Reconciling the Two Principal Meanings of the Notion of Ideology
The Example of the Concept of the 'Spirit of Capitalism'

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Abstract

The study of the notion of ideology shows that this corpus lends itself to a wide variety of different definitions. A certain opposition runs all the way through this set of definitions. Ideology would appear to be torn between a conception that emphasises its distortion and dissimulation dimensions and another conception which views as a set of social representations. After rapidly presenting the main characteristics of these two polar extremes, Paul Ricoeur's suggestion that these two conceptions can be united is discussed and illustrated by the concept of the 'spirit of capitalism', as defined in the book by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999). It is shown that this constitutes an ideology which is in fact an attempt to encompass both these conceptions. It is also shown that the concept of 'trial' as proposed in that book helps greatly to understand how this reconciliation is actually possible.

Key words
■ criticism ■ ideology ■ justice ■ legitimacy ■ social representations

The study of the notion of ideology shows that this corpus lends itself to a wide variety of different definitions. Most authors working in this domain have made the same observation: for example, Boudon refers to a 'great deal of confusion' (1986: 29); and Baechler mentions the 'absence of a firmly established tradition that would enable us to retrospectively identify an ideology which a group of specialists had thought up as such' (1976: 18).

A certain opposition runs all the way through this set of definitions. Ideology would appear to be torn between a conception that emphasises its distortion and dissimulation dimensions (this being its most pervasive form), and another conception that comes from the field of anthropology and which views it in a broader and more positive light, i.e., as a whole set of social representations. After briefly presenting the main characteristics of these two polar extremes, we will be

discussing Paul Ricoeur's suggestion (1986a; 1986b; 1997) that these two conceptions which are usually thought of as being mutually exclusive can be united. I will then demonstrate how it is that the 'spirit of capitalism', as defined by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999),[1] constitutes an ideology which is in fact an attempt to encompass both of these conceptions – along the lines that Ricoeur suggested.

The Polarisation of Differing Conceptions of Ideology and their Possible Reconciliation

Two Principal Meanings of the Notion of Ideology

At one end of the scale, the term 'ideology' is used as a means of denouncing and criticising other positions. Seen as a mistake made by other people, and usually construed as something that is at odds with science or knowledge, here ideology means having a set of false ideas.

This is the conception that the Marxist tradition has worked so hard to nurture, despite the fact that it cannot be associated with all the authors who belong to this school of thought, and even though the same type of definition is offered by authors who clearly have little to do with Marxism (such as Raymond Boudon, for whom ideology is a 'doctrine based on scientific argumentation and imbued with excessive or ungrounded credibility' (1986: 52)). In the Marxist tradition, ideology is a false consciousness, a distorted representation of a reality that tends to mask the working-class's actual bargaining position, and the oppression to which this class is subject. Given that it is primarily within the Marxist tradition that the concept of ideology has been developed and used, and given that the concept is largely absent from non-Marxist studies which prefer different foci, we can consider this to be the most commonly used meaning of the term. Moreover, criticisms of Marxism as an ideology itself have also focused on this point. This is because Marxists see Marx's work as a science that encapsulates the social world – the only one in fact that is capable of accounting for the reality that lies beneath the social relationships we can witness (all other conceptions being nothing more than illusion, distortion and dissimulation). It is precisely because orthodox Marxism portrays itself as being scientific that it came to be criticised as an ideology. One of the main problems with this definition of ideology is the assumption that 'those who know the truth about the social world' are omniscient – and that this omniscience helps them to distinguish between what is real and what is not.

Let us take the example of the Marxist definition of ideology as a false consciousness. False consciousness is supposed to stem from the fact that (1) our representations are guided by the position we occupy in the social space; (2) dominant representations are the representations of the dominant class; and (3) they are partially/totally wrong and do not account for reality as it really is (in particular, they conceal the true balance of power). For example, instead of portraying industrial relations in terms of all of their exploitative violence, such

representations try to make us believe that workers are acting freely when they sign contracts with their future employers. Now, this conception presupposes that people are able to access reality, and in particular that the representation which takes root in the proletariat contains a greater amount of truth than the one which can be derived from the bourgeoisie. It also presupposes that it is 'Marxist science' which will allow us to see reality. By extension, ideology becomes everything that Marxist science does not describe as being real. Yet if we are being totally honest and accept that all social representations are oriented by our own position in the social space (and distorted by our own states, values and vision of the world), it becomes extremely difficult to classify the production of ideas about life in society into two completely distinct categories, compartments that depend on criteria such as truth and error. The Mannheim paradox, as expressed in *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), is:

