

## Systemic Injustice, Ideology, and Agency

### 1. Introduction: Ideological Oppression v. Repression

There are different forms of oppression and injustice. Contrast: repression, e.g., slavery, and ideological oppression, e.g., gender oppression.

What is ideology and how does it work to maintain oppression? 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). 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.

I have argued elsewhere that ideology is not best understood in terms of shared beliefs, but is instead a set of cultural resources that we draw on to coordinate with each other in producing and distributing things taken to have value (Haslanger 2017). So 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 [and dominant!] place in the social formation. (Hall 1996/2006, 24-25)

My objectives in this paper are:

1) To illuminate the phenomenon of ideological oppression and argue that efforts to achieve social justice must address *culture*. 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, nor should they be primarily focused on changing individual hearts and minds.

2) Cultural critique depends, both epistemically and pragmatically, on social movements. Epistemically, we can adequately judge the hermeneutic failures of culture only through collective inquiry in counter-publics; and pragmatically, it is only through collective action that we can disrupt culture's coordinating power that keeps problematic social meanings and social norms in place.

### 2. Culture

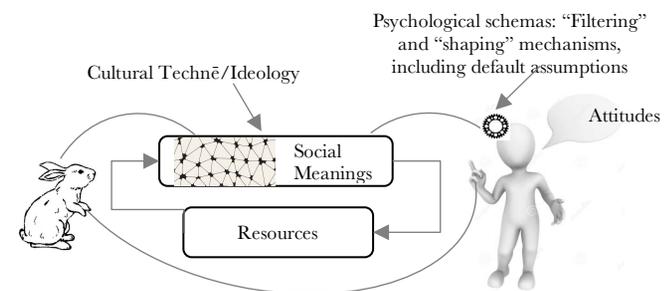
In mainstream moral philosophy, normative analysis seems to focus on either individuals or the state. Culture is almost entirely left out of the picture. Drawing on recent work in the social sciences, William Sewell (2005) argues:

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)

To elaborate, Sewell borrows Ann Swidler's (1986) suggestion that “[c]ulture influences action...by shaping a repertoire or "tool kit" of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct "strategies of action" (273). And yet, as Jack Balkin (1998) emphasizes, the tools “are not necessarily designed for a single purpose but have multiple purposes and are often the source of new purposes.” (24). We should not assume, then that the culture is coherent, or that those who employ the 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.

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. It provides a practical orientation for social agency. To emphasize the tool-like and skill-like aspect of culture, I will use the term ‘*cultural technē*’ for this sense of culture.

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 (Sewell 1992; Zawidzki 2013).



Some consequences:

- 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 and distribute things taken to have value (and disvalue).

- The role of the cultural technē in a coordination system is explanatorily useful because the system is stable and resilient.

For example, when we ask: why does the US suffer from enduring racial inequality, the answer is not: because people share racist beliefs (or other attitudes). That simply pushes the question back: Why do they share these beliefs (and attitudes), for so long, and in the face of good evidence that they are unwarranted? The available culture and material resources shape us, our practices and beliefs, to perpetuate the system.

- 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, viii). The social basis of identity helps explain the resilience of social structures. As Balkin puts it:

The tools of understanding work by becoming part of my apparatus of understanding, which is to say they work by becoming part of me...human beings do not become persons until they enter into culture and become imbued with some form of cultural software. (Balkin 1998, 23)

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.

Although state action can provide incentives for change, and can sometimes provide new hermeneutic resources ('sexual harassment' (Fricker 2007)), culture is a factor in the system that "shapes and constrains" what law, policy, etc. can do. State action can appear (and be!) unwarranted, and deeply destructive of who "we" are, as Governor George Wallace clearly expressed in 1963:

It is very appropriate that from this cradle of the Confederacy, this very heart of the great Anglo-Saxon Southland, that today we sound the drum for freedom as have our generations of forebears before us time and again down through history. Let us rise to the call for freedom-loving blood that is in us and send our answer to the tyranny that clanks its chains upon the South. In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.

