

## Ideology vs. Collective Action

### 1. Introduction

In 1577 the French thinker Étienne de la Boétie published *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*. In it Boétie (1577) wonders “how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him.” Why, in other words, do the oppressed tolerate their treatment? Why don’t they fight back? This is especially puzzling given that in many (but not all) cases the oppressed outnumber their oppressors. Boétie (1577) continues: “When not a hundred, not a thousand men, but a hundred provinces, a thousand cities, a million men, refuse to assail a single man from whom the kindest treatment received is the infliction of serfdom and slavery, what shall we call that?” Why, Boétie wonders, do oppressive social and political systems persist for as long as they do?

Boétie inquires about cases of what I shall call *centralized oppression*.<sup>1</sup> As Iris Marion Young (2011: 40) describes it, centralized oppression is “the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group.” Examples include Germany under the Nazis, the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, China under Mao Zedong, the rule over slaves by slave masters, apartheid in South Africa, and so on. Oppression need not look like this, however. Young (2011: 41) also introduces what I shall call *decentralized oppression*, which “designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.” In cases of decentralized oppression, “an oppressed group

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<sup>1</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the terminology I adopt in this paragraph.

need not have a correlate oppressing group” (Young 2011: 41). Its causes are “embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules” (Young 2011: 41). For example, even in liberal societies that have abolished *de jure* race and sex discrimination, there remain significant disparities linked to these factors, resulting in severe disadvantages. Boétie’s question also applies to decentralized forms of oppression. Why, for instance, do women in patriarchal societies not always revolt against their unfair treatment?

Social scientists working in the rational choice tradition have a compelling answer to Boétie’s question. Oppressive social and political systems persist because the oppressed are trapped in a collective action problem. If all the oppressed simultaneously revolted, then the unjust system would topple. But an oppressed individual can only control her actions, not the actions of others. If she revolts but others don’t, then she faces negative consequences (e.g., punishment), but the oppressive system stays in place. This makes her worse off than she would be if she had done nothing. So, without sufficient assurance others will join her in the streets, the oppressed individual forgoes rebellious action. Everyone reasons the same way. In equilibrium, the oppressive system persists.

Those in the critical theory tradition offer a very different answer. They explain persistent oppression by appealing not to oppressed individuals’ *incentives*, but to their *beliefs*. The oppressed are in the grip of ideology. They incorrectly believe the social and political system they live under is just, or perhaps they believe it is inevitable, or maybe that their subordination is part of the natural order of things. Because of these beliefs, the oppressed don’t revolt. Ideology explanations were developed by Karl Marx and his followers to explain the persistence of capitalism (Heath 2000: 367-368). More recently, ideology has been invoked to explain the

persistence of racism (Shelby 2003), sexism (Haslanger 2012), the Soviet Union (Kuran 1995: ch. 13), the Hindu caste system (Kuran 1995: ch. 12), nationalism (Allahaar 2004), gun culture (Herz 1995), why poor working-class people vote for Republicans (Lukes 2011), why Tea Party voters support low taxes (Leiter 2015), and more.

How can we resolve the debate? Some philosophers look for what I call a *conclusive resolution*. A conclusive resolution is an argument showing that one of the hypotheses is fatally flawed, so the alternative must be embraced. Joseph Heath, Michael Rosen, and Kirun Sankaran argue (all for different reasons) that ideology explanations face serious challenges, so we should instead embrace collective action explanations. Brian Leiter argues collective action explanations face insurmountable problems, leading him to embrace ideology as an explanation for persistent oppression. One goal of this paper is to show these conclusive resolutions fail. The alleged shortcomings of each hypothesis are less severe than the critics suggest. There currently exists no compelling reason to wholesale reject either hypothesis.

A different approach—which I adopt in this paper—does not look to conclusively resolve the debate with a single argument, but rather says we should decide which hypothesis best explains persistent oppression on a case-by-case basis. I call this *piecemeal resolution*. Rather than universally favoring either collective action or ideology explanations, piecemeal resolution says we should be open to both hypotheses for any given instance of persistent oppression we confront. If we pursue piecemeal resolution, it may be that in due time one hypothesis emerges as superior. It may be that both hypotheses find validation, in that some cases of persistent oppression are explained by ideology, while others are explained by collective action problems. Some cases may be best explained by a combination of the two. To pursue piecemeal resolution, we need an empirical strategy for assessing whether ideology or collective action problems best

explain specific cases of persistent oppression we confront. Drawing on relevant work from the social sciences, I sketch such a strategy in this paper.

