

Towards a General Definition of 'Ideology'

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Any set of normative or programmatic beliefs about social matters is likely to be called an "ideology" in a neutral sense of the word. For in this sense, 'ideology' merely designates the *ideas* advanced by some social movement. With this sense of the term we have nothing more to do. Rather, we must try to define the stronger and pejorative sense in which *some* social programmes are called "ideologies" and some are not.

Unfortunately, usages of this stronger kind are seen to vary. Indeed, because 'ideology' is a pejorative, writers at each end of the political spectrum have acquired the knack of using the word in such a way that it applies to the kind of thinking people do at the *other* end. Thus, in conservative mouths, what makes a set of social beliefs ideological is their revolutionary character, their heedlessness of perduring social realities (Burke, Kirk). In left-liberal or Marxist mouths, what makes beliefs ideological is precisely their conservative force, their tendency to justify ("mystify") certain social realities as "natural" or unchangeable (Engels, Mannheim).

An important step beyond this impasse has been taken by Sir Karl Popper, a philosopher of science. Popper locates the virtue of scientific thinking in its effort to frame *testable* hypotheses. Theories so vague, or so protected by fudge-factors, that no conceivable test could falsify them, cannot count as

"scientific" theories. Their unfalsifiability makes them pseudo-science. It is Popper's view that the defining vice of ideology is this same unfalsifiability. In several famous essays, Popper has tried to show how this vice afflicts both Marxism and Freudianism.

However, the notion of unfalsifiability is a delicate one. The present writer would agree that every sound and useful kind of thinking must be open to test and potential falsification in some way; but they are not all open to test in the same way. Metaphysical systems are certainly open to criticism and refutation, but hardly to "falsification" in the sense appropriate to empirical sciences. There is notoriously a problem, too, about the way in which ethical claims, norms, or value-judgments might be falsified. And since all programs for social action, ideological ones as well as anti-ideological ones, include judgments of good and evil, the difficulty about falsifying these latter will affect the programs themselves. To be sure, it is the present writer's conviction that this difficulty can be met. That is, I think that there exist considerations in the light of which ethical claims can be refuted effectively and objectively. But these cannot be *mere* considerations of empirical fact; and if that much is agreed, it already follows that 'unfalsifiability' is at best an analogical term. Whereupon it may prove inadvisable to press too far with an assimilation of ideology to pseudo-science.

Still, Popper's approach represents a definite advance over a certain Burkean tendency inherited by all too many Anglo-American writers. That tendency has been to identify ideology with "abstraction," with sheer gener-

ality, and hence with "all-embracing" thought about social matters. According to these writers, it is the duty of non-ideologues to be "concrete," "particular," "historical," and (often enough) anti-philosophical to the point of being anti-theoretical.¹ In their hands, the defense of the institutions which Conservatives prize tends to become too modest to be effective: the attachment to history comes to sound like historicism, and the attachment to concrete experience comes to sound like a Humean scepticism. When these tendencies are conjoined, the Conservative case reduces to saying something like this: "This is the way things have always been done (among us), and we don't know that anything else would work (here)." Moreover, a thorough-going social particularism is oddly self-defeating. Any attempt to *state* such a particularism will fail to be particular. "No social reality should be treated in an abstract way," for example, treats abstractly of all social realities! No, the attempt to separate ideological social programs from non-ideological ones on some quasi-semantic basis such as "abstractness" or "generality" is hopeless. What matters is not the abstractive remoteness of the thought from particular matters of fact but rather the stance of the thinker towards matters of fact. And that much, at least, Popper has suggested.

What I propose to offer below, therefore, is an account of ideology which begins with a matter of attitude, with how a social thinker *holds* his

¹ Several other strands of thought usually labelled "Conservative" -- from Catholic social doctrine on one wing to libertarian Capitalism on the other -- are highly theoretical. Hence they tend to be avoided by the Burkeans -- if not actively distrusted, then politely acknowledged and ignored.

beliefs, and proceeds from there to define what it is that makes the beliefs themselves ideological. The result will be compatible with Popper's view but will have a different point of departure.

We may begin with two necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for any set of beliefs to be or become an "ideology." The first is that it have directive power. These beliefs must be able to direct action, point up abuses, etc. Hence the set of beliefs must include normative claims about social matters. The second condition is equally obvious: the set of beliefs must be logically fertile. It must have far-flung implications, not all of them obvious at first blush; only so can it fascinate the mind and serve as a key to the solution of various social questions.

Now, in proportion as such a set of normative/programmatic social beliefs is held consciously and passionately, that set of beliefs relates to the whole set of social realities as "figure" relates to "ground." These latter terms are borrowed from the theory of human perception, but their more general employment has been made familiar by Marshall McLuhan. Let *B* be such a set of social beliefs. What serves to bring a thing like *B* into high relief as a figure? The answer, I think, is two-fold. On the one hand, the beliefs contained in *B* stand out or "contrast" with the existing social reality (the ground) because of some conflict or dissonance between the two. Social reality, which we may call *R*, does not altogether reflect the beliefs in *B* about how it ought to be. Hence the beliefs are interesting; they lead to action; there is some *point* to holding them. On the other hand, a set *B* of

beliefs comes into relief as "figure" in proportion as some rival set of beliefs, *B'*, is socially influential as a counter-figure.

