

# Utopia and Text: Ricoeur's Critique of Ideology<sup>1</sup>

JAMES B. STEEVES, *University of Western Ontario*

**ABSTRACT:** *In Lectures on Ideology and Utopia, Ricoeur claims that utopia can offer an adequate critique of ideology. Both contribute to the way in which a group identifies itself, with ideology providing common values and images, and utopia challenging those common values with new, imaginative alternatives for interpreting society. I relate this analysis to Ricoeur's earlier works on text to show how using utopias to criticize ideologies is like using a semiotic analysis of a text to disclose underlying tensions. The critical use of utopia helps to reveal underlying tensions in society and the ways that ideology conceals those tensions.*

**RÉSUMÉ:** *Dans L'idéologie et l'utopie, Ricoeur prétend que l'utopie est en mesure d'offrir une critique adéquate de l'idéologie. L'une et l'autre — l'utopie et l'idéologie — contribuent à la façon dont un groupe s'identifie: l'idéologie fournit des valeurs et des images communes, alors que l'utopie remet en question ces valeurs communes à l'aide d'interprétations nouvelles et imaginatives de la société. J'établis un parallèle entre cette analyse de Ricoeur et ses premiers ouvrages portant sur le texte afin de montrer que l'utilisation d'utopies pour critiquer l'idéologie est similaire à l'utilisation de l'analyse sémiotique pour exposer des tensions sous-jacentes d'un texte. L'utilisation critique de l'utopie contribue à révéler des tensions sous-jacentes à l'intérieur de la société et les façons dont l'idéologie dissimule ces tensions.*

We are entangled. The ties uniting us to others are false ones.  
There is no regime which, by itself, would suffice to disentangle  
them, but perhaps the men who come after us, all men together,  
will have the power and the patience to take up this work where  
we left it.

Sartre, 1998, p. 619.

History and sociology have always posed a problem to philosophy. These disciplines are highly interpretive, both on the part of the social scientist and the subjects that are studied. This makes it difficult to understand social

events free of prejudice, and thwarts the democratic project of free and open discourse. We pretend that we understand each other but have no way to determine if our relations are "false ones", and we share values that could easily be distortions of unconscious conflict.

Paul Ricoeur's philosophy provides a response to the problem of interpreting the social world. Ricoeur believes that social existence is mediated by a web of interpretations, so that a transparent picture of reality is impossible. He alludes, for instance, to Marxist philosophy, in which ideologies are seen to provide a distortive layer of meaning over real-life praxis. Marxist philosophy has tended to promote the elimination of ideology and the return to a science of praxis. But Ricoeur believes that ideology plays an essential role in the development of communal identity, and only needs to be counterbalanced by social fictions in the form of utopias. By combining the world of fiction with the world of praxis, we can overcome the distortive effects of ideology.

In the following, I will develop Ricoeur's theory of utopia as ideology critique. Despite its usefulness in the study of history and social existence, the theory is not sufficiently developed for practical purposes. This shortcoming can be remedied by a closer look at the relation between Ricoeur's later work on ideology and his earlier work on text. Utopia can be seen as a textual mirror for a society's current ideology, providing a fictional reference to which ideology can be compared and by which it can be criticized. By relating Ricoeur's theory of utopia as ideology critique to his earlier work on text, we can become better equipped to disentangle the false ties of social life.

## **I. Ideology**

We do not need to look far for literary references to false social exchanges. Shakespeare's plays are full of mistaken identities (in the form of cross-dressing, for example) and mishaps (such as Hamlet's slaying of Polonius) that ensue from acts that are based on misunderstanding. If literature does, to some extent, reflect reality, then it becomes important to determine the extent to which false social exchanges defines social existence in general. We have become suspicious, for instance, of what other people say concerning the common good. A prominent function of the social sciences has been to develop an adequate critique of ideology, so that we can monitor the amount of distortion and coercion involved in the way that a society comes to understand itself.

