

# **False Consciousness Revisited. On Rousseau, Marx and the Positive Side of Negative Education<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In some key aspects, Marxist approaches to ‘false consciousness’ share a common ground with Rousseau’s ideal of a ‘negative education’ – both want to rid man of illusions originating in reified abstractions and speculations. In the following article, this common ground serves as a platform for discussing ‘false consciousness’ as a viable concept for a 21<sup>st</sup> century ideology critique, arguing for the need to ground such critique in subjective, life world experience, while avoiding the outer regions of materialism as well as idealism.

## **Introduction**

“False consciousness”. As the words reverberate with an echo from the past, the reader of Marx recognizes the concept as the pitiful state of affairs when a man happens to be mistaken regarding the truth of his own motives, ideas and actions. Guided by a false ideology, the unlucky citizen has slipped into illusion, has indulged in abstractions, or simply failed to understand the real motivations behind his own actions – or that of others (Pines, 1993; Rosen, 1996). Fortunately, the citizen can dispel some of his false consciousness by realizing that it wasn’t Marx who invented the concept in the first place. It was Engel’s to begin with – and he defined it in relation to ideology:

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces. Because it is a process of thought he derives its form as well as its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material, which he accepts without examination as the

product of thought, and does not investigate further for a more remote source independent of thought (Engels, cited in Pines, 1993, p. 1)

The Marxist approach to this predicament is, traditionally, to engage in a critical examination of knowledge and its distribution throughout society, to understand how this distribution interrelates with concentrations of money and power; and, eventually, to arrive at clarification and the unmasking of false ideology (Morrow & Torres, 2002; Miller, 1998; Parekh, 1982). Interestingly, Engels seems to suggest that we make this proceeding from another basis than that of ‘content from pure thought’, in order to break the loop of ideology reproduction. But is it possible to even imagine such an approach, one that operates on a ‘more remote source independent of thought’? And would it be at all possible to depart from Engels’ proposition without making ourselves guilty to the very mistake he warned us about: accepting the thoughts of our predecessors at face value?

The ideology critique of Engels can, of course, be more seriously criticized for being ideological in its own sense – as Žižek (1994) reminds us, “[w]hen some procedure is denounced as ‘ideological par excellence’, one can be sure that its inversion is no less ideological” (p. 4). Nevertheless, the proposition of Engels may serve as a powerful incentive to refresh our potential for critical educational thought, provided, of course, that we do not claim to proceed under the flag of an ‘ideologically neutral discourse’.

The proposition itself – to seek for a ‘source independent of thought’ – may come out as rather outlandish, at least when engaged in from a perspective of educational science. But the notion has not lacked its predecessors in the history of educational thinking. Among its champions are, for instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *Émile*, he took it as one of his primary concerns to envision a pedagogy that could expand beyond the realm of abstract knowledge, returning to the core, material ‘hands-on’ experiences of human life (Løvlie, 2002; Rosen, 1996). Returning to this experience, for Rousseau, involved an educational ideal of the ‘negative’ kind; instead of asking what needed to be done for the child, he wanted first to know what needed to be undone (Oksenberg Rorty, 1998).

On this point, the pedagogy of Rousseau seems to provide an answer to Engel’s predicament as well. This article will be an attempt to discuss the relevance of that answer in current educational contexts, surveying the notion of ‘false

consciousness' for its potential to serve as an updated platform for ideology critique. The procedure will not necessarily aim at treating the concept faithfully according to Marxist tradition; rather it will be an undertaking to "awaken a dormant concept and to play it again on a new stage, even if this comes at the price of turning it against itself" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 83).

## **An Education for the Here and Now**

When Rousseau (1762/2007) first declared his educational credo, it was with the ambition to create an autonomous individual, free to act and think in accordance with the law of his life and his nature. But *Émile* was not your random free chooser. And his autonomy did not converge upon the libertarian's freedom to indulge in the treats and pleasures of bourgeois society. What Rousseau strived for, was rather the freedom and autonomy from cultural artefacts; autonomy from the passions; autonomy as self-mastery (Oksenberg Rorty, 1998). Whatever big cities offered to *Émile*, he would be far better off without; whatever their educational institutions could teach him, he could learn in a more safe and profound manner working on the countryside. Abstract knowledge and book-learnedness that lacked connection to the needs and deeds of the student were of zero interest: "[i]f your son knows many things, distrust his knowledge; if he is unlucky enough to be rich and educated in Paris he is ruined" (Rousseau, 2007, p. 156).