One clarifying point before I begin. This paper is about how to adjudicate between the two major hypotheses purporting to explain why oppressive social and political systems persist for as long as they do. I do not consider the question of how to topple oppressive systems. These questions are related, but not as tightly as one might expect. For instance, even if collective action problems rather than ideology best explain why the oppressed don't revolt, it does not follow that ideology critique—the critical theorist's preferred method of liberation—is ineffective as a tool for toppling oppressive regimes (O'Connor 2019: 203; Barrett 2022).<sup>2</sup> Ideology critique can change preferences, which can dislodge collective action problems. Determining what best explains persistent oppression does not immediately determine the most effective means for combating oppressive regimes. That is a different question I leave for another time.

## 2. Two Competing Hypotheses

Why do oppressive social and political systems persist for as long as they do? Critical theorists point to ideology. Ideologies are typically defined as sets of loosely connected beliefs about social, political, and economic issues (Hinich and Munger 1996: 9-13). Critical theorists adopt a narrower definition. More specifically, “to claim that a particular belief system is ideological ... is to impute to the system of belief some negative characteristic(s) that provides a

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<sup>2</sup> For comprehensive analysis of different theories of social change, see Heydari Fard (2022; 2024).

reason to reject it (or at least some significant part of it) in its present form” (Shelby 2003: 157).

What are these negative characteristics?

There are two. First, many of the beliefs that constitute ideologies are false or epistemically defective in some way. Second, ideologies serve a pernicious social function: they support and sustain oppressive social and political systems. Here are several passages highlighting these two features:

... *ideology*: a widely held set of associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations (Shelby 2016: 22).

False consciousness, as I shall use the term, refers to beliefs that are false and that are formed under conditions of oppression that support the maintenance of the oppression (Cudd 2006: 178).

... ideology is best understood functionally: ideology functions to stabilize or perpetuate unjust power and domination, and does so through some form of masking or illusion (Haslanger 2017: 150).

... ideology claims that the dominant social ideas in such societies are typically false or misleading in a fashion that redounds to the advantage of the economically dominant class; for example, by variously concealing or misrepresenting or justifying those flaws in the societies which also redound to the advantage of that class (Leopold 2013: 22).

... workers have a poor perception of their interests. They have absorbed commercial values and chase after consumer goods. Their desires have been organized by a system

which depends on their docility. In short, they suffer from false consciousness (Meyerson 1991: 7).

As an example of an ideology explanation, consider the classic Marxist puzzle: if capitalism is so bad for the proletariat, why don't they rebel against it? Marxists respond that the proletariat falsely believe capitalism is just, that success in the market reflects merit, that upward mobility is open to all, and so on (Heath 2000: 367-368).

Ideological beliefs can take many forms: a belief in the legitimacy of the system, denial of injustice, fatalism about prospects for social change, rationalization of social roles, false attribution of blame, identification with the oppressor, and more (Jost 2020: 54). Trying to capture all this variation, the *Ideology Hypothesis* (IH) says oppressive social and political systems persist because the oppressed hold false beliefs that inhibit any desire to revolt against their oppression.

By contrast, social scientists often explain persistent oppression by pointing to collective action problems (e.g., Chong 1991; Marwell and Oliver 1993; Lichbach 1998; Tullock 2005). Different game-theoretic models are used to explain why the oppressed don't revolt, ranging from prisoners' dilemmas, public goods games, stag hunts, coordination games, and more. Prisoners' dilemmas are most commonly used, but I favor the assurance game, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

	Revolt	Stay home
Revolt	1, 1	-1, 0
Stay home	0, -1	0, 0

## Figure 1

Both players must revolt to topple the oppressive system. The players' most preferred outcome is mutual revolt, for this is the only outcome where the system collapses. The players are indifferent between the outcomes where both don't revolt, or where they don't revolt while the other does, for in these outcomes the regime stays in place, yet they undertake no costly revolutionary activity. The least preferred outcome for both players is where they revolt but the other stays home. In this scenario the oppressive regime stays in place, yet the player undertakes costly revolutionary activity that may result in punishment. There are two pure strategy equilibria in this game: an efficient equilibrium where both revolt, achieving the (1, 1) payoff, and a risk-dominant equilibrium where both stay home, achieving the (0, 0) payoff. Even though revolution is in equilibrium, and even though revolution is efficient, it is by no means obvious rational players will revolt. They might settle on the risk-dominant equilibrium instead. Brian Skyrms (2004: 51) summarizes: "if you expect me to deviate, you might believe you would be better off deviating as well. And if I believe that you have such beliefs, I may expect you to deviate and by virtue of such expectations deviate myself."

