THE SYNERGY BETWEEN SOCIAL SCIENCE AND IDEOLOGY: A PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEMPLATION

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ABSTRACT

There has been a heated debate as to what actually is the nature of social science. Theorists and social scientists have been at loggerheads as they battle in an attempt to explain the true nature of social science as contrasted with ideology and why according to them, it is called social science and not science per se. Others still have argued that what we now call social science was once and is perhaps presently an embodiment of ideologies which itself cannot be said to be free of self-interest, prejudice, ethnocentrism, value ladeness etc. In an attempt to participate in this hot boiling debate, we have argued that there is a synergy between the duo of social science and ideology. We argued that the concept of value ladeness did as a matter of fact extrapolate into the different strands of social science theories and ideologies respectively but maintained that they are ‘distinctively’ different though they share similarities.

Key words: social science, ideology & value ladeness.

INTRODUCTION

It is no mincing words that one of the major problems with social science is that in all its strands of discipline, there seems to be no consensus amongst theorist and writers as each hold different point of view. Such multi-faceted conception and description of what is real becomes what leads us to ask: Is Social Science value neutral or value laden? If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, one is quickly led to ask that why then does it advocate policies of social actions. It is therefore reasonable to question whether social science is not just a collection of ideologies and social scientists a bunch of ideologues, selling their wares under a false label (Webb, 1995:63).

It is therefore the thrust of this paper to engage in a critical examination of the concept of ideology and social science respectively with a view of showing their areas of convergence and divergences. To achieve this, the paper shall attempt conceptual analysis of ideology, its major tenets and the types of ideology there is; this will be done in the light of what we know as social science in order to ascertain whether social science and ideology share a symbiotic relationship or whether they are mutually exclusive.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The origin of ideology can be traced to Antoine Destutt de Tracy who conceived it to mean a discipline which involves the general science of our "intellectual faculties, their principal phenomena, and the more remarkable circumstances of their activities (Destutt-Tracy, 1801:4). Convinced of the sensationalist epistemology of Locke and Candillac, Destutt de Tracy believed one could resolve all ideas into the sensations that produced them and thereby test their soundness. The sensationalist assumptions of his project led him to propose that "ideology is part of zoology" and he consequently paid close attention to the way physiological circumstances shaped and often misshaped ideas. Though Karl Marx appropriated this concept of ideology, he explored not physiological but cultural
determinants. He concerned himself with the way material and economic conditions influenced ideas, especially when they produced a false consciousness of the supposed reality to which they referred (Richards, 1993: 103).

Before we delve into the mainstreams of this paper, it is germane that we first understand what we mean by ideology before we can argue whether social science is an ideological conception along with other forms of ideologies. According to Webb, “In order to say whether social science is or is not an ideology, it has to be compared with those things that we call ideology” (An introduction to problems in the philosophy of social science, 63). Webb argues that if we are to define ideology as a logical and deductive interrelated set of political beliefs held by social group, since there are no such sets, such definitions would be futile for all practical purposes (Ibid, 64).

THE MEANING AND NATURE OF IDEOLOGY

Argument on ideology can be seen as the perception of the world from a subjective narrow point of view rather than as a whole. “It is the picture of the world seen from a particular standpoint, which is influenced by a multifarious collection of factors” (Harris: 1982, 63).

We therefore argue that ideology can be seen in the light of this perception of the world from a subjective standpoint which is though not devoid of self interest, ethnocentrism prejudices etc. Quoting Karl Marx, Kevin Harris argues that Ideology is necessarily misrepresentation (Ibid, 65). The concept of ideology is enshrined in those belief systems of human cultures, customs, education etcetera to which they can seldom free themselves. Every action of human is necessarily tailored to some end; hence one cannot but wonder whether we can totally bracket ourselves from such stereotypical and socio-cultural commitments owing to the fact that we are a product of our age (environment). This is why we are inclined to argue in the same vein with Kevin Harris that it is impossible for us to totally extricate ourselves from ideology on the pretext that both man and ideology were born twins! Against this backdrop, it is not to say that we should resign to fate and follow to whatever abyss our ideological colourations leads us as it regards our thought pattern, behavior, interactions and representations. But we can critically attack ideology as Kevin Harris suggested so as reducing its grip on us. He further opined that:

We might never be able to escape the prevailing ideologies of our time and place. If this were so, then we could be regarded as victims of our social-historical circumstances, who in certain situations might have little alternative but to see the world in the disguised and distorted form in which it was misrepresented to us, or in which we misrepresent it to ourselves... But the question that really face us is whether we can ever escape our ideological immersions and put ourselves in a position to see the world in a different way (Harris: 1982, 94).

From the foregoing, Harris attempts to argue not for the existence of ideological colouration but for the ways in which we can consciously identify and free ourselves if not totally but at least to a good degree from the chains of ideology which seems to pervade all of our existences.

