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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Explanatory Power of Ideology

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Abstract

This essay explores the range of phenomena that can be explained by application of a suitably broad but contentful concept of ideology. According to this concept, an ideology is an evaluative map of the social world, typically featuring an ingroup-outgroup distinction, at least in the case of political ideologies. This concept allows for ideologies that support the existing order and those that challenge it, including revolutionary ideologies. I refute the claim that the concept of ideology is not needed because "voluntary servitude" can be explained as a failure of collective action. I show that ideologies can inhibit revolutionary action as well as stimulate and guide it. They can inhibit revolutionary action by convincing the oppressed that their predicament is natural or inevitable or that they are not being oppressed. They can stimulate and guide revolution by debunking oppression-supporting ideologies and by supplying moral motivation that avoids the calculation of costs and benefits that cause failures of collective action.

Keywords: assurance problem; explanatory power; ideology; revolution; voluntary servitude

Introduction

The concept of ideology is not a central topic in contemporary, mainstream, analytic political philosophy. Race theory and feminist philosophy are exceptions, but it is fair to say that the focus of feminists and race theorists on ideology, like most of their contributions, have been undervalued and not well integrated into mainstream philosophical research.

Some political philosophers—whom I will call ideology skeptics—have offered what could be seen as a justification for the lack of attention to ideology, arguing that the concept of ideology is not needed to explain the phenomena whose explanation is supposed to be that concept's chief or only *raison d'etre*, namely, "voluntary servitude." Voluntary servitude is the curious fact that the oppressed, who are much more numerous and potentially much more powerful

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than their oppressors, usually do not revolt. Ideology skeptics claim that voluntary servitude can be explained as the result of a simple collective action failure and, consequently, that the concept of ideology is not needed to explain this phenomenon.[1] The basic idea is that even though the oppressed would be better off if the oppressive regime were overthrown, each oppressed individual will calculate that whether the revolution succeeds depends on whether enough others join it, regardless of what he does and, because participation in the revolution is a cost, each will conclude that he or she should not join in.[2] This is the free-rider version of the collective action problem.

Failures of collective action can also be explained as a result of the assurance problem. Even if individuals do not refrain from participating in the production of a good because they decide to be free-riders, they may refrain because they lack assurance that others will contribute. If the explanatory power of the concept of ideology consists solely or chiefly in its ability to explain voluntary servitude, and if voluntary servitude can be explained without recourse to the concept of ideology as a matter of collective action failures due to the free-rider or assurance problems, then the concept of ideology lacks significant explanatory power. Ideology skeptics raise a problem of considerable importance: What *is* the explanatory power of the concept of ideology? What sorts of phenomena can it explain?[3]

In this essay, I argue that the explanatory reach of the concept of ideology is extensive, once we abandon the arbitrarily restrictive concept of ideology popular among analytic philosophers and adopt a concept widely used in the social sciences. According to the arbitrarily restricted concept, ideologies only function to support existing oppressive orders. According to the broad social-science conception, there are also revolutionary ideologies, that is, ideologies that challenge rather than support existing orders.[4]

[1] Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Joseph Heath, "Ideology, Irrationality, and Collectively Self-Defeating Behavior," *Constellations* 7, no. 3 (2000): 363–71; Joseph Heath, "Problems in the Theory of Ideology," in *Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn: The Transformation of Critical Theory*, ed. William Rehg and James Bohman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 163–90.

[2] Gordon Tullock, "The Paradox of Revolution," *Public Choice* 11 (1971): 89–99.

[3] Heath, "Ideology, Irrationality, and Collectively Self-Defeating Behavior," claims that it is a defect of ideological explanations of voluntary servitude that they are patronizing or disrespectful in that they attribute irrationality to the individuals in question. In my judgment, this claim is implausible for two reasons. First, there is much recent work in psychology and behavioral economics indicating that irrationality is pervasive among human beings, but it would be wrong to reject such research on the grounds that it is patronizing or disrespectful. Second, ideology theorists, including those in the Marxist tradition, need not single out the oppressed as the only individuals subject to irrationality. They may, for example, attribute irrational ideological beliefs to both men and women (in the case of sexist ideologies), to whites and nonwhites (in the case of racist ideologies), and to capitalists as well as proletarians (in the case of capitalist ideologies). So ideologies need not pick out one group as being deluded or irrational.

[4] See also Virgil Henry Storr, Michael Romero, and Nona Martin Storr, "Ideology and Extreme Protests," elsewhere in this volume.

