

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Insidious Ambiguity of “Ideology”

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## Abstract

*This essay identifies and explores three dominant intellectual traditions that critique and theorize about ideology: Marxist, prudentialist, and social scientific. For these traditions, the word ‘ideology’ names interest-serving rationalizations, pseudoscientific totalitarian zealotry, or political outlooks. The blending of these three specialized meanings has generated a colloquial sense of ideology that is philosophically untenable and damaging to political discourse. According to this colloquial sense, all thinking is ideological and we are all ideologues. In response, I instead offer in this essay an adverbial account of ideology. In this account, “ideology” names a kind of epistemic vice. Admitting that this is something we all may do sometimes, I describe how we think when we think ideologically. Finally, I conclude with some suggestions about how education might help us avoid the epistemic vice of ideological thinking.*

**Key words:** ideology; science; power; value; truth; evidence; ideology critique; ideology studies; Marxism; philosophy of social science; totalitarianism; history of modern philosophy

## Introduction

Sometimes, we talk about things without getting hung up on the words because the words are functioning well or because we fail to notice when they are not. Other times, we try expressing ourselves, but get tripped up by a word that suddenly loses its transparency. We need to think a bit about the word itself before moving on. “Ideology” is a mess of a word, so I begin by surveying that mess. The massive amount of scholarly writing on ideology from diverse disciplinary, philosophical, and political vantage points requires this survey to avoid any pretense of thoroughness. Rather, I will sketch families of interpretation of ideology. I map three tributaries, each of which contributes to an important contemporary usage. For each tributary, I focus in depth on its origins, only sketching what surfaces downstream.

My first hope is that this approach makes it easier for any readers new to ideological analysis to navigate the literature, for there is a great deal of writing about ideology, whatever it is. Moreover, I hope to alert the reader that the

ambiguity of the word and the blending of its competing meanings make for dangerous waters.

### Tributary (a): Prudentialists

In the final years of the eighteenth century, French liberal Antoine Destutt de Tracy aimed to create a new science of ideas to explain why people think the way they do. His ideology may seem a typical, modern-style philosophy of mind, akin to a proto-psychology. Studying the “mechanics” of ideas and billed as “a part of zoology,” ideology starts from sense impressions and builds various types of ideas out of them.<sup>1</sup> Tracy asserts the primacy of facts and interprets thinking as another form of sensation,<sup>2</sup> while also claiming that enumeration and calculation constitute nearly “the entirety of reasoning itself.”<sup>3</sup> In exalting human rationality as data-plus-math, ideology constitutes a mixture of empiricism and rationalism not uncharacteristic of the age. Still, to discount Tracy’s ideology as merely an early attempt at psychology would underestimate his ambitions. He wanted it to be a modern science—in the sense of reductive, mechanical, and useful—of the human being as a thinker. Beyond this, Tracy foretold that this branch of zoology would replace theology as the highest field of human knowledge; he equally aimed it to be a scientific replacement for philosophy. He felt that it was destined to reform and replace traditional education *and to direct practical life and politics*. Ideology was to be the foundation of all other fields, including “finally the greatest of arts, for whose success all others must cooperate, that of regulating society.”<sup>4</sup> Tracy and his confreres were politically engaged in the French Revolution, in the French republic, and in post-revolutionary France.

The content of this belief system is now a historical curiosity. Since then, the word “ideology” has become generic, naming a *kind* of belief system. The crucial expansion of the word’s meaning begins with Napoleon Bonaparte, who as early as 1801 publicly criticized “windbags and ideologues who have always fought the existing authority.”<sup>5</sup> The ideologists are dangerous dreamers and anti-religious materialists, he averred. Moreover, the founding idea of ideology suggests that its backers were prone to assert their beliefs as the uniquely correct, scientifically justified political and economic system. In 1812, Napoleon denounced it to the Council of State:

We must lay blame for the ills that our fair France has suffered on ideology, that shadowy metaphysics which subtly reaches for first causes on which to base the legislation of peoples, rather than making use of laws known to the

<sup>1</sup> Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy, *Elements of Ideology*, trans. Juan Christian Guerrero (MA Thesis, University of Paris, 2011), 104 [3], 91 [xiii].

<sup>2</sup> Tracy, *Elements of Ideology*, trans. Guerrero, 117–21 [21–27].

<sup>3</sup> Tracy, *Elements of Ideology*, trans. Guerrero, 107 [8].

<sup>4</sup> Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy, quoted in Emmet Kennedy, “‘Ideology’ from Destutt de Tracy to Marx,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 3 (1979): 355.

<sup>5</sup> Tracy, quoted in Emmet Kennedy, “‘Ideology’ from Destutt de Tracy to Marx,” 358.

human heart and of the lessons of history. These errors must inevitably and did in fact lead to the rule of bloodthirsty men.<sup>6</sup>

Notice that, in Napoleon's diagnosis, the ideologists' way of thinking closed them to two types of evidence of utmost importance in political matters: the moral law and practical wisdom acquired through historical experience. With that point, we see the word acquiring a meaning now familiar to us. Soon thereafter, John Adams uses it in this same sense, writing to Thomas Jefferson on July 13, 1813:

Napoleon has lately invented a Word, which perfectly expresses my Opinion at that time and ever since. He calls the Project Ideology. And John Randolph, tho he was 14 years ago, as wild an Enthusiast for Equality and Fraternity, as any of them; appears to be now a regenerated Proselite to Napoleons [sic] Opinion and mine, that it was all madness.<sup>7</sup>

Ideology, on this view, is abstract thought producing a zealotry that does not admit of prudence as the preeminent political virtue. Despite Tracy's best efforts to be an empirical scientist, "ideology" derogatorily names *a priori* politics. It is speculation billed as science and inspires uncompromising activism. Napoleon makes "ideology" a generic label for bad philosophy gone political, and he makes "ideologue" a term of abuse.

Downstream in this tributary we find Hannah Arendt, for whom ideology is "the logic of an idea"—the inexorable, bloodthirsty working out of an idea in the political realm.<sup>8</sup> Ideologies "offer total explanations of everything."<sup>9</sup> Adherents hold each other to consistency in their ideological beliefs rather than allowing those beliefs to be adjusted through an engagement with reality: "The most persuasive argument in this respect, an argument of which Hitler like Stalin was very fond, is: you can't say A without saying B and C and so on, down to the end of the murderous alphabet. Here, the coercive force of logicity seems to have its source: it springs from our fear of contradicting ourselves."<sup>10</sup> Thus, for Arendt, "the self-compulsion of ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality."<sup>11</sup> That is, ideological thinking refuses to submit to the world being different from what the thinker's calculations say it should be. For this reason, "ideologies are never interested in the miracle of being."<sup>12</sup> Arendt concludes that "the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., standards of thought) no longer exist."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Tracy, quoted in Emmet Kennedy, "'Ideology' from Destutt de Tracy to Marx," 360.

