Ideology, Common Knowledge and Social Structure
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I. Introduction and Background
Within social theory, broadly construed, ideology is identified as source of much trouble. Ideology distorts our beliefs, compromising our ability to gain knowledge; it distorts our practical reasoning, leading us to act in ways that are immoral and/or contrary to our own interests. For example, race and racism are themselves sometimes referred to as “ideologies,” (Fields 1982, 1990; Shelby 2003, 155) or at the very least it is assumed that racism is sustained and supported by ideology; there are clear parallels with sex and sexism. If we are interested in undermining systematic forms of subordination, it would seem that we should seek to understand what an ideology is so we can figure out how best to intervene to disrupt it.

There are, of course, different understandings of ideology and ideology critique. Typically ideologies are considered to be representations of social life that serve in some way to undergird social practices. This makes them of special interest to humanists who are in the business of identifying and critically interrogating such representations. However, there is disagreement over the nature of the representations, their causes and their effects. On some uses, the term ‘ideology’ is used in a descriptive sense to capture any such representation, on other uses it is pejorative, intended to indicate that the representation in question is misguided. Moreover, sometimes ideologies are taken to be forms of “practical consciousness” that reside in the minds of individual agents; sometimes they are cultural phenomena, presupposed somehow in collective social life; sometimes they are explicit theories articulated by politicians, philosophers and religious figures, among others.

The causal or explanatory role of ideology within a broader social theory is also unclear. Within the context of Marxist thought it is sometimes held that ideologies are epiphenomenal. On this view, the causal forces of history occur at the level of material production, and although ideas change as material conditions change, the appearance of any internal development of ideas, or efficacy of ideology on material conditions, is an illusion. (Elster MSM 468-9, Marx GI 36-7). This, however, is an extreme view. A more moderate, though still Marxian, view is that ideologies have some degree of autonomy relative to material conditions and yet are selected, in part, for their ability to stabilize relations of power. (The idea seems to be quasi-evolutionary: just as natural selection takes advantage of genetic mutations to enable species to fit ever more snugly in their environmental niche, so ideological mutations are adopted that enable the dominant class to fit ever more snugly in its social niche.)

[I’ll insert here some other material on different ways ideology is thought to function.]

II. Goal and Problems
There are many ways to sort through these different senses and dimensions of ideology. The question I’d like to consider here is whether there a way to understand ideology that provides room for intellectuals, or more narrowly, philosophers, to facilitate social change. Much ink is spilled by intellectuals who would love to make a difference, not only by their activism, but by their work. But it is less clear how this is to be done, even in principle. The question I want to take up is not how to be effective in the socio-political domain as an intellectual. That is an important question, but press agents and social psychologists are likely to have more useful things to say about it than I am. What I want to know is whether, and if so how, ideas make a difference: where are the points in the grinding machinery of social life where a new idea, or the criticism of an old idea, can matter, even supposing the idea somehow caught on.
DRAFT ONLY: Please do not quote, etc.

[Some may find this an odd question because they find it obvious that if an idea caught on it would make a difference. I am much more cynical, perhaps, or maybe just discouraged. The idea that women are equal to men has, I think, caught on. But I don’t really see much change in structures of power. Is that just because social change is slow? Or perhaps – and this may be the real topic of this paper – we exactly is it for an idea to have ‘caught on,’ and what more, if anything, is needed for it to result in social change.]

