis of both ideology and utopia allows for the outbreak of creative imagination from within conservative imagination. Imagination is never easy to fetter.

Is there a place to stand in order to judge what is legitimate and what is not, what is "good" ideology and "bad," what is "good" utopia and "bad"? Karl Mannheim pointed out the paradox faced by Marx—and himself—namely, that Marxism itself is fated to become an ideology.[25] He suggested at times that one could transcend the situation, Hegelian-style, by being a comprehensive intellectual, somewhat value-free, who could take in the largest perspective. Ricoeur rejects the idea, as a hermeneutical philosopher, that one can ever achieve a God's-eye point-of-view and achieve such objectivity. The problem is that one person's good ideology is another person's bad, which gives rise to the ongoing, perhaps interminable debates between Democrats and Republicans. One person might appeal to a national health care system to enable equal opportunity, the right to life, liberty, and happiness; another person sees such a system as denying egalitarianism and taking from some unfairly to help others. As you may know, in the context of the debate on ideology between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas, Ricoeur has much sympathy for the critical edge of Habermas but ultimately rejects the possibility of escaping the hermeneutical situation.[25] But he recognizes the seductive appeal of such an effort. In fact, Ricoeur says of Mannheim's struggle with this issue, "I consider Mannheim's attempt to overcome this paradox one of the most honest and perhaps *the* most honest failure in theory."[26] Ricoeur's position, even with all of the help of utopia, relies ultimately on the risk of personal, hermeneutical judgment.

My own conviction is that we are always caught in this oscillation between

> ideology and utopia. There is no answer to Mannheim's paradox except to say that we must try to cure the illnesses of utopia by what is wholesome in ideology. . . and try to cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element. It is too simple a response, though, to say that we must keep the dialectic running. My more ultimate answer is that we must let ourselves be drawn into the circle and then must try to make the circle a spiral. We cannot eliminate from a social ethics the element of risk. We wager on a certain set of values and then try to be consistent with them; verification is therefore a question of our whole life. No one can escape this.[27]

In order to deal with this risk, we have added further nuances to the dialectic of ideology and utopia that assault the "rigidity and petrification" of ideologies by drawing on the utopian imagination short of outright utopias. In all these ways, a revision of Ricoeur's treatment of ideology and utopia allows for a fresh entree to the issue of ideology. Ricoeur's analysis funds a rich texture that goes beyond what he himself elaborated or imagined. Like the utopian spirit that arises from within ideology, this revision of Ricoeur's thought is not so much an absolute overthrow but reform. It also allows us to add another dimension to ideology critique. It is not just a utopia from outside that allows us to become aware of and to criticize the distortions of ideology; it is also the utopian dimension from within. If such a utopian imagination is curtailed, a final corollary can also be added. The new principle is that whenever an ideology becomes so rigid that it does not allow for any utopian awakenings from within itself, one could say that it has passed from its constructive functions to its destructive.

NOTES

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia UP, 1986).

2. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 183.

3. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 254-55.

4. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 182.

5. Paul Ricoeur, "Science and Ideology," *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 225.

6. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 183.

7. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 183, 200-02.

8. Paul Ricoeur, "Science and Ideology" 227.

9. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, 2d ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007) 84.

10. Loewen, *Lies* 92.

11. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 310.

12. Paul Ricoeur, "Ideology and Utopia," trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential

Philosophy. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1991) 324.

13. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 181.

14. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 182.

15. Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 27-138.

16. One brief place is Ricoeur, *Lectures* 309, where he mentioned in passing a connection between the imaginative power of utopia that is like fiction.

17. One can see here the more typical, domesticated version of the imagination as in Immanuel Kant. In a recent article on Ricoeur's unpublished lectures on the imagination, given in 1975 at approximately the same period as the lectures on ideology and utopia, George Taylor says, "In the Lectures, Ricoeur challenges the history of Western thought not only in its general failure to comprehend the interrelation of imagination and seeing but also in its almost singular emphasis . . . on the reproductive imagination to the exclusion of the productive imagination." George H. Taylor, "Ricoeur's Philosophy of Imagination," *Journal of French Philosophy* 16 (Spring/Fall 2006): 96. Cf. Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987).

18. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 261.

19. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 305.

20. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 307.

21. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004).

22. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 307.

23. Ricoeur, "Ideology and Utopia" 318. Ricoeur should have seen this point more clearly. After all, he is the one who reminded Habermas that "critique is also a tradition." In other words, the attempt to speak from nowhere always reveals traces to the past. Utopias like Thomas More's, Voltaire's, and Edward Bellamy's make sense only in light of contrast with their present realities. As Lewis Mumford said in his classic work on utopia, "Almost every utopia is an implicit criticism of the civilization that served as its background; likewise it is an attempt to uncover potentialities that the existing institutions either ignored or buried beneath an ancient crust of custom and habit." Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Viking P, 1962) 2.

24. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 159.

25. Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 99.

26. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 166.

27. Ricoeur, *Lectures* 312.