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"Ideological Surplus Value" and the Critique of Neoliberal Education — A Contemporary Reconstruction of Ludovico Silva's Theory

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Abstract. The theory of "ideological surplus value" proposed by Venezuelan Marxist philosopher Ludovico Silva provides important theoretical resources for understanding the nature of neoliberal education. By rereading Silva's core texts, this paper systematically sorts out the theoretical construction of "ideological surplus value," analyzes the operating logic of education as an ideological production mechanism, and further decodes how neoliberal education systematically extracts ideological surplus value through three mechanisms: the myth of human capital, the standardized examination system, and digital educational technology. On this basis, this paper draws on Silva's critical reflection on the concept of "revolutionary ideology," engages in dialogue with critical pedagogues such as Freire and Giroux, and attempts to provide a theoretical foundation for the reconstruction of contemporary critical pedagogy, moving toward a "de-commodified" educational imagination.

Keywords: ideological surplus value, Ludovico Silva, neoliberal education, critical pedagogy, alienation of mental labor

1. Introduction

1.1. The forgetting and revisiting of Ludovico

Ludovico Silva (1937-1988) is a name long neglected in the history of Latin American Marxist thought. This Venezuelan philosopher successively published The Ideological Surplus Value and Theory and Practice of Ideology in the 1970s [1, 2], systematically expounding the theory of "ideological surplus value" (plusvalía ideológica), revealing how capitalism achieves deep domination and value extraction of individual consciousness through mental production. However,

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with the rise of post-structuralist discourse theory, and because Silva returned to literary studies in his later years without forming a sustained academic lineage, his name gradually faded from the academic horizon [3, 4].

1.2. Why has "ideological surplus value" been neglected

The root cause lies in the transformation of contemporary educational research paradigms. Since the 1980s, "scientized" paradigms such as human capital theory and evidence-based education have dominated educational discourse, with education viewed as a neutral "human capital investment," and its ideological dimension systematically obscured [5]. At the same time, divisions of understanding within Western Marxism have also affected the reception of Silva's theory: Althusser emphasizes the materiality of the ideological state apparatus [6], while Laclau moves toward the deconstruction of discourse theory [7, 8]. Silva's unique contribution lies in placing the ideological question back at the core of the critique of political economy, emphasizing that ideology is a specific form of "surplus value" in the realm of capitalist mental production.

1.3. Why does the crisis of contemporary neoliberal education need this concept

The trends of commodification, marketization, and digitalization of contemporary education keep intensifying, and the notion that "education is a public service" has been replaced by "education is an industry" [9, 10]. Silva's theory provides a key to this: it not only explains how education serves capital accumulation, but also clarifies how education shapes human consciousness, making people consciously and willingly reproduce capitalist relations of domination. At the same time, Silva's critical reflection on "revolutionary ideology"—insisting on distinguishing "ideology" from "class consciousness"—provides important inspiration for the reconstruction of contemporary critical pedagogy. It is precisely on this basis that this paper attempts a systematic contemporary reconstruction of Silva's theory of "ideological surplus value."

2. The theoretical construction of Ludovico's "ideological surplus value"

2.1. From Marx to Ludovico: the semiotic turn of surplus value

In Capital, Marx unveiled the secret of surplus value: the capitalist buys labor power in the form of wages, letting the worker create value beyond the value of labor power without compensation [11]. Silva's greatest contribution is to extend this perspective to the level of mental production: capitalist mental production and material production are isomorphic, and capital occupies "a great deal of human thought" by controlling the mass media and the culture industry. As he pointed out: "In the production of consciousness, there is also labor value from which surplus value can be extracted" [1]. Thus, the "exchange value" of ideology (its function for capital accumulation) obscures its "use value" (its capacity to satisfy human beings' real mental needs).

2.2. Ideology as a specific product of "mental production"

Silva rejects the popular "reflection theory," defining ideology as "a system of representations, beliefs, and values unconsciously imposed on people within social production relations, which operates in their minds like an idol" [1]. This definition contains three elements: unconscious imposition, a complete framework of meaning, and operation like an idol—the latter being precisely a psychoanalytic transformation of Marx's concept of "fetishism" [12]. People embrace ideology not

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because they are forced, but voluntarily and even enthusiastically; this unconscious participation constitutes the most powerful mechanism of ideological domination [2].

