
Ideology, Revolution, and Totalitarianism

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A non-negligible aspect of ideology is its association with revolutions and the prevalence of totalitarianism. Though modern ideologies can have both positive and negative ends and implications, their great potential for social mobilization and fanaticism as well as propensity for domination and revolution are recognized by many.^① As was argued by Albert Camus (1913-1960), the prevalence of ideologies in modern history has caused numerous tribulations and incidences of terrorism despite many aiming to diminish human suffering.^② How did ideology transform from the initial “science of ideas”^③ to the terror of absolute freedom, and how does it relate to the emergence of revolution and modern totalitarianism? This paper traces the origin of ideology to the French Revolution and identifies its two major alterations during modernization: the former concerned with the rise of Marxism and Communist revolutions and the latter the birth of modern totalitarianism.

The term “ideology” first appeared in its French form during the French Revolution of 1789 and was originally used by French philosopher Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) as a technical term referring to the epistemological study of ideas. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), however, expanded the paradigm of ideology into social practices and historical changes and gave the term a pejorative color. Recognizing the ubiquitous alienation, Hegel pointed out that social reality is constructed by ideology rather than being a God-given or natural order. The terror of ideology, in Hegel’s analysis of the French Revolution, comes from the destructiveness of absolute freedom. Largely affected by the principles of utility that lie at the core of the Enlightenment, which Hegel considered groundless and empty in itself,^④ individuals who pursue utility become free and detached selves that are unrestrained by social rules; thus, Spirit achieves absolute freedom.^⑤ This internal revolution of spirit echoes the social revolution of the physical world. As is shown in the 40 years that came after the 1789 French Revolution, absolute freedom or the collective pursuit of universal freedom is naturally destructive and problematic for it negates everything and tolerates nothing. As Hegel put it, “this undivided Substance of absolute freedom ascends

① T.A. van Dijk, “Politics, Ideology, and Discourse,” in *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*, ed. Ruth Wodak (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2006): 730.

② Anthony Bower, trans., *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

③ Termed by A.-L.-C. Destutt de Tracy.

④ See “That is to say, of the being-in-and-for-itself of the Useful qua object, consciousness recognizes that its being-in-itself is essentially a being-for-an-other; being-in-itself, as devoid of self, is in truth a passive self, or that which is a self for another self.” in A.V. Miller, trans., *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ¶ 583.

⑤ *Ibid.*, ¶ 584.

the throne of the world without any power being able to resist.”^① Universal freedom is thus merely a negative action and the fury of destruction.^② History becomes an incessant sequence of oppressions and revolts, in which lives and principles are wiped out, in which there is no way out and the ultimate conclusion is death, which, in Hegel’s words, “has no inner significance or filling, for what is negated is the empty point of the absolutely free self.”^③ As a result, revolutionary terror becomes the defining feature of the period, where the ruling government is merely the victorious faction, and in the very fact of it being a faction lies the direct necessity of its overthrow; and it being government makes it, conversely, into a faction and therefore guilty.^④

Another figure who not only redefined ideology and its relationship with revolution but also left a significant ideological legacy is Karl Marx (1818-1883), whose thoughts greatly inspired 20th-century socialist revolutions worldwide. In Marx’s *Theory of Ideology*, the term “ideology” is also given a pejorative connotation and is considered a false consciousness of previous German thinkers. He criticizes German ideologists and the Hegelian illusions of consciousness. For him, past philosophers made the mistake of separating philosophy from reality and their own material surroundings.^⑤ Though Marx considered Hegel to be the first bourgeois thinker to have been aware of the alienation from his own thought,^⑥ he negated Hegel’s idea of absolute idealism and the subordination of materials to the spirit. To Marx, contemporary German ideology was a false consciousness and a symbol of alienation for it deviates from the real basis of society, the division of labor and property, and concentrated only on the state. Moreover, societies were ruled by bourgeois ideology, which was the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships at the time.^⑦ Since Marx saw bourgeois ideology at the brink of collapse, he argued that the role of philosophy was to lead the proletariat revolution. He saw revolution as the driving force of history: “all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism . . . but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug.”^⑧ In order to overthrow bourgeois ideology, a communist revolution was necessary, and only through this can a new society be born from the muck of ages.^⑨ It should be noted that though Marx recognized the utility of necessary violence in the said revolution, which would be a total revolution of “combat or death, bloody struggle or extinction,”^⑩ he never expressed approval or rallied for the reign of terror, which, judging from

