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Review of Robert Porter: Ideology. Contemporary Social, Political and Cultural Theory

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Porter, Robert, *Ideology. Contemporary Social, Political and Cultural Theory*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006.

Robert Porter has written a very insightful text book especially suitable for graduate students in the field of Film and Media studies. However students of Cultural studies, Philosophy, Political Theory and Sociology may also benefit from reading it since the book deals with Critical Philosophy. Robert Porter aims to give a renewed and critical understanding of ideology. He shows how well-known philosophers of contemporary Social, Political and Cultural Theory Jürgen Habermas, Slavoj Žižek and Gilles Deleuze share the basic assumption that it is possible to distinguish between ideology and its opposite 'the real', and he shows how this distinction makes it possible to criticise their theories of ideology from a normative point of view. The critique *per se* is the chief aim of the book. Robert Porter points out weaknesses in the theories of Habermas, Žižek and Deleuze, and he shows through examples from contemporary movies how critique makes it possible to analyse contemporary culture from a critical philosophical point of view. Examples as *Pleasantville* and *The Usual Suspects* are well-known to the broad audience addressed and the examples thereby help to make the abstractly formulated theories present to the reader. The examples may also serve as useful guidelines to students who apply the above-mentioned theories for analytical purposes. Having done his careful study of the three philosophers and their three different concepts of ideology, Robert Porter ends the book by showing how the three theories of ideology may be used to problematize one another. Firstly he shows how a Habermasian communicative critique of the Žižekian concept of ideology highlights its reliance on an explicitly and well-defined ethical point of departure. Robert Porter shows that without such a point of departure Žižek ends up in a relativistic distinction between what Žižek terms ideological and 'real'. Secondly Robert Porter uses Deleuze's theory of ideology to criticise the Habermasian conception of ideology. He shows that from a Deleuzian perspective the Habermasian distinction between normative and strategic communication cannot be upheld, and as a consequence the distinction between what ought and what ought not be perceived as ideological becomes blurred. Eventually Robert Porter emphasises the inconsistency between Žižek's concept of ideology and Deleuze's concept of ideology. If Žižek's argument is taken to its outer limit Robert Porter argues that Deleuze may paradoxically be regarded as an ideologist of late capitalism instead of as most people perceive him a critical philosopher.

This final comparison clearly distinguishes the book from other textbook and introductions to contemporary critical philosophy. It gives the reader a unique opportunity to see each theory in its full perspective and help students to critically select theories for analytical purposes.

It is a basic assumption for the book that it is possible to distinguish between ideology and something outside of it, i.e. the 'real', in at least three different and mutually exclusive ways. This assumption may however be criticised. From a realist perspective this kind of assumption is in itself perceived as ideology and realists may therefore be highly critical to Robert Porter's arguments. This ontological discussion lies however – as Robert Porter also points out himself – outside the aim of the book and will not prevent me from giving the book my best recommendations.

Having read Robert Porter's thorough analysis and critique of Habermas's, Žižek's and Deleuze's concepts of ideology only one critical remark remains unanswered. Accepting the basic assumptions of liberal democracy and multiculturalism one may from a poststructural and therefore also critical philosophical perspective ask whether it is appropriate to talk of ideology and critique of ideology? Following for instance Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their pathbreaking work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* any critique of ideology may always just be perceived as just another point of view having the same legitimacy as one's object of critique, i.e. ideology.

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