

## Gender Ideology as a Cultural Technē

### 1. Introduction

In my last lecture, I argued that there are different forms of oppression and injustice. Contrast: repression (slavery), and ideological oppression (gender oppression). I embrace Stuart Hall's suggestion that ideology

...has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation. (Hall 1996/2006, 24-25)

Very broadly, ideology is best understood functionally: ideology functions to stabilize or perpetuate power and domination, and does so through some form of masking or illusion (Geuss 1981; Shelby 2003; Celikates 2006; Haslanger 2015).<sup>1</sup> As a result, ideology critique takes two forms.

- The epistemic critique of ideology reveals its distortion and misrepresentation of the facts.
- The (broadly speaking) moral critique reveals the unjust conditions that such illusions and distortions enable.

My primary objective in this paper is to illuminate the phenomenon of ideological oppression and argue that efforts to achieve social justice must address culture; so our political efforts (and the normative inquiry that guides them) should not be focused entirely on the possibilities of state action or other forms of policy change (though law and policy change are also important!).

### 2. Notable Failures of State Solutions

A recent study documented 413 cases in the United States between 1973-2005 in which pregnant women were deprived of their liberty through arrests or forced medical interventions (Paltrow & Flavin 2013). [Examples] Many of the cases involve nothing more than alleged drug or alcohol use by the pregnant woman. Alarming, "...refusal to follow [a doctor's] treatment orders was identified as part of the justification for the arrest, detention, or forced medical intervention in nearly one in five cases" (316). Yet:

...no state legislature has ever passed a law making it a crime for a woman to go to term in spite of a drug problem, nor has any state passed a law that would make women liable for the outcome of their pregnancies... Similarly, no state legislature has amended its criminal laws to make its child abuse laws applicable to pregnant women in relationship to the eggs, embryos, or fetuses that women carry, nurture, and sustain. No state has rewritten its drug delivery

or distribution laws to apply to the transfer of drugs through the umbilical cord. (320-21)

We should begin by asking: What is wrong in such cases? It might seem that we don't actually need to rely on ideology to understand these incidents. They are epistemically problematic because the sheriffs, judges, police officers, have false beliefs about the law, and probably also about the likelihood of harms to a fetus of a VBAC birth or drug use. And these false beliefs lead them to do bad things, viz., to violate women's legal and moral rights. Why worry about ideology?

The pressing question is how to explain the grotesque and systematic violation of rights by those whose identity is invested in the protection of rights. As I see it, there may be false beliefs in these cases, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. These individuals don't *just happen* to have these problematic beliefs, or *just happen* to respond in extreme ways to these incidents. Explanations that rely simply on the ignorance or vices of particular individuals are unsatisfying because at least part of the problem lies at the *social* rather than the individual level. At the heart of this pattern is a structure of social relations that is ideologically sustained. But what, exactly does that mean?

### 2. Culture

In mainstream moral philosophy, normative analysis seems to focus on either individuals or the state. Culture is almost entirely left out of the picture. How is culture relevant? Drawing on recent work in the social sciences, William Sewell (2005) argues:

The point of conceptualizing culture as a system of symbols and meanings is to disentangle, for the purpose of analysis, the semiotic influences on action from the other sorts of influences – demographic, geographical, biological, technological, economic, and so on – that they are necessarily mixed with in any concrete sequence of behavior. (44)

I further assume that these dimensions of practice [mentioned above as "influences"] mutually shape and constrain each other but also that they are relatively autonomous from each other. (48)

On this view, culture is "relatively autonomous" because symbolic systems cast a wide net over social relations and "the meaning of a symbol always transcends any particular context, because the symbol is freighted with its usages in a multitude of other instances of social practice" (48).

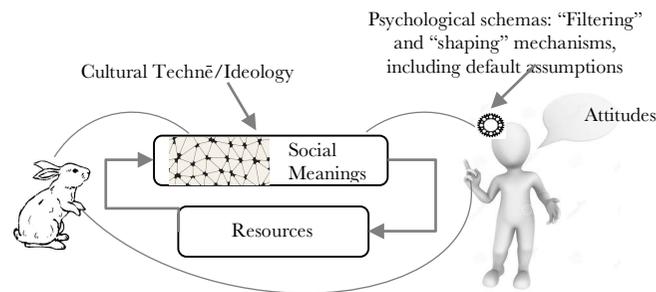
To elaborate, on this account, culture is a network of social meanings, tools, scripts, schemas, heuristics, principles, (etc.) that we draw on in action, and that gives shape to our practices. I will use the term '**cultural technē**' for this sense of culture. We should not assume, then that a culture is coherent, or that those who employ the

<sup>1</sup> Note that I use the term 'ideology' in the pejorative sense; 'cultural technē' is the neutral term.

tools have shared ends or act in solidarity. Culture is also a site of contestation and disruption (Sewell 2005, 50). Because of this risk, meanings that sustain the status quo are managed and sometimes enforced.

