

[Heading A] Ideologies/Cognitive Orientation

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[Heading B] General definition of the term

Ideology is typically associated with the classification of belief systems and the construction of social meaning, the development of political traditions – formal ideologies – and their function. In protest movement literature the significance of ideology as a discrete area of analysis is contested. At the heart of the debate is an argument about the role ideology plays in mobilizing action: in encouraging or securing the alignment of social movement organizational values with non-movement belief systems and/or in shaping and re-shaping activist understandings. Some scholars argue that emotions play a key role in this process; ideology focuses attention on what individuals know, or think they know about the world – on cognitive factors – in forging alignments and orienting actions.

The term ideology was coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy in the eighteenth century and first used to describe a system of classification useful for the construction of a science of ideas. Under Marx's influence, ideology came to be associated with political obfuscation and the distortion of reality, rooted in class interest and the legitimation of particular political practices. Karl Mannheim's sociological analysis pointed to a more nuanced conception. Ideology described a complex set of beliefs – rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious – which shaped individuals' knowledge of the world and were malleable to a range of outlooks. Mannheim argued that ideologies provided important psychological supports for particular social groups and that they were open to "utopian" challenge. He also shared de Tracy's interest in classification. Charging intellectuals with the task of rising above the partial and subjective ideological positions present in society at any given time, he held open the possibility of providing non-evaluative interpretations of the social world.

Clifford Geertz dubbed these dominant usages of the concept “pejorative” linking them to two alternative – not necessarily incompatible – perspectives on social determination: interest theory, in which ideology is associated with struggles for power advantage and strain theory, which casts ideology as a safety valve or social comfort in periods of upheaval or disruption. Both, he argued, treated ideology as an evaluative concept, “an entity in itself – an ordered system of cultural symbols.”¹ Indeed, Mannheim’s call for the formulation of *non-evaluative* interpretation illustrated this weakness. For in pitting ideology against reality analysts of ideology raised irresolvable methodological issues about objectivity and the boundary lines between truth and belief.

Geertz identified the limitation of these approaches in their narrow functionalism. Interest theorists focused their attention on the causes of ideology and strain theorists on its effects but both described ideology as a phenomenon that served a particular role in political systems and neither could explain the relationship between the structures which supported ideology and the attitudes they incited. Both neglected the complexity of the social processes through which cultural systems are shaped and the role that ideology plays within them.²

Drawing on philosophies of language and mind and on literary criticism, Geertz suggested that ideology was not so much a factor in the social construction of knowledge as it was concerned with the “vehicles” of conception or meaning, principally the metaphors used in the construction of social reality. The campaign against the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, which restricted US labor movement action, illustrated his point. The union’s description of the Act as a “slave labor law” was misunderstood by interest and strain theorists as an attempt to deceive or excite opinion. In fact, Geertz argued, the ideological import of the slogan “drew its power from its capacity to grasp, formulate, and communicate social realities that elude the tempered language of science ... mediate more complex meanings than its literal reading suggests.”³ The slogan was an ideological metaphor which derived its “expressive power”

from the images it evoked and its “rhetorical force” from the ways in which discussants mapped these images to existing social realities.⁴ For Geertz the study of ideology did not properly lie in the analysis of perceptions or their manipulation, but with the processes of “symbolic formulation.”

[Heading B] General cultural functions

Whilst Geertz suggested that mainstream approaches to ideology were narrowly functional, he did not deny that ideology fulfilled an important cultural role. On the contrary, the point of his analysis was to provide a better insight into the relationship between the causes and effects of ideology. He saw ideology as a special kind of map “a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes,” patterning the translation of symbols into principles, values, goals and ideals and shaping responses to events or behaviors in a reasoned way.⁵ An important aspect of this view is that ideology is an “extrinsic” source of information, and not something hidden in the realm of consciousness. Conceptualized in this way, ideology is an instrument for cognitive orientation (understood to describe experiential practices and behaviors, as well as learning or knowledge) particularly in moments of social dislocation, where individuals become temporarily disoriented and established institutionalized guides to behavior are weakened or put into abeyance.

