

http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/NAU-POS254-Enlightenment_ideologies

NAU-POS254-Enlightenment ideologies

POS 254 Political Ideologies

Northern Arizona University

Dr. Joel Olson

Contents

- 1 Lecture for Module 1: Enlightenment Ideals and Ideologies
- 2 I. Background Sketch of the Enlightenment
- 3 II. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
- 4 III. Seven ideals of the Enlightenment (From Kant, "What is Enlightenment?")
- 5 IV. How these Enlightenment characteristics influence political ideologies
- 6 V. What is ideology
- 7 Notes

Lecture for Module 1: Enlightenment Ideals and Ideologies

I. Background Sketch of the Enlightenment

A. The Enlightenment: A movement of intellectual change that swept throughout Europe and North America during the 18th century. It was rooted in a critique of the Catholic Church in Europe at the time.

B. Critique of the Church

1. It was a movement in opposition to what it considered the superstition, prejudice, and dogma of the Christian church and Christian theology. According to Enlightenment thinkers, orthodox Christianity was a bunch of myths, miracles, torments and tribulations constructed around the dogma of original sin and redemption in another world.

2. Furthermore, the Church had far too much power in society. It stifled intellectual thought and economic growth. It also brought with it bigotry, oppression, persecution and senseless wars and violence, like the Crusades or the Inquisition.

C. Replacing religion with reason and science

1. Enlightenment thinkers argues that instead of living our lives according to religious dogma and the hope of a better life in the next world, we should live our lives according to our reason. Rational thought, not religion, can make us free.

2. The enlightenment was a product of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Borrowing from mathematics and the natural sciences, it was an attempt to apply Isaac Newton's scientific language, methodology, and cosmology to the social world.

3. Enlightenment thinkers saw the natural world as self-regulating, automatic, and quantifiable, and assumed the social world must be like that as well.

D. A movement of elites

1. Most Enlightenment thinkers, or philosophes as they were sometimes called, were philosophers who rubbed elbows with the nobility and elites of Europe. Many of them tutored kings, queens and their

children, and they lived and wrote under the patronage of nobles. Often they gave rulers advice. Even in North America most of the Enlightenment thinkers like Jefferson, Adams, and Madison were Southern planters or wealthy merchants.

2. The nobility liked the philosophes because they undermined the power of the church, which challenged nobles' power. They didn't realize at the time that the ideas of the Enlightenment would eventually undermine their power, too.

E. Importance of the Enlightenment

1. From A Dictionary of Conservative and Libertarian Thought: "The impact of the Enlightenment on later western thought cannot be overestimated. All subsequent political and social philosophy is either a continuation and development of its main themes or else a reaction against them. In either case it sets the frame within which all later discussion is located."

2. Remember: The Enlightenment was not a monolithic movement. There was lots of diversity of ideas among various thinkers. Not all of them even shared all seven characteristics of the Enlightenment below. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment provided a frame of reference for all of them, one that continues to be influential. The shared attitudes, assumptions and methods of the Enlightenment provide a common "playing field" where different ideas and different ideologies are fought out.

II. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

A. Born and died in Königsberg, East Prussia (now Germany). Never traveled outside his region, and rarely ever left the city. Was a university professor.

B. Kant wrote about the physical sciences before he turned to morality and philosophy. For example, one of his early manuscripts was on astronomy. It was entitled *Cosmogony, or an Attempt to Explain the Origin of the Universe, the Formation of Celestial Bodies and the Cause of their Movement in Accordance with the Universal Laws of Motion of Matter and Newton's Theory*. Whew!

C. Kant was one of the most important philosophers ever. He is probably most famous for his moral philosophy and his categorical imperative: treat all humans as ends in themselves, not merely as means (i.e. the golden rule). Kant believed that morality and politics must be connected and that morality should shape politics by forbidding war, preventing violence, insisting on human rights, etc.

D. Living inside his head, Kant was also a bit of a nutter.

1. He only ate one meal a day, promptly at 1:00 pm, and he never ate alone because he believed that doing so exhausts one's strength instead of restoring it, since you're still occupied with your own thoughts. He usually had five guests over every day.