> . . . if everything we say is biased, and if everything we say represents interests of which we are unaware, how can we develop a theory of ideology that is not ideological itself? . . . The way in which the ideology concept thinks about itself is a source of paradox . . . Formulated in epistemological terms, the Mannheim paradox can be discussed in the following terms: what is the status of discourse on ideology if all discourse is ideological? If socio-political thinking is itself compromised by the world in which the thinker lives and by his/her own situation, is it not true that the very concept of ideology is absorbed into its own referent? (Ricoeur, 1997: 26–7)

If we take the consequences of this paradox to their logical extreme, the only way to be an honest social scientist is to clarify one's own normative foundations (those blind spots that explain 'where you are coming from'); to stop claiming that one is wielding a 'neutral science'; and to refuse to portray one's self as a clairvoyant master hovering above a mass of blind people, thereby accepting as a given that there will always be a gap between scientists and common mortals. This means that all humans must be granted the same elementary capacities as social scientists when it comes to questioning ideologies and social representations. It must be acknowledged that what the social sciences produce is already included in society's hermeneutic circle.

Diametrically opposed to this conception, and given the major difficulties that the critical concept of ideology has to overcome, exists another such concept, one that was developed by anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz or Louis Dumont, and which presents a positive and non-polemical version of the concept. It also encompasses a much wider array of social phenomena.

Dumont (1977: 31) states:

> I do not consider as an ideology everything that is left over once that which is supposed to be true, rational and scientific has been accounted for. Quite the contrary, it is everything that has been thought through at a social level, which has been believed and acted upon based on the hypothesis that it constitutes a living unity, one which is hidden beneath the distinctions that we customarily make. Here ideology is not a residue from something else, rather it is a unit of representation, and in actual fact a unit that does not preclude contradiction and conflict.

Dumont's definition is based on the notion of social representation:

> . . . the ideology of a given country at a given moment in time can be easily thought of as encapsulating all of its intellectual heritage – just as long as this only includes representations that are social in nature, and excludes those that are exceptional or unique. (1977: 26–7)

Social representations differ from individual representations insofar as they are shared by a large number of people within a given group. In addition, they are not based on purely mental representations that only exist in people's heads. This is because they are also a part of the things of which they offer a representation, and which they help to develop via the actions taken by the persons they guide. The point here is to avoid both 'idealism (where the idea is everything) and materialism (where the idea is an epiphenomenon)' (Dumont, 1977: 27).

Geertz also develops his definition of ideology by starting out with a criticism of other conceptions. For example, he criticises the idea of ideology as a representation of a certain number of interests (hence a biased representation), showing that it is blind to its own presupposition (which is related to the semiotic dimension of the action) and does not even understand it. In order to be able to consider that interests can in fact actually be represented (leading to a bias in the representations we hold of the social world), one needs to state their capacity for being translated into ideas, and therefore the mere existence of the representation development process itself. It is not true that there are moments of action that will only be followed at a later stage by moments leading to the development of representations. All human action is 'symbolically mediated'. If we agree with Geertz that 'action is immediately regulated by cultural forms that provide matrices and frameworks which allow for the organisation of social or psychological processes', we must accept the idea that 'it is *only* because humankind's social life is a symbolic phenomenon that it is capable of distortion' (Ricoeur, 1997: 28–31, my emphasis).

These 'culturalist' conceptions of ideology do indeed constitute a criticism of ideology-as-a-distortion since the latter is based on the idea that a separation exists between superstructure and infrastructure. Using Geertz's approach, 'we can no longer say that ideology is a form of superstructure. The difference between superstructure and infrastructure disappears entirely inasmuch as symbolic systems are already a part both of the infrastructure and of human beings' fundamental make-up' (Ricoeur, 1997: 341). When seen in this light, ideology tends to encompass a much wider array of social representations. As a matter of fact, it is precisely this characteristic that Boudon criticises in his affirmation that such a broad definition creates 'a great deal of confusion' due to the overly eclectic nature of the many different intellectual constructs that can be construed as being akin to an ideological production (1986: 47). As Dumont says, this can be made to include all kinds of collective representations. However, and unlike Boudon, it is precisely this aspect that causes him to prefer an all-encompassing type of definition: his 'main goal, the one that makes [him] refuse to really differentiate between ideology and science, philosophy, etc.' is that

. . . this does not just involve adding a new compartment to pre-existing ones. The vocation of [his] research is the exact opposite. It consists of revealing the relationships between the various pigeonholes with which our mental and even professional mental structures are already familiar; and of accounting both for the unity of this whole and also for the main lines of force that make up our culture. (Dumont, 1977: 31)

Where the Marxist conception of ideology emphasises its distortion function, the culturalist conception thereof stresses its group integration and identity preservation functions. People coming from one and the same world share the same states and interpretative codes. Inasmuch as it is 'by virtue of our society's ideology that we become aware of something' (Dumont, 1977: 27), this conception creates a framework for all of the social co-ordinations and interactions that occur, and tends to allow for their reproduction (see Table 1).

