Ideologies, Myths, Belief Systems: Tools for Analysing Cultures

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Cultural Explanations for the Rise and Fall of Civilizations

Studies explaining the rise and fall of Civilizations or of Great Powers have many explanations. Some scholars have emphasized lucky opportunities and external threats; others have focused on internal conditions. Among the internal conditions often mentioned for explaining the fall of civilizations is the central role played by a culture inadequate to protect its population. Institutionalized ideologies, myths, and belief systems have not always been up to unavoidable challenges.

Certainly, many studies can be found alleging that empires of the past and societies with cultures different from our own owe their disaster to a misguided culture. Few studies, however, have developed analytical tools for comparing the processes of the rise and fall among apparently very different societies. This may be one reason why we do not easily see the relativity and vulnerability of ideologies and myths in our own culture. We may not even recognize the mythical characteristics of many established notions in contemporary culture.

Various Explanations for Democratic Victory of World War II

I will start with some personal experiences. I am old enough to remember WWII from 1939 onward. I lived the first five years of my life in Nazi-occupied Norway. This, I think, gives me a background to see the ideological shortcomings of many books and articles written by people from the unoccupied English-speaking world, particularly by authors oriented to notions developed in the post-1968 period. Conventional wisdom sees WWII as a battle between democracy and dictatorship, between people fighting for freedom and people fighting for coercion. With this perspective, it may seem natural to interpret the fall of communism in 1989 in the same way—not only as a decisive fall of certain totalitarian regimes, but as the end of the ideological struggle in modern society and as a final victory for liberal democracy, preferably combined with free market and universal acceptance of human rights.

I think these notions are so oversimplified that they may lead not only to an unrealistic orientation in foreign affairs, but in the long run they may also promote a
destructive internal policy. My greatest concern for Western society today is not the
challenge from Al Qaeda and external terrorist groups, but from an internal mismatch
between our justly celebrated culture and serious ecological challenges.

I personally remember 1940, when Norway was invaded by German troops. Some of
these memories fit well with contemporary literature about how people in occupied
Europe reacted at that time. Others do not. For instance, the notion of individual
human freedom as the great bulwark against Nazism does not correspond to my
memory.

I remember, for instance, the discussion among the adults when the message came
that 4,000 German troops had conquered 11,000 Norwegian and British troops in the
Trondelag region of central Norway during two weeks of fighting in the Spring of
1940. In front of Norway’s parliament building in Oslo, a banner proclaimed:
“Deutschland siegt am allen Fronten” (Germany wins at all fronts) was hoisted. At
that time, it was generally accepted that the German soldiers were more motivated
and better led than the allied. “We have to train more to be as good as them,” I
remember my father said. By “we” he meant the Democrats, by “them” he meant the
Nazis. And by referring to training he meant a change in attitudes, not just in
technological ability to handle weapons. “We” had to be more nationalistic and more
willing to see our individual lives as subordinated to a greater purpose.

After the war, when “we” had won, discussions could be heard all over Continental
Europe, from Norway to Yugoslavia, about why we had won. Some claimed that we
had won in spite of democratic confusion; it was our alliance with the non-democratic
Soviet Union that had made the outcome. Others would claim that democracy had
shown its strength by its ability to overcome egocentric freedom and to include the
best from all ideologies, in contrast to a policy led by a Nazi ideology, which was not
able to correct foolish orders from der Fuehrer. No one, as far as I can remember,
claimed that a high evaluation of individual freedom could in itself explain the
outcome of the war.

Cultural Shifts After the War

A few years later we heard that the UN, upon an American initiative, had proclaimed
a Declaration of Human Rights, supposed to be universally valid for all individuals in
all societies. Even if I were only a half-educated teenager at that time, I remember my
skepticism: was not this one-sided emphasis on individual rights irresponsibly
jeopardizing dearly bought experiences from the years of war? I also learned that
American social scientists had protested against the proclaimed cultural universalism of the Declaration. Some argued for alternative versions of a supranational basis for ethics.

But ultimately, our country did accept this Declaration. What else could we have done? And we understood that the UN Declaration could serve as an ideological weapon against conditions in totalitarian regimes, this time in totalitarian communist regimes. But some of us hoped that the great powers would see the relativity of this Declaration and take it up for revision when the Cold War was over. It did not deserve to be regarded as an indisputable belief system. However, this seems to be exactly what it has become: a set of articles proclaiming individual rights to choose, procreate, and consume, without moral duties regarding the cohesion of society or the need to address nature with limited resources. This amounts to privileges without responsibilities.

How can this be accepted among people supposed to be responsible beings, at least in their own self-image? There are certainly many notions developed in wartime that assume the status of motivating myth, rather than of a balanced reality. But why do these myths persist long after they should be seen as political necessities? This is a question I do not think can be answered without going into the character of contemporary culture, with its myths, ideologies and belief systems.