<sup>7</sup> *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 355.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," *The Review of Politics* 15, no. 3 (1953): 316.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, "Ideology and Terror," 318.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, "Ideology and Terror," 319.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, "Ideology and Terror," 321.

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, "Ideology and Terror," 316.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt, "Ideology and Terror," 321.

As Arendt exemplifies, after the World Wars, given the facts of Marxism and fascism as murderous political systems driven by ideas, many political theorists developed accounts of ideology to reflect features shared by left and right totalitarianism.<sup>14</sup> Such features often include a single-factor account of socio-political problems or oppression; gnosticism or a special form of knowing, where dissenters are benighted, their beliefs dismissed as lacking genuine reasons; scapegoating and us-them thinking; perfectionism, where the Promised Land is immanent rather than heavenly, and where the ideologues' activism makes massive change imminent; and the believers casting themselves as prophets of History or as spokesmen and special agents for The People.

Also in this tributary is the conservative intellectual Russell Kirk. As he summarizes his usage, "ideology is inverted religion" that "inherits the fanaticism that sometimes has afflicted religious faith" and whose claim to possess absolute truth "makes political compromise impossible."<sup>15</sup> Writing more recently, Mark Shiffman remarks that ideology prioritizes logic over openness to being and he connects this to a propensity for violence. An ideology, he says, "is violent against reality. It is compelled to force everything to fit into the image of the person and society dictated by the ideology's vision and to punish or eliminate what does not fit."<sup>16</sup> Another recent theorist who follows this usage is F. Flagg Taylor, who argues that "ideology is an agent of demoralization." Drawing on a range of thinkers reflecting on totalitarian regimes—thinkers such as Czesław Miłosz, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Václav Havel, Alain Besançon, Pierre Manent, and Arthur Koestler—Taylor argues that "[i]deological thinking disrupts our own experience of the phenomenon of conscience and moral choice by its insistence that we use its ready-made concepts to navigate the world around us. We become agents of history rather than persons."<sup>17</sup>

Although claiming the authority of philosophy or science, ideology weaponizes itself politically in a way that is dismissive of prudence, hostile to reality (as it is, as opposed to how we think it should be), and often violent against persons in dissent. Theorists adopting this usage, though different among themselves, tend to hew closely to the origin of the word<sup>18</sup> and believe that the alternative to ideology in politics is prudence, the latter being an intellectual achievement, but one open to compromise and humble in the face of reality's

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1968); Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1952); Kenneth Minogue, *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985); Gerhart Niemeyer, *Between Nothingness and Paradise: The Role of Ideology in a Post-Ideological Age* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> Russell Kirk, "The Errors of Ideology," in Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute Books, 2004), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Shiffman, "What Is Ideology?" *The Political Science Reviewer* 46, no. 2 (2022): 12.

<sup>17</sup> F. Flagg Taylor, "Ideology and the Retreat from Personhood," *Perspectives on Political Science* 48, no. 4 (2019): 277.

<sup>18</sup> Writing for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Maurice Cranston notes that, though the word has acquired a broader usage, "[i]deology in the stricter sense stays fairly close to Destutt de Tracy's original conception." As Cranston puts it, ideologies "pretend to be scientific philosophy," but are "science with a mission." Cranston's "stricter sense" belongs to this first tributary. Maurice Cranston, "Ideology," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., February 22, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ideology-society>.

refusal to conform to our ideas. This line from Tracy through Napoleon, Adams, Arendt, and many others forms one major tributary of the word's current connotations.

### **Tributary (b): Marx and late Marxists**

Following Napoleon, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels invest further in the word's negative connotations while offering a more developed critique of the above-it-all character of ideology. They use the words "ideology" and "ideologists," respectively, for belief systems and those who develop them insofar as they have detached themselves from reality.<sup>19</sup> Reality is the alpha and omega of ideas, that is, their source and that which they represent. According to Marx and Engels, that reality is, at base, a material economic one: the forces of production. Ideology results from the division of labor when those whose work is to produce ideas are alienated from the material economic base. In their 1846 essay "The German Ideology," Marx and Engels identify the first ideologists:

Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. (The first form of ideologists, priests, is concurrent.) From this moment onward consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice ...; from now on, consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.<sup>20</sup>

As interest is, in Aristotle's words, "money born of money,"<sup>21</sup> ideology is ideas born of ideas born of ideas, ever further from reality and its evidence. In an 1893 letter, Engels explains:

Marx and I ... *were bound* to lay, the main emphasis, in the first place, on the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces. Because it is a process of thought he derives its form as well as its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material, which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, and does not investigate further for a more remote

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<sup>19</sup> Marx and Engels enjoyed a partnership that was unique in the history of great thinkers. I believe that their treatment of ideology remains consistent from their early to later work and whether they were writing alone or in tandem, as I believe is illustrated by the quotations in the text below.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 184.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), I.10.1258b6.

source independent of thought; indeed this is a matter of course to him, because, as all action is *mediated* by thought, it appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought.<sup>22</sup>

What is false in “false consciousness” is not necessarily the content of thought (which may be true), but the mind’s sense of its independence. The key mistake an ideologist makes is a form of naïve idealism; he thinks that people like himself are autonomous thinkers and that ideas have their own independent sources and power. Therefore, while ideas continue to have material economic causes, the ideological thinker does not recognize such external causes. This naïveté about the “real motive forces” of one’s ideas constitutes the type of alienated thought Marx and Engels call “ideology.” Ideologists are blind to the evidence that their own thoughts are conditioned by material, social, economic, and historical circumstances.

Ideas are caused, but Marx and Engels do not deny that ideas also have effects. Indeed, as a reflection of its cause in the forces of exploitative production while being alienated from that reality, an ideological belief system is likely to represent falsely the socioeconomic system and, in rationally explaining the status quo, the belief system is liable to become an apologia for it.<sup>23</sup>

Material economic reality is the driving force in the dialectical relationship between ideas and reality. In the ideologist’s self-misunderstanding, however, ideas seem autonomous and ultimately more powerful. Marx and Engels’s theory explains the cause of this illusion: “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Marx and Engels respond to ideologists with their own ideology, that is, they offer an alternative science of ideas and an alternative political economy along with it. It is important to see that, vis-à-vis Tracy, Marx and Engels are competing for the same territory while deploying the word “ideology” pejoratively for those competitors who give ideas explanatory primacy over material facts.

