

**THE USE AND ABUSE OF IDEOLOGY IN THE STUDY  
OF ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY AND TRAGEDY**

JAROSLAV DANEŠ, Katedra filosofie a společenských věd, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Hradec Králové, Hradec Králové, ČR

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My article will revolve around the following questions: First, who uses and defines the concept of ideology in the field of classical studies and how? Second, is the use of ideology preceded by discussion about this concept? Third and last, is this concept useful for the classics or can we do without it when talking about Athenian democracy, society, and drama? I conclude that not all scholars pay particular attention to discussion about ideology. We can find quite different attitudes to the use of ideology from the 'eighties to the 'nineties, from the negative (Loroux, Goldhill) to the mixed uses of the term (Croally). The word *ideology* usually served classical scholars as a substitute for a mental map or structure of social thought. From this point of view we can very often do without ideology in the field of classical studies.

**Keywords:** Athenian democracy – Classics – Ideology

**Introduction.** It is almost a norm to say that the term ideology has always been a slippery and puzzling one.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have not yet reached (and indeed they never will reach) a consensus even about the definition of ideology. Ideology circulates differently in Marxian and non-Marxian environments or in different sciences (political sciences, anthropology, literary theory, and sociology).<sup>2</sup> Therefore nobody will ever find some *Ur-*

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<sup>1</sup> We do not have enough space here to map all the historical mutations of the term ideology from the original use of ideology for the sciences of the origin of ideas by Destutt de Tracy (1796) through Marx, Mannheim, Gramsci, Hayek, Bell, Parsons, Sartori, Geertz, to, let us say, Freedon. A summary can be found in Feststein-Kenny (2005). But it is enough to say that this term has been used in negative, positive, and neutral or 'scientific' senses, e.g. ideology as a conceptualisation of a political programme (neutral, Lord 1999), ideology as a utopian dream which leads to a directive society (negative, Hayek 1944), and ideology as a guarantee of sane political development (positive, Schwarzmantel 1998).

<sup>2</sup> According to Geertz (1973: 217), ideology is a system of cultural symbols which functions 'to make an autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be sensibly grasped.' Salamun (1988: 53): 'Unter ideologien werden Gedankenbilde verstanden, die gesellschaftliche Gruppen als allgemeinen Orientierungsraster bei der Interpretation der sozialen Wirklichkeit dienen, Machtausprüche dieser Gruppen im politischen Leben legitimieren und neben echten wissenschaftlichen Einsichten... Normen und Handlungsapellen auch krypto-normativen und falsche Verstellungen enthalten und deren ungerechtfertigte

*Definition* despite the fact that from time to time somebody undertakes this Quixotic quest (e.g. Hamilton 1987). A further dividing line can be drawn between ideology in knowledge and ideology in politics. In the first case the question is whether and to what extent our knowledge is conditioned by beliefs or whether neutral social science is possible, while in the latter case we ask whether ideology is essential to politics and, if so, what it accounts for. The first point leads us to discrimination between ideology, science, and philosophy with respect to truth-value, while the second point focuses on functional aspects. From Tracy and Marx onwards it is obvious that discussion about the concept of ideology is a meditation about the concept of modernity and consequently about postmodernity or about the structure and development of industrial and post-industrial societies and politics.<sup>3</sup> However, it would be naive to think that there was no ideology or ideological work before the term ideology appeared and became politicised. The link between collective action, beliefs, justification, authority, power, and the like is not restricted to modern and postmodern societies. However, problems will arise if we pass from the reconstruction of, let us say, the beliefs of the ancient people about politics and society to some statements about the determination or condition of political action because we lack substantial evidence. We do not have sets of data which show us what or how the relationship was between the decision-making process and beliefs and if and how beliefs were involved in the decision-making process at all.

