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IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA IN SOCIAL IMAGINARIES¹

The social imaginary is defined as a representation of social reality of individuals and groups as well as a foundation for their self-cognition and shaping their own identity. Characteristic features of these functions of the imaginary are provided by Charles Taylor in his work *Modern Social Imaginaries*, where he stresses that imagination is an indispensable component of social reality. The proposed analysis of the meaning of the imaginary does not stop at this general characteristic. The presentation of the social imaginary from the perspective of contemporary hermeneutics, especially Clifford Geertz and Paul Ricoeur, does not only show it as an indefinite imaginary representation of social life, but also helps to bring out such features of imagination as its activity and creativity, and to pose a question about how it reflects social processes, the relations between them and the ideas related to them. The answers to these questions are based on the analysis of the two components of the social imaginary: ideology as understood by Geertz and Ricoeur and Ricoeur's approach to utopia, closely linked with ideology. Ideology (and utopia) expresses the basic feature of the imaginary as outlined by Taylor, its non-transparency

¹ Originally published: Grażyna Lubowicka, "Ideologia i utopia w wyobraźni społecznej", [in:] *Imaginarium interakcji społecznych*, ed. M. Biedroń, J. Kędzior, B. Krawiec, A. Mitreğa, Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT – Wrocławskie Wydaw. Oświatowe, Wrocław 2017, p. 53–63.

and inadequacy in relation to social reality and reveals the way it functions. Its definition as a distortion of social imagination and the location of the source of this distortion in relations of dominance characteristic of social reality, is common to various theories of ideology. On the other hand, the common feature of both ideology and utopia is the inadequacy of their representations of the current social reality. Ideology and utopia, then, are according to Ricoeur: “two opposite sides or complementary functions typifies what could be called social and cultural *imagination*”².

THE IMAGINARY AS A SYMBOLIC SPACE OF A COMMUNITY

The most general characteristics of the imaginary as presented by Taylor link it to the self-cognition of individuals and groups, to which it provides the backdrop. The imaginary, says Taylor, is expressive of “the way [in which] ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories and legends”³. Therefore, this way of understanding oneself in society is connected with the perception of oneself in everyday life or in relation to the world of one’s life. Self-understanding is therefore based on socially shared senses, “because of this, we can say that sense giving draws on our whole world, that is, our sense of our whole predicament in time and space, among others, and in history”⁴. The imaginary as a background of self-cognition and social practices is not, then, a set of patterns, abstractions and theories, and the knowledge of the imaginary is not theoretical and has no clear-cut boundaries:

That’s the very nature of what contemporary philosophers have described as a ‘background’. It is in fact that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its indefinite and unlimited nature. This is another reason for speaking here about the imaginary and not a theory⁵.

² P. Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. G. H. Taylor, New York 1986, p. 1.

³ C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, London 2004, p. 23.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 25. A similar take on the role of the imaginary in social life is adopted by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger in his work *Philosophie des images*: “Although the history of institutions in the West testifies to the rationalization of its forms and

The imaginary offers sense to social activity: “the understanding of what we are doing right now [...] makes the sense it does because of our grasp on the wider predicament: how we continuously stand or have stood in relation to others and to power”⁶. The imaginary is a background of self-understanding and actions of individuals and social groups due to its social character. It is inclusive of beliefs “shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society [...]. the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy”⁷. References to collective rules of the imaginary require that each social action, practice or communication be based on a shared meaning of rules if they are to be understood by and addressed at others: the imaginary “incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. Such understanding is both factual and normative [...]”⁸. The understanding of norms or rules of action refers to a certain “moral or metaphysical order, in the context of which the norms and ideals make sense”⁹.

According to the hermeneutic perspective of Geertz and Ricoeur, the imaginary as the socially-related background of understanding allows a “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy”¹⁰. Self-understanding is always mediated and requires distance through the interpretation of action in symbolic terms. The understanding of oneself in the context of hermeneutics consists in the indirect understanding (interpretation) of practices (actions) and, as a consequence, of one’s own identity¹¹.