Marx and Engels’s project shows crucial similarities to Tracy’s. Marx and Engels claim that ideas are originally caused not merely by sensations, as Tracy would have it, but by the mode of production structuring the world we sense: “The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.” Marx and Engels continue: “Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Letter from Engels to Franz Mehring in Berlin,” July 14, 1893, in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Correspondence, 1846–1895*, ed. and trans. Dona Torr (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 511.

<sup>23</sup> On these two sides of ideology—as idealism and as apologia—see Bhikhu Parekh, *Marx’s Theory of Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1982), chap. 1. Parekh argues that “Marx uses the term ideology to mean not only idealism but also apologia.... Marx’s second usage grows out of the first.” Parekh, *Marx’s Theory of Ideology*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 180.

retain the semblance of their independence.”<sup>25</sup> Ideology names, first, the “immense superstructure” of culture and ideas echoing underlying economic realities. When the productive forces change, outgrowing the sociopolitical conditions they first produced and then in which they have matured, they force a conflict: The “legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic” ideas are “ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out,” Marx explains in his 1859 “Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*.”<sup>26</sup> Ideologies tend to legitimize the system because “[t]he ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class,” as Marx and Engels put it in 1849 in “The Communist Manifesto.”<sup>27</sup> Still, when ideas arise that reject the system and its mystifying ideology, this can be only because the contradictions in the base have produced those contradictory ideas. Also: “Man’s ideas, views, and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence.”<sup>28</sup> The material economic reality maintains causal primacy over ideas in Marx and Engels’s explanatory system. Admitting this is what allows their system to escape becoming ideological in their own sense of the term. Ideological thinking is ideological not because it is caused by economic forces, but because one believes that it is not.

Like Tracy’s “mechanics” of the mind, this is a material causal account of our thoughts. Like Tracy, Marx and Engels reject speculation for concrete, materialist science.<sup>29</sup> Like Tracy, they claim to replace philosophy’s abstract claims with facts.<sup>30</sup> Like Tracy, Marx and Engels’s attempts to substitute empirical science for metaphysics and theology have not prevented people from categorizing them as speculators closed to counterevidence, as political enthusiasts animated by uncompromising *a priori* principles, and as atheist prophets. In short, like Tracy, they too have been sneered at as ideologues.

Marx and Engels’s account of ideology has been influential, but with a twist. As we have seen, over the course of a few decades, Marx and Engels use “ideology” to name ideas that assume their own independence rather than facing their causal origin in economic reality. This usage carries the *connotation* that such ideas likely serve as a rationalization for the status quo because such ideas usually (but not always) do, according to Marx and Engels. In the twentieth century, as part of the late-Marxist tradition, the connotation takes over: apologia displaces alienated thought as the primary meaning of the word.

An important theorist found in the late-Marxist tributary is Karl Mannheim. Ideological analysis, Mannheim tells us, occurs when we “make so-called ‘ideas’ a

<sup>25</sup> Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 180.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, “Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 426.

<sup>27</sup> Marx and Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 260.

<sup>28</sup> Marx and Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” 260.

<sup>29</sup> “Where speculation ends—in real life—there real, positive science begins.” Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 181.

<sup>30</sup> Philosophy’s place, according to them, will be taken by “a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of man.” Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 181. In Tracy’s version: “For all of our more abstract truths are nothing but consequences drawn from observations of facts.” Tracy, *Elements of Ideology*, trans. Guerrero, 106 [6].



function of him who holds them, and of his position in his social milieu.”<sup>31</sup> We do not look at people’s reasons to explain their beliefs; instead, seeing their statements as deceptions or distortions, we look for “causal determinants” and do not hold them “personally responsible.”<sup>32</sup> Mannheim holds that “[i]t is only when we more or less consciously seek to discover the source of their untruthfulness in a social factor, that we are properly making an ideological interpretation.”<sup>33</sup> In defining ideological analysis as subjecting ideas to causal explanation, Mannheim remains downstream of both Tracy and Marx. When defining ideology, Mannheim contrasts it with utopian modes of thought. “Norms and values are historically and socially determined,” he insists, but that does not mean they accurately reflect their social milieu.<sup>34</sup> While both ideological and utopian ideas are “incongruous” or false to surrounding sociopolitical reality, ideologies maintain current reality, whereas utopias shatter it. Utopian thought remakes reality to match itself. Ideological thought occurs when, in a “new and changed situation,” older norms, lingering past their expiration date, resist change: “Antiquated and inapplicable norms, modes of thought, and theories are likely to degenerate into ideologies whose function it is to conceal the actual meaning of conduct rather than to reveal it.”<sup>35</sup> Although not a Marxist, Mannheim’s usage here reflects Marxist influence; beliefs are determined causally by social surroundings and “ideology” has come to name an apologetics for the status quo.

More recently, John B. Thompson writes in this tradition: “To study ideology, I propose, is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination.” According to this usage, which he calls a “critical conception” of ideology, “ideology is essentially linked to the process of sustaining asymmetrical relations of power—that is, to the process of maintaining domination.”<sup>36</sup>

The following structure is typical of present-day late-Marxist accounts of ideology: (a) Ideology is a false belief system rationalizing current socioeconomic political structures, making them seem necessary, natural, or good. (b) The structures of oppression and domination are, in fact, built and maintained by ideology. (c) It is in the interests of the dominant group that people believe the ideology. (d) People who believe the ideology think they have *reasons* and evidence that show its truth or plausibility, when their belief is in fact *caused*

<sup>31</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harvest Books, 1936), 50.

<sup>32</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 84.

<sup>35</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 85.

<sup>36</sup> John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 4. In his “map” of different branches of ideology studies, Jonathan Leader Maynard labels as “discursive approaches” two traditions that are, I think, better understood as appearing in the late-Marxist tributary: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and post-structuralist analysis. Both tend to use the word pejoratively and both conceive ideology “as produced by power and relations of domination, and as serving to sustain (though sometimes also challenge) those relations.” Jonathan Leader Maynard, “A Map of the Field of Ideological Analysis,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 18, no. 3 (2013): 305.



by the interests of the dominant group through motivated thinking or propaganda. One further idea is that (e) once dominated people have lost their naïveté about the causes of their beliefs, their pretended evidence and reasons would lose their force. If this were to happen on a mass scale, the ideology's spell would break, undermining the system of domination. For example, as Brian Leiter puts it, in developing his own late-Marxist account of ideology, because people are naturally concerned with their own interests and the ideology is opposed to most people's interests, "if those in the grips of the ideology understood the actual causal process by which they came to hold these pernicious beliefs they would no longer accept them."<sup>37</sup> This hopeful conviction underlies attempts at "consciousness raising" in movements influenced by Marx.

