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NOTES TOWARDS A THEORY OF IDEOLOGY

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Offense

"If I were to imagine... a day-labourer, and the mightiest Emperor that ever lived... sent for the poor man... and informed him that he wished to have him for his son-in-law... what then?... the labourer... would become somewhat or very much puzzled, shame-faced and embarrassed, and it would seem to him... quite mad, the last thing in the world about which he would say a word to anybody else, since he in his own mind was not far from explaining it by supposing... that the Emperor wanted to make a fool of him, so that the poor man would be the laughing stock of the whole town... This thing... of becoming the Emperor's son-in-law might readily be subjected to the test of reality, so that the labourer would be able to ascertain how far the Emperor was serious... or whether... he merely wanted to... help him... find his way to the mad-house... And suppose now that this was not an external reality but an inward thing, so that factual proofs could not help the labourer..."

(Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness unto Death)

Ideologies are systems of ideas or beliefs. This is hardly contentious and does not tell us very much, partly because we do not know, from the definition, just how much is to be read into the words occurring in it. Moreover, whilst ideologies are systems of ideas, not all systems of ideas are ideologies. What is the specific differentia? What is it, within the (nebulously defined) wider class of systems of ideas, which makes some of them ideologies?

Offensiveness, in the quasi-technical sense which Kierkegaard here gives it, seems part of the answer. Ideologies contain hypotheses, but they are not simply hypotheses. They are hypotheses full of both menace and "sex appeal". They threaten and they promise; they demand assent with menaces; they reclassify the moral identity of the believer and the sceptic; and they generate a somewhat new world. The world is different according to whether one looks at it from within or without a given ideology.

It might be objected that any idea whatever can be exciting or terrifying for someone, in some context. Indeed. Anything whatever can be the object of sexual desire—as a character in Sartre observes in self-defence—and I have a feeling that it says somewhere or other in the works of Talcott Parsons that anything whatever can be the object of cathexis. So it is.

It seems to me an essential characteristic of ideologies that this offense-generating property is inherent in them, that it is implied in their very intellectual content. It is not contingent. Any fact, in a suitable context, may indeed be overwhelmingly significant and exciting to someone, somewhere. But ideologies contain contentions which are inherently fear- and hope-inspiring and are meant to be such to anyone, anywhere. This does not necessarily mean that they always succeed in eliciting such powerful reactions in the people exposed to them. Kierkegaard clearly believed that it was of the very nature of Christianity that it gave offense, but, in the work in which he introduces the notion, he also displays some irritation with, and contempt for those who stubbornly refuse to be offended. They clearly are, for him, a lower form of humanity, a kind of human vegetable:

"The degree of offense depends on what passion a man has for admiration. The more prosaic men, devoid of imagination and passion, and who therefore are not apt to admire, they too may be offended, but they confine themselves to saying, 'Such a thing I cannot get through my head, I let it alone.'"

And earlier on, discussing despair, which for him is the failure to embrace the offense-giving faith, he says:

"In unconsciousness of being in despair a man is furthest from being conscious of himself as spirit. But precisely... not being conscious of oneself as spirit is despair... whether the condition be that of complete deadness, a merely vegetative life, or a life of higher potency... In the latter case the man is like the sufferer from consumption: he feels well, considers himself in the best of health... precisely when the sickness is most dangerous."

All this amounts to an admirable explication of the concept of offense. Kierkegaard's own favoured belief system promises salvation, but only on condition that one "believes in" the system in question. The system also overtly proclaims itself offensive, and this offensiveness is of its essence, if Kierkegaard is to be believed. The tension which this offensiveness induces in the souls of some, is then treated as a kind of confirmation of the system itself. No truth, indeed no identity, without offense. Nevertheless, the indisputable fact that the tension-generating offensiveness fails to work for some, is also accommodated and in-
voked: the despair of those who do not even know they are in despair, is deeper, more noxious, than the condition of more conscious sufferers.