Ideology, simply defined, is any set of images, beliefs and norms that determines the identity of a group or nation. It establishes how a society will interpret its values and goals, and its relation to the world around it. Ideology can take the form of a common set of values and norms, basic principles that

are treated as fundamental, and mutual goals for the future. Overall, ideology reflects the general way in which a group determines what makes it unique from other groups and what establishes the cohesion of that group.

Paul Ricoeur describes two functions of ideology that are essential to the development of societal cohesion. One of these functions is providing an identity that satisfies the interests of the entire group. Each member of a society has different interests and goals, making the establishment of communal values impossible without abstracting from these differences and focusing on values that are held in common. Ideology blurs or 'distorts' the differences between individuals into norms and goals that everyone will accept. Without this blurring, the individuals would be too focused on their differences and would continually disagree about which values and goals should be held in common. As a result, the community would remain in a state of civil war. "The underlying integrative function of ideology," writes Ricoeur, "prevents us from pushing the polemical element to its destructive point — the point of civil war" (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 263). Ideology allows individuals to blur their values with those of others so that a common set of values can be established and a community can avoid disintegrating into a "war of every one against every one" (Hobbes, 1996, p. 91).

Another social function of ideology is the legitimization of authority. No society can exist without the organization of its members and an authority that upholds that organization. But in order to stay in power, the authority must demand more respect and conformity from its members than any individual would want to give. No authority can satisfy all of the demands of the different members of the community, so it must use persuasive methods to gain public support<sup>2</sup>. Ricoeur writes that even the worst of tyrannies "has never been the brute and mute exercise of force. Tyranny makes its way by seduction, persuasion, and flattery" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 93). Some persuasion is necessary in order for society to exist. Ideologies allow an authority to convince the public that its rule is necessary in spite of the objections that some people might have to that authority.

Like any organization, a society's survival will depend on its cohesive strength. If any of its members threaten to leave or revolt, the integrity of the group will be jeopardized. This means that ideology will be called upon to preserve the life of the community at all costs. Reason has frequently been sacrificed and nationalistic sympathies paraded for the sake of maintaining social cohesion. Ideology quickly falls prey to the sentiments of the people, especially those who benefit most from the current social order. Ideology can become a tool for those people to meet their interests of domination in the name of collective values. This change from meeting group interests to meeting the interests of a particular subgroup is facilitated by distorting ideology so that it appears to be for the common good when it is really for the

benefit of those in power. Ideology poses a constant threat of distorting communal values and ideals to suit the interests of a particular subgroup.

If ideology is to be monitored for distortion, then there must be a way of freeing ourselves from total distortion. According to Karl Mannheim, however, this does not seem possible. He argues that ideology is an interpretation of social reality, and like any interpretation, it can hide what it claims to reveal. While some Marxists hope to oppose ideologies with a science of social reality, Mannheim warns us that the very science that is to reveal ideological distortions might itself be a distortive interpretation of social phenomena. In light of this paradox, we are at pains to provide a sufficient critique of ideological distortion (Ricoeur, 1986a, Chapter Eight).

Paul Ricoeur echoes Mannheim's concern for the grounding of ideological critique. He claims that no science can appeal to a meaningful structure of reality that exists independently of human interpretation. Ideology does not provide a secondary reflection onto reality, but is the very means by which a people comes to identify itself. He explains:

If it is true that the images which a social group forms of itself are interpretations which belong immediately to the constitution of the social bond, if, in other words, the social bond is itself symbolic, then it is absolutely futile to seek to derive the images from something prior which would be reality, real activity, the process of real life, of which there would be secondary reflections and echoes. (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 237)

There is thus no secondary reflection or science of social reality to which an ideology critique can appeal. Rather an antidote to distortive ideology must be found within the very symbolic medium by which a society understands itself. Ricoeur finds such an antidote in the literary genre of political utopia.

