

## Enrique Dussel – Critique of Ideology from the South

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For over three decades, the Argentinian-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel has been engaged in developing a Philosophy of Liberation in the context of critical dialogue with various philosophers. Inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, Dussel's main concern was from the beginning to formulate an Ethics of Liberation, which was first conceived of as specifically Latin American, but later simply as ethics, — the result is an impressive work, the *Ética de la liberación*. This text, first published in 1998, is now in its fourth edition in Spanish and is in the process of being produced in English. Apart from Levinas, Dussel's main philosophical inspiration in this project comes from a new reading of Karl Marx. In addition, his preferred interlocutors during the period of writing were philosophers representing Discourse Ethics, namely: Karl-Otto Apel, Jürgen Habermas, and Albrecht Wellmer. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the reader to one aspect of Dussel's thought, specifically his critique of ideology, from the perspective of political philosophy. Due to word limits and the necessarily focussed subject matter of this paper, complexity will sometimes be sacrificed for the sake of clarity. The paper accordingly does not intend to make a thorough presentation of Dussel's thought, but only to highlight a few aspects in which his contribution to political philosophy is most salient.

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## Political philosophy and critique of ideology

Political philosophy is about justice. The goal is to determine justice in such a way that it can contribute to the realization of justice. It is in this sense philosophers consider political philosophy as practical philosophy. How this kind of thinking is dealt with, however, varies considerably. Many philosophers take the point of view of the government and discuss how we — that is, those of us who rule — can organize society in the best possible way. This point of view is perfectly sensible and legitimate, if ‘we’ are actually a substantial proportion of the population in question, and if ‘we’ form a community that rules itself democratically. If on the other hand, we are dealing with a absolutist monarchy, a feudal society, or a military dictatorship, where the very few rule a vast majority, then it is reasonable to ask, if the ‘we’ of ordinary political philosophy authentically expresses the common interests of all members of the society. Or whether the ‘we’ is not more likely to function as a cover for serious conflicts of interests between various groups and classes (Addelson 1994, 4. f.).

This way of questioning opens up political philosophy to include the point of view of those members of a society, who are simply ruled. This may in turn lead to a critique of the ruling ideas as the just ideas of the rulers, and such a critique is relevant no matter what kind of government is in power. When we forget that the ruling ideas might have an origin that shows them precisely to be the just ideas of the rulers or, when we forget that such ideas therefore might not be valid for and beneficial to all members of society (Marx 1845, 125 ff (sect. 9)), then we can consider such ideas as an ideology, and a critique of such ideas can thus be called ‘critique of ideology’.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marx opposed ideology to science, whereas, for instance, Lenin thought of communism and bourgeois ways of thinking as both kinds of ideology (cf. e.g. Nogueira 1992, 185 ff.). Habermas argues that the fault is to be found in Engels’s naturalized conception of ideology

Political philosophy, as an institution, tries to determine justice in the most universal sense, but of course philosophers are each by themselves ordinary people, influenced by time and place, by local culture and politics, and by social and economic conditions. The problem is that we ourselves cannot often see, what these conditions mean to our thinking. Thoughts that we assume simply to be true as a matter of course, or that we sincerely believe to be the best possible expression of something universally valid, can show themselves to be only intuitively valid to us only because of the special circumstances of our living conditions. We can thus be — and most often probably are — ideological in our thoughts without knowing it. As the Bible expresses it, it is easy to see the speck in the eye of your brother, it is quite another thing to discover the log in your own eye (Matthew, 7.3-5).

Such a lack of consciousness of one's dependency can be called hypocrisy, but is probably better considered as 'false consciousness'. Ideology and false consciousness are prejudices that we develop growing up and living in society. Some of them are fundamental to our orientation in what is otherwise a complicated world, and they are therefore very difficult to both discover and to change. This means, however, that distance can be considered as a condition that contributes positively the acquisition of knowledge (Gadamer 1960/86, 301 f., 457 f.), and the marginalized members of a society can therefore be said to occupy a privileged position when it comes to knowledge acquisition.

It is this privileged position that Enrique Dussel has taken upon himself to exploit as much as possible as a philosopher. He was born in Argentina in 1934, that is, at the periphery,<sup>2</sup> where he also received his basic academic training. His doctoral

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(Habermas 1963/1971, 266 f.). To my way of thinking, it is sufficient to recognize the opposition between ideology as only of particular validity and thus opposed to what must be considered reasonable, that is, of universal validity.