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The core idea of the social-science conception—or rather, family of conceptions, because there are variations in detail[5]—is that an ideology is a shared evaluative map of the social world that not only orients individuals, but, more importantly, provides a shared orientation that can facilitate coordinated action. On the broad conception, ideologies include beliefs and attitudes, but also belief-management mechanisms the chief function of which is to preserve the ideologies' core beliefs in the face of apparently contradictory evidence or testimony.

Some might complain that the broad conception is too broad, in effect, by equating an ideology with a worldview. There are two responses to this complaint. First, the broad conception's emphasis on belief-management mechanisms and the role of ideologies in coordinating beliefs and actions of various individuals is more contentful than the notion of a worldview. Second, the difference between an ideology and a worldview comes into even sharper focus if one distinguishes *political ideologies.* Political ideologies not only provide a shared evaluative map of the social world and include beliefs, attitudes, and belief-management systems; in addition, groups—and, typically, a distinction between "Us" and "Them"—are prominent landmarks in the landscape the map portrays. Political ideologies also include beliefs about the proper and improper uses of power and the appropriate means for obtaining and maintaining it; in effect, they include beliefs about legitimacy. In this essay I will mainly be concerned with political ideologies in this sense, which is a specification of the broad social-science conception. If one finds the broad social-science conception too broad, one can opt for the characterization of the political conception offered here. It is with political ideologies and their explanatory power that this essay is concerned.

Although political ideologies thus understood are a subset of ideologies on the broad conception, they are still more inclusive than the restricted conception popular among critical theorists in the Marxist tradition. According to that conception, ideologies only serve to support existing oppressive social orders. According to the conception of political ideology I will be operating with, some political ideologies may do that, but others may challenge rather than support the existing order.

The key point is that the conception of political ideologies on offer here can accommodate both status quo ideologies that support existing orders and revolutionary ideologies that challenge existing orders. My aim in this essay is to make the case for this conception of political ideologies, chiefly by showing how explanatorily potent it is.

It is puzzling that philosophers who employ the restricted, Marxist critical theory conception of ideology and hold that any other use of the concept is incorrect, do not respond to the fact that the broad conception is routinely employed by social scientists. More specifically, they ignore the fact that a good

[5] My arguments in this essay do not require taking a stand on which of the alternative versions of the broad social-science conception of ideology is correct. My characterization of the broad conception is capacious enough to encompass a number of alternative further specifications.

deal of social-science analysis of actual revolutions assigns a causal role to revolutionary ideologies.[6]

Just as important, neither the broad social-science conception nor the political conception, unlike the restricted one, is pejorative. In addition, neither implies a positive attitude toward ideologies. Both the broad social-science conception and its specification in the political conception allow for the possibility that some ideologies are an obstacle to progress toward justice or liberation or are otherwise undesirable, while others may be valuable and progressive. The broad conception and the political conception allow for ideologies that contain false beliefs (for example, about power and in whose interests it is wielded), but neither stipulates falsity, illusion, or "false consciousness" to be essential features of ideologies. It is for that reason that the broad social-science conception and the political conception, unlike the restricted, Marxist critical theory conception, do not make 'ideology' a pejorative term.[7]

Here, it is worth noting that while no American politician would publicly say that she has an ideology, many politically active people in the global South, whether they are politicians or ordinary citizens, unapologetically endorse some political ideology as an ideology.[8] This difference in usage of the term 'ideology' is understandable, once one distinguishes between the restricted conception, which makes 'ideology' a pejorative term, and the broad conception, which allows for nonpejorative uses. In the "Conclusion" section, I will explain why some politically active people cheerfully acknowledge that they have an ideology and why they stress the importance of sharing an ideology with others who have the same political goals.

In the "How ideologies can prevent the emergence of the revolutionaries' collective action problems" section, I begin by showing that the fact that voluntary servitude is sometimes the result of a failure to solve the free-rider problem or the assurance problem does not show that the concept of ideology lacks explanatory power. I show how an ideology can prevent the oppressed from getting to the point where they would encounter a collective action problem by

[6] For prominent examples of social scientists assigning a causal role to ideologies in revolutions, see Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 53, 159, 170, 171; Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 114, 153–54, 168–71; Mark D. Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution: 1905–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–2, 32, 54, 56, 68, 72, 85, 94, 98–101, 108, 153, 158–59, 201, 225–26, 228, 237, 241, 248, 261, 266, 298, 304, 307–8, 316, 353–55; Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 422–36; Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 6–7, 17, 29, 33, 40, 97, 158, 161, 119–20, 204.