In short, social change cannot rely simply on law, policy, and state intervention, nor on implicit bias training (!).

### 3. Ideology Critique

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 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.
- This creates a loop: The unjust practices, in turn, shape our capacities to have knowledge of who and what matters.

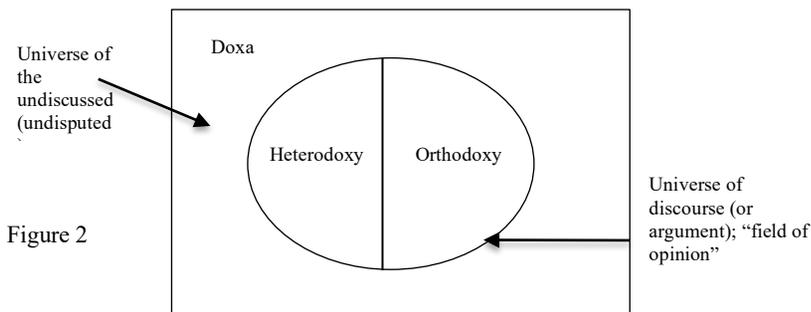
In contexts of ideological oppression, the problem is not that the individuals who participate in the injustice – who either suffer from, perform, or are complicit in it – are stupid or ignorant. Even epistemic responsibility within the available cultural technē is often insufficient to appreciate the 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!).

Can we be more specific? How do we go about ideology critique? Can we just apply the tools of mainstream epistemology (or RCT)? Of course, we can critique as misrepresentations many of the beliefs that ideology produces as misrepresentations. But given the idea that the problem we are addressing is a *practical orientation*, more is needed.

- If our shared practices depend on the local mindshaping that enables us to coordinate, then there will be pressure for individuals to continue to act on the outputs of those cognitive mechanisms, whether or not the attitudes are shown to be epistemically problematic.
- If the practices have been effective in shaping the world, then attempting to change the belief will look epistemically unwarranted, e.g., women *are* more nurturing than men.
- When internalized by individuals, ideology provides tools for psychosomatic self-regulation that enables fluent coordination with others; it also structures our subjectivity. (Gatens 1996, viii) Because of its regulative function, it has normative force. Yet insofar as it regulates our interactions in ways that are problematic (morally, epistemically, politically), it is an apt target for critique.
- To disrupt a cultural technē that promotes injustice, we need to establish new practices that enable us to both discover and create value. Reasoning

with people is not enough.

But then how is critique possible? Let us consider Bourdieu. Bourdieu distinguishes doxa, heterodoxy, and orthodoxy (Bourdieu 1977/1972, 168). See Figure 2:



Doxa include not only background assumptions, but also the terms and taxonomies that structure or frame what is available to be believed or contested. The line between the “field of opinion” and the doxa, is a crucial site of social struggle, e.g., we can disrupt the system by making the doxa explicit and available for contestation or by making what was heterodox or mere opinion part of doxa.

However, this model is not adequate as it stands. First, Bourdieu seems to include in doxa both “what goes without saying and what cannot be said for lack of an available discourse” (1972/1977, 170). There is reason, however, to distinguish doxa from what cannot be said or comprehended, i.e., the culturally unintelligible. In some cases what lies outside of the universe of discussed and undiscussed is, in a sense, forced into cultural intelligibility – either as doxa, heterodoxy, or orthodoxy – but only through a process of distortion, and so is not fully, or aptly, disclosed (Spivak 1988), e.g., in some social contexts forms of lesbian desire are culturally unintelligible, for any representation of lesbian desire is rendered “intelligible” by modeling it on heterosexual desire with two females. But arguably, such “intelligibility” does symbolic violence to the phenomenon (Butler 1990). The culturally unintelligible is not part of what “*goes without saying because it comes without saying*” that can simply become an object of contestation.