2.3. The consciousness industry: the structural isomorphism of mass media and education

One of the most original concepts in Silva's theory is the "consciousness industry" (industria de la conciencia): the monopoly stage of capitalism produced a "global nervous system"—the mass media—whose core function is not to disseminate information but to produce ideological surplus value [13]. Silva keenly noted the "structural isomorphism" between mass media and educational institutions, and pointed out: "Without a theory of communication, it is impossible to construct, from a Marxist standpoint, a theory of ideology for the capitalist-imperialist era" [14]. Today, PISA rankings, standardized curricula, and online education platforms are all components of the contemporary "consciousness industry," and Silva's concept thereby becomes an important tool for understanding the industrialization of contemporary education.

3. Education as the production mechanism of ideological surplus value

3.1. School and church: a historical comparison of ideological state apparatuses

Althusser was the first to systematically incorporate education into Marxist ideological analysis, pointing out that the educational ISA (Ideological State Apparatus) bears the key function of "interpellating" individuals as subjects [6]. Silva agrees with the "materiality" of ideology but criticizes its neglect of the "value dimension" of ideological production: the school is not only a tool for the reproduction of production relations, but also a site for the production of ideological surplus value, where students' thoughts and desires are systematically transformed into ideological raw materials serving capital accumulation. The school is more effective than the church because it combines ideological control with the authority of modern science, making itself appear as "neutral" education rather than the inculcation of "belief."

3.2. From "culture industry" to "education industry": the Adorno-Ludovico extension

Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of "culture industry" points out that the culture industry standardizes and commodifies art and entertainment, turning them into instruments of domination [15]. On this basis, Silva explicitly proposes the concept of "education industry": from textbook publishing to examination services, every link of education is brought into the logic of capital accumulation, and the "use value" of education (cultivating well-rounded human beings) is increasingly obscured by its "exchange value" (diplomas and qualifications). Students are not only consumers of educational commodities, but also the "raw materials" being processed—this profoundly reveals the essence of "educational industrialization": the commodification of the structure of human consciousness itself.

3.3. The teacher as "ideological laborer": the alienation of mental labor

In Silva's theory, the teacher is the direct producer in the "consciousness industry," yet his or her mental labor is also deeply alienated [16]: alienated from the knowledge transmitted, from the teaching process, and from the educator's "species-essence," his or her creativity is systematically suppressed by standardized curricula and examination requirements. Yet Silva also points out the teacher's potential for resistance: because they directly participate in the formation of consciousness,

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teachers possess a unique possibility to change the conditions of ideological production. "If revolution means anything, it is the effort to make people aware of the state of the real world; to directly show and expose the mire covered up by ideology" [1]. In this sense, the teacher can become a catalyst for "consciousness liberation"—not by inculcating revolutionary ideology, but by helping students develop critical consciousness.

4. The ideological decoding of neoliberal education

4.1. The myth of human capital: the obscuring of education's use value by its exchange value

Human capital theory, represented by Schultz and Becker, regards education as a kind of "investment," whose "returns" are higher wages and stronger competitiveness [17]. From Silva's perspective, human capital theory is itself an ideology: it individualizes the social function of education into "personal investment," reduces the multiple values of education to economic "returns," and commodifies human beings themselves into "human capital." Seemingly neutral goals such as "skill upgrading" and "lifelong learning" in fact presuppose human beings as "capital units" that must be constantly "upgraded" within the system of capital accumulation: the failure of education is individualized as "investment failure," and educational inequality is naturalized as "difference in ability" [9].

4.2. PISA, standardization, and global educational governance: the "scientific" disguise of ideology

If human capital theory provides the economic foundation, then the OECD's PISA program provides the "scientific" legitimacy for this educational model [18]. The "literacy" tested by PISA is not broad cultural literacy, but "the competence required to participate in economic and social life," and the global promotion of its measurement framework is in essence the global promotion of neoliberal educational values. PISA's ranking mechanism creates a global discourse of "educational competition," and driven by "PISA shock," countries have rolled out remarkably uniform "reforms"—standardized curricula, performance evaluation, school marketization, and teacher accountability [19, 20]. Under the cloak of the objectivity of "numbers," the neoliberal education agenda is packaged as "international best practice," and national educational sovereignty is thereby eroded by "international standards" [21].

4.3. EdTech and platform-based learning: the consciousness industry in the digital age

Educational technology (EdTech) and platform-based learning represent the "production" dimension of neoliberal education [22]. Online education platforms claim to "break down educational barriers," but the core of their business model is to turn educational content and the teaching process into data and commodities: attention becomes a commodity, learning data becomes an asset, and students are exploited not only as consumers but also as "data producers" through a second round of exploitation [23]. Algorithmic pushes decide what students "see," and gamified design transforms learning motivation into a desire for points and rankings, ultimately producing "digital subjects" that meet the requirements of platform capitalism. This is precisely the reproduction of ideological surplus value: it not only determines what people think, but also shapes how people think. In this sense, the digital education platform is the highest form of Silva's concept of "consciousness industry" in the 21st century.