[7] It is worth noting that the broad social-science conception and its specification in the political conception are neutral as to whether ideologies that support existing oppressive orders exist *because* they do so. In contrast, Marxist critical theorists frequently claim that ideologies not only support existing oppressive social orders, but also come to exist because they perform that function.

[8] For example, there is the Constitution of the Indian National Congress, India's leading liberal political formation, which unapologetically describes the "ideological training of the cadre." See Indian National Congress, "Constitution & Rules of the Indian National Congress," https://cdn.inc.in/constitutions/inc_constitution_files/000/000/001/original/Congress-Constitution.pdf?1505640610.

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(i) convincing them that the existing social order is natural and therefore unalterable, (ii) preventing them from seeing that the social order is oppressing them, or (iii) convincing them that they lack the agency needed for there to be a reasonable prospect of successful revolution. When (political[9]) ideologies function in either of these three ways, the oppressed will not even consider participating in an attempt to overthrow the existing order to be a viable option. Hence, their inaction will not be explained as a failure of collective action, because both types of collective action failures occur only when individuals contemplate acting. Everything I say in the second section is congenial to ideology theorists who operate with the restricted, Marxist critical theory conception according to which ideologies only function to support existing oppressive orders. However, because the Marxist critical theory conception is a specification of the broader conception of political ideology I endorse, the second section supports my claim that the broader political conception has impressive explanatory power.

In the "How ideologies can solve collective action problems" section, I exploit the resources of the political conception, arguing that when they do not prevent people from reaching the point at which they would encounter a collective action problem, political ideologies can *solve* collective action problems that would otherwise thwart action against the existing order. They can do this if they include moral commitments that motivate people to disregard or override calculations of costs and benefits that would result in the free-rider problem or even cause them to refrain from engaging in those calculations in the first place. The moral commitments that ideologies include and solidify can also lead individuals to believe they must act even if they lack assurance that others will do so as well. The explanatory power that this section describes employs a conception of ideology that is broader than the restricted, Marxist critical theory conception.

The "How the broader concept of ideology can illuminate the spiral of extreme coercion in revolutionary conflicts" section demonstrates that the concept of ideology can play a valuable explanatory role, if one assumes that collective action problems are central to the success or failure of revolutions. I argue that the assumption that both sides of revolutionary conflicts are motivated by ideologies can help explain the extreme character of the spiral of violence that often occurs in such conflicts. The revolutionary leadership resorts to coercion against the masses to solve the latter's collective action problem by penalizing those who do not participate in the revolution. Then, the regime responds by using coercion to raise the costs of participating so as to stymie collective action by the oppressed. And then, the revolutionary leadership ups the ante by using more extreme forms of coercion to penalize nonparticipation, and so on. Because ideologies can portray conflicts in extremely moralized terms —in effect, as competitions in which the highest moral stakes are to be won or lost—and can also dehumanize the enemy, they can motivate both revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries to disregard ordinary moral constraints on violence in the arms race of coercion and countercoercion that characterize

[9] Henceforth, I will drop the qualifier "political," but the focus will be on political ideologies as previously defined, unless otherwise specified.

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strategic interaction centered on the revolutionaries' collective action problem. In this way, the concept of ideology can help explain the extreme violence of the spiral of coercion and, more generally, the especially brutal character of ideologically driven armed conflict. The explanation of the spiral of extreme violence I provide employs a broader conception of ideology than the restricted, Marxist critical theory conception because it acknowledges that there are revolutionary ideologies and emphasizes the strategic interaction between those moved by revolutionary ideologies and those moved by status-quo-supporting ideologies.

In the second section, I operate with one specification of the broad social-science conception of ideology, namely, the restricted, Marxist critical theory conception. That is, I focus on ideologies that support existing oppressive orders. In the third and fourth sections, I abandon the restricted specification and take seriously the idea, endorsed by Vladimir Lenin and Georges Sorel and accepted by many social scientists, that there can be revolutionary ideologies that challenge rather than support unjust social orders. In doing so, I employ a conception of political ideologies of which the critical theorists' concept is one specification. According to this conception of political ideologies, ideologies that support unjust social orders and ideologies that challenge them share important features distinctive of political ideologies, including belief-management mechanisms, the provision of a shared practical orientation in the social world, and beliefs about the rightful uses of power.

