

Ideology

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"Ideology" marks the twentieth century as no other term. Since the social and political upheavals in the United States and France at the end of the eighteenth century, revolution, of course, has laid claim to first rank among modern-era concepts. And since Freud, the notion of "the unconscious" has gained strong currency as the chief marker of our age. But neither term has the breadth and extension of ideology; neither concept has exercised such inclusiveness as ideology; and neither has replaced so many others as has ideology. It is not to be wondered, then, that the study of religion, that many-headed Hydra of modernity, is inextricably, even intimately, linked to the notion of ideology.

Ideology as Category

Ideology does not take its origins in Western culture's antiquity or even in the Middle Ages, as do so many other political and social concepts. Rather, it is in the overthrow of these older, traditional categorical systems during the French Revolution (1789) that the word first was formed. In the beginning, the so called French Ideologists sought only to name their new science, but due to Napoleon's later use of the term, and the resulting political/public relations campaigns, the word lost its original philosophical and quite a-political meaning, to be transformed into a polemical slogan during the first half of the nineteenth century. As a result, the notion assumed its status as a battle cry, a function it has not lost to this day. It is also in this guise that Marx and Engels appropriated the term and provided it with the specific meaning that still attaches to this label in many disparate areas of dispute. The end result is that the very term ideology has been ideologized.

Initially, ideology refers to a pattern of thought, a way of life, and a political course of action—in other words, a more or less coherent system of ideas—that are bound to sets of ideas with little or no connection to reality, indeed are opposed to experiential reality. Ideology thus presupposes a gap between theory and practice, between idea and reality. It is only when the belief in the primacy of thought is attacked as the reverse of what the actual state of human consciousness is, that ideology also assumes the secondary meanings of illusion and self-deception. In this form, then, ideological criticism becomes the process by which unrecognized impediments in the process of establishing truth are revealed.

For the purpose of the study of religions, however, it is important to note that the current primary reference of the concept ideology is to a special form of illusion, namely the belief that ideas are the chief elements in human politics and history. Despite logical consistency, the presence of scientific rationality, and even practical evidences, what characterizes ideology in its usual applications is the hidden, even repressed role of the key historical, social and economic interests, motives and determinations that produced the seemingly disembodied system of ideas to begin with.

The History of Ideology

It was the French Ideologist, Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836), who first coined the term "ideology" (1801-1807). As the founder of a *science of ideas*, Destutt hoped to study the origin of human conceptualization, not as norms but as products. Such a science would, in his view, serve as a foundation for the rest of human knowledge. Following the English philosopher John Locke, Destutt sought merely to observe and describe the actions of the human mind, emphasizing that ideology, properly conceived, would be nothing other than a part of zoology. This is so, according to Destutt, because all ideas take their origin in the senses and achieve expression in language. By investigating the relationship between ideas and the (linguistic) signs that matched them, he hoped to achieve for his science of ideas the same strict precision that rules in such other fields as mathematics and the natural sciences. As such, ideology would be the scientific basis of human society: politics, law, morality and education would flow from it.

The influence exercised by the Ideologists, however, throughout revolutionary and post-revolutionary France, especially in the form of a-religious and empirical teachings in the schools, led to a clash with Napoleon. Initially he had been friendly toward the Ideologists, even inviting Destutt to accompany him on his military campaign in Egypt. But after assuming sole power in France in 1799 (the coup of the 18th Brumaire), Napoleon saw the need to consolidate his position by restoring, in a controllable form, both church and state (Concordat with the Roman Church, 18(1)). This move led inexorably to a break with the anti-theological and liberal teachings of the Ideologists. There was little doubt in Napoleon's mind that the Ideologists, now disqualified by him as merely "metaphysicians and fanatics," were working counter