Using Geertz’s insights, contemporary political theorists have also drawn on linguistic philosophy to examine the operation of ideology. For Michael Freeden ideologies are a form of Wittgensteinian language game “whose meaning and communicative importance can only be determined by noting their grammar ... their conventional employment in a social context, and the degree of acceptability of the rules by which they play.”⁶ Here too, ideologies are maps, but maps whose intelligibility depends on shared understandings. Similarly, ideological traditions can be thought of as “family resemblances”: constellations of ideas which usually

share certain features in common but which might also include atypical elements. Ideological traditions do not exist apart from or outside cultural systems, but play a particular role in processes of symbolic formulation, articulating norms and values and patterning ideas, both conceptually and through collective political actions.

[Heading B] Role in protest cultures

The value of ideology in social movement research is contested. However there is a consensus that interest in the concept was re-kindled in the 1980s as part of an attempt to “bring ideas back in” to the study of mobilization. Ideas had always played some role in social movement research, but as D. A. Snow argues, in resource mobilization and process/opportunity accounts the role was narrowly construed. Ideas were treated as generic grievances and mobilization conceptualized as an expression of perceived injustice. The possibility that grievances were described by ideas and that they might be understood or interpreted in different ways, was downplayed and so, too, was the significant effect that interpretation might have on the process of mobilization. However, as scholars turned their attention to the “interpretative processes” that mediated the relationship between “meaning and mobilization,” research refocused on the concept of ideology.⁷

[Heading B] Theoretical and empirical research perspectives

In recent social movement literature, ideology has been discussed in the context of frame theory. In Zald’s work, ideology operates at a “micro and social psychological level” as a methodological tool for examining processes of socialization and – “on meso and macro levels” – for analyzing the relationship between social movements and other political organizations: political parties, interest groups, government bodies and bureaucratic institutions.⁸ He classifies social movement activity as Ideologically Structured Action (ISA).

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And pointing to a fundamental change in the “intellectual conditions of the social sciences and ... on the ground in the world of social movement related phenomena,”⁹ he suggests that ISA both reflects this shift and offers a framework of analysis best suited to capturing its complexity.

For Zald ISA deepens understanding of social movement activity and, especially, frame theory. Oliver and Johnston also focus on this relationship and suggest that there is an analytical distinction between ideology and framing which frame theorists have wrongly neglected. They explain this neglect with reference to the negative connotations of the concept. Echoing Geertz, they argue that mainstream approaches to ideology are “pejorative”. Yet ideology, they contend, can be cast in positive terms and they point to three applications. Ideology provides a tripartite account of action, proceeding from diagnosis, to prognosis and finally to the rationale legitimizing and motivating the action. It helps analyze the ways in which individuals understand the world and steer their behaviors. As Zald also suggests, it can be deployed to examine the inter-relationship of movement and anti-movement positions.¹⁰ Bringing these ideas together, Oliver and Johnston define ideology as “a system of meaning that couples assertions and theories about the nature of social life with values and norms relevant to promoting or resisting social change.”¹¹ To study ideology, they continue, “is to focus on systems of ideas which couple understandings of how the world works with ethical, moral, and normative principles that guide personal and collective action.”¹²

Turning to the relationship between frames and ideology, Oliver and Johnston argue that “framing points to process, while ideology points to content.”¹³ Their view – hotly contested by Snow – casts framing as a process through which movement entrepreneurs market or present messages to maximize their appeal to movement activists and outsiders, and ideology as the belief systems within which framing operates and is coded. To underscore the distinction they suggest that shared frames are subject to ideological dispute. To illustrate,

they argue that both parties to the abortion debates of the 1970s adopted a civil rights frame *ideologically*: either to stress the unborn's right to life or the mother's choice.¹⁴