Hence there are two very different kinds of relations upon which *B*'s status as a figure depends. The first kind of relation is semantic; *B* refers to social realities, some of which are out of conformity with it. The second kind of relation is logical; *B* conflicts with rival normative beliefs. By virtue of the first kind of relation, certain parts of social reality must appear as flawed, "not OK," in need of change. By virtue of the second kind, one or more other social programmes must appear as deleterious, and those who advance them must appear as hostile forces.

All of which is a windy way to say the obvious: a situation of socio-political conflict is the pre-condition for the emergence of ideology. It is only in such situations of conflict that one can speak of a figure/ground relation between *B*, as a distinguished object of conscious reflection (an object of interpretation, inference, application, defense, etc.), and the vast expanse of social realities, *R*, which, far from being a distinct object of consciousness when *B* is entertained, is present only at the "corners" of the mind's eye, providing the source and ground from which the elements of *B* and their overt referents are "detached."

We are now ready for two preliminary definitions.

(D₁) A set of beliefs, *B*, is held "ideologically" when, and only when, no element of *R* is accepted as good ("OK," not in need of reform) or indifferent, unless it follows from *B* that that element is good or indifferent.

Was it all right to wear make-up? Was it all right to dress fashionably? Was it still all right to marry and have a family? Was it OK to believe in God or say, "Our Father"? Earnest young feminists did not know, until a deduction had been made, one way or the other, from a core set of feminist beliefs. A clear case of ideological attitude -- characteristic to the point of caricature.

Vice-versa:

(D₂) A set of beliefs, *B*, is held "anti-ideologically" when, and only when, every element of *R* is presumed good ("OK," not in need or reform) or indifferent, unless it follows from *B* that there is something wrong with that element.

Could one keep one's job? Could one remain a slave? Was it all right to marry or hold civil office? St. Paul's answers to the questions of early Christians very quickly made it clear that all the normal social arrangements of the time were acceptable, unless it clearly followed from something in the gospel that they weren't (promiscuous unions, pagan liturgies). A classic case of non-ideological thinking.

Notice that in both cases we are dealing with highly distinctive sets of beliefs, normative and logically fertile, and standing in figure/ground relation to the existing social reality. But in the first case, the figure puts

the social ground "into question" or "in suspense." In the second case, it does not.

Now for a third and final definition.

(D₃) An "ideology" is a set of normative and logically fertile social beliefs, *B*, which contains elements sufficient to encourage those who hold *B* to hold it in the ideological way [cf. (D₁)]. Those who do so are "ideologues."

Here the only new idea is "encouragement." I have in mind the familiar fact that our normative or programmatic beliefs tend to influence our behavior, including our mental behavior regarding other beliefs, in proportion as we take them seriously. The strongly held belief that we ought to be logical, or ought to be radical, or ought to be empirical, or ought to be uncompromising, has that kind of influence. Such beliefs "encourage" us to act in a certain way and to entertain other beliefs in a certain spirit. I wish to say that the same power to "encourage" attaches to beliefs like these:

- it is within our power to alter all social realities as we please,
- all past history has been a tale of alienation and oppression,
- all the ideal features of the Kingdom of God can be set up on earth,

or

- all events significant enough to have been widely reported should be understood as the machinations of hidden conspirators.

Beliefs such as these latter have so great a tendency to put the total ground of social reality "into question," that one can fairly say that their

inclusion in any programmatic set of social beliefs "encourages" those who hold that set to act as ideologues.

I close by noting two advantages of this account.

First, my account permits an immediate derivation of the Popperian property of unfalsifiability (broadly understood) for all ideologies. Because the ideological way of holding the figure, *B*, puts the whole social ground, *R*, into question, it is difficult (and often psychologically impossible) for any reality in that ground to emerge as a potential falsifier of *B*. Every potential falsifier can be written off as a mere part of the "conspiracy," or as part of the "old system," or as part of "this world which passeth away," and hence as something destined to disappear in proportion as man implements *B*.

The second advantage of this account is that it illuminates how there can be persons holding an ideology in a non-ideological way and, vice-versa, persons holding in an ideological way what is objectively not an ideology. If a Socialist tends to take with a grain of salt those portions of Socialist doctrine which encourage a totalistic suspicion of traditional social arrangements, the result is a Socialist who strikes us as a reasonable fellow, open-minded, not an ideologue. Vice-versa, if a born-again Christian holds his new faith in such a way that every aspect of the personal and social existence he formerly took for granted is now dismissed as "the un-saved world's way of doing things," and hence is excluded from Christian acceptance unless and until something in the Bible is found to justify it, the result is a Christian ideologue, even if his explicit theology contains none of those curious (e.g. Joachimite) heresies that would render his Christianity itself an ideology.