For example, traffic laws and norms constitute a relatively benign cultural technē that enables us to coordinate in sharing right of way: traffic signs, lines, and signals have a social meaning that we respond to, assuming that others will do so as well. We can explain patterns in driving behavior without having to consider drivers as deliberating about what to do at a stop sign. We become fluent in driving and, if there is general fluency, then under good conditions, coordination is successful. But sometimes an intersection can be dangerous because the traffic pattern is badly structured or marked; we explain the pattern of accidents there not in terms of bad drivers, but of bad design. Sometimes the problem is a set of bad habits or dispositions that drivers have developed by inculcating a local norm.

It is crucial to note, however, that a cultural technē is one part of a system that functions (not always successfully!) to regulate our interactions in a domain, and cannot be understood apart from its role in that system. Other parts of the system include *resources* – things such as material objects, time, knowledge, and the like – taken to have (+/-) value, and the *psychological capacities* of humans and other non-human animals to be responsive to and learn from each other.



Some consequences:

- i. A cultural technē, is not just a random collection of meanings, but is a frame for socially meaningful action that is a constituent part of the local social-regulation system. Cultural technēs enable us to coordinate by providing the paths and signals that structure our practices.
- ii. Explanations drawing on culture, or a cultural technē reference a coordination system that enables us to manage resources (things taken to have value); the system is explanatorily useful because it is stable and resilient. This is due to the looping effects of culture and resources (Hacking 1995; Mallon 2003). E.g., phillips-head screws, interstate highway system (Rehm 2016).

- iii. A cultural technē not only informs and structures our practices, but also gives rise to different forms of subjectivity and frames our identities (Gatens 1996).

The social basis of identity helps explain the resilience of social structures. Effective social change must not only provide incentives for acting differently, e.g., through law, but must also replace the problematic practices and meanings with alternative meanings; successful alternatives must have some continuity with the prior meanings so we can project ourselves into the new practices and new form of life. Culture is a factor in the system that “shapes and constrains” what law, policy, etc. can do. State action can support social justice, but can also appear (and be!) unwarranted, and deeply destructive of who “we” are.

### 3. Gender ideology

The examples I started with are a snapshot of a larger pattern in which women, especially women of color and poor women, are not granted the respect they are entitled to; this disrespect is exacerbated in some contexts, including when the woman is pregnant. How might we explain this pattern? Pregnant women have a social meaning, and poor pregnant women and pregnant women of color are at risk for violating that social meaning. When they do, there are a variety of possible responses, but on one approach to law enforcement, correction is called for.

What is the social meaning of pregnant women? There are, of course, many meanings. However, drawing on Lakoff (1999), we might begin by listing a number of distinct but overlapping positive associations: mother, caregiver, carrier of male seed, incubator of fetus, producer of the next generation, partnered (i.e., unavailable) female. The cluster of positive associations forms the basis for an ideal or paradigm, allowing that the particular weighting of elements of the cluster will vary depending on context. The ideal, in many US contexts, is the white, relatively affluent, heterosexual, married, behaviorally cautious, young, fit, woman. The social meaning of pregnancy governs a wide range of social practices that manage access to resources; and practices involving pregnant women are interlocked with others involving sex education, childcare, marriage, property, and citizenship.

In the rights violation cases, the dominant element of the schema seems to be that of the *fetal incubator*; this meaning, of course, is linked to meanings of caregiver, producer of next generation and carrier of male seed. The presumed failure of the woman to fulfill that function adequately overrides all other considerations in how to respond to her. Her cries of protest, her midwife’s expert advice, her partner’s resistance, are filtered through a frame of meaning that renders them irrelevant. The fetal incubator is malfunctioning and action is required to save the fetus; or worse, she is a criminal attacking an innocent victim. The poor woman of color is not interpreted as a citizen whose rights must be protected. This injustice is made possible by the distortion embedded in the dominant social meanings.