Table 1   Two opposing conceptions of ideology

Ideology in the Marxist sense of the term	*Ideology in the culturalist sense of the term*
Definition through distortion and even dissimulation	As is the case for all social representations, the existence of distortion is postulated.
Ideology = erroneous collective representations, 'false consciousness', a veil that masks the material interests of those who are in a dominant position	However, given that these are representations of society; inasmuch as 'no subject is ever in a sovereign position, i.e., able to distance him/herself from all conditioning';[1] and because people only know 'reality' through their representations thereof, it is impossible to finish the work of criticising ideologies on the basis of a criterion of truth
Ideology is that which people operating out of a position of truth are able to unmask	
As opposed to knowledge	Ideology, a spontaneous vehicle of thought, is a fundamental framework of perception, hence of knowledge
A critical, polemical and derogatory notion	A positive notion
Ideology is something that other people are to be blamed for	Ideology is that which we share
A realistic epistemological position	A constructivist epistemological position
Suspicion leads to an unmasking of ideology	Ideology can be ascertained by trying to understand other people
Distortion and manipulation function	Social integration, group preservation and reproduction functions

Note: [1] Ricoeur (1986a: 363).

Unifying the Two Conceptions of Ideology: Ricoeur's Proposal

The search for unification oriented Ricoeur's work on the notion of ideology. He says:

> I am not trying to deny Marxism the relevancy of its concept of ideology. Instead I am trying to link this with some of the less negative functions of ideology. We should be integrating the concept of ideology into our analysis as a distortion that exists within a framework which acknowledges the symbolic structure of social life. (1997: 25)

This integration involves seeing ideology-as-a-distortion as one of the effects (or pathologies) of a wider culturalist conception of ideology as a factor of integration. Of course, as Geertz forcefully stated, symbolic action is that which precedes the distortion effect. Nevertheless, we still have to understand how the semiotic dimension of action can produce distortion in the Marxist sense of this term, meaning a distortion of thought due to the interests involved. Towards this end, Ricoeur interpolated a third function for ideology between the two aforementioned conceptions. He draws this function from Max Weber, although Weber operated without the concept of ideology. This is the function of legitimation. It is because ideology in its group integration function tends to legitimise a social order in its current state (trying to ensure the preservation and reproduction thereof) that it is a theatre of distortion.

Ideology in its group integration function provides meaning to the social and political organisation (and therefore to the social order) of a given society. This also means that the ideology concept is particularly well formatted for the study of political issues. Here we have to start out by analysing the social order completely independently of hierarchy or power. Order is first of all that which produces the social division of activities. It is a shape and a type of structuring, and should be thought as an organisation. This type of order is a product of the integration function, which provides it with its legitimacy (Ricoeur, 1997: 25). However, a social organisation of this nature is also marked throughout by a much more restrictive notion of order, one that emphasises authority and hierarchy. These are dimensions that Max Weber only introduces at a later stage, when differentiation arises within a given social group between a governing body and everyone else. It is at this moment that the legitimising function of ideology can serve as a legitimation of the relationship that exists between those who dominate and those who are dominated, thus engendering a Marxist type of distortion. Max Weber puts forward the idea that no domination system, however brutal it may be, can govern solely through the use of force. The system always needs our consent and co-operation, which can only be given if this domination is legitimate.

Ricoeur's suggestion here is to endow ideology, a concept that Weber does not use, with the role of legitimising authority. 'Ideology must lessen the tensions that characterise the legitimation process, meaning the tensions between the current power's claim to legitimacy and citizens' belief in this legitimacy' (1997: 33). He even offers an audacious parallel with Marx's theory of surplus value:

> This distortion between belief and claims may well indicate the real source of what Marx called surplus value. Surplus value is not intrinsic to the production structure – but it is inherent to the power structure. For example, even though in socialist systems there is no private appropriation of the means of production, surplus value neverthe-less exists as a result of the power structure. This raises the same sorts of issues as all other structures do, namely the issue of belief. Political leaders demand that people believe in them. The difference between this claim and the belief that people are offering translates the surplus value, something that all of the power structures share in. In their legitimacy claim, people in a position of authority (power) ask for more belief than the members are actually offering. (1997: 33)

