ACADEMIA | Letters

Ideology: Where Does It Come From and How Is It Used

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The historical roots of the concept of ideology can be traced back to the French Revolution, when Antoine Destutt de Tracy proposed the "*science des idées"*, or the study and analysis of ideas and thought-formation.[1] Contemporary definitions of ideology continue to make reference to this notion. Social psychologist L.B. Brown, for example, defines ideology as "systems of thought and explanations that underlie many forms of social and individual behaviour."[2] Categorically, some definitions describe the notion of ideology in economic and political terms,[3] while others are centered on the purpose of ideology – which includes providing a means of understanding reality, reinforcing existing ideologies, and promoting particular vested interests[4]. While these definitions are all valid, they are premised on the foundational definition of ideology as a system of interrelated thoughts and ideas.

This study examines ideology from a socio-psychological perspective in order to develop a nuanced understanding of the concept. The foundational definition of ideology as a system of interrelated thoughts and ideas functions as the basis of this study. With an initial definition of ideology established, two questions arise which merit further study: how is ideology formed? And, how does it work?

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[1] George Lichtheim, "The Concept of Ideology," *The Concept of Ideology and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1967), 7.

[2] Laurie B. Brown, Ideology (Baltimore: Penguin Education, 1973), 9.

[3] For definitions of ideology in economic or political terms, see, for example, Myron Aronoff, "Ideology and Interest: The Dialectics of Politics," in (ed.) M. Aronoff, *Political Anthropology Yearbook I – Ideology and Interest: The Dialectics of Politics* (New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1980), 1-30.; as well as, Douglas Ashford, *Ideology and Participation* (California: Sage Publications, 1972), 13-34.

[4] For definitions of ideology focusing on the functions of ideology, see, for example, Mark Lowes, "Spectacular Space and the Ideology of the 'World-Class' City," *Indy Dreams and Urban Nightmares* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 112-121; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (London: Yale University Press, 1987) ; as well as Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

The Formation and Functions of Ideology

Much of the academic literature on the concept of ideology centers upon the use of ideology, or speaks to ideology from a particular perspective – for example, politically, economically, and religiously – while neglecting to address the formation of ideology as a distinct process from its overriding functions. Some authors discuss ideology as a discourse through which to exercise power,[5] while others discuss ideology as a means through which one can rationalize, explicate, and understand society, reality, and oneself.[6] These studies implicitly consider the process of ideology formation as part of the functions of ideology, whereby pursuing specific goals or values of an ideology is, in turn, forming ideology. This presents a tautological argument, in that the function of ideology presumes the pre-existing presence of ideology which is created through the processes of ideology.

Ideology itself is a motivational, and yet, action-neutral concept, for in its most basic form ideology is merely a set of latent and interrelated thoughts and ideas. It is through the employment of these attributes in discourse that particular objectives can be achieved, be they, as an example, political, economic, or religious. Therefore, prior to discussing uses of ideology, an understanding of the formation of ideology must be developed.

Brown argues that ideology is formed by attitudes and beliefs that are acquired through processes of learning and socialization. He also puts forth two functions of ideology – shaping social and individual behaviour, and reaffirming and reinforcing existing attitudes and beliefs – processes which will be examined later in further detail. Brown's model of ideology formation and function has been conceptualized in Figure 1[7].

As attitudes and beliefs, as well as learning and socialization, are whole concepts on their own, they will not be discussed here in further detail. What is important to note, though, is that ideologies are complex systems of meaning that are comprised of not only attitudes and beliefs, but also values and culture, including rituals and myths, metaphors and images –
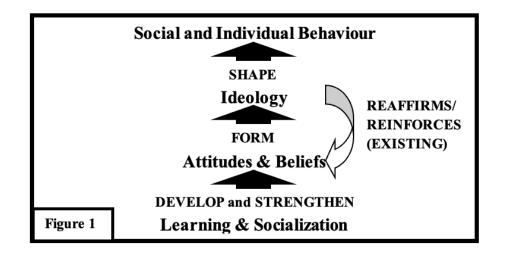
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[5]For a discussion of ideology as a discourse through which to exercise power, see, for example, Marc Steinberg, "Rethinking Ideology: A Dialogue with Fine and Sandstrom from a Dialogic Perspective," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 11, No.3 (Nov., 1993), 314-320

[6]For a discussion of ideology as a means of rationalizing, explicating, and understanding society, reality, and oneself, see, for example, M. Seliger, "Fundamental and Operative Ideology: The Two Principal Dimensions of Political Argumentation," *Policy Sciences* Vol. 1 (1970), 325-338; J.T. Jost and O. Hunyady, "Antecedents and Consequences of System-Justifying Ideologies" *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (2005), 260-265; as well as J.T. Jost, et al. "System-Justifying Function of Complementary Regional and Ethnic Stereotypes: Cross-National Evidence," *Social Justice Research*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (September 2005), 305-333.

[7]The model depicted in Figure 1 is a visual representation of L.B. Brown's argument in *Ideology*. Although the model is never explicitly or visually presented as such by Brown, he identifies the various stages of ideology development as well as the functions of ideology in his work.

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Social and Individual Behaviour

SHAPE

Ideology

FORM

Attitudes & Beliefs

REAFFIRMS/
REINFORCES
(EXISTING)

DEVELOP and STRENGTHEN

Figure 1

Learning & Socialization

all of which are humanly constructed through learning and socialization processes, including but not limited to personal and emotional experiences, social and authoritative influence, and social interactions.[8]

Furthermore, it is important to note that ideologies are not static, that they change and adapt, and that new ideologies emerge and are disseminated in society.[9] An example of this may be found if one examines the portrayal of the "enemy" in Hollywood productions, where, in a post-Cold war context the enemy is usually from the former Soviet Union, in contrast to a post-9/11 context, where the enemy is often of Middle-Eastern descent.[10] Both historically and conceptually, the very idea of "the enemy" has changed.