Oliver and Johnston's treatment of framing appears to dovetail with Geertz's understanding of ideology. Just as Geertz understands ideology as cultural map, they talk about frames as the "template" which facilitates the negotiation everyday culture. Yet their description of the frame is not Geertz's ideology re-labeled since the interpretative role seems to rest on intentionality rather than expressive power, rhetorical force or, as Freedman argues of political ideologies, the articulation of shared meanings. In ordinary life, framing occurs "tacitly by subtle linguistic and extralinguistic cues." In social movements, it is deliberate and "calls attention to the ways in which movement propaganda reflects both the frames of the writers and their perceptions of their targets."¹⁵ Moreover, in tracing the disciplinary roots of frame theory to cognitive psychology and linguistics and ideology to political theory Oliver and Johnston suggest a clear and sharp divide between the two. Frames, they suggest, refer to "the cognitive process wherein people bring to bear background knowledge to interpret an event or circumstances and locate it in a larger system of meaning." In contrast, ideology describes the "content of whole belief systems." Underscoring the division, they tie each concept to specific research agendas: the study of frames to the analysis of movement organizations and actors and the study of ideology to the origin of ideas "their interrelations and consistency."¹⁶

In sum, whilst Oliver and Johnston's discussion of the pejorative connotations of ideology appears to chime with Geertz's, their desire to strip ideology of its negativity points to an evaluative treatment rather than an understanding of symbolic formulation. And their attempt to distinguish the politics of ideology from the cognition of framing runs counter to recent developments in political theory, where the cultural turn has encouraged analysts to probe the links between linguistic practices, norms and cognition when reflecting on the

complex ways in which individuals orientate themselves politically. In pointing to a disciplinary and conceptual space between ideology and framing, they veer towards a formal concept of ideology rather one that is rooted in culture. And they view framing as a form of extrinsic manipulation, stimulating an intrinsic, unconscious cognitive process.

[Heading B] Research gaps and open questions

The open questions about ideology in social movement research turn on its conceptualization and on the research agendas to which competing concepts are linked. There is a consensus that ideology plays a role in social movement research, but little agreement about its definition or applications. Snow argues that ideology and framing describe “different aspects and dimensions of the complex of symbolic, ideational, and intersubjective factors associated with movement mobilization and dynamics”¹⁷ Ideologies are resources for frames – once the theoretical clarity and empirical value of framing is recognized and the difficulty of determining the precise analytical value of ideology is acknowledged.¹⁸ Questions about the relationship between cause and effect, to use Geertz’s terms, and the special properties of social movements as sites for ideological action, are difficult to resolve for as long as the concept of ideology itself remains contested.

[Heading C] Recommended Reading

Freeden, Michael. *Ideology A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) provides a concise statement of the complex analysis presented in *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), the benchmark for the analysis of ideology in contemporary political theory.

Geertz, Clifford. “Ideology As A Cultural System.” *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*. (London: Hutchinson, 1975). 193-229. This essay outlines

his highly influential understanding and the significance of his anthropology to its conceptualisation.

Snow, David A. "Frames", in this volume, usefully describes the conceptual architecture now associated with framing and the strategic role that he attaches to framing in ideological formation.

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1. Clifford Geertz, "Ideology As A Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, (London, 1975), 196.
 2. Ibid., 212-3.
 3. Ibid., 210.
 4. Ibid., 213.
 5. Ibid., 216.
 6. Michael Freeden, *Ideology A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2003), 43.
 7. David A. Snow, "Framing Processes, Ideology, and Discursive Fields," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule and H. Kriesi (Oxford, 2007), 382-3.
 8. Mayer N. Zald, "Ideologically Structured Action: An Enlarged Agenda for Social Movement Research," *Mobilization* 5, no. 1 (2000): 2.
 9. Mayer N. Zald, "Mobilization Forum: New Paradigm? Nah! New Agenda? I Hope so," *Mobilization* 5, no. 1 (2000): 33.
 10. Pamela E. Oliver and Hank Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Ideology and Frames in Social Movement Research," *Mobilization* 5, no. 1 (2000): 43.
 11. Ibid.
 12. Ibid., 44.

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13. Ibid., 45.
 14. Ibid., 39.
 15. Ibid., 45.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Snow, "Framing Processes," 405.
 18. David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, "Mobilization Forum: Clarifying the Relationship Between Framing and Ideology," *Mobilization* 5, no. 1 (2000): 59.