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The Origins of the Concept of Ideology

ABSTRACT: The concept of „ideology” as, firstly, a term that points at non-epistemological conditioning of cognitive processes, and, secondly, as a term which aimed at disclosing the ancillary role of given ideas in regard to specific political interests of certain groups, has long history. Since Francis Bacon’s theory of idols modern philosophy endeavored to create a comprehensive classification of systematic cognitive errors which divert man from innate light of reason and experience. In the philosophy of French Enlightenment range of problems later labeled as „ideological” was taken up from the perspective which concentrated on the role that ideas play in legitimizing socio-political order. The very concept of ideology was coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy and his intention was to create a new primary science that, while investigating systematic relations between the realm of ideas and psychological processes which underlie them, is ultimately to become a motor of social advancement and an instrument of establishing a rule of enlightened and rational public governance. In the concluding fragment several major theoretical and practical difficulties of the early formulations of ideology before the appearance of the groundbreaking works of Marx are discussed.

KEYWORDS: ideology • Enlightenment • Destutt de Tracy • materialism • critique of metaphysics

The term *ideology* emerged in the field of philosophical and political discourse in nineteenth-century. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are responsible for its dissemination and although they did not coin the term itself, it is commonly associated with Marxism and political left; however, the concept of ideology was susceptible to decontextualization and became appropriated by various philosophical schools and traditions, changing, sometimes dramatically, its content and meaning. In popular and widespread usage the concept of “ideology” denotes nowadays any coherent set of beliefs which characterizes certain political, religious or ethnic group. The function of ideology is above all to justify and legitimate the pursuit of materializing groups’ specific interest. The irony lies in fact that the term was initially designed to become a name for a new fundamental science that aimed at investigating human mind and which would serve the whole humanity as a lever for further development in order to put a stop to the social and political perturbations. Meticulous scrutiny of ideas would extirpate prejudices, eradicate superstitions, eliminate traditional social divisions and propel

humanity to much-desired state of happiness and universal harmony. The author of the term was Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy.

The term “ideology” refers to the system of beliefs and ideas which are perceived as false. “Ideology” certainly aims at evaluating the cognitive content of ideas, just like traditional epistemology does. The concept of ideology differs nevertheless from the purely epistemological ones. Its specificity consists in establishing new type of approach towards ideas, approach which abandons traditional epistemological distinctions. Ideological perspective assumes that “cognitive content is tied up with multiple genetic and structural relations with being”¹ (ideology in its genetic aspect) and at the same time seeks to explicate what function ideas do fulfil in regard to processes and issues of preserving or overturning existing relations of power (ideology in its functional aspect). The aforementioned falsity of ideology results from the incapability of the ideological consciousness to grasp its origins, to connect its content with the social and political moorings. This brief and rudimentary definition allows us to count among thinkers who dealt with the problem of ideology those modern philosophers who investigated the relation between ideas and physical (sensory) aspects of cognition (de Tracy) or attempted to elucidate the intricacies and relationships between popular beliefs (ideas) and control mechanisms of power (Holbach, Hélietius). The paper’s goal is to adumbrate in a concise manner the origins of the concept of ideology. In the final part of the article I will point at major shortcomings, drawbacks and weaknesses of the earliest formulations of the problem of ideology.



The Enlightenment thinkers were clearly influenced by Francis Bacon’s relentless assault on traditional scholastic logical patterns and rationalistic philosophy; they continued the critical intention of *Novum Organum*, replacing the word “idol” with “prejudice”². Bacon’s theory of idols³, methodolo-

¹ S. Czerniak, *Pomiędzy socjologią wiedzy a teologią negatywną. Filozofia Maxa Horkheimera*, Warszawa 1990, p. 187.

² Prejudice was defined by one of the Encyclopedists, *le chevalier* Louis de Jaucourt, as a “false judgment, which emerges in one’s mind when, studying the nature of things, our intellectual faculties fail us due to insufficient effort. The hapless fruit of ignorance captivates our intellect, blinds it and imprisons”, [in:] *Ideologiekritik und Wissenssoziologie*, ed. by K. Lenk, Neuwied und Berlin 1967, p. 67.

³ According to H. Barth it was Bacon who was the most important inspiration for eighteenth-century philosophy; it was his empirical skepticism, vigorous advocacy of empiri-

gical scepticism, his approval of empiricism and materialism⁴, his repeatedly stated and deeply-felt belief in the fact that science should be predominantly characterised by a practical orientation and an appreciation of a moderate scepticism with a rigid criticism of the metaphysical and religious superstitions “were the elements which constituted the philosophical core or the Enlightenment – most evident predominantly in the current of the so-called French Enlightenment”⁵. The works of Helvétius, Holbach and de Tracy, which are of most interest for us from the point of view of the theory of ideology, abound in remarks and observations concerning psychologically, socially, politically and customarily generated systemic (“systemic” should be understood as “interrelated” and “of common origin”) disruptions of human knowledge; ones which in their general critical resonance and their immediately voiced political implications herald the later, “mature” (Marxist) theory of ideology. It has to be said, however, that even if influenced by Bacon’s theory of idols, the French philosophers advanced in a different direction. The centre of gravity of their deliberations was shifted from epistemology to political philosophy⁶. The idols were no longer the false constructs of the mind, criticised from the point of view of the theory of epistemology, but rather illusions which rendered impossible the reform of the social order in accordance with reason. The source and function of these illusions spring from the socio-political contexts. Religion is criticised not as much for hindering the unrestrained development of science, but more for the fact that it serves for the metaphysical justification of the existing despotism. Helvétius, Holbach, Mably, Diderot or Condillac

cism and his dedication to the rigorous pursue of truth that encouraged the philosophers of the Enlightenment to engage in a combat “against idols and prejudices that haunted humanity”, [in:] H. Barth, *Wahrheit und Ideologie*, Erlenbach-Zurich, Stuttgart 1961, p. 17.