The backdrop of understanding in the meaning of Ricoeur’s and Geertz’s hermeneutics is expressed as a symbolic space which includes

foundations, especially through the idea of social and political agreement and the progress of democratic spirit, the rational notion of togetherness and power remains to a large extent based on or surrounded by images” (J. J. Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images*, Paris 1997, p. 276).

⁶ C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, op. cit., p. 27.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 23. “This implicit grasp of social space is unlike a theoretical description of this space [...] The understanding implicit in practice stands to social theory in the same relation that my ability to get around a familiar environment stands to a (literal) map of this area [...] Similarly, for most of human history and for most of social life, we function through the grasp we have on the common repertory, without benefit of theoretical overview. Humans operated with a social imaginary well before they ever got into the business of theorizing about themselves” (*ibidem*, p. 26).

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

¹¹ This sense of pre-cognition is taken up by Taylor, too.

symbols and senses. This helps bring out in it active and creative processes by identifying two of its fundamental functions: ideology and utopia. Geertz defines symbolic space in the context of his own understanding of cultural anthropology based on the foundations of hermeneutics, according to which all social processes and practices are expressed through symbolic action; their senses and rules are expressed via symbols. Thanks to its power of generating senses, a symbol, as Geertz stresses, has a “capacity to grasp, formulate, and communicate social realities”¹². Since our understanding is an attempt at capturing something with the aid of symbolic tools, symbols “are extrinsic sources of information in terms of which human life can be patterned – extrapersonal mechanisms for the perception, understanding, judgment, and manipulation of the world”¹³. Such symbolic patterns, i.e. rules, for the organisation of social and psychological processes, are described by Geertz, in accordance with the tradition of cultural anthropology, as cultural models. The concept of symbolic space complements the general term “imaginary” as proposed by Taylor, defining it via symbol-mediated social imaginary. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, too, emphasizes the need for the imaginary to be approached in semiotic terms, i.e. as the place and manner of functioning of symbolic languages: “Socio-political life becomes understandable only when we discover the driving force of symbolic and mythical languages, which supplement or abolish the rational language that supposedly governs the institutions and manifestations of public life”¹⁴.

The imaginary as a set of symbols shared and understood by a community is, then, a figurative language, with its specific rules and regulations, functioning according to Geertz’s remarks from his text *Ideology as a Culture System*, in a manner similar to a “metaphor, analogy, irony, ambiguity, pun, paradox, hyperbole, rhythm, and all the other elements of what we lamely call ‘style’ operate”¹⁵. The rhetorical power of social symbols means that “these devices are of any importance in casting personal attitudes into public form”¹⁶. Thus, according to Geertz, social activities and processes are expressed by stylistic figures, by the rhetoric of public discourse, by the processes of constructing symbolic

¹² C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, New York 1973, p. 210.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

¹⁴ J. J. Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images*, op. cit., p. 276.

¹⁵ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, op. cit., p. 209.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

systems and manipulating them. The final effect of these interactions is the result of both the configuration of different meanings influencing the expressive and rhetorical power of a given symbol, and the effect of social processes is “an occurrence not ‘in the head’, but in that public world where ‘people talk together, name things, make assertions, and to a degree understand each other’”¹⁷.