Second, Bourdieu (1972/1977) represents doxa as if it is constituted by consensus, and is *unanimous* (168): “each agent tacitly [accepts the doxa] by the mere fact of acting in accord with social convention” (169). But as James Scott (1990) has argued, things are always (and thankfully) much more complicated:

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of *both* hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination. (xii)

So at least within the field of opinion (perhaps also within doxa<sup>2</sup>), we should include a distinction between the public transcripts from the “hidden” transcripts.<sup>1</sup> This distinction encourages us to locate sites and forms of resistance that provide resources for ideology critique, e.g., counter-publics (Fraser 1990; Warner 2002; Medina 2013). Moreover, the differences between public and hidden transcripts can illuminate how cultural domination functions in the public sphere, e.g., by silencing, distortion, and marginalization (Scott 1990, 5). Resistance revealed in hidden transcripts can attest to the limits of a dominant ideology, thus avoiding the presumption that we are merely “cultural dupes” and the anxiety that hegemony is so complete that social change is impossible because unthinkable (Scott 1990, 90-96).

On Scott’s view, hidden transcripts emerge as forms of resistance to domination. However, this is an empirical claim that we need not embrace. Although surely one source of hidden transcripts is resistance, another source lies in the conflicting demands of different practices. In moving between different social milieu, we engage in practices that situate us in very different roles, e.g., a single individual might be a being a mother at home, a choir director at church, a cashier at Wal-Mart, and a student at the community college. The norms for interaction and the meaning of one’s actions differ dramatically between these settings. Some hidden transcripts emerge just in an effort to make sense of our lives; and experience in one setting can give one resources, e.g., meanings and practices, to critique others.

It is important to note that although Scott’s work emphasizes the hidden transcripts of the subordinate, on his model, the dominant as well as the subordinate produce and enact hidden transcripts, and both depend on their own alternative “public” spaces, collective social meanings, and their own structures of power. Speaking specifically of the subordinate “hidden” transcript, he points out:

First, the hidden transcript is a social product and hence the result of power relations among subordinates. Second, like folk culture, the hidden transcript has no reality as pure thought; it exists only to the extent it is

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Rachel McKinney for suggesting this.

practiced, articulated, enacted, and disseminated within these offstage social sites. Third the social spaces where the hidden transcript grows are themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power. (Scott 1990, 119)

So it seems that critique can emerge even under conditions of ideology:

- The doxa may “fix” certain social categories, assumptions, norms, that in ways that distribute resources unjustly. The powerful will be better positioned to shape social meanings, define what falls within the categories, shape the social norms. (The “cool” kids in school.)
- And yet, resistance provides insight into the failures of dominant social meanings, norms, and practices.
- Such resistance emerges in counter-publics and through consciousness raising, which involves collective reconsideration of our hermeneutic resources and the development of alternative paradigms.
- An epistemology of consciousness raising must provide resources to distinguish apt from inapt, just from unjust, changes to our paradigms.
- The claims of a social movement are not dispositive – they are, at best, *pro tanto* claims against others who are party to collective self-governance.

Epistemology is not just about individuals and what knowers can share, but also about the construction of knowers through social and cultural practices. To ignore this is to allow ideology to do its work unnoticed and unimpeded. Moreover, critique cannot simply challenge belief, but must involve challenges to those practices through which we ourselves become the vehicles and embodiments of ideology.

#### **4. Conclusion**

How should we interpret the Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movement, the Black Lives Matter movement? 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).

Social movements seek 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. In short, 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 can produce knowledge that even if the practice constitutes some sort of value, it is harming *them* in ways that are morally problematic.

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 as long as their resistance is grounded in fact and sound epistemic norms, 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. In other words, further political processes will be required to determine what to do next. It may be too much to ask for the consent of all those engaged in the practice, but insisting on 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. The paradigm case of contentious politics is the social movement.

For a list of references relevant to this project, see:

<https://tinyurl.com/criticaltheorybib>