The broader conception of political ideologies and the restricted conception employed by Marxist critical theorists, then, are not rivals; the latter is one specification of the former. Revolutionary ideologies are simply a different specification. So, in employing my conception of political ideologies in the third and fourth sections, I am neither rejecting the idea that ideologies (sometimes) function to support existing oppressive orders nor switching to a new conception different from that employed in the second section. By allowing for revolutionary ideologies, my conception of political ideologies extends even further the explanatory domain of the concept of ideology. Table 1 below makes the relationships between the various conceptions of ideology clear.

How ideologies can prevent the emergence of the revolutionaries' collective action problems

There are at least three ways in which an ideology can prevent an individual from even considering whether to participate in an attempt to overthrow the existing social order and, hence, from reaching the point at which she would confront a collective action problem of either the free-rider or assurance variety. First, the ideology can present the existing social order as natural and, therefore, as inevitable or at least as not something that anyone should attempt to overthrow or could succeed in overthrowing. Ideologies perform this function when they portray deeply inegalitarian social orders as reflecting a hierarchy of different natures for different groups of individuals, in rank order from inferior to superior. If an individual believes that she is by nature a member of an inferior class of beings and that her subordination to members of a superior class is the

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Table 1. Political Ideologies

Marxist-Critical Theory Conceptions	Social-Scientific Conceptions
—	Revolutionary (challenge the existing order)
Support the status quo (existing oppressive order)	Support the status quo (existing oppressive order)

proper order of nature, then she will not consider overthrowing the social order as an option. Ideologies that support caste systems or sexist systems typically include the belief that the social hierarchy is natural, a reflection of the different natures of those who are dominant and those who are subordinate. If something is regarded as natural, that is enough in many cases for people to think it would be wrong or at least futile to try to change it. If one thinks of the existing social order in this way, one will not get to the point of calculating the costs and benefits of trying to overthrow it, because one will not regard overthrowing it as a viable option. Nor will one get to the point of even considering whether one should attempt to overthrow if one cannot expect that others will participate in revolutionary action. Those who strive to mobilize the oppressed to revolt understand this; that is why they devote considerable energy to trying to convince people that the inequalities of the social order are not natural, but rather, are human constructs, subject to alteration through human action.[10]

Second, as theorists in the Marxist tradition emphasize, an ideology can help sustain an unjust social order by masking its injustices. This would be the case, for example, with an ideology that portrayed the worst-off in a capitalist social order as people who lacked drive or self-discipline, who fail to exhibit the bourgeois virtues. If one thinks that the existing order is just or at least not gravely unjust, one is not likely to take seriously the idea of overthrowing it; if that is the case, one will not reach the stage of calculating the costs and benefits of participating in an effort to overthrow it or deciding to refrain from participation because one doubts that others will do so. The behavior of revolutionary leaders suggests that they are aware of this function of ideology; they work hard to convince the masses that their inferior position in the social order is not their fault, but rather, is an inevitable result of fundamental structural features.

Third, an ideology can convince the oppressed that they are powerless to overthrow the system. One way ideologies do this is by exaggerating the power of the oppressors while portraying the oppressed as inherently weak. Those who attempt to convince others to join a revolutionary struggle take this function of ideology seriously; they advocate "the propaganda of the deed," where this includes acts of violence against people identified with the regime, especially police personnel and other public officials. The message that such acts send is:

[10] This point is prominent in early works in feminist philosophy, including Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol Poston (1792; repr., New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988); John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays: On Liberty, Representative Government, The Subjection of Women*, ed. Richard Wollheim (1869; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

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"We *can* hurt Them!" In other words, the would-be revolutionary leadership proceeds on the assumption that part of the task of generating "revolutionary consciousness" in the masses is to convince them of their agency and, more specifically, their potential to inflict costs on the oppressors. The first, relatively minor acts of violence toward regime officials are usually not so much designed to convince the oppressors to give up their power as to convince the oppressed that they have power. Unless the oppressed become convinced that they have power, they will not even reach the point at which a collective action problem will be encountered, because they will not contemplate taking revolutionary action. Ideologies can prevent them from reaching that point by robbing them of an appreciation of their own agency.[11]

Once one recognizes that ideologies can function in these three ways, it becomes clear that failures of collective action are not the only viable explanation of voluntary servitude. Critical theorists have done much to illuminate the first two ways in which ideologies foster voluntary servitude; to my knowledge, they have not emphasized the third.