The definition of the social imaginary in terms of symbolic structures enables it to be shown not only as an undefined representation of existential experience, but also underlines its activity and creativity. The way of shaping the imaginary due to ideology and utopia as two complementary functions of the social imaginary shows the social process as cultural, taking the form of transformations of the symbolic sphere. Ideology and utopia, inseparable from the imaginary, express themselves as dynamic processes, shaping the basic ways in which the social imaginary operates. Ideology explains the process of inevitable inadequacy of imagination in relation to social reality, posing the problem of interdependence between symbols and social reality, which “concepts like ‘distortion’, ‘selectivity’ or ‘oversimplification’ are simply incompetent to formulate”¹⁸. According to Ricoeur and Geertz, ideology is constitutive for mediation of symbolic self-understanding and social action, and its main function is the integration of the community. Ricoeur also introduces utopia in a function opposite to that of ideology, i.e. as disintegration, which results from utopia undermining the existing order. As Ricoeur points out in the introduction to *l’Ideologies et l’Utopie*: “My own attempt, as perhaps has already been anticipated, is not to deny the legitimacy of the Marxist concept of ideology, but to relate it to some of the less negative functions of ideology. We must integrate the concept of ideology as distortion into a framework that recognizes the symbolic structure of social life”¹⁹. The presentation of ideology and utopia as function of operation of the social imaginary helps to show some of its principles (process of social integration and disintegration), and thus its influence on the self-understanding of individuals and social groups related to this symbolic space.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 213.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, op. cit., p. 8.

IDEOLOGY IN THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY – THE FUNCTION OF INTEGRATION

Individuals and social groups understand their real social situation by always inadequate imagination, and this distortion of the actual situation of an individual or group in an imaginary relationship is accounted for, according to Geertz and Ricoeur, by ideology. The ideology in its function of distortion of consciousness or self-understanding was first described by Karl Marx in the *Economics and Philosophy Manuscripts of 1844* and then in *German Ideology*. The author considers distortion and inconsistency with reality understood as praxis to be the basic feature of ideology. In the *Economics and Philosophy Manuscripts*, ideology is a part of the work process and its assimilation in the capitalist relations of production, where private property is the cause of domination of one person (social class) over another. The work is understood by Marx as the basic activity of man, the place of its production as a species and its assimilation and its own and nature, in the broadest sense it is treated as praxis. The assimilation of work and its products is never fully understood; the self-consciousness mediated by production is distorted. Therefore, ideology is defined by Marx as a distortion of praxis, i.e. as a biased awareness of oneself and one's situation in the process of production; it is an expression of human alienation. In *German Ideology*, Marx defines ideology through a metaphor of an inverted image of reality. The image of real life (praxis, human activity) is reversed and thus distorted "in the heavens of ideas". The representation of praxis is always distorted and always untrue and depends on the context of one's own place, the status of a class or group in society as a whole, and precisely is a consequence of the interests of the dominant class. A more universal concept of ideology was put forth by Karl Mannheim in his 1929 *Ideology and Utopia*. The author saw its source not so much in praxis but in the process of representation and idealization of the interests of the dominant group or simply political power. Ideology in this neutral and broad sense is made up of ideas expressing the interests of the dominant group, which represent this group's image and transform into the dominant ideas of the epoch.

Marx's concept of ideology, in which praxis, which produces a distorted awareness, is separated from the idea as its representation, leaves unsolved the problem of how praxis produces ideology and distorts consciousness? How can the relationship between praxis and

the world of ideas in the process of self-understanding be presented in the social imaginary? How, in Mannheim's view, can we define the relationship between the dominant class and its interests and the dominant ideas of a given era?²⁰ According to Geertz, it would be hard to define ideology as a representation of interests; how could interest be expressed in an idea? How are interests expressed by something else? As Geertz observes, this search for group interest, which is expressed in ideology, is based on a superficial "theory of benefit" or banal historicism, "that speaks with a studied vagueness of men's ideas as somehow 'reflecting', 'expressing', 'corresponding to', emerging from' or 'conditioned by' their social commitments"²¹. These difficulties are addressed by the concept of ideology proposed by Geertz, which expresses the distortion and obscuration resulting from the interests, and thus the relationship of power and domination, exclusively through the symbolic structures of social life. Therefore, ideology is constitutive for the imaginary, and its primary function is to distort social activities and processes that are explained in terms of interest. In Geertz's opinion, social interests (groups, power), which are transformed into dominant ideas, have a symbolic structure, which is expressed solely as a relation between meanings. As Geertz points out, ideology functions in a purely symbolic way, so it cannot be compared and linked to *praxis*. Geertz, then, and Ricoeur adopts this reasoning, sees ideology solely as a manner of functioning of symbolic space, shunning questions about its sources in *praxis*. Instead, Geertz poses questions about the manner of its expression via symbols or functions it performs in the social context. As Ricoeur stresses, "Only because the structure of human social life is already symbolic can it be distorted"²². The study of ideology boils down, then, to the analysis of interdependencies in a symbolic space or to the analysis of symbolic action.

