

Ideology Today

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by
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I hope I'm not intruding here, so I'm sorry if I am. However, no, ideology doesn't have a "good" or "bad" nature intrinsic to it. It's a rather complicated topic, especially without understanding hegemony, but according to Louis Althusser in "Lenin and Philosophy", ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence, and ideology itself has a material existence because it manifests itself through our actions which are "asserted into practice", as he says, such as within basic rituals and conventional behaviors, and since ideology always exists in an apparatus and its practices (this is where understanding hegemony becomes important), its purpose is to constitute concrete individuals as concrete subjects to ideology. Althusser uses the example of a police officer shouting "hey, you" and the individual turns around to acknowledge the officer, that individual has become a subject to the dominant ideology. To put this in a better way of understanding, your physical existence, such as your physical body, physical brain, etc., is what makes you a concrete individual, but your social existence, such as your personality.

These three aspects of ideology form a kind of narrative. In the first stage of ideological doctrine we find ideology in its "pure" state. Here ideology takes the form of a supposedly truthful proposition or set of arguments which, in reality, conceal a vested interest. Locke's arguments about government served the interest of the revolutionary Americans rather than the colonizing British.

In a second step, a successful ideology takes on the material form which generates belief in that ideology, most potently in the guise of Althusser's State Apparatuses. Third, ideology assumes an almost spontaneous existence, becoming instinctive rather than realized either as an explicit set of arguments or as an institution. The supreme example of such spontaneity is, for Žižek, the notion of commodity fetishism.

And if ideology exists we must be able to subject it to critique. This is the aim of Žižek's theory of ideology, namely an attempt to keep the project of ideological critique alive at all in an era in which we are said to have left ideology behind.

The very concept of ideology implies a kind of basic, constitutive naiveté: the misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own effective conditions, a distance, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representation, our false consciousness of it. That is why such a 'naive consciousness' can be submitted to a critical-ideological procedure. The aim of this procedure is to lead the naive

ideological consciousness to a point at which it can recognize its own effective conditions, the social reality that it is distorting, and through this very act dissolve itself. In the more sophisticated versions of the critics of ideology – that developed by the Frankfurt School, for example – it is not just a question of seeing things (that is, social reality) as they 'really are', of throwing away the distorting spectacles of ideology; the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into – its very essence.

Theoretically, every oppressed group is subjected to some form of invidious contrast with the ruling group in which the oppressed group appears \"inferior\" in some respect said to be, by the ruling group, essential to human beings – intelligence, good judgement, self-discipline, initiative, beauty. These ideologies of invidious hierarchy then justify the practical denial to the oppressed of access to the resources and participation in the institutions which their freedom as self-determining agents would require.

Human emancipation does not dictate from on high which particular ways of life are meaningful. Instead, it identifies, on the basis of studies of human biology, psychology, social organization, cultural systems, histories of political struggle, and through dialogues with different groups of oppressed people common demands: for the physical requirements of life, for the social and political conditions of dignified, social self-conscious agency, for the time to explore and unfold life-capacities freely.

Again, the project of human emancipation does not impose alien demands on anyone's interests by virtue of this argument in favour of reciprocity between extraction and contribution. There can be different ways of concretely organizing reciprocity, but without it, society is not possible, and even if it were, it would hardly be worth living in, as it would be, as I argued above, devoid of the intrinsically valuable emotional relationships that elevate human life beyond mere survival and reproduction.

The Political Unconscious carries through several important theoretical displacements. The first we have already had occasion to consider, namely that from economics in the last instance – a concept of classically Althusserian extraction – to that of politics in the last instance. But, in the present context, it is a second displacement that is of more interest, namely that from ideology to politics. Interestingly, in this case, Jameson feels called upon to \"explain himself.\" Many of the findings of *The Political Unconscious*, he confesses, could well have been expressed more forcefully in a Marxist \"manual,\" that \"would have as its object ideological analysis\" and that would thereby require that he \"settle its accounts with rival methods in a far more polemic spirit.\"⁴² Such a prospect clearly does not appeal to Jameson in the slightest, notwithstanding his artful appeal to Althusser's lemma of \"class struggle within theory.\"⁴³

The more cynically minded might argue that the substitution of an etiolated

"politics" for the marked category of "ideology" could only have served one purpose: to avoid a term whose use, within the precincts of a conservative academy, could only have signalled a damaging allegiance to Marxism.⁴⁴ Even so, as the political tide began to turn decisively against the Left in the 1980s, Jameson was forced to make a further reformist concession by actively disowning "ideology" altogether. The latter, we are informed, in *Postmodernism* (1991), no longer provides the key social function it formerly exercised; indeed, it may now be legitimate to speak of the "end of ideology," understood in the sense of "conscious ideologies and political opinions," which is to say, more strictly, understood as constitutive of "thought systems" or official philosophical ideologies. Jameson elaborates: "... the whole realm of conscious argument, and the very appearance of persuasion itself (or reasoned dissent)... has ceased to be functional in perpetuating and reproducing the system."⁴⁵

Humans rarely do this in completely seamless, rational and well thought-through ways. We are all bad philosophers (except for those few good philosophers), and we change our minds a lot. Political thinking is dynamic and contextual, reacting to history as it unfolds, and ideologies change over time. Ideology is emotional and fluid. But it still betrays patterns, and those patterns are what we should seek to understand.

