

## Ideology - 19th vs 20th Century

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Date: Fri, 9 Feb 1996 13:16:24 -0500  
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)" ([idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu](mailto:idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu))  
Subject: Re: Ideology (19th vs 20th century)

Date: Fri, 9 Feb 1996 17:36:27 +0900 (JST)  
From: [JLM@twics.com](mailto:JLM@twics.com)

Bill Everdel writes,

"I would want to argue that the major difference between the thinking of the 19th century and that of the 20th is an acceptance of unsystematic relations between things, especially ideas, a taste for sharp edges over smooth fairings, for divisionism over sfumato, for catastrophe over Entwicklung, and for the ad hoc assemblage over the unitary design. The objection McCreery raises to "ideology" is, I think, to the 19th-century meaning of the word, and it is, I think, a 20th-century objection related more to form than to function or effect."

I must admit that while I find Bill's characterizations provocative, they raise questions for me.

Question 1: Is constructing an opposition of 19th to 20th century in these terms in itself "ideological"? Or is it, instead, an example of the use of binary opposition identified by Levi-Strauss as characteristic of *Pensees Sauvages*? Is there a difference?

Question 2: Is it historical? As an undergraduate studying philosophy at Michigan State in the late 1960s, I found the proposition that "science" broadly construed depends on systematic relations between all things alive and well in what I was taught. I was, admittedly, in the grip of hard core logical empiricists, but....the deconstructive potential in, forexample, Wittgenstein, was hardly part of the culture at large. Portman, Baudrillard, Derrida, Fish, etc., were barely glimmers on the horizon.

I would also like Bill to say a bit more about "a 20th-century objection related more to form than to function or effect." I wonder if the common, casual separation of form from function and effect is, in fact, so obvious as this comment makes it appear. As someone in advertising, I deal daily with discussions in which minute differences in form, e.g., a camera angle, the hue or brightness of a color, the phrasing of a bit of copy, are held to have momentous effects. On a more abstract plane, I have learned while writing computer programs that what seem at first glance to be insignificant differences in the way input is represented will often produce catastrophic differences in output. Chaos theory teaches us that these kinds of effects are, in the real world, far more common than we had once been led to suspect. That old "This is anatomy, that is physiology" view of form and function now strikes me as very naive indeed.

John McCreery  
Yokohama  
2/9/96

Date: Sun, 11 Feb 1996 14:49:27 -0500  
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)"  
Subject: Re: Ideology (19th vs 20th century)

Date: Fri, 9 Feb 1996 20:43:42 -0500  
From: [Everdell@aol.com](mailto:Everdell@aol.com)

John McCreery offers me the big end of a huge chew. I suggested that the unsystematic is a characteristic 20thc idea, and he wrote, inter alia:

"Is it historical? As an undergraduate studying philosophy at Michigan State in the late 1960s, I found the proposition that "science" broadly construed depends on systematic relations between all things alive and well in what I was taught. I was, admittedly, in the grip of hard core logical empiricists, but....the deconstructive potential in, for example, Wittgenstein, was hardly part of the culture at large. Portman, Baudrillard, Derrida, Fish, etc., were barely glimmers on the horizon."

Let me take a bite of this. In my view Baudrillard, Derrida, and Fish are not all that new. (Portman I don't know of and would appreciate a reference.) Wittgenstein was new, but that was in 1913, when he began to write the *\*Tractatus\**. The kernels of "postmodernism and deconstruction" all seem to me to be present in the thought of the best minds by 1913. Henri Poincare had chaos theory worked out mathematically in the 1890s. It has taken time, indeed, for these ideas to get out into the world, especially in a time of such extreme fragmentation of the disciplines that many philosophers (French ones, to tell the truth) are surprisingly ignorant of science, and most literary scholars know much less philosophy than they believe they do. It is also true that "postmodernism and deconstruction" are not the only sources of the critique being assigned to this century. Of course, historians like myself are prone to push the roots of things ever further back into the past, and to identify the root with the plant. Still, I think the argument can be made, and should be made as long as the lay public continues to be seduced by that very American binary pair called 'one orthodoxy or the other'.

Rather than argue it now, I'd like to ask McCreery for more on the way the viewers of advertising film make connections unintended by the film's producer. There is an early Russian experiment (admittedly post-1913) showing that viewers make a unity willy-nilly out of *\*any\** set of visual fragments, and film is indeed the perfect example of a medium totally made up, on every level, of fragments, from the frame to the shot to the montages.

