Structure of the Ideology of 'Kurdism'

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Abstract

By the term 'ideology', a brand of sociocultural software for producing what we call 'reality' is meant. In this article, the structure of an ideology predominant in Kurdistan, particularly among political elites, has been discussed by using the concepts of ideology critique, in particular, signifier, master-signifier and 'point de capiton'. But the ideology critique theory has been criticized for being ahistorical and for the lack of recognition of different layers of a given ideology. In this article, the different layers of the ideology of Kurdism have been discussed in relation to historical periods of Kurdistan and the world. It is concluded that the ideology of Kurdism, contrary to the existing image, does not only consist of nationalism but also includes socialism, feminism and environmentalism respectively.

Keywords

Ideology, Kurdism, Master-signifier, Nationalism, Socialism, Feminism, Environmentalism

Introduction

In recent decades, for numerous reasons, interest in the notorious word of the twentieth century, that is, ideology has been revitalized. But a brief explanation of the term 'ideology' is not an easy task. We should specifically have read the writings of

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Karl Marx, Karl Manheim, Luis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek so that the contribution of this study is clearly understood. Here, in brief, it can be said that, by ideology, a kind of sociocultural software for producing what we call reality is meant. Namely those phenomena which are called 'reality' have a direct relationship with 'ideology' and reality cannot exist without it. Here the meaning of ideology goes beyond false consciousness (Marx), the means for justifying the status quo versus utopia (Manheim), or a kind of imaginary relationship with reality (Althusser). Here, ideology is defined as sociocultural software for producing reality.

Structure of ideology

As a sociocultural meaning system, ideology is made of some signifiers. These signifiers are only written or spoken words until they unite with their signifieds (the images they refer to). Before Lacan presented his theory about the relationship between signifier and signifieds, the structuralist theorists believed that signifiers and signifieds were not separable; they are like two sides of the same coin. But Lacan made three innovations in this regard: the first was that the signifier and signified are separable, the second was that signifier is more important than signified and the third was that signifier and signified unite by *the point de capiton* or quilting point. The factor that stabilizes meaning is another signifier which Lacan calls master-signifier; a signifier which is without a signified but makes other signifiers unite with their signified in a meaningful constellation (Žižek 2006).

  Lacan did not deal with ideology directly but Žižek used his theory for meaningful ideologies. One of the questions Žižek asks about ideology is: what keeps an ideological field of meaning consistent? Given that signifiers are unstable and liable to

slippages of meaning, how does an ideology maintain its consistency? The answer to this problem is that any given ideological field is "quilted" by, referring to Lacan, what he terms a 'point de capiton' (literally an "upholstery button" though it has also been translated as "anchoring point"). In the same way that an upholstery button pins down stuffing inside a quilt and stops it from moving about, Žižek argues that a point de capiton is a signifier which stops meaning from sliding about inside the ideological sphere. A point de capiton unifies an ideological field and provides it with an identity. Freedom, i.e., is in itself an open-ended word, the meaning of which can slide about depending on the context of its use. A right-wing interpretation of the word might use it to designate the freedom to speculate on the market, whereas a left-wing interpretation of it might use it designate freedom from the inequalities of the market. The word "freedom" therefore does not mean the same thing in all possible worlds: what pins its meaning down is the 'point de capiton' of "right-wing" or "left-wing". What is at issue in a conflict of ideologies is precisely the point de capiton - which signifier ("communism", "fascism", "capitalism", "market economy" and so on) will be entitled to quilt the ideological field ("freedom", "democracy", Human rights" and so on) (Myers 2003, 64). The word 'nation' in the ideology of nationalism is also a master-signifier that maintains the consistency of the ideology. Nation is a signifier without signified but unifies all signifiers of the ideology with their signifieds.

Ideology of Kurdism
Here an ideology called Kurdism is being referred to. For providing a critical analysis of Kurdism, a Lacanian-Žižekian theoretical model with some considerations has been used. Žižek

uses the Lacan's psychoanalytical theory in order to explore the structure of ideology in a Marxian meaning. Such concepts as signifier, signified, point de capiton and master-signifier are important in Žižek's analysis (Žižek, 1989: 78-79). But there are some considerations in this regard. The first problem of this model is that it is ahistorical while a historical approach has been adopted in this article. The second problem is that the signifiers in the Žižekian model are floated in the ideological sphere without any prioritization, while in this analysis the signifiers are prioritized according to their importance in the ideological sphere.