The *Collective Action Hypothesis* (CAH) says oppressive social and political systems persist because revolution requires coordination, but the oppressed are unable to coordinate. The difference between the two hypotheses should now be clear. The CAH says the oppressed want to revolt, but can't. The IH says the oppressed, due to their distorted beliefs, don't even want to revolt in the first place.

Importantly, the two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. In a recent paper, Jacob Barrett (2022) demonstrates how the two can complement each other. Ideology can affect individuals' preferences as well as their perceptions of the actions available to them. The way

ideology impacts individuals' preferences and perceptions can create collective action problems that ossify their oppression. Furthermore, "an ideology critique that overturns these distortions can respectively change people's *preferences* or their *perceptions of the feasible set*" (Barrett 2022: 715). Such changes can resolve collective action problems.

### 3. Conclusive Resolutions

The last section introduced two competing hypotheses purporting to explain persistent oppression. A conclusive resolution to the debate seeks an argument showing that one of the hypotheses is fatally flawed, so the alternative must be embraced. In this section I examine four attempts at conclusive resolution. They all fail.

#### 3.1 *The Principle of Charity.*

Heath thinks the CAH is superior to the IH. According to Heath (2000: 364), when explaining human behavior, we ought to adhere to the *principle of charity*, which says "the best interpretation is the one that ascribes the most reasonable set of beliefs to that person, which is to say, the one that maximizes the number of true beliefs the person is thought to hold." Across this metric the CAH outperforms the IH, for the IH posits false beliefs among the oppressed—indeed, it is these false beliefs that explain why the oppressed don't revolt—while the CAH does not. The CAH is thus superior for "it allows one to engage in social criticism while minimizing the tendency to insult the intelligence of the people on whose behalf the critical intervention has been initiated" (Heath 2000: 363). Due to the principle of charity, we should explain persistent oppression with the CAH instead of the IH.



I agree we should charitably assume individuals are rational when explaining their behavior. I disagree, however, with Heath's (2000: 364) claim that interpreting someone as rational requires we maximize "the number of true beliefs the person is thought to hold." Denote the theory of epistemic rationality Heath embraces *rationality-as-truth*. A different view says epistemic rationality demands not having true beliefs but instead "processing the available evidence using procedures that, in the long run and on average, are most likely to yield true beliefs" (Elster 2007: 202). Call this alternative theory *rationality-as-responsiveness*. Rationality-as-responsiveness does not require true beliefs, only that agents respond appropriately to their available evidence.

In many cases, *rationality-as-truth* and *rationality-as-responsiveness* converge in their judgments. Suppose an agent possesses reliable evidence; she responds appropriately to this evidence and thus acquires true beliefs. Both accounts say she is rational. However, when agents have unreliable evidence the two come apart. Consider a case.

*Evil Teacher.* A kindergarten teacher wants to maximize the number of false mathematical beliefs her students have. She teaches them all that  $2 + 2 = 5$ . This is the first mathematical instruction the students have ever received, and they don't receive any mathematical instruction outside the classroom. All the students believe  $2 + 2 = 5$ .

Are the students epistemically rational? The *rationality-as-truth* view says no, because they have false beliefs. The *rationality-as-responsiveness* view says yes, because the students respond appropriately to their evidence. They have bad evidence which leads to false beliefs, but they act rationally given their evidence.

*Evil Teacher* not only highlights how the two theories of epistemic rationality diverge, but it also highlights why *rationality-as-responsiveness* is superior. Intuitively, there is nothing

irrational about a child believing  $2 + 2 = 5$  if that is all she is taught. Rationality-as-truth says she is irrational, though. By contrast, if a child is only taught that  $2 + 2 = 5$  then it does seem irrational for her to believe  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Indeed, there is just as much basis for her to believe  $2 + 2 = 4$  in this case as there is for her to believe  $2 + 2 = 143$ . And yet, the rationality-as-truth theory says she is rational if she randomly stumbles on the true belief.