2. He was of frail health but he didn't trust medicines so he didn't take any (which was probably a smart thing, given the nature of medical science then). Instead, he developed his own hygiene program: Keep your head, chest, and feet cold (wash them in icy water); and sleep little because "the bed is the cradle of many illnesses." (If he had trouble sleeping he just spoke the word "Cicero" and it put him out immediately.) He also avoided liquid foods like soup, and he thought that being a bachelor would help you live longer and keep you youthful looking longer.

E. Why Kant is key to understanding the Enlightenment

1. Kant was one of the most influential thinkers of his time and one of the staunchest defenders of the Enlightenment. He explicitly defended it against its critics (which sometimes got him into trouble with the Church).

2. His newspaper article, "What is Enlightenment?" that you read is important not only because it defends the Enlightenment in a more or less populist manner, but it also reveals most of the major characteristics of the Enlightenment in just a few pages, characteristics which we will see manifest in various ideologies.

III. Seven ideals of the Enlightenment (From Kant, "What is Enlightenment?")

A. Human autonomy is the means and end of Enlightenment

1. Look at the first paragraph and the very first sentence again. Think about what Kant means.

2. Enlightenment means that humans are growing or becoming mature through the use of their reason rather than following the dogmas of the church or the state. Enlightenment means think for yourself!

3. Two prerequisites to becoming mature or enlightened:

a. The belief in individuals' ability to seek knowledge and to think for oneself. (This relates to humanism, the idea that humans are the source and measure of value, with human life valuable in and of itself.)

b. Have the courage to make the choice to seek enlightenment. "Have the courage to use your own understanding!" Kant writes. It's your own fault if you don't seek enlightenment. But thinking for yourself involves some danger. "It is so easy to be immature," he writes. It takes courage to reject old dogmas and formulas, and perhaps even old leaders and institutions (such as the church and monarchical power). But once you've made the choice to seek enlightenment, Kant argues, you will be rewarded.

4. Individual freedom and the state

a. Enlightenment requires freedom, Kant argues, but he has a more limited notion of freedom than we do.

b. For Kant, freedom doesn't mean the freedom to act and speak as you please so long as hurt no one else (that will come from John Stuart Mill, who we will read soon). For Kant, freedom means "the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters."

c. This creates a classic debate between individual freedom and the power of the state: when can the state intervene in one's life and when must it stay out? How much power should the state have over individuals? This issue will be central to Mill, but also to Marx and conservatives.

B. The importance of reason

1. Freedom means being able to think rationally for yourself. Kant argues that humanity must abandon a life of unreason, of relying on superstition, faith, and blind obedience. Instead, we must order our lives according to reason.

2. This implies that people are generally intelligent and capable and not morally depraved. Education in the use of our capacities to reason can morally uplift us.

3. To use our reason we must have knowledge, and so part of enlightenment is about seeking knowledge, not because it brings power but because it is important for its own sake. The political theorist Isaiah Berlin calls it a "disinterested love of the truth."

4. We find the truth through science, through objective and empirical knowledge. Human rationality is epitomized by scientific inquiry—science is the height of human reason. Through scientific inquiry we can solve all the mysteries of the universe and reveal the solutions to all the problems people face.

a. Kant's model is physics and mechanics. In the previous century, Isaac Newton had made it possible to explain the properties and behavior of the entire material world with just a few fundamental laws. He had

brought order and clarity to the physical world. Kant and other enlightenment thinkers wished to do that in the social world as well. In their mind, philosophy should be turned into a natural science.

b. This is especially evident in liberalism and socialism, which both sought to be “scientific” belief systems. So, for example Marx’s best friend Frederick Engels wanted to create a “scientific socialism” based on universal laws of history, and libertarians such as William Graham Sumner justified his liberalism on Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” theory of evolution.