This late-Marxist account of ideology is ideological in Tracy's sense, insofar as it offers a causal explanation for ideas. It is ideological also in Marx and Engels's sense, insofar as it is idealist, per claims (b) and (e). This new account reflects the blending of Marxism with other intellectual traditions in the twentieth century, particularly in psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and continental philosophy. According to this turn of mind, we are submerged in language and socially constructed categories of which we are not fully conscious. We lack access to any "reality" apart from such categories. In this Marx-influenced belief system, the social world remains exploitative, but not merely or primarily economically. All social relations seem tainted with constructed forms of domination and self-interested ideological "mystifications."<sup>38</sup> In this account, the relations of oppression are not caused by the forces of production necessary to this stage of history and contributing positively to the next; rather, in reverse, the current structure of oppressed and oppressor, including the economic system, are sustained by socially constructed categories. There can be no science that describes the base "reality" that, according to Marx and Engels, is the prime mover. Instead, in one version of this late Marxism, the whole thing seems to be based on arbitrary power. Words like "truth" and "reality" now need scare quotes, as even the distinction between truth and falsehood appears as another mask for ideological domination.

The account known today as Marxist makes ideology a false belief system that rationalizes the status quo structures of oppressive power where those beliefs function to support those power structures and thus the interests of the powerful. The line from Marx and Engels through Antonio Gramsci, Mannheim, Louis

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<sup>37</sup> Brian Leiter, "Marx, Law, Ideology, Legal Positivism" (Public Law and Legal Theory Working Papers, University of Chicago Law School, 2014), 5–6.

<sup>38</sup> As James Kavanagh explains the now standard late-Marxist sense in literary theory, it is no longer focused on economic exploitation and oppression: "Notwithstanding its roots in a class-based understanding of history, contemporary ideology theory also recognizes that perceived forms of social 'reality' and subjectivity are constructed within more than one system of differences. In various socially specific ways, differences of sex, race, religion, region, education, and ethnicity, as well as class, form complex webs of determinations that affect how ideology works up a 'lived' relation to the real." He adds, emphasizing its universality: "Ideology is a social process that works on and through every social subject, that, like any other social process, everyone is 'in' whether or not they 'know' or understand it." James Kavanagh, "Ideology," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 311.

Althusser, and many others forms a second major tributary of our current meaning of the word “ideology.”

### Tributary (c): Social scientists

By the mid-twentieth century, the social sciences began converging on a concept of ideology as, in Samuel Huntington’s words, “a system of ideas concerned with the distribution of political and social values and acquiesced in by a significant social group.”<sup>39</sup> Along the same lines, ideology theorist Jonathan Leader Maynard more recently defines ideologies as “[w]orldviews that meaningfully shape ... political thought and political behavior.”<sup>40</sup> The spring of this third tributary is found in the attitudes of earlier social scientists whose influence continues to shape subsequent researchers’ assumptions about how scientifically to study values.

While Max Weber does not develop a theory of ideology, his contributions to the methodology of the social sciences nevertheless help to establish a family of theories that regards ideologies as nonrational, evaluative worldviews that motivate political action and are prone to conflict with other nonrational, evaluative worldviews. Weber argues that prescinding from personal evaluation is an “elementary duty of scientific self-control.”<sup>41</sup> One might object that this ideal of objectivity is impossible in the social sciences because social phenomena are infused with expressions of value. Weber avoids this objection by distinguishing between *making* value judgments and *studying* phenomena that are laden with value judgments: “When the normatively valid is the object of empirical investigation, its normative validity is disregarded. Its ‘existence’ and not its ‘validity’ is what concerns the investigator.”<sup>42</sup> He elaborates:

The “objectivity” of the social sciences depends rather on the fact that the empirical data are always related to those evaluative ideas which alone make them worth knowing and the significance of the empirical data is derived from these evaluative ideas. But these data can never become the foundation for the empirically impossible proof of the validity of the evaluative ideas.<sup>43</sup>

One might further object that value-free science is impossible because social scientists, who are concrete human beings, unavoidably choose their subjects of

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology,” *The American Political Science Review* 51, no. 2 (1957): 454.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Ideological Analysis,” in *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*, ed. Adrian Blau (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 298.

<sup>41</sup> Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” in *Max Weber on the Methodology of Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1949), 98.

<sup>42</sup> Max Weber, “The Meaning of ‘Ethical Neutrality’ in Sociology and Economics,” in *Max Weber on the Methodology of Social Sciences*, 39.

<sup>43</sup> Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” 111.

study according to what they judge valuable. Again, Weber avoids this objection by making a key distinction. Science, he holds,

assumes that the knowledge produced by any particular piece of scientific research should be *important*, in the sense that it should be ‘worth knowing.’ And it is obvious that this is the source of all our difficulties [about the meaning of science for life]. For this presupposition cannot be proved by scientific methods. It can only be *interpreted* with reference to its ultimate meaning, which we must accept or reject in accordance with our own ultimate attitude toward life.<sup>44</sup>

Making value judgments is not something the scientist may do qua scientist, but something one must do as a human being engaging in science (or any activity). There would be no objectivity in the social sciences were objectivity to require either value-free data or value-neutral human beings.

Likewise, according to Weber, a professor has a duty to leave politics out of the classroom, but he may speak “about democracy at a public meeting,” for there “the words you use are not the tools of academic analysis, but a way of winning others over to your political point of view. They are not plowshares to loosen the solid soil of contemplative thoughts, but swords to be used against your opponents: weapons, in short.”<sup>45</sup> Values are not a matter of reason, he says, so conflicts of values are adjudicated by fighting.

In Weber’s requirement for “impartiality,” scholars and teachers are similar to professional political officials who must have the “discipline and self-denial” to leave their evaluations out of it and to follow orders they disagree with.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, political leaders must decide on values. They must “have a cause” backed by “belief” and be ready to “fight.”<sup>47</sup> When reflecting on the ethics of politics and of the leader who acts for a cause, Weber comments, “we find ourselves caught up in a conflict of ultimate worldviews, and it falls to us to choose between them.”<sup>48</sup>

It seems that, to Weber, “nonrational, evaluative worldview” would be redundant. Worldviews have evaluative content and are thus nonrational; they call for decision, not for evidence. If so, how and why should a scientist study them?

Social science can classify and clarify worldviews, which would help political leaders and officials better understand, calculate about, and control our political surroundings. It would push back when a person’s worldview distorts inconvenient facts. It would also help people choose with open eyes between available worldviews because, according to this position, truth is not a standard for values. The most that rationality can accomplish with worldviews is consistency. When

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<sup>44</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), 17–18.

<sup>45</sup> Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 20.

<sup>46</sup> Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures*, 53–54.

<sup>47</sup> Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 78, 54.