The term ideology had not been used regularly in the field of the classics but rather sporadically before the 'sixties of the 20th century and many authors, especially in German-speaking countries, have avoided using the term ideology until the present when writing about Athenian democracy (Ruschenbush 1979; Meier 1988; Bleicken 1995). Its sporadic use up to the 'sixties was confined to scholars of a Marxian slant (e.g. Thomson 1946). On the contrary, since the end of the 'sixties we have experienced an ever-increasing boom in the use of ideology in the field of the classics. Classical studies copied the inflation in the field of sociology (e.g. Geiger 1953; Birnbaum 1962) with a delay of ten or fifteen years. The fact of the inflation of ideology led some scientists to a critical re-

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Wahrheitsgespräche und Umwarheiten auf eine interesseunbedingte Befangenheit ihrer Produzente und Verfachter zurückführe.' Eagleton (1991: 1-2) enumerates sixteen definitions or uses of ideology, e.g. 'a) the process of production of meanings, signs, and values in social life, b) a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class, c) ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power..., e) systematically distorted communication..., h) identity thinking, i) socially necessary illusion,....p) the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality.' Šaradin (2001: 80) provides two definitions: a) neutral-positive, b) negative. A) Ideology is a system of collectively held ideas, beliefs and attitudes which justifies a model of social relations and organization...Ideology is a functionalization of power relations and it is a guarantee of the development and emancipation of society. B) Ideology signifies definite and shaped thought patterns which are not influenced by any new experience...and which are sustained by collective effort in order to justify existing power configurations.'

<sup>3</sup> In the field of the political sciences the concept of ideology is closely linked with party politics, aggregates of collective interests, and with a right-left spectrum. E.g. Hinich-Munger (1996), Freedon (2001), and McCullough (2010).

evaluation of the term.<sup>4</sup> The inflation was further inflamed by anthropologists and historians (Geertz 1973; Lévi-Strauss 1983) who studied the symbolic world of cultures and historical imagination. The end of the 'sixties and the beginning of the 'seventies is a period when classical studies leapt aboard the runaway train of ideology and theory and they have been there ever since.<sup>5</sup> As is obvious from note five, classical scholars cannot use the tools of the political sciences or non-Marxian political science because ancient Athenian political reality had nothing in common with modern and postmodern Western political reality and almost all the conceptual instruments<sup>6</sup> we have now for the study of politics and the decision-making process of industrial or post-industrial societies are useless to us with regard to ancient reality.

My article aims at several points and it will revolve around the following questions. First, who uses and defines the concept of ideology in the field of classical studies and how? Second, is the use of ideology preceded by discussion about this concept? Third and last, is this concept useful for the classics or can we do without it when talking about Athenian democracy, society, and drama? Of course, my selection of authors and questions is not and cannot be complete; on the contrary, in the frame of an article it must be reductive and selective. In this article I group three distinguished scholars who made an extensive use of ideology.

**1. N. Loraux.** Loraux varies concerning the use of ideology. We do not find ideology in *Les enfants d'Athéna* and Loraux prefers the concept of the imaginary in connection with civic discourse and collective representation (Loraux 1981/1993: 3-23, 11-146).<sup>7</sup> Loraux scrutinised the self-image of the city of Athens and its mythical representations. Where many of Loraux's followers would have used the term ideology Loraux cautiously kept the term social imaginary for the study of the civic context of mythical narratives. On the contrary, in *L'Invention d'Athènes* (1981) and *La Cité divisée* (1997), Loraux adopted ideology and in the former paid particular attention to this Protean concept (407-417) in connection with funeral orations.

In principle Loraux realised that the term originated in modern society but with reference to Lanza and Vegetti (1975) she justified the use of this term. According to Loraux,

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<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Sartori (1969) showed that many scholars broke the principle of Ockham's razor by multiplying concepts which were useless for a causal explanation of socio-political phenomena (Cf. Converse 1964). Sartori set himself against an extremely wide definition of ideology as a belief system shared by the majority of the populace and demonstrated that not all belief systems are ideological systems.

<sup>5</sup> Among many others we can single out Lanza and Vegetti (1975), Ste Croix (1981), Loraux (1981, 1997), Goldhill (1987, 1990, 2000), Rose (1992), Croally (1994), and Pelling (1997). The invasion of theory is credited to the so-called French school (Vernant, Vidal-Naquet, Loraux).

<sup>6</sup> I mean categories such as mass, political parties and programmes etc. For the sake of accuracy we must remark that in the first half of the 20th century many scholars tried to utilise the pattern of party politics in searching for conservative, liberal, and suchlike parties in ancient Athenian politics. Contra Connor (1971) and Rhodes (1978).