5. “Public” vs. “private” use of reason

a. Again, Kant defines freedom as, “the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters.” By “public use of reason” he means the freedom to think for oneself in regards to religion, arts, sciences, and even government. The “public use of reason” is the freedom to criticize and express one’s own opinion on matters “as scholar” before the “entire literate world.” It’s about the freedom of thought and expression, including the freedom to criticize these institutions. The public use of one’s reason must always be free and never restricted by the state or the church.

b. The private use of reason, however, can be restricted. Kant argues that when one is acting as a “scholar,” as an abstract thinker who is writing for “the entire literate world,” one should be able to freely discuss anything. But as a public official or a priest acting on behalf of the state or church, one must obey these institutions. One can criticize the tax system, for example, but one must still pay taxes. The priest may question church theology as a scholar, but as a person in charge of a congregation he must obey church dogma. As Frederick the Great, the king of Prussia in Kant’s time, said, “Argue as much as you want and about what you want [public use of reason] but obey!” [private use of reason]

c. In other words, the public use of reason should not be limited by people, the church, or the monarchy, but private reason can be limited in order to guarantee public order. Kant thus advocates freedom of thought but not necessarily political freedom (equal rights, suffrage, representative government, etc.) Intellectually, we can think whatever we want, but politically and socially, we must obey.

6. (Kant probably makes this strange distinction between public and private reason for political reasons. Arguing for civic freedom would get him into trouble with the church and the state. He’s walking a fine line, arguing that the church and the state should not be able to limit freedom of expression without challenging the power of the church and the state. That’s why he writes “freedom need not give cause for the least concern regarding public order and harmony in the commonwealth.” [3rd from last ¶])

7. But even though Kant was no revolutionary, he’s opened up a can of worms that no one will be able to stuff back. Once one is able to criticize church and state, it’s a quick step to advocate overthrowing them.

a. See the second-to-last paragraph in the article, for example. Kant argues that freedom of thought should not only apply to arts, sciences, and religion, but even to government. A government’s constitution and laws should all be susceptible to criticism. Of course, he does not advocate overthrowing them (that would have got him into big trouble), but others will take the quick step from criticizing a government to overthrowing that. We’ll see that in liberals such as Locke and communists such as Marx.

C. Enlightenment is universal

1. Kant insists that all human beings possess the ability to be enlightened. Compare this with the aristocratic belief in “blue blood,” i.e. that some people are naturally born superior and society should be organized so that they stay in power. Or compare it to the belief that some people are “fit by nature” for slavery.

2. For Kant, all humans are equal by nature. We are all part of a “universal community” and we all share a single human nature despite our differences.

3. Thus, part of the task of enlightenment is finding those principles by which all humans can live by and

which are applicable in all places throughout all times.

4. Through the enlightenment, we can also see renewed emphasis on the public/private distinction. Some activities are meant to be public (and therefore universal) such as criticism and debate, while other activities are meant to be private, such as one's work, religion, or home life. In the public realm, all are equal: all have equal opportunity to express themselves. In the private realm, all are not equal, and some must obey others. The public/private distinction is an ancient one, but unlike the ancients, Enlightenment thinkers argued that the private realm, i.e. civil society, is as important as the public sphere.

5. This public/private distinction will be eventually attacked by Marx and feminists.

D. A belief in progress

1. Kant believes that it is "almost inevitable" that humanity will become enlightened. It will inevitably progress out of its stage of immaturity to that of maturity and freedom. In fact, he goes so far as to say human nature's destiny is to progress in enlightenment. Human history is the story of progress in the human condition.

2. Ancients such as Plato believed that the good and the true and the just was constant and never changed. Christians thought the good was only possible in heaven. After Kant, enlightenment ideologies fixed on the notion of gradual progress toward enlightenment and freedom.

3. Liberals embraced this belief in progress. Socialists were for revolutionary change, not gradual, but they also accepted the general notion of progress being in one direction. Conservatives are hesitant about change and are skeptical that all change is progress, but they spend much time discussing it and in general favor progress as well.

E. Secularism: separating church and politics

1. Kant emphasizes the importance of enlightenment primarily in religious matters in this essay, which is no accident. The church was a powerful political actor in his day and held great influence over opinions in the arts, sciences, and in politics. The church's influence sometimes hindered the pursuit of knowledge and the use of one's reason. E.g. Galileo (1564-1642) was persecuted for saying the earth revolved around the sun rather than vice-versa. Thus, separating religion from other social spheres was important for intellectuals like Kant.