## **II. Utopia**

If ideology is essential for social cohesion, and if there is no way to get outside of the realm of potentially distortive interpretations of reality, then an ideology critique must be found within the very symbolic medium by which the individuals within a particular society understand themselves as a group. Ricoeur finds such a critique by extending the symbolic medium to include not only potentially distortive ideologies but also enlightening utopias. By allowing the society to have access to fanciful stories about alternative forms of social integration, the social scientist is able to criticize current ideologies without the need to show how such alternatives are completely beyond the

possibility of distortion. It is in the very dynamic relation between ideology and utopia, and not in their relation to an external reality, that the problem of distortion is overcome.

Utopia is traditionally understood to be a literary genre involving fanciful descriptions of future societies. Such writers as Thomas More and Jules Verne constructed utopias as 'non-places' where the imagination could soar free from the confines of contemporary values. But utopias need not be mere escapes from reality. Ricoeur believes that utopias can provide better alternatives for social cohesion than those supported by the ideologies of the day. Utopias can also mirror the values and goals of contemporary society by exaggerating those values and goals to show what society will become if it continues to develop according to them. Thus utopia must be more broadly defined as any set of images, norms and goals that constitute an alternative to those of a currently existing society. As an alternative, utopia can cease to be merely a fanciful literary genre and become the voice of the oppressed. "Utopia is the discourse of a group and not a kind of literary work floating in the air" (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 274), argues Ricoeur. The critical function of utopia is the "deinstitutionalization of the main human relationships" (ibid., p. 299) of any given society so that it can reinstitute new values. The idealistic tone of utopia can dissolve the public's commitment to a particular ideology and expose the public to alternative values and goals. If the ideology in question is less desirable to the general public than the alternatives presented by utopia, then the ideology must be rejected for the best possible alternative<sup>3</sup>.

The social function of utopia can be illuminated by a comparison to metaphor<sup>4</sup>. The latter involves a distortion of traditional differences, such as the differences between man and wolf, in order to arrive at a new meaning (in this case, of man as wild or aggressive). Ricoeur believes that the primary purpose of metaphor is not to embellish the traditional meanings of words but "to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language" (Ricoeur, 1978, pp. 132-33; cited by Gay, 1992, p. 64). The destruction of traditional meanings opens the way for new interpretations that may lead to a deeper understanding of social phenomena. Metaphorical distortion can be the source for greater insight and increased awareness (Ricoeur, 1983, pp. 182-87). Likewise, utopia can usurp the cohesive power of ideology and expose a group to new forms of cohesion.

Ideology and utopia combined constitute what Ricoeur calls the "social imagination" (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 3). Just as an individual makes use of the imagination to establish and explore images of herself, so a society collectively embraces and explores images of itself by means of a 'collective' imagination. This imagination takes the form of a dialectic with two poles: one being ideology which establishes the images and goals of a given society, and the other being utopia which exposes society to an open horizon of new

images and ideals. The goal of a critical social science, claims Ricoeur, is to find a balance between these two poles. Without utopia, ideology becomes fixated on a particular set of values. Without ideology, utopia becomes an unrealizable pipe-dream. Together, ideology and utopia provide the cohesion and legitimation required for the life of the community, while remaining open to growth and improvement.

In the dialectic of ideology and utopia, the latter plays the critical role. We have already discussed how utopia can provide a critique of ideology by providing alternative values and goals or by exaggerating contemporary values and goals to reveal their long-term effects on the development of social relations. Utopia, however, is also capable of distortion. When utopia is treated as an eccentric literary genre, it no longer penetrates the status quo and becomes useless as a critical tool. An author might see his work as an escape from reality rather than a form of social criticism. An author may also reinforce current ideologies with his utopia rather than providing society with a critical alternative. The utopia of Saint Simon, for example, does not question the nineteenth century belief in the progress of science and technology, and simply reinforces this belief by illustrating how an increase in technological development can eventually solve most major social problems (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 296). By reading Saint Simon's utopia, one might be led not to question the value of technological progress but to value it even more. The mere presence of utopia, then, is not sufficient to counterbalance the distortive effects of ideology; we need, as well, a way of distinguishing radical utopias from those that merely support a given ideology.