One can of course see the origin of Existentialism at this point, and also understand the manner of its bifurcation into religious and atheist varieties. The latter kind invokes a premiss drawn from the theory of knowledge or from an account of the human condition: all belief systems are offensive, in the appropriate sense, and hence all are tension-generating, simply because men never have the evidence adequate for a viable system of ideas. A viable system can be defined in various ways, but basically what is at stake is a picture of one's environment good enough to warrant action. In practice, we can never have such a picture with a logical warranty, and hence action and life are always a gamble, a leap, a device without safeguards of correctness. Q.E.D. Religious Existentialism contains a further nuance: it points an accusing finger at philosophies which claim that they can warrant our vision of things, and proceed from the falsity of this claim to stress the greater psychological truth of religions, with their frank demand for non-rational commitment, and from this it somehow slides to a putative vindication of religion itself. Religious irrationality lays bare or exemplifies the human condition, therefore those irrational beliefs are valid.

These questions in the history of ideas do not concern us here. I have begun with Kierkegaard's concept of offense simply because it seems to me to offer an admirable starting point to the understanding of ideology, to what it is that distinguishes what in practice we recognise as ideology, from any old system of ideas. Ideologies attract and repel; they do both at once; and, I suspect, they can generally function only if indeed they do both.

"... the mightiest Emperor... informed [the labourer] that he wished to have him for his son-in-law... and suppose now... that factual proofs could not help the labourer...."

This seems to me of the essence of the predicament of man-in-face-of-an-ideology: he has cause to be attracted and to be afraid, and has no way of telling which.

The threat or menace in an ideology is in some ways like a painful rite de passage, which restricts entry, makes membership valuable to those who have gained it, ensures that membership does not become devalued by becoming too easy; it is a source of pride to the initiates, and gives them a psychic investment in retained and restricting membership. But it has the advantage over an initiation rite in that it is timeless and ever-present. The Queen in Alice claimed to believe at least three impossible things before breakfast. Believers in offense-giving faiths perpetually carry such impossible convictions with them.

A community of believers is defined by shared belief, but this could hardly work if the membership-conferring belief were something anyone could simply
stumble on or work out for himself. It must be different. There is no way of patenting ideas or convictions, other than, perhaps, by making them simultaneously eccentric, demanding, difficult and authoritative. Their eccentricity disconnects them from other ideas: and if they positively contradict commonsense notions, there can be no way of deriving them from such ordinary notions.

The strain generated by offensiveness has at least two functions: it is diacritical, serving to separate believers from unbelievers, and it helps enforce discipline and ranking within the community of the faithful. No man is tied to another by an unstressful conviction which he can understand and establish by his own unaided efforts. Precarious, and above all offensive ideas are different. If one man presents an idea of this kind to another, with the full backing of his own authority, he is really issuing a challenge: submit, or defy me. And if the man submits, he is henceforth tied to the idea he accepted by his own pride and dignity. If it is subsequently discarded as absurd, he himself is also thereby demeaned.

But offense is not generated by unacceptability alone. The world is too full of absurd ideas; not all of them are embraced, and not all of them define a community of the faithful. Something else is required. In Kierkegaard’s illuminating story, the promise or offer made by the Emperor is not merely implausible—it is also tempting.

If the repulsiveness, the offensiveness, is the trap, then an ideology also needs bait. In fact, I do suspect that all ideologies need both a trap and a bait: an entry-inducing and an exit-hampering mechanism; usually these take the form of commitment to an absurdity, and of some positive, unproblematical appeal, which attracts potential believers initially. The trap may prevent them from leaving once they are in, but what is also required is something to lure them in the first place. In Kierkegaard’s story, we can feel that the labourer, terrified of his own presumption, nevertheless does rather fancy himself as in-law to the Emperor. It is absurd, of course... but not so absurd as not to be rather attractive, all the same.

The bait can be a promise or an idea, or both. An unifying idea, with a genuine or putative explanatory power, which illuminates what had previously been obscure or disconnected, will do very well; and at the same time, it is good if some kind of salvation is also implied. The idea generally clicks: this, we feel, at last makes sense of it all, we had always vaguely suspected that something of this order was the underlying truth. A promise of salvation does click: can the world be such as to justify despair? We are inclined to think not. The offense of which Kierkegaard speaks so eloquently clearly springs from the co-presence of both the click and the revulsion.

The revulsion seems necessary for production of that tension without which
there would be no price, no value, no discipline, no commitment. It seems built into ideologies by some hidden hand, some cunning of reason, to ensure that they can function as such; let us leave aside just how, for the moment. But how is it ensured that we are vulnerable to the seduction of the promise, to the bait?

