

Ideology as Shared Belief and the Epistemology of Critique

I. Racism as Ideology

Shelby (2014) – along with many others – has argued that we should understand racism as a “fundamentally a type of ideology.” He suggests,

Racism is a set of misleading beliefs and implicit attitudes about “races” or race relations whose wide currency serves a hegemonic social function. (66)

He continues, drawing on his earlier (2003) paper,

An ideology is a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations. (66)
(In both cases, his italics.)

Shelby’s broader argument in (2014) is to make the case that racism is, primarily, a political rather than a moral wrong:

I want to suggest that the *morally* troubling feature of these beliefs and assumptions, the cause for moral concern, lies not in their specific content, (i.e., in what their propositional content conveys) but in their social function: *They contribute to the production and reproduction of unjust social arrangements by concealing the fact that these arrangements are unjust.*” (70)

He continues,

Racial ideologies – what I am here suggesting as the primary referent of “racism”- have the same function as other ideologies but can be distinguished from them by their content. Both dimensions, content and function, are proper objects of social criticism. Their content justifies epistemic criticism (though sometimes moral criticism, as with immoral beliefs). Their function justifies moral criticism. (70)

The form of moral criticism he has in mind is social/political:

...racism should, first and foremost, be understood as a problem of social injustice, where matters of basic liberty, the allocation of vital resources, access to educational and employment opportunities, and the rule of law are at stake.” (71)

Shelby’s preferred framework of social/political assessment is Rawlsian. (71)

I am sympathetic to Shelby’s emphasis on ideology and his objections to other dominant accounts of racism. However, we differ in what we take racist ideology to be, both its content and function, and its relation to the materiality of oppressive

structures. This has implications for what we take to be the proper mode of assessment and critique.

II. Ideology critique: challenges

I take the project of critical social theory to be deeply political. The critical social theorist is not a neutral third party in disputes over justice, but is committed to a particular social movement at a particular time. In the current context, my commitment is to the movement to end racism and other interlocking forms of oppression with a focus on the early 21st century United States.

In undertaking ideology critique there are two well-known challenges, one normative and the other broadly epistemic:

- *Normative challenge:* in debates with another who fundamentally disagrees on moral/political issues, one’s moral criticism can draw on one’s own moral/political framework, in which case it is not likely to be convincing, or one can draw on the other’s moral/political framework, in which case it is unlikely to recommend the changes one hopes for.
- *Epistemic challenge:* to unmask the illusions of those who endorse a hegemonic understanding of reality one cannot simply point to “the facts,” because hegemony functions to constitute the facts that render it legitimate. But if one’s own approach is not supported by “the facts” then what does support it? Wishful thinking?

In response to these challenges, Shelby takes what I’ll call “the high road.” In short, scientific and philosophical inquiry provide us with the resources to cut through the controversy. Science tells us that there is no such thing as “race.” So the content of racist ideology is undermined. And Rawlsian liberalism tells us that the impact of racist ideology is unjust. QED.

Historically, this sort of approach has been criticized as elitist. The picture is that the theorist, relying on fancy training and purporting to occupy a privileged objective standpoint, just swoops in and tells the ignorant masses what they ought to believe. Supposedly, if they follow his instructions, then their problems will disappear and the world will be just.

To be more specific, one concern is that the approach is not politically helpful. Racists are not going to be convinced to dismantle White Supremacy by the latest biological theory or the most compelling Rawlsian argument.

This criticism, however, is not fair to Shelby. *Of course*, people don’t change their beliefs, especially ones that serve their interests, by being lectured at. The purpose of critical theory is to identify an ideology’s cognitive failings:

In a word, ideologies perform their social operations by way of illusion and misrepresentation. What this means practically is that were the cognitive failings of an ideology to become widely recognized and acknowledged, the relations of domination and exploitation that it serves to reinforce would, other things being equal, become less stable and perhaps even amenable to reform. (Shelby 2003, 174)

He goes on to list a variety of factors that may prevent an ideology's cognitive failings from being recognized and the social changes from being implemented: economic conditions, dominant class control over the media, the organizational coherence and power of the movement, etc. (174-5) The theorist cannot insure that the movement will be successful, for success depends on contingencies of history that the theorist cannot control (nor can anyone else!).

A second concern about the approach is that the theorist's perspective is not actually privileged, and, possibly further, the form of reason/rationality that purports to yield objective truths about our social condition is itself defective in some way. This concern can be rearticulated in terms of the two challenges mentioned above.