⁴ Materialism is considered here as a metaphysical and epistemological stance stating that reality consists of matter and rejecting the idea of existence of extrasensory (spiritual) beings; materialism is often connected to empiricism, atheism and rationalism (in this case rationalism is understood as a conviction that reality can be rationally explained and is accessible to human reasoning).

⁵ P. Hazard, *Mysł europejska XVIII wieku*, Warszawa 1974, p. 41–80.

⁶ Obviously, Bacon’s technocratic utopia, *New Atlantis*, also contained political overtones: the elimination of idols, or purely epistemological obstacles, was mainly supposed to serve the instrumental subjection of nature, but at the same time, it was to automatically eliminate any social dysfunctionality. The main impediment hindering the achievement of this utopian vision was, however, not the unjust socio-political order, but an epistemological error.



were not satisfied with knowledge regarding nature and human being but were combating everything that was standing in the way that led to establishing rational public order. In order to achieve this goal two questions were to be answered: what are the causes which hinder man from living life in accordance with principles of reason and, which is basically the same thing, with the nature itself, and: where these impediments which block off the advancement of knowledge come from [...] ⁷.

At this point the Enlightenment critique begins. According to it, fully rational social order, compatible with the natural rights' doctrine has yet to be discovered and if it still doesn't exist it means it has been buried by prejudices [...]. Theory of idols has been transformed into general theory of prejudices and now possesses strong political undertones. It usurps the right to replace the social order based on tradition and divine authority with such an order that derives its legitimacy from reason ⁸.

The remarks of *les philosophes* in this respect can be narrowed down to several basic claims, frequently repeated in various contexts.

Firstly, the metaphysicians and theologians have directed people's minds to false tracks, thus confirming the untrue and false beliefs concerning human subjectivity, mind, soul, nature, essence of law, morals, economy, politics, *etc.* The favourite example for the Enlightenment philosophers, which they used in order to make people realise the fatal influence of religion, church dogmatism and speculative philosophy, was the analysis of the popular representations concerning the human consciousness. It was transformed into a hypostasis of an abstract concept of soul and defined through the religious worldview as a non-material (spiritual) grounds of all psychic phenomena which were, allegedly and in principle, independent from the human flesh

what people had been taught to believe as real entities – i.e. soul, sin, divine rights, *etc.* – were nothing more than fictitious ideas produced by a misguided religious and metaphysical imagination [...] in effect human thought had become alienated from reality and dwelt in an imaginary, ideological world ⁹.

The religious and metaphysical ideas, out of touch with reality, were transformed into an ideological barrier for the human mind, separating people from

⁷ H. Barth, *Wahrheit...*, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁹ Ch. Pines, *Ideology and false consciousness*, Albany 1993, p. 30.



the truth and, thus, captivating them. In the diction that was an indication of the later phrasing of Feuerbach and the young Marx, Holbach wrote

Trembling with awe, they worship idols created in the depths of their brain which is their sanctuary. Nothing can disabuse them, nothing can persuade them that they worship merely themselves, that they kneel before their own creation, that they fear the peculiar picture they have painted beforehand¹⁰.

Secondly, the liberation from the power of prejudices and a renewed contact with reality leads through the acknowledgment of the authority of science and strict subjugation to the rules of empirical research which will liberate people from the futile “contemplation of chimeras”. By empiricism, construed as the only acceptable stance of an unbiased researcher, *les philosophes* understood the theoretical and epistemological principle of refusal of the hypothesis of innate ideas and the legitimisation of only these claims which can be strictly transferred onto conjunction of observational statements. What was frequently associated with such a definition of empiricism was materialistic nominalism because it allowed to differentiate between the objective, grounded generalisations of experience – i.e. general statements which register the qualities of spacetime objects – from the false “metaphysical” ideas which were only empty, verbal constructs of an unknown reference. Experience could only concern the entities endowed with mass or observable qualities¹¹.

Apart from the critique of the metaphysical ideas from the standpoint of empirical nominalism and phenomenism, an important topic discussed by *les philosophes* was the critique of the religious representations which, for the first time, were linked to the rule of secular powers. In the remarks scattered around the pages of *The System of Nature* Holbach emphasised that the religion-stemming illusions, or the false representations of mores and customs, which persist in people’s minds are, at a final examination, functional with regard to power. It is in the good interest of rulers, despots and the clergy to retain people in the state of ignorance and spiritual enslavement. In a particularly telling passage Holbach states: „Worldly powers allied themselves with spiritual powers and one is inclined to believe that they want to rule over stupefied slaves locked in dark dungeon”¹². Both the

¹⁰ P. H. Holbach, *System przyrody*, przeł. Szaniawski, Warszawa 1957, vol. I, p. 84. All excerpts from this edition of Holbach’s fundamental work were translated by the author, if not indicated otherwise.