The answer is of course that we are not all of us equally and at all times so vulnerable. In the work with which I have chosen to start, Kierkegaard does of course employ a simple device for making sure that we are so vulnerable. Despair, which in his language means amongst other things susceptibility to faith, is universal, of course. If some men are not aware of being in despair, that only shows that their despair is that much deeper, that they are at a lower level of consciousness, approximating to a merely vegetative existence. Within this system, despair is clearly not to be escaped, other than through faith.

Other writers choose different definitions and valuations. Nietzsche and the pragmatists valued robust confidence and instinct higher precisely because it is not vulnerable to the bait and the trap, because it does not need to sustain life by faith, because its life is allegedly self-sustaining or is its own faith. Nietzsche spoke with derision of Pascal as a man who tried to induce despair in us all.

Arguments exist, less tautological than Kierkegaard’s, which claim that we are all vulnerable. Death, uncertainty, contingency, the limitations of our power and our knowledge, and the inherently incomplete and/or uncertain status of our ideas—all these, and perhaps other features of the human condition, seem to ensure that we are ever vulnerable. Anyway, there seems to be no doubt at any rate about the vulnerability of some men or groups, at least those less favoured or protected by good fortune, temperament or fortitude.

Perhaps, in those pessimistic accounts of the human condition which purport to show that we are all vulnerable and in need of faith, we can find a clue to why both the bait and the trap are ever present: if the objective situation is such that we can never be confident, either morally or cognitively, or in any other way, then that insures that any faith which promises to reassure us will also be false to the facts of the case and thus generate offense. Any coherent picture will be less than adequately justified, and thus at risk, open to doubt, and hence offensive.

Double Status

It is a well-known feature of ideologies that they claim to be intellectually sovereign. The truth, Spinoza said, is the touchstone both of itself and of falsehood. From the inside, ideologies are not merely true: what is far more impor-
tant is that they provide the very criterion for telling truth from falsehood. They monopolise validation.

They can provide the promised salvation to their believers only on condition that they are treated as logically terminal: they are to be the final touchstones of truth and falsehood, it is in them that cognitive sovereignty resides. Questions are ultimately resolved by appeal to them.

This is a conspicuous trait of ideologies. But certain odd, and indeed most significant, consequences follow if one sees this trait in conjunction with their offensiveness, discussed above.

A claim can only give offense, in the sense intended, within the context of some other and wider world, of some other set of rules, which it manages to offend, and which it did not itself invent or sanction. The promise of sublime elevation made to Kierkegaard's humble day-labourer is offensive precisely because it is made in a given world in which it goes against all social expectations, against all social norms, for day-labourers to be so elevated. Both the bait and the trap, indeed, can only have their efficacy in terms of some prior world, a world preceding the one to be defined and logically dominated by the ideology in question. So, in a curious way, ideologies tacitly and implicitly admit that they do not dominate or fill out the world after all. They function within a world they did not themselves make.

This admission can, in a simple religious form, be quite naive and unselfconscious. Robertson Smith's work on the religion of the Semites consists precisely of spelling out tacit assumptions of this ante-world, a world which traditions such as the biblical one simply took for granted, and within which they naively, unselfconsciously operated. At the same time, I would not wish to claim that a sophisticated theology could not overcome this seeming contradiction, somewhat along the following lines: at first of course, the offense operates in a prior world, one which the believer had inhabited before his full conversion, and it made its initial impact in terms of the ideas and conventions of that world. But this does not mean that this prior world has some basic or ultimate authority. It was a provisional and illusory habitat, from which the believer had to propel himself to the vision of truth; but once that is attained, the ladder by which he has ascended is rightly pushed away and discarded and is then seen to be redundant. Just because Grace first makes its appearance to the unregenerated in terms of their erstwhile condition, and impels them in those terms to seek their own salvation, it does not follow that those terms are ultimate or even sound. Not at all.

We shall not here (or anywhere else, for that matter) solve the question of the legitimacy or ultimacy of either outlooks—of the internal vision of soteriological belief, or the external, dispassionate, faith-suspending scrutiny which preceded it (or followed it again, in the case of renegades). We are here concern-
ed with the sociological, not the normative aspect of the matter. And sociologically, this situation has most important implications:

Ideologies are indeed ultimate, normative, sovereign, and offense-giving in their total claims: but at the same time, they do not altogether conceptually define and dominate a world. They are articulated in a language wider than the world which they themselves would define and authorise to exist. It is from that richer world that they recruit the neophyte, and it is also in that world that they are offensive. Hence they are bi-lingual or bi-conceptual. The ultimacy-claim commits them to treating their own conceptual scheme as all-embracing, terminal, as the very touchstone both of truth and falsehood; but the crucial mechanisms of offering bait, and closing the trap, work in an idiom and by standards external to the ideology itself, which has its own standards of truth and falsehood, of conclusiveness, of evidence, and of proper presentation.