To begin with, we must understand how the legitimation function of ideology can link its integration function (the anthropologists' view) with its distortion function (a product of the Marxist tradition). The distinction between 'legitima-tion' and 'legitimacy' which derives from the varying meanings of the verb 'to legitimise' (on this topic, see Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 68) might be able to illuminate this point. Indeed, with the first term, legitimation is seen purely and simply as an attempt to conceal something ex post facto, a manoeuvre that we need to unmask if we are to glimpse reality. This is a more or less Marxist conception of ideologies. Inversely, with the second expression, emphasis is placed on those representations that, by ensuring a shared description of the world (of the sort that is able to orient everybody's actions), help to reinforce the legitimacy and stability of a social order. This paves the way for an integrative conception of ideology. By so doing, it is easier to carry out Ricoeur's comparison between these ideas and the concept of surplus value. In actual fact, there is an hiatus between the idea of legitimacy (which does not account for the balance of power and the existence of violence and which therefore does not question the social order in its current shape) and idea of legitimation (which, quite the contrary, places all its emphasis on the balance of power underlying the current form of domination, even if this is legitimate). Reformulating Ricoeur's proposal, we could say that legitimacy is that which those who are being dominated voluntarily grant to those who are dominating them. However, in actual fact this latter group has a surplus to play with. They have been able to obtain more, i.e., they have developed power above and beyond that which those who are being dominated would be willing to grant to them if they alone had the choice in this matter. Still, those who are in a dominant position do need to legitimise the sum total of their domination, including any excess therein (this being their surplus power). As Ricoeur states, their 'legitimacy claim' is greater than the 'belief in this legitimacy' that their fellow citizens are offering. By carrying out its legitimation function, ideology makes it possible to offset this legitimacy deficit. Note here that, if we have indeed fully understood Ricoeur's thinking on this subject, ideology as a producer of inte-gration produces legitimacy *but also* legitimation as a way of accounting for the surplus power (i.e., the surplus of legitimacy) that those who are in a dominant position dispose of. It is specifically in the legitimacy production function, in other words, in this legitimation of surplus power, that ideology meets up with the distortion function upon which Karl Marx cast a spotlight.

I will now try to demonstrate that the conception of ideology that Luc Boltanski and I used to write *The New Spirit of Capitalism* relates specifically to a conceptual synthesis that is similar to the one which Ricoeur is proposing.

The Conception of Ideology in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*

The book attempts to understand how the changes that occurred in the social and economic conditions of the salaried in France between 1968–78 and 1985–95 were possible without running into any real resistance. Indeed, the contrast between the France of 1968–78 and the France of 1985–95 cannot help but draw attention. The earlier decade was marked by aggressive social movements (not all of which were the actions of the working class); an extremely active trade unionism; changes in the allocation of value added which benefited wage-earners (as did the adoption of security-enhancing social legislation); and at the same time, lower product quality and lower productivity gains, due at least in part to employers' and corporate leaders' inability to control labour. The later decade was marked by the quasi-absence of social movements (humanitarian aid being their only real manifestation); disoriented unions who had become reactive rather than proactive; an employment relationship that had been increasingly precarious; a greater disparity in incomes and an allocation of the value added that once again had become favourable to capital; the re-subjugation of a labour force undermined by a significant reduction in the number of strikes and social conflicts and by a drop in absenteeism and in staff turnover; and the manufacturing of higher quality goods. We summarized the situation by saying that France faced a deteriorated social situation within the context of a regenerated capitalism but in a period of intense crisis of capitalism criticism. This can be seen as rather counter-intuitive because usually when the social situation deteriorates, criticism arises.

The concept of the *spirit of capitalism* that we have drawn and adapted from Max Weber (1922) is key in this study. It allows us to dynamically articulate the two other central concepts upon which our analyses are based: *capitalism*; and *criticism*. In order to explain the differences between the two decades, we showed how a change in the spirit of capitalism occurred, entailing at the same time a pacification of criticism and a liberation of capitalistic accumulation. However, the research carried out was not only intended to provide a credible and novel description of this period. Our aim with the present historical example was also to propose a more general theoretical framework, thus enabling greater understanding of how the ideologies that are associated with economic activities can be modified.[2]

The Notion of Ideology in The New Spirit of Capitalism

We define the spirit of capitalism as an ideology in the sense that Dumont lends to this term (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 35), meaning that we have opted for a broad, positive and culturalist definition, thereby refuting the Marxist interpretation thereof (1999: 35, 46, note 17, 669). And yet, if we only operate within the confines of a culturalist perspective, we have to recognise that the word ideology is not really necessary. If we have chosen this word, it is because we would like to keep some of its critical connotations (relating to distortion-dissimulation). Actually, it is quite possible that Dumont had the same kind of reasons for also choosing this word. This is the paradox which, we believe, Ricoeur's approach will help us to understand by demonstrating that a reconciliation of these two approaches is within the realm of possibility. Our interest in Ricoeur's solution is also reinforced by the fact that like ourselves he refers to Max Weber's work to build up a conception of ideology that makes it possible to move from a Marxist conception to a culturalist one.