How ideologies can solve collective action problems

An ideology can *solve* collective action problems rather than prevent people from encountering them, if it includes a moral element that motivates the oppressed either to refrain from or to disregard the calculations that generate the free-rider problem or to not base their decision on whether others will participate. Ideologies—including revolutionary ideologies—typically have a moral dimension. For example, capitalist ideologies present capitalism not only as the most efficient economic system, but also as one that maximizes individual freedom and rewards people according to merit. Consequently, capitalist ideologies can lead people to be morally motivated to support capitalism. Similarly, Marxist-Leninist ideology presents capitalism as an economic order that necessarily exploits workers, stunts their development as human beings, and alienates them from one another. Even if Karl Marx and Lenin sometimes wrote as if they thought their critique of capitalism was nonmoral and strictly scientific, the appeal of their views was surely due in part to the fact that they engaged moral motivations.[12]

Moral considerations can function as exclusionary reasons; they not only supply reasons for acting, but exclude certain reasons from consideration. In doing so, they can serve to dismiss calculations of self-interest, to exclude them from consideration in an agent's decision-making process. Some moral

[11] See, for instance, Thomas E. Hill, Jr., *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[12] See Allen Buchanan, *Marx and Justice: The Radical Critique of Liberalism* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982). The key point is that political ideologies typically have a motivationally powerful *normative* element. Whether this normative element is properly called moral may vary depending on the ideology and is irrelevant to points I am making about the explanatory reach of the concept of ideology. The idea is that a normative or moral element can supply motivation that overcomes or sidesteps calculations that would otherwise stymie collective action.

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considerations, in particular, those framed in terms of rights, serve to trump calculations of self-interest or of social utility. Given that this is so, an ideology, because of its moral dimension, can motivate the individual to refuse to base her decision about whether to participate in the revolution on the calculations of costs and benefits that generate the free-rider version of collective action problems.

Sorel vividly portrays the effects of this aspect of ideologies. He describes a soldier in the French revolutionary army who dies with a smile on his face as his comrades tread on his broken body through a breach in the enemy's defenses.[13] The clear implication is that the revolutionary zeal of this individual motivated him directly to participate in the revolution—indeed, to participate to the point of self-sacrifice—rather than to calculate whether his action would produce a benefit that exceeded the costs to himself (the free-rider problem). Nor does the ardent revolutionary soldier consider whether others will make similar sacrifices (the assurance problem). Because some of the most fundamental moral commitments serve to exclude basing one's conduct on calculations of what would maximize net benefits and are understood not to depend upon reciprocation by others, ideologies that include such commitments can solve both versions of the collective action problem. In this way, recourse to the concept of ideology can explain why the oppressed sometimes do rise up, even though in principle their doing so could be stymied by collective action problems.

One need not look only to historical examples of revolutionary ardor that side-steps or overrides calculations of costs and benefits or considerations of whether others will participate in the revolutionary endeavor. Contemporary behavioral experiments yield the same result. People who are morally motivated can often achieve collective action when they would not be able to do so in the absence of that motivation.[14] They do not determine how to act on the basis of the calculations that are supposed to thwart collective action according to simplistic rational choice theories. Nor do they always make their participation in collective action conditional on credible assurance that others will participate.

Even if the moral motivation that ideologies supply does not bypass the calculations that generate the collective action problem, it can override them. This occurs when an ideology leads the individual to believe that the moral stakes are extremely high. In that case, even if the individual makes the calculation that it would be best, from the standpoint of his own interests or even from the standpoint of the maximization of social utility, to refrain from participation, his ideology-grounded moral priorities (at least if they are deontological in nature) may override any such calculations. Similarly, with regard to

[13] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[14] Karthik Panchanathan and Robert Boyd, "Indirect Reciprocity Can Stabilize Cooperation without the Second-Order Free Rider Problem," *Nature* 432 (2004): 499–502; Jon Elster, "Social Norms and Economic Theory," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (1989), 99–117; Jon Elster, "Rationality, Morality, and Collective Action," *Ethics* 96, no. 1 (1985): 136–55; Ananish Chaudhuri, "Sustaining Cooperation in Laboratory Public Goods Experiments: A Selective Survey of the Literature," *Experimental Economics* 14 (2011): 47–83.