<sup>7</sup> The term imaginary came from Lacan and if I understood it well then it signified self-image, which involves self-projection, wish fulfilment, and idealisation.

funeral orations functioned as an ideology or ideological discourse (Loraux 1981/2006: 410). How did she define ideological discourse? Loraux (1981/2006: 410) gives a functional definition: 'the general property of an ideological discourse is *to conceal the internal divisions of a society*, then the funeral oration functions, for the Athenian citizens, as an ideology, when it suppresses, within the civic army, the difference of status between combatants or whether it makes the Athenian democracy the fatherland of *arete*. Whether it silences *misthophoria*, the rotation of offices, and drawing lots; whether it deprives democracy, grafted onto autochthonous origin, of any history; or whether it transforms *stasis* into a manifestation of unity, the funeral oration is trying to deny the existence of any division within the city.'

Now it is clear that Loraux used ideology in a negative sense as an effect of masking power or, in other words, a kind of false consciousness. Funeral orations mask power on two levels (Loraux 1981/2006: 411): 'kratos of the people, transformed in Pericles, Plato, and Lysias into an appreciation of valor; and kratos exercised over the Greeks, transformed into a prize of bravery.' The aim of a funeral oration is to demonstrate the superiority of the Athenians in valour and the irreducible difference between them and the rest of the Greeks and to create a model that is unavailable to others. With respect to the internal organisation of democratic politics it aims to pretend that there is unity of birth, orientation, and shared values where none actually exists. In accordance with this Marxian approach Loraux continues with an exposition about slavery and exploitation. Funeral orations mask the exploitation of other Greeks and slaves, says Loraux. This silence, which cannot be explained only by the conventions of genre, underpins the ideological character of the funeral oration.<sup>8</sup> Loraux dissected the vocabulary of slavery and made, in my opinion, the correct comment that slavery as an institution and domination and subjugation in international relations were not on the same level for the Greeks. At this point Loraux rejects the old Marxian interpretations of history. The vocabulary of slavery is either neutral or pejorative, according to Loraux. Its pejorative use pertains to oligarchy, tyranny, and expansionism (e.g. Persian and Macedonian expansionism), while its neutral use is linked to the institution of slavery as such. The ideological attitude, says Loraux, lies in the fact that in their funeral orations the Athenians deny their tyranny over other Greeks.

I am not sure that what Loraux stated as a matter of fact (tyranny over other Greeks) is and was generally accepted by scholars. Basically, such a statement adopts a position with regard to pseudo-Xenophon, Thucydides, and Isocrates which is not entirely confirmed by the historical evidence and the operation of the system. From the methodological

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<sup>8</sup> In *La Cité divisée* Loraux (1997/2006: 56) formulates a methodological principle according to which the 'mask of ideology is made of its silences, not of what it says. It is necessary to focus on the words that are absent from civic discourse – for example, *kratos*, a word typically missing from the flights of oratory that prefer the word *arkhe*, the name of institutional power, shared and always renewed in the endless succession of magistrates at the centre of the city. With *arkhe*, the peaceful meson is not far away; but implications of *kratos* are so dreaded by the city that whenever possible it silences the name that evokes them.'

point of view the evaluation of Athens and her role in the transformation of the Delian league determine the approach to ideology. The object which Loraux views from a Marxian perspective as negative can also be viewed as neutral or neutral-positive. Funeral orations enabled citizens to understand the world of politics, they enabled citizens to identify with the system, and they also involved a justification of power relations and facilitated the reproduction and sustainability of the order. If ideology hides some traits of reality and idealises it this is not a priori negative because ideology does not pretend to be an analytical theory of philosophy. Power can also be viewed from a dual perspective. On the one hand, it implies constraint, which may seem to some people to be something negative (this does not mean that it is), but it also implies the possibility of self-determination. However, I consider Loraux's appropriation of the term ideology correct and explanatory with respect to the object of her study, which is genuinely political in a narrow sense of the word.

