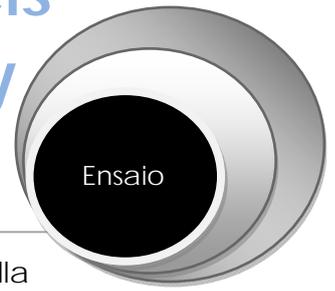


Knowledge is Power. Francis Bacon's Theory of Ideology and Culture



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1. Francis Bacon's Theory of Idols as the Concept of Ideology's Intellectual Precedent

Human beings have conceived ideas as weapons that help to fulfil our desires or interests, rather than the discovery of truth. Francis Bacon established that, when a man wishes something were true, the more he readily believes it, the more mankind commonly talks of the wish as being father to the thought (White 22). Thinkers have always been aware that there have been several obstacles that had impeded their knowledge of the world. Most of these obstacles are located in the human being's cognitive capacity itself. With the disintegration of medieval society, a new scientific approach to the knowledge of nature received impulse and began to supersede scholastic philosophy. In this way, theoretical contemplation of a hierarchical and sacred world was replaced by a conception that valued the practical function of thought. The development of trade, money exchange, secularised education, communities, cities, and so on, led to a new consideration of knowledge in its social and historical perspective (Houghton 48). An accurate and unprejudiced knowledge of nature is needed for it to be practically mastered, and this became the irresistible preoccupation of intellectuals. The new trends arise in opposition to the feudal system and its theological view of the world. The development of a precise knowledge of nature had been deeply limited, not just by some theocentric ideas such as the notion that human beings are essentially unable to conceive the world, but also by some artificial impediments that had prevented

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it. The search for this accurate knowledge, together with the appearance of science, was the fight against all those factors that had been perturbing its development. Likewise, the conception of science is accompanied by a critique of former methods of cognition.

The first step to protect knowledge from these obstacles was the existential conscience of these irrational elements that suddenly arise in the mind and make it difficult to discover reality (Gaukroger, *The Emergence of Scientific Culture*, 182). Philosophers realised that there was a need to create a new approach to help eradicate those traditional distractions from the acquisition of true knowledge. Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620) and René Descartes' *Discourse de la méthode* (1637) were two such new approaches conceived under the need to search for a new methodology. The aim of this new method was based on the overthrow of the short-comings of Scholastic medieval thought. While Descartes remained at a more deductive level, Bacon insisted on the role of positive science and its observational character. He wanted to supersede Aristotle's *Organon* by a *New Organon* that no longer insisted on the deductive formal logic in the approach to reality but replaced it with an inductive approach (McRae 32). The Kingdom of the Human Being hence could only be erected on his knowledge of nature. Man acquired power over nature by obeying it, and he could obey it only after he had learned to understand it.

According to Bacon, there are four idols or false notions that could be obstructing human understanding and preventing it from discovering the truth. In fact, Bacon's theory of idols has been placed in the destructive side of the *Novum Organum*. Its function was to discover whether the foundations of human power and greatness could be more secure as well as broadened. There are four categories of idols, these being the idols of the tribe, the idols of the cave, the idols of the market place and the idols of the theatre. For Bacon, the first two are innate. These cannot be eradicated, only recognised in the process of cognition that is operated

spontaneously by them. In this operation human understanding resembles a mirror whose shape and curvatures change the rays of objects, distorting and disfiguring them. The foundations for this distortion are based on human nature itself. Therefore the idols of the tribe are closely linked to the human being. His character, education and general tendency are determined by the idols of the cave as the conceivers of his human idiosyncrasy (Farrington 29).