This dualism or ambivalence is an extremely important trait of ideologies. Its most obvious explanation lies in the fact that they propose monopolistic solutions in contexts in which they do not, or do not altogether, monopolise power. Even in cases when they possess the political power to proscribe rivals, they do not really have the conceptual power to make rival positions unthinkable. There is a certain fashionable philosophy of culture (with quite diverse roots in contemporary philosophy, sociology and anthropology) which would make culture ultimate, as the only necessary, and sufficient, ground of the norms and cosmological ideas which pervade it. Quite apart from the devastating objections one can raise against this philosophically and morally—it is an attempt to browbeat us into accepting culture, or even accepting a specific given culture, as self-validating and authoritative—this is quite mistaken on a straightforward descriptive, sociological level. It is a most interesting and important trait of many, perhaps of all conceptual systems, that, unlike the artificial Newspeak of Orwell's *1984*, they do not succeed in making dissent or unsayable, unconceptualisable.

If I am right in my stress on this trait of ideologies—they claim ultimacy and at the same time naively accept the rules, conventions and norms of some other world within which they operate, attract clients and endeavour to peddle themselves—, then this also shows the misguided nature of certain modern theological reformulations of religious belief. Take, for instance, Barthian religious fundamentalism. It defends religion by pointing out, correctly enough, that it is above or beyond all defence. Its claims have so elevated and ultimate a status that to defend them, from some other premises or assumptions, would be to contradict religion itself—for such a defence or justification would implicitly give those other premises or assumptions, whatever they might be, an even higher and more ultimate status. The argument is perfectly cogent as far as it goes. It faces one or two difficulties which do not concern us here—notably,
that it applies with equal force and indeed equal facility to any belief system which takes the trouble to incorporate in itself the simple assertion that it itself is ultimate. It makes things too easy for too many claims. What does concern us here is the phenomenology of religion, as a form of ideology. The Barthian defence is quite untrue to the facts of the case, to the very spirit of that which it would defend. Logically or not, actual faiths have in fact both claimed ultimacy and are defended, argued for, from extraneous premises drawn from an antecedent world which is naively taken for granted, as given.

The rival wing of modernist theology, exemplified by Tillich and others, travestied the nature of the defended faith in another way. It totally removes all offense. If God is equated with one's ultimate concern (whatever it may be), it only needs the fairly trite premises that men do have concerns, and that these concerns can be ranked (at least at any given time) in order of urgency, to establish, by a terrifyingly simple argument, the existence of God, or at least of a God per man. (A man who, at the top of his list of concerns, has a number of equally urgent or ultimate concerns, ipso facto becomes a polytheist, I suppose.)

World-Generator or World-Apex?

The conceptual bi-lingualism of ideologies, or their double status as defining the limits and norms of the world and at the same time inhabiting a world which they share with their infidel rivals, brings one to a further point of importance in the study of this topic. There are two distinct, though interrelated questions, which are sometimes confused or at any rate not distinguished with adequate emphasis: (a) the social construction of reality; (b) the role of ideology within reality.

The social-construction-of-reality theme has had a certain vogue of late, and has been fed by a variety of philosophical and sociological streams, similar to those which encourage the idea of culture as normatively sovereign, ultimate, and beyond challenge. Indeed, the two sets of ideas appeal to similar tastes and are often conflated. The ultimacy of cultural norms protects those norms

1. Nur mit ein bisschen anderen Worten, a similar argument is nowadays often found in fashionable Marxist theology. At one point, we learn that Marxism cannot be transcended (as long as the conditions which engendered it obtain, or because it is the philosophy of our age, etc., arguments which curiously imply that conditions of its transcendence are conceivable, even if they are not yet our conditions); this established, we take from the philosophy of science the trendy claim that no theory is at the mercy of mere fact; and we reinforce the package by noting that the putative refutations are in any case in the idiom of a bourgeois vision which we have transcended, and the case is established.
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(or those which one most fancies amongst them) from criticism and challenge; the social construction of reality ensures that reality, being man-made, cannot be alien to man, cannot be icy, impersonal, cannot exemplify the theses which are pejoratively known as scientism or reductionism. Things are as we fancy them. Thus (a) our beliefs are true, and (b) our world is as we wish it. The two arguments converge like pincers on the same objective.

