



The Ideological Basis of Stupidity



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Opinion

Every belief system is invariably accompanied by an ideology—another cultural universal [1] which plays its role in fostering stupidity throughout the human family. As the intellectual face of a given secular dogma which can become nearly theological in nature and disastrous in intensity [2], each ideology provides its believers with a *raison d'être* and a logical justification for existence (although it may appear irrational to outsiders if based on flaky assumptions). It describes, to their satisfaction, their relations with other people and to the universe as they perceive it [3]. Further, it provides a means of comprehending the environment, and it also serves as a guide to action [4] (or inaction) so as to maintain as secure and static a psychic *quo* as possible. It provides a society with an explanation of itself which suppresses underlying contradictions [5]. In most cases, a well developed ideology is conservative, but fanatics may tailor their own to justify extreme acts of violence deemed necessary in their value system. In the cognitive dissonance confrontation between belief and behavior, rationalizing verbiage is piled into the gap between creed and deed. It may be logical to the extreme and likewise perversely immune to conflicting evidence or contradictory facts—e.g., for good or ill, a prevailing ideology hypes the minimal contribution of burning fossil fuels to global warming [6], which, in the background, is eternally going cyclically up and down.

The ideology finds impractical expression in the laws and explicit rules of cultural organizations. These serve to mislead such organizations, bureaucracies and formal social groups into set patterns of behavior which protect insiders from criticism as they crudely crush human aspirations and any sense of justice. If laws are left on the books long after they are dysfunctional, if bureaucrats insist on following procedures for the sake of procedure, if groups cling to irrelevant traditions, somewhere an ideologue is smugly content in the knowledge that his world is consistent with itself [7]. The failure of an organization to adapt to changes in the environment matters little to the loyal member committed to obeying rules. If anything good does befall a group, priests leap forward to claim confirmation of the ideology, whereas any ills are attributed to faulty application of the “Peachable” ideals.

People really need an ideology [8], just as they need food and drink. The constant attempt of humans to make principles of behavior both moral and rational indicates an inner quest for a universe with both meaning and order. While learning can be an opening and broadening experience, it often tends to be self-confirming and progressively restrictive: ergo, the cultural characteristic that a given philosophical system tends to become entrenched ever more within itself, inhibiting adaptability and repressing expressions of novelty. The unquestioning commitment to an ideology can make compromise difficult, particularly in times of challenge and change when a willingness to adjust may be needed most. Military history shows that most wars have been fought over theological if not religious or metaphysical issues when they realize how totally useless reason and philosophical/analytical, factually based argumentation really are in addressing ingrained psychoses [1].

In terms of morality, ideology malfunctions as a guide for behavior by defining right and wrong and good and evil so that people can be wrong and evil. Naturally, people like to think they are right and good (or extremely clever) and that any snafus are due simply to bad luck or unforeseeable circumstances. However, people so often bring on their own bad luck and contribute to their own demise by failing to heed clear warnings that they must usually be at least wrong and perhaps evil as well or else being right and good is not all it's cracked up to be. The point is very simple: priestly sanctions of individual behavior and cultural institutions, economic morality, the family marriage, propriety in society, honorable leaders— all these express a “Correct ideology” [9] which, if not selectively applied to reality, may be tragically maladaptive. Further, an ideology as a theoretically abstract set of idealized answers to life's problems may be maladaptive not only for what it is but for what it is not: it can be fatally misleading when providing answers inhibits further questioning.

An ideology is supposed to be explicatory, and, in a sense, it is. It usually does explain to members of a culture who they are, why they are, whence they came, and what they should do and be. It pro-

vides an explanation of how the universe operates, how to respond to the environment and how the group will realize its end [10]. It does not much matter that these are all stories based as much on agnosticism and ignorance as misinterpretation and emotional conjecture nor that leaders commonly ignore them in pursuit of their own personal goals of power, glory, money or whatever.

Editor/"Journalist" Henry (Harry) Luce exemplified the consummate ideologue. If he willed something to be true, it was—evidence notwithstanding: contradictory evidence was ignored and confirming evidence sought. If confirming evidence was unavailable, an expert could and would be found who would opine that none was needed. However flawed this was intellectually, Luce's ideology prevailed. For example, he was unabashedly pro-American if a bit simple-minded: i.e., segregation ended in 1954 with the Supreme Court's "Brown" ruling because it said so [11].

If it is stupid enough that an ideology acts as a substitute for learning, it is even stupider when it prevents people from learning what it purports to explain. Having an explanation is the biggest stumbling block to getting a better one. Since people need credible explanations, an ideology is constructed to be sort of consistent with it even if—to the dismay of adherents of the theory of connive dissonance—it is contradictory to mutually conflicting beliefs and behavior. When it dominates to the point of making ideas independent of and coping responses irrelevant to unacceptable circumstances, an ideology becomes a menace to its own well being and that of its devotees. One basic problem in such a situation is that some specific problems are simply declared taboo and left to fester because they should not exist in the first place: they confront the cultural ideal and threaten the underlying belief system. The fundamental, avoidable message is clear—society is not working as expected. Thus, taboo problems pose a threat to the ideology, as this is the rational element of the schema which provides people with the illusion that they are in control of their lives [12] and that everything is going along AOK. Beliefs are basic and irrational, rituals are fixed action patterns for responding to perceptions, and the ideology is somewhere in between trying to organize information into some rational order that will, in Barry Goldwater's term, "Make

sense".

The fact that the ideology (set of ideas) contributes to the existence of shameful problems by inhibiting reasonable discussion of them [13] is largely lost on nearly everyone. Poverty and disease are but two phenomena which may be explained by acts of God, moral turpitude of the afflicted or any number of other possible causes. The explanations offered invariably conform to and confirm the ideology of the explainer: rebels blame the establishment while officials blame the victims or immutable forces of nature. The problems, however, remain and become ever more serious until a way of coping is found by someone responsible enough to understand how to relate the power structure to potential cures, rebels and victims alike.

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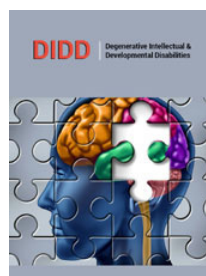
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