²⁰ Mannheim took up the problem of the possibility of criticizing ideology from the point of view of social sciences, e.g. sociology, concluding that the theory or critical science itself is ideology and cannot serve as a basis for its investigation. This proposition, or "the Mannheim paradox", shows the impossibility of applying the concept of ideology to oneself; the theory of ideology is also an ideology (what we say as representatives of social sciences is also obscure, represents interests which we ourselves do not know), leading to an epistemological and ethical relativism.

²¹ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, op. cit., p. 202. "The nature of the relationship between sociopsychological stresses that incite ideological attitudes and elaborate symbolic structures through which those attitudes are given a public existence is much too complicated to be comprehended in terms of vague and unexamined notion of emotive resonance" (ibidem, p. 207).

²² P. Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, op. cit., p. 10.

Power, its interests, its ideas are expressed solely by the rhetorical supremacy of social symbols, through which our experience is also expressed. The dominant group produces an ideology or dominant ideas, representing its interest as a common interest for all members of society, thus giving it a universal form. Therefore, a coherent ideological system based on shared images, ideas and ideals presents an image of a social group or of social order. The main positive function of ideology as a symbolic strategy applied to depict the situation of the community as perceived by Geertz and Ricoeur is the integration of society. Through myth, religion, philosophy, propaganda or rhetoric, the group represents its own place in society, and ideology is connected with the necessity for the group to create an image of itself, to present itself and thus its own identity. Ideology in the social imagination becomes a guarantee of order and coherence of the identification process.

The integrative function of ideology in the social imaginary is, according to Geertz and Ricoeur, constructive because it nurtures social ties and identity. Integration is based on a common language and sense, on a common image of culture, whose essential element is the memory of the founding events. Ideology has the function of strengthening and consolidating the social bond through symbolic simplification, schematization, stereotyping, ritualization or mythical behaviour and representation²³. Social integration is also based on the repetition and retention of shared meanings, which makes it possible to retain power and at the same time consolidate the identity of the community. Wunenburger describes the integration function as follows: "Images contribute to both the creation of a community bond, to the shaping of the identity of a group united by the rule of law, especially in the form of national identification, and to the legitimisation of the very figure of power"²⁴. However, in this function, due to its striving to preserve and consolidate social bonds and identity, ideology becomes an obstacle

²³ Ideology in this function presents a special symbolic strategy: "ideology names the structure of situations in such a way that the attitude contained toward them is one of commitment. Its style is ornate, vivid, deliberately suggestive: by objectifying moral sentiment through the same devices that science shuns, it seeks to motivate action. Both [science and ideology] are concerned with the definition of a problematic situation and are responses to a felt lack of needed information" (C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, op. cit., p. 231). "The imaginary of the political sphere can be captured in many ways; we will tackle two of them: one can first demonstrate the role of archetypical images in the self-imagination of the social and political body" (J. J. Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images*, op. cit., p. 276).

²⁴ J. J. Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images*, op. cit., p. 276.

to social change, while at the same time adopting pathological forms such as compulsion to repeat, schematic images, empty rhetoric. Therefore, as Ricoeur stresses, the integration function necessary for the imaginary should be accompanied by the opposite processes, namely resistance to the fixed images of a social group, which leads to the disintegration of identity; only combined do the functions of integration and subversion trigger social change.