Although ideology can be employed in many environments and is present in many realms – including political, economic, and social realms – ideology performs four primary and over-lapping functions: explanatory, evaluative, orientative, and prescriptive.[11] Ideology functions

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[8] For further discussion on attitude, belief, and value acquisition through processes of learning, socialization, and experience, see Brown, *Ideology*, 15-24 and 87-169; Aronoff, "Ideology and Interest: The Dialectics of Politics," 1-30; as well as Alan Fine and Kent Sandstrom, "Ideology in Action: A Pragmatic Approach to a Contested Concept," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 11 (1993), 21-38.

[9] Göran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (Great Britain: Redwood Burn Ltd, 1980), 47.

[10] See for example, 24 Season 1, where the antagonist is Victor Drazen who is of Serbian descent, and Seasons 2,4 and 6 where the antagonists are part of a Middle-Eastern terrorist cell. Although not all Seasons of 24 involve the depiction of a Middle-Eastern terrorist cell, the existence and possible complicity of a terrorist from the Middle-East is often alluded to; as an example, the framing of Jibraan Al-Zarian for a terrorist attack on Washington in Season 7.

[11] Terence Ball and Richard Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal*, 5th Edition (United States:

as a means of explicating and understanding reality, society, events, and oneself. It provides explanations about the existing state of a subject, for example, a society, a government, or a social group, which are often rooted in historical narratives.[12]

Ideology also provides a framework, or a context, within which to analyze and rationalize the existing state of a subject, including its policies and ideals, in order to determine if they are just, unjust, or tolerable.[13] It provides a forum in which to decide if the general concepts or beliefs that are held by a particular group of individuals merit naturalization and universal application.[14] Ideologies can therefore be employed to legitimize the attitudes and beliefs, the culture and values, of which they are comprised, and to challenge the attitudes and beliefs, the culture and values of other existing ideologies. Stereotypes are a concrete example of an ideological process that, when utilized by particular power-oriented vested interests, function to maintain the current social order through the rationalization and legitimization of the policies and conditions of that order.[15] Ideology can be employed, then, to reaffirm and reinforce existing ideologies.

Ideology provides individuals, groups, and societies with a form of identity and a means of association. In a group context, through various psychological and social apparatuses including confirmation bias, ideology becomes a "reality" wherein certain orientations and understandings of the world are shared.[16] Each ideologically-oriented group develops its own set of norms and values which are binding among those who accept them.[17] This is one method in which ideology can be employed to shape and control both social and individual behaviour.

Ideology can also be utilized to promote a particular program of and forum for collective social and political action.[18] Ideological mobilization involves the setting of a common agenda for a mass of people. This is done by fusing several oppositional ideologies into a single major threat, which is often expressed using a simple slogan. This ideological fusion

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Pearson Education Inc, 2004), 1-18; as well as Brown, *Ideology*, 170.

[12]Fine and Sandstrom, "Ideology in Action: A Pragmatic Approach to a Contested Concept," 27-28; as well as Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology,* 32.

[13]Ball and Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal*, 5.

[14]Lichtheim, "The Concept of Ideology," 12.

[15]Jost et al., "System-Justifying Function of Complementary Regional and Ethnic Stereotypes: Cross-National Evidence," 306. For a contemporary example of the employment of stereotypes to maintain the social order and, in turn, rationalize and legitimize the policies and conditions of that order, I invite the reader to observe all forms of Parliamentary Debate, including Question Period, at the federal level in Canada.

[16]See, for example, Aronoff, "Ideology and Interest: The Dialectics of Politics," 4; as well as Steinberg, "Rethinking Ideology: A Dialogue with Fine and Sandstrom from a Dialogic Perspective," 316.

[17]Lichtheim, "The Concept of Ideology," 32.

[18]See, for example, Ball and Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal,* 6; Aronoff, "Ideology and Interest: The Dialectics of Politics," 18; as well as Seliger, "Fundamental and Operative Ideology: The Two Principal Dimensions of Political Argumentation," 326.

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involves summarizing the dominant aspects of a crisis, identifying the target of the opposi-
tional ideology, segregating relevant groups into self-other dichotomies, while defining the
course of action that needs to be undertaken to achieve a specific desired outcome.[19] An ex-
ample of this ideological fusion is present in the discourse employed by proponents of the War
on Terror in Canada and the United States. Terms such as the War on Terror and the Axis of
Evil were invoked for their historical significance, in that similar terminology was used in the
Second World War to refer to Nazi Germany and its allies, but also to confuse and frighten
society into action. The contemporary War on Terror embodies the three types of ideolog-
ical mobilization identified by Therborn: mobilization by anticipatory fear, mobilization by
revival – based on the past, and mobilization by example – on the basis of another present
reality.[20]

   A final point to take note of in this study on the concept of ideology is that one ideology can
only exist with the presence of another, differing ideology. Ideology is therefore relational in
that oppositional ideologies provide a frame of reference that can be employed in ideological
discourse to inspire, mobilize and give legitimacy to the ideology of a specific group.[21]

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[19]Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology,* 116-117; and Brown, *Ideology*, 9. For an
application of the self-other dichotomy, the targeting of oppositional ideologies, and the development of specific
courses of action within the realm of U.S. Foreign Policy see, for example, David Campbell, *Writing Security:
United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
   [20]Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, 123.
   [21]Steinberg, "Rethinking Ideology: A Dialogue with Fine and Sandstrom from a Dialogic Perspective," 317.

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