

What Is Meant By Ideology?

A review of the research over the last 40 years reveals the extent to which the term ideology remains a 'highly flexible conceptual tool' (Gerring, 1997, p.957). It is seemingly customary to start any discussion of ideology with concern over the terms semantic promiscuity (See, Bennett (1977), Eagleton (1991), Sartori (1969), Seliger (1976), Converse (1964), Naes et al (1956), Hamilton (1987)). This multivalent approach to ideology has resulted in striking contradictions when comparing different definitions. Ideology is dogmatic to some (Sartori 1969, p.42), while others attach connotations of political sophistication to it (McClosky, 1964, p.362). Ideology could refer to dominant modes of thought, but then also be used to reference those furthest from the status quo (e.g. revolutionary movements and parties). Some base ideology on the interests of a social class, while others characterise it without emphasis on economic self-interest. By categorising the most common approaches, this paper attempts to clarify the semantic confusion around the term. It concludes that particular attention should be placed on the construction of a "core" definition.

Gerring's respected definitional analysis of ideology, identified five common approaches: operationalisation, terminological reshuffling, intellectual history, etiology, and multivocality (1997, p.959). This paper attempts to expound upon his ideas for categorisation by introducing Leader Maynard's (2013) insights in '*A map of the field of ideological analysis.*' Gerring (1997, p.967) provides a vast framework outlining the attributes associated with ideology. Maynard, who insists on categorising approaches to ideology as "broad clusters of methodological practices" (2013, p.300), allows us to explore the motivations behind certain attributes being attached to ideology. This is achieved by analysing the methodology presently used within the field of ideological analysis (Maynard, 2013, p.301). This takes into account both a definitional and methodological perspective when discussing the meaning of ideology. Although their groupings have different names, the phenomena they are identifying are in fact the same, albeit through different analyses. However this is positive, ideas replicated independently of each

other suggests credibility. Maynard's article identifies the common approaches as: conceptual approaches (or intellectual history), quantitative approaches (or operationalization) and discursive approaches (or etiology/multivocality/ terminological reshuffling).

Operationalization/Quantitative approaches

Both Gerring (1997, p.959) and Maynard (2013, p.309) identified this quantitative approach to ideology among political scientists within the United States. The aims of quantitative analysts is to "identify correlative and causal links between ideological component and political behaviour" (Maynard, 2013, p.310) rather than analysing the complexities of ideological content. This creates problems when trying to concisely define ideology. Different definitional attributes can be operationalized in different ways. While one may conclude that the American public are highly ideological based on certain operationalized attributes, differing attributes when operationalised could suggest the opposite. It may help behaviouralists to pay notice to Sartori's (1970, p.1038) dictum that "concept formation stands prior to quantification." The problem with definitions defined 'backwards' - in the sense of working out measurements first, is that it can encourage a facile approach to definition. Behaviouralists may gain more from a more rigid examination of the term, rather than simply deducing definitions from sets of empirical data.

Intellectual history/conceptual approach

Intellectual history, or conceptual history, provides a more serious attempt at defining the concept, however ultimately does not lead us to a comprehensive definition of ideology. Conceptual approaches are primarily interested in ideologies as 'system of ideas', to understand their 'ideational content' in other words (Maynard, 2013, p.301). Conceptual analyst have traditionally been less concerned with the discursive or institutional structures through which ideology is expressed (Maynard, 2013, p.302), and more interested with 'particular authors' of ideologies. It is possible to for the conceptual approach to locate "traditions" of usage i.e. Marxist, Weberian, structuralist, however the identification of

intellectual traditions blurs semantic distinctions within each tradition and between individual works. Gerring (1997, p.963) makes the suggestion that perhaps the intellectual history approach may be useful to explore semantic tensions within a particular set of writers but this will not however lead to a comprehensive definition of the concept.

Discursive approaches

Discursive approaches differ from conceptual approaches in that “the principal objects of study are the communicative practices through which ideology is constituted, transmitted and made visible” (Maynard, 2013, p.304). There are two dominant traditions within contemporary discourse analysis of ideology, that is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and what Maynard (2013, p. 304) terms ‘the post structuralist tradition’. Both traditions tend to use conceptions of ideology that when compared to conceptual and quantitative approaches are considered pejorative. This is due to ideology from a discursive approach “being conceived of as being produced by power and relations of domination, and as serving to sustain those relations” (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 8-10). The main differences between the two can be seen over how epistemologically extensive the implications of ‘constitutive discourse’ are and differences in methodology (Maynard, 2013, p.305). CD analyst are comfortable speaking in the name of truth in contrast to analyst within the post-structuralist tradition who are sceptical of such a standpoint. Finally whereas CDA can be characterized as a more formal linguistic analysis (Maynard, 2013, p.306), post-structuralism abandons the categories of traditional linguistics in favour of concepts such as ‘myth’, ‘imaginaries’ or ‘empty signifiers’ inspired from neo/post-Marxist innovations (Maynard, 2013, p.307).

Conclusion

In order to combat against this oversupply of meanings, emphasis needs to be placed on constructing a “core” definition. Gerring correctly points out that the only trait that stands virtually unchallenged within the social science literature is the importance of coherence. – aka ‘consistency’ or ‘constraint’” (1997, p.980). Ideology at the very least he posits “refers to a set

of idea-elements that are bound together, that belong to one another in a non-random fashion” (Gerring, 1997, p.980). Now in what ways these idea-elements intercorrelate or remain in dispute are still up for debate, but the concept of coherence as Gerring points out is difficult to gainsay. All other possible attributes are simply not universal in usage. The attribute *dominant* conflicts with *subordinate*, consciousness likewise with *unconsciousness*. Those who would define ideology to explicitly *political* subject matter must concede that this would exclude non-political uses of the term such as “pertaining to relationships mediated by power, or relationships within the *world at*” (Gerring, 1997, p. 980). Ultimately we must also allow for context-specific definitions. It is the task of the writer who is situated in a particular problem, region, time-period, methodology to define ideology in a way which suit the purpose of their research. Differing definitions will be useful for different purposes. So while this does not resolve the question of what is “the best definition”, by accounting and mapping all possible definitional choices, will make it easier to move forward the practical task of defining what is meant by ideology.

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