① A.V. Miller, trans., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Φ 585.

② Ibid., Φ 589. Note “Die Furie des Verschwindens” is translated as “the fury of disappearing” in other versions.

③ Ibid., Φ 590.

④ Ibid., Φ 591.

⑤ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus, 1998), 36.

⑥ H. M. Drucker, *The Political Uses of Ideology* (London: Macmillan Press, 1974), 17.

⑦ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 67.

⑧ Ibid., 61.

⑨ Ibid. 60.

⑩ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1955), 118.

the lesson of the French Revolution, implies useless cruelties perpetrated by the frightened leadership in self-reassurance.^① It was likely beyond Marx's expectation that Marxism as an ideology its own would later contribute to the reign of terror in many communist countries, one prominent example being the Great Purge (1936-1938) in the Soviet Union. At this point, one might wonder what makes modern ideologies so dangerous and inclined to terror despite some (like Marxism) striving to diminish oppression? The answer lies in its close relationship with the emergence of modern totalitarianism.

After WWI, totalitarianism emerged as a result of the decline of nation-states and the end of the rights of man. Abandoning the rule of law, totalitarianism found its legitimacy in ideology. As was pointed out by Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), all ideologies contain totalitarian elements,^② and communism is no more totalitarian than any other ideology in principle. Ideology's inclination to totalitarianism is determined by ideology's nature as an instrument of explanation that refines and redefines history. An ideology is established with its own idea, logic, and motion. The danger of ideology lies in the assumption that one set of ideas is sufficient in explaining everything and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction.^③ Therefore, the tyranny of logic in ideology is exploited by totalitarian rulers as the source of legitimacy that justifies compulsion and terror. For instance, according to Stalin, it was not the idea but the "irresistible force of logic" that thoroughly seized the masses.^④ The real power of Marxist ideology, as he saw it, lies not in the idea itself but in its logical process. This logical process becomes a self-coercive force against individuals and makes them submissive to the colossal movement of history that uses mankind as its material. Totalitarianism rises as a new form of rule whose principle of action is the logical process of ideology and whose essence is terror. Ideology prepares men for submission, and terror secures their loyalty and willingness to sacrifice. Terror diminishes the plurality of men, reducing them to one motion of the course of history and a device to liberate historical forces. As a result, under the rule of totalitarianism, men lose the capacities for both experience and thought, and can no longer distinguish fact from fiction.

In conclusion, the essence of ideology shapes and is shaped by the zeitgeist of different periods of time. It has been largely expanded from a scientific subject to a complex mixture of both practical means and theoretical ends. Ideology was first associated with the incessant destruction of the reign of terror in the French revolution, and later, under the influence of Karl Marx, was considered a false consciousness that should be overthrown by the communist revolution. Moving toward modern times, ideology has become increasingly associated with totalitarianism. It is clear that since its creation, the idea of ideology was inexorably connected with the creation and destruction of political regimes. Throughout the course of social

① George Fabian, *Karl Marx, Prince of Darkness* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2011), 524.

② Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), 470.

③ *Ibid.*, 470.

④ *Ibid.*, 472.

progress and disenchantment with authority, the dangerous implications of ideology as a powerful tool of destruction and domination begins to reveal itself a truth which hopefully be recognized and upheld by those who pride themselves as being members of the new modernity.

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