#### 4. Ideology Critique

Let's return to the idea of ideological oppression. Ideology, on my view, is a cultural technē gone wrong: it *organizes us in ways that are unjust*, and/or in ways that *skew our understanding of what is valuable*. This can affect all those involved (women who take on more than their fair share of housework, law enforcement who take fetuses into custody, etc.).

- This is partly an epistemic problem: ideology prevents us from knowing what and who matters.
- It is also a political problem: the ideological technē guides practices that together constitute unjust structures.

In contexts of ideological oppression, the problem is not that the individuals who participate in the injustice – who either suffer from, perform, or are complicit in it – are stupid or ignorant. Even epistemic responsibility within the available cultural technē is often insufficient to appreciate the wrongs it enables. Moreover, because the cultural technē not only informs cognition but also agency and sense of self, participation in injustice appears called for, and moral critique misfires (though in some cases the agents are negligent and can be blameworthy for acting badly!).

So, put simply, the task of ideology critique is to challenge, disrupt, and replace those aspects of the cultural technē that mask or occlude what's valuable and prevent us from organizing ourselves in ways that are more just. [Recall: not all injustice is due to ideology, so ideology critique is not always the solution!] However, Robin Celikates (2016) points to two challenges an account of ideology critique must address (he includes a third that I won't address today):

i) *Normative or criterial challenge*: what makes an ideology problematic? And “is there a single feature or set of (systematically related) features that makes them problematic”? (3) Do we need ideal theory to answer this question?

ii) *Methodological or epistemological challenge*: from what standpoint does the critic speak? Traditionally critical theory is embedded in a social movement and aims to articulate the interests and demands of the oppressed (Fraser 1989, Haslanger 2012). But then the question is “which insights of which agents” should the critical theorist articulate? (4)

#### 4. Value

In responding to the normative challenge, critical theorists are extremely wary of relying on ideal theory. But why should we hesitate to rely on ideal theory to critique culture and unjust social practices? The problem isn't just a knee-jerk cultural relativism; it emerges from the very notion of culture we have been discussing. Culture shapes what we value and our reasons for action. It is not just that culture shapes what we *take to be value*, i.e., our beliefs about value, but *what is valuable*. Some value is path-dependent.

Values are not so much what people have as what they do and feel. Human beings possess an inexhaustible drive to evaluate, to pronounce what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, advantageous and disadvantageous. Without culture, human values are inchoate and indeterminate; through culture they become differentiated, articulated, refined. (Balkin 1998, 27-8)

Cuisine, art, religion, are perfect examples. All of these evolve and offer opportunities to create new things to attend to (e.g., sushi, orchestras, electric guitars). Attending to these new things enhances and extends our appreciation, our valuing, our values, what is valuable.

For example, capitalism, White Supremacy, and patriarchy teach us to be selective in what we notice, what we respond to, what we value. Just as the musician, worshipper, or chef ignores certain considerations and takes this to be required by their practice, the police academy trains the officer to ignore or skew certain behaviors, e.g., the cries of the Black person or the poor woman in labor. She/he is not what matters; the local cultural technē produces “blindness” that filter and shape experience. The practices in question create a topology of social space, channel resources, and become entrenched through commitment to roles and identities. However, culture inevitably teaches us to be epistemically selective. This is the whole point of culture because selection is essential for coordination. How (and from what position) do we decide which selection is legitimate, and which not?

The question of cultural critique is pressing. If value is not only appreciated through social practices but also created through them, then how can one understand or appreciate the values “from the outside,” so to speak? And if one cannot appreciate the values in question, what epistemic standing does one have to critique them, and the practices in which they are embedded?

#### 5. Non-ideal Moral Epistemology

As mentioned, some draw the conclusion that we should be moral relativists from the observation that value is path-dependent. However, I endorse the presupposition that there are moral truths e.g., that slavery and genocide are morally wrong, that men *and women* have a right to bodily integrity.<sup>2</sup> If we have moral knowledge, then the proper target of ideology critique simply follows: we should disrupt the cultural technē that prevents us from valuing things aptly and disrupt those social structures that produce injustice. But how do we avoid moral relativism? What is the basis for claims of moral knowledge?

Much of the discussion of cultural critique situates such critique as cross-cultural

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<sup>2</sup> I am not committing myself here to a particular meta-ethical view about the nature of moral facts. What I say here is only incompatible with moral nihilism.