Discerning the motives which lead men to find pleasure in these views does not of course undermine, let alone refute these views. These views have a simple and powerful basis. One premise is provided by the contention that any picture of reality must be conceptually saturated: “things” can only be “grasped” in terms of some system of ideas. The second premise is provided by the contention that the carriers of such systems of ideas are not individuals but “languages” or cultures, which are internalised by individuals in the process of their education, of their “formation” as human beings with a cultural identity and a capacity to use a cultural medium. (One need not here face the question of the extent to which such a process of internalising a language or culture presupposes a pre-existing, “innate” equipment.) Each of these premises is very powerful (even if not necessarily very precise), and jointly they certainly encourage the conviction that reality is “socially constructed”. This view then agreeably opens the way both to endorsing a given view of reality irrespective of logical objections to it (because that is what reality is, and one could not expect it to be more than our social vision), and also, if one wishes, of rejecting uncongenial views, however well supported by facts, simply because they allegedly are no more than artefacts of a social order which one happens not to endorse.

The idea has received further encouragement in the recent past from the at least partial successes of Chomskian linguistics. The tacitly unquestioned pre-Chomskian view of language was as of an accumulation and an echo; we accumulated our linguistic wealth like a squirrel amassing nuts, “from experience”. The essence of the Chomskian view is to see the wealth of sentences which an individual can utter and understand, as generated by some central, persisting mechanism, whose mode of operation can hopefully be reconstructed by working back from a delimitation of the range of performances of which it is capable. If this can be done for language, for recognising sentences, why not also for the rest of psychology, for our capacity to recognise anything, for the range of things which “are” our world, or for the range of actions and meanings which are our social world?

For various reasons, it seems to me that this task, of explaining the “generation” of our social or our total worlds, is much harder even than the task of specifying the “generative grammar” of a language. For one thing, discipline or social control in linguistic behaviour seems, interestingly, to be much stricter and more effective than in other spheres. Speech eccentricities are much easier
to detect than eccentricities of conduct, and people seem much less inclined to commit them. The linguist seems to have access to much more clear-cut material at the basis of his work. But is there such a thing as ungrammatical conduct? You might say that a solecism such as wearing a black tie with tails is a sartorial-grammatical slip. But it is easy to identify such slips only in spheres such as these, e.g., “formal dress”, which are, precisely, distinct from the rest of life, and recognised as such, by being heavily “ritualised”. In language we do have grammar, but in conduct we have only morality or custom; and immoral conduct, far from being hard to interpret in a given culture, may in fact be its statistical norm, and perfectly intelligible to all participants. Really bad grammar verges on incomprehensibility, but improper conduct is perfectly comprehensible. Is there then some deeper moral grammar which excludes some physically possible actions, and which effectively precludes them even when they are technically efficient and carried out by a powerful people? It seems doubtful. The large majority of sane normal adults have no difficulty in internalising the grammar of their language to a point at which they commit fairly few solecisms. But this is not so in the field of norms of conduct outside a man’s home circle: people need to tread warily, and their fear of ridicule is an important factor in social control. They are not sure of the moral grammar; but if they are powerful enough, they also do not respect its bounds. The powerful defy etiquette with impunity. Social conduct does not have as firm a grammar as language does. It is often technical: it chooses effective means, not codified symbols. If this is so, much modern structuralism may be inspired by quite the wrong model, and Pierre Bourdieu may be giving us a wrong hint in his choice of epigraph from Chomsky for his Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique, which runs as follows:

“When we discuss the levels of descriptive and explanatory adequacy, questions immediately arise concerning the firmness of the data in terms of which success is to be judged [. . .] For example, [ . . .] one might ask how we can establish that the two are sentences of different types, or that ‘John’s eagerness to please . . . ’ is well-formed, while ‘John’s easiness to please . . . ’ is not, and so on. There is no very satisfying answer to this question; data of this sort are simply what constitute the subject matter for linguistic theory. We neglect such data at the cost of destroying the subject.”