Ricoeur claims that the criterion for a disclosive utopia is its capacity to offer society a realizable alternative. If a utopia can be used to alter the social fabric, then it fulfills its critical role<sup>5</sup>. Radical utopia must strike a balance with current ideologies (without simply reinforcing them), and must not appeal to something external to the symbolic medium of the social imagination. The goal is not to replace ideology with a new self-understanding, but to expand ideology into a broader and more open conception of society. Ricoeur describes this process as developing the dialectic of ideology and utopia into a spiral, in which both poles are preserved as moments that complement each other<sup>6</sup>.

The constructive spiral of ideology and utopia can be illustrated as follows. On the one hand, most utopias provide us with only fanciful escapes from reality, making them useless as a critical tool for monitoring current ideologies. On the other hand, some utopias, like that of Saint Simon, merely reinforce current ideologies. A spiral in the dialectic of ideology and utopia would occur if the utopia of a given society challenged current ideologies at least to the point where they could be reflected on and compared to alternatives<sup>7</sup>.

Ricoeur's suggestion of a spiral in the dialectic of ideology and utopia is not a sufficient safeguard against distortive ideology. Despite its strength as a model for understanding ideology and utopia, it is difficult to tell how this model could be applied to social phenomena. Merely stating that ideologies should be open to change and utopias to application is not enough. It could be claimed, for instance, that the end proposed by nineteenth century Marxism of a science-dominated society was a utopia that supported rather than challenged the ideologies of that century. The utopia of a technocracy for the sake of class-equalization could conceal the problems caused by technology while promoting Marxism and facilitating its realization. The fact that the utopia for a classless society effected change in Imperialistic Russia is not enough to determine whether or not Russia's social imagination is spiraling, since the utopia could be simply replacing an old ideology with a new one.

One of the few commentators to offer a solution to Ricoeur's problem is Bernard Dauenhaur. He believes that we should distinguish categorical commitment to a given ideology from hypothetical commitment. In the former case, a contingent truth concerning what is to be valued is treated as a universal truth. For example, the common value of scientific knowledge and progress in the nineteenth century was treated by some as an objective standard for everyone and for all time. Hypothetical commitment involves the recognition of the contingent basis for the values in question. Hypothetically considered ideologies are treated as temporary measures with the positive functions of integration and legitimation, and with an openness to correction and change. "If a particular ideology or utopia is so recognized," explains Dauenhaur, "then it is embraced or entertained only hypothetically" (Dauenhaur, 1989, p. 35). An appropriate relation between ideology and utopia would involve ensuring both that the utopias are effective in causing social change and that the public continues to treat its ideologies and utopias as merely hypothetical ways to understand itself. Dauenhaur writes: "No contingent product of the social imaginary [such as an ideology or utopia], if recognized as contingent, can pretend so to exhaust the possibilities of the social imagination that other plausible representations are impossible" (*ibid.*, p. 36). In the case that the people hold their beliefs to be absolute, we can assume that they are subject to distortive ideologies and utopias.

Dauenhaur's revisions, however, merely displace the question of critique rather than providing us with an answer. Utopia is replaced by hypothetical reflection as the grounds for critique. It is not the utopia itself that provides a society with a critical viewpoint, but the hypothetical attitude of the public towards both its ideologies and utopias. But Dauenhaur does not fully explain the criteria for such a critical perspective. How are we to know when we are being truly hypothetical? A partial response to this question is provided by Dauenhaur when he claims that a hypothetical attitude must be "supported by

the best presently available evidence" (ibid., p. 38). In light of such evidence, a society is expected to validate its ideologies and utopias. But the criterion for what serves as evidence is not clarified by Dauenhaur. It is quite possible that a society could claim to be open to new evidence while never questioning the criteria for validating the evidence involved. Dauenhaur's revisions merely replace the problem of developing criteria for radical utopia with the problem of developing criteria for the best available evidence.