Rousseau's pedagogy could, accordingly, be nothing short of radical. Its objective was, in many ways, to maintain *Émile* in the natural, pre-social state as long as possible. While society provided "the necessary but disastrous transitional stage from natural man to his fulfillment as a rational, autonomous citizen" (Oksenberg Rorty, p. 238), Rousseau was bent on delaying this transition as long as possible. What were his methods? As he himself declared, they all followed from a basic principle; "[t]hat man is truly free who desires what he is able to perform, and does what he desires" (Rousseau, 1762/2007, p. 46). The trick was to balance the desires of the child against the possibilities of the child, so that he would come to desire only that which he was truly able to perform:

The world of reality has its bounds, the world of imagination is boundless; as we cannot enlarge the one, let us restrict the other; for all the sufferings which really make us miserable arise from the

difference between the real and the imaginary (Rousseau, 1762/2007, p. 43).

Handiwork and bodily exercise were important methods for bridging this gap; therefore “[e]xercise his body, his limbs, his senses, his strength, but keep his mind idle as long as you can” (p. 56). Idle, but not chained to the ground. The child must still be given “his or her space for making relevant experiences, for self-initiated musings, for wondering about the world, for philosophising, for formulating questions and suggesting one’s own answers” (Løvlie, 2002, p. 338).

Nevertheless, it is a mind held in check. The danger of the opposite – an imagination roaming free – was apparently so substantial, that Rousseau would rather see *Émile* “in the worst company in Paris than alone in his room” (1762/2007, p. 281). In a sense, this seems to put the finger on Rousseau’s view on social life as well: it is a bringer of great opportunity as well as of great risk. A risk worth taking, since he did not want to make *Émile* “a savage and to send him back to the woods”, only that while “living in the whirl of social life it is enough that he should not let himself be carried away by the passions and prejudices of men” (p. 205). After all, Rousseau never intended *Émile* to be shielded away from danger in the first place. On the contrary, it was important that he was acquainted with it as soon as possible; like Achilles, to be dipped ‘in the waters of Styx’:

Indeed I maintain that to enjoy great happiness he must experience slight ills; such is his nature. Too much bodily prosperity corrupts the morals. A man who knew nothing of suffering would be incapable of tenderness towards his fellow-creatures and ignorant of the joys of pity; he would be hard-hearted, unsocial, a very monster among men (Rousseau, 1762/2007, p. 49).

A strange coincidence it seems, that the tutor would go to such lengths to ensure a harmonious social life – perhaps, once again, a sign of the double-edged relationship Rousseau had towards the profits and perils of sociality. But the experience of suffering has more profound virtues as well. It is the beginning of self-mastery, and happiness too – which, for Rousseau, “is not the absence of suffering, but the experience of courage and virtue that comes from strength and control over ourselves” (Jonas, 2010, p. 53).

It was probably with this intent in mind that Rousseau recommended children to be “accustomed to the hardships they will have to face”, trained even, “to endure extremes of temperature, climate, and condition, hunger, thirst, and weariness” (1762/2007, p. 15). But it was certainly not in his mind to take this training to extremes – that would be even more perilous. Still, there is a clear intent on showing the child the natural frontiers of his life; rather than fearing, pondering and brooding over them, he would rather have *Émile* look them in the eye. And this is something that requires a transition from the mind that speculates, to the mind that experiences; or rather, to the body that experiences. Hardship and slight suffering are no strangers in this transitory process – on the other hand, they may prove to be valuable resources in the ongoing process of returning to the here and now; suspending that “false wisdom which is ever dragging us onwards, counting the present as nothing” (Rousseau, 2007, p. 42).

The Rousseauist ideal of approaching and understanding the limits of man’s existence extends to epistemological dimensions as well. Much as can be grasped by sense and understood by reason, Rousseau finds that much more remains; we are “surrounded by impenetrable mysteries”, not even knowing “the limit of the knowable” (p. 217). Self-assuredness – theological, educational or philosophical – that fails to recognize this limit gives no help in the pursuit of truth:

I consulted the philosophers, I searched their books and examined their various theories; I found them all alike proud, assertive, dogmatic, professing, even in their so-called scepticism, to know everything, proving nothing, scoffing at each other. This last trait, which was common to all of them, struck me as the only point in which they were right. Braggarts in attack, they are weaklings in defence (Rousseau, 1762/2007, p. 217)

In his out-and-out scepticism towards any theory that lacks connection to subjective experience, Rousseau seems to stand in a closer relation to a post modern criticism of Marxism, than to Marxism itself (cf. Simons & Billig, 1994; Peters & Wain, 2002). Like many postmodernists, Rousseau declares his disinterest in any claim for objective, total knowledge, and unquestionable truth; like Foucault, he sees man as an active partaker in, not bystander to, “that life whose web, pulsations, and buried energy constantly exceed the experience that he is immediately given of them” (Foucault, 1966/2002; p. 352).

