# Ideology and Social Structure. *A Review Article*

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How do we know when an ideological framework is in place? If more than one exists, how do we know which is dominant? To what location of society are we to turn if we are to find out its true beliefs? (Its political publications? Its art? Its laws? Its philosophers?) What counts as the proper domain for cultural inquiry? (A country? A continent? A town? A novel?) Two books—Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova, ed., *The Enlightenment and Its Shadows* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), and Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989)—raise questions that approach the problem of ideology from directly opposite assumptions.

The subtitle of Robert Wuthnow's book "Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism," is accurate. He really does try, in 732 pages, to account for four centuries of competing ideologies and social structures in about a dozen countries. Wuthnow explains that current theories of ideology have not successfully located the precise mechanism that establishes a dominant discourse and believes that a properly systematic review of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and socialism in Europe will show us that it is the state that establishes or selects for a prevalent discourse. The effort intrigues but cannot convince (this reader at least) for two reasons. First, the claims are immense and incompletely elaborated—the book glides over hundreds of years of social thought without developing the basic conceptual work necessary for it to bear meaningfully on specific arguments. Wuthnow says that he will build on an "implicit theoretical scaffold" that "provides a loose-fitting framework from which an edifice of many particular details and architectural refinements can be constructed" (p. 6). But Wuthnow does not make good on this goal. The implicit scaffold yields only implicit theory. Second, Wuthnow's totalizing theory (his own caveats notwithstanding) about the state's role in determining a society's ideology does not do justice to the complexity of the social and political structures that he studies.

Wuthnow collapses the ideological references of state officials with the ideology of their societies. Discussing the emergence of the Reformation,

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Enlightenment, and socialism, he writes: "In each new case the new ideology that became institutionalized was but one of a number of competing alternatives . . . It was the one that succeeded in gaining support from the state" (p. 577). The problem is not that Wuthnow privileges the state as the exclusive referent for judging the success of an ideology but that he does so without sufficient explanation. He culls secondary sources to find instances in which state actions are consistent with social movements bearing certain principles (Wuthnow is not always convincing on this, as I discuss below), but this is no substitute for a theoretical or historical account of how the state is an epistemically privileged site, that is, for why the state's position is definitive of an entire national community's discourse, particularly when there are tensions in an ideological agenda realized in the state and in the rest of society. As a way of illustrating some of the problems raised in *Communities of Discourse*, this essay refers to a familiar setting—1990s America—to show the difficulties that inhere in making general claims about ideology embodied in a "social structure" if the borders demarcating the latter are broadly national ones (as opposed to more discrete ones of region, class, religion, occupation, and so forth).

I use examples of religion and sexuality in the United States to illustrate the problems with Wuthnow's approach because they are familiar and because religion is crucial to the periods Wuthnow evaluates.[1] In the contemporary United States we witness competing publics that do not simply disagree on religion and sexuality but do so in entirely different languages—one of God and patriarchy, another of science and equality, and still another (much smaller) of post-enlightenment and *ressentiment*. Jerry Falwell's exhortation that "we must fight against those radical minorities who are trying to remove God from our textbooks, Christ from our nation. We must never allow our children to forget that this is a Christian nation"[2] prompts us to revisit Wuthnow's claims about the long-term successes of Enlightenment philosophers. In this case we will consider schematically the competing norms about family and religion in the realms of public opinion, practices, low culture, high culture, and laws in the United States.

Wuthnow is rather dismissive in his discussion of "the people," perhaps because he sees them as mouthing ideas of elites, perhaps because it is even

[1] That the United States in the 1990s is a more differentiated society than the ones Wuthnow considers is certainly a possibility. However, Wuthnow does not dispute the fact that competing ideologies are circulating among his patrons of history. My intent is to raise theoretical questions that Wuthnow's methodology does not address. The United States has a two-party system that supposedly mitigates against an ideological state, and, further, the public here has a reputation for being non-ideological altogether. Hence sharp disputes found here may be especially instructive on the weakness of Wuthnow's thesis, although any findings with respect to religion would have to be evaluated in the context of American "exceptionalism." (For an argument that it is European secularization that is exceptional, see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 28.)

[2] *The Religious Right: The Assault on Tolerance and Pluralism in America* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1994), quoting sermon, March, 1993.