So, we should embrace Heath's imperative to interpret people's behavior as rational, but this is better done through the lens of rationality-as-responsiveness rather than his favored rationality-as-truth. We know rationality-as-truth indicts the IH. What about rationality-as-responsiveness?

That depends on how the oppressed come to hold their distorted ideological beliefs. Critical theorists have answers. Marx (1978: 172) explained the hegemony of the bourgeoisie's ideology among the proletariat by arguing that "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production." The basic idea is that organizations supplying ideas for people to consume—the state through public schools but also private news media, religious and civic organizations, universities, and so on—are all controlled by members of the ruling class. Because the ruling class benefits from the status quo, these organizations all push distorting ideologies that justify the status quo. With no other organizations to consume ideas from the oppressed embrace the ruling class's distorted ideology.

Many critical theorists embrace this account of how oppression-sustaining ideologies are inculcated (e.g., Meyerson 1991: 134; Leiter 2004: 86; Cudd 2006: 179; Leopold 2013: 26;

Stanley 2015: 236-237).<sup>3</sup> For our purposes, the point is that if this ideology origin story is correct then rationality-as-responsiveness does not indict the IH. The oppressed are not epistemically irrational. They are drawing rational inferences from unreliable subsets of evidence curated by their oppressors. Heath is thus wrong to say the principle of charity favors the CAH over the IH. The principle of charity—properly construed—favors neither.

### *3.2 Origin Stories.*

Rosen also thinks we should embrace the CAH over the IH, but for different reasons than Heath. Rosen's main issue is that defenders of the IH offer no plausible story as to how the ruling class's ideology achieves hegemony. Others have raised similar concerns about the IH (Elster 1994: 473). Because there is no plausible origin story explaining how the oppressed find themselves in the grip of a distorted ideology that sustains their oppression, Rosen (1996: 260-262) embraces the CAH.

Defenders of the IH propose origin stories. Rosen just thinks they are all flawed. These include: ideology takes hold because the ruling class controls the means of mental production (Rosen 1996: 182-183), because the oppressed make inferential errors (Rosen 1996: 263-265), because the oppressed have sour grapes (Rosen 1996: 265-266), because the oppressed engage in wishful thinking (Rosen 1996: 266-270), and because societies are self-maintaining systems (Rosen 1996: 258-259). I agree the IH needs a plausible origin story and many of the candidates are implausible. Not all are, however. In what follows I examine Rosen's criticisms of the most

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed formal model of evidence manipulation, see Weatherall et al. (2020).

common origin story touted by critical theorists and argue they fail. Because there is at least one plausible origin story, Rosen's rationale for favoring the CAH over the IH collapses.

I introduced the relevant origin story above. The oppressed come to embrace the ruling class's ideology because the ruling class controls the "means of mental production" and uses them to push an ideology sympathetic to its rule. Rosen has two issues with this origin story. First: "Why should one suppose that the ruling class is capable of promoting its interests effectively, forming its ideas in response to those interests, whereas the dominated classes simply accept whatever is served up to them?" (Rosen 1996: 183). If the ruling class uses the means of mental production to push an ideology legitimating its rule, then some members of the ruling class must be capable of creating ideologies. Why aren't the oppressed able to come up with their own? Call this the *asymmetry objection*, for the charge is that the classic Marxist origin story assumes the ruling class has abilities the oppressed lack.

The critical theorist has a plausible response to the asymmetry objection. Coming up with a novel political theory promoting one's interests that is also plausible enough to be widely adopted is intellectually difficult. There are three reasons to think only some members of the ruling class will achieve the level of intellectual skill required to create a novel ideology, but no members of the oppressed class will.

First, the oppressed may lack access to sufficient education. Developing novel political theories is something typically done by professional scholars who have undergone rigorous academic training. Members of the ruling class will have access to these opportunities; oppressed individuals may not.

Second, the nature of their occupations may prevent oppressed individuals from reaching the requisite level of intellectual skill. Adam Smith (1981: 781-782) argues that because a poor

laborer “has no occasion to exert his understanding” in the workplace, he “naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.” Marx (1990: 483) approvingly cites these passages in *Capital*. Though the work of the oppressed attenuates their mental faculties, this is not so for the ruling class. Smith (1981: 784) notes that individuals of “rank or fortune” are employed in professions that are “extremely complicated, and such as exercise the head more than the hands. The understandings of those who are engaged in such employments can seldom grow torpid for want of exercise.”