Among the Idols of the Tribe, the most important problem that had arisen in human knowledge acquisition is human nature as a filter. In fact, human nature acts as a filter that prevents knowledge from being perceived in analogy with the universe. This filter is made up of two elements of importance, these being superstition and the influence of human passions. Bacon had been deeply concerned with the corrupting effect of superstition upon science and philosophy. Superstition is the source of baneful deviation for scientific knowledge. Bacon considered that the scholastic confusion between philosophy and theology was especially damaging for science. He supported a clear split between religious knowledge and philosophy. So Machiavelli's concern with the social effects of religion was spread by Bacon from the field of political practice to the field of science (Larrain 20; Atkinson 39). The other element is the influence of human passions. According to Bacon, human understanding is not a dry light. It is determined by feelings and passions that corrupt it. For this reason, human knowledge cannot be reduced to its intellectual components because it is suffering from a negative effect not only by means of feelings and passions, but also by superstitions and religious representations (Mendelsohn 23).

The Idols of the Market Place are important for the concept of ideology in a different manner. Such idols arise in relation to language. Human beings learn linguistic signs even before their apprehension by means of experience. They barely need to reach experience through language, but due to superstition and passions sometimes language overwhelms truth and therefore experience. To prevent that,

human knowledge needs to create a corpus of ideas that links language to truth and, therefore, to experience and science. Bacon stated that the destiny of science was not only to enlarge human beings' knowledge but also to improve human beings' life on earth. Therefore, all human knowledge was the knowledge of ideas.

In turn, the Idols of Theatre arise from the authoritative and dogmatic character of traditional theories. Human beings tend to see the world through the eyes of former philosophical systems, full of dogmas and false rules that, like plays, create fictitious worlds. Bacon wanted to liberate knowledge from blind obedience to the opinion of former authorities. All experience which does not come from reason itself should be rejected. When idols operate, human beings apprehend *ex analogia hominis*. On the contrary, the true interpretation of nature should explain the world *ex analogia universi*. Human beings can only master nature by obeying its laws. To obtain this, a proper comprehension of them is required (Barth 48). For this reason, science must purge the mind of idols so that the truth can be achieved. Then science may appear as a reflection of reality unhindered by ancient prejudices, superstitions, feelings and passions. The corruption of philosophy could cease if the dichotomy cause-effect and the idea of superstition were explicated. In *The Proficiency and Advancement of Learning*, Superstition was ascribed by Bacon to the same influence that he had attributed to Idols in *Novum Organum*. Thus, he added Superstition to the Four Idols. Superstition was reprehensible for two reasons. First of all, Superstition had been the main factor why divinity had been overburdened by disgrace and outrage; and, second, Superstition had contributed to destroy the natural system of law and morality by subjecting the mind to an uncontrollable force. Superstition transferred the leadership and power of the state to the popular mass and, therefore, to popular culture. In these terms, Francis Bacon could also be said to have settled the basis on which popular culture has been established.

2. Puritanism, Reformation & Modern Science as the Basis for the Concept of Ideology

The rational discussion on which society must rely was sacrificed or adapted to the extent that not only had Superstition appropriated the power of the state, but had also destroyed freedom of conscience and established uniformity of opinion in society (Henry 112). Reflecting the need for the creation of a rational basis in either the doctrines of revelation or the rational understanding of nature, Superstition destroyed the supernatural and the natural order, surrendering both to human impulse. Regarding Superstition, its connection with the French Enlightenment is based on the later view that idols in the state and in science were identical. Moreover, Bacon considered the social interests of the clergy as of decisive importance. As in the concept of Ideology, he discovered that certain religious customs, institutions and ideas no longer reflected "true" religion but served the interest of certain social estates; the criticism of the idols and superstition was transformed into social criticism.