- Re the normative challenge: The Rawlsian theorist seems to be just adding a further normative framework in addition to the two already locked in debate. If we weren't making progress in adjudicating between the two, adding a third (highly abstract and idealized) one hardly seems helpful.
- Re the epistemic challenge: How can "objective" science discover that there are no races, if the concept of "race" is part of an ideology whose content adjusts to maintain power relations, and if ideology makes real what it purports simply to describe? At best, science will continually be playing "catch up" to refute the latest adjustment of "common sense."

A standard strategy to address these concerns is to resist the suggestion that the theorist is engaging in a special sort of "scientific" or "philosophical" inquiry that is inaccessible to or at odds with everyday practices of inquiry. Broadly, the strategy is to embed the theorist in the social context and construe ideology critique as "immanent," i.e., somehow drawing upon the shared commitments of the divergent parties to debate. To my mind, the most compelling articulation of this strategy is offered by Robin Celikates. On his view, ideology critique is itself a social practice continuous with our everyday efforts to achieve reflective endorsement of our ongoing practices. He suggests:

To give an example: the attempt to show that particular interests stand behind a moral position that presents itself as universal, that an agent was lured into a moral judgment by arranged evidence, or that under certain social conditions someone was unable to come to the "right" insight, is part of the practice of

morality. It becomes ineffective if voiced as a generalized suspicion from a standpoint that locates itself outside of this practice. (Celikates 2006, 33)

In effect, "The critique of ideology can then be reformulated as a specific case of the practice of critique without presupposing a privileged epistemic position and a break with ordinary practices of justification." (Celikates 2006, 35) Science and philosophy are not to be treated as privileged discourses, but as resources to be drawn on in ordinary social contestation over issues of justice. (See also Shelby 2014, 63)

III. Ideology and Intellectualism

I am sympathetic with much of this picture. However, I am worried that the model of reasoned public dialogue is not sufficient to disrupt ideology. That is because an ideology is not simply a set of commonly held beliefs, and adding other implicit attitudes (or antipathy) to the set doesn't solve the problem. An ideology frames our experience of the world and the possibilities for action in a way that involves beliefs, but is better understood, I think, by situating ideology primarily within social practices rather than individual minds.

The problem begins to appear in Shelby's own characterization of ideology:

...ideologies are not, generally, attributed to individuals but to social groups, whole societies, or historical eras. These are those commonly held beliefs and implicit judgments that legitimate stratified social orders or imperial projects....Indeed, the locus of ideology is common sense, that reservoir of background assumptions that agents draw on spontaneously as they engage in social intercourse. (2014, 67)

There seems to be a tension, or at least an unclarity, in Shelby's understanding of ideology. On one hand, defining ideologies as sets of commonly held beliefs makes it seem that the content of the ideology is determined by the attitudes of the majority; ideology is just what most people believe, or believe together.¹ But as he suggests in the latter part of the quote, what people believe derives from the ideology that dominates their social context. He points out, "Individuals now absorb, through processes of socialization and mass media, the attitudes and habits of mind

¹ Though he says, "...the theory of ideology is not concerned with the mental life of individuals per se but with those beliefs that are widely shared and known to be so. Thus ideologies are essentially forms of *social* thought." (2003, 158) I suspect that a source of our disagreement is in what it means for something to be *social*. I don't think it is a matter of shared intentionality, or even common knowledge.

that are constitutive of racial ideology.” (71)²

I’m not really sure how Shelby would develop the idea that ideology is a set of shared beliefs, but let me raise two ways such a view might go wrong.

First, what we absorb through socialization is not just a set of beliefs, but a language, a set of concepts, a responsiveness to particular features of things (and not others), a set of social meanings. Shelby acknowledges that ideologies are not just “false” but are possibly in other ways defective.³

There are many types of cognitive error that are typical of ideological thinking – inconsistency, oversimplification, exaggeration, half-truth, equivocation, circularity, neglect of pertinent facts, false dichotomy, obfuscation, misuse of “authoritative” sources, hasty generalization, and so forth.” (2003, 166)

Note, however, that it remains the individual’s thinking that is in error, not the very tools that our language and culture provide us in order to think.⁴

My concern with ideology as a set of beliefs, it is really a particular model on which “a set of shared beliefs,” held, say, by Smith and Jones is understood simply in terms of the beliefs had by Smith and Jones (either their beliefs simply have the same content, or they have common belief that they have beliefs with the same content). I have multiple concerns with this model, including:

- a. In the case of ideology, it isn’t just a “matter of chance” that Smith and Jones (et al) share their (ideological) beliefs.