¹¹ The underlying principle was the realistic assumption about the non-problematic ontological status of the objects of research.

¹² P. H. Holbach, *System...*, *op.cit.*, p. 369.



rulers and the clergy have entered into an alliance and are using religion to hold people in the state of ignorance and, thus, indirectly rationalise and legitimise their own rule¹³. The spread of such beliefs resulted in the reinforcement of the conviction that the established social order is the only possible one and, by the same token, reflects the divine one. It encourages people to regard their own plight, poverty, and political dependency in the fatalistic categories of fate, paralysing any thoughts about an alternative to the existing socio-political order. People are incapable of comprehending what lies in their “true” interest and what is the public interest: they do not speak in their own name, but they voice beliefs which were instilled in them through religious education and official censoring imposed on the public opinion¹⁴. Similar views were held by Helvétius: the ruling elites are able to control and shape people’s views in such a way that they are useful for their particular interests¹⁵. The accusations levelled at “the rulers and the clergy” were voiced not only by Holbach or Helvétius, but also by Voltaire, Diderot, Meslier or Pietro Giannone – this was one of the most typical leitmotifs of the Enlightenment¹⁶. Reasoning was frequently similar: the ruling groups deceive people by hiding from them the fact that the interests of the ruling class are different from the interests of the majority. In order to retain one’s own domination, authority, and servitude of others they spread false beliefs (“superstitions”) which “mask”, or “hide”, the relation of domination and subjugation. The subjects are, in consequence, not able to live according to their own interest; they are also incapable of stepping beyond this “false

¹³ „Ambition, imposture, and tyranny, have formed a league, to avail themselves of popular religious ideas[...] to the end that they may blind the people, and bend them beneath their yoke. The monarch makes the use of it, to give a divine lustre to his person, the sanction of heaven to his rights [...] The priest uses it, to give currency to his pretensions, to the end that he may, with impunity, gratify his avarice, pride and independence [...]”, P. H. Holbach, *System of nature*, translated by Samuel Wilkinson, London 1820, [in:] Ch. Pines, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁴ „Oppressed by the double yoke of spiritual and temporal powers, it has been impossible for the people to know their happiness [...] Men have had no other Morality, than what their legislators and priests brought down from the unknown regions of heaven [...] It is only by showing them the truth that they will perceive their true interests and the real motives that ought to incline them to do good [...]. But everything conspires to blind them, and to confirm them in their error [...]”, P. H. Holbach, *System of Nature*, translated by Samuel Wilkinson, London 1820, [in:] Ch. Pines, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁵ Ch. Pines, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 55–57.

¹⁶ Similar statements can be found in P. Hazard, *Mysl...*, *op.cit.*, p. 42–68. Holbach’s enunciations are exemplary: „Religion is nothing more than an art of arousing and preserving chimeras, delusions, allurements and uncertainties in mortals’ souls [...] Only fighting with them man can enter the path that leads to happiness”, [in:] P. Holbach, *System...*, *op.cit.*, p. 399.

consciousness” and grasping the essence of the mechanism of power and the way the society functions, thus eternalising their own enslavement. This pioneering attempt at describing the phenomenon of linking the power and the dominant, popular superstitions led to the conception which could be described as ideology in the instrumental sense. Ideology as a system of interrelated superstitions may be a tool to define people’s behaviour through supporting particular epistemological illusions, beneficial for the ruling elites.



The French philosopher’s suggestions, in the style typical for the philosophical discourse of the times, constituted an attempt of an essayistic presentation of the claim that the social consciousness is conditioned by the ruling powers. It was the first time that, using still an imprecise language of the nascent psychology and sociology, formulations were made about certain developing regularities concerning the role of religion, church, the state and power as the regulators of social practices. The legitimising function, identified by Holbach, masking the true relation of power held by the metaphysical and religious systems, was picked up in a different theoretical context by Marx. However, the very concept of “ideology” itself was coined not by Holbach, but by Antoine Louise Claude Destutt de Tracy, the French philosopher and liberal, one of the pioneers of social sciences and the main proponent of the French philosophy of the postrevolutionary times. From 1796 he worked at the National Institute founded by the revolutionary French Directory. He was the chair of *Analyse des sensations et des idées* section, where he cooperated, among others, with Cabanis, Volney, Garat and Daunou in the Department of Political and Moral Sciences. The philosophers and scientists grouped around this centre were colloquially termed as *les idéologues*¹⁷.