**2. S. Goldhill.** Goldhill (1986: 74-77; 1987) discusses ideology in connection with Athenian tragedy and its questioning or subversive function. From *Reading Greek Tragedy* onwards he uses discourse and ideology interchangeably. Goldhill (1986:74) focused on 'what Vernant would call "the structure of social thought", of what Foucault would term "discursive practice" – the way one's place in the order of things is thought about and organised conceptually.' Thus Goldhill fell into the trap of the ubiquitousness of ideology and the term ideology loses all its explanatory strength. He could certainly do without this term because he was interested in how people spoke about themselves, their family and the city and how this language practice shifted and what tensions it conceptualised. Goldhill's extremely broad definition of ideology leads to things which may seem to be absurd, e.g. the ideology of *oikos*. In fact Goldhill, for example, discusses the clash of interests: no mother bears children in order for them to be killed on military service. These interests, we may say, are universal and certainly not dependent upon a specific form of political organisation (*polis*), not to say political values or different types of families. Without doubt, these interests may be ideologised if we say, for example, that women are or should be only producers of soldiers and that they must think about themselves only in this way. Fortunately, Goldhill shifts his interest in this way several times when analysing, for instance, Plato's *Republic*. In principle Goldhill was less cautious than Loraux, who felt somewhat uncomfortable with the term ideology, except for an analysis of *epitaphios*. This is somewhat striking because Goldhill's source of inspiration, and here I mean Foucault, elaborated the concept of *discourse* in opposition to Althusser's concept of ideology.<sup>9</sup>

More attention is dedicated to political aspects in a narrow sense in Goldhill's brilliant and controversial article *The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology*.<sup>10</sup> Here Goldhill also praises French scholarship (see n.11) for its contribution to 'our understanding of the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Foucault (1980) and Freeden's discussion about ideology and discourse (1996: 300-8).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Griffith (1995: 63-129), Rhodes (2003: 104-19), and Carter (2004: 1-25).

formation of fifth-century Athenian ideology – in the sense of the structure of attitudes and norms of behavior’ and then he adds ‘and this developing interest in what might be called a “civic discourse” requires a reconsideration of the Great Dionysia as a city festival. For while there have been several fascinating readings of particular plays with regard to the *polis* and its ideology (Goldhill 1987: 58; 1990: 97)’, Goldhill tried to link the ceremonies preceding the dramatic competitions during *The Great Dionysia* with democratic civic discourse or ideology. In this point we come to the limits of his definition of ideology. The connection of words implies a set of political values: freedom, equality, justice, law, collective wisdom, Athens as a shelter for the oppressed and pursued etc. But we cannot find anything like this in Goldhill’s minute analysis. Instead we find him focused on the relationship between citizens and soldiers/hoplites in Sophocles’ *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* (Goldhill 1987: 15-19). Goldhill tried to demonstrate how tragedy questioned the military ideology of the polis or, in other words, the widespread attitudes to war and fighting excellence encapsulated in opening rituals. Many misunderstandings originated from the connection of terms such as democratic civic ideology, democratic military ideology and similar ones because the critics did not pay particular attention to the definition of ideology and its ubiquitousness. Of course, there was nothing specifically democratic in what Goldhill described (a parade of the orphans, a display of the tribute paid by the allies). However it was democratic *ex definitione* or as a tautology. The attitudes of a society which was by chance a democracy must have been democratic because all shared opinions and values were ideological, and so the opinions and values of this concrete society, which was a democracy, were expressions of democratic ideology. Goldhill shows us by his own example why we should avoid using some terms. It brings more confusion than clarification.

I must at least briefly mention one more point concerning the methodological approach of the new philology which Goldhill adopted. Serious criticism can be levelled at the relationship between the context (civic discourse/ideology) and the text. It was Michelle Gellrich (1995: 38-55) who pointed to some methodological difficulties inherent in the new philology, sociocriticism, or the so-called French school. According to Gellrich, the approach, which originated with Vernant and was adopted by, among many others, Goldhill, is based on three interconnected principles. First, every text has a context (a mental map). Second, the term context is identified with the term ideology. Third, the context is structured by binary opposites or polar antonyms. The context is supposed to be primary; it precedes the text and in some way determines the text. We may say that the context is considered to be a frame which to some extent determines the possibility of thought and action. This context ideology was usually defined as a structure of beliefs, mental habits, values, and ideas (it means things that Vernant and Vidal-Naquet supposed made tragedy intelligible). Such a structure was described as an ideology. The adoption of structural, sociological, and anthropological perspective enabled the French school to leave the concept of false consciousness as limiting in favour of a structure rooted in social action and attitudes. But how much did scholars succeed in rebutting the of Marxian approach? Gellrich (1995:45) showed that it was only a small victory in the fight against

