

# Ideology

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Ideology is an important aspect of social and political movements. The most basic and commonly held view of ideology is that it is a *system* of multiple beliefs, ideas, values, principles, ethic, morals, goals, and so on, that overlap, shape, and reinforce one another. In Swidler's (1986: 279) influential terms, ideology is "a highly articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action."

Ideology is often an implicit and assumed feature of movements. Without an ideology that articulates and identifies a mobilization's beliefs and goals, it would be difficult to speak of this as a movement at all. Rather, collective action without ideology would appear disorganized and temporary. In contrast, movements are generally held to be relatively organized and relatively sustained over a period of time. Ideology can be one such feature of organization and a marker of sustained collective action.

There is little consensus of how ideology can be best conceptualized or empirically researched. This may be due to the implicit, but understudied, assumption of ideology as a feature of movements or perhaps the legacy, particularly in Marxist thought, of the pejorative use of the term (see Oliver & Johnston 2000). Yet, since the broad "cultural turn" of the latter twentieth century, particularly through the framing and new social movements approaches, ideology has re-entered the study of collective action. This has yielded common recognition of ideology's import for understanding movements, numerous conceptualizations, and prominent debates (e.g., Sewell 1985 and Skocpol 1985; Oliver & Johnston 2000 and Snow & Benford 2000; Zald 2000, Diani 2000, and Klandermans 2000). Four primary perspectives on ideology are outlined below: cognition and social

psychology; emergence and interaction; action and strategy; and social order and structure.

## IDEOLOGY AS COGNITION AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

One of the most prominent approaches to ideology has been to stress it as a cognitive or social psychological process. Since ideology is held to provide a systematization and articulation of underlying beliefs, it can be said that ideology is one method that actors use to make sense of the social world. Thus, ideology differs from culture in that it is a "tool kit" (Swidler 1986) of hermeneutic, interpretative, and sense-making strategies. Rather than being mere ideas, ideology is distinguished by its active use and its import for shaping and creating certain types of action. This process is theorized to occur most crucially when pre-existing cognitive strategies and normative routines are stressed by new realities. From this view, ideology may have its most important role during unsettled times, akin to theories of social strain that featured so prominently in collective behavior approaches to movements.

Beyond the level of individual cognition, ideology also exists in social psychological approaches to movements. Ideology is not just a rational sense-making strategy for an individual. Rather, ideology is distinguished by its social feature – its systematization is usually shared by multiple actors and is thus a feature of groups more so than individuals. In fact, commonly held systems of beliefs and values, that is, ideologies, provide meaning and identity for movement participants as stressed by new social movement theorists. Many identity statements are actually statements of ideological affiliation, for example, Marxists who follow Marxism, environmentalists who subscribe to environmentalism, feminists who identify with feminism, and so on. Thus, ideology can be seen as more than

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just a cognitive tool that suggests actions or beliefs for an individual; it is also a shared social psychological process that can create group affiliations and help stitch together a movement of like-minded actors. In short, ideology plays a role in both individual and group understandings, actions, and formation.

### IDEOLOGY AS EMERGENCE AND INTERACTION

If ideology is the cognitive and social psychological scaffold on which shared beliefs, actions, and identities are built, then another approach is to consider how this scaffold is constructed. Rather than being inherited in a complete and stable form by actors, ideology is used and, in being used, created and recreated. In other words, ideology can be emergent during periods of mobilization and shaped by the interactions of movements' leaderships and participants, and even movement exogenous actors. Thus, the assumption of a coherent and stable nature of ideology can be problematized (Snow 2004).

In early stages of mobilization, movements are often riven by ideological debates as movement goals and strategies are crafted. In later stages of a movement's life, ideological debates are again often prominent as successes and failures challenge prior settlements of tactics and objectives. Thus, one strategy has been to analyze how ideologies emerge and the role of leaderships and intellectuals in crafting ideologies. For example, Wuthnow (1985) examines the role of "discursive communities" in shaping sixteenth-century Protestant theology, eighteenth-century Enlightenment principles, and nineteenth-century socialism, all of which became important ideological bases for social and political movements.

Ideology is also often held to be created by the interactions of movement actors, publics, countermovements, and authorities. A primary emphasis in this perspective is on the discursive side of ideology, seeing it as heavily shaped, and even created by, ongoing and iterative

ideological appeals and repartees. Emphasis on the emergent and interactional side of ideology is most prominent in studies of revolutionary movements (e.g., Goldstone 1991; Moaddel 1992), perhaps because revolutions seem to be times of confusion where prior actions and beliefs are challenged and new ways of doing and understandings are formed (Sewell 1985; Kurzman 2004).