In the world of conduct, the conventional and the technical compete with each other. Means-ends (technical) effectiveness makes itself felt, whether or not it conforms to the conventions (“grammar”) of the culture. A man with the
more powerful weapon can impose his will, whether or not the social syntax
condones it. It is not so with language. Breath is cheap, the opportunity cost
of utterance is very small; so the means need not be costed carefully. But
words generally do not have any effect directly; such effects as they have, they
normally attain through being understood. So there is neither need nor incentive,
generally speaking, to break the rules, to violate the “grammar”. Hence a
“structural” approach, which makes such good sense for the study of language,
cannot easily and without great reservations be transferred to the study of social
behaviour. One does wonder whether the failure to see this does not make
a great deal of structuralismo irrelevant. Specimens of actual conduct are not
evidence for a “structure” in the same sense as utterances, or the boundary
between acceptable and unacceptable utterances in a given language, constitute
evidence for the structure of the generative mechanism of that language. (It
is also not at all clear just where in “society” such a mechanism could possibly
be located.) Actual conduct, unlike speech, is a by-product of two quite different
sets of factors—the cultural conventions within which the conduct takes place,
and the real-world causal connections which are quite independent of those
conventions.

In speech, the same is true of this choice of meanings to be conveyed but it is
not true of the manner in which these meanings are articulated, conveyed and under-
stood. But linguists are concerned with this latter process, which is significantly
different from the choice of either actions or meanings.

Another obvious difficulty faced by anyone attempting to extend and apply
the Chomskian strategy to our “reality-construction” is this: language, however
important and central, is nevertheless a thing in the world amongst others, and
does not fill out the world. A linguist attempting to specify the mechanisms
which generate a given language, may without circularity assume a certain world
with given properties, within which and in terms of which he is endeavouring
to achieve his aim. But an epistemic-sociologist endeavouring to tell us how
we “construct our world” is a man who has sawn off the branch on which he is
sitting. Which prior world is left in terms of which he could do it? And what
precisely is the status of that more ultimate world or idiom? The practitioners
of this art, of giving us conceptual frissons by telling us we have made our world,
do not seem unduly worried by this painful regress, but this seems to be so only
because they do not aspire to any very high level of explanatory precision or
rigour. They seem to be quite content with a general indication that such
construction must be taking place, and with a fairly nebulous specification of
just how it is done. The whole thing is then illustrated with alleged examples
of the end-products of the process, without any genuine, concrete and precise
theory of “social world-construction”.

My own guess is that for various reasons, over and above the ones indicated,
the task of indicating just how we construct “our” reality will be well beyond
our powers for a long time to come. What Sir Peter Medawar says about the
related problem of the genetics of behaviour is also applicable here: “. . . the
problem is very, very difficult. Goodness knows how it is to be got at. It may
be outflanked or yield to attrition, but probably not to direct assault.”

Our present purpose does not require us to decide either how or whether such
construction takes place. It does require of us to separate this question firmly
from the problem of ideology in a narrower (but still broad and important) sense.
Ideology, in the sense in which I am here approaching a tentative sketch of it,
is something within the world, and not co-extensive with it, or with the world
of any individual or group. It is a set of ideas with claims to intellectual author-
ity and sovereignty in the world, and with a consequent strong tendency to
elicit offense in Kierkegaard’s sense—promising much but also inspiring
fear of deception. It is something operating in our world, even if it claims a
high status in it, and not something which actually makes the world and is
presupposed by it. The two problems are of course inter-related. We must of
course take seriously the Durkheimian thesis (of The Elementary Forms of Reli-
gious Life), which runs as follows: the main function or effect of the central
belief system of a society is to inculcate, to make compulsive, the pivotal concepts,
moral, cognitive and other, of that society. Those pivotal concepts then organise,
direct, the perception and understanding of anything else in the world of the
members of the society. Without them, we would not have a world at all.

This thesis may or may not be true. But if true, that means that “ideology”,
in the somewhat narrower sense, which I am trying to define, is also crucial for
the wider question concerning how we “construct our world”. The concepts
which it makes central also dominate and organise all others. But that wider
question—how do the central categories make the world?—is as yet beyond
our powers. The narrower question—how do they comport themselves in the
world?—may be much more manageable. It seems to me best to try and deal
with it first, without sliding over into the wider one, notwithstanding their inter-
connection.