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more difficult to know the beliefs of most people 400 years ago than it is today. This means he does not address the possibility that a "dominant ideology" may operate quasi-autonomously from the beliefs of most people. Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan Turner point out that in medieval Europe only a handful of people understood Latin and most of the population observed pagan rituals. Only a small number of people were touched directly by the Reformation in England (a country receiving extensive attention in Wuthnow's book).[3] Most were either "indifferent" or "hostile" to all varieties of institutionalized Christianity during this period.[4] Abercrombie *et al.* resist the notion that elite world views "trickle down." Rather, they suggest that an ideology is dominant only insofar as it cements the belief system of a ruling class. Beyond that what Marx dubbed the "dull compulsion of labor" is enough to maintain a class system. Whether most people believe in God, Newton, or Marx is irrelevant to the cohesion of a society's inegalitarian economic and political institutions. Wuthnow's state-centered theory does not help us understand the status of non-elite beliefs. Are they not a part of the community of discourse? Wuthnow's focus on the state might prompt him to pay little notice to the facts that in a 1992 survey 46 percent of the respondents said that they prayed at least once daily and that more than one of four Americans answered affirmatively when asked "have you personally had a conversion experience related to Jesus Christ?" Over three-quarters identified as Christian, while less than 15 percent are agnostic or atheist.[5] The secularism of state institutions would presumably trump these beliefs Wuthnow's account, if one were to ask whether the United States is religious.[6] Similarly, there is a sharp division among the public with respect to legalized abortion. Some 46 percent believe that abortion should be provided with no restrictions; only 9 percent maintain abortion should never be performed. Abortion is legal, yet the violence against the providers and users of abortion clinics means that abortions are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. Some 83 percent of the counties in the United States lack any abortion services. South Dakota has one for the entire state. In North Dakota a doctor must

[3] *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, 75, 77 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980).

[4] *Ibid*, p. 77. See also David Martin, *A Sociology of English Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1967); *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969); and Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971).

[5] All statistics on attitudes in this essay are from the 1992 National Election Study, Institute of Survey Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

[6] Wuthnow is no stranger to the tensions in the United States on the matter of religion. It is strange that the state-society split he acknowledges in his other books does not guide his analysis in this one. See *Experimentation in American Religion: the New Mysticisms and Their Implications for the Churches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War Two* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989).

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fly in from Minnesota.[7] Can it be that the attitude of the 9 percent is hegemonic in this case? How could this be determined?

If beliefs about religion and sexuality vary, we might also want to consider the actual *practices* in which people engage. Wuthnow's account tells us little about what counts as specific instances of Reformation behavior, except for church membership and attendance (which are mandatory in some times and places). Criteria for behaviors that count of those of "Enlightenment" or "socialism" are even more obscure. Wuthnow emphasizes what elites say and write, ignoring the implications of the fact that during the Reformation "the" Church survived—diminished perhaps, but intact; that many on the Continent affirmed their ties to the Pope; and that mercantilist and colonialist trade practices during the Enlightenment bore few traces of any shift in ideology. Perhaps this is the place to note that Wuthnow does not mention the slave trade nor the politically defining debates and party politics that emerged in relation to it, specifically in England. Perhaps it is the religious tenor of these controversies that excludes them from analysis, insofar as it is "Reformation" Quakers and other Christians who are making religiously based abolitionist arguments during Wuthnow's Enlightenment.[8] Nor does Wuthnow discuss any aspect of family relations or gender roles in the formation of ideologies, which is a major omission, since the family is an important site of theoretical contestation and political consolidation in the discourses and institutions Wuthnow considers.[9] Were Wuthnow to exhibit a similar lack of concern for contemporary families, we could expect him to think irrelevant the fact that about 90 percent of our population gets married and over half end in divorce.[10] Over two-thirds of this country's children live with both of their parents, but a significant 27 percent do not—a proportion three times greater than in 1960.[11] Do we focus on the 90 percent number that suggests the religiously inflected institution of marriage is alive and well or on the rate of

[7] United States Senate. Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Report on the Freedom of Access to Clinical Entrance Act, 1993 (July 29, 1993). (Washington, D.C.: GAO, 1993), note 29.