Another problem with Dauenhaur's suggestions is that they obscure rather than clarify the relation between utopia and ideology. In Dauenhaur's plan, ideology and utopia are essentially the same. They are both "representations of what is not real" and "supplements or alternatives" (ibid., p. 35) to the contingent context in which they are developed. It seems that utopia is merely an ideology in the future that will eventually be realized. If this is true, then Dauenhaur is justified in replacing hypothetical reflection for utopia as the proper locus for critique. But this is clearly not what Ricoeur has in mind when he describes utopia and ideology as separate poles of the social imagination. The meaning of a society's utopia lies not in its future actualization as an ideology, but as a reflective horizon that may guide society and criticize current ideologies. Utopia is like a goal that society sets for itself, conditioning the significance of its ideologies in terms of how those ideologies facilitate the actualization of the goal. Just as the future of an individual provides a horizon for the present, so utopia provides a future horizon for the social imagination. In the same way that the future of an individual conditions what that individual does and becomes, utopia as the future horizon of the social imagination determines, in part, what that society does in the present. Ricoeur explains: "What I call the identity of a community or of an individual is also a prospective identity. The identity is in suspense. Thus, the utopian element is ultimately a component of identity" (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 311). Utopia is like the future dimension of a particular society, while ideology represents the ways in which a people has understood itself in the past. Utopia must be understood as unrealizable to the extent that it is not a future ideology waiting to happen, but a dimension of possibility that holds the social imagination in question<sup>8</sup>.

Ricoeur's description of utopia as a future dimension to society's identity also suggests that Dauenhaur's hypothetical attitude is superfluous. In order to remain open to alternatives, it is not necessary, as Dauenhaur claims, to achieve a neutral and hypothetical standpoint from which to criticize our own perspectives. On the contrary, an interest in our own ideologies and utopias is essential to determining their full potential and usefulness for our present condition. Gary Madison claims that "[a]ll conversations, however open and well-meaning they might be, are controlled by exogenous factors ... [B]ut it is not at all necessary that relations of power and inequalities of condition be



eliminated from the discursive situation" (Madison, 2000, pp. 469, 472-73). According to both Ricoeur and Madison, an interest in our own position is essential to the critical process. We cannot explore the impact of an alternative position if we do not already see our own position as important and as potentially at risk; it is the sense of urgency that forces us to consider alternatives in the first place and to treat them in as thorough a manner as possible. "The only way to get out of the circularity in which ideologies engulf us," writes Ricoeur, "is to assume a utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis" (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 172). It is true, as Dauenhaur suggests, that we must never take our options as final, but it is also true that we should never treat them as mere hypothetical possibilities.

### III. Text

Prior to writing *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Ricoeur wrote several essays on text and narrative. Reading a text, he claims, is like a negotiation between what the reader expects and what the text has to offer. Borrowing an expression from Martin Heidegger, Ricoeur writes that reading involves a context or *Vorhabe* (fore-having or prior possession) that determines what can appear to the reader as meaningful (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 69 and 107; Heidegger, 1962, p. 191). This *Vorhabe*, however, is open to change and development, so that when the reader encounters difficulty in understanding the text, he can alter his expectations and try again. Understanding requires a background of expectations that is modified until the text appears in a meaningful way.

Ricoeur illustrates the process of reading by referring to discourse. When one engages in a conversation, one begins with an idea of what the other person means to say, and modifies that idea until the words of the other person begin to make sense. Assurance that a proper understanding has been achieved is provided when one plays back the words of the other person and seeks her approval either by a statement or a particular gesture (a smile or a nod, for instance). If the interpretation is incorrect, then the other person will object and will attempt to restate what was said earlier so that an understanding can be achieved. The *Vorhabe* of each person, then, is modified in the process, and must be flexible so that it can be modified repeatedly. The *Vorhabe* also exposes one to the criticism of the other person who guides one towards a meaning that was not previously understood. "No horizon is closed," argues Ricoeur, "since it is possible to place oneself in another point of view and in another culture" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 75). Discourse exposes each interlocutor to the criticism of the other person and arrives at a common meaning that did not exist prior to the conversation. Likewise, reading is like a conversation in which the *Vorhabe* of the reader is modified until the text begins to make sense. The reader acts as if he were conversing

with the text, asking how it wants to be understood and following the cues of its words and narrative for approval.