‘Ideology’ or ‘Discourse’?
Within the trends of post-modernist thought, the concept of ‘ideology’ is in disrepute. So it might seem odd to frame the questions I want to take up with this term. However, because I myself am rather ambivalent about postmodernism, it doesn’t worry me too much that ‘ideology’ is out of favor amongst its adherents. However, there are several concerns that arise in critiques of ideology that will be worth having in mind as we proceed. I’ll mention three (See Foucault 1984 (Rabinow), 60, quoted in Hoy 2004, 196-7; Fraser 1989, Ch. 1; Purvis and Hunt 1993):

i) Ideology is usually contrasted with truth, but the notion of truth is problematic because, e.g., we lack access to the truth. So a concept wedded to the true/false dichotomy is not useful. [Although I am lover of the truth and the true/false dichotomy, as we will see, there are important questions about whether the most apt way to evaluate ideologies is in terms of their truth or falsity.]

ii) Ideology is understood as a form of consciousness and ideology critique as a criticism of its contents. However, the relationship between consciousness and practice is complicated; if the target is our practices, we need to be clearer about how a change of conscious matters. E.g., Fraser, interpreting Foucault, suggests that the very fact that the issue is our practices “rules out” the strategy of ideology critique.

...Foucault’s genealogy of modern power establishes that power touches people’s lives more fundamentally through their social practices than through their beliefs. This, in turn, suffices to rule out political orientations aimed primarily at the demystification of ideologically distorted belief systems. (Fraser 1989, 18)

iii) Ideology assumes that it makes sense to speak of a “group consciousness,” as if members of a social group all experience things in the same way. But this is at best misleading. (Hoy 2004, 200). There are two sorts of questions here. First, who or what is the proper subject of an ideology (an individual, a group, a society?). Second, how pervasive must an idea be to count as an ideology? If ideologies are not completely pervasive, how do they have their “undergirding” effects? If they are pervasive, how do they establish their hegemony (See Fields 1990, 112-113)?

In light of these concerns, Foucauldians have adopted the notion of ‘discourse’ in place of ‘ideology’. The choice of whether to revise the notion of ‘ideology’ to address these (and other) concerns or to adopt instead a notion of ‘discourse’ that avoids them from the start (but brings other disadvantages with it), is complex; although there is substantial overlap between the notions, they draw upon different theoretical and political traditions. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will adopt the working assumption that there is a valuable role for a reconstructed notion of ideology. Whether there is, and what it might be, will have to emerge as we go along. [Though it might be said now that the best reason, to my mind, for not simply embracing the notion of ‘discourse’ as a replacement is that the Foucauldian notion of ‘discourse’ provides less conceptual space for the possibility of critique. This is related to Foucault’s unwillingness to take a genuinely normative stance.]

Setting aside, for the moment, the concerns just mentioned, the core idea underlying the notion of ideology seems to be this: We are not simply cogs in structures and practices of subordination, we enact them. And something about how we represent the world is both a constitutive part of that enactment and keeps it going.
…ideology and discourse refer to pretty much the same aspect of social life – the idea that human individuals participate in forms of understanding, comprehension or consciousness of the relations and activities in which they are involved...This consciousness is borne through language and other systems of signs, it is transmitted between people and institutions and, perhaps most important of all, it makes a difference; that is, the way in which people comprehend and make sense of the social world has consequences for the direction and character of their action and inaction. Both ‘discourse’ and ‘ideology’ refer to these aspects of social life. (Purvis and Hunt 1993, 474; see also McCarthy 1990, 440)

They continue:

If ‘discourse’ and ‘ideology’ both figure in accounts of the general field of social action mediated through communicative practices, then ‘discourse’ focuses upon the internal features of those practices, in particular their linguistic and semiotic dimensions. On the other hand, ‘ideology’ directs attention towards the external aspects of focusing on the way in which lived experience is connected to notions of interest and position that are in principle distinguishable from lived experience. (Purvis and Hunt, 476)

It is ideology’s concern with the external aspects of representation: the causes, effects, and mis-representational possibilities that give it its critical edge. Optimistically, then, we might tentatively think of ideology as (a) an element in a system that causes or sustains hierarchy/subordination that is (b) susceptible to (direct?) change through some form of cognitive critique. Although “understanding, comprehension, or consciousness” can be surprisingly entrenched, the hope of politically motivated intellectuals is that some kind of cognitive intervention can have politically meaningful results.