² Also, “The relevant beliefs play a role in *mediating* social interaction; they are part of the “life-world” or “common meanings” through which social actors live their lives and coordinate their actions. Racist beliefs, as we know, have engendered a complex and sometimes subtle ensemble of social symbols, codes, norms and expectations; and these structure social conduct between and within the so-called races.” (Shelby 2003, 159-60) It is interesting here that beliefs are taken to be “prior” to the symbols, codes, etc.

³ “...a form of social consciousness may be ideological in ways that are not fully or accurately conveyed by simply calling the set of beliefs “false.” This is part of the rationale behind using the vague term “cognitive defect” to refer to the negative epistemic characteristics of ideologies.” (2003, 166)

⁴ Note also that in (2003) Shelby suggests that ideologies are sets of beliefs held with false consciousness, so the same set of beliefs held by one person may not be ideological, but when held by another might well be. This requires an individualistic approach: whether a set of beliefs is ideological is partly a matter of content, partly a matter of social function/effects, and partly a matter of how the individual(s) in question hold(s) them. He seems to drop the last condition in (2014).

- b. Unless we characterize the beliefs in *very* thin terms, it is implausible that an ideology is so specific to manifest itself in the same beliefs in the members of the culture. One might even think that two who disagree about an (ideological) claim are both engaged in ideological thinking, e.g., those who disagree about whether a particular action is chaste, or slutty, or ghetto, are all in the grip of an ideology.
- c. An account of ideology needs to explain what it is for the ideology to be *culturally* shared, public, dominant and as a *source* of “shared beliefs” rather than constituted by them. Consider a language. Although it is true that if ‘dog’ means *dog* in English, the English speakers will believe that ‘dog’ means *dog*, so there is a set of shared beliefs. However, the explanation of *why* ‘dog’ means *dog* can’t simply be that English speakers have that belief. The story of how language conventions evolve (plausibly using including a story about solving coordination problems) is going to look a lot like developing linguistic *practices*.

Interestingly, Shelby himself takes the concept of race to be central to racial ideology, “Its most fundamental illusion, the linchpin of the whole system of thought, is arguably the belief that “races” exist at all.” (168) Might we usefully reframe the “linchpin” as an organizing of social life around an evolving *concept of race*, rather than a *belief* in the existence of races?

Why might this matter? I grant that social movements need to refute false beliefs or challenge the inferences, reasons, etc. that people offer for their unjust behavior or policies. However, another crucial dimension of ideology critique is a disruption of the very terms and concepts we use to understand the world (think of CR, strategic separatism, radical counter-publics). This disruption challenges us not by offering reasons, not by rational debate, but by queering our language, playing with meanings, monkey-wrenching or otherwise shifting the material conditions that support our tutored dispositions. (Slut walks?) Effective social movements force our everyday concepts to break down and demonstrate how they fail to serve as adequate tools to get along in the world.⁵ We create new experiences, experiences that highlight aspects of reality that were previously masked or obscured. (See Tilly, Anderson, Alcoff.)

⁵ The background issue is how we develop public tools (linguistic, conceptual) that enable us to solve coordination problems, and how these tools evolve. One way to disrupt ideology is by destabilizing the coordination so that the standard conventions (schemas) are no longer a solution. The destabilization may be through disruption of the material conditions, or appropriation of the linguistic/conceptual tools for different purposes so they no longer have their coordinating function.

The suggestion is not that we relinquish a commitment to non-violent and rational discourse, but it is to insist that there are multiple ways to gain knowledge of social reality and the normative demands of justice, including *experience*. It is hard to have radically new experiences because ideology manages experience for us; however, it is not impossible. A crucial step in disrupting ideology is to create experiential breaks that allow for (and often depend on) the creation of new and potentially emancipatory concepts.

IV. Rules and Practices

A second, and perhaps more substantial, concern with the suggestion that ideologies are sets of beliefs draws on a distinction between patterns of behavior and (roughly) rule-governed behavior, or practices. Ideology, as I view it, is a component of practices that, in the normal case, orient us collectively towards, and distribute access to, resources (usually material things that are taken to have value). For example,

An ear of corn can be viewed as something to eat, as a commodity to be sold, as a religious symbol. In other words, we can apply different schemas to the object, and the schemas frame our consciousness of the object. The different schemas not only offer modes of interpretation, but license different ways of interacting with the corn. Actions based on these different schemas have an effect on the ear of corn, e.g., it might be cooked for food, or the kernels removed to be shipped, or dried and hung in a prominent place to be worshipped. The effects of our actions then influence the schema. If the corn sells for a good price, its value is enhanced and the farmer may seek ways to grow it more efficiently, possibly investing in new and different varieties.

