

# Organizational Ideology and Leadership: A Semiotic View

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The article suggests a reconsideration of the traditional ideology concept. The role of leadership in creating and maintaining meanings within the organization is discussed within the emerging management of meaning paradigm. A new approach is suggested based upon the ontological assumption of man as a storytelling animal and on the semiotic method of viewing ideology as an interplay between the narrative and the cognitive.

In the study of organizations the term ideology has been most often used in the traditional meaning as a false consciousness, as borrowed from sociology or political science. Ideology as a concept has been seen belonging to the sphere of political or religious organizations, but not to the world of business organizations.

Recently, for instance, Professor Abraham Zaleznik of Harvard Business School (1990) criticized the role of business schools in creating and maintaining a »managerial mystique« by presenting business organizations as an arena of power and political struggle, and by replacing the good old personal leadership with group considerations. Zaleznik sees this as a biased view that faculty people have developed by experiencing the politics of their own academic organizations, and as not true of genuine business content.

That negative aspect of a distorted construction of reality in the traditional view of the ideology concept is shown in some definitions:

»Ideology functions as an overarching idea-system or symbol-system that provides a protective shield . . . for aversion of reality that would minimize the disturbing effects of reinterpretation and reconstruction. It provides a fundamental justification and legitimation for what it would have us believe is an established

order. It thus provides a rationale for a particular form of selectivity and seeks to exclude others.» (Thompson, 1980, 232)

Ideology may be seen quite contrary as well: as vehicles for change, not as maintaining. Gouldner (1976) sees ideologies as symbol systems used to justify and to mobilize public projects of social reconstruction. Based on an extensive review of the ideology concept, Czarniawska-Joerges gives her definition of ideology in an organizational setting:

»We can say, then, that an organizational ideology is a set (system) of ideas describing the organization-relevant reality, projecting a desired state of affairs, and indicating possible ways of reaching the desired state. . . . Such a concept of ideology can easily be used alongside the idea of culture and can clarify the relationship between ideology and science. . . .» (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988, 8)

In my study of leadership as generating and maintaining of meaning, the above definitions of ideology as a system of ideas — or as a system of symbols (of ideas), seem plausible.

However, following in the footsteps of semiotic culture research, I wish to focus more on the process of signification and communication of meaning, i.e. on the building of the ideational structure (system). Particularly, I wish to emphasize the role of language as the foremost of sign systems, as well as labels, metaphors and other symbols. In this sense, leadership is essentially »the process, whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others« (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, 258). One may trace this view of leadership from Barnard (1938) to Selznick (1966) to the current »management of meaning« view (Smircich & Morgan; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985).

A relevant definition from a leadership research perspective is the one by Geertz (1973, 231):

".. ideology is the justificatory (dimension of culture) — it refers to that part of culture which is actively concerned with the establishment and defense of patterns of belief and value... ideology names the structures of situations in such a way that the attitude contained toward them is one of commitment.. it seeks to motivate action."

In organizational culture research the concept of culture has been found to be all too general, to lack analytical bite (Pettigrew, 1979) and, therefore, Alvesson (1985) among others has suggested the concept of ideology as narrower, analytically more useful. Alvesson suggests also another concept, close to ideology, the organizational frame of reference (OFOR). It specifies the cognitive framework of an organization, Alvesson maintains.

Alvesson criticizes the subjectivist or idealist approaches so common in organization culture research, and, the traditional objectivist or materialist approach in sociology. A similar treatment of the ideology concept in organizational analysis may be found in Weiss & Miller (1987).

The concept of commitment in above statements is crucially related to the concept of leadership/followership. If organization members judge the vision, or definition of reality, of the leaders to be reasonable, they may commit themselves to it.

The compelling vision of a leader, a popular term in leadership literature today, and the above views of ideology highly resemble each other. Therborn's (1980) description of how ideologies influence people is illustrative in this respect:

"Ideologies subject and qualify subjects by telling them, relating them to, and making them recognize:

1. What exists, and its corollary, what does not exist, what nature, society, men and women are like. In this way we acquire a sense of identity, becoming conscious of what is real and true; the visibility of the world is thereby structured by the distribution of spotlights, shadows and darkness.

2. What is good, right, just, beautiful, attractive, enjoyable, and its opposites. In this way our desires become structured and normalized.