<sup>2</sup> The reference to 'center', 'periphery' and the 'world system' is employed with a conscious reference to the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, which is also of major importance for Dussel

work, which comprises of history, theology and philosophy, was done in the center of the world system, in Spain, France, and Germany in the sixties. Nevertheless, in his thought, Dussel has never left his peripheral position, that is, in his thought he has never abandoned the position from which the ideological repression and false consciousness that rules in the centre is most easily revealed. Since the seventies, he has also been physically located at the periphery, as professor in philosophy in Mexico. As a philosopher his main merit is to have brought classical critique of ideology to that periphery, that is, to the position, from which the ideological repression and false consciousness that rules in the center is most easily revealed. The result is termed the ‘philosophy of liberation’; it is a practical philosophy in the (above mentioned) classical sense, that is, it is ethical and political thought that has ambitions to be both universally valid and practically relevant. As practical philosophy it must contribute to the realization of justice in the world, and for the suppressed classes such a realization implies liberation — therefore the expression ‘philosophy of liberation’.

## **Modernity and globalization**

This approach to philosophy becomes especially relevant, when one considers the history and development of mankind in singular, as, for instance, in discussions of what is called ‘world history’. Probably the most widely read Danish historian, Erling Bjøl has recently published a book, in Danish, entitled *When the World Went Amok*. His work allegedly covers the period 1914-45 from the ‘first world war’ to the ‘second world war,’ including the ‘world crises’ and the changing ‘world order’ (Bjøl 2005, cover blurb). However, it is only about the history of one corner of the world, namely western Europe and northern America. Such ubiquitous wording is quite common, both in the humanities and in the social sciences, for instance, in

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(cf. e.g. Dussel 1998a, p. 51 ff.). In this context, however, I will not discuss further questions concerning this aspect of Dussel’s work in this essay.

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discussions about globalization, or the differences between the traditional society, modernity, and post-modernity. The idea of modernity is from around the time of the 1789 French Revolution and has been defining for discussions in politics, sociology, and parts of philosophy (Habermas, 1980). The modern society is presumed to be characterized by individualization, rationalization, and capitalism. At least these are the factors underlined in the classical sociological theories of respectively Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx. In modern sociological theory it is then assumed that these factors in different ratios and combinations are behind phenomena such as industrialization, imperialism, parliamentary democracy and the western welfare society.

Modernity is typically assumed to be something unique that has developed in northern Europe and spread across the ocean to USA. As a historian with a sharp sense of ideological blindness, Dussel however reveals that if modernity is understood in this way, then there are at least three modernities (Dussel, 2004, p. 140 f.). First, there is the Iberian modernity, which emerged in Spain and Portugal after 1492 as a continuation of the discoveries of Columbus and the conquest of Granada. Here one finds precisely that distinguishing combination of factors just mentioned. The cultural individualization is achieved through a growth in fine arts, as for instance in the first European novel *Don Quijote* (Dussel, 1998a, p. 126). This growth happens in the center of the system, where capital is accumulated, and it is based on the exploitation of what can truly be called ‘the periphery’, that is, the new world beyond the Atlantic ocean. The enormous extent of this exploitation means that parallel to these developments, it is necessary to increase the administrative rationalization and — no matter how one thinks the causal chain is — this process is accompanied by rationalization that is spurred by science (Dussel, 1998c, 58 ff.). The Spanish university of Salamanca is one of Europe’s oldest.

The second modernity can, according to Dussel, be localized around the Spanish Netherlands, that is, around what is now the Netherlands and Belgium, where

in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century a similar development had taken place, also based materially on both trade and massive exploitation, this time, however, of the Far East. Only after this modernity had been accomplished did the development begin, which then leads to the French revolution and the modern society in the sense normally used with reference to G.W.F. Hegel (Dussel 1998a, 126). This critique of the assumptions inherent in much of the humanities and social sciences is important, since it reveals some general social trends and mechanisms, and so it negates the idea of a unique modernity only possible in our part of the world. In the development of modern Western capitalism, Weber for example, underlines the importance of puritan sects in Great Britain, and in general Protestantism, which is a particular north European strand of Christianity (Weber 1904-05, 114 ff. (sect. II.2); Dussel 1998c, 50 f.). And in his philosophy of history Marx takes as his point of departure in the European development from feudalism to capitalism and considers such a development to be the precondition of the realization of a communist society (Marx 1845 108 ff. (sect. 4).