2. On the other hand, political leaders also had great influence in determining what a people should worship and how they should worship. This is another example of "immaturity" in religious matters: not letting a person worship as she sees fit. Enlightenment thinkers advocated that not only should church and state be separated, one's method of worship should be a personal matter of individual choice, not subject to government interference. (See the paragraph that begins, "If it is now asked...")

3. Nevertheless, Enlightenment thinkers still frequently put limits to the freedom of religion. Locke, for example, said anyone should be able to worship as she pleases except for Catholics—because they owe their first loyalty to a foreign ruler, the Pope—and atheists, because they owe loyalty to no God and so can't be trusted! And Jews were persecuted in Europe until the end of WWII.

F. Concern with economics

1. The social organization of production and distribution becomes a central problem for enlightenment ideologies, though it doesn't appear in Kant's essay.

2. Some Enlightenment thinkers are for laissez-faire economics (i.e. no government involvement in the economy) while others are for strong central planning, but this very debate is possible because both are deeply concerned with economics.

3. In other words, instead of being a means to the good life as it was for the ancients, economy has become an end in itself. Starting with the Enlightenment, the good life depends in large part on how a society's economy is structured.

G. The ideal of popular government

1. With Enlightenment thinking came the notion that people were capable of ruling themselves, or at least that the aristocracy was not the only class that deserved to rule. The middle class, or bourgeoisie, argue that they should also play a part in politics. This is where, for example, the House of Commons emerged in England, which consisted mostly of the middle class (vs. the House of Lords, which consisted mostly of aristocrats).

2. The notion of popular government developed into support for democracy in the 19th century, or voting rights based on citizenship rather than property ownership.

3. Democracy

a. The word "democracy" comes from the Greek words demos (common people), and kratia (to rule). It literally means rule by the common people, which in ancient Greece meant rule by and for the lowest class. For this reason, democracy was not popular, even among Enlightenment thinkers, until the nineteenth century, with the Jacksonian era in the U.S. (Jackson was president from 1828-1836.)

b. Ball and Dagger refer to the democratic ideal, or the belief that governments should be democratic, and argue that this ideal has been crucial for all political ideologies since the nineteenth century. (Only one ideology—fascism—is antidemocratic, though some people also make this argument regarding religious fundamentalisms.) All other ideologies claim to be democratic and to create the ideal democratic society. Even communist states such as China consider themselves democracies, i.e. a "people's democratic dictatorship."

c. That's why they argue that democracy is not an ideology in itself. Rather, it's an ideal that most ideologies strive for. It is an essentially contested concept: ideologies struggle over our understanding of what democracy is and how we achieve it.

4. As you read about various ideologies throughout the course, think about what each author or ideology's conception of democracy, freedom, and equality is. Don't dismiss communism as anti-democratic, for example, because Marx actually thinks it's the most democratic system.

IV. How these Enlightenment characteristics influence political ideologies

A. Human autonomy is the means and end of Enlightenment

1. Look at the first paragraph and the very first sentence again. Think about what Kant means.

2. Enlightenment means that humans are growing or becoming mature through the use of their reason rather than following the dogmas of the church or the state. Enlightenment means think for yourself!

3. Two prerequisites to becoming mature or enlightened:

a. The belief in individuals' ability to seek knowledge and to think for oneself. (This relates to humanism, the idea that humans are the source and measure of value, with human life valuable in and of itself.)

b. Have the courage to make the choice to seek enlightenment. "Have the courage to use your own understanding!" Kant writes. It's your own fault if you don't seek enlightenment. But thinking for yourself involves some danger. "It is so easy to be immature," he writes. It takes courage to reject old dogmas and formulas, and perhaps even old leaders and institutions (such as the church and monarchical power). But

once you've made the choice to seek enlightenment, Kant argues, you will be rewarded.