[8] Key books on this topic include Roger Ashley, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (New York: MacMillan, 1975); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), especially pt. III; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

[9] See for instance, Ernest H. Katorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Los Angeles, London, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Hanna Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman* (Los Angeles, London, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Gordon Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought: The Authoritarian Family and Political Speculation and Attitudes Especially in Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975); Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

[10] These statistics were compiled from U.S. census data by David Popenoe in "American Family Decline, 1960–1990: A Review and Appraisal," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55:(3) (August 1993), 533.

[11] *Ibid.*, 531.

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divorce and single-parent families that suggests the nuclear family and the patriarchal values associated with it are on the decline?

Of course many scholars feel that such statistics on behavior are crude measures, that we do not develop our self-understandings through the aggregated details of our individual lives. Rather, it is our media—especially the mass media as well as popular culture—that perform our deepest values. This brings us to an area Wuthnow studies most intensively. In the periods he analyzes, these media are newspapers, books, paintings, sculptures, theater, and opera. Of course the circulation and familiarity with these varies by class, as do the messages they convey. Wuthnow is for the most part concerned with what is written, not read, although he does offer a few statistics on book and newspaper publications (pp. 229, 308, 356). He concentrates on one part of the ideological terrain, that which he claims has received state support. So looking at the American mass media, his approach leaves us unable to assess the significance of the fact that only remote-controlled micro seconds separate Beavis and Butt head's beaver jokes on MTV from Wally and Eddie's Beaver jokes on Pat Robertson's Family Channel. And yet access to cable is not uniform. Many motel chains in the Midwest carry Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) instead of Ted Turner's Cable News Network (CNN). (Turner is viewed as some sort of anti-Christ, for his treasonous Goodwill Games and pro-environmental, feminist programming.) But compare this with the poronographic channels available in Manhattan hotels and the fact that most video rentals in this country are X-rated. As a country, are we obsessed with God or Madonna?

When Madonna's *Sex* was first distributed, it was at the top of the *New York Times* best seller list, having knocked off a book by her antithesis, Rush Limbaugh's *The Way Things Ought to Be*, which had perched there for the preceding three weeks—but only into the number two position; *Sex* also demoted General Norman Schwarzkopf's memoir to third place.[12] Using these statistics one could say the United States is either sexually libertine or conservative or both. How would we decide? Pat Robertson's *New World Order* made the *Times* best seller list in 1991 but was not reviewed by that publication. And this brings us to the discourse with which Wuthnow most concerns himself—that of high culture—in which those who have the ear of politicians, bureaucrats, presidents, and kings tell them what they want to hear. His self-avowedly Darwinian/Lamarckian schema (pp. 9, 11, 551) is a survival of the fittest ideology, determined by its adaptability to the political environment structured in part by economic factors but most crucially by the state. For the Reformation, the state selected for those ideologies that would weaken the grip of the landed aristocracy, which was largely in league with the Church (pp. 48–49, 55, 69, 71, 73). The state was the key agent mediating between economic relations and ideology. In Lyons, Augsburg, Amsterdam, and London, "the decisive effect of capitalism was to alter the balance of

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power between the central governing agencies and the landowning class to the point that the former were able to become a supportive institutional crucible for the Reformation" (p. 117). From the purchase of Bibles in England (p. 118) to the expropriation of Church holdings throughout Europe, state actions ensured that Luther and Calvin would prevail. The places in which the Reformation did not succeed were those countries in which the state had not developed in opposition to the Church and the landed aristocracy (pp. 90–91). The Reformation is the best case for Wuthnow's thesis, which does not work so well for the next epochs he both encounters and establishes.

