**Ideology**

The term ideology (F *idéologie*) was invented by a group of French philosophers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These Enlightenment thinkers wanted to bring the new scientific method to an understanding of the mind by offering psychological answers to philosophical questions. Ideology, the science of the mind, was the study of the origin and development of ideas. In particular, these philosophers, known as ideologues, traced ideas back to empirical reality and more particularly, following John Locke, to sensations. “Ideology” first appeared in English in 1796 in a translation of the work of one of these philosophers, Destutt de Tracy.

It was taken over by Napoleon Bonaparte, who turned the term on its head, using it to attack the defenders of Enlightenment values (especially democracy) because they divorced the problem of governance from “a knowledge of the human heart and of the lessons of history” (R. Williams, 1976: 154). Ideology was abstract knowledge, not rooted in the realities of human life and self-interest. This pejorative use continued and expanded throughout the 19th century, when “ideology” was used, primarily by conservatives, to label any supposedly extreme or revolutionary political theory or platform, especially derived from theory rather than experience.

In a sense, Karl Marx (and Friedrich Engels) turned this Napoleonic use on its head (as well as turning Hegel’s philosophy, which privileged the reality of ideas over material life and reality, on its head) in the mid 19th century. They returned to the project of the ideologues, offering a theory of the origin and development of ideas, but they located the answers in history and social life. Marx and Engels argued that ideas were nothing but the expression of the material relationships of social life, material relationships “grasped as ideas.” There are two distinct theories of ideology in their work. In the first, they linked ideology directly to the uneven relations of power. And in the second, “ideology” described the
unconscious system of beliefs belonging to any particular class or social group. Both uses assume the possibility of a better – more scientific – knowledge.

According to the first position, ideology is a misrepresentation of the actual material conditions of life, presenting the world as if seen through a camera obscura (in which the image is always upside down). Ideology is distorted knowledge, producing a state of false consciousness for all those living within its understanding of reality. This illusory representation of reality serves the interests of the ruling economic class, which also has the power to define acceptable knowledge of the world. In *The German ideology*, Marx and Engels wrote: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (1974 [1846]: 61). On this view, not only are people living lives that are alienated (or inauthentic), they cannot even realize or recognize that they are alienated.

The second position, while continuing to assert that ideological forms are the expression of material relations, defines ideology as the forms in which people become conscious of their world. On this view, every social class has its own set of ideas that are a direct expression of its material conditions and interests. All ideologies are necessarily partial, offering an incomplete and abstract picture of the world to the group that lives within the world as described by those ideas. The Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács (1971) argued that this could only be overcome when the working class became fully conscious of itself as the universal class, making its ideology universally true.

This division within the concept of ideology – between a narrow conception of direct determination by relations of power and a broader conception of socially located knowledge – has continued within Marxist and sociological theory. For example, Karl Mannheim (1976) distinguished between particular, explicit political ideologies and the broad Weltanschauung or worldview of a society or social group.

Two thinkers have been particularly influential in the past decades in reshaping academic theories of ideology. Antonio Gramsci (1971) emphasized the complexity of the relationships that define human reality at any particular time and place; and he rejected the assumption that such relationships were the necessary result of transcendental forces – like the economy. Consequently, he opposed the tendency to assume that class and/or economic relations necessarily provided the truth about everything. Instead, he argued that human reality was the product of the work of producing or articulating relationships. His concept of hegemony describes an ongoing struggle to create ideological consensus within a society, while his concept of common sense emphasizes the fragmentary and contradictory nature of the unconscious meanings and beliefs with which people make sense of their world.

Building on Gramsci, theorists like Ernesto Laclau and Stuart Hall (1996) emphasize that the ideological significance of a text is never directly available from the text itself. A text does not wear its ideological position on its back for all to see. One cannot know it ahead of time, as if it were based simply on the class position or social location of its
producer. Hence, ideology is always a matter of work. It cannot be understood in terms of one dominant ideology, for it is always an ongoing ideological struggle.

Louis Althusser (1970) once more turned the concept on its head by defining ideology as the systems of representation in which people live their relationship to the real conditions of their lives. Ideology is an indispensable dimension of human life, the means through which experience itself is produced. Experience becomes a political reality rather than a natural "fact" that remains free of political determination. For Althusser, then, ideology is always embedded in the actual material practices of the language use of particular social institutions, which he called ideological state apparatuses.

One of the most important results of these theoretical developments was that it enabled the concept of ideology to extend its reach beyond the Marxist focus on class, to encompass other dimensions of social division including race, gender, and sexuality. As a result, ideological theories of racism, patriarchy, and homophobia became important aspects of critical thinking in the IC20.

Outside the academy, "ideology" continued to have multiple meanings. It can refer narrowly to an explicit set of political beliefs, such as liberal, conservative, or socialist ideologies, usually assumed to be in conflict. It was in this sense, for example, that some social commentators claimed the end of ideology as a result of the supposed liberal consensus following World War II (D. Bell, 1960).

"Ideology" can also refer to broader systems of beliefs, ideas, and attitudes that have direct implications for political commitments and actions. In this sense, the Cold War was seen as a battle between communist and capitalist ideologies. Such uses tend to treat "ideology" as a relatively neutral term, since all sides can be said to have an ideology. Yet even so, there is something implicitly negative about the concept, for it is taken to suggest an unnecessary battle between camps, which should be overcome either by consensus among the sides, or by the victory of one side over the others.

Still, the most common use of "ideology" in the I20C was pejorative: ideology is opposed to "fact," "logic," "reason," "philosophy," and even "truth." It is always the other side – and never one's own – that has an ideology. It was in this sense that conservative politicians have always spoken about communism as an ideology.

In the I20C and e21C, the salience of ideology as a political or critical concept has diminished somewhat, partly as a result of the end of the Cold War. The perceived victory of "democratic capitalism" over communism seems to have produced, especially in the West, a perception that there are no longer any alternatives and hence no opposing ideologies. Instead, the struggle is more likely to be seen as a clash of civilizations (often understood as religions).

Nevertheless, the notion of ideology continues to operate in domestic politics, as part of what has been called the "culture wars." In fact, it has revised two meanings from its past. First, ideology is opposed to practicality rather than truth, so that it becomes a way of contemptuously dismissing any principled opposition to the status quo. Ideology is equated
with idealism and opposed to realism. This is how conservatives in the e21C dismiss the demands of the left. Second, ideology is equated with the passion of moral certainty and absolutism, and opposed to a thoughtful engagement with complexity and differences. For example, during the Iraq War, liberals distinguished George Bush’s focus on “big picture ideological campaigns” with Tony Blair’s more sophisticated “idealism without ideologues” (Kristoff, 2003).

Interestingly, the academic centrality of the concept in theoretical debates and political analyses has declined in the e21C. There are at least two reasons for this: one is the influence of new ways of thinking about the nature and forms of power, and about the relations of power, language, and ideas, embodied, for example, in broader notions of common sense, representation, and discourse. The other is the perception that the growing dominance of neo-liberal globalization as the framework for international relations, and the growing power of various new conservative moments in many (but not all) Western nations, cannot be explained by theories of ideological domination, consensus, or struggle.

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