Ideology in Industrial Relations

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The paper discusses the significant role the concept of ideology has in industrial relations theory and the problems created by the varied and deficient definitions of the concept. A definition is developed and justified which helps explain industrial relations behaviour.

Introduction

Industrial relations throughout the industrialised world has seen tremendous changes within the last decade, not the least being the changes in the dominant ideology. In New Zealand alone, the major legislation has changed from the *Industrial Relations Act* - which was merely an adoption of 1894 legislation - based on a pro-union/paternalistic ideology to the *Labour Relations Act* which was based on a pluralistic ideology to the *Employment Contracts Act* based on a unitarist ideology.

Industrial relations as an academic subject in its own right has had a fairly short history. This is not to deny the earlier publication of classics such as those by the Webbs (1896, 1902) and later by such as Commons (1924) and Perlman (1928). However, *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations* is claimed to be the oldest university journal specialising in industrial relations (Lafflamme, 1994) and not until 1995 will it celebrate its half century. If industrial relations as a field of study is accepted as only really coming into being since the 1950s, then "ideology" has played a role in industrial relations theory almost since its inception.

This paper will argue that the concept of ideology plays a significant part in our understanding of industrial relations both in theory and in practice. However, the potential contribution that an understanding of ideology can play, is severely limited by its problematic use in the literature. Confusion is created by the fact that writers use the term either without definition, or with different and deficient definitions. This diverse use of the term can be traced to the development of the concept in general usage, which explains, but does not compensate for its confused use in the industrial relations literature. A justification is given for the proposed definition of ideology taken by this paper.

Historical origins of "ideology"

There have been many diverse meanings attributed to the word "ideology" in industrial relations writings over the last 50 years. These result from its development over the past

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200 years. The word was first used by a group of French philosophers who participated in the French Revolution. Then the word was used to mean the "science of ideas". Credit for coining the term is usually attributed to one of their number, Destutt de Tracy, whose five volume work *Elemens d'Ideologie* (1827) appeared over a period of time, the earliest section published in 1801. Kennedy (1978) states the word "ideology" was chosen after some consideration in preference to "psychology" because "psychology", being derived from *psyche* (soul), "may have been misunderstood as pre-supposing the existence of the soul" (p.46). The philosophers became known as "ideologues".

During the Jacobin Reign of Terror many ideologues, including de Tracy, were imprisoned and some guillotined. Their "ideologies" came under suspicion. However, in the Thermidorian Reaction, Robespierre was overthrown, de Tracy was released, and in the following decade the influence of the ideologues was at its zenith. They dominated the newly created *Institut National* and were charged with the remodelling of the French educational system. The ideologues had supported Napoleon Bonaparte in his rise to power so were rewarded with flattering comments from him about the value of their work. However, the honeymoon period between Napoleon Bonaparte and the ideologues was short lived. Soon after he achieved full power, conflict took place, with Bonaparte now characterising the work of the ideologues as "idealistic trash" (Bendix, 1964: 300), claiming "it is to ideology, that sinister metaphysis that we must attribute all the misfortunes of our beloved France" (Taine, 1898: 219-220).

Thus, ideology came to be regarded more often as "hopelessly impractical philosophising" rather than "the science of ideas", and "thenceforth all thought labelled as 'ideology' is regarded as futile when it comes to practice, and that only reliable access to reality is to be sought in practical activity" (Mannheim, 1992: 64).

While Napoleon Bonaparte may have made the first publicly recorded attack on ideology, it was Karl Marx who was most influential in giving the word a pejorative meaning. Plamentaz (1970: 23) observes that "Marx often called ideology 'false consciousness'" and, similarly, Bottomore and Rubel (1956) consider that:

> Marx's concepts of 'false consciousness' and 'ideology' are related to the concept of 'alienation'. False consciousness is the consciousness of individuals in a condition of alienation, and ideology is the system of beliefs produced by such a false consciousness. Later, of course, Marx used the term 'ideology' in different senses; e.g. in one sense to mean a deliberately misleading system of ideas (p.52).

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels attack ideology as being an erroneous theory that viewed human thoughts in terms of abstract metaphysics. Ideologists, they claim "are in no way combatting the real world . . . in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*" (p.47).

Larrain (1979) considers the antagonistic attitude of Marx and Engels towards ideology stems from their belief that ideology is used to conceal class contradictions, and "by concealing contradictions, ideology serves the interests of the ruling classes, which can display the present order of things as natural and in the interests of all society" (p.61).