-Bill Everdell, Brooklyn, but away from it next week. Forgive the Parthian shot.

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Date: Sat, 17 Feb 1996 14:05:11 -0500

From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)" ([idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu](mailto:idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu))

Subject: Re: Ideology (19th and 20th century)

Date: Sat, 17 Feb 1996 13:40:41 +0900 (JST)

From: [JLM@twics.com](mailto:JLM@twics.com)

Bill Everdel writes, "The kernels of "postmodernism and deconstruction" all seem to me to be present in the thought of the best minds by 1913."

The impertinent riposte is, of course, "But how did they play in Dubuque." Here we face a classic problem in periodization. Should we mark the start of a period when ideas first emerge in "the thought of the best minds" or when they become established as common knowledge in a field? in academia? in the literate press? in People magazine? From various scattered observations I have observed that a combination of market forces and organizational rigidities result in a cascade pattern in the spread of ideas, i.e., they emerge in a spring, high on the mountain, fill a pool then splash on to the next. By the time they reach the ocean of public opinion, they are frequently mingled with a good deal of silt and pollution that may make them hard to separate out. On the whole, however, as an anthropologist, I suspect that my views start further downriver than an intellectual historian's.

Everdel continues,

"Rather than argue it now, I'd like to ask McCreery for more on the way the viewers of advertising film make connections unintended by the film's producer."

That, I should say, is largely dependent on the viewer. As an exercise in my seminar on "The Making and Meaning of Advertising" I sometimes divide the class into several groups before showing a TV commercial. Group A is asked to provide a strictly behaviorist account of what they see with no reference to meaning whatsoever [an impossible task]. Group B is asked for an aesthetic account, focusing attention on the formal properties of layout, color, timing, music, etc. Group C is asked for a strategic account, i.e., why a sponsor would pay good money to present this message in this way at this place and time. Group D is asked for a critical account, attacking the commercial from an ideological point of view. The group is free to choose its perspective. After each group offers its observations, we then discuss what it might mean to the target group at which it was directed, which, of course, will depend on the life experience that target brings to the viewing.

John McCreery  
Yokohama  
February 17, 1996

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Date: Mon, 19 Feb 1996 12:36:10 -0500

From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)" ([idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu](mailto:idea@hs1.hst.msu.edu))

Subject: Re: Ideology (19th and 20th century / discourse)

Date: Mon, 19 Feb 96 17:34:47 +0100

From: Thomas Diez ([tdiez@mzes.sowi.uni-mannheim.de](mailto:tdiez@mzes.sowi.uni-mannheim.de))

John McCreery wrote:

From various scattered

>observations I have observed that a combination of market forces and >organizational rigidities result in a cascade pattern in the spread of >ideas, i.e., they emerge in a spring, high on the mountain, fill a pool >then splash on to the next. By the time they reach the ocean of public >opinion, they are frequently mingled with a good deal of silt and >pollution that may make them hard to separate out.

That's a good point. Although I would insist that it's always hard to separate ideas out anyway. And it always is an active construction on the part of the researcher. That refers back to the point I made earlier about ideologies being discourses \_named\_ ideologies. I accept the caveat that this naming has no necessarily negative connotation, although I would say that in most contexts it has. Talking about the postmodernism/deconstruction "beginning": There have always been traits of alternatives to the dominant modern discourse: Montaigne in philosophy or Althusius in political theory. In each of them, one can find ideas that look quite similar to the insistence on difference, intertextuality, and what else is associated ("with a good deal of silt and pollution", if you will) with these terms. My question then would be: Is it possible to say when these ideas changed their place within the discourse? There certainly has been a time (that called itself modernity) in which there has been a trend towards universalism, single-point-perspective, either/or-arguments, functionalism etc. It seems to me that this trend is changing / has changed. Not everywhere, not in a linear, uniform way. There's never been a uniform culture. Thus, to point at some thinkers and ideas, as Bill Everdel has done, doesn't seem to be to the point to me. It's rather the status of these ideas that matters and that may provide for a temporal meaning of "postmodernism", with all the problems coming with that.

Ahoi! (as one says when it's carnival here in Mannheim...)

Thomas Diez

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