Dussel, however, does not stop at merely revealing alternative European modernities. When the world is considered as a system of political-economical exchanges, Europe as a whole was for thousands of years peripheral in relation to the centers, which were located in Asia (Dussel 1998a 127). After all, India was the place Columbus wanted to ‘discover’, and it was from China Marco Polo could report all kinds of wonders. The traditional connection to those centers was the Silk Road. It was in Asia, one could produce silk, gunpowder, porcelain (china, as it is still called), and many other things, which as a whole showed how backwards Europe was culturally, technologically, in both administration and in science. The Iberian modernity was the crucial world historical event, because it was then that the world center for first time was displaced from Asia to Western Europe. The conquest and exploitation of the American continent created such wealth that a society could develop, which could then be compared with the central Asiatic societies. This society was the first version of the modern society, and its dynamics have since

secured the western world its dominance. The world center was thus moved to the west and with Europe as the center Asia was gradually reduced to the periphery.

### **Formality and materiality**

With the analysis of the idea and reality of the modern society Dussel reveals, how ideology, false consciousness, and prejudices bias the general conception of the historical development. More important, however, is such a critique of ideology, when it is directed towards the idea of politics and ethics as such, and even more crucially when the subject of critical inquiry concerns the very way one thinks about such matters, that is, practical philosophy.

As his point of departure Dussel maintains the traditional philosophical ambition of universal validity, and he also recognizes the claim that philosophical thinking should be scientific, adding simply that science, as such, should be critical. To engage in critical science, however, means something specific to Dussel, namely that one should in scientific work place oneself beside the victim (Dussel, 1998b 191ff), that is, alongside the poor, the hungry, the orphan, the woman, the Indian *et cetera*. To be critical means to take part for those who are marginalized and excluded from the modern western society, both in first and the third world. It is point of view of the excluded that reveals thoughts as ideological, and when one stands side by side with the marginalized it means that one stands in the best position to experience the limitations that practical philosophy has to overcome. Dussel is not trying to construct a practical philosophy designed especially for the periphery, the exploited and the oppressed. He only refers to the excluded as part of the critique of ideology mentioned above. If a practical philosophy wants to claim universal validity, the excluded are a perfect test case.

Those who are excluded are however also interesting in another sense, precisely because they in a concrete way experience the consequences of the order of the world system. Attention to those excluded reminds us that practical philosophy must never forget the body as the material foundation of the consciousness. It is with the body that we feel pleasure, but it is also with the body we feel pain. It is with the body that I starve, get tired, am worn out, suffer and eventually founder because of economical and political inequality. It is bodies that every day must give up, when thousands in the third world die because of abuse, starvation, or illness. Even in our first world middle class center it is through the body we experience stress as a consequence of the anxiety produced by local ideological and material pressure.

With inspiration from Levinas, Dussel criticises the critical theory of Apel and Habermas, because they, in their discursive ethics, have put too much stress on the demonstration of the universal validity of moral norms. A moral norm is only valid, if it is acceptable to all parties affected, real as well as potential, and it can survive a critical discussion (Habermas 1983 75 f.). Dussel recognizes this formal aspect of ethics as necessary (Dussel 1999 116 ff.), but he thinks that the proponents of this kind of ethics has forgotten the basic material concern of ethics, namely the preservation and development of the life of every single human subject (Dussel 1998c, 252). *Material* is here to be understood in more than one sense. First, as mentioned above, such a development requires a material basis in the form of a body, which is also recognized by Marx (Dussel 1998c, 130. ff.). Second, however, to develop human life in a fuller sense than the (merely) biological, a material foundation is needed in a broader sense, namely as the economic basis of a human life, which includes politics and culture. Finally, there is the dichotomy between formality and the material understood as the matter concerned, that is, the content (Dussel 1998c 130 ff.). This means that Dussel can claim that discourse ethics has forgotten the material aspect in ethics as content, as economy and as the body.



Dussel thinks this omission is ideological. Overlooking such obvious aspects of ethics is only possible, because western middleclass, in its everyday life, has put such a distance between material needs and suffering that they do not seem in urgent need of attention. As a privileged part of the ruling discourse Habermas can no longer claim the marginality and thus the privileged access to knowledge of material conditions of the excluded. Discourse ethics simply lacks materiality in all the senses mentioned, that is, it lacks understanding of the importance for ethics of content, the body and the economy. In addition to Levinas and Marx, Dussel also refers to two of the founders of Critical Theory, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who had a sound understanding of the conditions of human suffering (Dussel 2008 296 f.).