In addition, our affirmation that the spirit of capitalism constitutes an ideology has caused some of our readers to analyse this phenomenon in the light of the Marxist concept of superstructure, or else in terms of false consciousness (Gadrey, 2001; Piore, 2000), whereas our goal has in fact been to overcome the very same problems as the ones that were created by this Marxist concept (see our answers in Boltanski and Chiapello, 2000; 2001). We provide below a brief review of our concept of the spirit of capitalism. Subsequently, we will analyse the development of our concept in the light of Ricoeur's work.

Capitalism, defined by a minimal format stressing the need for unlimited accumulation by pacific means, is considered an absurd system:[3] wage-earners have lost ownership of the fruits of their labour as well as any hope of ever working other than as someone else's subordinate. As for capitalists, they find themselves chained to a never-ending and insatiable process. For both of these protagonists, being part of the process of capitalism is remarkably lacking in justification. Capitalistic accumulation requires commitment from many people, although few have any real chances of making a substantial profit. Many will be scarcely tempted to get involved in this system, and might even develop decidedly adverse feelings. This is an especially thorny problem in modern economies that require a high level of commitment from their employees, in particular from managers. The quality of the commitment that one can expect depends not only on economic stimuli, but also on the possibility that the collective advantages that derive from capitalism can be enhanced. The 'spirit of capitalism' is the ideology which brings together these reasons for commitment to the system.

As Schumpeter and Marx realised perfectly well, one of the main characteristics of capitalism as a social order is that it constantly transforms itself. Capitalism in the general sense is capable of assuming highly variable historical forms, which continue to be capitalist through the continuity of a number of central features (wage-labour, competition, private property, orientation to capital accumulation, technical progress, the rampant commodification of all social

activities). The 'spirit of capitalism' is therefore an ideology which serves to sustain the capitalist process in its historical dynamism while being in phase with the historically specific and variable forms that it takes. Thus there are in a sense two levels within the configuration of ideas of the 'spirit of capitalism' of a particular epoch: those which account for the process of capitalism in the long term (most of which have been shaped by economic theory), and those which accord with its historical incarnation at a given period of time within a given region of the world.

Three dimensions play a particularly important role at this second level in providing a concrete expression for the spirit of capitalism:

- The first dimension indicates what is '*stimulating*' about an involvement with capitalism – in other words, how this system can help people to blossom, and how it can generate enthusiasm. This 'stimulating' dimension is usually related to the different forms of 'liberation' that capitalism offers.
- A second set of arguments emphasises the forms of *security* that is offered to those who are involved, both for themselves and for their children.
- Finally, a third set of arguments (and one that is especially important for our demonstration) invokes the notion of *justice* (or *fairness)*, explaining how capitalism is coherent with a sense of justice, and how it contributes to the common good.

Thus, one might argue that to successfully commit people to the capitalist process, the ideology which legitimises its social order needs to provide answers to these three implicit questions: what is stimulating about it, how does it provide security, how does it assure justice?

The term 'ideology' is used here in a different sense from common conceptions which define it in terms of truth and falsehood. Indeed, the 'spirit of capitalism' does not just legitimise the process of accumulation, it also constrains it. If one were to take the explanations contained in the spirit of capitalism to their logical conclusion, then not all profit would be legitimate, nor all enrichment fair, nor all accumulation legal.

Analysis of the Kind of Ideology that is a Spirit of Capitalism

When the spirit of capitalism is thought of in this light, we rediscover the three functions that Ricoeur has attributed to ideology: integration, legitimation and distortion. For greater clarity, note that from now on we will be talking about the 'production of legitimacy' to describe the legitimation function of ideology (with the meaning that Ricoeur lends to this term), and reserving the term 'legitimation' to describe any concealment of the balance of power. Thus, the legitimacy production function of ideology produces legitimacy, insofar as those who are being dominated believe in this legitimacy. However, it also produces a legitimation of the surplus of power – yet this is not something that they agreed to give.

The spirit of capitalism has a social *integration,* group reproduction and preservation function. This is because it organises the representations that are held by those people (mainly employees) who are involved in the business world. Like a culture, the spirit of capitalism is mainly comprised of rules with which people need to be familiar if they are to be at ease in this world (and potentially become successful along the way). The spirit of capitalism can be portrayed as a set of shared representations that facilitate co-operation and co-ordination. We can consider that the conceptualisations that are associated with this spirit at a given moment in time and in a particular country are shared by capitalists and by employees alike; that is, by those who govern and by those who are governed. They therefore create a shared sense of belonging to one and the same social system. By so doing, they help to stabilise the system.