The clergy's interests were supported first by the Reign of Charles I and second, by the Government of the Saints that was led by Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell in the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland (1649 – 1660). Charles I permitted his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, to push for Anglo-Catholic liturgical conformity (Trevor-Roper 182). He married a Catholic queen, persecuted the Protestants and imposed on Scotland an English-style prayer book and Episcopal system. As a reaction against Charles I's pro-Catholic political position, the English Revolution was the first modern attempt to reorder the political affairs of an entire nation while at the same time reforming the consciousness of its citizens. John Milton, the official propagandist for Cromwell's revolutionary Protectorate, was compelled to enlist ancient and medieval ideas in the service of political innovation, just as Machiavelli had done in Renaissance Florence (Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, 82). The construction of the

utopian movement was to create the scientific/industrial transformation of the natural world. In England's Protectorate, this reform was accompanied by an emphasis upon the practical implications of the new learning and the ways through which knowledge could be used for charitable purposes. Bacon's writings would play a central role in the English reformers' educational schedules. Therefore, the critique of religion was expanded into a critique of the state when, on the one hand, the interests of the leading group in this state had coincided in some aspects with those of the clergy, and, on the other, the social hierarchy and the political constitution had been sanctioned by religion. A state that had been founded on religion was bound to regard any criticism of clergy and religion as aimed against its own establishment and therefore turned its instruments of power to their defence (Whitney 106). The separation of theology and philosophy had had for Francis Bacon certain consequences regarding the relationship between the Church of England and the English State. Although he had regarded the unity of religious faith as useful and desirable for the state, he had refused all compulsion in matters of conscience for two reasons. First, throughout History, the passions and interests of specific parties have been too easily inflamed by religious compulsion. And, second, compulsion had reduced the importance accorded to scientific subtlety and accuracy (Mannheim 48).

In his struggle against everything that had obstructed the introduction of a rational order in human relations and in knowledge, Bacon had only expected his theory of idols to act as a safeguard for the understanding and explanation of nature. In fact he had to confront two problems. On the one hand, he had to discover the causes which prevented human beings from ordering their lives according to reason and nature. And, on the other, he had to identify the source of the obstructions which impeded the advancement of knowledge (Weinberger 93).

The Puritanical era forced itself upon England during the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. Even theatres were closed. Like most revolutions from above, the

Commonwealth that had been created by Cromwell soon foundered due to popular conservatism, and the monarchy was finally restored in 1660 (Mulligan 101). Through Puritanism, the Government of the Saints had transformed religion into a universal moral faith which led them to advance their demands with the passion of secular missionaries. Faith in Human Beings' ability to discover the immanent laws of nature, that were equivalent to the laws of reason, was beyond doubt. Regarding this, Christopher Hill supported the Weber-Tawney-Merton hypothesis concerning the interrelated rise of Puritanism, Capitalism and Modern Science (Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*; Webster 253). Furthermore, this faith did not prevent them from recognising that the current use of human beings' reason was severely impeded and at times rendered completely ineffectual. They were equally certain that the natural, rational order was as yet nowhere realised. Although the aim of establishing a rational order was to be abandoned at the start, the nature of the obstruction had to be known. If the mind was like a mirror that distorts the rays of objects, surely the intellect was constitutionally unsuited for the comprehension of nature. None the less, Bacon was clear enough in the sense that science could reach the truth despite the action of idols. This first indicated that for him there was no logical necessity for the operation of idols and that, using the right method, human beings could eradicate them. The mere recognition of the existence of idols was already a way of rendering them harmless. But the true and immanent problem was how to understand and reconcile the intervention of innate idols and that of external idols. The difficulty regarded the concept of ideology (Fulton 306).

Hence, the dilemma that beset the construction of this concept was already implicitly posed by Francis Bacon. Ideology could be conceived either as an aftermath whose roots were based on human beings' social relations, or as an aftermath whose origins derived from the universal presence of irrational and emotive elements, those which were inherent to human nature, that recurrently assailed and perturbed science (Hall, "The Early Years of the Royal Society", 265-