The philosophy of Destutt de Tracy is usually overlooked in historical monographs and is rarely treated as a particularly important element of the history of the Enlightenment thought. The figure of the philosopher himself has also fallen into oblivion and the general knowledge of his *oeuvre* is mostly limited to treaties concerning economy. This results from the fact that the person who was particularly enthusiastic about Tracy’s liberal mac-

¹⁷ The best monograph to date containing detailed history of the institute, biographies of its members and overview of their ideas was written by François-Joseph Picavet and published in 1891. See: F. J. Picavet, *Les idéologues. Essai sur l’histoire des idées, et des théories scientifiques, philosophiques, religieuses etc. en France depuis 1789. Nouvelle impression*, New York 1971.



roeconomic solutions was Thomas Jefferson (who translated Tracy's treatise on economy into English). However, it seems that his work, together with Tracy's renowned word coinage – the concept of “ideology” – is of interest due to its characteristics typical for the Enlightenment reformatory projects: its reflection of the key Enlightenment beliefs concerning the nature of the human mind, the questions about the way nature should be studied, or about the manner of conducting research, reforming the society, mending politics, as well as the issue of the identification of the nature of relationships between the social sciences and the history of socio-political and economic transformations. In Tracy's wide-ranging “ideological” plan to construct a primary social science one can identify the grouping of aims typical for the eighteenth-century philosophical reflection which was to provide theoretical groundings for the social sciences. Using methodology which is as rigid as in the case of the natural sciences will allow people to gain a possibility of a rational insight into the shape of the socio-political institutions and will provide unlimited occasions to manipulate them. Social engineering was supposed to attain the same practical consequences and similarly tangible results as the natural sciences, already well-established at the time.

Tracy's philosophical mind was shaped by those scholars and thinkers who highlighted the role of experience in the process of cognition, as well as those who were reluctant towards speculative cognitive schemata and avoided any vague claims which were not supported by any sound empirical facts; such scholars additionally emphasized the close bond between scientific knowledge and practice, both in terms of an immediate implementation of the scientific knowledge into technology, as well as in the form of an encouragement to create such a corpus of disciplines which might be used for what would presently be termed as social engineering. From Bacon Tracy took over the belief that the true knowledge needs to be based on observation, experiment, and classification of facts; from Descartes he took over skepticism, the unwillingness to fall under the sway of the authority of tradition – and the belief in the general unity of all natural sciences for which mathematics was the universal research tool and a general methodological principle – it required every scientific endeavour to commence with the recognition and careful delimitation of the employment of one's cognitive faculties and insisted that during the research itself the concepts should be deconstructed down to the simplest and non-dividable constituents in order to create more complex constructs (theorems and evidence of thereof). Newton was also highly praised by Tracy, due to his demonstration that the most disparate natural phenomena can be linked with the use of a relatively limited set of laws; similarly Lavoisier, who proposed (like Condillac) that any science is



primarily a “well-made language”, that “to make science is to make its language, and to learn the language is to learn the science itself”¹⁸. The assumption was that “ideology” was supposed to constitute the founding for all other disciplines. Ideology is nothing else than a *science des idées*, a study of the ideas that appear in people’s minds and which, while constituting the basic “building blocks” of human knowledge about the external world, deserve a meticulous scrutiny. De Tracy came up with the name “ideology” because he thought that the name “metaphysics” or “psychology”, which was to be given to the science of ideas, might be wrong or misleading. In the case of metaphysics, there was a chance to make the impression that the work of *les ideologues* was to continue what Tracy believed to be the most disgraced metaphysical deliberations of the past ages – the ones concerning “the primary causes” or “primary substance”. The concept of psychology mostly meant at that time the dealings with the “soul”, construed as “the feeling substance”. Conversely, de Tracy, similarly to Condillac, rejected the hypothesis about the existence of a fixed spiritual substance and any analyses of mental activities, during scientific research, were narrowed down to the simplest sensory perceptions, appearing in consciousness, and to the mechanisms of association and reflexive binding (grouping) of these simple perceptions into more complicated forms of ideas. According to Tracy, the only thorough research on ideas needs to follow the path advocated by Locke who believed that all productions of the human spirit should be studied as minerals or plants. In the same vein, according to Hans Barth, de Tracy’s programme fits into the spirit of the age: it was, in fact, a typically Enlightenment endeavour, putting before itself the ambitious task of forming sound foundations for knowledge free from any errors and distortions, typical for the erstwhile systems in using the conceptual residues of scholastics and tainted with theological elements referring to a metaphysically understood reason, entangled in abstract speculation, not based on experience or experiment and, most importantly, not leading to any interesting practical results. Like Kant, “de Tracy perceived the task of ideology in pointing at the origins of our knowledge, its limits and achievable degree of its certainty”¹⁹. Most importantly, Tracy understood the term “idea” – differently than Plato and in accordance with Locke and Condillac – as a certain bundle of simple sensory qualities which are imprinted in the mind and which are then, secondarily, ascribed by the mind with a certain form of sign (the form of a spoken or

¹⁸ B. Head, *Ideology and Science. Destutt de Tracy and French Liberalism*, Dordrecht 1985, p. 30.

¹⁹ H. Barth, *Wahrheit...*, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

written sign) and not an eternally existing conceptual form, because “when sensory experience converges with the notion of idea we cannot maintain the concept of idea as being in-itself, independent from human consciousness which at the same time possesses characteristics of a eternal image or pattern”²⁰.

Descartes differentiated yet three more types of ideas: innate ideas, ideas produced by the mind, and ones taken from the external world. The concept of an innate idea was for the French sensualists already an unacceptable concession on the metaphysical and theological conception of man and was refuted as an unauthorised hypothesis. Condillac was straightforward about the fact that thinking boils down to “feeling” and all ideas and functions of the mind were derived from the sensations registered by our sensory organs (in his *Treatise on Sensations* he tried to give evidence for the fact that a statue, having at its disposal only one sensory organ, is able to recreate all the ideas known to people). Tracy took over this claim and repeated it, however making it at the same time less radical by claiming that apart from the faculty of a passive perception, human beings also have at their disposal a “faculty of judgement” – one that is prior in relation to the perceived phenomena; such faculty is differentiated through links (*rappports*) between ideas appearing in the mind, or, as he put it himself, “feeling of relations between ideas”. According to de Tracy, „Feeling and judging (*sentir et juger*) – this is what constitutes our intelligence [...] This is what makes our whole existence”²¹.