Reading, however, offers a moment of critique that is lacking in ordinary discourse. Conversations usually flow freely and are easily forgotten, while texts are preserved in written form. Interlocutors also usually assume that there are no hidden motives. The immediacy of discourse makes it difficult to reflect on the various semantic structures involved in it, including the intricacies of locutionary and illocutionary meanings. These meanings could be concealing certain tensions at the root of the discourse (the Freudian slip and sexist language being two examples). It is possible that we could come away from a conversation believing that an understanding has been achieved while feeling that we have been overpowered in some way.

Ricoeur believes that reading a text offers us the chance to study the structures of the text more closely than we can study the structures of a conversation. A text is an objective structure of signs that can be analyzed in isolation from its usual context. The signs, symbols and structures involved in a text provide "clues" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 175; see also p. 213) for interpreting its meaning. Though the usual reader passes over these smaller units of meaning to arrive at an overall conception of the text, these units can be studied in order to reveal meanings that might go unnoticed by the naïve reader. Reading in Ricoeur's specialized sense is the act of treating a text as an objective structure, providing greater critical potential to the reader than the critical moment of discourse in which we are simply exposed to an alternative viewpoint.

The critical potential of reading is particularly helpful when applied to self-analysis<sup>9</sup>. While ordinary discourse allows us to focus on our activities and ignore our self-image, treating our identities as texts forces us to look carefully at how we understand ourselves and why. Perhaps our identities involve contradictory values, or promote things which we are unwilling to consciously uphold. We are especially able to detect problems in our self-image when we compare them to characters in a text. As we read about the characters, our own identities can be compared to them and challenged by them. Ricoeur concludes that "the text is the medium through which we understand ourselves" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 142). We understand ourselves by reading ourselves into the text, and by using the text to mirror aspects of ourselves that we might not have noticed before. Reading allows us to reflect on our own identities. This holds not only for the reader, claims Ricoeur, but also for the author: "Thanks to writing, the 'world' of the *text* may explode the world of the *author*" (ibid., p. 139, his italics). The text provides a medium through which both the author and the reader can reflect on themselves, and become aware of aspects of themselves that may have been otherwise overlooked.

The critical distance achieved by reading is the same distance from reality that we assume when we imagine. "Fiction and poetry," writes Ricoeur, "intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be. Everyday reality is thereby metaphorized by what could be called the imaginative variations of the real" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 142). Reading our self-identities allows us to destroy any fixations and to open our self-images to a variety of alternatives. The best alternative will not only make sense of the quasi-objective structures of our lives, but take advantage of a wide range of possibilities, as well. By treating our self-images as fictional texts, we are able to open them to development and renewal.

There are obvious parallels between the role of the imagination in Ricoeur's essays on text and narrative and its role in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. In the former, the imagination allows us to alter our *Vorhabe* in order to understand a text. In the latter, the imagination becomes a function of an entire population, giving shape to ideologies and utopias. Just as we use the imagination to explore and develop our self-identities, so a society as a whole makes use of the imagination to create and preserve its self-image in the form of ideologies. Without such an identity, a society would disintegrate into an aggregate of atomistic individuals (Ricoeur, 1986a, pp. 202 and 263). Ideology provides a *Vorhabe* for a society's self-identity just as in reading there is a *Vorhabe* that is used to understand the text.

The imagination involved in reading also offers a moment of free-thinking and analysis that is in keeping with the critical moment of utopia. The individual is able to read the 'text' of his own life by projecting it into the domain of the imaginary. Likewise, authors can project the values and norms of their societies into a fictional future. Utopia allows us to stand back and analyze a given structure of society and expose it to radical criticism by imaginatively exaggerating that structure or by comparing it to an alternative possibility. Utopia provides an alternative reading of social structures to the reading of those same structures provided by ideology.