5. In his interesting recent Malinowski Memorial Lecture (“The Past and the Present
in the Present”, Man, August 1977, 12 (2): 278-292), Dr. Maurice Bloch has argued that
anthropologists have been too ready to accept what I have called the Durkheimian thesis,
and to assume that the solemn concepts of the official faith do dominate, and are exempli-
ﬁed in, the concepts of daily use. (May not ritual solemnity create a kind of conceptual
ghetto, insulated from the notions of daily life?) He has shown that some of the debate about
the alleged social relativity of rationality hinge on the insufficiently examined assumption of the
correctness of this thesis.
What Else Is not Ideology?

I have endeavoured to exclude from "ideology" the very big thing, namely our total vision of reality (avoiding the question of whether we do live within a single such totality). But there may also be much smaller things which deserve to be excluded from it.

It seems to me pointless to include pre-literate, tribal religions within the class of "ideologies". These religions tend to be "Durkheimian" in the sense of being a heightening of the ordinary social life and its confirmation; but the relatively low level of religious specialisation, doctrinal codification, and of the independent power of doctrinal propositions make them, in important ways, unlike that which we normally classify as ideology. No doubt, there are grave problems of demarcation. Cargo cults have made it amply obvious that traditional faiths of this kind can easily be adapted to transform rather than ratify and perpetuate a social order. Or again, tribal religions can compete with clearly doctrinal, "ideological" world religions on something at least approaching equal terms:

"Il y a longtemps, le lama, le pucu, le klihbri et le brahmane décidèrent d'organiser une compétition pour déterminer lequel d'entre eux avait le savoir le plus étendu. Les perdants devraient percer leurs tambours et brûler leurs livres... Pour... gagner... il fallait être parvenu à [un]... lac tibétain... le lendemain matin... le lama et le brahmane... voyagèrent sur un rayon du soleil levant... Les deux autres prêtres volant sur leurs tambours n'arrivèrent que quelques instants plus tard et perdirent l'épreuve. Le pucu et le klihbri brûlèrent leurs livres et percèrent leurs tambours." 6

Tests of rival magical power of course also take place between contestants within a single faith:

"The Alawite sultan, Moulay Ismail, having heard that Sidi Lahcen was a great scholar, invited him to the capital... at the palace, and each... night, Sidi Lahcen smashed the dinner plates. The sultan was enraged... and demanded an explanation. The saint told the sultan that he was only breaking clay dishes, whereas he, Moulay Ismail, was breaking the dishes of Allah (i.e. the workers)... Humiliated, the sultan, his sword raised, charged Sidi Lahcen. Suddenly his arm froze above his head, and his horse began to sink into the ground. A wall of fire sprung up. Terrified, the sultan begged for his

life, offering his kingdom to Sidi Lahcen. Sidi Lahcen refused the kingdom but told the sultan to have his scribe draft a decree freeing the shurfa. Decree in hand, Sidi Lahcen left Meknes.”

But one is disinclined to consider these spiritual-athletic contests as ideological ones. No doctrine is being tested: what is at issue is only priority or power or excellence of given religious performers. Ideological conflict arises when doctrines, not men or shrines, are in opposition. But indisputably, this boundary is one which is very difficult to trace on the ground: there will be many borderlines and ambiguous cases.

These notes are notes towards a theory, and not a theory; and hence, naturally, they are not complete.

7. A legend recording competition in relative power of baraka between local saint and central ruler (narrated by local followers of descendant of saint...), in Paul Rabinow, Symbolic Domination, Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco (Chicago & London, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975): 19.

Abstract

Ernest Gellner, Notes Towards a Theory of Ideology.—The article is concerned first of all with separating the general problem of the “social construction of reality” from the more specific problem of ideology, namely the nature of those belief systems which are plausibly called ideologies. It tries to find the differentiating characteristics of ideologies, as distinct from any other system of ideas, in their capacity both to attract and to repel powerfully, in virtue of their content, and it explores the idea that this capacity is socially essential for dominant systems of ideas.

Résumé

Ernest Gellner, Notes pour une théorie de l'idéologie. — Dans cet article, on cherche tout d'abord à distinguer le problème général de la « construction sociale de la réalité » du problème plus spécifique posé par l'idéologie, c'est-à-dire par la nature des systèmes de croyances que l'on peut désigner par ce terme. On tente de découvrir les caractéristiques qui différencient les idéologies d'autres systèmes d'idées, et qui leur donnent la capacité de susciter une attirance ou une répulsion violentes de par leur contenu; on examine l'hypothèse selon laquelle cette capacité serait socialement essentielle à des systèmes d'idées dominants.