268). The first possibility emphasised the social determination of ideology, whereas the second pointed to the opposition to science. These two options were necessarily contradictory. Bacon was interested in the Idols of the Market Place only in so far as they had also constituted an obstacle to science. The important difference he had contemplated was that while the innate idols could be logically dealt with at the level of the human condition, the idols dependent upon human intercourse could not be easily eliminated without modifying that relation. The reference to innate idols truly emphasised the opposition to science, when in fact the reference to a social liaison rather tended to the revision of material situations. Bacon had even sharpened an accurate distinction between innovations that had affected the intellectual and institutional bases of civil society and those which had basically remodelled the logical foundations of knowledge. The theory of idols that had been expanded into a theory of prejudice at the time had acquired a pronounced political character. Prejudices had concealed this character from common view. Therefore, Francis Bacon had advocated replacing a social order that had been based on divine authority and sovereignty with a secular order which has been justified by reason. At this point, the critique of Enlightenment commenced from Bacon's position (Archer 112). The irrational basis of the state and religion, which had already admitted by Bacon, was then perceived as another idol to be put on trial before the court of reason. If this did not succeed, this new idol would be revealed as the result of the conspiracy of class interest and group volition (Dzelzainis 144).

Bacon did not question the links between the two kinds of idols, nor did he foresee the difficulty in dealing with idols that were created in social relations by means of an intellectual exercise. His main fixation was how to protect rational knowledge from any unreasonable incursion. The supposition was implicitly established that this could be done at the level of knowledge itself, even for the idols of the market place. For this reason, Bacon distinguished progress in science

from changes in civil society. While the former is appreciated, the latter are frightening. He insisted on the opposition between idols and science. This opposition to science was more highlighted than its social equivalent that was the seed of the concept of ideology.

At this point, the critique of the Enlightenment started from Francis Bacon's position. This critique established that the existence of a natural, lawful order of state and society could be disclosed. If this order did not exist at the time, the reason simply was that prejudices had concealed it from common view. Bacon's idols were considered as prejudices by French philosophers like Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach and Claude-Adrian Helvetius and had acquired a more pronounced political dimension. This new political vision claimed to replace a social order which had been founded on divine authority and sovereignty with a secular order that had been justified by reason. The irrational basis of the state and religion in Cromwell's Government of Saints, which Bacon, in his own time, had already admitted to regarding the state in general, was perceived as one more idol to be brought before the auspices of reason. If this idol did not work, this would be exposed as the machination of class interest and group will. Purging the mind of idols was the first step to impartiality, liberating thought from preconceived ideas and prejudices.

When monarchy was restored in England, social life came back to pre-Protectorate social, not political order. Places of entertainment and theatres were reopened. Under Charles II scientific analysis became associated with the newly opened musical houses under the watchful eye of the Royal Society established in 1662 by King Charles himself. This was an innovative stage in the English theatre as King Charles blended science and drama to create a much greater interest in the theatre by a wider audience. An example of this was Francis Bacon's interest in acoustics and the development of strategies to identify the ambiguous nature of consonance, which he believed was not simply a matter of numerical ratios and

musical effect, but could be understood through experimentation with musical instruments (Gouk 239). This assumption was the first step towards entering the scientific dawn of the seventeenth century. Francis Bacon was the first to understand the importance of experiments as a means of advancing all branches of scientific knowledge. He began in the *Advancement of Learning* by enunciating the general principles of the experimental method. Thus Bacon appreciated that facts obtained from experiments would have little significance unless they were correlated, and that their proper interpretation was one of the chief aims of science. But Bacon's insight did not end here. He realized that the scientist would require protection, and that progress could be made only through cooperation and organization. A society must be formed which would have its own laboratories and scientific equipment with special facilities, such as caves for the study of subterranean phenomena, high towers for meteorological observations, experimental stations for the study of fauna and flora, special rooms for the analysis of heat, sound, and the transmission of light, which has probably never been realized in any one institution. The Royal Society of London, therefore, found its analogue in *Solomon's House*, the fictional institution in Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (Martin 29). This idea had inspired some Bacon's followers such as Samuel Hartlib and his circle and Robert Boyle. The *New Atlantis* appears to have been written around 1617, and its importance lies not in what it proved, but in having suggested and pointed the way to any kind of organized scientific attempt. In order to protect experiments from idols, through empirical method, Bacon tried to designate a philosophical discipline that was to provide the foundation for all the sciences. In other words, he understood the existence of this discipline, a science of ideas, but he could not designate it. This designation finally took place in France at the time of the Revolution. There, the word *idéologie* was first introduced by a philosopher, Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy, as a short name for what he called the science of ideas, which he said he had adapted from the epistemology of

the philosophers John Locke and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, for whom all human knowledge was the knowledge of ideas (Kennedy 357).