Hence, there is the claim not only that ideology is a technique used to conceal class contradictions, but that it is a weapon used by the ruling classes to enable them to continue to be able to dominate society. This view is clearly expressed by Marx and Engels (1970):

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. . . . the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force . . . each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society (pp.64-5).

In later Communist works "ideology" comes to mean the ideas of a particular class, and thus usage takes precedence over all the previous ones. Hence the major task for revolutionary parties, according to Communist doctrine, is to ensure ideological victories. Lenin (1968) writes of the revolution involving "an unremitting and most merciless ideological struggle and political struggle against bourgeois liberalism" (p.55).

Thus, in general usage ideology has been considered, amongst others, as the science of ideas, futile philosophy, incorrect beliefs, deliberately false beliefs, a means of ensuring domination, and the ideas of a particular class. It is hardly surprising that when taken into industrial writing the concept of ideology should be equally ambiguous.

The use of "ideology" in industrial relations writings

Industrial relations writers on various occasions have explicitly emphasised the importance of ideology. Thus Wood (1978/9) claims it has "a central place in the study of industrial relations" and "a consideration of the nature and role of ideology is essential" (p.42). Marsden (1982) takes a similar stance, claiming that "industrial relations is not the study of industrial *relations*. It is the study of objectified ideologies or laws" (p.247), and earlier states that "ideology is the phenomenon to be explained" (p.240). Similarly Goll (1990) observes that "industrial relations theory identifies ideology as an important variable shaping employee management practices" (p.502).

While the above writers, amongst others, have explicitly emphasised ideology, it is more frequent for writers to implicitly note its significance. The two who had the greatest influence were John Dunlop in the United States and Alan Fox in the United Kingdom. However, those two were not the earliest. Taft (1954) discussing ideologies and industrial conflict, points out that "indirect evidence indicates that ideology can be a factor in promoting or restraining industrial conflicts" (pp.257-8). Clark Kerr (1955) introduces concepts raised later by both Dunlop and Fox. Kerr makes the point that "the same general ideological orientation has been accepted by the people at large. This ideology has changed over the decades, even quite rapidly in the 1930s, but it has attracted at any moment of time the large majority of all our citizens" (p.7). Kerr's paper was acknowledged by Hyman (1978) as a seminal paper in industrial relations theory, and Hyman also gave it the credit for introducing "the *concept* of pluralism to the analysis of relations of unions with employers and with their own members" (p.20).

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While Kerr and Taft preceded him, it was Dunlop (1958) in his classic *Industrial Relations Systems* that generated interest and debate over the concept. He asserted that such systems contain "an ideology or a set of beliefs commonly held by the actors that helps to bind or integrate the system together as an entity" (p.16). Two leading British theorists (Bain and Clegg, 1974) took issue with the above statement claiming it had conservative implications and was unacceptable. More radical academics took greater exception, with Hyman (1972), for example, claiming that Dunlop's statement is "sheer mysticism" (p.68). Notwithstanding the criticism, Dunlop made the concept of ideology a new and vital focus of attention for industrial relations theorists, but his contribution was surpassed by that of Alan Fox. Most writing in industrial relations concerned with ideology owes a debt to Fox's work, either directly or indirectly. In his early writings (1963, 1966a, 1966b, 1971) Fox postulated two industrial relations ideologies of managers - the well-known Unitarist and Pluralist ideologies[1].

Later Fox (1973, 1974a, 1974b) introduced a critique of the Pluralist Ideology which could be considered the Radical Ideology.

Fox never suggested the Radical Ideology was held by *managers*, but it received support not only, it appeared, from himself but also from radical academics, to the extent that the term "New Industrial Relations" was used to refer, not as it is used today, but to radical theorists demonstrating "insights derived from sociology and Marxism" (Hill, 1976b: 214).

Through the 1970s there was an ongoing debate in the literature between pluralists (Clegg, 1975 and Kochan, 1980, 1982) and radicals (Fox, 1973, 1974a, 1974b and Hyman, 1974, 1975, 1978), although Fox's radicalism was challenged by Wood and Elliott (1977).

In the 1980s and 1990s ideology was again under consideration with the emergence of today's version of "The New Industrial Relations" - a term apparently first used in the modern context in *Business Week*, 11 May 1981. This was taken up in the literature by, amongst others, Kochan *et al.* (1989); Dunn (1990) and (1991); Kelly and Kelly (1991) and Keenoy (1991). Reference here is to the apparent switch by managers back to the unitary ideology. This, after the 1970s, when Anthony (1977) observed the unitary ideology was "respectfully abandoned when it was so heavily criticised by Fox" (p.252).