Due to the fact all knowledge stems from the work of the faculty of judgement – one that analyses, synthesises and differentiates the sensory perceptions – Destutt de Tracy believed that a primary science, the goal of which is the elimination of the most common cognitive errors and false assumptions (ones that do not have any confirmation in the information from the external world), needs to be focused, primarily, on the analyses of the basic operations of the mind. Relying on these premises, he reached the conclusion that ideology deserves the name of a primary science and that it should be given precedence over all other disciplines. This claim was based on two assumptions: firstly, only a scientific method guarantees the reasonability of science – ideology explains and proposes the logics of the scientific method; secondly, ideology studies ideas and the ideas (as, consequently, all our knowledge) are derived from our experience of the world and ourselves, from the reflexive study of the external world and our thoughts (from extra- and introspection). De Tracy believed that

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

²¹ *Antologia filozofii francuskiej XIX wieku*, ed. by B. Skarga, Warszawa 1978, p. 58.

Now these preliminaries constitute what is strictly designated as *idéologie*; and all the consequences derived from it are the object of grammar, logic, instruction, private morality, public morality (or the art social), education and legislation [...] We will go astray in all these sciences only to the extent that we lose sight of the fundamental observations on which they rest²².

De Tracy distinguished two types of truths: the first of them was the truth of “experience or fact”; the second, is “the truth of reasoning or deduction”²³. This distinction was based on the differentiation between the truth of experience (i.e. truth as a presence of values encapsulated in the sensory perceptions which accumulate in the mind in the form of the empirical knowledge) and formal truths (logical) which Tracy understood as the popular and common to all people principles of binding the signs which denote simple and complex ideas into reasonable wholes (theorems and scientific theories).

Any possible operations of the mind were narrowed down by Tracy to the “four basic faculties or modes of operations simple sensibility, memory, judgment and desire”²⁴ and that “all mental phenomena were produced by these modes”. The human mind exhibits similar characteristics and an identical structure, common to all people, hence, the process of acquiring knowledge and forming scientific theorems is similar and, in fact, should follow a comparable pattern. By assuming a universal unity of the human mind de Tracy was arguing for the common application of the laws of deduction. Being aware of the achievements of contemporaneous philosophy, he concluded that sensations, or the simple qualities imprinted in the mind – like colour, taste, shape, temperature, or hardness of physical objects – are perceived as ordered and are measured up to quantitative comparative scale in a similar way by all people. The fact that we come in contact with a given set of qualities more often than with another depends on an accidental context, in other words, it hinges on an individual experience, or on the type of the natural or social environment, including education, that surrounds a given person.

De Tracy was a sensualist. His theory, however, attempted to avoid the pitfall of solipsism. First of all, he believed that the universal application of the rules of logic (deduction and analysis) is ultimately based on an identical psycho-biological construction of the human mind and cognitive faculties.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 36.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ B. Head, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 38.



The logical regularities are, therefore, not absolutely true, but relative for the human species' essence; since the representations of the objects are shaped in any given mind in the form of ideas, the image of the world needs to be, as a result, similar in the eyes of all people. Secondly, the solipsistic hypothesis is contradicted by what he sees as a plain and simple fact – the ideas are freely communicated in people's social lives through the socialising medium of language. For de Tracy, language was any system of signs (*language*) and any particular use of language was an enunciation (*discours*) which sends us back to the sensations experienced by the subject. "Enunciation is always a manifestation of our ideas and only excellent knowledge of those can reveal the true structure of enunciation and disclose its secret mechanism and framework"²⁵.

Consciousness, according to de Tracy's propositions and his division of the psyche into the four basic faculties, is seen as a stream of incessantly flowing impressions, occasional judgements, and incidental urges. Consciousness manifests itself as will, most frequently defined by de Tracy as "a decision centre", responsible for the fact that an individual undertakes or withholds actions. De Tracy was convinced that despite the fact that, in the process of reflection, an individual acquires the awareness of the separateness of one's consciousness – the sense of an absolute sovereignty and independence of the self – it is free will and, consequently, actions initiated by an individual that are completely determined by external circumstances. Therefore, nothing like an absolutely free will exists. This is because it cannot, autonomously, of itself, produce a stimulus for action: people can only imagine that they have free will at their disposal. Free will is an illusion and our actions were decided for us in advance by the external circumstances, our mental habits and things we are accustomed to. In the end, our choice is ultimately an expression of personal tendencies and is motivated by particular interests. Vested interest is the underlying principle of human morals: an individual strives towards the satisfaction of a particular need (in the language of psychic economy: it strives for the maximisation of the feeling of satisfaction), or to minimise the unpleasant feelings (pain).