formalism, authorial intent, and historical determinism, which this methodological approach denied (Cf. Rose 1992: 35). First, the term context pretends to be something objective which functions as a semantic centre. In the preceding period this centre was occupied by the author and his intent or by the text as a self-referential entity. But the context itself is a construct and the binary opposites upon which it is based can be challenged, as was persuasively demonstrated by Jacques Derrida (1972:3) in his criticism of the ethnographic analysis of Levi-Strauss in the category of incest. Furthermore, Derrida drew attention to the structure of a dichotomy, which implies a certain hierarchy. One of the terms in a pair is always perceived as dependent, derived, or subordinated (man/woman, nature/culture, and we may add *oikos/polis*). Binary opposites in the text betray a distortion and tension and such an unstable opposition points to the possibility of its self-deconstruction.

**3. N. T. Croally.** Croally belongs to the set of persons who undertake toil to analyse the concept of ideology, but the sources he cites are, in principle, only the Marxian ones (Larrain, Thompson, Geuss). Croally tries to elaborate Geuss's division into the descriptive, positive, and pejorative uses of ideology. He summarises the advantages and disadvantages of these three concepts in order to retain something valuable from all of them. The descriptive term makes ideology 'a set of beliefs, values, desires, interests etc. held by society as a whole, as well as by particular groups within society, or as a production of meanings and ideas within a social system'. As Croally rightly stresses, ideology in this sense becomes ubiquitous. But this ubiquitousness, comes first from the broad application of the sociological category of a belief system (see note 9), while second, it can be an echo of the Marxian tradition, for which everything is political and for which symbolic struggle operates at each and every level of culture. But if we differentiate the sphere of politics from the sphere of non-politics and if we limit ourselves to the use of ideology in the sphere of politics in order to preserve some of the explanatory rigour of this term than we probably escape the trap. True, we can also be victims of our broad definition of what is political concerning ancient Greece, by which I mean that we may define as political everything which is linked to the life of the polis.<sup>11</sup> A positive concept of ideology means that ideology fulfils a necessary social function and it is viewed as an instrument of social cohesion. The number and diversity of ideologies contribute to political stability. Croally did not want to neglect conflicts of interest both within and between different groups. The third negative concept can be described as variation on the issue of false consciousness or beliefs held for unacknowledged reasons. In the latter case Croally refers to Bourdieu (1977: 167) and his famous statement that 'every established order tends to produce the naturalization of its own arbitrariness'. While Bourdieu's statement shows something valuable in general, the negative concept ignores the relationship between legitimate interest and ideology, not to mention the fact that it also makes ideology ubiquitous. Croally honestly admits that all three concepts originated in an analysis of modern capitalist society

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rowe (2000: 4). Contra Carter (2007: 66-67).

and that 'they are not necessarily germane to the study of fifth-century Athens' (1994: 262). However, he searches for the possibility of applying ideology to the study of Athenian tragedy (society/democracy). In other words, Croally contradicts the principle of Ockham's razor when he multiplies terms which are not necessary for understanding. In his attempt to make ideology meaningful for the study of tragedy and Athens he finally comes to the definition of ideology as 'authoritative self-definition of the Athenian citizen', which was produced and sustained in civic discourse. 'This is descriptive in that it obviously describes the ideas, values etc. which inform self-definition; it is positive in that it assists group cohesion; and it is pejorative inasmuch as the interests of the dominant group caused the self-definition to fall foul of some of the processes which produce false consciousness (attitudes to slavery being a good example).'<sup>12</sup> The process of self-definition proceeds through a perspective of othering or thinking in polarities.<sup>13</sup> To translate these complicated words Croally in substance says: it is important to tell stories about ourselves as male citizens, who we are, in order to hold together, but it is easy to forget that these are stories. *We* is always defined against somebody else/other. Stories should be constructed and deconstructed. The problem with Croally's definition may be that only men/citizens had an ideology. But how are we to cope with the Periclean citizenship law if ideology was defined in this way? Are we to assume that Athenian women also set themselves against non-Athenians, against slaves, and perhaps against children or married girls against maidens, banausic against aristocratic? Furthermore, the example of attitudes to slavery as an expression of ideology as a false consciousness is a clear liberal projection onto ancient times and this institution is, of course, independent upon the authoritative self-definition of an Athenian citizen.