Ideology also features in the literature on human resource management versus personnel management (Guest, 1987, 1990, 1991). The suggestion in the literature is again that there is a shift from the pluralist to the unitary ideology with personnel management being more

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[1]   There are no universally accepted versions of the three types - but the following are approximations:

1.   Unitarist: The organisation is a team, with common objectives. General acceptance of managerial authority and managerial prerogatives. Unions are necessary, conflict is pathological.

2.   Pluralist: The organisation comprises sectoral groups with objectives which sometimes coincide, sometimes clash. Unions help achieve more equal bargaining power. Conflict is inevitable.

3.   Radical: Class conflict paramount. Capital always with superior power. State sides with capital over labour. Concept of 'national interest' not meaningful.

pluralist while human resource management is clearly unitarist (Guest, 1987).

The functions of ideology

The principal function of an ideology is to help the social groups achieve its objectives. It does this by way of "instrumental" functions which are means to an end - the end being the principal function. Thus when Fox (1966b) makes reference to the functions of the unitarist ideology being "at once a method of self-assurance, an instrument of persuasion and a technique of seeking legitimation of authority" (p.5) he is referring to instrumental functions.

Ideologies promote solidarity by the very fact that the members of the group accepting the ideology are accepting and reiterating the same values. Further, ideologies can increase the emotional feeling among the group - Bell (1970) asserts the most important latent function of an ideology is "to tap emotions" (p.371) - which also tends to build solidarity. As solidarity increases, the power of the group increases.

In many cases the objectives or goals that groups are striving to achieve could easily be considered selfish, immoral and sometimes evil. A small minority of people can accept that they are pursuing selfish or evil goals and keep working to achieve them. However, most people cannot, and if they actually recognised they were being selfish or immoral then this would probably divert them from their objectives. Ideology helps them to achieve their objectives by fulfilling the instrumental function of self reassurance. The ideology tells them their goals are not selfish or immoral, allowing them to happily pursue their goals. As Anthony (1977) states:

> No one is ever capable of accepting the immorality of goals which he is publicly seeking - although the process of rational reconciliation may be tortuous. Both Hitler and Himmler believed themselves to be moral men; it is much easier for managers to do so (p.270).

The final instrumental function is closely interrelated. This is that an ideology serves to justify the actions of the group. Hinton and Hyman (1975) claim, for example, that rank and file (union) leaders "develop ideologies to justify and reinforce their activities" (p.12). If this function is served successfully, other groups will accept the goals and behaviour of those holding the ideology as being legitimate. Thus others may partially accept the ideology - even though it disadvantages them. This "power" becomes accepted and legitimate and eventually not even considered as "power", but rather as "authority".

Definitional problems

Many industrial relations writers use the term "ideologies" without definition, supporting the view of Martins (1981) that "industrial relations writers have shown relatively little interest in the precise definition of terms" (p.107). Thus, the meaning has to be assumed from the context. Where definitions are given, they vary through the range outlined in the section on the historical origins of the word.

Implicit or explicit definitions of ideology vary considerably. One definition is that it is a "set of beliefs" (Dunlop, 1958: 16) or, as used by Fox (1966b) a frame of reference. That is a "conceptual structure of generalisations or concepts, postulates about what is essential, assumptions about what is valuable, attitudes about what is possible and ideas about what will work effectively" (p.2).

A second definition is that ideology refers to observations and beliefs which are value contaminated, unprovable and probably untrue. Child (1969), for example, states that "it may be postulated that British management thought could draw upon four broad categories of ideas: (1) scientific observation; (2) erroneous observation; (3) distorted observation; and (4) pure value statements. These four positions represent a progression from the scientific to the ideological" (p.221).

This use of the term is more apparent when the "user" has different values and a different ideology to the person being criticised. Thus Wood (1976), critically evaluating the text: *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* by Hyman (1975) states that "there is a discontinuity in the book between his (Hyman's) more scientific statements and his ideological, ethical passages" (p.54).

Roberts (1976) makes a similar attack on Hyman in another review of the same text, stating that at times "scholarship is subordinate to ideology" (p.236).

A third meaning suggests it refers to impractical, theoretical views, out of touch with "the real world". Thus Rico (1987) claims that Japanese-owned British firms insist on dealing with "pragmatic rather than ideological unions" (p.68).