[Is there anything like this? Is the construal too broad: anything can be changed if we change our minds? Or is it too narrow? More specifically, is there anything that is both a constitutive part of the actions that subordinate and also perpetuates the subordination? How important is this particular formulation of the idea?]

III. Ideology as belief and Ideology critique as underwritten by epistemology

Many theorists seem to construe ideology as a set of beliefs. (See Elster, Shelby, et al) The advantage of this is that ideology can be easily critiqued on straightforward epistemic grounds. Problems however:

- Beliefs seem too cognitive, or too “intellectual”:

  Ideology is concerned with the realm of the lived, or the experienced, rather than of ‘thinking’. An important example through which to make this point is provided by the notion of ‘common sense’. It is precisely the ‘spontaneous’ quality of common sense, its transparency, its ‘naturalness’, its refusal to examine the premises on which it is grounded, its resistance to correction, its quality of being instantly recognizable which makes common sense, at one and the same time, ‘lived’, ‘spontaneous’, and unconscious. We live in common sense – we do not think it. (Purvis and Hunt, 479)

  But what if we include in the “cognitive” not only thought but perception, experience broadly construed, unconscious or tacit attitudes, etc.

  But the kind of knowledge seems not merely representational but involves “know how,” abilities, habits, behaviors that are more primitively embodied. (It may be useful to draw here on Jen Hornsby’s notion of “practical knowledge” concerning what an agent does directly, e.g., saying something in one’s “mother tongue”. (See Hornsby 2005)

- Beliefs aren’t sufficiently flexible. Ideologies seem to work at the level of “slogans” that can be interpreted in different ways by different constituencies and over time. (Fields 1982, 155-9)
• Beliefs may be too individualistic. Who is the subject of the ideology? (And can collectives be the subject of belief?) Many people who live in a culture and follow its practices don’t have the beliefs that are ordinarily identified as ideological. Options: (a) we attribute the ideology to the group even if not all of the members of the group have the beliefs. This would be collective belief, like “the committee believes that…” But there are still questions: what determines whether the group has the belief? Must the majority believe it? Note that the analogy with the committee breaks down because there are no explicit decision procedures in the cases in question. (b) individuals have ideologies—but then we still need to know what it is for a culture/society to have an ideology; (c) practices/institutions have ideologies—but how do we understand this except through (a) and (b)? Practices can be interpreted in many ways, and there are many different and competing practices in a society [see Stevens’ review of Wuthnow].

• Common knowledge makes things worse because typically accounts of common knowledge assume not only that the members of the collective believe p, but believe of each other member that they believe p. Also, if conventions involve common knowledge, this suggests that ideology shouldn’t be understood as a set of conventions.

III. Social structure
In order to develop an account of ideology, it will be useful to think about the relationship between agents and social structures generally: what are social structures, and how do agents create, maintain, and participate in them? Of course, here too there are multiple models to consider. In particular, there is a lot of pertinent interdisciplinary work on this topic by social historians, social psychologists, and sociologists interested in subordination and critical resistance. Let me sketch the outlines of a model that I find especially useful, and philosophically rich. We’ll then return to consider how we might position ideology and ideology critique in the model.

William Sewell, drawing on Anthony Giddens, argues for an account that takes structures to be “both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems.” (Sewell 1992, 4, quoting Giddens 1981, 27). Sewell continues: “Structures shape people’s practices, but it is also people’s practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures. In this view of things, human agency and structure, far from being opposed, in fact presuppose each other.” (Sewell 1992, 4). This role of structure as both medium and outcome, Sewell refers to as its “duality”. [It would help to have a clearer sense of this duality of medium and outcome. Is this related to the point above that ideology both constitutes and sustains problematic social relations?]

Sewell’s model of structure is dual in a second sense as well. Giddens’ is known for identifying structures as “rules and resources.” On Sewell’s account, the combination becomes “schemas and resources.” (Sewell 1992, 8). Let’s consider schemas first.