Third, there is empirical evidence suggesting that people who live in material deprivation—a state many oppressed individuals find themselves—reason differently when compared to those in better conditions (Shah et al. 2012; Mani et al. 2013; Mullainathan and Shafir 2013; Morton 2017). Those facing material deprivation allocate greater attention to the short run and less to the long run. Crafting a novel ideology is something only someone with the luxury of focusing on the long run can do.

Rosen has a second problem with the common Marxist origin story. He writes:

Marx now seems to have switched to a view of those who live under the domination of the ruling class as passive victims, taking their ideas from those who control the ‘means of mental production’ like obedient chicks, with no critical reflection on their part as to whether the ideas are either true or in their own rational interests (Rosen 1996: 182-183).

Rosen here wonders why the oppressed listen to what the ruling class has to say. Given the pernicious effects of the ruling class’s ideology, why not just ignore it? Call this the *effectiveness objection*, for the question is how the ruling class is so effective at inculcating its preferred ideology.

The critical theorist has good responses to the effectiveness objection. To begin, I assume the oppressed must have *some* beliefs about the nature and legitimacy of the social and political system they live under. This issue is too important a part of their lives for them to remain agnostic about. To reject the ruling class's ideology the oppressed must thus encounter alternatives. If my response to the asymmetry objection succeeds—that is, if there are reasons to think the oppressed will be unable to come up with alternative ideologies—then the response to the effectiveness objection is simple: the oppressed adopt the ruling class's ideology because it is the only game in town.

Suppose my response to the asymmetry objection fails. Even if the oppressed can come up with competing ideologies, the ruling class may still have ways to ensure their preferred ideology is the only game in town. In illiberal societies, views critical of the ruling class's ideology are banned. Competing ideologies are not allowed in newspapers and television news broadcasts, in classrooms, on social media, and so on. Censorship might be so extreme that alternative ideas cannot even exist in private residences, as happened in the Soviet Union (Figs 2007). In this draconian social order, it would be unsurprising if the oppressed came to accept the ruling class's ideology, given the lack of alternatives.

In many cases, however, the ruling class's grip on the means of mental production will not be so complete. They control schools and universities and major news media outlets but there are opportunities for alternative ideas to slip in, for instance in independent news media outlets that are not censored. But even here it is not obvious the oppressed will encounter alternative ideas. In societies where alternatives to the ruling class's ideology are permitted, some spend their entire lives consuming news solely from agencies controlled by the ruling class—such as Fox News and MSNBC—without ever encountering alternatives like The Young Turks or

Jacobin. If the ruling class's grip on the means of mental production is imperfect yet still quite extensive, alternative ideas will only be encountered if they are actively sought. Many oppressed individuals will not do this, however.

Though alternative ideas might be hard to find, some members of the oppressed may encounter them. Even if they do, they might still embrace the ruling class's ideology because the ruling class controls *so much* of the means of mental production. Some argue that the credence we place in proposition  $p$  is a function, in part, of how many others believe  $p$  (Levy 2021: §3). All things equal, the more people who tout  $p$  the higher our credence in  $p$  should be. Suppose 80 percent of the means of mental production are controlled by the ruling class and 20 percent are controlled by the oppressed. In this epistemic environment it would be unsurprising if an oppressed individual embraced the ruling class's ideology given how quantitatively skewed her evidence is.

The classic Marxist origin story is not as hopeless as Rosen suggests. The critical theorist has good responses to both the asymmetry and effectiveness objections. Because there is at least one plausible origin story bolstering the IH, Rosen's rationale for favoring the CAH fails.

### 3.3 *Distinct Phenomena.*

Heath and Rosen believe that whatever the IH explains the CAH explains better. Leiter thinks there are things the IH explains that the CAH cannot explain at all. In this sense, the IH is indispensable. He writes:

Even putting aside doubts about the claims of rational choice theory which undergird the analysis of coordination problems, the real problem here is that coordination problems

don't explain the relevant phenomenon. The coordination problem explanation of why the few rule the many is that the many cannot coordinate their behavior to overthrow the few, but the *actual* phenomenon the Marxist theory explains is that the many don't even see the need to overthrow the few, indeed, don't even see that the few rule the many! (Leiter 2004: 85).