Ideas which are managed by our mind are wholly dependent on the received education, external conditions and the influence of the tutors²⁶. So, once we know that our beliefs are shaped by experience and habits, this knowledge can be used to change the existing social milieu in order to allow for the construction of a society where the true "foundations of true

²⁵ *Antologia...*, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

²⁶ De Tracy agrees in this point with H elvetius and Holbach: our ideas, values and mental representations are derived from our social *milieu*.



happiness”²⁷ are possible: liberated from the power of traditional superstitions, the human reason will allow to establish the guidelines for conduct leading to the erection of a happy society.

The setting up of rules governing the utilitarian calculation of profit and losses which marks the direction for individual actions was the theme of the bulk of Tracy’s deliberation in *Elements d’idéologie*. This issue was of interest to him mostly from the socio-political point of view: how, “in the face of limited resources reconcile the conflicting interests of individuals who strive for satisfying their private desires?”²⁸. The question which frequently occupied his attention was the possibility of agreement between the often mutually exclusive interests of individuals, which led him to the attempts at the formulation of a personal theory of “reasonable egoism” (the issue being an *idée fixe* of the Enlightenment). The task of ideology was not only to establish a primary science and become the most important branch of the generally defined zoology, the future foundation for all disciplines. The complete reduction of all ideas to the simplest sensory qualities

was the only demand of ideology. Due to that reduction there should be created – like in mathematics – grammar and language which assigns every idea to the unequivocal language sign. Such a reduction should be done carefully in order to prevent science from generating false abstract principles, which can hinder communication process and are harmful both to the structure of the state and for the social fabric²⁹.

The immediate inspiration for such an idea was Condillac, who, in his *Cours d’Etudes pour L’Instruction du Prince de Parme*, argued that correct thinking and correct philosophy is necessary for the proper political work. Similar works were, however, common for the whole age and they expressed the beliefs shared by most of the philosophers and thinkers of the time – they can be found in Helvétius, Holbach, Diderot, Rousseau, and others. Ideology was, therefore, in the rigidity of its results, to meet the standards of the results of natural sciences, but it was only owing to ideology that a fair and reasonable social order was to be achieved. *Elements d’idéologie*, consequently, contain an explicitly stated, clear pedagogical sense and the idea of ideology, as a primary science, includes a u n i v o c a l n o r m a t i v e goal. The abstract, illusory and purely theoretical analysis of ideas, systems of signs, and grammatical structures (the linguistic mechanism of producing

²⁷ H. Barth, *Ideologie...*, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 16–17.



any utterances) was aimed at the construction of knowledge free from empty concepts, deprived of an imprecise object reference or imprecise in terms of meaning. Making people aware of the unity of their knowledge, through referring to a common reservoir of principles linking them to a common and widespread understanding, will allow to harmonise their egoistic interests in such a political system which is supported on a universal law; a law which, owing to the developments in ideology, is in accordance with the most profound internal human nature and which will not require any further adjustments³⁰. The belief in a metaphysical order of nature, which is governed by the mechanical rules of the matter movement and a common unity of the human mind, led de Tracy, like many of his contemporaries, straight to the belief that an ideal socio-political order can be identified and that it should be materialised in practice. It sufficed to confront the present state of culture and civilisation with the normative model of nature, obtained on the basis of its proper study, and, subsequently, using the guidelines established by ideology, to work on the implementation of the plan researched at the Institute to change the socio-political reality.

The motor for the controlled social change was, as it was already mentioned, pedagogical³¹. The social transformations need to start with the reforms in schooling and higher education. That is why de Tracy published a series of texts and pamphlets aimed at the students of the second level of education which summarised the outcomes of his studies in ideology and general grammar. The course in general grammar was, in its original plan, to make the students aware that “all languages have common rules which are derived from the nature of our intellectual faculties” and that this knowledge is necessary “not simply for the study of languages but it is also solid basis of the moral and political sciences”³².

The discovery of the principles governing the operations of the mind is the key to the reconstruction of the laws of social behaviour of people and this, in turn, leads to the creation of a proper educational system and a

³⁰ According to the enlightenment theory of „rational egoism” the state should create such a legal order in which egoistic actions of individuals pursuing their own private interests were at the same time contributing to the common good. More on this topic in: P. Hazard, *Mysł...*, *op.cit.*, p. 158 and L. Kołakowski, *Główne nurty marksizmu*, Poznań 2001, vol. I, p. 180.

³¹ B. Head, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 187: „It had become a commonplace in eighteenth-century social philosophy that education was the key to reforming moral and political practices and improving the material prosperity of the people”. See also P. Hazard, *Mysł...*, *op.cit.*, p. 178 – 187.

³² B. Head, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 194.

reasonable and fair – because it is in accordance to nature – social system³³. Ideology is therefore the basis for undertaking such practical actions that will, in consequence, “deliver the mind from the yoke of superstition”³⁴.

De Tracy’s and his colleagues’ work and ambitious projects of transforming France into an enlightened constitutional republic were terminated by Napoleon. The work of the members of this branch of the Institute, motivated by a deeply-felt sense of political mission and heading towards the change of the erstwhile understanding of a reasonable state government (according to them the state should not be epitomized and represented by the despot-individuals who based their power on tradition and cold political calculation, but by an ideologically enlightened, well-studied public officials who were efficient in running the country and based their policy on republican ideals of the 1789 French revolution³⁵), constituted a threat to him. In his speech of December 1812, Napoleon attacked the members of the Institute by accusing them of professing non-viable political projects and, paradoxically, of suggesting that the state could be founded on the “metaphysical primary principles”.