Contrast that to Napoleon's famous dictum that "Sensible people rely on experience, or have a philosophy; silly people rely on ideology." (Williams 1985: 157). Philosophy for Gramsci is precisely not removed from the 'silliness' of ordinary beliefs but necessarily embedded in their life worlds. Philosophy is a metaphor for culture, by which Gramsci essentially makes thinking – and culture – a political question. "One might say ideology here," he continues, "but on the condition that the word is used in its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicit in art, in law, in economic activity, and in all manifestations of individual and collective life." (Ibid. 328). This broad conception of ideology maintains that it is a phenomenon, which at the same time orders individual conceptions of the world and large-scale power structures. Indeed, it is the ability of leaders to relate to the substrata of ideology that Gramsci calls common sense, which determines their success as molders of a "new culture," that is, as ideologists. Studying such processes therefore requires every level of analysis, and certainly not just the macro-level of political economy, sociology and international relations. Anthropologists must pitch in too.

These are the basic political ideologies that are prevalent in contemporary times. Of course, these are largely simplified, and most people don't adhere purely to one ideology, but adopt concepts from multiple ideologies. Still, most political works can be broadly defined as falling into one of the following categories.

A political ideology does not arise in a vacuum. A political ideology is usually the product of a series of beliefs about how human beings are, how they acquire knowledge, how they should interact with each other, and how they should be

governed (if at all). For instance, one who believes Hobbes Was Right will come to very different political conclusions to one who believes Rousseau Was Right. While their theorists are almost exclusively European, the ideologies themselves are near-universally applicable and are known worldwide. None of these ideas is more than 300 years old, and their heyday seems to have been the 19th–20th centuries.

When we browse this page, we inevitably come across at least one ideology that doesn't sound like an ideology at all. To us, it doesn't sound like a belief system: it sounds like common sense, like the way things 'should be', like the way that everyone should think about the world and act. This is because we are, all of us, ideologues. The ideologies that we accept are barely noticeable or totally invisible to us because their precepts and our personal beliefs are largely or wholly identical, so there are few or no noticeable differences. Moreover, few ideologies can be fully explained by their adherents: typically they are reflected in vague feelings and opinions of what 'human nature' or 'the natural order of things' is. Every ideology has (had) proponents who have proclaimed it as being non-ideological or post-ideological, and few have explicitly pushed their ideologies by calling them that: 'Ideology' itself is almost always used as a slur against one's ideological enemies, not one's own ideology.

Enlightenment philosophers can be divided into two camps; the British or Empirical enlightenment, and the Continental or Rationalist enlightenment. These camps had different theories about how reason worked; the empiricists believed it worked on the basis of human experience. The rationalists believed it worked by making logical deductions from intuitively-known first principles.

Regardless of this difference, both camps agreed on the broad points stated above: humans were rational beings with free will capable of progress and advancing their condition.

When the Counter-Enlightenment rolled around in the wake of The French Revolution, things changed. On the British side, Empiricism had been pushed so far that many began to embrace Skepticism (in the philosophical sense — the belief we cannot reach knowledge). Ostensibly, they were following on in the wake of David Hume (arguably, they were going much further than he did). On the Continental side, Rationalism had been pushed to extremes that argued reason has a nature which shapes its user. This is purportedly derivative from Kant, but many additions were made by Kant's intellectual successors (known as the German Idealists). For instance, Fichte argued that one's nationality shapes one's consciousness. Hegel took this even further, diminishing the role of human beings as free agents in favor of making them voices of larger forces.

The skeptical British Counter-Enlightenment eventually produced British Conservatism (see below). The Continental (German Idealist) Counter-Enlightenment gave us Hegel (who was a great influence on Karl Marx (see Socialism, below), although Marx was inspired by The Enlightenment as well as the Counter-Enlightenment) and Fichte (who has been called the father of German Nationalism and was arguably a great influence on Fascism).

The Counter-Enlightenment overall constituted a rejection of the Enlightenment view of humanity as rational beings capable of understanding the world and possessing free will. The British Counter-Enlightenment cast doubt on the efficacy of our reason. The Continental Counter-Enlightenment did so as well, by asking how much of our minds and selves were conditioned by external forces (Zeitgeists, Nationalities, Economic conditions, et cetera).

It is in the context of the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment that the following political theories originated.

The inflation of ideology into a matrix for structuring awareness puts conceptual relativism inescapably on the agenda, and with it traditional idealist puzzles about the proper application of the concepts of truth, objectivity and reality.