On the basis of his definition of ideology he approaches the question of the didactic function of tragedy. He emphasises the questioning function of tragedy and indeed the questioning of the didactic function of tragedy itself in the case of *Trojan Women*, in other words the value debate. The result is that the polarities which helped define citizens were no longer tenable and were deconstructed by Euripides in his theoretical reflection

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<sup>12</sup> Croally (1994: 263). Croally makes his position precise at several points: '2. Ideology is therefore a form of legitimation since it seeks to justify the authority of the self, 3. Athenian self-definition...was to a large extent based on comparison with a (usually) inferior other, e.g. women, slaves, foreigners... 4. In fifth-century Athens we have the citizens defining themselves against barbarians, men against women, the free against the enslaved.' (264-6).

<sup>13</sup> Croally elaborates a very popular issue at the end of the twentieth century: identity and difference. The classics were penetrated by the ideology of multiculturalism and before Croally we were able to find at least two excellent expressions: Hall (1989) and Cartledge (1992). I cannot prevent myself from citing an introductory sentence from Hall (1989: IX): 'Every era finds in the study of the ancient world a context in which to express its own preoccupations. One of the imperatives of the late twentieth century is the destruction of the barriers of misperception which perpetuate conflict between different nations, peoples, and ethnic groups. This book is confined to the examination of one ancient people's view of others, but it has been written in the conviction that ethnic stereotypes, ancient and modern, though revealing almost nothing about the groups they are intended to define, say a great deal about the community which produces them.'



on the Peloponnesian War or the war itself turned all polarities upside down. However, assuming that non-citizens and women watched the dramatic performances, what could they take from all these? Basically, Croally substitutes ideology for a value discussion through the example of a world which is upside down as a result of the terrible constraints imposed by war. However, I am not able to see why we cannot do without ideology.

**Conclusion.** With regard to the questions raised in the introduction, we saw quite different attitudes to the use of ideology from the 'eighties to the 'nineties, from the negative (Loraux, Goldhill) to the mixed uses of the term (Croally). The issues they chose to scrutinise mirrored the problems of post-industrial societies and in their works one might trace touches of the ideologies of multiculturalism and a certain form of (post-) Marxism. To a great extent the changes in the interpretation of Athenian tragedy and democracy mirror the intellectual changes of the leftist agenda and its handling of the problems of a post-industrial society (diffused power, elitism, multiculturalism and identity). To this we must add that the invasion of theory (political sociology, literary theory, structural historiography, and anthropology) makes the classics, which are in serious danger of extinction, interesting and animate, albeit sometimes not without costs. As for explanatory strength in terms of causal relations and the study of politics, we mentioned that as a result of the absence of sets of data we cannot approach problems as if we were modern political scientist and it would probably not make good sense either with respect to the completely different social and political reality. This is the reason why attention has shifted to what people thought about the world of the polis and politics. The word ideology usually serves scholars as a substitute for a mental map or structure of social thought, and the like. From this point of view we can very often do without ideology. However, if we confine ourselves to questions of the operation of power, political discourse in a narrow sense, by which I mean especially the political alphabet of democracy, internal political struggles (the oligarchic propaganda), interstate relations (the Persian Wars and Peloponnesian Wars), then the category, in my opinion, becomes meaningful and acquires some strength. Third and finally, not all scholars pay particular attention to discussion about the concepts they are accustomed to using. Croally laboured hard to explain the concept of ideology, while Goldhill remained satisfied with one sentence or a short paragraph only. I conclude with a paraphrase of a well-known principle: we should use the term ideology only if necessary.

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Jaroslav Daneš  
Katedra filosofie a společenských věd  
Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Hradec Králové  
Rokitanského 62  
500 03 Hradec Králové  
Česká republika  
e-mail: jaroslav.danes@uhk.cz