It is to the doctrine of the ideologues — to this diffuse metaphysics, which in a contrived manner seeks to find the primary causes and on this foundation would erect the legislation of peoples, instead of adapting the laws to a knowledge of the human heart and of the lessons of history — to which one must attribute all the misfortunes which have befallen our beautiful France³⁶.

The implied addressees of this attack were *les philosophes*, supporters of the political solutions proposed by Rousseau, freethinkers like Voltaire, d’Alambert, Condillac, Cabanis, Garat or de Tracy, and those who were implementing such ideas into life – like the politicians in the vein of

³³ „Ideology was meant to be the only science of society, or, to phrase it precisely, the science of society could not be anything else than ideology”, [in:] Z. Bauman, *Prawodawcy i tłumacze*, Warszawa 1998, p. 129.

³⁴ H. Barth, *Wahrheit...*, *op.cit.*, p. 18. Compare with d’Alambert words adduced by J. Habermas: „Everyone who knows how to use *raison*, who understand the tasks of *critique* is able to point at the „road of emancipation from yoke of prejudices and barbarity”, [in:] J. Habermas, *Strukturalne przeobrażenia sfery publicznej*, Warszawa 2007, p. 199.

³⁵ De Tracy thought that hereditary monarchy „is bound to inculcate and propagate the maxims of passive obedience, a profound veneration for established forms, confidence in the permanence of these political arrangements, a great antipathy to the spirit of innovation and inquiry, and great aversion to the discussion of principles”, B. Head, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 173–174.

³⁶ T. Eagleton, *Ideology*, London 1991, p. 67.



Robespierre. The conflict between Napoleon and *les ideologues* can be treated as a paradigmatic quarrel between the theoreticians of politics, or the philosophers of politics, and cold-blooded pragmatists who kept both their feet on the ground – an argument concerning the legitimisation of political actions³⁷. This issue, which became the root of the Napoleon vs. *les idéologues* conflict, can be formulated in the following manner: can the governance of the state and the shape of political institutions be based on the universal foundations of reason, ideas and values common to all people? or, should it stem from the continuity of certain systemic solutions, tested over centuries and founded on political practice? If we look at this conflict from the point of view of Habermas's theory of the birth of the Enlightenment public sphere, the conflict between *les idéologues* and Napoleon, in its essence, concerns the question of making a choice between the two models of legitimisation of political actions – the choice between the absolute monarch's power, based on the authority of tradition, and a liberal democratic power of the public opinion (*l'opinion publique*) which puts under discussion any demands legitimating the actions proposed by the ones in charge and urges on the introduction of the principle of public openness.

Since Napoleon the concept of "ideology" has received a univocally pejorative shade of meaning. From a project of the primary science, which was to ferment into a rational transformation of reality, ideology has become a depreciating term for political day-dreaming and irresponsible aestheticism which, while deliberating the universal rights before undertaking concrete political action, postulates agreement with the order of reason (this is – due to towering difficulties – a futile task)³⁸. In this way, the paralysis of effectiveness of all executive power renders the traditional values, together with the political order resting on them, doubtful; as a result, it makes the state weaker³⁹.

³⁷ See also Z. Bauman, *Prawodawcy...*, *op.cit.*, p. 133–134 and especially B. Head on the antirevolutionary reaction in France: „The finest results of the revolution were being abandoned in the name of redressing the errors of the past. The wisdom of 'practical knowledge' was now being championed as an antidote to 'theories'”, [in:] B. Head, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 194.

³⁸ As T. Eagleton puts it: „In his [Napoleon – AK] eyes, these thinkers have pressed through their enquiry into the laws of reason to the point where they have become marooned within their own sealed systems, as divorced from practical reality as a psychotic. So it is that the term ideology gradually shifts from denoting a skeptical scientific materialism to signifying a sphere of abstract, disconnected ideas; and it is this meaning of the word which will then be taken up by Marx and Engels”, [in:] T. Eagleton, *Ideology...*, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

³⁹ In such manner ideology is understood within the conservative tradition: as elaborated (that is: made up, concocted, deduced, created „on paper”) theoretically coherent and highly abstract model of triggering off a project of social change, which is characteristic of liberalism and socialism alike. Conservatism stands in comparison as a sober counterba-





The project of studying ideology proposed by Destutt de Tracy was not undertaken by any philosophical tradition. The direction of his research on ideology as the primary science turned out not to be philosophically or scientifically appealing, at least not in the shape proposed by de Tracy. Some of the traits of his philosophy – mostly the fact of ascribing the worldview and educational functions to the social sciences, as well as standing by their theoretical and practical significance – constitute an important elements for a historian of ideas studying the fate of the positivistic doctrine; one which, already during de Tracy's life, acquired its mature shape in the form of Comte's positive philosophical system. The propagation of de Tracy's ideas at the time are seen, since the very first edition of Comte's writings, as canonical for this strain of philosophy and it is with his name that they are most frequently associated (it is mostly about, among others, phenomenism, nominalism, the belief in the fundamental unity of the scientific method in all branches of knowledge, about the belief in the possibility to reduce the edifice of human knowledge to one basic sphere – including the area of psyche where ideas are born and joined⁴⁰ – and about the disqualification of the cognitive pretences of theology and religion as the introductory, still “immature” stages of the evolution of human cognition).