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the assurance version of the collective action problem, an individual's ideology may lead her to conclude that it is important to participate, even if others are not likely to do their fair share. In other words, depending on the character of the moral commitments they include, ideologies can present participation as unconditionally mandatory, that is, not mandatory conditional on congruence with one's own interests, the maximization of utility, or on reciprocation by others. In this way, ideologies, because they include moral beliefs, can solve collective action problems that would otherwise stymie revolution.

The role of ideology in overcoming the assurance problem warrants elaboration. If an individual knows that many others subscribe to the same ideology to which she subscribes and appreciates the appeal and motivational potency of that ideology, she may be more confident that her revolutionary activity will not be wasted and that enough others will participate to give the revolution a good prospect of success. In brief, the conviction that *we* are deeply committed to the revolution avoids the assurance problem.

Furthermore, an ideology can make one moral commitment among others salient—in this case, the commitment to working with others to overthrow the existing order and create a better one. In other words, the ideology may offer guidance as to how individuals should order their commitments and, in doing so, facilitate more effective, coordinated revolutionary activity.[15]

So far, I have emphasized the significance of the fact that ideologies can contain moral commitments. Above, in characterizing the broader conception, I said that ideologies are *evaluative* maps. I used the latter term to capture the point that ideologies do not merely describe the social world, but also have practical import, providing resources for action and for acting together. The effectiveness of ideologies in solving or avoiding collective action problems depends upon their normative or evaluative character. In some cases, those motivated by an ideology may not conceive of their motivation as moral (as might be the case with "scientific" Marxists), but that is consistent with the general thrust of my ideological explanations.

How the broader concept of ideology can illuminate the spiral of extreme coercion in revolutionary conflicts

Contemporary empirical research on violent revolutions and other intrastate armed conflicts supports the assertion that collective action problems sometimes loom large. They also document a spiral of extreme forms of coercion that often occurs as a result of strategic interactions between the revolutionaries and the regime's forces, with strategic interaction centered on the revolutionaries' collective action problem.[16] Because the revolutionary leadership knows that collective action problems may result in lack of sufficient participation in the revolution, they employ coercion against those they hope to mobilize in order to

[15] I am indebted to Aaron James for this point.

[16] Douglas Van Belle, "Leadership and Collective Action: The Case of Revolution," *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1996): 107–32.

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make the costs of not participating exceed the costs of participating. This would be the case if they surmised that their revolutionary ideology by itself was not persuasive enough or widely shared enough to avoid collective action problems.

The coercion that revolutionary leaders employ runs the gamut from acts of terrorism against members of the oppressed group to conscription enforced by harsh penalties to confiscation of the means of subsistence. The regime then responds by using similarly coercive means to thwart this effort to solve the collective action problem by raising the costs of participation in the revolution.

An example from the Vietnam War will make this point clearer, though many if not all cases of insurgency, civil war, or revolution would serve as well. Suppose the year is 1968. The Vietcong enter your village and threaten to kill everyone if the village does not make some of its young men join their ranks and provide hidden storage for Vietcong weapons and supplies. If these threats are credible, they change the payoff matrix that otherwise might have produced a refusal to participate in the revolution. According to the logic of collective action, this means that if the costs the Vietcong credibly say they will impose exceed the benefits of nonparticipation, then (so far as they base their decision on cost-benefit calculations), you and your fellow villagers will decide that the best alternative is no longer to refrain from participation. Similarly, if U.S. forces come into your village the next day and tell you that they will destroy it if any member of the village aids the Vietcong, their strategy is to convince you that the costs of participating in the revolution outweigh the benefits of participating, including the avoidance of the costs that the Vietcong may impose if you do not participate.

Regime leaders know that revolutionaries will try to solve the revolutionary collective action problem by raising the costs of nonparticipation. Regime leaders then respond by raising the costs of participation, also using various forms of coercion, from imprisonment or summary execution of those suspected of participating in the revolution or cooperating with the revolutionaries to confiscating property and conscripting potential revolutionaries into the regime's armed forces. The revolutionary leadership then responds by escalating their use of coercion in order to tilt the cost-benefit ratio in favor of participation, and so on. That is the spiral of coercion at the locus of the revolutionaries' collective action problem.