Schemas
Sewell takes schemas to include “all the variety of cultural schemas that anthropologists have uncovered in their research: not only the array of binary oppositions that make up a given society’s fundamental tools of thought, but also the various conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action, and habits of speech and gesture built up with these fundamental tools.” (Sewell 1992, 7-8). It is crucial to Sewell that these schemas are intersubjective and transposable in response to new circumstances.1

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1 From Sewell, “Throughout his theory, Giddens places a great deal of weight on the notion that actors are knowledgeable. It is, presumably, the knowledge of rules that makes people capable of action. But Giddens develops no vocabulary for specifying the content of what people know. I would argue that such a vocabulary is, in fact, readily available, but is best developed in…cultural anthropology. After all, the usual social scientific term for “what people know” is “culture,” and those who have most fruitfully theorized and studied culture are the anthropologists.” (7) Think about comparison between what people know when they know a language and what people know when they know a culture. Following Hornsby, it doesn’t make sense to understand this as entirely “procedural knowledge” (One can ϕ by ψ-ing, etc). “…some things…must be done without possession of
Responding to Sewell, Judith Howard (a social psychologist) points out that Sewell’s (1992) use of the term *schema* is different from its use in social psychology. Whereas social psychologists tend to think of schemas as concerned with the organization of an individual’s thought, Sewell develops the notion in a way that highlights its cultural deployment and its substantive content. She suggests: “A synthesis of these conceptions of schemas might prove remarkably useful: the stricter social cognitive models provide a sound basis for predicting how and when intraindividual schemas change, whereas the more recent sociological conceptions say more about how group interactions shape the formation and evolution of cultural schemas.” (Howard 1994, 218) If we take Howard’s idea seriously, we explore the interdependence between individual schemas and their cultural counterparts. “Schemas, for example, are both mental and social; they both derive from and constitute cultural, semiotic, and symbolic systems.” (Howard 1994, 218). (NB: here too there is a suggestion that something both constitutes and sustains social systems.)

What are we to make of this? Schemas are intersubjective patterns of perception, thought and behavior. They are embodied in individuals as open-ended dispositions to see things a certain way or to respond habitually in particular circumstances (i.e., they are “situated,” prompted by specific settings). Schemas encode knowledge and also provide scripts for interaction with each other and our environment. They also exist at different depths. Deep schemas are pervasive and relatively unconscious. Surface schemas are more narrow and are easier to identify and change; but their change may leave the deeper schema intact. For example, rules concerning gender differences in clothing have changed, but it remains the case that the more formal the event, the more strict the gender codes. Does this suggest that in contexts where power, authority, and prestige are managed, the deep schema of women as submissive or hobbled property of men still functions?

[As Howard notes, even if we have the concept of a sociocognitive schema, this leaves many questions unanswered, e.g., how and when are such schemas formed both in the individual and in the culture? What explains their formation and disruption? How are they transposed? (etc.) But in thinking about ideology, schema seems to be an improvement on belief or common knowledge.]

**Resources**

It is clear that social structures are not merely schemas because social structures have material existence and a reality that “pushes back” when we come to it with the wrong or an incomplete schema. For example, the schema of dichotomous sex categories is manifested in the design and labeling of toilet facilities. The automobile-centricity of certain regions of the country is manifested in the wide roads without sidewalks or bike lanes.

There is a further suggestion in Giddens and Sewell that schemas are only “virtual” rather than “actual”. This is misleading, however, for if schemas include dispositions – habits and the like – then they are not just images or representations that exist only in the mind, but are embodied. The point may be, however, that if we’re analyzing social structures, then in addition to the mental content or disposition there must be an actualization of it in the world, i.e., an enactment of it, and any actualization will involve something material.