In this way, the spirit of capitalism fulfils a *legitimacy production* function for the capitalist social order. It justifies the organisation of this order, and provides reasons for accepting the way in which it has been structured. By offering modalities that allow for the preservation of this capitalist order, the ideology also justifies existing social hierarchies and the relationships that exist between those who govern and those who are governed. Nevertheless, the production of legitimacy should not be equated too precipitously with the production of distortion, because in this case the positive function of ideology as a tool of social integration and as a collective framework for action is lost. Here we must consider that the production of legitimacy opens the door to the idea that those who are in a dominant position have the right to (or else deserve) this domination, and not just to the idea of legitimation, i.e., a discourse that provides the wrong reasons for this domination, inferring that it stems from nothing more than a mere question of the balance of power. We then oscillate between a conception based on the concealment of the balance of power and one that focuses on a notion of justice. However, there is no need to choose between these two conceptions, inasmuch as it is precisely this double dimension of the idea of legitimacy that makes it possible to shift from ideology-as-distortion to ideology-as-integration.

It should therefore be recognised that part of the legitimacy of those who are in a dominant position stems from what those whom they are governing grant them by acknowledging their right to govern. Indeed, those who are being governed use their representations of the spirit of capitalism a way of testing the social systems to which they belong. Accessing power infers that those who are going to find themselves in a position of dominance in the future already accept the rules of the game; that they believe in these rules as much as those are being dominated believe in them because these rules are the key to their authority. At any given point in time, those who are being dominated can in fact refuse to be dominated by anyone who is not playing by the accepted rules of the game. The spirit of capitalism, by offering interpretative frameworks for action, thus helps to build a world that is relatively coherent with collective representations. As for those who are being governed, they use the spirit of capitalism to co-develop the world or to seek its improvement. As such, there is indeed a production of legitimacy, but this does not necessarily involve a 'false consciousness', i.e., a

manipulation of the representations that those who are being dominated hold. This latter group possesses the same critical capabilities as a critic or a social scientist. They are able to criticise social structurings and therefore to decry any variances with the propositions underlying the spirit of capitalism.

After all, there has always been a de facto variance between the models that are supposed to be built according to the general organisational principles contained within the spirit of capitalism, and the concrete achievements that are situated elsewhere. Where this variance has been neither detected nor criticised, we can consider that those who are in a position of dominance are enjoying 'surplus' or excess power – and that in this case, the spirit of capitalism tends to take on a *distortion* function.

Ideology has two faces. This is because even though it legitimises people's relative bargaining positions, it also comprises a basis that enables individuals to protest whenever existing domination relationships are at odds with the prevalent legitimation discourse. This means that the variance between a hierarchy such as it is being experienced and the discourse being diffused is perceptible and becomes a source of criticism. From that point onwards, ideology can no longer serve as a totally effective form of concealment. Those who are in a dominant position, if they want to be legitimate, must also to a certain extent come up with whatever it is that the ideology states they have to provide. As we have repeated on several occasions, the spirit of capitalism does not just legitimise the accumulation process – it also constrains it. We could even say that it *only* legitimises the process insofar as it acts as a constraint upon it.

One idea that we have set at the very heart of our conceptual framework helps to solidify this particular conception of ideology by guaranteeing the shift from ideology-as-integration (which casts a positive light on social relationships) to ideology-as-distortion (which stresses criticism of the balance of power). This is the idea of *test,* or of *trial* (*épreuve* in French).[4]

Using the Concept of Trial to Unify the Different Functions of an Ideology

The concept of trial refers to the social arrangements organising any testing of people abilities and whose outcomes result in arranging tested people in order. This order makes it possible to allocate social goods (money, power, the authority to issue orders, etc.). Examples are supplied by academic and sporting tests. People undertaking them are measured in terms of the trajectory of their performance in French or mathematics, the javelin or the high jump.

We make a distinction between two different test modes: trial of strength (*épreuves de force*); and trial of greatness (*épreuves de grandeur*). A test is always a test of strength. Yet a test can be considered to be legitimate (and to become closer to a trial of greatness) as long as strengths are being measured according to the tenets of the *cité* model (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). An overriding requirement is the obligation to specify the type of strength that is involved in a specific test and to arrange a testing device that does not call upon the use of any other kind of strength. All in all, a legitimate test must always test something that has

been defined, presenting itself as a *test of something*: for example, a test of industrial efficiency, market opportunism, respect for domestic duties, or even (the school system offers many examples) Latin or sociology. Imagine how little credibility an academic examination would have if nothing was known about it in advance: not the subject or the programme or the evaluation criteria or the names or qualifications of the examiners or the place or the duration. Is it conceivable that society would enable its future elite to be selected on this ad hoc basis and that the people under their control would agree to be governed by people chosen almost at random in this way? If a test is to be legitimate, the strengths upon which it focuses must undergo a process of qualification and categorisation. We then say that such a trial tends to be a test of greatness rather than a test of strength.