The spiral of coercion is extreme; it typically proceeds in violation of the most basic rules of just warfare, often exhibiting a lack of restraint that is exceptional even in interstate conflicts. An explanation of why participants in the struggle would be motivated to engage in such extreme violence is needed. Ideology theory can provide it. The fact that ideologies typically, if not always, contain a moral dimension and can frame conflicts in heavily moralized terms—as a contest in which the moral stakes are extremely high—can help explain why the spiral of coercion in the revolutionary context exhibits an exceptionally flagrant disregard of ordinary moral constraints on armed conflict.

According to the broad social-science conception of ideology, there can be revolutionary ideologies as well as ideologies that support the existing social order. If one's revolutionary ideology convinces one that the regime is evil and the fate of human progress or at least the liberation of oneself and many others

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from a soul-crushing tyranny depends on the success of the revolution, one may in effect regard oneself as being in what Michael Walzer calls a "Supreme Emergency" and, accordingly, be willing to set aside the moral constraints on the use of force that one would take to be mandatory in any other context.[17] Similarly, if one's counterrevolutionary ideology convinces one that the success of the revolution will mean the destruction of all that is good and wholesome, then one may be willing to engage in the most extreme forms of coercion to convince potential revolutionaries that they should not become revolutionaries.

Ideologies can also "dehumanize" the Other, depicting them as less than human, as dangerous, unclean beasts not entitled to the basic moral regard accorded to human beings. As the extensive literature on genocides attests, dehumanization prepares the way for the most ruthless and cruel violence.

The belief-management mechanisms of ideologies contribute to the development of more extreme views by screening out beliefs that challenge the beliefs that help constitute the ideology. Ideologies also tend to promote loyalty and solidarity, which can deter people from associating with those who might question shared beliefs. When this occurs, opportunities for qualifying and moderating those beliefs in the light of such challenges are precluded. The result is the so-called echo-chamber effect: beliefs tend to become more extreme and extreme beliefs can fuel extreme behavior.[18]

In brief, once one acknowledges the moral dimension of ideologies, and recognizes that ideologies can both support and challenge the existing social order, one can take seriously the possibility that the concept of ideology can help explain the extreme violence that characterizes revolutionary conflicts. And one can do so while foregrounding, rather than ignoring, the important role that collective action problems sometimes play in the revolutionary context. Contrary to what ideology skeptics suggest, we need not choose between an explanatory framework that focuses on collective action problems and one that includes a significant role for ideology.

It is a commonplace that ideologies can encourage people to violate widely accepted rules of war in interstate wars as well as revolutions, that ideologically motivated wars of either type can be more savage than those motivated simply by interests. My point in focusing on revolutionary wars is that in this sort of conflict one party's collective action problem looms large: the revolutionaries lack the resources that states enjoy, including standing armies and institutions that encourage collective action in times of conflict. This fact about the revolutionary context has important implications. It is the starting point for the spiral of coercion that ensues when the revolutionary leadership tries to give the masses effective incentives to participate in revolution and the regime responds by raising the cost of participation in order to thwart revolutionary collective action. An appreciation of this feature of the revolutionary context, then, shows

[17] Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006), chap. 16.

[18] C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 141–61; Hanna Kiri Gunn, "How Should We Build Epistemic Community?" *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2020): 561–81; Yuval Avnur, "What's Wrong with the Online Echo Chamber? A Motivated Reasoning Account," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2020): 578–93.

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that it is a mistake to think that the failure to revolt must either be understood as a failure of collective action or as an effect of ideology—that collective-action-failure explanations and ideological explanations are competitors. Instead, ideology can affect both the means by which the oppressed attempt to solve their collective action problem and the nature of the response to that attempt by the regime. Therefore, even if one believes that the key to understanding why revolutions fail—when they do fail—is that the oppressed were unable to solve a collective action problem, the broader conception of ideology can play a valuable role in explaining both the extremes to which revolutionaries are willing to go in trying to solve their collective action problem and the equally extreme response of regimes in their efforts to thwart revolutionary collective action.

Conclusion

I have argued for adopting a conception of political ideologies by demonstrating its impressive explanatory power. In particular, I have argued that the fact that voluntary servitude can sometimes be explained as the failure to solve collective action problems does not show that the concept of ideology is explanatorily otiose or of limited explanatory power. Recourse to this concept of political ideology can explain both why the oppressed do not even reach the point where revolutionary action would be stymied by collective action problems and also why collective action problems do not always prevent revolution.