Giddens and Sewell incorporate materiality in the account of social structures by including, in addition to schemas, resources. Roughly, resources are anything that “can be used to enhance or maintain power.” (Sewell 1992, 9) This includes human resources such as “physical strength, dexterity, knowledge, and emotional commitments that can be used to enhance or maintain power, including knowledge of the
means of gaining, retaining, controlling, and propagating either human or non-human resources.” (9) Non-human resources include animate and inanimate things.

How do schemas and resources together constitute social structures? Sewell suggests a causal interdependence, “Structure, then, should be defined as composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and of resources, which are actual. If structures are dual in this sense, then it must be true that schemas are the effects of resources, just as resources are the effects of schemas.” (13) He elaborates:

A factory is not an inert pile of bricks, wood, and metal. It incorporates or actualizes schemas….The factory gate, the punching-in station, the design of the assembly line: all of these features of the factory teach and validate the rules of the capitalist labor contract….In short, if resources are instantiations or embodiments of schemas, they therefore inculcate and justify the schemas as well. (13)

If schemas are to be sustained or reproduced over time – and without sustained reproduction they could hardly be counted as structural – they must be validated by the accumulation of resources that their enactment engenders. Schemas not empowered or regenerated by resources would eventually be abandoned and forgotten, just as resources without cultural schemas to direct their use would eventually dissipate and decay. Sets of schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute structures only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time. (13)

Note that in the last sentence Sewell says that the two elements of structure “imply and sustain each other”. Although it is possible to see the relationship as simply causal interdependence, this suggests a constitutive relationship as well: the pile of bricks, wood, and metal is a punching-in station because there are schemas that direct employers to pay employees by the hour and employees to keep track of their hours. The schema for keeping track of hours directs is a punching-in schema because there is a punch-clock that the employer will use as a basis for calculating wages. Without the invention of the punch-clock, there could be no punching-in schema. This is not just a causal relationship, but demonstrates the incorporation of the material in our action and behavior, i.e., in our intentional and sub-intentional lives. [This needs to be clarified! How are schemas and resources co-constitutive?]

Sewell points out that structures can be assessed not only on their depth (pervasiveness), but on their power. Some structures, e.g., the economy, the military, mobilize substantial power. Others, e.g., very local or playful structures work with much less. Some structures, such as capitalism, are both deep and powerful. Others may be powerful but not deep, or deep but not powerful.

So on this account:

Structures, then, are sets of mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that social action. But their reproduction is never automatic. Structures are at risk, at least to some extent, in all of the social encounters they shape – because structures are multiple and intersection, because schemas are transposable, and because resources are polysemic and accumulate unpredictably. Placing the relationship between resources and cultural schemas at the center of a concept of structure makes it possible to show how social change, no less than social stasis, can be generated by the enactment of structures in social life. (Sewell 1992, 19)

IV. Ideology in the pejorative sense and Ideology critique
If we work within a framework of this sort (details can wait to be worked out), how might we think of ideology? Recall, this is what we were tentatively aiming for: Ideology is (a) an element in a system that causes or sustains hierarchy/subordination that is (b) susceptible to (direct?) change through some form of cognitive critique. Three options look promising:

i) Ideology as structure
   • Not all structures cause or sustain subordination (I hope!)
• Because structures involve resources, they aren’t (in the relevant sense?) directly responsive to critique.
• It looks like we should reject this option if we’re looking for something that meets conditions (a) and (b).

ii) Ideology as schema
• Not all schemas cause or sustain subordination.
• Are schemas directly responsive to critique? Does this depend on what sort of critique? Does this depend on what we mean by “directly”? (Recall that schemas are both individual and cultural (intersubjective).)
• It looks like we should reject this option, at least because it doesn’t fit well with (a). It is unclear whether it fits with (b). To determine this we should look further at how schemas can go wrong (see option (iii)).

• Critique of schemas is not like critique of belief. (Very likely also epistemic critique of belief has less value than we sometimes accord it in political debate!)