By Kurdism, a special kind of ideology is meant, predominant amongst the political and intellectual elites of Kurdistan that makes a reality, i.e., the Kurdish national movement. Although the roots of Kurdish political thought could be as far back as the 17th century; the poems of Ehmede Xanî, particularly in the preface to Mem u Zîn, are regarded by patriotic Kurds as the foundation of Kurdish classical nationalism; this ideology did not manifest in politics and social institutions until the 19th century. Before the 19th century, the Kurds, who were mainly under the dominance of the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar Dynasty, enjoyed a high level of autonomy; there were not, therefore, many issues between these empires and the Kurds. Semi-independent feudal city-states (or Emirates) provided a type of self-rule for the Kurds so they did not create their own nation-state.

From the beginning of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire moved towards various reforms which eventually diminished Kurdish self-rule (McDowall 2004, 60-62). The last emirate, namely Baban, was destroyed in 1851 and several uprisings occurred in this era under the leadership of such feudal families

as the Bedirxan. In particular, the uprising of Sheikh Ubeydullah Nahri in 1880 was of importance because it crossed the border between Ottoman and Qajar and encompassed the eastern parts of Kurdistan. According to the nationalist narrative, Sheikh Ubeydullah was the first Kurdish leader who used the word "nation" in his correspondence and his movement is known as the birth of modern Kurdish nationalism (Bajalan 2013, 6).

The ideology of Kurdism was a simple nationalism until the twentieth century, although the Kurdish nationalism has always been a defensive nationalism rather than an offensive one. However, after the October Revolution, this ideology merged with socialism, in particular after WWII (Jongerden 2007, 58). This particular combination (or articulation, if we borrow Laclau and Mouffe's term) is manifested in the stances and codes of conduct of the Kurdish political parties. There are many debates about the positive and negative influences of socialism on the Kurdish movement but there is no doubt that, if socialism was not present in the movement, Kurdism would not enjoy the existing features. For example, if socialism was not one of the layers of Kurdism, perhaps the Kurdish movement, instead of being secular, would move towards a religious path as has the path of nationalism in neighboring ethnicities (Fars, Turk and Arab) which have been dominated by diverse versions of political Islam.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, another ideology was added to Kurdism: feminism (Yuksel, 2006). Although women's rights were previously discussed in socialism, feminism raised a more radical viewpoint towards all the issues, including nationalism. The feminist movement in Kurdistan had to tie its demands to the national movement. The attendance of women

in the armed struggle against occupier states has been one of the prominent features of the Kurdish national movement.

Another ideology which has manifested from the beginning of the 21st century is environmentalism. Kurdistan, which enjoys beautiful natural scenery, has been dramatically destroyed due to wars of the national liberation movement. Burning of forests and exploitation of natural resources has culminated in a kind of environmental consciousness in the Kurdish movement, so environmentalism is also added to Kurdism.

So we have an ideology named Kurdism that has several layers including all signifiers of four mentioned ideologies, i.e. nationalism, socialism, feminism and environmentalism which have gathered around a master-signifier: The Kurdish nation. It means that all of these signifiers unite with their signifieds under the effect of this master-signifier.

Conclusion

There is an ideology predominant among Kurdish political elites and patriots which produces a reality: The Kurdish national movement. Contrary to the usual image of Kurdism that regards it as simple nationalism, the ideology of Kurdism is a complex and multi-layered ideology consisting of the signifiers of nationalism, socialism, feminism and environmentalism. These different layers have been added to Kurdism in different historical eras. But all signifiers match with their signifieds under the effect of the Kurdish nation as the master-signifier. In Kurdistan, all political parties and independent personalities have to clarify their stance towards the national movement. All those who have tried to marginalize the Kurdish question, have been marginalized in Kurdistan because Kurdistan suffers from

colonialism. Until the solution of the national problem, all other ideologies, including Islamism, will be marginalized.

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