(Okin 1999, etc.). I suggest, however, that we take the paradigm of critique to occur *within* a culture. I am a member of the heteronormative, patriarchal, racist, ableist, classist, society that I critique. I have first-person knowledge of some of the harms and wrongs that the culture produces, and I object to these wrongs. I also have indirect knowledge, through testimony and witnessing, of wrongs to members of other subordinated groups (Jones 1999). The harms to them are linked to harms to me, and as a critical social theorist I am committed to a unified social movement – or at least to work in coalition – to change the culture. This is not a movement to change someone else’s culture. It is a movement to change *my* culture and *our* culture. Sometimes oppositional social movements cross cultures, e.g., transnational feminism. In such cases the critical social theorist should be allied with those who have situated knowledge of the cultural harms, and resists claiming moral knowledge from a neutral standpoint.

This approach assumes that human beings are capable of recognizing at least very basic (and serious?) forms of good and bad, justice and injustice for humans; and under good enough conditions, the method they have for doing so is fairly reliable. At least in some cases, it is not just an accident that our justified moral beliefs are true and constitute knowledge (Setiya 2013, Ch. 4).

According to this view there are two sources of moral knowledge. On one hand, we can draw on knowledge we have by virtue of being human (or better: by being a social animal (Gruen 2014)) under good-enough conditions.

- Humans (and some other non-human animals) are capable of recognizing suffering and have it matter. In such cases, we are exercising our epistemic capacities adequately and gaining moral knowledge. We are social animals, and these epistemic capacities come with the sort of being we are, even if we are almost always in conditions that prevent us from exercising them well.
- This is compatible with individuals and even whole societies being grossly mistaken about what’s right and wrong and leaves room for disagreement about the conditions under which we are adept at exercising our capacities to judge the moral facts.

On the other hand, we can draw on knowledge we have by virtue of being a participant in a particular form of life (Medina 2013; Mills 1988).

- Participation in social practices provides us with first-person moral knowledge and also knowledge through testimony from trustworthy others. However, our claims of moral harm are fallible.
- Moral knowledge is not “immediate.” In many cases, I don’t just experience the harm. It may take work to know or even to believe that I’ve been harmed; it may take consciousness raising, participation in counter-publics, critical reflection, and theory (MacKinnon 1989, Ch. 5). There are stages in the process of gaining what we might call “counter-knowledge,” e.g., complaint →

conversation → collective claim of wrongdoing → “ask” → rejection of ask → coalitional demand. One way critical theory contributes to oppositional social movements is to provide context, language, and empirical research, to articulate the injustices involved in oppression.

So how do we gain normative standing to critique culture? Recall that under conditions of ideological oppression there is, by hypothesis, a range of unjust social practices that oppress a group; however, the oppression is not experienced as such, either by those who are subordinated or by those who are privileged by the practices (or both). As a result, in social movements that seek to undermine ideological oppression, there is a risk that those engaged in the critique are illegitimately imposing their values on others. This is especially the case when the practices that are the target of critique are ones that constitute value for the practitioners.

I’ve argued, however, that an important form of social critique begins amongst (some of) the practitioners as a resistance to the practice that they are being asked to perform. Resistance arises from their knowledge that even if the practice constitutes some sort of value, it is harming *them* in ways that are morally problematic. They reject the ideology that makes the injustice appear harmless, and connect the epistemic and moral dimension of critique.

It may be that the values the resistant rely on when making claims of being harmed are at odds with what others engaged in the practice value. But that does not delegitimize their claims. Practices are cooperative enterprises, and if parties to the cooperation have reason to think that they are being treated unjustly, or their values are undermined, there is reason – at the very least – for all parties involved to reconsider the practice. Insisting on existing terms of cooperation in the face of non-consent is coercive, and is a *pro tanto* wrong. This is the normative basis for contentious politics.

## 6. Conclusion: Social Movements

It is important to gain the support of (and train) elites so that you can convince lawyers to take your case to the Supreme Court, and to lobby legislators to pass new laws. Laws and other state action are often effective in incentivizing more just and less harmful behavior (Lessig 1992). But this is not enough. We need cultural change, e.g., a reorganization of our society around different values, a restructuring of our practices so that we are positioned to recognize the value of new or different things and coordinate on just terms. Women are not just fetal incubators. Women who choose not to parent are no less women than those who do. Such changes are essential for social justice, and cannot be achieved simply by changes in law or policy. We need social movements to achieve justice.

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