The Marxist thematic on the other hand, carries more of a scent from Enlightenment’s hope for rational illumination. Accordingly, the concept of

false consciousness has been heavily criticized in postmodern and poststructuralist thought traditions (Simons & Billig, 1994; Miller, 1998). For instance, with the argument that the existence of ‘false consciousness’ implies the existence of a ‘right consciousness’ – and then we would have invited essentialism right back into conversation (Torfing, 1999). But that does not mean that we have to abandon ideological criticism altogether. Indeed, the postmodernist inclination to mistrust anyone who claims the objective position of ‘right consciousness’ is in itself a powerful anti-ideological position – ‘false consciousness’ then refers to that consciousness which promises itself to be the truth in all “fullness and transparency” (Torfing, 1999, p. 114). This was, arguably, the position of Rousseau as well.

### **False Consciousness and Beyond**

As a philosopher, Rousseau digs deep into the terra firma of man’s existence – literally. As Nature and Earth are the bases of human life, the most honourable trade naturally becomes that of farming; and the most honourable man is he who plows the land, harvests its produce, rejoices when he can and suffers when he must. Farther out in the outskirts of society’s surplus value – among poets, writers (such as himself) and actors – honourable men are fewer and further between. This is the realm where Man runs the greatest risk of having his natural self-love, *amour de soi*, turn into the love of his social self, *amour-propre* – and that would be the very beginning of false consciousness (Rosen, 1996). But it is a misfortune that reflects more closely off society’s construction than it does off the fallibility of man. For Rousseau, our “failures are the result of lives lived wrongly in societies that are badly arranged, not inevitable consequences of Man's Fall” (Rosen, 1996, p. 86).

In making this explicit connection “between false consciousness and the maintenance of oppressive forms of political order” (Rosen, p. 56), Rousseau seems to anticipate the coming of Marx’s historical materialism – and in many ways, the Marxist and ‘Rousseauist’ approaches to false consciousness are very similar as well: it is an epiphenomenon that requires bourgeois culture and a capitalistic mode of production. The irony is – in Marx’s ‘drama of Enlightenment’ (Miller, 1998) and that of Rousseau as well – is that false consciousness plays a ‘productive’ part in the scheme of things. Selling labour for wages, the story goes, modern man became alienated from nature and from natural human relations, and as a result, he was in a much worse position to

bargain for truth – far from being able to resist illusions and false ideology, he was now in need of them (Marx, 1932/2009). An important difference though, is that while Marxist approaches are bent on unmasking or unveiling ideology on a basis of rational illumination, Rousseau refuses a close encounter and wants, as it were, to dissolve false consciousness by removing himself from its arena of reproduction altogether.

What, then, is the positive inspiration that we can take from Rousseau's 'negative pedagogy' into an ideology critique for education today? Surely, it is not by the imperative that we all return to agrarian styles of life, refraining from theoretical work in order for false consciousness to be kept at a minimum level. Communism has already tried that, and the results were not encouraging. In Maoist China, the revolutions went hand in hand with denouncement of intellect and of dialogue, in Cambodia, they were followed by cultural repression and in Stalinist Soviet, they brought persecution and suspicion towards the middle classes (Thompson, 1997).

Between Marx and Rousseau, there must be a better way to extract a realization of the material aspects of human knowledge. At the junction where they meet on the theme of 'false consciousness', we afford ourselves the liberty to hold distance to Marx' and Engels' historical materialism, which argues that human consciousness is an *altogether* "social product, and that all modes of thought have a practical and social basis" (Pines, p. 45), while still agreeing with their critique of "ideas as absolutely independent *vis-a-vis* social and material circumstances" (*ibid.*). Doing so, we acknowledge that knowledge is more than a material epiphenomenon, more than airy abstraction, more than a system of representations that may of may not address reality – it is a creative territory of matter as well as mind. Crossing it, we plot the course with due distance to one-sidedness in either direction.

With Rousseau, we begin the journey – not on the basis of a 'remote source independent of thought' – but with a rationality that is rooted in the territory of Body, Earth, and Life; agreeing with Løvlie (2002) that the basis of education is, precisely, "the child who is physically and mentally present in its world" (p. 340). The corresponding task for an updated educational ideology critique, accordingly, will be to examine whether current trends in education succeed in making this double connection. From Løvlie's point of view, it is highly questionable whether they do. Striving only "for production and achievement,

for competition and excellence”, they are “ideological in the classical Marxian sense” (p. 340) – completely ignoring the idea of an education of the soul.

Engaging in that idea – the education of the soul – uncompromisingly begins with us *creating* the concept unto ourselves, charging it without our own meaning, our own sense of physical and mental presence. For Løvlie, it is synonymous with “initiation into human culture” (p. 340) – for us, it might become something quite different. But as soon we attend the task of reinventing the concept (the prime task of philosophy according to Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) we have the cornerstone of our own ideology critique. Standing upon it, we can begin to recharge the idea of liberal education with new content, starting to “take back the rich vocabulary that educational history has given us and to work on the idea of an education that makes children’s lifeworld a priority” (p. 341). This is, for the time being, our best shot against false consciousness.

## Noter

1. Ursprungligen ett examinationspaper till kursen ”Historiska & Filosofiska perspektiv på utbildningsvetenskap”, KAU, vt-11.

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