When the state moves on to select for proponents of the Enlightenment—a mixed bag marked more by the time period Wuthnow investigates (1715–1789) rather than a set of principles—it becomes increasingly unclear as to what he means by "the state," and many passive verbs appear. About Austria, for instance, Wuthnow tells us that after some territorial losses in the 1730s–1740, the "need for administrative centralization became more apparent. An enlarged bureaucracy was created" (p. 286). In Russia, the "war with Sweden from 1700 to 1709, along with simultaneous threats from Turkish armies, demonstrated the need for an administrative apparatus capable of mobilizing military resources on a more complete scale" (pp.291–2). And so on. The state functionaries and philosophers Wuthnow surveys held a variety of views, some compatible with the instrumental interests of bureaucracies, others not. He acknowledges the diversity of beliefs (p. 201) but does not explain why a state that selects for its survival would support those who oppose it. Wuthnow's inclusion of Rousseau as an Enlightenment writer is paradigmatic, since he is placed on the basis of time period (the late eighteenth century) and having been supported by the state (p. 187), but neither a Darwinian, a Lamarckian, nor Wuthnow can account for the state prize awarded Rousseau for his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755).[13] Insofar as Rousseau's essays suggests that the state, private property, and even marriage are corrupt institutions, there would be no reason for the state (or a judge wanting to curry favor with state officials) to select it. And insofar as Rousseau consistently showed contempt for the French state, there would be little reason for him to write it. A weaker version of Wuthnow's thesis—that the state makes possible the very diversity of beliefs we know as the Enlightenment by funding projects indiscriminately—limits the heuristic possibility of even thinking about the state. Is it really "the state" that supports literary and philosophical experimentation, or do a variety of individuals hold different ideas about how to spend their own and government funds?

To this Wuthnow might respond that it is not the diffuse views of political elites that interest him, only those beliefs that are actually institutionalized. But as the examples above indicate, it is hard to know what to think when the state "selects" competing views, as well as those at odds with its own survival. Hence, it might be the laws and regulations of a society that would most

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clearly reveal the ideology for which a state selects. And yet again Wuthnow's evidence of their coherence is weak. Ironically, it is the chapters in which he discusses the state's institutional decisions in the most detail—his chapters on socialism—where his thesis is the most untenable. Despite his best efforts, Wuthnow cannot demonstrate that the conservative German state is at the root of the success of socialism as an ideology between 1864 and 1914. He advances two arguments: first, that the German state was behind the increase in industrialization during this period, and hence produced the working class (p. 388) and, second, that the state's conservatism produced a socialist backlash and deprived liberal parties the ability to act as the coopting forces that otherwise would have stymied the communists (p. 395).

> For the socialist movement the effect of being outlawed was not a disaster but an enforced self-reliance which proved to be especially effective. Socialism gained a distinct cultural identity more quickly from the state's action than from any efforts of its own. (p. 399)

How strange, then, that the United States does not have such a legacy, for it vehemently repressed communists and anarchists (some of whom were escaping the very states that were so kindly, on Wuthnow's telling, nurturing their movements). What is implicit in Wuthnow's earlier case studies becomes more pronounced here. Whatever link the state holds in a causal chain is the one Wuthnow deems the linchpin. Further belying the weakness of the argument's functionalism, Wuthnow notes that it is the granting of universal suffrage that also made the German state the necessary accomplice to socialism's success (p. 398). Passage of national insurance programs in Europe between 1880 and 1914 was the work of conservative "regimes that initiated them as a way of luring working class support away from the liberal parties" (p. 370). In sum, when the state does something conservative, it prompts socialism; and when the state does something progressive, it stokes the socialist flames itself (p. 399).

What do current laws tell us about the state's relation to religion and the sex-gender system? That depends. Do we focus on the religiously based Georgia law prohibiting sodomy (similar to that in twenty-three other states)? Or the interpretation of California's privacy clause in its state constitution, precluding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation? Or the state laws prohibiting same-sex marriage—justified as constitutional by reference to God or the Judeo-Christian tradition?[14] Or local laws recognizing "domestic partnerships"? Or the absence of "sexual orientation" as a protected clause in the federal civil rights bill, or its inclusion in city ordinances in numerous cities in the United States?

[14] For a view of the Christian basis of marriage, see G. Sidney Buchanan, "Same-Sex Marriage: The Linchpin Issue," *University of Dayton Law Review* (1986); for the state's view of the religiousity of marriage, see *Jones v. Hallahan*, 501 S.W.2d 588 (Ky.Ct.App.1973); *Baker v. Nelson 291 Minn. 310, 191 N.W.2nd 185 (1971); Singer v. Hara*, 11 Wash.App 247, 522 P.2d 1187; and *Baehr v. Lewin* 852 P.2nd 44 (1993) 63.