The essential difference between ideology and utopia is like the difference between discourse and reading: while the former assumes the context of all involved to be valid, the latter exposes any interests that direct the ideological context and brings them into question. Utopia does not provide a future possibility to be actualized, but a fictional distance in which ideological readings of the society's structures can be compared to analytical readings of the same structures. This, in turn, brings to view any distortions by ideology of those structures, such as the structure of power relations. If an ideology is used by a particular group to conceal its own interests, this structure of power will be revealed by a utopia that analyzes those structures. A critical utopia will be one that treats the social context as a text, revealing any tensions that would otherwise be concealed by ideology<sup>10</sup>.

The spiral of the dialectic of ideology and utopia is the continuing modification of a group's self-image by means of utopic analysis. In *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Ricoeur claims that reading a text explodes the circular movement of discourse into an arc<sup>11</sup>. Rather than making us continually circle back onto our own *Vorhabe*, reading radically exposes us to alternatives that free us from our original context and expose aspects of that context that we may not have noticed. By analyzing the objective structures of a text, furthermore, we are able to expand our understanding beyond our initial interpretation. And in the same way, a critical utopia will explode the blind circling back of a society onto its original ideologies and expose them to a clearer picture of society's structures — a picture that might reveal aspects of the society that the ideologies were intended to conceal. As a society progresses toward the use of less restrictive ideologies, the social imagination can be said to spiral upward. The practical signs of this spiral include a healthy attitude of the people towards change, a set of norms and values that are more inclusive than exclusive, and a goal that flows freely from the past and into the open future.

The parallel between individual and social imagination helps to strengthen Ricoeur's claim that utopia is the source of ideology critique. Ideology, like discourse, establishes a common ground of understanding that holds the society together. This ground, in turn, becomes the *Vorhabe* by means of which each individual comes to interpret her role as a member of that society. Utopic images and texts provide a counter-balance for ideology's cohesive force by providing alternatives to the status quo. Utopia also can be used to expose the underlying power structures of society that get clouded over by distortive ideologies. This exposure allows for a critical analysis not only of a given societal identity or ideology but also of tensions at the root of social life. In this way, a utopia provides a 'reading' of the 'text' of social existence and a criticism of how past ideologies have interpreted social reality.

Ricoeur believes that the elimination of all distortion in our interpretation of self and world is impossible. We will always be entangled with others in the twilight of mixed understandings and half-truths. By treating our interpretations as fictional possibilities, though, and exploring their analytic potential, we can remain open to alternatives and alert to unconscious interests. By exposing ideology to the critical domain of utopia, we do more than just find a way out of the web of ideology. We continue the project of unravelling our entangled interpretations of self and world and re-cast these interpretive threads so that they better expose us to the critical power of the social imagination.

**Bibliography:**

Dauenhaur, Bernard, "Ideology, Utopia, and Responsible Politics", *Man and World* 22, 1989, pp. 25-41.

Gay, William, "Ricoeur on Metaphor and Ideology", *Darshana International* 32, 1992, pp. 59-70.

Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1962.

Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (revised edition), 1996.

Madison, G.B., "Critical Theory and Hermeneutics: Some Outstanding Issues in the Debate" in *Perspectives on Habermas*, ed. L. E. Hahn, Chicago, Open Court, 2000.

Ricoeur, Paul, "Violence and Language" in *Political and Social Essays*, ed. David Stewart and Joseph Bien, Athens, Ohio University Press, 1974.

———, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles Reagan and David Stewart, Boston, Beacon Press, 1978.

———, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, tr. and ed. John B. Thompson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

———, "On Interpretation" in *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

———, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George Taylor, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986a.