4. Individual freedom and the state

a. Enlightenment requires freedom, Kant argues, but he has a more limited notion of freedom than we do.

b. For Kant, freedom doesn't mean the freedom to act and speak as you please so long as hurt no one else (that will come from John Stuart Mill, who we will read soon). For Kant, freedom means "the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters."

c. This creates a classic debate between individual freedom and the power of the state: when can the state intervene in one's life and when must it stay out? How much power should the state have over individuals? This issue will be central to Mill, but also to Marx and conservatives.

B. The importance of reason

1. Freedom means being able to think rationally for yourself. Kant argues that humanity must abandon a life of unreason, of relying on superstition, faith, and blind obedience. Instead, we must order our lives according to reason.

2. This implies that people are generally intelligent and capable and not morally depraved. Education in the use of our capacities to reason can morally uplift us.

3. To use our reason we must have knowledge, and so part of enlightenment is about seeking knowledge, not because it brings power but because it is important for its own sake. The political theorist Isaiah Berlin calls it a "disinterested love of the truth."

4. We find the truth through science, through objective and empirical knowledge. Human rationality is epitomized by scientific inquiry—science is the height of human reason. Through scientific inquiry we can solve all the mysteries of the universe and reveal the solutions to all the problems people face.

a. Kant's model is physics and mechanics. In the previous century, Isaac Newton had made it possible to explain the properties and behavior of the entire material world with just a few fundamental laws. He had brought order and clarity to the physical world. Kant and other enlightenment thinkers wished to do that in the social world as well. In their mind, philosophy should be turned into a natural science.

b. This is especially evident in liberalism and socialism, which both sought to be "scientific" belief systems. So, for example Marx's best friend Frederick Engels wanted to create a "scientific socialism" based on universal laws of history, and libertarians such as William Graham Sumner justified his liberalism on Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory of evolution.

5. "Public" vs. "private" use of reason

a. Again, Kant defines freedom as, "the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters." By "public use of reason" he means the freedom to think for oneself in regards to religion, arts, sciences, and even government. The "public use of reason" is the freedom to criticize and express one's own opinion on matters "as scholar" before the "entire literate world." It's about the freedom of thought and expression, including the freedom to criticize these institutions. The public use of one's reason must always be free and never restricted by the state or the church.

b. The private use of reason, however, can be restricted. Kant argues that when one is acting as a "scholar," as an abstract thinker who is writing for "the entire literate world," one should be able to freely discuss anything. But as a public official or a priest acting on behalf of the state or church, one must obey these institutions. One can criticize the tax system, for example, but one must still pay taxes. The priest may question church theology as a scholar, but as a person in charge of a congregation he must obey church dogma. As Frederick the Great, the king of Prussia in Kant's time, said, "Argue as much as you

want and about what you want [public use of reason] but obey!" [private use of reason]

c. In other words, the public use of reason should not be limited by people, the church, or the monarchy, but private reason can be limited in order to guarantee public order. Kant thus advocates freedom of thought but not necessarily political freedom (equal rights, suffrage, representative government, etc.) Intellectually, we can think whatever we want, but politically and socially, we must obey.

6. (Kant probably makes this strange distinction between public and private reason for political reasons. Arguing for civic freedom would get him into trouble with the church and the state. He's walking a fine line, arguing that the church and the state should not be able to limit freedom of expression without challenging the power of the church and the state. That's why he writes "freedom need not give cause for the least concern regarding public order and harmony in the commonwealth." [3rd from last ¶])

7. But even though Kant was no revolutionary, he's opened up a can of worms that no one will be able to stuff back. Once one is able to criticize church and state, it's a quick step to advocate overthrowing them.

a. See the second-to-last paragraph in the article, for example. Kant argues that freedom of thought should not only apply to arts, sciences, and religion, but even to government. A government's constitution and laws should all be susceptible to criticism. Of course, he does not advocate overthrowing them (that would have got him into big trouble), but others will take the quick step from criticizing a government to overthrowing that. We'll see that in liberals such as Locke and communists such as Marx.