to his notions of supreme power. Indeed, their concepts of state and society were, for the Emperor, but abstract theories that had nothing to do with political reality. By giving the term ideology a new meaning, Napoleon attempted to make the Ideologists ridiculous: an idea is for him no longer a sensually grasped content projected by the human imagination, but rather merely a theory disconnected from reality. As such, any discourse about ideas was disqualified as substanceless theorizing. With one blow Napoleon had turned ideology into a pejorative characterization of all philosophical theories, particularly those that may have laid claim to some practical political legitimacy. As a consequence, ideology was seen throughout Europe as the hallmark of dreamers, theoreticians, doctrinaire professors, people of principle, writers of fiction, insane projections, and so on. This was especially true for the followers of natural law theory and the supporters of a restoration of the monarchical political order that had been swept away in the tide of the French Revolution. True, and particularly in Germany, there was also a positive conception of ideology: Goethe, and later Heine, saw the power of ideas realized in the wars of liberation fought precisely against Napoleon, and they viewed their victory for freedom as the reverse of his version of ideology. But in the main, ideology remained at the mid-nineteenth century a term of derision and a polemical slogan—a sense of the term that we still find in use to this day.

Of long-lasting importance for the development of the term ideology is, of course, the role played by Karl Marx. Tracing the history of ideology in Marx's writings is extremely complicated. For one thing, the key text authored by Marx and Engels dealing with ideology, *The German Ideology* (1970 [1845/46]), was not published in any form until early in the twentieth century (1903/1904), and in its entirety only in 1932. Apparently, both Marx and Engels thought that the notion of ideology was so transparent that a precise delineation of its meaning was unnecessary. The result was a myriad of different nuanced uses of the term in their writings, which in turn led to a wide number of Marxian-based conceptions of ideology that could simply not be undone by such late revelations of what Marx and Engels may have thought ideology was at the beginning of their careers. What is clear, however, is that Marx found the notion of ideology associated with Napoleon to be the proper one: ideology for him was, at least to begin with, an act of theorizing that was distant from reality, and above all foreign to political practice. From this point of departure it was not long before Marx spoke of his now famous "alienated consciousness," a consciousness permeated by abstract projections and mental spider webs. Only later was one able to see that already in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels had made this interpretation of ideology even more precise. Here they took on the so-called Young Hegelians, those critics of Hegel who, in the judgment of Marx and Engels, had stood reality (and also Hegel) on its head: ideas, concepts, thoughts, projections do not determine human life and history to maintain that position is to turn the true relationship between being and consciousness *ideologically* upside down. Of course Marx and Engels did know what that relationship should be: it is only individuals, their actions and the material conditions of their lives that determine their history; the entire mental production of human beings is conditioned by the development of the products of their labor and the exchange of those products. According to Marx and Engels, ideologies, unfortunately, see this process in reverse: rather than viewing the progression of consciousness from material production, ideologies maintain the independence of thought and spirit.

One consequence of this legendary position-consciousness does not determine life, but rather life determines consciousness—was that, in the Marxian view, morality, religion, metaphysics, and other ideologies lose any claim to social and historical autonomy. Since Marx and Engels argued that the genuine relationship between humans and reality lies in the material preconditions of life, it was easy for them to proceed to the analysis of the products of human action as the source of an empirical confirmation. Reality was expanded to include, however, not only the material conditions but also the social conditions of human life, namely the class interests that were hidden by ideologies. In fact, in later Marxian thought, this becomes one of the chief tasks of ideology: to hide the true interests that lie behind the goals and acts of the power-wielding classes (e.g., the nobility, the bourgeoisie). This forgetting of the genuine, material motivations for thought and action is the product of self-delusion rather than conscious intention: ideology is therefore a process of self-alienation. Consciously or not, such self-alienation as found in religion, morality, and so on, is therefore revealed as a lie. Ideology results from the attempt to make the *super-structure* of ideas autonomous and independent of the true relationship between consciousness and reality. Indeed, for Marx religion is one of those areas of human activity that, by its very nature, must understand its norms and beliefs as eternal, holy and, above all else, as unchanging; as such, religion strives to break the connection between itself and the class interests that lie at its foundation. Religion, in other words, is ideology *per se*.