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It is not just the organization and evolutionary method that Wuthnow uses which suggests a forward-looking march to a state-led history, but his conclusion that each ideology identifies more closely to the state than its predecessors, as the "power of ideology gradually came to be more closely integrated with the power of political agencies" (p. 575). He continues:

> The tendency of each succeeding movement to define itself more closely to political power than the last had a cumulative effect. Thus the relation of religious movements to the state is now generally weakest, and that of religious conviction to individual conscience generally strongest, while socialism is imposed by central regimes or the rights and duties it champions are protected and carried out by welfare state bureaucracies. The main themes of the Enlightenment occupy a middle ground (p. 576).

In other words, ideologies are mutating organisms, the most successful of which are being selected for their perfect adaptation to the political-economic environment. Such a formulation is convenient for Wuthnow's theory but social movements do not conform. First, the concern about the relation between the state and religion in Europe is informed by a worry, historically founded, about the ways that religion is entirely too suited for state control. Religion is confined to conscience in most parts of Europe, but not because religion is ill-suited to authoritarian, coercive organizations—as episodes such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch burnings, not to mention the conflicts in the Middle East, Ireland, and the former Yugoslavia, illustrate. Second, the Enlightenment's "middle ground" is a function of Wuthnow's loose definition of it. Finally the collapse of the Berlin wall, occurring after Wuthnow's book was published, marks the collapse of his evolutionary argument as well—either socialism is not the pinnacle of state adaptive ideologies, or the state and its environment is not always the most crucial site for selecting ideology. The fact that the vastly different premises of Wuthnow's book and those of the volume containing the essays edited by Hulme and Jordanova, are products of late-twentieth-century Anglo scholars itself suggests a need to move away from a totalizing theory of elite discourses.

Rather than develop a sweeping theory about ideology, Hulmes and Jordanova attempt, in their book, *The Enlightenment and its Shadows,* the far more narrow project of assembling a collection of essays that will expose students to different aspects of Enlightenment culture. The authors lack any strict affinities of method, and the editors do not presume that the compilation will speak definitively to the character of Enlightenment culture. As the introduction acknowledges, "we know very little about how ideas move either across or within societies" (p. 2). Whereas Wuthnow discusses neither slavery or gender, this collection has essays on the impact of colonialist policies on Enlightenment thought by Peter Hulme and Gordon Brotherston, and a terrific piece by Margaret Iverson on the gendered images of "Liberty" and "the Republic" in France. The editors explain that these essays are collected from participants in a lecture course on the Enlightenment taught at the University

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of Essex (p. 12), and some do not appear to have received much editing for purposes of this different medium (for example, David Musselwhite introduces a quotation with, "Again, listen to the following") (p. 150). Attention to detail that also distinguishes essays from lectures is missing in some of the pieces. In addition to Iverson's piece, I also appreciated Michael Freeman's inquiry into the tension between the democratic and individualist understandings of human rights discourse. In "Human Rights and the Corruption of Governments, 1789–1989," Freeman juxtaposes different versions of "The Rights of Man and of the Citizen" with the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 to argue that rights discourses are more populist and less abstract than we often credit them with being.

The range of assumptions and approaches among all these texts suggests we extend David Musselwhite's observation about political theorists to all social scientists. He writes in "Reflections on Burke's *Reflections*, 1790–1990" that Burke is in fact a major political theorist to the extent that he produces concepts that have a performative rather than a logical consistency, concepts which *produce* the behavioral reality" (p. 159, his emphasis). All intellectual texts perform their truths in relation to those performed by others, rather than objectively report "the facts." At its best the results are not relativist musings, but those of Hegel, Marx, and Weber—to name a modern trio whose lucid elaboration of a specific conceptual terrain maneuvered social inquiry in their direction. Students of their work know the importance of the method to the message. It is the consistency and clarity of the concepts—not simply the collection of observations—that largely determine a paradigm's sucess. Wuthnow's intuition that the state is an important actor in the circulation of ideas is one I happen to share. The problem is that he does not grasp the limitations of relying on a positivist approach to claims that are nonfalsifiable. For those already persuaded by notions of state autonomy, Wuthnow provides more data; for those who think other parts of society are more central, the data will not be convincing. Perhaps he cannot be simultaneously persuasive as a Darwinian and a Lamarckain; perhaps Wuthnow' correlations of discourse do not yield knowledge for those who lack his faith.

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