———, "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator" in *Facts and Values: Philosophical Reflections from Western and Non-Western Perspectives*, tr. J.N. Kraay and A.J. Scholten, ed. M. C. Doeser and J. N. Kraay, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1986b.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, "Merleau-Ponty vivant" in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, tr. Benita Eisher, ed. Jon Stewart, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1998.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Gary Madison and Elizabeth Loaring for their many helpful comments.
- 2 Ricoeur describes the blurring of particular beliefs in terms of the Marxist conception of surplus value: since relying on individual interests alone is not enough to give an authority legitimacy, the authority requires a surplus of belief that it gains by means of ideology. Ricoeur writes: "There is always more in the claim of a given system of authority than the normal course of motivation can satisfy, and therefore there is always a supplement of belief provided by an ideological system" (1986a, p. 202); see also p. 212.
- 3 Ricoeur elaborates on the nature of utopia, by showing that it can involve either the promotion of a new ethical order or anarchy against authority in general. He writes: "the utopia has two alternatives: to be ruled by good rulers — either ascetic or ethical — or to be ruled by no rulers. All utopias oscillate between these two poles" (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 299). In both cases, an alternative to the status quo is suggested and the present values are challenged.
- 4 William Gay observes that Ricoeur does not explicitly relate ideological distortion to that of metaphor, and argues that new uses of metaphor can help to correct ideological distortion (Gay, 1992, p. 65). Gay's example is the use of the term 'window of vulnerability' which describes the threat of a sneak-attack by a foreign nation. This metaphor could lead to an overemphasis on national defense in a time when fostering peace might be the better alternative. We can gain access to such an alternative when we replace the window metaphor with the metaphor of a 'house with no ceiling', suggesting that every nation is radically vulnerable. If we see ourselves as vulnerable on all fronts rather than only in one place, then we will be more willing to negotiate peace. The change in metaphor from window of vulnerability to an open ceiling could change our understanding of international relations and the alternatives that are available to us (*ibid.*, pp. 69-70).
- 5 Bernard Dauenhaur explains this point clearly: "If utopian thought ignores or trivializes actual circumstances, if it fails to connect the 'here and now' of social reality to the 'elsewhere' or 'nowhere' of utopia, then it is pathological" (Dauenhaur, 1989, p. 30).
- 6 Paul Ricoeur explains that "we cannot get out of the circle of ideology and utopia, but the judgment of appropriateness may help us to understand how the circle may become a spiral" (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 314).
- 7 A lengthy discussion of Saint-Simon's utopia is found in Ricoeur, 1986a, pp. 285-300. Ricoeur also makes the same point with respect to Fourier's

- utopia, in which scientific values are challenged by the value of human passion. Ricoeur claims that Fourier's utopia, like that of Saint-Simon, involves "the denial of the problematic of work, power, and discourse" (ibid., p. 309); Ricoeur's criticism of Fourier's utopia occurs on pp. 301-14.
- 8 Ricoeur develops Karl Mannheim's idea that utopia is an unrealizable future by adding that if utopia and ideology were to become totally congruent, we would have a society that is closed to change. In such a society, "people are adapted [to their present situation], and because they are adapted they have no illusions; but with the loss of illusions people also lose any sense of direction" (Ricoeur, 1986a, p. 282). Utopia must remain an unrealized future with real practical effects on a society's present condition. For Ricoeur's discussion of Mannheim, see pp. 269-83.
  - 9 For an explanation of how personal identity can be treated as a text, see Ricoeur, 1986b, pp. 121-32.
  - 10 It may seem on the surface that an appeal to an imaginative openness to alternatives supports Dauenhaur's suggestion that critique be conducted from a hypothetical standpoint. But fictional distance is not hypothetical distance; in a very strong sense, an actor takes on the persona of the character, and the audience feels the character's passion and is absorbed in the events of the drama. Commitment to a given possibility allows us to take alternatives seriously rather than treating them as neutral. By comparing the use of utopia to reading a text, we are able to understand utopia as being more than a hypothetical game.
  - 11 Ricoeur refers to the image of the hermeneutical arc in several places throughout *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, including pp. 161 and 218. See also his essay, "On Interpretation", where he explains that self-understanding must be forced to "take the round-about path of the whole treasury of symbols" (Ricoeur, 1983, p. 193).