Leiter's point is that the IH is not actually in competition with the CAH, for they explain distinct phenomena. The CAH explains cases where the oppressed want to overthrow their oppressors, but don't. The IH explains cases where the oppressed don't want to overthrow their oppressors. So, theorists like Heath and Rosen are wrong to say the CAH is superior to the IH; the two hypotheses are not substitutes.

How might Heath and Rosen respond? They must argue that there are no or at least very few cases where the oppressed lack a desire to revolt; the oppressed always want to rebel against their chains. Leiter is no fool, however, so he will surely point to cases where the oppressed seem content with their oppression. Heath and Rosen have a plausible response to such counterexamples. Appearances can be misleading; the oppressed don't accept their oppression, they merely pretend to.

Relevant here is economist Timur Kuran's (1995) work on preference falsification. According to Kuran, when we express a preference in public, there are multiple factors we consider. First, we consider our actual beliefs. All things equal, we want to express what we genuinely believe. But this is not the only relevant consideration, for the preferences we publicly express can influence how others treat us. If our true views are unpopular with the powers that be, then we may elicit a false preference to avoid sanction. Kuran (1995: ix) calls this *preference*



*falsification*, which is defined as “the act of misrepresenting one’s wants under perceived social pressure.”

There are many examples of preference falsification among the oppressed. In *The Power of the Powerless*, Václav Havel presents the story of the greengrocer. Living under draconian communist rule, the grocer sticks a sign in his window that says, “Workers of the world, unite!” The same slogan can be found in nearly every shop window. Initially, one might think such expressions are evidence that the grocer and his fellow merchants are in the grip of ideology, embracing the oppressive system they live under. Havel (1992: 132) disagrees: “If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper decoration in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life.” The grocer expresses support for the oppressive regime only to avoid punishment. He is not in the grip of ideology. The broader point is that in oppressive contexts we cannot take what the oppressed say at face value; their oppression often means they cannot speak freely. What appear to be cases of the oppressed embracing their oppression may just be cases of preference falsification.

### 3.4 *The Redundancy of Ideology.*

Sankaran argues the IH is really just the CAH in disguise. The key premise in Sankaran’s (2020: 1446) argument is that ideologies are *conventions*. Conventions are solutions to coordination games. By saying ideologies are conventions Sankaran is claiming that we would rather embrace the ideology of those around us—even if it is misguided—than embrace a set of ideas they reject. This is displayed in Figure 2. Players can either embrace the ruling class’s

ideology or an egalitarian worldview. Both players would rather embrace the egalitarian worldview than the ruling class’s ideology. Neither wants to adopt it unilaterally, however.

	Ruling class ideology	Egalitarian worldview
Ruling class ideology	1, 1	0, 0
Egalitarian worldview	0, 0	2, 2

Figure 2

Because ideologies are conventions it follows ideology critique—the critical theorist’s main tool of liberation—is ineffective. Even if the critical theorist convinces the oppressed they are in the grip of ideology, they will not embrace a new worldview. They will jump to the egalitarian worldview only if others do so. Returning to Figure 2, if both players embrace the ruling class’s ideology and are at the (1, 1) equilibrium, it is in neither player’s interest to unilaterally adopt the egalitarian worldview. Switching from the (1, 1) equilibrium to the (2, 2) equilibrium is a collective action problem: each player needs assurance the other will switch before she switches. Once this is recognized, however, the differences between the IH and CAH seem to vanish. The IH is just a special case of the CAH. In Sankaran’s (2020: 1453) words, the IH “reinvents the wheel, poorly.”

The key premise in the argument is that ideologies are conventions. Why believe this? Ideologies, writes Sankaran,

... solve the coordination problem of *mutual intelligibility*. In order to communicate with one another, we have to be confident about how others around us are interpreting features of the world. We have to be able to *interpret them*—to figure out what they’re paying

attention to, what behaviors they take to be normal, what concepts get used in what ways, et al ... If we didn't have them, we'd have a lot of trouble communicating with and understanding one another and going about our business (Sankaran 2020: 1446-1447).

Even if an ideology sustains our oppression, mutual embrace of it facilitates communication. When white supremacists debate anti-racists, they often talk past one another. Coordinating on a shared set of beliefs—either white supremacy or anti-racism—lubricates communication.

Sankaran is right that shared ideologies and worldviews lower the costs of communication. This gives us a reason to coordinate our beliefs with those around us. This reason to coordinate is not always decisive, however. There are many reasons to adopt a set of beliefs independent of how well these beliefs facilitate communication. These other considerations may trump the value of cheap communication, leading some to unilaterally adopt beliefs inconsistent with those around them.