However, the relationship between the dominant class and the dominant ideology cannot be understood mechanically. In *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Ricoeur opposes the assumptions of causality in social life and the application of mechanistic thinking to it. According to Ricoeur, the symbolic function of ideology integration is explained by the motivational rather than causal model already proposed by Max Weber. The relationship between interest and ideology, as well as the function of the integration of ideology, the problem of relations between dominant groups and dominant ideas can be understood in terms of legitimacy, authority and recognition of credibility. The process of universalization of dominant interests is at the same time a process of validation of the authority of a dominant group or power. Claims for authority that are the basis for legitimacy, however, require recognition by society that is based on the notion of motivation. Like Weber, Ricoeur therefore stresses that the source of ideology is not so much the interest of the group or power, but the pursuit of its legitimacy, since all forms of domination require authority and trust. Ideology occupies a place in the process of legitimising power, in which claims for authority require their acceptance. According to Ricoeur's, in this motivational process of legitimising power, ideology supplements our conviction, trust and credibility against the claims of authority²⁵. Ideology provides a surplus of confidence in authority in a situation of its legitimacy.

UTOPIA IN THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY – THE DISINTEGRATION FUNCTION

In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Ricoeur indicates two fundamental and interlinked forms of activity of the social imaginary, i.e.

²⁵ “We must recognize that passive acquiescence is part of social action, as it is a component of the belief in authority; to obey, to submit oneself to, to assume the validity of an authority, is part of an action” (P. Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, op. cit., p. 185).

ideology and utopia. The common criterion for ideology and utopia is, as Mannheim has already stressed, their incompatibility with reality. If the primary function of ideology is integration, that is to say, preserving the identity of groups or individuals by maintaining and reproducing it at the level of symbolic action, the function of utopia is the opposite and in this sense it is destructive. Therefore, utopia plays the function of social disintegration. Utopia is oriented towards the future, while ideology, related to the dominant group, is oriented towards the past.

The concept of utopia is ambiguous; it was initially the name of a literary work containing an imaginary project of an alternative society or institution. The name *Utopia* was used by Thomas More in the title of his 1516 book. It would be difficult to find a common denominator for different concepts of utopias presented in similar works, as well as in various sociological and philosophical frameworks (utopian socialism). They present different intentions and give a different shape to the images of other types of society. Utopias also propose various forms of reconstruction of society or suggest ways of escaping from it, both into the future (end of oppression, triumph of freedom) and into the past (conservatism)²⁶.

Utopia, initially but a name of literary works, introduces however a special kind of thinking. The utopias addressed in these texts denote “a-topos”, or “nowhere”, “a place outside a place”, which can be subsequently projected onto the actual social reality, as a result of which we notice that this reality can be understood in another way. Utopia expresses the “nowhere” since the social image it depicts invariably remains outside the actual social reality.

I suggest that we start from the kernel idea of the nowhere, implied by the word “utopia” itself and by the descriptions of Thomas More: a place which exists in no real place, a ghost city; a river with no water; a prince with no people, and so on. What must be emphasized is the benefit of this special extraterritoriality. From this “no place” an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living²⁷.

²⁶ Utopia has been the subject matter of works by Thomas Münzer, Thomas More, Campanella and of utopian socialists: Saint-Simon and Fourier.

²⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, op. cit., p. 16.

Utopia is therefore, as Ricoeur notes, “situationally transcendent”²⁸ (“*situationnellement transcendante*”), is impossible to implement in the current order; in this sense it opens up other possibilities. Utopia is not practicable, because it is not a legitimization of what there is. Literary fiction is an imaginary variation, proposing a rewriting of possibilities. Utopia introduces “nowhere” to the constitution of social action or symbolic action and its interpretation, which is the basis for undermining the established order. In this way, it undermines the existing state of affairs, raises doubts, criticism, also undermines the claims of political power to authority, reveals the weaknesses of its legitimacy, and demystifies ideology: the function of utopia is “to expose the credibility gap wherein all systems of authority exceed [...] both our confidence in them and our belief in their legitimacy”²⁹. Contrary to integration, then, utopia plays a destructive role. It reveals a specific temporal dynamic; as a transcendent element it is incompatible with reality, denies it, suspends claims about reality, opens up other possibilities, but also, by influencing current historical processes, it increasingly thwarts its own incompatibility with it by adapting to reality.