Habermas's aim with discourse ethics is to find the foundation of democracy in a discourse, which is only ruled by the force of the better argument. Politically Dussel is sympathetic about the ideals of discourse ethics, but he criticises the way this foundation is thought through. Habermas only gives criterias for evaluating democratic practice theoretically *post festum*, and especially when it has gone wrong. He does not offer any advice about how to formulate and construct politics, so that justice can be realized in a particular society. Habermas can therefore not contribute positively to guiding the public politically in the right direction. And in this case Dussel cannot supplement the thinking of Habermas with that of Levinas and early Critical Theory. The problem here is something that Habermas has inherited from the original Critical Theory, namely the hostility towards what Weber called 'goal rationality' (Weber 1921-22, 1.I §2), and which later became known as 'subjective reason' or 'instrumental rationality'. The problem is that doing practical politics often implies treating people instrumentally. According to the ethics of Immanuel Kant, however, it is wrong to treat a human being simply as a means (Kant 1788, A 156), and Weber, as well as, the philosophy of Critical Theory agrees with Kant on this point.

Dussel's point here is that engaging in practical politics necessarily will imply treating other individuals instrumentally, and that it even will imply, what Habermas denounces as 'strategic action', *i.e.*, an action where one includes the rationality of the other in the instrumental calculation to optimize one own choice of means and ends (Habermas, 1981, vol. 1, 385). Dussel thinks that practical philosophy must accept this as a condition of politics as such; if not, it will fail to become practical in the (afore mentioned) sense. In a democracy we collectively are the ones who make decisions about ourselves, and therefore we are at the same time rulers and ruled. Therefore we should — in principle — be able to think of politics in a way that has practical validity from the perspective of the rulers, and at the same time, is able to give reasonable answers to critique from below. Habermas tries to think through the foundation of the discourse, but shies away from positively considering how we are to use the power necessary to realize what is right. In terms of his communicative ethics, power has no validity as such; it is only a technical means to reduce complexity (Habermas, 1981, vol. 2, 229 ff.).

As Habermas expresses it, it is obvious that material living conditions can make people think of freedom and democracy in less economical and, one can add, material or even less bodily terms.<sup>3</sup> In many places in the center of the world system, material necessities are almost unnoticeable. As Habermas puts it, alienation has lost its form as misery, meaning that in the rich centres of the world alienation does no longer by necessity imply starvation, pain and death in their literal senses. But, as Dussel is never tired of emphasizing: at the periphery, life is to a much greater extent confronted with death, and whether it is in the cities or in the country. At the periphery, daily existence is marked by matter, prevalently poverty and a deficit of social rights.<sup>4</sup> The basic thought being that apart from the special separation between centre and periphery, the living conditions at the centre makes a person living at the centre ignorant of the sufferings of those excluded or living at the periphery, and that

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<sup>3</sup> Habermas: 1963/1971, p. 228 f. (Dussel 1998a: 188 & 1998b, p. 142).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g. Dussel 1997 (2005b: 341).

this also effects the way we, as philosophers, think of ethics and morality, no matter how much we discuss them in universal terms. Actually, it influences the very way we discuss universality. Dussel simply claims that it is the living conditions that condition western philosophers, such as Apel and Habermas, to be less aware of those aspects of ethics, which are important for the victims of exclusion and suppression, the widows, the refugees, the orphans, the harassed women etc.

There is, however, more to the democratic process both at the center and at the periphery of the world system. Dussel refers to world system precisely to keep in mind, that social, economic, political developments in one part of the world cannot be detached from the rest of the world. Democracy in Europe, for instance, is not fully realized — there are still all kinds of conflicts and class struggles. But beyond this point, democracy cannot be based upon the exploitation and exclusion of large parts of the world's population, as European democracies are. It is when we ignore the excluded, and neglect the interrelatedness of phenomena in the world system that we, as Habermas, become blind to the positive necessity of strategy for political action. By contrast, to Dussel power and strategy must be recognized as necessary constituents of political action in a positive way (Dussel 2008, 326 f.). As stated at the start of this paper, the aim of practical philosophy is to realize universal justice. For the oppressed this means fighting for liberation, and this will necessarily conflict with particular interests. Political philosophy cannot allow itself to be limited to give normative support to a democratic dialogue ruled only by the, to all practical purposes, powerless force of the better argument. For Dussel the fight for justice will imply class and race war with real battles, the first being fought to conquer the state in order to protect the people from the market. Political philosophy must be able to give normative reinforcement to such efforts.

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