The post-Marxian development of socialism and social democracy, however, led to often quite different results. Georg Lukacs (1955), for example, considered a reified or independent consciousness as the product of capitalism's terrible effect on the worker. Such an autonomous consciousness must achieve *ideological* maturity, must gain accurate knowledge about its true class situation—it must, in other words, reach a state of authentic class consciousness. At that point, for Lukacs, ideology is no longer a theory independent

of practice, but instead is the location of unity between theory and practice. This is, however, a position that neither Marx nor Engels would have represented. Nor would Theodor Adorno's (1964) understanding of ideology have been happily accepted by Marx and Engels. Ideology in his sense is precisely society itself, but society in its essential appearance. For Adorno there is no false consciousness that is independent of society, making ideologies somehow stand apart from history. Rather, the consciousness that is ideology is the duplication of the society from which it springs. Although Herbert Marcuse viewed ideology as restricted to the one-dimensional reality of technological development, Jürgen Habermas went even further, finding ideology in the identification of possessions and humanity. One of the most recent attempts to reconceptualize the notion of ideology is found in the work of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1977) who sees ideology as the "value system by which members of a society determine which consequences of their actions are acceptable and which are not. For Luhmann ideology is primarily, if not completely, comprehensible as a function of human society, not as separate and autonomous thought.

Critique and Evaluation

Religion, observed the sociologist Peter Berger (1969), is the "audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant." Or put another way, religions are systems of meaning, and as such they are ideologies. For if the history of the term has taught us anything, it is that, whether considered to be false or authentic, ideologies are precisely systems of ideas that are organized to produce meaning for human actions. And religions are exactly such constructions, claiming to be models for all other theorizing. Religion is therefore not simply one ideological creation among others-though it is certainly that-but also a key node for the distribution of power or control over the texts and limits of consciousness. Luhmann is therefore correct when he maintains that the key to understanding ideology is its function: a religion represents just such a function as the self-evident pattern of human experience, and thus of reality. But religion and ideology are not the only constructs to share the function of providing meaning: world-views, mythologies and cosmologies^{ies} also strive to systematize human meaning. Are they therefore all the same as ideology? Hardly! Despite Ninian Smart's (1981, (1983) tendency to mix and match these categories, the lines of distinction are important to observe. A world-view, for example, deals with the difficulty of comprehending the relationship between humans and the world in which they are located, and imposing a meaning upon that connection. A cosmology, on the other hand, strives to present as complete a picture as possible of the relationship between the world and the nature that inhabits that world, humanity included; such a presentation may or may not lead to the establishment of meaning, or a pattern of relationships between all the players.

Mythology is perhaps the most difficult of these categories to determine, and at the same time the most relevant to understanding both ideology and religion. For mythologies deal directly with constituting data as self-evident; analyzing mythology seeks to understand not only how this process works, but also to what purpose it is undertaken. It is only within such a framework that we can ask about religion, ideology, world-view and cosmology.

One can perhaps most easily grasp the function of mythologies as the metacodes which govern the choice (selection) of the actual interpretive codes used to decipher experience and the expression of experience. Myths, in other words, both govern the choice of a code (world-view, cosmology, ideology, religion) and judge its application. Precisely as meta-code, mythologies establish what gets to count, or what is considered self-evident in a culture, be that in the realm of the so-called sacred or the general cultural code.

Religions, as specific forms of ideology, are culture-wide interpretations or code applications, dedicated to making manifest the latent meaning behind the text of the culture at large; myths, particularly in their manifestation within a religion, are the governing tools or codes by which this product is performed. These basic tools or codes are always about relationships: origins to world to humans. A major consequence therefore of understanding religions as ideologies is that they only make sense when viewed as human productions rather than as external impositions. Finally, religions also allow the accessing of world-views and cosmologies by establishing an absolute claim to do so: the meaning of the world, or a World-view, and the representation of that world, or a cosmology, can only, according to religion, be interrelated by means of that religion and its mythology. Precisely, however, because religions are ideologies, and therefore changeable, every person has a world-view, and every person has a cosmology, but not every person has a religion.