3. What is possible and impossible; our sense of the mutability of our being-in-the-world and the consequences of change are hereby patterned, and our hopes, ambitions and fears

given shape." (Therborn in Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988, 18)

In order to achieve an established system of ideas, an ideology, the leader of an organization must communicate and act out his vision symbolically, as Bennis (1989) points out, time after time. Here the signification of the meaning through some form of symbol is required in order to communicate the ideas to others.

I disagree with the view, reflected in some of the definitions, that people are passive receivers of an ideology and, thus, unaware objects of manipulation. The rhetoric of a strong leader and grave circumstances may contribute to such a state of mind, but normally people have an inherent awareness, a narrative rationality, to see the probability and fidelity in the stories they are told (Fisher, 1987).

The ideas of the narrative paradigm, suggested by Fisher, where man is seen as inherently a storyteller, fits well with our semiotic approach to ideologies in organizations. In a similar fashion the Greimasian semiotics sees narrative as a supercode, ontological in nature.

Greimas himself considers ideologies as surface level phenomena (of social "text"), as articulations of fundamental values. He defines ideology as a (surface) actantial structure which actualizes the values that it selects within deep level axiological systems (of a virtual order). Ideologies, in this sense, are syntagmatic surface articulations of the universe of values, in contrast to axiologies, which are the deep level abstract paradigmatic articulations of values (Greimas & Courtes, 149).\*

Petitot-Cocorda suggests that the deep structures in Greimas' theory are lived existen-

\* The microsemantic universe, at the fundamental level, articulates elementary axiological structures such as life/death (individual universe), and nature/culture (collective universe). These basic structures situated at the deep level are considered ad hoc universals that serve as starting point for the analysis of semantic universes, be they individual or collective. Their meaning is never apprehensible as such, but rather only when they are manifested in the form of an articulated signification, or in other words, when they are converted into actantial structures. At one instance, Greimas proposes a new formulation of Dumézil's work on myth, by which the study of myth and the structural methodology borrowed from the social sciences are used to examine the superstructures of social ideologies. This is a major development semiotically, as, in Hjelmslev's terms, a "connotative semiotics" is transformed into a "denotative semiotics" which is a precondition for an adequate description of a text. (Perron in Greimas, xxv-xxviii)

tially in human passions, ideology, actions, and dreams and that these semio-narrative structures can be thought of as 'the anthropological structures of the imaginary'.

Greimas' semio-narrative grammar establishes a specific relation between syntax and semantics, which may be described as "the projection (or conversion) of the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic axis, the understanding of which constitutes one of the central problems of structuralism, perhaps even its most central problem" (Petitot-Cocorda in Greimas, xxvii).

Also Jameson sees the reduction of the narrative into an interaction of cognitive traits, or projecting the cognitive onto the narrative (in Jameson's terms), as a unique contribution by Greimas. However, for him it is not a one-way road, but rather it is the "constant process whereby the one is ceaselessly displaced by the other".

This has led Jameson to suggest an enlarged version of the ideology concept:

".. ideology, in some more comprehensive sense, be grasped as a twofold or amphibious reality, susceptible of taking on two distinct and seemingly incompatible forms at will, which are precisely our old friends the narrative and the cognitive. That 'ideology' in the narrower sense is a mass of opinions, concepts, or pseudoconcepts, 'worldviews', 'values', and the like, is commonly accepted; that these vaguely specified conceptual entities also always have a range of narrative embodiments, that is, indeed, that they are all in one way or another buried narratives, may be less widely understood and may also open up a much wider range of exploration than the now well-worn conceptual dimension of the ideology concept." (Jameson in Greimas, 1987, xiii)

This interesting redefinition of the ideology concept gives us clues into how an organizational ideology may be "awakening" due to the narrative of a visionary leader, for instance.

In Fisher's narrative paradigm we may find similar standpoints. Narratives (stories) are enactments of the whole mind; they contain both fact and value, both intellect and imagination, both reason and emotion. They are also moral constructs, as Fisher shows (Fisher, 68).

If we agree with Fisher that "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal" (Fisher, 58), we

can view leadership and followership from a fresh angle. Whereas there has been attempts to develop a management of meaning paradigm among organization researchers with a cultural perspective, the lack of appropriate conceptual tools has hindered the development.

Fisher's narrative paradigm and the modern narrative semiotics offer us such tools to work further on, for instance, the interesting aspect described by Jameson.

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