3. Conclusions

This return to Francis Bacon's early conception was due to reveal the true mission of ideology. Interest could damage science, turning judgements into prejudices. Ideology works here as a part of objectivity, bowing to what is advantageous. The excellent achievements of the human intellect have sometimes been obtained by those scholars who usually worked alone, but the caution of some academic institutions was an obscure atmosphere that only a few, if any, could envisage. Throughout History, the constant advance of scientific progress, nevertheless, has depended not so much upon individuals as upon groups who had collaborated with one another in the quest of a common purpose. Francis Bacon admitted this, but this recognition by universities was remarkably procrastinated. The fact was that the scientific community's reaction against universities' conservatism generated the founding of the great scientific societies in the seventeenth century. As stated, on 15th July 1662, King Charles II issued a decree that officially recognized the assembly of these scientists as a society and named it *The Royal Society*. Despite not having been officially born until 1662, the Royal Society of London originated as early as 1645. Notwithstanding, the first organized scientific academy appeared in Florence, this being the *Accademia del Cimento*, founded in 1657, which existed for ten years. Its name, the Academy of Experiment, was well chosen by Galileo Galilei who was also its spiritual father. Even his disciples Evangelista Torricelli and Vincenzo Viviani were its most distinguished members. This institution soon vanished, and, when it collapsed, Italy's high position in science was replaced by England. The Royal Society of London has been the most intensively examined of the seventeenth-century scientific academies. It has been representative of particular social and ideological movements in Restoration England (McKie 14).

Five years after its foundation, in 1667, the first *History of The Royal Society of London* was published by Bishop Thomas Sprat (Wood 20). In this document, Francis Bacon was considered as the chief inspirer of the founders. Under the motto *Nullius in Verba*, Bacon was said to have conceived The Royal Society of London as an institution which had been created 'To the honourable society for the advancement of experimental philosophy', where his ideas were transformed into actions (Syfret 84; Hoppen 19; Dear 154). This full transformation in the founding of the Royal Society after the Restoration of 1660 represented Francis Bacon's deification as a philosopher, and the final victory of his project of collaboration, utility and progress (Pérez-Ramos 132). Bacon laid the groundwork for modern science by means of a distinction between the knowledge that had been derived from the unquestioned authority of the Ancients and of Scholastic Philosophy, and the knowledge that had been gained through rigorous, empirical observation. The place of experience in the *New Philosophy* played a crucial part in this process. First, because the idea of experiment and observation played an important role in the Scientific Revolution generally and in the Royal Society in particular; and, second, because polemical anti-scholastic writings of the period opposed experience to an alleged reliance on ancient authority. Like Bacon's idols, some of these obstacles to true perception are produced by the internal working of the mind, while others are imposed by external forces. This had been represented by John Locke's division of experience into two categories, these being reflection and sensation. On the one hand, experiences that had taken place outside of human beings could be appreciated by the intellect and, on the other, the inner operation of the human mind could also be experienced. The former experiences had been named as the sensual or material dimension of external encounters by John Locke, that is, those which had been contemplated as distinct from the ideal dimension of these kinds of experiences. These two experiences had raised the two main questions that ruled the establishment of the intellectual basis for the creation of ideology (Hill, *Intellectual Origins*).