Suppose an oppressed individual undergoes ideology critique. She realizes she lives under a patriarchal ideology that sustains her oppression. Everyone around her still embraces the ideology. Should she continue to do so, or unilaterally embrace feminism? If she continues embracing the patriarchal ideology it will make communication with those around her easier, as Sankaran notes. This is a reason to keep embracing it. There are also reasons for her to unilaterally embrace feminism. She might put a premium on having true beliefs. She might care about not contributing to oppressive systems and she might desire to be part of the solution. Adopting the feminist worldview may enhance feelings of self-esteem and self-worth. It may make her feel righteous. It may give her permission to do things she was hesitant to do before. These are reasons to unilaterally embrace feminism.

Will the reasons to unilaterally embrace feminism always trump the utility of coordinating on patriarchy? No. But surely, they will at least some of the time. When they do, patriarchy is no longer a convention, for coordinating with others is no longer the highest priority. Ideology critique will be effective, and the oppressed will unilaterally adopt an alternative worldview. Sankaran thus overstates his case. Sometimes ideologies are conventions; when they are, the IH is a special case of the CAH. But ideologies are not always conventions; when they aren't, the IH and CAH are distinct.

#### 4. Piecemeal Resolution

Conclusive resolutions to the debate between the IH and CAH look for an argument showing that one of the hypotheses is fatally flawed, so the other must be embraced. I just showed that existing attempts at conclusive resolution fail.

In my view, philosophers should stop searching for an argument that establishes one of the hypotheses as superior, to then be used to explain all cases of persistent oppression. They should instead pursue *piecemeal resolution*. Piecemeal resolution says that when we confront a specific case of persistent oppression, we should be open to both hypotheses, and empirically investigate whether the IH or CAH best explains it. As we apply the method, we may find that one explanation proves more broadly applicable over time. Alternatively, we might discover that some cases of persistent oppression are driven by ideology, others by collective action problems, and still others by a mix of both factors. The key point is that we should stop searching for defects with the hypotheses—the IH violates the principle of charity, or it merely reinvents the CAH in more specific terms, etc.—and instead empirically investigate which hypothesis best explains specific cases.

One reason to pursue piecemeal resolution is because existing attempts at conclusive resolution fall short. Another reason is that piecemeal resolution leaves us more open to both hypotheses coexisting with one another and, upon reflection, we should be unsurprised if this ends up being true. This is because oppression manifests in diverse ways.

In the introduction I noted that oppressive systems can be *centralized* (when a small ruling group tyrannizes a population) or *decentralized* (when there are no oppressive rulers, oppression resulting from institutions, culture, practices, etc.). Within centralized oppressive systems there is significant diversity. Some maintain themselves through terror and violence (Arendt 1976: ch. 13), others through information manipulation (Guriev and Treisman 2019), others through controlling who enters politics (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003: 70). Beyond the means they use, social scientists also categorize centralized oppressive regimes based on how much power rulers have, who holds the power, and how long power is expected to last (Wintrobe 2019: 286). Decentralized oppressive systems also have many “faces”: they can exploit, marginalize, create power asymmetries, imperialize cultures, perpetuate violence, or some combination (Young 2011: 48-63).

Given this diversity, it would be unsurprising if the IH explains some cases of persistent oppression, while the CAH explains others. But if we reject the IH outright because it violates the principle of charity or because it offers no plausible story as to how the ruling class’s ideology originates, then we may miss this.

If we are going to pursue piecemeal resolution, then we need a strategy for empirically investigating whether a specific case of persistent oppression is best explained by the IH or CAH. I now offer a sketch. It is not meant to be exhaustive; it is only meant to start a conversation about how to resolve the debate between the IH and CAH in a more empirically

minded manner. In sketching the strategy, I rely on social scientific work on oppression that has yet to make its way into the philosophical literature. There is likely more relevant social science I have missed. In general, piecemeal resolution requires greater engagement with the social sciences.

#### 4.1 *Watch the Oppressed.*

Here is a simple empirical strategy for resolving the debate: ask the oppressed if they think they are oppressed. If they deny they are, that counts in favor of the IH. If they recognize their oppression, that counts in favor of the CAH.