<sup>48</sup> Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 78–79.

it comes to values and worldviews, words are weapons. “The different value systems of the world are caught up in an insoluble struggle with one another” that Weber likens to a war among the gods of polytheism, these gods becoming, in our age of disenchantment, impersonal forces.<sup>49</sup> Science can offer no more, as it cannot judge the validity of values and it cannot control these values, which are eternal and indomitable forces in human life: “These gods and their struggles are ruled over by fate, and certainly not by ‘science.’”<sup>50</sup>

Weber’s attitude is complicated. Even as he dedicates himself to science and chastises other scholars and professors for their corruption of it, he insists, with some tragedy, that science cannot address our innermost need to answer the question, “How shall we live?”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, as modern scientific knowledge promises to be power, the nonrationality of values puts hard limits on social scientists as those wishing to be masters and possessors of the social order.<sup>52</sup> We cannot control values—these irrational forces within human life—not even with science. Finally, he says, “Our age is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization, and above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Its resulting fate is that precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have withdrawn from public life.”<sup>53</sup>

Insofar as worldviews motivate people to act together politically, perhaps becoming “causes” championed by charismatic leaders, they seem to be ideologies that resist rationalization’s withdrawal of value from public life. On this account, ideologies would be the battle cries of brigades rushing in headlong to claim the field. It is “a fundamental fact,” for Weber, “that as long as life is left to itself and is understood in its own terms, it knows only that the conflict between these gods is never-ending. Or, in non-figurative language, life is about the incompatibility of ultimate possible attitudes and hence the inability ever to resolve the conflicts between them. Hence the necessity of *deciding* between them.”<sup>54</sup> Thus spake Weber.

Weber makes these arguments in an academic context against those who want science, scientists, and professors to take sides in political and economic struggles. He is not trying to develop a theory of ideology (a word he uses sparingly), but of science and of political action. Still, from this we can recognize attitudes toward worldviews, values, knowledge, and reason that are reflected in subsequent social-scientific traditions that study ideology.

By establishing factual knowledge as an “entirely heterogeneous problem” from answering questions of value,<sup>55</sup> Weber sets up later value-neutral attempts

<sup>49</sup> Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 22.

<sup>50</sup> Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 23.

<sup>51</sup> “How shall we live?” ... The fact that science cannot give us this answer is absolutely indisputable.” Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 17.

<sup>52</sup> “The growing process of intellectualization and rationalization” means “that if only we wished to understand them [the conditions under which we live] we could do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle control everything by means of calculation.” Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 13.

<sup>53</sup> Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 30.

<sup>54</sup> Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 27.

<sup>55</sup> Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 20.

—especially after World War II—to study ideologies in the social sciences. Namely, we can study those belief structures or worldviews by which people interpret their surroundings, take stances on questions of value, and advocate actions and policies, fighting for “a cause” against other such value systems. We can do this without engaging in ideological activities ourselves. As Stanley Fish jabbed at his fellow professors, “Save the world on your own time.”<sup>56</sup> Not only is this separation of roles not a threat to our scholarly integrity; it is required by it. In this tributary, social science students are taught, in their scholarship, to avoid normative claims and terms with evaluative connotations. When words sneak into an essay draft that plainly express values, they are edited out as ideological.

In contrast to tributaries (a) and (b), tributary (c) does not cast ideologies as inherently false, wrong, or evil. While they may sometimes involve false beliefs about facts, their value-content is neither true nor false. In this sense, ideology is part of the human condition precisely because values are both beyond reason and necessary for human life. Some in this tradition conclude that human beings are by nature ideological, which is to say that there are obstacles to human reason and rational citizenship rooted in the way we must think with values and in systems.<sup>57</sup>

Within this third tributary, the tendency toward a lowest-common-denominator approach to definitions has made the concept of ideology increasingly generic. Any belief system seems to count as an ideology by virtue of having normative content that informs social structures and political action and by virtue of possessing some relative coherence, especially if it is also stable (by having “coherence through time”) and if it conflicts with other such systems (by having “coherence vis-à-vis competing ideologies”).<sup>58</sup>

Tributary (c) includes attempts like that of Phillip E. Converse in his influential 1964 article “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” He categorizes voters according to the reasons they offer for their positions. When the voter has a system of beliefs beyond mere self-interest or prudential judgment, this is classified as ideological; the more coherent and systematic, the more ideological. Converse explains:

What is important is that elites familiar with the total shapes of these belief systems have *experienced* them as logically constrained clusters of ideas, within which one part necessarily follows from another. Often such constraint is quasi-logically argued on the basis of an appeal to some super-ordinate value or posture toward man and society, involving premises about the nature of social justice, social change, “natural law,” and the like.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> Leader Maynard, “Ideological Analysis,” 300; Leader Maynard, “A Map of the Field,” 305.

<sup>58</sup> John Gerring, “Ideology: A Definitional Analysis,” *Political Research Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1997): 979.

<sup>59</sup> Phillip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 7.

Notice that in explaining the group of voters he labels ideological, Converse appeals to values.

A more recent example is found in the work of Michael Freeden, who views ideologies as significant “idea-clusters,” each forming a “political *Weltanschauung* [worldview]” that would enable collective action.<sup>60</sup> In 2007, he writes:

The evaluation of truth (not to be confused with facts) is the preserve of ethicists, moralists, and religious preachers, while an awareness of the ubiquity and pervasiveness of ideology relocates its study to the scholarly areas of observation, analysis, and interpretation—by any reasonable account a ‘scientific’ or rather ‘*Wissenschaftliche*’ activity, to which ethical evaluation can and indeed, should, subsequently be attached by others.<sup>61</sup>

Science handles the facts part. Claims of value and deeper “truth” are something for non-scientists to do later. Converse is more on the empirical and Freeden more on the interpretive-conceptual side of the social sciences. While Converse concludes that most people are not ideological, Freeden concludes that everyone is. Neither would self-identify as Weberian, yet they reflect shared Weberian assumptions. Ideologies are there for scientists to observe, analyze, and interpret, but—as far as reason goes—they are at best consistent, governed by a “quasi-logical” constraint imposed by values, attitudes, and postures.

For a century, social scientists have tried to scrub ‘ideology’ of its pejorative stain and have insisted that their usage is value-neutral. According to Joseph Roucek, writing in 1944, in sociological analysis, “‘ideology’ means strictly a system of ideas elaborated in the light of a certain conception of what ought to be.”<sup>62</sup> “Ideology” and “ideologue” are not derogatory terms, he says, yet within a page, Roucek argues:

Science bases its beliefs on the best available evidence; ideology bases its beliefs on selected facts, frequently on imaginary evidence .... Ideologies are pervaded with values. Actions and ideas, as well as ideals, are regarded as ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ Certain things ‘ought to be,’ others ‘ought not.’ Science describes and explains what ‘is’ and says nothing about what ‘ought to be.’ It recognizes only facts, which are brute and ‘indifferent.’ The subjective evaluation, the ‘value-judgment’ is left to the ideologist.<sup>63</sup>

The implication seems to be that giving up on values is the source of science’s superiority over ideology. It is no wonder that Clifford Geertz concludes in

<sup>60</sup> Michael Freeden, “Ideology and Political Theory,” in *The Meaning of Ideology: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Michael Freeden (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Freeden, “Ideology and Political Theory,” 16.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Roucek, “A History of the Concept of Ideology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 5, no. 4 (1944): 479.