Harris argues further that the reason why we cannot be totally free from ideology is buttressed in the fact that we are at one point or the other operating within a particular ideological program. And these ideologies vary from one another. Some can be right and too detrimental as compared to the other which could be mild and a little accommodating. Harris puts it this way: "It is in our best interest only if we end up adopting a less distorted or undistorted perspective for coming to know the world, or; to put that in different terminology, if we forsake a particular ideological research program in order to embrace a more
progressive one. For Him, we cannot however, simply decide to go out and change our beliefs and perspectives for these things are determined by ongoing social practice, and short of changing social practices very little can be achieved (Ibid, 95).

We therefore, agree with Harris that one is a product of his socio-cultural milieu and the logic of his time which appear as the most prevalent. However, like Harris suggested, we must attempt to decipher the correct logic of life from those which appear too erroneous, through conscious awareness and critical disposition with a view to attacking every ideological system that we seem to identify, by so doing we could like the French philosopher, Rene Descartes also “wake up from our dogmatic slumber”. For according to Harry Schofield in his book *The Philosophy of Education: An Introduction*, “Ideology, culture and education are inter-related...Education and culture are words which are almost frequently used”. According to him, Culture means doing the done thing...the done thing to which we referred have become traditionally accepted (Schofield, 1980, 107).

Our reasoning from the foregoing is that there is a close similarity between ideology, culture and education as argued by Schofield. Since from our definition, *ideology refers to the representation or supposed misrepresentation of the world in a particular way and culture refers to a repetition of what has already been done from ages immemorial*. Such monotony would to my mind, consequently make us have a subjective perception of the world which is akin to those held by previous generation. This is in the same vein what Paulo Freire attempt to prove in his book *The pedagogy of the oppressed* where he attempted to articulate arguments against the banking system of education and such issues as Man’s inhumanity to man (the former being the oppressor and the latter, the oppressed) as it is revealed in such concepts as feudalism. Paulo Freire describes it thus:

... Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressed society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? It will not be defined by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it through recognizing the necessity to fight for it. And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the Heart of the oppressors’ violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity (Freire,23).

He further opined that *the pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization* (Ibid, 25).

**THE NATURE AND MEANING OF SOCIAL SCIENCE**

By way of definition, the phrase ‘social science(s)’ has been defined by the online edition of the Oxford Dictionary (British and world English) to mean: ‘the scientific study of human society and social relationships’ ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)). On the other hand, it has again been defined as ‘a branch of science that deals with institutions and functioning of human society and with interpersonal relationships of individuals as members of society (The Merriam-Webster dictionary). The above lexical orientations portray the discipline as a scientific enterprise. It is believed to comprise sociology, anthropology, economics and political science; and loosely, history, archaeology, linguistics and law. It has been observed in the Columbian Encyclopedia (1897) that as at the 19th century, the social sciences comprised five fields namely, jurisprudence (amendment of the law), education, economy, health, trade and art. However, kuper and kuper(1985) emphasizes that the underlying are discipline branches in the social sciences informed by the need to address problems of social significance, they are, environmental studies, social works, sociology, public administration,
psychology, anthropology, business studies, area studies, communication, criminology, demography, Development studies, Economics, Education, Geography, History, Industrial relations, information Science, Law, library Science, Linguistics, media studies, political science and Public Administration.

It was against this backdrop that webb argues that “There is only one central methodological question about the social sciences, and that is whether they are sciences at all” (Webb,80). The introduction of a scientific mode of analysis into the study of society was an attempt to cope with the uncertainty surrounding the study of social life (Ibid, 8). According to Chris Akpan in an article published in 2008 on The question of value-freedom in the social sciences: a philosophical reflection, he argues that social sciences are seen by many as a different form of science dealing with a different subject matter (human social behaviour or action) and as such, would not, or perhaps would never attain such success recorded by the natural sciences (African Pentecost 140-146).

THE NEXUS BETWEEN SOCIAL SCIENCE AND IDEOLOGY
The above is what forms the thesis of this paper. It attempts to suggest that there is a relationship between social behaviour of man in the society with the concept of ideology. The question that readily comes to mind is therefore whether social science itself is not a collection of ideologies. Webb has argued that there are clear difference between the duo of social science and ideology. According to him:

... To suggest this is not to imply that social science is better or worse than ideology in a normative sense. Ideology performs political and social functions that are incapable of being performed by social science, and social science comments on social life in ways that cannot be emulated by ideology, (Webb, 62). What Webb attempt to argue from the above is that social science and ideology is in fact very different things like the two-edges of a knife. No doubt, they have some areas of convergence but its dissimilarities appear to be clear cut. He further Posit in the same vein that "to suggest that 'social science' is not ideology does not mean that it is a science; it merely means that it is a different kind of thing to ideology”.

In evaluating the nature of social science, Chris Akpan has argued in another paper A Panoramic view on the philosophy of social science that:

The social sciences are a complex web of inter-related disciplines concerned with the exploration of distinct features of human behavior... One thing is obvious: the subject matter-is Human social action” the complexity that adorns human behavior is what each of the social sciences (no matter its sub-division) attempts to understand. It must be noted that not all behaviors fall within the purview of the social sciences. Behavior is said to be social when it has social significance (Akpan, 67).