The notion that the occupied nations during WWII were inhabited by freedom fighters against Fascism fits a liberal ideology that promotes individual liberation as the highest value. But a reference to this kind of liberalism cannot provide a full answer to the question. Liberalism was not a dominant ideology during the first years after the war, at least not in Europe.

During the 1950s, however, several events signaled a change in ordinary life. Within economics, rising standards of wealth began to take form. In politics, the Cold War led to the idea that the West represented freedom and the Marxist world represented repression. This idea culminated some years later, around 1968, when not only irrational “authoritarianism,” but even all moral authority, ranging from religion to family structure and common folkways, was attacked on a broad front. The result was not the autonomous free personality, but rather individuals depending on the latest cultural fads for their support and orientation. It seems that cultural radicals, unintentionally, paved the way for a market-oriented consumer society with few moral restrictions.
Indications of a Dysfunctional Culture

The costs of these new attitudes came in the form of increased criminality, social deviance, drug abuse, a more fragile family structure, as well as a weakened national and civilizational identity, observed in statistics from the 1970s on. The big challenge in our time, a growth of global population combined with a lifestyle of consumption, seems to be on a collision course with nature. This, however, was not much of an issue before the end of the last century. According to the World Wildlife Fund communique, Living Planet Report 2004, we had in 2001 an over-consumption of 23% in relation to nature’s reproductive bio-capacity. Or, put another way, we lived as if we had more than one earth at our disposal.

In the long run, we are here facing a dysfunctional culture if it cannot be corrected in due time. How to achieve such a correction cannot be seen as just another job for our politicians. I do not think we can hope for a functional correction without analyzing the character of contemporary myths, ideologies and belief systems, showing the relativity of our form of orientation. In such a context, scholars with comparative civilization as one of their specialties could perhaps make a difference.

I will not try to elaborate various research programs within this field, preferably to be promoted in the years to come. Instead, I will limit myself to discussion of some criteria for recognizing and analyzing myths, ideologies, and belief systems, even when these elements in our culture are presented in other terms. At the same time I will mention that I have written more about this issue in my book Dysfunctional Culture, published by University Press of America in 2005.

Analytical Hallmarks of Ideologies

The literature on ideologies is immense. Even if we limit our attention to authors writing about ideologies with false premises, we can find many, and contradictory, views. However, it is possible to draw out at least five hallmarks to be found in both Marx-inspired and anti-Marxist literature. I will describe them in this way:

System context: For thoughts or interpretations to be categorized as ideologies, they must comprise a continuous flow of perceptions in which one claim enhances the reliability of the other. An ideology used by many as a point of reference must contain a number of mutually dependent principles for social analysis. Its systematic character will be recognizable when it is not possible to eliminate one part without affecting the other parts of the social interpretation. A system, in contrast to a pattern,
is characterized by an internal dependence of elements. When A and B are observed, we can also expect to find C. Before we characterize something as ideology, the interpretations concerned should also have been applied by many, and over a period of time. Situation-governed devices for justifying a particular standpoint do not necessarily qualify as an ideology.

**Interest-dependency:** The appeal and spread of ideologies is to a large extent based on social interests rather than on the weight of superior arguments. However, suggesting some form of dependency between interests and perspectives does not in itself justify the claim that what we are dealing with is an ideology. Most perceptions have some sort of affinity to personal motivation or social interest. To prevent everything from being grouped together under an umbrella of ideological determination, the term should be reserved for interests that are particularistic while pretending to be universalistic or serving a general purpose.

**Distortion of reality:** Ideologies should be exposed and recognized as such because, in one way or other, they represent a distorted perception of reality, often called “false consciousness.” To claim that something is false and not merely at odds with our own perceptions and interests, we must be able to show that a stated claim is clearly inconsistent with experience or with a logical way of thinking, or that the interpretations in question are clearly less functional than plausible alternative interpretations.

Demonstrating that we are up against arguments with non-falsifiable metaphysical and axiomatic principles does not, in itself, qualify as determination of ideology. No interpretations lack presuppositions. Nor should all types of errors and maladjustments in human assessment be traced back to ideologies. False assessments that originate from the personality traits of a given actor, or from coincidental situation-governed circumstances, are not necessarily part of an ideology.

**The adversely affected party:** In the literature of ideologies, the notion that some people will be suppressed or adversely affected if a reigning ideology remains predominant is a recurring theme. There are often several reasons why reality-distorted notions, defended by people with vested interests, will ultimately cause people to lose touch with reality and also lead to an increasing number of maladjustments, which are bound to affect something or somebody.