<sup>63</sup> Roucek, “A History of the Concept of Ideology,” 480–81.

1964: “Even in works that, in the name of science, profess to be using a neutral sense of the term, the effect of its employment is distinctly polemical.”<sup>64</sup>

Reviewing a century of political science papers on ideology, Kathleen Knight suggests in 2006 that what finally “purged ideology of its pejorative connotations” and “removed the negative implications of bias or false consciousness” was the use of the left-right spectrum.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps it seems this way to researchers because it feels more scientific to measure ideology mathematically, albeit by flattening and distorting people’s beliefs to fit a simplified, two-dimensional model. But notice that this measurement tool itself feeds into a view of politics as a polarized battle of value armies and tempts people to define as villainous either one or both extremes on the scale.

Geertz’s judgment still rings true. The social scientific usage of “ideology” owes its peculiar judgmentalism to its claim of being above judgment. Social scientists continue to try to use this pejorative word nonpejoratively rather than opting for a nonpejorative word. This obliges them to correct outsiders about their technical usage of the term. They seem to say, unlike *other* people, we social scientists do not make *value* judgments, while looking sideways at everyone else and then plotting them on the political scale. Social scientists, as part of their obliged impartiality, wish to undo the stink stuck to the word since Napoleon, yet the word still seems apropos for their purposes, likely because it connotes what they take to be the subrational or non-evidentiary character of values. This situation results, I suggest, from a conflation of reason, science, and value-neutrality, on the one hand, and a conflation of values, preferences, and arbitrariness, on the other hand. That is, the problem results from the assumption that truth is not a standard when it comes to values. To treat values as not possibly true or false is to treat them like things rather than as thoughts, as subject to causes rather than reasons. In this respect, contemporary ideology studies replicate the key maneuver made by Tracy and Marx and Engels.

Studying blithely, empirical social scientists downstream of Weber become concerned only when some system arises that offends their own arbitrarily chosen personal values. However, they usually lack Weber’s philosophical edge, his Nietzschean sense of tragedy and danger, his awareness that the banishment of the good and the bad from the domain of reason should not only make us question our decisions to engage in “science,” but might fate us to be cannon fodder in an eternal war among the gods.

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<sup>64</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 193. Geertz then wonders “what such an egregiously loaded concept is doing among the analytic tools of a social science,” before admitting that there is no use in protesting: the word is too entrenched in the profession. Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” 199. He tries, instead, to defuse the problem by recasting ideologies as “schematic images of social order” that constitute the apologetic side of culture. Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” 218.

<sup>65</sup> Kathleen Knight, “Transformations of the Concept of Ideology in the Twentieth Century,” *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 4 (2006): 622, 623.



## Estuary

Each tradition sketched above provides a useful concept. Each is like a lens bringing into focus a significant phenomenon: (i) political enthusiasms with a scientific pretense, marked by hostility toward reality and harboring mass-murderous proclivities; (ii) rationalizations for domination; and (iii) networks of beliefs and values structuring social life and animating political behavior. These are all genuine and different phenomena. It is unfortunate that the same word is used to refer to each.

Unlike the bark of a tree and the bark of a dog, the meanings of the word “ideology” are close enough that people often do not notice the differences, creating confusion. When the word is deployed in a closed, interpretive context within one of these traditions, its ambiguity is not hazardous. Across the three specialized contexts, though, theorists talk past each other, so written scholarship should always explain rather than assume its usage.

Worse even than this, outside the banks of these specialized contexts, the tributaries dump everything they have into an estuary that blends their connotations thoughtlessly, despite their contrary currents, mutual accusations, and clashing claims. What trickles down to nonscholars in this estuary is a con-founded mess, a false folk theory of ideology. Namely, ideology would be (a) an irrational belief system, like a political religion, empirically unverifiable, that blinds us to reality, motivates activism, and fights with other systems like it. It (b) provides a myth or rationalization for action that serves group interests and power and is determined by who you are and where you come from. Plus, (c) everyone has one, since your political opinions are based on your values and your values are determined by self-interest and your socioeconomic and political environment. According to this folk theory, which we might call “ideologism,” we are all ideologues.

What makes the ambiguity of “ideology” insidious is that, instead of having three clearly different phenomena going by the same name, the ambiguity makes them all melt together, forming one monstrous amalgamated concept. That concept would convince us that standards of truth and goodness do not apply to our—or anyone’s—social and political beliefs. Attempts to get closer to the truth or course corrections in search of genuine goods are, we are told, just more ideology, more delusions masking power and seeking dominance. The ambiguity of “ideology” would convince us all to dismiss those who disagree with us as merely possessed by some (other) ideology. And it would excuse us to act like ideologues ourselves, for, according to ideologism, we have no alternative. By believing this, we give up on fair statements of facts, on listening with an open mind to those who disagree with us, on compromising prudentially, on rethinking our assumptions, on admitting our team’s flaws and weaknesses, and on broadening our understanding of the good. We give up on these because, according to ideologism, we are not responsible. Our convictions are caused by other forces, like upbringing, interests, and propaganda; “truth” is not a standard for belief; “good” merely expresses a decision and asserts power.

In its current state, the word “ideology” pressures us to become ideologues and makes it more likely that political activity becomes an ever-escalating

culture war, more and more like Weber's battle of the gods. One might wish to retire the word and to invent better phrases for the three specialized meanings: pseudoscientific totalitarian zealotry, interest-serving rationalizations, and political outlooks. Alas, the word is so entrenched as to make that a false hope.

Just as mixing the wrong aspects of the three concepts has produced a monstrosity, perhaps we might imagine a better mixture of the three concepts of ideology. Human beings desire to understand, to find explanations of the way things are, to judge things in the light of the way they should be, to make sense of things—ultimately, to make sense of everything together. We might imagine a belief system that is consistent, comprehensive, and well-evidenced; whose values affirm genuine goods; that endorses the perfect policies rather than the powers that to be; and that wins acceptance by the whole community. This ideal would fulfill the desires implicit in our three concepts. It would be ideology made beautiful. While it is important to remember that such an ideal transcends human reach, it is equally important to remember that such an ideal is sought, implicitly, by the dangerous, corrupt, and imperfect belief systems analyzed by these three traditions of ideological analysis.

### An adverbial account

Casting in this estuary, theorists of ideology have pulled out a wide variety of fish. I am loath to throw another on the pile. Ideology theory seeks a theory of ideology, as though it were a thing out there and our job were to catch, dissect, and classify it. Instead, I suggest we try something else. "Ideology" as the object of thought, as the system of beliefs, is not the primary phenomenon, but rather is derivative of something else.

The problem we started with is that ideology is spoken of in many ways. Deploying an Aristotelian strategy, we might give some order to the ambiguity by determining whether there is a primary sense of ideology from which the others are derivative. For example, health in a living body is the primary meaning toward which other meanings of healthy point, such as when we call food, urine samples, or complexions healthy because they are causes, effects, or displays of health.<sup>66</sup> Just as what is healthy in the primary sense is a living body, what is ideological in a primary sense is ways of thinking. I seek to recenter the concept of ideology around concrete, common, and personally experienced patterns of thought. By calling mine an adverbial account, I hope to redirect our attention away from *what other people* think to *how we* think.

I start with a hunch. Thinking ideologically involves some type of closedness to evidence or a disordered disposition preventing us from considering evidence honestly. This hunch arises from clues left by the traditions sketched above. For the Prudentialists, ideology is closed to those modes of unscientific or inexact evidence by which we recognize the moral law and can identify those compromises with reality that make for prudent policy. People in the grips of an ideology

<sup>66</sup> On this type of ambiguity, also called "*pros hen* equivocation," where many meanings of a term hover around and point back to one focal meaning, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV.2.

turn hostile to reality when the evidence is not what the ideology determines it should be. On Marx and Engels's account, ideology consists in the alienation of theory from practice, ideas from evidence. By dismissing in advance how the thinker's own ideas might be conditioned by historical and material forces, ideology blinds the thinker to those forces. On the late-Marxist account, false consciousness consists in a delusion by which the person is equipped by a ready-made belief system with excuses to explain away the evidence of domination in which we are submerged. On the social-scientific account, values are dismissed as non-evidentiary. Moreover, while social-scientific accounts make relative consistency one of the signature features of ideology, it does not make accuracy or responsiveness to evidence an important feature.

Each of these three traditions supports the hunch that ideological thinking involves developing and clinging to beliefs without regard to evidence. My description of thinking ideologically identifies this as its core.

*Core Feature 1: When thinking ideologically, we close ourselves to counterevidence.* Reason involves an openness to and a striving for evidence. Reason gives us the ability to recognize evidence as the evidence it is. Thinking ideologically involves deploying arguments and ideas—pieces in reason's toolbox—to dismiss evidence without authentically considering it. It is a sophisticated use of rationality to justify unreason.<sup>67</sup> We think ideologically in service to something we believe ideologically. We are not willing to consider our ideologically held belief as wrong, such that we use thinking not to weigh the other possibilities, not to consider the evidence of those who disagree, but to find ways not to. Believing ideologically involves desiring one's assertion to stand and thinking ideologically enslaves reason to this passion.

We can all recall concrete instances when we have encountered ideological thinking in others or have succumbed to it ourselves. The person thinking ideologically often seems to wear blinders. When someone presents counterevidence to their position, the person responds with an excuse or theory to slip away from what the evidence suggests. The person employs evasive maneuvers to avoid genuinely considering alternatives. When thinking ideologically, we build walls around core beliefs to keep evidence away. Certain beliefs nestle closer to our identity as unquestionable and we shuffle other opinions in order to protect them, as though moving pieces on a chessboard to protect the king. We know in advance what types of reasons to roll our eyes at and what types of talk are nonsense.

Although an ideologue avoids confronting counterevidence, that does not entail avoiding confrontation with those who disagree. An ideologue might revel in the battle, delighting in words and arguments just as one enjoys the power felt when wielding a weapon.

We should distinguish between the way we are closed to counterevidence when thinking ideologically and the way we become closed after genuinely considering counterevidence. When closed ideologically, the person guards his

<sup>67</sup> We can use a shoe as a door stopper, but being used as a door stopper is not part of what it means to be a shoe. Likewise, we can use reason for all manner of things (e.g., moneymaking, pleasure maximization, deception, etc.), without any of these uses being definitive of reason.

belief against its possible downgrading by counterevidence. He is protecting something believed as something beloved. In contrast, in closing the case after engaging counterevidence, a person listens, hears enough, and determines that the counterevidence is no credible threat to the claim. He has already offered up his beloved for sacrifice to the truth by exposing himself to correction; he has spoken honestly with himself about the possibility of his own error.

*Core Feature 2: When believing ideologically, we neglect the need for evidence for our own claims.* Going along with our disdain for others' evidence is the overestimation of our own. When in an ideological mode, we are confused and annoyed when someone else wants substantiation for some claim we take as basic. Believing ideologically comes with a feeling of certainty, even if this covers up a deeper feeling of terror. In an exaggerated form of confirmation bias, we deploy as dispositive any evidence suggestive of our view. When thinking ideologically, we may do research looking for evidence, but only for corroboration, as though calling for back-up. We do not, during this process, inwardly question whether our view might be false or undermined by what we find, nor do we look for evidence that might undermine it. We are so certain, that all evidence becomes the source of more certainty, and we are so terrified of being shown wrong, that we will not let any evidence do anything but support our view.

In this adverbial account of thinking ideologically, we do not need a theory of how the belief system serves some macro-level social function, such as protecting the interests of whatever power structure, although it may do so. To assume that the *cui bono* question is answered at the societal level ignores ideology's intrinsic features and more immediate feedback at the personal level. The prime beneficiary of thinking ideologically—and its first victim—is the person thinking ideologically. He wins the right in his own eyes to avoid admitting error and sacrifices to this idol his chance at a more honest encounter with reality.

*Core Feature 3: When thinking ideologically, we have ideas about ideas, usually a theory that allows our ideas to be motivated purely by reason while dissenters' ideas are things caused by other forces.* This feature distinguishes ideological thinking from other forms of obstinacy, makes ideology especially modern, and connects to the word's origin in Tracy's pseudoscience of ideas. Ideological thinking provides an account of causes for how other people think such that we do not have to take their thoughts seriously as thoughts.

There is a meta-moment in the process of ideologically closing oneself to counterevidence. The person thinking ideologically does not merely have a theory, a story about the world, or a mythology justifying the ways things are. Rather, his theory includes a chapter on your theory, an etiology of how you got so wrong. When thinking ideologically, we have in mind who our opponents are and we know (or think we know) what they think and why. This inoculates us against their evidence. Entering into a competitive us-versus-them mode, we downgrade their evidence because it is theirs. Their endorsement renders it unreliable and inadmissible. "Consider the source," we say to ourselves, poisoning the well against opposition. This meta-moment does not involve self-criticism. We protect our ability to continue to believe ideologically by not allowing ourselves to suspect that our own ideas might have, in addition to reasons, ulterior motives or might be conditioned by our circumstances and

experience. There is thus an asymmetry between the way the ideological thinker trusts his own direct access to evidence and the way he regards others' access as blocked, corrupted, or distorted.