• Note that there are three traditional forms of ideology critique: epistemic, functional, genetic. (Geuss 1981, Shelby 2003)

 o Functional critique: “…what makes some discourses [in this context, equivalent to schemas] ideological is their connection with systems of domination. Ideological discourses contain forms of signification that are incorporated into lived experience where the basic mechanism of incorporation is one whereby sectional or specific interests are represented as universal interests.” (Purvis and Hunt, 497)

 o Genetic critique: the source of the schema is the dominant group. But source of a schema is not by itself a good basis for rejecting or changing it. Such critique would have to depend on functional or epistemic features of the schema.

 o Epistemic critique: e.g., enacted schemas seem to be self-justifying: they produce the effects that seem to warrant them; they mask evidence of their own flaws.
  ▪ But recall that we’re not talking about beliefs, but schemas. How should we think of epistemic warrant for images, habits, dispositions? What sort of epistemic critique is apt for knowing how, e.g., knowing how to open the door for a lady, knowing how to punch the time-clock?
  ▪ We can critique habits of thought, habits of inference, habits of perception on epistemic grounds.
  ▪ We can critique schemas for a variety of faults, e.g., …a form of social consciousness may be ideological in ways that are not fully or accurately conveyed by simply calling the set of beliefs “false.” This is part of the rationale behind using the vague term ‘cognitive defect’ to refer to the negative epistemic characteristics of ideologies….There are many types of cognitive error that are typical of ideological thinking – inconsistency, oversimplification, exaggeration, half-truth, equivocation, circularity, neglect of pertinent facts, false dichotomy, obfuscation, misuse of authoritative sources, hasty generalization, and so forth. (Shelby 2003, 166)
o Even if we know something we do is bad (unwarranted, self-undermining), such knowledge may not result in a change of behavior. One can know that biting fingernails is a nasty habit, but continue to do it. One can know that relying on racial stereotypes is bad, but continue to do it. (Though, knowing that a habit is bad may be an important step in trying to change it.)

o Failure to adhere to cultural schemas brings negative social repercussions. People are strongly motivated to employ the intersubjective schemas they’ve learned. These schemas, in a sense, constitute social reality.

o Insofar as schemas are enacted and materialized, the world reinforces them (both politically and evidentially). Old schemas are never thrown away until there is a new schema available. A new schema remains virtual (and apparently unreal) until it is enacted. Problem: the only reliable way of undermining a schema is through repeated exposure to counter-examples. But counter-examples do not appear as such due to the grip of the schema (and there are pragmatic reasons not to see or become a counter-example.)

o Nevertheless, is some form of critique useful?

Conclusion
In considering whether to explore the notion of ideology we noted three potential concerns: (i) whether ideologies are true or false; (ii) how, if they are a form of consciousness, they relate to practice; and (iii) whether they presuppose a group consciousness or a pervasive belief set.

I’ve suggested that one way of thinking about ideologies is as problematic schema that partly constitute and sustain social structures. They function both individually and intersubjectively, but they do not presuppose a “group consciousness,” or shared belief. Moreover, ideologies can be deep (pervasive), or on the surface (highly local). If ideologies are schemas, then they are not, paradigmatically, true or false. Yet there are a number of ways in which they can be criticized, both politically and epistemically.

The question that remains is, in a sense, the most important one. Can philosophers and other academics make a difference by their work, in undermining the ideological grip of racism and sexism? If what I’ve outlined is right, the window of opportunity is depressingly small. As I see it, the best route is not to combat the schemas directly, but to work to change the attitudes driving those who have the power to influence material circumstances – the organization and distribution of resources – that appear to confirm the schemas. Philosophical arguments for changes in the law, in taxation, in deed restrictions/zoning, voting districts, parental benefits, educational opportunities, and such may make a difference to those who have some power to influence such things. Other than this, we have to devote ourselves to making a difference by our actions and our lives.
References:


