

# Key Concepts in Sociology

# ideology

To say in ordinary conversation that someone is speaking ideologically is to suggest that they are judging a given issue with preconceived ideas and that this distorts their understanding (Eagleton, 1991: 3). This view is consistent with the comment that, in the late twentieth century:

Still, the most common use of 'ideology' was pejorative: ideology is opposed to 'fact', 'logic', 'reason', 'philosophy', and even 'truth'. (Grossberg, 2005: 177)

If the word *ideology* is often used to describe the ideas of others, and never to describe one's own ideas, perhaps this

... can be explained by the fact that, in providing the very concepts through which the world becomes intelligible, *our* ideology is effectively invisible. (Heywood, 2003: 13, emphasis added)

Thus, liberals might condemn communism and fascism as ideologies, but refuse to accept that Liberalism is itself an ideology, while Marxists would treat Liberalism (which they see as portraying rights that can only be exercised by the moneyed and privileged as universal entitlements) as the classic example of ideology (Heywood 2003: 7).

The first appearance of the word 'ideology' in English (from the French *idéologie*) was in 1796 in a translation of a work by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy, who used it in respect of philosophical questions and employed the term to announce a new 'science of ideas'. Subsequently, Napoleon Bonaparte used ideology differently and pejoratively to attack Enlightenment values – especially democracy – and the 'doctrine of the ideologues'. Following Bonaparte, it was often used pejoratively in the nineteenth century to refer to supposedly extreme or revolutionary ideas, and the label 'ideology' continued to be used negatively in the twentieth century to criticise any social policy that was thought to be consciously derived from social theory (Williams, 1976).

Though ideology has been much debated in sociology, it has been decried as 'the most elusive concept in the whole of the social sciences' (McLellan, 1995, quoted in Heywood, 2003: 5). Heywood listed the following meanings of ideology: a political belief system; an action-oriented set of political ideas; the ideas of the ruling class; the world view of a particular social class or group; ideas that propagate a false consciousness among the exploited or oppressed; an officially sanctioned set of beliefs used to legitimise a political system or regime; an all-embracing political doctrine that claims a monopoly of truth (2003: 6). In his view, ideology straddled the boundary between descriptive, normative and active:

... [it] is a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides a basis for organised political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power. All ideologies therefore (a) offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a 'world view', (b) advance a model of a desired future, a vision of the 'good society', and (c) explain how political change can and should be brought about ... (2003: 12)

An ideology refers not just to frameworks of thought used to explain, make sense of, or give meaning to society, but also to the way these ideas involve links between one another to create a perspective on the social and political world, thereby allowing us to make sense of the puzzling or the unexpected. The paradox is that:

Without these frameworks, we could not make sense of the world. But with them, our perceptions are inevitably structured in a particular direction by the very concepts we are using. (Donald and Hall, 1986: x; see also Thompson, 1990)

Thus, Donald and Hall's treatment of ideology encompassed not just the great organic 'systems of thought', such as Liberalism, Conservatism and Socialism, but also what they described as 'the terrain of common sense'. By this, they referred to the chains of (often contradictory, fragmentary, incomplete) thought that ordinary people use in everyday life to interpret and make sense of their social and political world (1986: xi-xii).

As well as referring in a neutral way to a set of beliefs that are more or less consistent with one another, the term 'ideology' has been widely used – especially by Marxists – to describe a cluster of beliefs that are not only judged false or distorted, but also as deliberately concealing some hidden interest. Here, a vital aspect of ideology is that it is linked to power and domination and attention is focused on the ability of those in power to promote values that they find congenial, to conceal 'inconvenient truths' about the social formation, and in particular, to discredit views and doctrines that challenge their position. In Eagleton's version:

The most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power; and any practice of political emancipation thus involves that most difficult of all forms of liberation, freeing ourselves from ourselves. (1991: xiii–xiv)

The modern sociological treatment of ideology stems primarily from Marx's discussion of the relationship between knowledge and social processes and, in particular, his distinction between the cultural 'superstructure' of ideas and the material (economic) 'base' which was held to determine these ideas. According to Marx, the exploitative relations of industrialisation and capitalism would inevitably result in alienation and conflict unless hidden by ideas and values provided by a dominant ideology. In his much quoted formulation:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class, which is the ruling class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its

ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx and Engels, 1970 [1854–1856]: 64)

Thus, Marx's concept of ideology connected falsehood and mystification to the class system, and specifically to the interests and outlook of the ruling class, which needed to reconcile the oppressed to their oppression, and could best do so by presenting its own interests as if they were universal cultural and moral values. In his analysis, the proletariat (working class) would be misled by 'bourgeois ideology' and as a result develop 'false consciousness' (in this case, a systematically defective and distorted perception of the unequal reality). To better convey the way that he considered ideology operated, Marx used the notion of a *camera obscura* (in which the image always appears upside down) to show how ideology caused the actual material conditions of society to be misrepresented (Heywood, 2003: 7).

The Marxist account of ideology and false consciousness has been questioned for several reasons: why is it that one class, the bourgeoisie, has an ideology that reflects its interests, while another, the proletariat, infused by a belief in the dominant ideology, acts and thinks in a way contrary to its interests? If I am raised in a society, how can I be free of the ideologies that constrain others and so be able to recognise what is ideology? And even if I am somehow free of *existing* ideologies, why would my views not still be judged as ideological (Jones, 2003: 257)? Moreover, as Eagleton suggested, not every body of belief that people 'commonly term ideological' is 'associated with a dominant political power', and here he cited socialism, feminism, the Suffragettes, and the Levellers (1991: 6). A further objection was made by Abercrombie and Warde, who doubted whether there was agreement in Britain about the content of any supposed dominant ideology: they highlighted a survey that had shown no value was shared by more than three quarters of the population, prompting them to say:

If there is a dominant ideology, a large proportion of the population has failed to 'internalize' it. (1998: 366)

According to Heywood, it was because Marx's prediction of the demise of capitalism proved optimistic that largely explained the particular interest that later Marxists took in ideology (2003: 8). Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*, expounded in *Prison Notebooks* (written between 1929 and 1935), has been particularly influential in directing attention towards the relative autonomy of the 'ideological realm', and illustrates how far Marxism has combined two approaches to ideology: one preoccupied with ideology as illusion, mystification and falsification; the other more concerned with the function of ideas in social life, rather than with discussions about reality and unreality (Eagleton, 1991: 3). Gramsci gave particular emphasis to the role of human action, consciousness and culture in the maintenance of capitalism, which:

... however much it is organized institutionally and structurally at the level of production, depends also upon the ways in which these institutions and structures are institutionalized, legitimized and enshrined in a dominant and hegemonic culture which,

as it becomes taken for granted within society as common sense, preserves the status quo. (Walsh, 1998: 288)

Gramsci (1971) considered that ideology was embedded in every level and aspect of society – in popular culture, arts and literature, the education system and the mass media. He argued that what confronted the dominant group was a constant struggle to obtain the consent of the less-privileged to the existing social order and to create a consensus in which the existing order is seen as natural and normal: since in a bourgeois society power depended as much on persuasion and consent as it did on force, power could never be permanently secured; though what prevailed was not a contest between evenly matched social forces for political, intellectual and cultural leadership, neither was it a matter of straightforward domination.

A consistent topic in postwar British sociology was how best to explain the passivity of the British working class and their lack of revolutionary consciousness. This produced a variety of sociological responses, including *Working Class Conservatives*, which drew on Gramsci's idea of hegemony to explore the role of socialisation in working-class support for the Labour Party, and concluded that this amounted to a 'symbolic act of deviance' – fostered by working-class subcultures – from the dominant values of British society (Parkin, 1967: 282); *Consciousness and Action in the Western Working Class* (Mann, 1973) and *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (Abercrombie et al., 1980), which questioned Gramsci's idea of a dominant ideology, and attributed the apparent complacency of the working class not to ideology, but to the material conditions of their existence and to the effects of everyday needs as well as 'mere survival' – indeed, as Turner put it:

Everyday life does not require any coherent ideological legitimacy, because the dull routine of humdrum existence explains the acquiescence of the working class. (2006: 179)

Other key contributions on the subject of ideology include Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1936 [1929]), Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964), Bell's *The End of Ideology* (1960), and Seliger's *Politics and Ideology* (1976). In *Ideology and Utopia*, Mannheim drew a distinction between thought systems that served to protect a particular social order (ideologies) and idealised representations of a future society that better served the interests of subordinate groups (utopias). Marcuse's concern, in *One Dimensional Man*, was to examine the way that capitalism had developed ideology to shape thought and restrict opposition. In *The End of Ideology*, Bell argued that various developments in post-Second World War America signalled the arrival of an era marked by conformity and broad social consensus, where issues would be decided pragmatically on the basis of efficiency, rather than on the basis of opposing class-based ideologies. Seliger took a more neutral approach to the concept of ideology by defining it as 'a set of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify the ends and means of social action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order' (1970: 325).

According to Grossberg, at the start of the twenty-first century, the centrality of the concept of *ideology* has declined in academic debate. He gave two reasons for this: one was that the increasing dominance of 'neo-liberal globalisation' in

international relations and the advances made by ‘new conservative movements’ could not be ascribed to ‘ideological domination, consensus or struggle’; the other was that there were new ways of thinking about power and ideas, such as ‘discourse’ (though others have suggested that discourse is the equivalent of ideology) and ‘representation’ (2005: 178).

**See also:** *Capitalism, Class, Discourse, Orientalism, Race*

### FURTHER READING

In *The German Ideology* (1970 [1854–1856]) Marx and Engels argue that a society’s ideology is also explained in terms of its economic structure. In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971) Gramsci uses the notion of ‘cultural hegemony’ to argue that the subordination of the working class depends primarily on ideological domination. Other important works on the subject of ideology include: Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* (1936 [1929]), which takes issue with the position that ideology simply reflects class membership; Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), which argues that modern capitalist society produces ‘one-dimensional thought’ and a false consciousness in the working class; and Bell’s *The End of Ideology* (1960), which argues that the older ideologies derived from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are exhausted. In *Ideology and Modern Culture* (1990) Thompson provides a critical appraisal of major contributions to the theory of ideology. In *Ideology: An Introduction* (1991) Eagleton discusses the different definitions of ideology and examines the concept’s history from the Enlightenment to postmodernism.

## modernity and postmodernity

### MODERNITY

According to Williams, the word ‘modern’ began to appear in English in the late sixteenth century, when it was used more or less as a synonym for ‘now’ to demarcate the present from both medieval and ancient times. Williams noted that prior to the nineteenth century, most uses of ‘modern’, ‘modernism’ and ‘modernist’ were wary or disparaging of what was new, while the uses of ‘modernise’ were