Our survey above has recounted the invention, the reinvention, and the re-reinvention of an empirical science of ideas. Part of the scientific pretense of ideology is to regard others' thoughts not as conclusions based (however imperfectly) on reasons, but as things that have been caused by outside forces.<sup>68</sup> A natural corollary is to treat dissenters not as persons, but as things without reason. This attitude of studying other people's ideas as though they were things rather than thoughts has rationalized ignoring dissenters' evidence and has—many million times over—rationalized ignoring their humanity.

In addition to these three core features of thinking ideologically, here are two other common characteristics. *First, when thinking ideologically, we often act as members of an ideological community.* Knowledge is a social achievement. Our sense of objectivity is constituted by the object's availability for verification by others. Others' beliefs aligning with ours reinforces our own. Moreover, we learn practices of knowing from those with whom we share life and conversation. The social character of our knowledge means that when members of our community think ideologically, we are likely to pick up that habit. If members of our community close themselves to counterevidence or to the need for evidence for a belief we hold in common, we are more likely to make these moves ourselves. We form not only epistemic bubbles, where our community as a matter of fact lacks access to evidence that would support alternative claims; we also form echo chambers in which people in our community are trained to spar with counterclaims and equipped with excuses to disqualify counterevidence.<sup>69</sup> It is common and unavoidable to use the judgment of those we trust as an indication of a claim's likely truth. Ideology abuses this heuristic. When we think ideologically, we use our team's belief as proof of a claim; we use the other team's belief as proof against a claim.

*Second, thinking ideologically and accusing other people of doing so reciprocally reinforce each other.* The motivational arrow can run in either direction. When we think ideologically, we dismiss other people's evidence, and thus we might naturally take their supposed lack of decent evidence as proof that they are thinking ideologically. When we start by identifying an opponent as an ideologue or an opposing viewpoint as an ideology, we then naturally discount the person and the viewpoint as not operating reliably with evidence. We might, then, close ourselves to their evidence, and so increase our risk of doing what we accuse them of. Thus, accusations of ideology are often self-implicating.

We see this risk on display in the three dominant traditions, discussed above, of ideology critique and analysis. They are theories about other people—this holds for even the social-scientific approaches, which are about the non-science

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<sup>68</sup> Science's own conclusions are exempt from this treatment. A science that treats the activity of science as just another series of causes and effects in the world would destroy its own authority, for we would have no reason to trust a scientist who admits that his conclusions were not justified with evidence and reasons but were instead merely the causal product of incidental forces.

<sup>69</sup> See C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 141–61.

of value-inclusive belief systems. I would not call any of those traditions “ideologies.” Rather, let us say that each offers an “Other People’s Problem” theory of ideology. There is a heightened risk in each of thinking ideologically, a risk that follows from focusing energy on diagnosing *other* traditions and thinkers as ideological. To balance our analyses of other people, it is helpful to start with an examination of our own habits of thought. In the adverbial account I have offered here, human beings do not always or unavoidably think ideologically. Still, my hunch is that, upon examination, most of us will admit to having some firsthand, internal experience with thinking in this distorted way.

### Unlearning ideology

What is ideology, then, according to the adverbial account? It is primarily a condition of one’s intellectual character. It is a *hexis* (acquired disposition), a habit, a way of holding oneself; it is a readiness to spar with others, to deflect their evidence, and to shield one’s identity from admitting error. Ideological thinking is something we do sometimes and something for which we are responsible. Furthermore, by thinking ideologically often enough, by letting this perversion of reason settle into our spiritual constitution, we establish a disposition and make ourselves ideologues. We take on the vice.

Like other vices, ideology is abetted by natural dispositions; it is acquired by repetition, it can be tightened or loosened by the company we keep, and it is unlearned only when replaced with better habits. Unlearning ideology requires practice believing and thinking non-ideologically.

We might even imagine an education designed to teach people to think non-ideologically. When confronted with possible counterevidence, we must force ourselves—against our fears—to let it be whatever evidence it is. When asked for evidence, we must force ourselves to wonder whether our evidence proves precisely what we are claiming for it. We should consider the ways in which our access to evidence might be conditioned, skewed, or limited and the ways in which others might have access we lack. This education would help us hold on loosely, rather than dogmatically, when we inevitably use shortcuts and heuristics, such as trusting our community’s beliefs when we do not have the inclination or time to investigate better evidence. We should be suspicious when we believe something that is convenient for us or that justifies some dominant interest or power; we should resist vocally when our epistemic communities show signs of facile disregard of dissent. We must not allow others’ ideological behavior to seduce us into dismissing their evidence ideologically.

To teach these virtues, this education would have us confront many significant and well-developed ideas, exploring their strengths and weakness, their origins and trajectories, putting them in playful yet sincere conversation with each other. For words to be weaponized, they must first be words, so this education through words would never treat words as mere weapons. Rather than trying to develop a science that treats thoughts like things caused by biological, economic, or social forces, this would let thoughts be thoughts, which can be more or less true, backed more or less strongly with evidence, and

motivated more or less reasonably. Speculation about ulterior motives could supplement, but not supplant, considerations of reasons.

This education would resist ideologies, but not by giving us the true system of beliefs or some ideal ideology made true and beautiful. It would, instead, teach us to think well and to readjust our ideas to evidence as an ongoing activity. In this, it would counteract the pathologies inherent in “ideology” in the prudentialist and late-Marxist senses of the word and would help us work toward a network of beliefs that the social scientists would call an ideology. However, rather than being at best rational only in the sense of coherence (which leads to the perverse logicity Arendt diagnoses), this network of beliefs would be committed to rational revision.

This education would foster reasonableness as responsiveness and not merely as consistency. By teaching us to identify and reflect on our assumptions, this education might loosen their grip on us and allow us to identify commitments truly worth defending. By recovering the breadth of reason, this education in texts and talk, in argument, theory, history, story, myth, and beauty would help us recognize the evidence by which the evil and the noble, the good, the bad, the better, or the worse show up, and thus would help us converse about how to live and to live together well.

This education does not present itself as a new science of ideas. Indeed, it may seem more like a mixture of intellectual play, character formation, and spiritual practice. It promises us no knowledge that is power. It increases mastery and possession of only ourselves. This very different way of studying ideas is still called by those who love it “liberal education,” and far from replacing it, ideology makes it all the more important.

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