The theories of the causes of false opinions, or false leading cognitive judgements, had several drawbacks and were intertwined in the irresolvable antinomies. Both Bacon and the French philosophers identified an error, in its epistemological meaning, with an error in a psychological meaning – in other words, there was a tacit acceptance of an obvious assumption that the human mind is naturally leaning towards the truth disclosed by science and only a momentary contamination of the cognitive act with the volitional and affective acts, the ungrounded calling for the authority of tradition, and the lack of acceptance for the finality brought about by the significance of experience, leads to perversions. The empirical procedures, used in the scholarly practice for the verification of hypotheses and initial research assumptions, could not be unproblematic in their application in the socio-political sphere. The moral and political premises, in the meditation concerning the normative bases for the social and political institutions, cannot be justified through the reference to the authority of experience. Because of the very same reason, the attempts to conceptually unite the

lance, shunning any utopian declarations and emphasizing the role of political practice, tradition and legitimate authority in maintaining of social stability and political order.

⁴⁰ L. Kołakowski, *Filozofia pozytywistyczna*, Warszawa 1966, p. 9 – 19.



order of nature with the order of reason, and to achieve a concise model of the rational public order compatible with the human nature, undertaken by the Enlightenment philosophers, arrived at a failure. The called innate unity of nature and mind did not, at a closer inspection, hold sway. Starting from a normative definition of the state of nature, radically different results were achieved, especially concerning the essence of morals, virtue, justice, freedom or equality, and the decision about which of these concepts actually describes the internal nature of the phenomena relating to morals, politics, law, *etc.* This, in consequence, resulted in a fundamental disagreement about the way in which the politics, economy, and the political institutions should be reformed. The achievement of the Enlightenment philosopher's vision of combining the incidental (in the sense of not having any final right, not stemming from necessity) quality of human existence (the accidental nature of historical events) with the eternal essence of humanity, embodied in the normative understanding of people, but one that has not yet been historically concrete, turned out impossible. The Enlightenment thought was not able to use its own assumptions and explain the multiplicity of the normative models of social organisation. If they were all to stem from an impartial study of nature, then their differences could be explained in the following way: it is either the method of study that is wrong, or reason is, generally, incapable, because of its imperfections and shortcomings, to discover the truth (a belief held most frequently by conservative thinkers), or the order of nature is principally different than the order of reason and the order of morals, ethics, and politics cannot be reproduced in any, allegedly nature-compliant, institutions. The Enlightenment, in its final stages, was more and more leaning towards a third option which achieved its fullest formulation in Kant's philosophical critique.

The Enlightenment writers' doubts about the religious illusions and distortions, which were incompatible with the experience of superstitions and the errors of traditional metaphysics (the goal of philosophical criticism for Bacon, Holbach, Helvétius or de Tracy), did not automatically finish with the transformation of reality. Practice put forward a riddle that was difficult to explain: people preferred to persist in their error, rather than to follow what seemed to be the obvious light of reason. The beliefs discredited as false and illusions incompatible with reality or reason did not disappear even when, while calling upon science or nature, they were actually exposed and criticised as irrational. The theories which explained such a state of affairs were naively psychological and difficult to accept. What appeared frequently in the explanations was a vision of a world "cabinet" conspiracy of despots, the wealthy, the aristocrats and the clergy, whose aim was to pur-



posefully hold people under the yoke of slavery and superstitions. The vexed problem of relationship between political and symbolical power and the social consciousness, together with the social acceptance (legitimation) of particular forms of knowledge, became noticeable; however, in the writings of the theoreticians it took a psychologically justified shape of a conspiracy of the rulers and the clergy who remained in the position of power because of dishonesty and brutal force. Such claims did possess little explicatory power. On a closer inspection, the concept of ideology as a mere instrument of ruthless power could not be maintained⁴¹.

The French philosopher's conviction that it is enough to educate the people in order to rationally transform the political system and that the human mind, seen as a unity of the cognitive, affective and volitional acts, can be reduced to the sum of the disparate influences of the incidental social conditions has also lead to aporia. If we look at the human being as an object whose actions and moves are completely determined and can be, similarly to the objects in the physical world, explained by external circumstances and which can only be changed owing to a well thought-out pedagogical intervention, then how can one explain the single fact that there live people like philosophers-educators, free from prejudices and superstitions, people who reject the ideas and beliefs typical for a given age? A similar challenge was put forward by Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach*: who is to educate the educators? The theory of "false consciousness", as a conspiracy of the wealthy and cunning, is not able to explain the very fact of existence of people who have exposed the forms of this "false consciousness" as a perverse game of power and the ruling elites. ~

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⁴¹ Larrain puts his doubt in the following manner: „Ideological distortions were accounted for by passions, superstitions, individual interests, religious prejudices [...] The theory of priestly deceit propounded an extreme form of this psychologism by insisting upon the conscious lies and the conspiracies of priests. This theory could explain man's misfortune by the existence of religion, but could not explain religion except as a fabrication [...] it was more a theory of the lie than a theory of the necessary false consciousness”, [in:] J. Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology*, Athens 1979, p. 33.