By contrast with a trial of greatness, it is acceptable in a trial of strength to mobilise any and all kinds of strength. Nothing is specified beforehand. Anything goes, as long as it is crowned with success. In a trial of greatness that pretends to legitimacy, on the other hand, everything is not possible.

Thus a trial can be regarded as legitimate, only if its arrangement specifies its purpose and if its implementation is controlled in order to prevent its illicit exploitation by unknown or at least unexpected forces. An examination can be formally arranged for the confrontation of a unique ability, and in practice, however, can allow the expression of multiple abilities. This is one of the reasons why no trial is beyond criticism – even the most 'perfect' in formal terms. The critical skills of social agents are essential here, since criticism reveals what is unfair in the trials, namely the abilities mobilised by some of the examinees without the knowledge of others, giving them an unfair advantage. In this case, the aims of the criticism are to increase the fairness of the trial (what is referred to as 'tighten' the trial), to increase its level of standardisation and to develop its regulatory or legal framework.

The spirit of capitalism provides participants in the business world with information about the criteria of justice that operate in their world, and which therefore constitute a basis for the legitimacy of those who govern. If this latter group is to possess a legitimacy whose foundations are solid, the individuals therein must demonstrate that they have passed tests (or trials) that are sufficiently fair for other people to consider that they actually 'deserve' their position. As such, it is very much in their interest to ensure that the tests being organised are sufficiently strict ('tense') in justice terms to avoid any criticism of their legitimacy. The various protagonists can base their thinking on the representations of justice that are found in the spirit of capitalism; analyse the modalities of operational implementation and the different testing systems; and request that they be improved (in terms of the justice they incarnate).

As an extension of these ideas, we could say that the degree of legitimacy of those who are in a position of government corresponds to the degree of tension characterising the tests that they have passed. Moreover, the degree of legitimation depends on the extent to which they have succeeded in these tests on the basis of strengths that have not been filtered and which are being wielded illegitimately. Note that is very difficult to design a perfect test, one that excludes

everything except for those specific strengths that it is supposed to measure. This would almost require having a different test for each person and for each separate occasion – this explains why part of people's success at a given test will forever remain unexplained. Now, it is precisely this part that is in need of being legitimised. This is the excess power that the test grants to the successful individual, and it results from strengths that are not being tested.

Second, we are not able to determine, within a given situation of domination, the exact proportion of legitimacy and legitimation, or of justice and strength. This is because our knowledge of the tests (and of the way people think of them) is socially conditioned by the level of criticism that has been invested in such tests, and by the specific aspects of the test upon which such criticism focuses. Socially acceptable and relatively uncriticised tests will produce legitimacy until the day when criticism reveals the impurities they contain, and decries them for being part of the legitimation process. We can therefore state that ideology will be viewed as a source of distortion whenever the critic is doing his/her job and protests against the tests' poor functioning. At the same time, and through this behaviour, he or she is offering a guarantee that ideology produces not only distortion but also social integration and legitimacy.

We therefore have a conception of ideology that can state distortion at any moment in time, since it is impossible to organise tests that are completely fair. This aspect broadly justifies basing one's approaches on a suspicion of dominant ideologies, especially when the tests are being organised by the dominant parties themselves. Such situations are characterised by the highly asymmetrical nature of the information that the dominating or else the dominated parties have about the way in which the test is being run. As such, the role of any criticism that is born out of a position of suspicion is to try to fill this informational gap. It is therefore in a position where it is always 'lagging' behind the injustices of the social world. This explains why, in our opinion, it is not possible to totally drop all the Marxist connotations of the notion of ideology – and also why it is impossible to state the existence of fully-fledged concealment efforts that can only be dissipated by social scientists. In reality, criticism is the work of a very large number of people. It is neither the exclusive realm of social scientists and their disciples (non-scientists also participate in the critical process), nor is it produced by every social scientist (after all, some of them are quite happy with the world as it is). Criticism, whose competencies are widely disseminated throughout society in our model, both unveils the legitimation process and, paradoxically, allows an ideology to fulfil its integration function.