C. Enlightenment is universal

1. Kant insists that all human beings possess the ability to be enlightened. Compare this with the aristocratic belief in "blue blood," i.e. that some people are naturally born superior and society should be organized so that they stay in power. Or compare it to the belief that some people are "fit by nature" for slavery.

2. For Kant, all humans are equal by nature. We are all part of a "universal community" and we all share a single human nature despite our differences.

3. Thus, part of the task of enlightenment is finding those principles by which all humans can live by and which are applicable in all places throughout all times.

4. Through the enlightenment, we can also see renewed emphasis on the public/private distinction. Some activities are meant to be public (and therefore universal) such as criticism and debate, while other activities are meant to be private, such as one's work, religion, or home life. In the public realm, all are equal: all have equal opportunity to express themselves. In the private realm, all are not equal, and some must obey others. The public/private distinction is an ancient one, but unlike the ancients, Enlightenment thinkers argued that the private realm, i.e. civil society, is as important as the public sphere.

5. This public/private distinction will be eventually attacked by Marx and feminists.

D. A belief in progress

1. Kant believes that it is "almost inevitable" that humanity will become enlightened. It will inevitably progress out of its stage of immaturity to that of maturity and freedom. In fact, he goes so far as to say human nature's destiny is to progress in enlightenment. Human history is the story of progress in the human condition.

2. Ancients such as Plato believed that the good and the true and the just was constant and never changed. Christians thought the good was only possible in heaven. After Kant, enlightenment ideologies fixed on the notion of gradual progress toward enlightenment and freedom.

3. Liberals embraced this belief in progress. Socialists were for revolutionary change, not gradual, but

they also accepted the general notion of progress being in one direction. Conservatives are hesitant about change and are skeptical that all change is progress, but they spend much time discussing it and in general favor progress as well.

E. Secularism: separating church and politics

1. Kant emphasizes the importance of enlightenment primarily in religious matters in this essay, which is no accident. The church was a powerful political actor in his day and held great influence over opinions in the arts, sciences, and in politics. The church's influence sometimes hindered the pursuit of knowledge and the use of one's reason. E.g. Galileo (1564-1642) was persecuted for saying the earth revolved around the sun rather than vice-versa. Thus, separating religion from other social spheres was important for intellectuals like Kant.

2. On the other hand, political leaders also had great influence in determining what a people should worship and how they should worship. This is another example of "immaturity" in religious matters: not letting a person worship as she sees fit. Enlightenment thinkers advocated that not only should church and state be separated, one's method of worship should be a personal matter of individual choice, not subject to government interference. (See the paragraph that begins, "If it is now asked...")

3. Nevertheless, Enlightenment thinkers still frequently put limits to the freedom of religion. Locke, for example, said anyone should be able to worship as she pleases except for Catholics—because they owe their first loyalty to a foreign ruler, the Pope—and atheists, because they owe loyalty to no God and so can't be trusted! And Jews were persecuted in Europe until the end of WWII.

F. Concern with economics

1. The social organization of production and distribution becomes a central problem for enlightenment ideologies, though it doesn't appear in Kant's essay.

2. Some Enlightenment thinkers are for laissez-faire economics (i.e. no government involvement in the economy) while others are for strong central planning, but this very debate is possible because both are deeply concerned with economics.

3. In other words, instead of being a means to the good life as it was for the ancients, economy has become an end in itself. Starting with the Enlightenment, the good life depends in large part on how a society's economy is structured. G. The ideal of popular government

1. With Enlightenment thinking came the notion that people were capable of ruling themselves, or at least that the aristocracy was not the only class that deserved to rule. The middle class, or bourgeoisie, argue that they should also play a part in politics. This is where, for example, the House of Commons emerged in England, which consisted mostly of the middle class (vs. the House of Lords, which consisted mostly of aristocrats).

2. The notion of popular government developed into support for democracy in the 19th century, or voting rights based on citizenship rather than property ownership.