Political ideologies can prevent people from encountering collective action problems by undermining the sense of agency that would enable them even to contemplate acting, by convincing them that the existing order is natural and inevitable or by masking its oppressive character. Ideologies can also help people to overcome collective action problems, when they do consider action to be an option, by virtue of including moral commitments that either lead individuals to refrain from calculating the costs and benefits of various actions or to disregard the results of those calculations. Ideologies can also lead people to regard their participation in revolution as unconditional—that is, not dependent upon assurance that enough others will participate to achieve success. Finally, in contexts in which revolutionary conflicts have already begun, the fact that political ideologies have a moral dimension, taken together with their doxastic immune system function and the fact that they create communities united by the same resilient beliefs that tend to become more extreme through a kind of echo-chamber effect, can help to explain the extreme violence employed in efforts to solve collective action problems or to thwart an opposing group's efforts to solve its collective action problem.

It is laudable that most philosophers who describe themselves as critical theorists focus on how ideologies function to sustain oppressive social orders. But if my arguments are sound, then I have shown that the way in which ideologies perform this function are more diverse than is generally thought. In addition, I have shown that the broader conception of political ideology—of which the critical theorists' concept is only one particular specification—can explain both that people do not always persist in a condition of voluntary

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servitude and the spiral of extreme coercion that often occurs when they do revolt. The explanatory power of the conception of political ideology endorsed in this essay, then, is impressive.

I have also noted that what I have characterized as the political conception of ideology is one specification of the broad social-science conception, a specification that includes the salience of groups and the distinction between Us and Them in its evaluative map of the social world and that includes beliefs about the proper ways of obtaining and using power. This specification adds content to the broad conception but, unlike the arbitrarily restricted, Marxist critical theory specification, allows for both status-quo-supporting and revolutionary ideologies. Because they speak directly to issues of power, political ideologies are predominant in the competition between ideologies that support the existing political order and those that challenge it.

At the beginning of this essay, I noted that some people today openly acknowledge that they and others with whom they act politically have an ideology. In fact, they view their having an ideology as an asset, not a cognitive or moral defect. My analysis helps explain why this is so. An ideology can be a valuable political resource, especially for people who wish to alter or abolish an order that they regard not only as oppressive, but as embodying and replicating an opposing ideology that shores it up.

It is a familiar point among ideology theorists, especially those associated with the Frankfurt School critical theory approach, that an oppressive order includes ideological apparatuses, institutions, and social practices that promulgate and sustain an ideology that supports that order.[19] Given the practical power that ideologies possess, including their ability to block collective action to alter or overthrow the existing order, this advantage of the status-quo-supporting ideology is formidable. To mobilize effective resistance to the existing order, a *counter-ideology* may be an indispensable resource.

For example, if the status-quo-supporting ideology includes the belief that the existing order is natural, inevitable, or that the masses lack the power to oppose it successfully, a revolutionary ideology that refutes these beliefs may be an important asset for the opposition. Simply providing information—in this case, stating that the existing order is not inevitable or that the masses do have the power to oppose it—may be ineffective, however, unless these beliefs are embedded in a larger web of beliefs, attitudes, mechanisms for managing beliefs, and distinctions between Us and Them that motivates people to act together against the status quo. Ideologies do include information that contradicts beliefs included in the opposing ideology, but much more than that, they make this information salient and motivationally powerful by embedding it in the larger evaluative map that the ideology provides. That they do helps explain why ideologies can be a valuable political resource, especially in the struggle to overthrow an order propped up by its own ideology. Awareness that the order "We" oppose is supported by an ideology creates demand for a counter-ideology.

[19] See, for discussion, Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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Given that this is so, instead of terminating ideology critique when it has been shown how the dominant ideology supports the existing order, a more comprehensive theory of ideology would go further. It would also consider ways in which a recognition that the existing oppressive order is supported by an ideology can generate demand for a counter-ideology. In the contest between those who support the status quo and those who challenge it, both sides may find ideology a valuable political resource.[20]

If there is a potent revolutionary ideology, proponents of the status quo may be compelled to develop a counter-ideology or to modify an existing one to make it more effective in the face of the challenges that the revolutionary ideology poses. In other words, the development of opposing ideologies may be a coevolutionary process. If that is the case, then a comprehensive theory of ideology should develop an account of how opposing ideologies coevolve. If such a research program succeeds, it will become clear that the explanatory power of the (broad) concept of ideology is even greater than I have shown it to be. One may need to invoke the idea that ideologies respond to each other in order to explain their character.

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[20] I thank Ritwik Agrawal for this point.

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