This is a conception of ideology that has a major empirical impact, notably in terms of the status that it attributes to the various discursive productions which a sociologist is meant to analyse. Take as an example something in which we are very interested, management literature for the general public. Indeed, in order to describe the way in which the spirit of capitalism changed between the 1960s and 1990s, we based our efforts (as Weber and Sombart had done previously) on texts that provide moral education on business practices. For our era, this meant two bodies of work from the field of management studies: one from the 1960s; and one from the 1990s (each representing around 500 pages and 50 texts).

We analysed these texts as a theatre for expressing the spirit of capitalism, thus as a place for the production of an ideology that is intended to legitimise the existing corporate order. Many readers have criticised us for having taken this literature too seriously. True, it is often relatively simplistic (and even rudimentary), its style is metaphoric and it contains a low level of scientificity (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002) but what this actually means is that it holds no real credibility for social science researchers. They might laugh at it or scorn it, and of course they will quickly criticise it as something that is 'ideological' in nature. Yet how can we forget that thousands of readers and managers, people who are often much better informed about corporate business life than sociologists are, continue to be interested in this literature? Is it not a bit hasty and far too readily self-glorifying to see this literature as an opium for managers? For this reason, we have chosen not to demonise it. Quite the contrary, we chose to believe in it – to believe that it is based on real concerns with justice; and not to believe that those who read it with such great interest have been manipulated and/or blinded by some dominant ideology that differs from what we call the spirit of capitalism. We have specifically put ourselves in the shoes of anthropologists trying to understand the world we are studying. In perusing this literature, we have also accepted that managers have the same capacities for suspicion as we do. Moreover, we have studied its social role in terms of what is really at stake, i.e., this is a normative and moralising literature that talks of a marvellous world which no one has ever really encountered. Plus, it is highly probable that most readers think the same thing. This approach allows us to understand the effectiveness of management literature, specifically because it provides a foundation which allows people to assess organisational systems and transform them; because it inspires managers' actions and criticism; because it gives employees the means to hold company executives accountable for what they promise; and not because it offers a reliable account of the reality of the business world.

Conclusion

The spirit of capitalism, in our conception of this term, therefore provides a definition of ideology that allows us to use one and the same conceptual apparatus to shift from the integrative function of ideology to the distortion function thereof. This is a definition that allows us to adopt a positive or, alternatively, a negative vision of ideology, thanks to the way in which it helps us to understand the legitimacy production process that is part of a given social order – and more specifically, the legitimacy production of the domination effect which characterises the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed.

One of the conditions that makes it possible for us to carry out this construct is the fact that all human beings possess the same capacities for discovering the truth as scientists (who would otherwise be considered the only ones capable of discerning the contrast between ideology and science). With this in mind, we can say that it is the actors themselves who veer from one function of ideology to another: from ideology-as-a-distortion when they use their critical capabilities

to protest against the non-realisation of the promises that a ideology conveys; to ideology-as-integration when they take this ideology very seriously and use it as a means of testing (and therefore interpreting) the social world.

By examining the legitimacy development process in light of the ideas underlying testing procedures which will generate legitimacy if people are satisfied by the fairness thereof, we believe that we are able to specify to what extent a social order can be considered to be either 'unfair' and therefore subject to the effects of concealment through ideology, or else 'fair' hence purely and simply legitimate (for this same reason). Inasmuch as it is impossible to carry out tests that are totally flawless (although we would like to work towards this ideal), we can predict that an excess of power will always be left over, in the form of a surplus, and that this will benefit those who are in a dominant position in a given social order. It is this surplus that makes the distortion function of ideology so very interesting.

Notes

1 *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, forthcoming in English translation, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso).
2 A paper, by Luc Boltanski and myself, presented at the Conference of Europeanists, 14–16 March 2002, Chicago, gives the general argument and the main findings of this investigation to an English-reading audience. See also the book review by Guilhot (2000).
3 More completely, capitalism is characterised in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by:
   A *minimal format* stressing the need for unlimited accumulation by formally pacific means. Capital is cut off from material forms of wealth and can only be increased through continuous reinvestment and circulation. This endows it with a clearly abstract quality that contributes to the perpetuation of the accumulation process.
   Competition. Each capitalistic entity is constantly being threatened by the actions of competing entities. Such dynamics create a perpetual state of concern. Self-preservation is thus a very strong motivation for capitalists – it is a never-ending catalyst for the accumulation process.
   Wage-earning. Many of those who hold little or no capital make money from the sale of their labour rather than from the sale of the fruit of their labour. They own no means of production, and therefore depend upon the decisions of those who do own them.
4 The translation of the French concept of *épreuve* is difficult. We feel that 'trial' (which we used in Chiapello and Bourguignon, 2002) has more the connotations of a 'trial of strength' while 'test' (which we used in Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002; Chiapello, 2001; Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002) points rather towards a 'trial of greatness'.

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