3. Democracy

a. The word "democracy" comes from the Greek words demos (common people), and kratia (to rule). It literally means rule by the common people, which in ancient Greece meant rule by and for the lowest class. For this reason, democracy was not popular, even among Enlightenment thinkers, until the nineteenth century, with the Jacksonian era in the U.S. (Jackson was president from 1828-1836.)

b. Ball and Dagger refer to the democratic ideal, or the belief that governments should be democratic, and argue that this ideal has been crucial for all political ideologies since the nineteenth century. (Only one ideology—fascism—is antidemocratic, though some people also make this argument regarding religious

fundamentalisms.) All other ideologies claim to be democratic and to create the ideal democratic society. Even communist states such as China consider themselves democracies, i.e. a “people’s democratic dictatorship.”

c. That’s why they argue that democracy is not an ideology in itself. Rather, it’s an ideal that most ideologies strive for. It is an essentially contested concept: ideologies struggle over our understanding of what democracy is and how we achieve it.

4. As you read about various ideologies throughout the course, think about what each author or ideology’s conception of democracy, freedom, and equality is. Don’t dismiss communism as anti-democratic, for example, because Marx actually thinks it’s the most democratic system.

V. What is ideology

A. The word “ideology” (which literally means the study of ideas) was invented in 1790s by the French scholar Antoine Destutt de Tracy, who wrote a book called *The Elements of Ideology* in 1801.

1. De Tracy defined ideology as the systematic, scientific study of the sources and origins of ideas, and hoped it would become a scientific field just like geology or zoology.

2. He believed that the human mind was like a tabula rasa or blank tablet in that we are born with no knowledge and no ideas. Eventually, our “tablet” is filled with ideas based on our experiences. Once we know the source of our ideas, we can use this knowledge to eliminate bad ideas (such as religion, which is superstition according to him) and improve society.

B. Three definitions of ideology

1. Pejorative definition: Ideology is just a way to rationalize or to mask one’s true interests. Marx, for example, criticizes liberal ideology as a set of ideas that serve to justify and legitimize the rule of the dominant class. To be “ideological” or an ideologue means a person who doesn’t think for herself and just blindly obeys what a book or another person says.

2. Total world view: This definition is used to describe the characteristic ways of thinking of an entire society or historical period, e.g., “modernity,” “postmodernism,” “the West,” Orientalism, Confucianism, etc. These ways of thinking are so broad and so commonly shared by a society that its members are always wrapped up in them and no one can ever be “nonideological.” For this reason, according to some theorists such as Karl Mannheim, all social thought is in some way ideological, which means there is no purely scientific or objective understanding of social arrangements.

3. Belief system, or political ideology: In this definition, a political ideology is “A fairly coherent and comprehensive set of ideas that explains and evaluates social conditions, provides a vision of the ideal society, and provides a program for social and political action.” (This is my definition, based on Ball and Dagger and other sources.)

4. It is this 3rd definition that we’ll be using in this class, but keep the other two definitions in mind, too.

5. Ideology shapes how we “see” the world. They create a framework of interpretation. “Ideologies provide the member of a polity with a worldview, with constellations of ideas with which to organize their understanding of the political world.” (Michael Dawson, *Black Visions*, p. 54)

C. Reminder about ideologies

1. Think of ideologies as a core or a base from which people’s beliefs about the world come from. Don’t think of ideologies as perfectly coherent and rational, and don’t think that to be a liberal you have to agree to everything Mill says or to share every characteristic of liberalism we’ll be discussing. Sharing the same ideology doesn’t mean you’ll agree on much; in fact, being of the same ideology often means you’ll disagree all the more vehemently (e.g., communists from Marx to Bakunin to Stalin).

2. No one thinks alike or exactly like an ideology (that's an ideologue), but no one gets their ideas in a vacuum, either. People who think they get their ideas on their own and therefore don't have an ideology usually believe this because the dominant ideology of their society (e.g. liberalism in the U.S.) is so dispersed throughout society and so immersed in our culture that we don't recognize it as an ideology. I'm sure you've heard this said before: "Other people have an ideology; I deal with reality." But what is "reality" or "normal" is also part of ideology. In other words, everyone has an ideology. We can't escape ideology—but neither are we dominated by it totally. Think of ideology as a base to build on or criticize, but not something we can do without.

Notes

Add notes, references and edit categories here