Utopia as a recognition of new possibilities and contestation of the current order becomes in the social imagination a carrier of social desire and hope. It is characterized by wishful thinking and expectation, always contradictory and different from the given circumstances. Utopian imaginative activity can also take on pathological features, as it contains a strong emotional dimension: phantasmagoria, a crazy dream, schizophrenia, fixations, escape, and eccentricity.

Imagination in its function of ideology and utopia refers in different ways to the problem of non-transparency of social reality or, more precisely, to the domination of the interests of political power. The consequence of ideology is subordination of the current reality; individuals and groups gain stability, but at the same time they are stripped of delusions, dreams and desires, an interest in searching for meaning and destiny. In this situation, the utopian factor is necessary, introducing tension, distance and critique into social life, which is a prerequisite for change. If ideology is “false consciousness of our real situation, we can imagine a society without ideology”³⁰? Ricoeur claims that social life should contain utopias, i.e. a distance to reality, and first of all its

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 173.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 17.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 283.

prospective function, or hope. Utopia is liberating, opens up to a range of possibilities and creates a horizon of expectations³¹.

The creative power of imagination is thus expressed in the relation between these two figures of consciousness, the integration function, the repetition and consolidation of ideology and its subversion by utopia. Ricoeur believes that "There is no social integration without social subversion, we may say. The reflexivity of the process of integration occurs by means of the process of subversion"³². The mutual dialectic of ideology and utopia delineates two tense directions of the social imagery. Ideology is not critical; it increases opacity, leads to immobility, wears out quickly, and eliminates opportunities. Social change requires the intertwining in the social imaginary of the subversive function introduced into history and tradition by utopia: disintegration alongside integration, desire and hope for stability, emotion and motivation instead of adjustment, the ability to be guided by critical ideas and relativization towards trust and affirmation towards what there is. As Ricoeur stresses, "the turning point of ideology from its integrative to its distorting function is also the turning point of the utopian system"³³. Hope inherent in utopia becomes a motivation for social change.

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³¹ Wunenburger sees the subversive function of utopia mainly in the actions of rebellion, revolution and resistance: "also participates in representations and actions belonging to the sphere of political disputes, referring to violence that undermines the established order and idealizing the social model that would replace it. The imaginary of rebellion, and revolution in particular, gathers a strong load of images that individuals and groups are supposed to give a mobilizing impetus to" (J.J. Wunenburger, *Philosophie des images*, op. cit., p. 276).

³² P. Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, op. cit., p. 16-17.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

Abstract:

The paper presents the social imaginary from the perspective of contemporary hermeneutics, with the focus on Paul Ricoeur's and Clifford Geertz's theories, as the basis for the self-understanding of individuals and social groups. The point of departure is the problem of social imaginary Charles Taylor discusses in his *Modern Social Imaginaries*. The background to understanding in both Ricoeur's and Geertz's hermeneutical accounts is a symbolical space comprising symbols and senses, an interpretation which allows to identify active and creative processes within that space through distinguishing its two primary functions, i.e. ideology and utopia. The way in which the imaginary is being shaped according to ideology and utopia as two complementary functions of the social imagination offers the possibility of construing social processes as cultural processes taking form of symbolical space transformations. Thinking of ideology and utopia as functioning as social imagination activity makes it possible to show the rules that govern social imagination (social integration and disintegration processes), as well as to discuss social change in which the dialectic of ideology and utopia occupies the central place.

Keywords:

social imagination, symbolical space, ideology, utopia, Clifford Geertz, Paul Ricoeur

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See also:

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