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5. The reconstruction of critical pedagogy: beyond "revolutionary ideology"

5.1. Ludovico's negation of "revolutionary ideology" and its educational significance

Silva acutely points out that the concept of "revolutionary ideology" contains "a terrible absurdity": if the purpose of revolution is to make people aware of the state of the real world, then it cannot be achieved through "ideology"—that is, false consciousness [24]. He insists on distinguishing "ideology" from "class consciousness": ideology is always "the realm of mental activity that protects the values of the oppressing class," whereas the oppressed's conscious liberating consciousness should be named class consciousness. This distinction has far-reaching significance for contemporary critical pedagogy: many critical educational practices, in the name of "emancipation," replace "wrong" political content with "correct" political content, without touching the fundamental problem of ideology. True critical education is not the inculcation of another ideology, but the development of students' critical thinking; not the erection of new idols, but the breaking of idols.

5.2. From "critical consciousness" to "counter-culture": the utopian dimension of education

Negating "revolutionary ideology" does not mean giving up utopian imagination. Silva calls this transcendent imagination "counter-culture" (contracultura)—it is not some specific cultural content, but a mode of practice that constantly questions and transcends the existing cultural order. In the field of education, "counter-culture" means creating educational spaces that can break the closure of ideology: dialogic teaching replaces indoctrinatory teaching, and interdisciplinary inquiry replaces disciplinary training. Silva's "counter-culture" deeply resonates with Bloch's "utopian spirit": utopia is not an escapist fantasy, but the dimension of the "not-yet" inherent in reality [25]. The fundamental task of critical pedagogy is not to "cultivate revolutionaries," but to cultivate "utopian subjects" capable of identifying and creating possibilities of emancipation.

5.3. Dialogue with Freire and Giroux: the re-foundation of emancipatory pedagogy

Silva's critique of ideology has a deep theoretical affinity with Freire's "emancipatory pedagogy." Freire likewise opposes "indoctrinatory education," advocates "problem-posing education," and calls this process "conscientization" [26, 27]. Silva's theory provides the political-economic foundation for "conscientization," while also pointing out its limits: any "consciousness" that is fixed and authorized may fall back into ideology, and emancipatory pedagogy must preserve its inner self-criticism. Giroux further deepens this tradition, emphasizing the teacher's social responsibility as a "transformative intellectual," and pointing out that the task of critical pedagogy is to "repoliticize" education—not to inculcate a specific political stance, but to cultivate the ability to think critically about politics [28-30]. The theoretical dialogue among the three establishes the basic principle: adhere to the political-economic foundation of ideological critique, reject the inculcation logic of "revolutionary ideology," and maintain the self-criticism and openness of educational practice.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Toward a "de-commodified" educational imagination

Through the contemporary reconstruction of Silva's theory of "ideological surplus value," this paper reveals the deep ideological mechanism of neoliberal education: the triple mechanism of the myth of human capital, PISA-based standardized governance, and digital educational technology realizes the

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systematic, global, and digital extraction of ideological surplus value. Yet critique itself contains the potential for emancipation—the "de-commodification" of education is not only a policy proposition, but a fundamental shift in educational imagination: from viewing education as "human capital investment" to viewing it as "the all-round development of human beings," from viewing students as "educational consumers" to viewing them as "critical subjects," from viewing teachers as "skill transmitters" to viewing them as "transformative intellectuals."

6.2. "Relative utopia" as the practical orientation of educational critique

Silva's negation of "revolutionary ideology" reminds us that the emancipatory function of education cannot be reduced to a fixed political program, but this does not mean giving up the utopian dimension. Borrowing Bloch's term, this more modest "relative utopia" contains three layers of meaning: acknowledging the strong resilience of the capitalist education system and rejecting the simplistic fantasy of "overthrow"; insisting on the possibility of educational change and rejecting cynicism and the end-of-history thesis; maintaining the self-reflexivity of educational critique and guarding against its own fall into a new ideology [31]. Silva's theory was born in Latin America in the 1970s, but the fundamental question it raises—how capitalism achieves domination and extraction of consciousness through mental production—is ever more urgent today. Revisiting Silva is not to return to the past, but to move toward a future where education truly belongs to human beings, serves human beings, and liberates human beings.

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