Traditional religions, however, particularly those in Western culture and those claiming universal legitimacy, reject any identification with ideology as inauthentic and destructive. For them religion cannot be ideology for the simple fact that religions (or their religion) are true and thus certainly are not in any sense manifestations of an alienated consciousness. In contrast, the view represented here, following Louis

Althusser's (1971) lead, holds that ideologies are the inevitable result of human consciousness. Among the key functions of consciousness is to process the myriad stages of identification with which human beings construct the world around them. As the chief tool for doing so, consciousness makes use of definition, or the establishment of relationships as *objects* which are consequently subject to use and control. To identify both self and world and have them remain stable and separable, consciousness stamps them as independent and external, rather than seeing them as the products of cultural and representational imagination. As a result, humans are constantly bringing forth new identifications and linking them up with previous identifications in a feverish attempt to provide definitions capable of covering all possible experiences. Such a plurality of definitions, in turn, demands a catalog or ranking of their relationships of one to another; tests are produced which allow one to locate new definitions within the catalog. These catalogs are ideologies.

The presence of such catalogs in human lives, and more particularly in commonly shared human lives, leads inevitably to a struggle over the power to control their formation and their application. Who, for example, defines the ranking with a particular catalog? How, and with what force, is that primary definitional act exercised? The answers to these questions form the stuff of ideologies, or the dynamic process by which such catalogs cease to be ever changing, contestable systems of judgment and, instead, come to be understood as self-evident and fundamental to human existence. Such self-evident systems of definition and classification must constantly be legitimated in order to head off the collapse of the intricate patterns of relationship, which make up the supportive ideologies. Any society, I would argue, is forever and inextricably bound up with the process of sustaining its basically shared catalogs of definitions and classifications for human experience of the world. Any society, in other words, is always producing and legitimating sets of ideologies.

In order to sustain such sets, or systems of ideologies, authority is needed to impose them on those segments of a society, which may have constructed quite different, or variant catalogs of definitions. Force may be employed, and the role of law codes to regulate the function of such force in maintaining broad-based ideologies is well known. *Constitutions* for example, have as their reason for being the provision of such a self-evidently understood and accepted framework for ideologies and their attendant rules of enforcement (law), that the very basis of the societies for which they were created cannot be called into question. *Religion*, on the other hand, frequently serves as the label for those systems of legitimation, which attempt to anchor their foundation outside of, or external to, the ideologies being legitimated. In either case, stability is the desired product. And stability promises a constant, unvarying pattern of relationship between inside and outside, or more prosaically, between self and others. In overcoming separation and distinction, stability of ideology becomes both inclusive and exclusive, that is, it assumes all experiences available to the society in question and rejects all those experiences which might be used to question the accepted set.

But what happens if such questioning does occur? What happens if the stability, no matter how powerfully enforced, breaks down and the catalog of definitions, which makes up a society's ideologies no longer is understood to be self-evident? Inevitably, chaos and the competition of ideologies results. It is precisely religion, however, always the preeminent discourse of definition, that is opposed to such chaos. Together with law, religion works tirelessly against the dismantling of ideological systems, trying to stem any encroaching chaos by shoring up the once-self-evident catalogs of definitions which are the substance of a society's ideologies. Religion, in other words, is always the enemy of revolution, since revolution can only mean the subversion and destabilizing of ideological systems. As such, revolution is also the ever-present shadow of religion. Where you find history and religion, ideology and revolution both lie at their roots and are not far behind. For both history and religion are not true in the sense that their stories are full, complete and forever unchanging, though each would have you believe that is indeed the case. Rather, history and religion are only interpretations, are better, ideological narratives: how one views, represents and comprehends a subject, event or experience is very much dependent upon the ideology underlying the interpretive effort; that is why history and religion are so full of mysteries, not clarity. There are no real artifacts to go on: you have to reconstruct it all. Due to the interspacing of ideology between us and reality, the past, present and future are not self-revealing: we have to *make it up*. Not every ideology is a religion, but every religion is ideology.

Ideology and the Study of Religion

There is widespread agreement that doing religion is not the same as studying religion. If we were to take the notion of religion as ideology as our point of departure, then three directions offer contemporary and future scholarship the most fruitful sources for the study of religion: tracing the natural history of religions; the interaction between religion and the law; and the anchoring of a theory of religion in the biological sphere.