This “something or somebody” needs not consist of social categories such as class or gender. The fact that the ideology-exposing literature still suffers from a lopsided
emphasis on certain groups that are the most adversely affected, is undoubtedly due to a hope that these groups will be motivated enough to break free from the dominant ideology. This is understood most clearly when a person develops a rebellious and vengeful streak while viewing his group as one of “the oppressed.” Nevertheless, we must take into consideration how an adversely affected party in a reality-distorted ideology might in fact be nature itself, future generations, or a specific civilization or society on a grand scale, for that matter.

**Self-immunization:** Since, analytically speaking, ideologies enjoy an intellectual status beyond what they deserve, it is only reasonable to expect that people who have benefited from a specific ideology will do their utmost to ward off close scrutiny and criticism. Individual defenders of an ideology are not the only ones with such needs. We can expect to find immanent interpretations built into the ideological system for the purpose of defending social groups against intimidating arguments.

Systems of self-immunization (holding themselves beyond criticism), closely related to the general system of political interpretation, have easily recognizable structures. Arguments that threaten the credibility of an ideology are not always met with superior intellectual ripostes. Threatening arguments are quite often just rejected as expressions of evil intent on the part of hostile persons, groups, classes, or nations. An ideology presenting itself as indisputable may even avoid critical examinations by presenting itself as an indisputable derivation of reason, science, democracy, modernity, history, or progress.

Notions characterized by these five hallmarks can certainly be used to analyze more totalitarian ideologies, such as Nazism and Communism, but they can also be applied in critical analyses of liberal notions. Even devotion to democracy and freedom does not in itself guarantee orientation to reality. Cultural values may be seen as nature’s values. Or, if we see culture as something we can completely free ourselves from, this would presuppose that culture could be understood as something external in relation to our conscious orientation. Such a perspective, in the line of liberal thinking, will most certainly limit our understanding of cultural influence. To see the relativity of liberal notions, we need more sophisticated tools than those directly derived from liberalism itself.

**Analytical Hallmarks of Belief Systems**

The creditability of an ideology will always, in one way or another, depend upon a belief system. Such belief systems often have the character of a religion. And, as
Berelson and Steiner, among others, have emphasized in their cataloguing of empirical inventories to be found in all societies, “all societies have religion(s).” If transcendental religion is persecuted in an attempt to “liberate man,” we can expect a political cult to take up the role of a belief system. There are several reasons for saying that this is what has happened with the contemporary cult of Human Rights.

In short, five hallmarks of belief systems could be described as follows:

- A belief system refers to convictions and conventions with an inner meaning of its own premises.

- Belief systems are basically characterized by axiomatic assumptions, not by derivations from other assumptions. If other axiomatic assumptions are used as the prime premises for orientation, these other premises become the real belief system.

- Belief systems are maintained both through arguments and through collective rituals around the sacred. The sacred arena is often protected by taboos, separating it from the profound or secular arena.

- Belief systems are usually interpreted and promoted by people with a special status. People of status might use their rank as well as common images to give authority to their teaching.

- Belief systems are typically employed for moral training and for support of a sacred entity serving a greater society.

**Analytical Hallmarks of Myths**

Ideologies and belief systems may appear to be somewhat abstract. References to concrete events may serve the purpose of giving moral motivation for support of the more abstract ideals.

Social myths enter the picture at this point, and not only as moral tales, explicitly called myths. The term “myth,” from the Greek word *mythos*, can certainly be interpreted in a variety of ways, not all equally useful for social analysis. As a rule, myths can be seen as concrete, often personified, accounts that provide us with dramatic pictures and explanations of the world order. Myths may be used to spread a
religious message or to make the substance of a politicized ideology believable. But myths are primarily tall tales, not political programs or religious beliefs.

Myths may remind us of national sagas. A saga usually tells the story of a specific historical character, e.g. a central figure in a heroic battle. As opposed to fairy-tales, sagas purport to relate actual historic events, and may do so. We should guard against a hasty dichotomizing of the antithetical terms mythos/logos.

The question of what might be true and what might be false in a mythically told story does not necessarily involve the typical characteristics of myths. If myths are automatically assumed to represent what is false, as is often the case, then an anti-myth can easily attain a status of being true because it is in opposition to the myth in question. This leads to an oversimplification. We should rather analyze a myth in the same way that we treat an ideology or a belief system, by using analytical criteria. As a working ideal type of myths, the following five hallmarks can be seen as typical for a myth used to legitimate ideologies:

- Myths refer to familiar notions that purport to say something important about our lives.
- Myths give shape to a universal struggle by reducing it to a conflict between two forces.
- Myths incite our involvement by dramatizing these two forces as expressions of good and evil. There need not be equilibrium in the presentation of the two. As long as the one has been determined to be unequivocally good or bad, the other has thereby been defined.
- Myths are archetypal or repetitive in character. It is up to alert guardians to remind us of their presence in shifting guises in ever changing situations. People can be taught to recognize the mythical drama in a given situation through specific codes or symbols.
- Myths are usually geared more toward mobilizing the individual mind than toward inciting collective political action. They may be directed toward the cultural sphere rather than the political arena.
By using this kind of hallmark it should be obvious that myths are to be found in all kind of societies, and not only in pre-modern ones. Even tales about modernity may have characteristics typical of myths.