### IDEOLOGY AS ACTION AND STRATEGY

As ideology has interactional dynamics and can be a form of activated culture, a third perspective has emphasized how ideologies inform collective action's tactics and goals, link supporters to movements, and are strategically employed in mobilization. The primary example of this approach is found in the framing literature on movements (see Benford & Snow 2000). Framing focuses on the construction of meaning by actors and how through the rhetorical use of particular meanings, "frames," movements mobilize and transform society. From the perspective of ideology, frames are crucial to the extent that they resonate with actors (as suggested by a social psychological approach) and articulate, amplify, and transform existing beliefs and values (as suggested by an interactional approach) in a strategic manner that furthers a movement's goals. An important part of this process is the existence of "master frames" that are broad enough value and belief systems that multiple meanings and instantiations can thrive under their aegis. For example, discourse and belief in civil rights has extended beyond a race-based notion to encompass the rights of numerous other marginalized groups. Ideology thus may suggest particular frames, but a unidirectional link should not be assumed (Snow 2004).

The framing perspective on movements has been criticized for only describing intentional and strategic use of ideology, rather than being a distinct process (Oliver & Johnston 2000; Westby 2002). Framing may also be dynamic as well as strategic, transformed through discussion (see Steinberg 1998). In particular, master

frames may be considered as systems of beliefs and values, that is to say ideology, present outside of a movement's use of them. Thus, another ideology as action perspective has been to emphasize how ideological forces enable and constrain all collective action, even outside of the strategic and constructivist process of framing. Zald (2000), in particular, proposes that consideration of "ideologically structured action" is a broad and fruitful area for research on movements. In this view, the historic and stable nature of ideology is stressed. Rather than being primarily emergent and interactional, belief systems are held to be more permanent properties of society.

#### IDEOLOGY AS SOCIAL ORDER AND STRUCTURE

If ideology is a more stable and permanent feature of society, then it logically follows that social structures and institutions can have ideological features. Thus, a fourth perspective is to examine how ideology is institutionalized within society and how these legitimate belief systems shape collective action of any sort. This, in fact, is the classic approach to ideology in Marxist thought, for example, the hegemony of Gramsci (1971) or the ideological state apparatuses of Althusser (1971). The Marxist view stresses how ideology is a tool of social control whereby widely shared beliefs and values are created and/or maintained by elites to legitimate their authority and undercut opposition.

It is possible, however, to recognize the institutionalization of belief systems in society without necessarily seeing all ideology as a facet of state cooptation and repression: "ideology needs to be recognized as a constitutive feature of social order itself" (Wuthnow 1985: 815; see also Rudé 1980). Social structures are embedded in cultural and ideological constructions that make sense of them and articulate their role in society. One view in the structure–agency debate holds that social structures are dual, comprised of both resources that can be used

and rules that govern the action of using them. Thus, all institutions and orders have an element of ideology in the schemas that are used to interpret resources (Sewell 1992). In short, "Ideology, then, should be conceived in structural terms" (Sewell 1985: 60).

In the context of movements, a focus is on how the ideological properties of existing structures and institutions inform collective action. These beliefs, principles, values, and so on, may inform the repertoires of movements – particular forms of action and strategy are deemed more or less legitimate at different times. Further, the goals and discursive appeals of movements are likely shaped by the ideological orientation of the society in which they occur. And the cognitive and social psychological resonance and utility of particular systematized beliefs are heavily dependent on prior cognitions and psychology shaped by the context of the social system. Thus, a social order or social structural view of ideology may provide a perspective that unifies the dissensus among the other approaches.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPIRICAL STUDY

Each of the four perspectives on the nature of ideology suggests particular conceptual tools and methods of empirical analysis. For example, a cognitive and social psychological approach calls attention to the role of individual beliefs and group processes in collective action. Interactional and emergent approaches suggest that ideology can be studied through discursive dynamics in times of mobilization, while action and strategy perspectives lend themselves to examining the tactics of movements. And a social order or social structural view requires a broader examination of the context, both current and historical, in which collective action takes place. In this manner, the study of ideology in movements may benefit from consideration of discussion in other subfields; be it on cognition and culture (e.g., Vaisey 2009), the dynamics of intellectual movements (e.g., Frickel & Gross

2005), or the traditional political orientations literature (see Walder 2009).

Rather than only consider ideological effects at the individual, group, movement, or social level, systematic research could examine the interactions and overlaps of the four perspectives, for example, the stages at which one is more important than the others or how changes in one cascade into changes in the other. Clearly, existing social orders do change, novel strategies and repertoires are innovated, new ideologies do emerge, and beliefs and values evolve. It is possible to consider these as “contentless” social processes that have common features no matter the ideology in question. However, there is likely a role for the particular beliefs and values at hand in shaping the dynamics of these processes. Thus, the implicit understanding of social movement research – that all movements have an ideology – could be harnessed explicitly to advance knowledge of ideational processes.

SEE ALSO: Claims-making; Culture and social movements; Discourse analysis and social movements; Framing and social movements; Institutional theory and social movements; Master frame; Resonance, frame.

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