When we “absorb through socialization...attitudes and habits of mind,” we are becoming participants in a practice. The practice, however, is logically prior to the behavior and states of mind of the participants. Practices provide a “stage setting” for action (Rawls 1955, 25); they render our action meaningful; they constitute reasons for action.

In the previous section I suggested that *reasons* are *insufficient* in thinking about the moral domain because the language and concepts in terms of which we give and take reasons *and experience the world* is an inherited part of (linguistic/conceptual) social practices.

In this section I’m saying that the giving reasons is a practice and can’t be understood without understanding the practice of reason-giving as ideological. What *counts as* a reason depends on the social practice in question.

Akna performs a ritual with maize *because* this is a way to worship. The practice constitutes her reason. It may also be that she believes that performing the ritual will have good effects and others will respect her if she does, but even if these beliefs are false, she has reason to perform it. Moreover, Akna’s performance of the ritual may be, in some sense, “unthinking.” She does it because *this is what one does*, this action may be constitutive of her role, her identity, who she is.

If racism is an ideology, in this sense, then it is partly constitutive of social practices that give people *reason* to act in racist ways. The practices in question may also be constitutive of roles and identities.⁶

Attempting to change individuals who are socialized into a practice by engaging in debate about their actions is not just (typically) futile; it rests on confusion about the nature of social agency. Insofar as my action is called for by a practice, the pros and cons of this particular choice to act are set aside (think of promising). (Rawls 1955) And because we are typically fluent, “unthinking,” in the social practices of our milieu, debate over the reasons for the practice tend to be otiose.

However, this allows for questioning the practice as a whole. But questioning the practice as a whole is not something that individuals are in a good position to do – they may of course withdraw their commitment, but this does not change the practice or (usually) disrupt the practice. What is required in order for a practice to be “questioned” in the relevant sense is for there to be a social movement that challenges the practice. Otherwise individuals who resist the practice are easily cast as “rule breakers” and their resistance is punished.

How do practices change? I suggested in the previous section that they can change by providing disruptive experiences that force a shift in our conceptual repertoire. Another strategy is to challenge everyday practices in public and systematic ways, to bring them to the surface so they might be critically evaluated. Yet another is to bring about changes in the material conditions/resources that sustain the practices. These modes of social change are, I suggest, revolutionary rather than revisionary, because they are not (usually) a matter of reasoned engagement with one’s opposition. Yet they need not be violent.

V. Challenges Redux

I have argued that we should understand ideologies in terms of the concepts, rules/norms, stereotypes, attitudes and the like, that partly constitute a practice by

⁶ The issue of commitment to a practice as being at least partly constitutive of an identity needs to be considered further (see Anderson 2001, Rivera 2009, Chang 2013). This is going to be especially relevant in connecting the more general issues of ideology to specific forms of racist and sexist ideology and other pernicious ideologies.

managing our collective responses to resources.⁷ Ideology critique, then, can involve epistemic challenges to beliefs, but also must include challenges to the concepts and other framing devices that create meaning, and more generally to the practice as a whole.

With this revised conception of ideology and ideology critique, we can begin to address the challenges we considered before. Recall:

- *Normative challenge*: in debates with another who fundamentally disagrees on moral/political issues, one's moral criticism can draw on one's own moral/political framework, in which case it is not likely to be convincing, or one can draw on the other's moral/political framework, in which case it is unlikely to recommend the changes one hopes for.
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Regarding the normative challenge: we have seen that ideology critique is not all about moral/political debate, but about making experiences possible that challenge "common sense" and force conceptual change. There is no guarantee that such disruption will yield more apt concepts or more just practices; whether it does depends on the particular movement and the historical circumstances. It is important to consider further whether setting conditions/constraints on such critique can provide a greater probability that it will bend the arc of history towards justice.

Regarding the epistemic challenge: ideology critique, in the sense I've sketched, challenges not only the truth/falsity of our beliefs about "the facts," but also the terms used to describe the facts. E.g., redescribing meat as the flesh of tortured animals, or racial profiling as racial targeting, matters. Hegemony both creates a world and a way of seeing a world, but the world created can be seen in different ways. This is part of what ideology critique offers.

More generally, on the account I've sketched, reasoned debate is a good thing, but we should not, even as philosophers, let reasoned debate absorb all our energy, when there is so much other work to be done.

⁷ Those who prefer to use the term 'ideology' in a pejorative sense, can distinguish between "forms of consciousness" that are benign and "ideologies" that are unjust. I choose not to take a stand on this issue here.

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