**Analysis of Unintended Consequences**

Analytical hallmarks of everyday words may be useful for researchers when they analyze cultural processes independent of the motives and intentions of the actors to be studied. Besides, abstract concepts may ease comparisons between various societies and civilizations.

When talking about an analysis of unintended consequences, I, as a sociologist, must mention Max Weber and his studies of economic consequences of a religiously-motivated new ethic. Studies of latent, or not-recognized, functions constitute an established tradition in sociology; however, this is less so on a civilizational level. Here much remains to be done, and not only by sociologists.

As mentioned above, there are several issues in contemporary well-developed societies that indicate a dysfunctional pattern. Several societies have critical issues with criminality and exhibit indications of low moral cohesion. Hardly any contemporary Western society is generating birth rates adequate for reproduction. The ecological adjustment in the long run is not viable. Here, we are facing several processes with cultural preconditions that have to be recognized before they can be corrected. And the concepts of ideology, belief system, and myth may be useful in the analysis of dysfunctional culture.

Modernity has often been described as a breakthrough for rationality; controllable theories should replace the authority of traditions. Theories of modernity thus have been presented in opposition to a mythical orientation. Dominant modern ideologies have been presented as a form of orientation for overcoming myths. However, legitimating statements of this kind may appear to be just another way of self-immunization from interpretations that otherwise fit the hallmarks of myths.

Prevailing presentations of the French Revolution, supposedly a story of people overcoming mythical thinking, may indicate a hidden myth behind the selections of events to be told. I will end this essay by referring to a pattern behind some of these selections.
The Story of the French Revolution

There are many elements in the accounts of the French Revolution that have been handed down that deserve further analysis. Here are a few.

The decisive, but relatively non-dramatic weapons thefts from Les Invalides are usually played down in favor of the events surrounding the subsequent gunpowder theft from the Bastille prison on July 14. This was an event with all the ingredients of battle and blood, since the forces assigned to defend the fortress shot about 100 people before they surrendered and were massacred by their captors.

What clinched the fortress’ fall, however, were the cannons from a deserting military unit that joined forces with the rebels. In the mythical recounting of events, those who rammed the barricades are spoken of as “the people.” This wasn’t just because women and children took part in the battles, but because through the destruction of an opponent that symbolized the old regime the people were able to become bearers of their own sovereignty; thereby the concept of popular sovereignty was embellished.

Soon “the people” became synonymous with “the nation.” Previously, the people (le peuple) in the French state had meant all Frenchmen, or that part of the population not belonging to the nobility, whereas la nation was represented by the politically privileged: the authoritative elite. Now the nation was perceived as a society of justice comprised of citizens of equal rank and rights. Those who voluntarily embraced the law, i.e., those who relinquished their privileges, were permitted to be part of the nation. Those who were more inclined to fight for their privileges became enemies of the nation.

In this new picture of the people’s battle with their enemies, it became necessary to elaborate on those circumstances that could specifically make it clear that the old regime had kept the people in bondage. The popular attack on the Bastille, which from the rebels’ point of view was initiated mainly because they wanted to get their hands on some gunpowder, was mythically presented as a battle to liberate the people from the yoke of imprisonment. At the outset, this motive was hardly more than a secondary consideration. Even in hindsight this explanation seems strained, since at the time of the attack, the Bastille was only holding seven prisoners: two were mentally ill, one was a forger, and one was an aristocrat!

Mythological stories about July 14 convey one interpretation that is presented as politically correct: the one about the people’s righteous battle against tyranny, and
about a victory that must be won, over and over again, in order to secure the people's freedom and sovereignty. The violent events of that day were an outgrowth of the suppression under the old regime. The overthrow of the old regime's representatives marked a violent but necessary transition to a new and more liberated order.

There is more than one reason for calling this mythical: not just because this type of story represents only one particular version of events or simply because many of the details and facts that did not tally with the story were either hushed up or distorted. Basically, what makes it mythical is the fact that its presentation has a typical form, one that is intended to say something important about many later political events. This story dramatizes a complex conflict as a battle between the suppressed and their suppressers, a fight between good and evil, and it does so in such a way that key interpreters can later use symbols from the story in order to get people to relive a drama that presumably provides an explanatory basic pattern for politically "correct" orientation, even in our time.

Suggested Readings