A fourth category of meanings is very close to the second in that it too sees ideology as representing something false, possibly as a tactic or method of persuasion. Aldridge (1976) asks if managers "act upon beliefs about management rights or is the doctrine merely an ideology?" (p.xiii). The pejorative use of the word reaches its height when ideology is discussed simply as something blatantly untrue. Thus Dahrendorf (1959) refers to an argument which he asserts is "ideological, i.e., demonstrably false" (p.253). Thus one has the pejorative progression from ideology being value contaminated and not provable, to probably untrue, to blatantly untrue.

Developing a definition

The previous section outlined the range of definitions. Although varied, the majority go along with Dunlop and Fox to the extent they accept the ideology refers to a system of beliefs and attitudes.

Rokeach (1975) progresses towards a valid definition with his view that an ideology is "an organisation of beliefs and attitudes - religious, political, or philosophical in nature that is more or less institutionalised or shared with others deriving from external authority" (p.123-4).

The major point to be gained from this is that there is necessarily an organisation of beliefs and attitudes, or a system, or "a connected set", rather than Fox's (1971) "rag bag of assorted notions" (p.125). A secondary point is that this organisation of beliefs and attitudes is shared with others, rather than referring to "belief-systems" *per se*. While a value may be defined as a specific belief, Rokeach's definition is deficient in that it fails to identify "values" as being a component of an ideology, particularly given the emphasis many place on the value component of an ideology. If one accepts the inclusion of "values", Rokeach's definition provides that an ideology is "a connected set of beliefs, attitudes and values", and that it is "held by an identifiable social group which refers to a specific aspect of social reality".

However, the above definition is still inadequate. On top of the confusion created by the implicit or explicit use of widely different definitions, it is suggested that further confusion is caused by the lack of explicit acceptance that an ideology should be defined as having different elements and different levels of abstraction.

Elements of an ideology

The early writings of Fox, noted earlier, were widely accepted by British, Australian and New Zealand academics and the less insular Americans (Kochan, 1980, 1982). That was, that the Unitarist ideology, although commonly held by managers was unrealistic and "distorts reality and thereby prejudice(s) solutions" (Fox, 1966b: 2). He considered it essential that the Pluralist ideology be adopted "if industrial relations issues are to be handled and evaluated properly" (p.33). Later, again as mentioned, Fox criticised the Pluralist ideology in his "social critique" (1973) and "Radical Challenge" (1974). Not surprisingly, therefore, this apparent about-face caused more than a little confusion and consternation and a debate on pluralism "raged for much of the 1970s" (Purcell, 1983: 11).

A common interpretation seems to be that Fox moved from anti-Unitarist and pro-Pluralist to anti-Pluralist and pro-Radical. As argued below this is not the case, but the confusion is understandable, given Fox's lack of clarity. Some confusion seems excessive. Anthony (1977) in an otherwise perceptive work produces an amazing conclusion. Anthony apparently believes that the "later Fox" stance is anti-Pluralist and pro-Unitary. Anthony states that the Unitarist framework is "a stance respectfully abandoned by sophisticated managers since it was so heavily criticised by Fox (1966). Whether they will rush back to it now that Fox has recanted remains to be seen" (p.252). Anthony then repeats in a note that "Fox's recantation of his attack on the unitary outlook may be very significant" (1974: 318-9).

Wood and Elliott (1977) wrote a paper, hoping to prove that in fact Fox had not really become pro-Radical. Fox (1979) demolishes this paper, charging Wood and Elliott with failing to read and understand his works. While Fox may well be correct, this writer feels that Fox's writings can be legitimately criticised for lack of clarity and a confusing approach - and indeed for failing to adequately work through the concept of ideology.

It is submitted that the main reason for confusion is that practically all the writings on industrial relations ideologies have failed to explicitly acknowledge that an ideology has three elements, reflecting beliefs, attitudes and values with:

normative   :   relating to the perceived ideal situation

empirical (or descriptive)   :   relating to the perceived current situation

prescriptive   :   relating to what should be done to achieve the ideal situation.

On the rare occasions that writers do acknowledge this (such as Fox (1979)) - they still do not articulate it clearly.

As stated above, it appears that many people considered that "later" Fox had indicated that he had become anti-Pluralist. Fox (1979) denies this, in fact stating "I may be (and in fact am) fully committed to liberal-Pluralist values, seeing them as sign-posts pointing in the directions I would prefer society to move" (p.107).

Fox, in that article, indicated that while being a normative Pluralist, he is a prescriptive Radical. In the view of this writer, "early" Fox concentrated on the empirical elements and to a lesser degree the normative elements. He is a Pluralist with regard to those elements. "Early" Fox did not really consider the prescriptive elements of Pluralism. "Later" Fox emphasised the prescriptive elements and, in this regard Fox is more Radical.