The Royal Academy also wanted to provoke an impulse towards science and philosophy. But the true revolution that had been envisaged by its members, from its first president Christopher Wren to its first secretaries Henry Oldenburg and John Wilkins, was a gradual, Baconian process of education, where the idols would have tactfully been removed and reason would be installed in its place so that knowledge could be produced. To designate knowledge as ideology, and consequently as an entity that is bound to power, a relation between the product of thought and the social situation of the thinking topic made this designation an important one. The aim then was to design a file where those conditions were compiled in order to defend the objectivity of knowledge against prejudices. Definitely, power changes hands, but in so local and arbitrary a manner that in the end only power remains. By explaining away the existence of authentically new ideological formations or modes of thought, Francis Bacon issued this warning against the increasing dominance of historical revisionism in the time of King James I (Hall et al, "The Intellectual Origins of the Royal Society", 161; Rattansi 136; Woolf 78).

In the twentieth century, Christopher Hill complained about a similar effect that had taken place in the mid-seventies regarding the conflict that had been raised between historical revisionists and new historicists, thus effectively regarding history as "just one damned thing after another": a force without real agents, ideals or goals. Notwithstanding, as Hill accurately contemplated, this position on history has remained attractive for obvious sociological reasons, including the failure of the great political and social revolutions of the early twentieth century (Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*; Lake xii). These reasons also went far toward explaining the coined paradigm which was explained by Stephen Greenblatt's "subversion and containment" model of early modern culture in the aftermath of the failed cultural revolution of the 1960s (Greenblatt 72). Although Marx and Freud had obviously offered wide models of liberation, they were associated here simply because late Marxists such as Louis Althusser, Christopher Hill and his friend and fellow scholar

Norman O. Brown had commonly done so. To expound the ideological liability of human knowledge, the primary question is not whether wisdom is objective and related to an object and to an idea. This question would be based on the kind of conditions under which knowledge is formed. This question brought to light the dependence of historical and social knowledge on a multitude of non-theoretical conditions that, nevertheless, had indisputably exerted an influence on theorising and its results. The aim then was to design a treaty of these conditions in order to secure the objectivity of understanding against possible sources of error. In this sense, the theory of ideology appeared as a continuation of Francis Bacon's Theory of Idols. Every social group or stratum possessed a definite ideological corpus linked to its own material reality. This theory has been followed by John Locke and David Hume, Voltaire and Laplace. Since Arthur Schopenhauer and Auguste Comte, there has been a wide range of responses (Rodríguez-García 119). This range has been represented, since Francis Bacon's Theory, by a confluence of relevant ideas from, among others, Dilthey, Spengler, Marx and Nietzsche (Lampert 61). At the same time, this impulse culminated in the contention that all kinds of thought have been inevitably determined by the cultural and economic position of the thinking subject. This consideration has been taken over in the work of British Marxists such as Raymond Williams as well as in the even more influential accounts of ideological containment developed by Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. This tradition that was established by Francis Bacon had been opened by philosopher and physician Francisco Sanches. He established that, if scientific knowledge is sought, science ought to refrain from the methods, summaries and commentaries on Aristotle. Bacon's Theory of Idols has had its place in this "destructive" part of the *Novum Organum*. Following Sanches' statements, this "destruction" is referred by Bacon as those methods of judgment and experience which are mistaken when in the wrong hands. In order to prevent mankind from this "destruction", Ideology was born to

protect and to promote learning, knowledge and truth through experiment and induction bound to truth. In Francis Bacon's words,

There are and can be two ways of searching into and discovering truth. The one flies from the sense and particulars to the most general axioms, and from these principles, the truth of which it takes for settled and immovable, proceeds to judgement and to the discovery of middle axioms. And this way is now in fashion. The other derives axioms from senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last at all. This is the true way, but as yet untried. (Bacon 1879: 56)

Thanks to Bacon, action has been subordinated to science and progress to knowledge. And Knowledge is power because it reaches the boundaries of possibility and truth with the protection of ideology.

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