Another attempt at rationalizing on the nexus between ideology and social science(s) is from the perspective of the role 'self-interest' play in human interaction. As human beings, we act from the primitive drive of self-interest. Self-interest has been defined as,

The disposition always in all situations to desire undue advantage for and solely for the person or persons involved, in total disregard of the common good. When a person seeks his interest within the confines of the common good, he is not being selfish. This is where the main difference is located. In the act of self-interest, a person places himself always before and above others and thus regards his interest as supreme (Asouzu 2003).

From the previous delineations of ideology and social science(s), we see the role of self-interest (and by extension, its extreme in self- selfishness) as it simmers. In fact, this may
explain why the advent of Economics under the umbrella of Social science was viewed by some, especially Lazear (2000) as “economic imperialism” (Economic Imperialism 2000) probably owing to the fact that the other species of social sciences in their ideological persuasions saw in Economics an over-riding ideology. In essence, our argument subsists in the fact that human interest bestrides both ideology and Social Science(s). Accordingly, the extent to which the instinct of human interest characterizes ideological or Socio-Scientific perceptions of the world demonstrates the extent of the nexus (necessary connection) between ideology and social science. However, to suggest that social science is 'merely' or 'only' an ideological perception therefore would only make sense in so far as there is little or no difference between the two (ideology and social science). It will be suggested that there are very great similarities as there are also areas of difference, “... our major concern is therefore focused on what differentiates them and not what they have in common” (Webb, 64).

In addition, webb further argues that prior to this our contemporary time, the concept of ideology is far from new: it was pejoratively used as a term of abuse by Napoleon; this sense of the word when used in the context of seeing someone as an ideologist, means that such an individual has a mode of thought considered as dogmatism and indoctrination. Looking at the various usages of the terms, Webb informs that ideology can be seen as:

- Systematic, coherent, quasi-logical, congruent, constrained belief, such beliefs referring to social and/or political structure, beliefs that demands high affective identification, loyalty, commitment, held by a group, a form of distorted thinking in cooperating a philosophy of historic, social theory, futuristic beliefs which could be considered in the light of a myth... It is a form of dogmatic, closed rigid manner of thinking (Ibid, 65).

VALUES IN IDEOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

One of the major fusion between ideology and social science circles around the question of values which has to do with human nature and the society in which we live "Both social science and ideology are infused with values at base, but because they are both value laden does not mean that they are the same thing" (Ibid, 71). It is no gainsaying the fact that the theories of social science do make value assumptions about the world like those similar to ideology. We can therefore argue that what gives meaning to and serves as the ontological equilibrium upon which social science comfortably lies is the question of value. These values are therefore necessary to identify what we consider to be significant in social science.

Webb quoted Max Webber as an advocate of value-freedom in social science, who noted that values must come into play in such situations of selection of topics for study and that there is no such thing as value-free selection. This argument goes to buttress the fact that human nature is ontologically self interested, egocentric, ethnocentric as well as anthropocentric in all its dealings and hence an attempt to totally bracket one’s mind from such self interested intentions would only be tantamount to a futile exercise or a wild goose chase. Webb avers that, if we are to follow this line of thought, it follows deductively that ideology and social science cannot be distinguished by the mere fact that one purveys values and the other does not. However, while we cannot separate ideology and social science on the simple grounds of the presence or absence of values, a distinction can nonetheless be made on two further grounds:

1. The presence of additional values in social science not found in ideology
2. The role and function of values in ideology and social science being fundamentally different.
For social science, Webb contends that such additional values referred here are those of openness and the acceptance of challenge and dispute as a legitimate and proper activity. He further argues that, there are debates which are sometimes referred to as theoretical disputes. There is no social science discipline that is not marked by division of this kind. A further point noted above was the function of values in social science where such values are to be explored with respect to their limits. They are placed in juxtaposition with other values to discover potential contradictions (Ibid, 76).

In respect to ideology, the function of values is very different, Webb opined that while the individual social scientist will struggle for coherence in his thought, an ideologist (ideologue) will attempt in varying degrees to be itself coherent but more importantly will address itself to the maintenance of coherence and unity of action of a group.

He further maintains that, the first function of ideology is to his mind, the ability to promote a persuasive view of the world. But one will not stop to reason, in what sense does Webb attempt to use the adjective "persuasive" is it in the sense of one being deterministically controlled to perform an action? Or is it in the sense of such perception of the world being convincing enough or better still having some valid logic in it? Furthermore, Webb argues that another purpose of ideology is to exclude what he (Webb) calls 'divisiveness' which he avers often manifest itself in a lack of openness.

Deductively, ideological fragmentation is not evident in openness but is an evidence of competitive struggle within a group or movement.

CONCLUSION
We have argued that there is as much similarity between social science and ideology as there are also differences. We have in the foregoing shown that the concept of ideology is distinct from social science based on the standpoint of value and valuation functions. However, the most important difference between ideology and social science is seen in the nature of the beliefs held and how they are held: social science is open and argumentative and it is also marked by a tentatively held belief system. Further, social science and ideology are functionally different just as we have argued earlier.

Without ideology many of the great accomplishments in the world today would not hold sway, the reason is that often times than not, a shared belief system help to mobilize individuals for collective social action and are thus of great value. However, social science and ideology will remain closely linked while they shall ever have areas of divergence.

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