A so-called natural history seeks to trace the emergence, or *prima I* identity; development, or mature identity; and dissolution, or death of identity. Understanding religion as ideology grants us the flexibility to apply such analytic categories to religions. This is so because tracking the development or patterns of change in a particular religion over time allows us to understand it as ideologically determined, that is, as contingent. Without a coherent account of the process of change that lies between the narrated emergence and the present point of observation, establishing the identity of a religion becomes difficult if not impossible. And without an identity, there is not intelligibility. One need only witness the current chaos reigning in the world of Christian origins: soon tracing this area of study will have mainly ethnographic interest.

The result of such an approach would mean that one never comes to closure on what constitutes the object of such a history. The target, or particular religion under review, would always be shifting, would always be contingent, would never be final, just as with our other rational objects of knowledge. Indeed, the evidences that one might adduce for such a history would also always be in movement. The ethical, moral, ritual and intellectual choices that adherents of a specific religion consider to be demanded by their beliefs, or demanded by *religion* in general, would constantly be changing, would never be absolute. A *natural* history of a religion could never, therefore, posit the *reality* or, better, the validity of any religion's claims or persuasions (beliefs) as the object and intelligibility, but rather only the origins, the history and the death of such claims and their resulting functions. In other words, desire and need are not identical: a genuine science of religion would acknowledge that a choice of reality does not constitute hegemony over all of reality or over others. Study of religion, precisely as ideology, is not the giving or bearing of testimony to the truth of a particular religion, or of religion in the abstract: it is not an act of belief.

The question of what place religion occupies in our larger social life is an almost classic case of the intimate relationship between religion and the law, as well as to the broader political setting in which law is found. A colleague of mine observed some years ago that the parallel to the slogan of that well-known Jewish teacher of antiquity, Jesus of Nazareth, who said that *the meek shall inherit the earth*, was none other than the observation of that contemporary social critic and baseball manager of the 1950s, Leo Durocher, who noted that *nice guys finish last*. There are very real tensions between these two stances, tensions that come from competitive ideologies. In our own time we have seen National Socialist Germany co-opt the major Christian churches in its spasm of totalitarian control and self-destruction, using particularly Roman Catholicism to organize public ritual and the celebration of fascist political domination. Again, in Yugoslavia, or more specifically Croatia, we have seen the church coopted by a national movement hardly distinguishable from its German masters; now Archbishop Stepinac, who welcomed his fascist allies with such enthusiasm, is being praised by the Roman Catholic Pope as a martyr and has been beatified. In the United States there continues sharp controversy over whether the Congress and the states should amend the Constitution to permit prayer in school classrooms; the struggle is, of course, over the questions of "*which prayer?*" and "*whose composition?*" Religion and law, in other words, is one of the most thorny but also most potentially fruitful areas for the study of religion today precisely because it is in the law, and in a religion's relationship to the law, that the struggle between competing ideologies becomes most clear.

As biologists probe ever deeper into the structure of the human brain, as the final mapping of the human genome becomes ready for us in the next few years, more and more students of religion are questioning the possibility that religion is *hard-wired* into the human genetic structure. Or at the very last, that evolutionary hangovers (experiential adaptations), rather than specific genes, lie at the heart of the human creation we call religion. What if, for example, we were to view religion as a set of artifacts, artifices and strategies by which the human species moved from being a prey species to a predator species? In other words, what if the ideological understanding of religion took as its point of departure a notion of religion as a complex strategy designed as a system of values, reinforced by ritual, to locate our origin and our fate outside of ourselves, with the goal of this strategy being the effort to cope with an initial prey experience and eventual shift to outright predation, ultimately ending in preying upon ourselves? What if the ghosts of predators past, and still chase the human species displays its strategic adaptations for surviving those predators? Other constructions are, of course, not only possible but likely if one were to take seriously the ideological character of religion.

Understanding religions as ideologies will liberate the study of religions and their traditions in ways we can only dimly anticipate, leading to more profound, and more accurate ways of determining both the role

religions play in wider society, and the definitions of what gets to count as religion in that society.

(Gary Lease, Ideology. In: Willy Braun & Russel T.McCutcheon, *Guide to the Study of Religion*, Cassel: London & New York 2000, pp. 438 – 451)