

Ideology (Levels)

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Date: Thu, 1 Feb 1996 00:11:17 -0600

Date: Wed, 31 Jan 1996 14:18:27 -0500
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)"
Subject: Re: Ideology(levels)

Date: Jan. 31, 1996
From: David Bailey, Editor, H-ideas

In a seminar I am teaching this term (on the works of Lincoln), I rather casually asked about Lincoln's ideology in the 1840s. For non-Americanists, this is when he was a member of the hard-to-define Whig Party. The students fumbled a bit and ultimately came up with some quite vague and general statements (he believed in the constitution) which left me wondering what was wrong with my question.

In the next session, I asked the same question, but made it more general--what do we mean by ideology in ordinary language. Of course, the problem is that ideology in ordinary language is used primarily as an epithet. When you think your opponent has gone overboard, he or she is "ideological." I think, for example, that "politically correct" and "ideological" are used in some common discourse as synonyms.

What we began to work on, after trying to disassociate ideology from this particular usage, is the way in which there are ideological statements made at various levels of social interaction. There are primarily personal ideological statements, there are ideological statements within families and small groups, there are regional ideologies, there are national ideologies, and there are trans-national ideologies. Ideological analysis is usually done at the level of the largest group (usually the nation state), but in looking at the ideology of any individual, such as Lincoln, one is forced to discuss the interaction of various of his deeply held ideological views. He had a number of assumptions about the emerging nation, a number of assumptions about his political party, and number of assumptions about the midwest, and a number of assumptions about local matters. He also had a number of assumptions about how he should behave in his personal life. Personal ideology therefore seems to be the complex interweaving of these various levels of behavior and thought. It is also subject to many forces which make it dynamic, subject to change over time.

I suppressed the temptation to bring into the discussion discourse theory, but in many ways the malleability and interdeterminance of ideology is key to this multi-tiered analysis. But I bring up this analysis to H-ideas in response to the top-down analysis that has been offered in much of the discussion so far.

Moreover, at least in Gramsci, hegemony is interactive--ideology must constantly adjust to the marketplace. If that is so, and the marketplace is made up of massive numbers of people with complexly evolving individual ideologies, then the attempt to impose ideology top-down is, as Gramsci

argued, based upon an elaborate and sophisticated set of political skills and techniques. (My reading of Gramsci is certainly open to dispute. I am particularly influenced by several of the essays in *The Modern Prince*.)

One final observation: some might object that this multitiered analysis of ideology robs the term of meaning. Economists like to talk about personal utility functions, and they are still puzzled as to whether, in the aggregate, these amount to what we might want to call an ideology. What I am raising here is the degree to which, if we disaggregate ideology, we can return to the individual in society and his or her belief system.

I pose these thoughts with hope they will stimulate even further lively discussion.

David

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Date: Tue, 6 Feb 1996 00:10:09 -0600

Date: Mon, 5 Feb 1996 13:57:38 -0500
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)"
Subject: Re: Ideology (levels)

Date: Sat, 3 Feb 1996 08:16:16 -0500
From: Everdell@aol.com

John McCreery's restriction of ideology to systematic collections of ideas, a set of Craftsmans rather than a bunch of tools picked up here and there out of many manufacturers' toolsets, would not necessarily have fitted the views of Destutt de Tracy and the other associationists who invented the word. On the other hand, 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.

-Bill Everdell, Brooklyn

Date: Wed, 7 Feb 1996 00:11:16 -0600

Date: Tue, 6 Feb 1996 13:04:02 -0500
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)"
Subject: Re: Ideology(levels)

Date: 1 Feb 96 09:48:11 CST
From: GREENER@holly.hsu.edu

David,

In response to your multi-level "ideological" analysis of Lincoln, I don't think it destroys the definition of ideology, but it certainly alters it considerably. What you have described seems to me to be the necessary levels of response of any thinking being to his or her situation. That being the case, one would be very hard put to describe a non-ideological intellectual response.

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Date: Tue, 6 Feb 1996 13:12:52 -0500
From: "H-Ideas Co-Editor (David Bailey)"
Subject: Re: Ideology (levels)

Date: Mon, 5 Feb 96 14:27:44 PST
From: Victor Bondi

On Monday, Feb. 3, Bill Everdell said:

"John McCreery's restriction of ideology to systematic collections of ideas, a set of Craftsmans rather than a bunch of tools picked up here and there out of many manufacturers' toolsets, would not necessarily have fitted the views of Destutt de Tracy and the other associationists who invented the word. On the other hand, 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."

Good point. Like Wittgenstein said: The meaning is the use.

[Return to Menu](#)