Levels of abstraction

A number of studies, including Mann (1973), Nichols and Armstrong (1976), Parkin (1971) note that people can make apparently contradictory statements of their values and beliefs depending on whether their views are tapped at general or particular levels of abstraction. Thus employees may express views about management "in general" which differ markedly from their views about their own particular managers.

Ramsey (1975) attempted to determine worker ideology by questioning employees as to their agreement with the analogy that "a firm is like a football team". He found that 79 percent agreed with the statement in general, but that only 54 percent agreed with the statement as it applied to their particular firm. Cousins (1972) came to a very similar conclusion in his study of the attitudes of workers and shop stewards in the shipbuilding industry. He claims:

> It is as if workers had two separate systems of understanding: one reflected in general attitudes and responses to the industrial normative systems of order and drawn from public attitudes; the other, with potentially more radical implications, reserved from concrete interpersonal interpretations and drawn from specific experiences of injustice and conflicting lifestyles (p.227).

Similarly, Hill (1976a) concluded from his study of dockworkers that workers would adopt different postures in concrete situations than in abstract situations. Thus they would be more "militant" (to use a value-loaded expression) over an issue such as trade unionism in the workplace, than over an abstract question on trade union power at the national level. Armstrong and his colleagues (1978) have come to similar conclusions from their work in the footwear industry, emphasising:

> The dualistic nature of worker consciousness, i.e. . . . the extent to which generalised orientations which acquiesce in the institutes of work are at odds with the oppositional character of work relation with management on precise acts of authority or work delegations. This underlies the unpredictability of social behaviour in the workplace (p.19).

Rodman (1963) has the phrase "value stretch" to describe the apparently different values people have according to the level of abstraction. It is equally plausible to assume there may be an "ideology stretch" emphasising the importance to make clear whether the ideology refers to matters in general or to specific.

This therefore gives the following definition: An ideology is:

> A connected set of beliefs, attitudes and values held by an identifiable social group which refer to a specific aspect of social reality, which comprise normative, empirical (or descriptive) and prescriptive elements and which may be at a general or particular level of abstractions.

Conclusion

One of the modern classics in industrial relations is the 1986 work by Kochan, Katz and McKersie. Observations they make in their text explain the importance of an acceptance of the above definition of ideology, and the resultant understanding of the concept. They point out that:

> While American management remained hostile to unionization in their own firms, there also has been a long tradition - dating at least as far back to the work of the National Civic Federation in the early years of this century - of leading executives of large corporations supporting the legitimacy or even the desirability of a free labor movement as a part of our democratic society . . . there has been a curious inconsistency in the dominant management belief or value system: unions are an essential part of the democratic fabric of society, but they are not necessarily desirable or acceptable 'in my firm or on my property' (p.15).

This paradox is clearly either evidence of differing ideologies at different levels of abstraction or simply evidence that leading executives are pathological liars. If the latter, it begs the questions why they perceive the need to apparently pander to public opinion by lying. It is clearly more probably that an "ideology-stretch"' has occurred.

What is likely to have occurred is that when unions are perceived as powerful, empirical pluralism becomes paramount. Poole and Mansfield (1993) building on the earlier work by Poole *et al.* (1982), produce evidence in Britain that in 1980 82.1 percent of managers

felt unions had too much power and 52.1 percent felt they had more power than management. In 1990 the respective percentage had fallen dramatically to 31.7 percent and 14.1 percent respectively. As early as 1983 Purcell and Sissons saw that in Britain the pragmatic laws for the adoption of pluralist policies had been weakened (p.117). This supported Kochan *et al.* (1986) on the other side of the Atlantic, whose view was that "the conclusion that management had adopted and accepted unions as legitimate partners misinterpreted as a change in managerial *preferences* or *ideology* what was actually a *pragmatic* or *strategic* adaption to the high costs of avoiding or dislodging established unions" (p.14).

While a change in one's empirical (or descriptive) ideology will probably influence one's true normative ideology, it is probable that what has occurred between the 1970s and 1990s is not so much a change in the *normative* ideology of managers but rather in the *empirical* ideology. Deep down, as a description of the ideal world, the unitary concept of managerial prerogatives, common objectives, accepted authority and irrelevant or non-existent unions has probably always been paramount. Once managers perceive that it is a realistic possibility to at least have compliance with, if not commitment to, the normative unitary ideology they will pursue it with increasing vigour.

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