This strategy assumes the oppressed will speak truthfully, but there are reasons to doubt they always will, as foreshadowed in §3.3 when discussing Kuran's work on preference falsification. The oppressed often face negative repercussions for speaking their mind, particularly on issues related to their oppression. In illiberal societies, this punishment takes the form of physical violence. If you speak out against Stalin, you end up in the Gulag. This kind of punishment is not present in liberal orders, but softer forms are. A woman who speaks out against sexism in the office may limit her opportunities for promotion.

The pressure to falsify one's preferences runs in one direction: the oppressed have reasons to deny their oppression even when it is clear to them, but rarely (if ever) will their oppressors pressure them to *affirm* their oppression. Thus, if an oppressed individual says she doesn't see herself as oppressed, we cannot take this as evidence for the IH, because there is a reasonable chance she engages in preference falsification. However, if an oppressed individual recognizes her oppression, that counts as evidence for the CAH, for any incentive she has to

falsify her preferences runs in the opposite direction. Hence, we have a form of evidence to help resolve the debate.

*Dispositive observation 1:* If the oppressed recognize their oppression, that is evidence for the CAH.

In line with this, Heath (2000: 366-367) notes that “one very good clue that people are stuck in a collective action problem is when everyone knows that there is a problem, but nothing changes.” The opposite does not hold, however: everyone *not* publicly recognizing a problem does *not* support the IH, for preference falsification may be at work.

Beyond what they say, watching what the oppressed do may prove illuminating. So far, I’ve been talking as if there are only two states of the world: either the oppressed are compliant with the oppressive system they live under or they are in full-scale revolt. This is a false dichotomy. James C. Scott’s research focuses on “weapons of the weak” or what he also calls “everyday forms of resistance.” Examples include “foot-dragging, dissimulation, false-compliance, pilfering, poaching, desertion, arson, sabotage, feigned ignorance, slander” and more (Scott 2013: 65). Scott introduces a technical term, *infrapolitics*, to describe these subtle forms of resistance. “Infrapolitics” designates “a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name” (Scott 1990: 19). Infrapolitics is not revolution, but it is a far cry from compliance.

An important feature of infrapolitics is that it requires “no or little coordination or planning” (Scott 1985: xvi; Scott 2013: 65). The decision to engage in infrapolitics is thus unlike the decision to engage in revolution. I might prefer revolution but won’t march in the streets unless I’m certain enough others will join me. Everyday forms of resistance are not like this. An oppressed individual need not coordinate with others to mark the side of a building with graffiti

that slanders her oppressors. The uncoordinated nature of infrapolitics offers insight as to whether the IH or CAH best describes a case of persistent oppression.

*Dispositive observation 2:* If the oppressed engage in infrapolitics, that is evidence for the CAH.

The rationale here is that if oppressed individuals engage in infrapolitics it means they recognize their oppression and want to resist it in some way, even if their resistance is relatively minor and ineffective. Recognizing and wanting to resist one's oppression is consistent with the CAH, but not the IH.

Can we infer that a *lack* of infrapolitics supports the IH? After all, those in the grip of ideology would not want to fight back against their oppressors, even in small ways. We should be hesitant to infer this, for two reasons. First, detecting infrapolitics is difficult. As Scott (2013: 64) puts it, "the job of peasants is ... to stay out of the archives. By extension this implies staying out of the newspapers and below the radar of the authorities." In oppressive systems we often find what Scott (1990: 4) calls a *hidden transcript*, which is the "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation of powerholders." Infrapolitics is always a part of the hidden transcript; if done correctly, it occurs beyond oppressors' observation. This makes it hard to detect. Infrapolitics may be happening in ways that evade empirical observation.

Second, there may be some cases where persistent oppression is best explained by the CAH, yet infrapolitics is absent. This can happen when oppressors' authority is so absolute that no space is left for a hidden transcript and thus resistance of any form. In these cases, "subordinates are more or less completely atomized and kept under close observation. What is involved is the total abolition of any social realm of relative discursive freedom" (Scott 1990:



83). The Soviet Union may have been an example of this. The oppressive regime was so extensive that individuals were hesitant to criticize it even in the privacy of the home, as children were weaponized by the state against their parents (Figes 2007). So, there may be cases where the CAH is true but infrapolitics is absent.

Can the empirical strategy outlined in this section actually help resolve any debates? Yes. Scott's main area of expertise is rural peasants in Southeast Asia. Over his career he has meticulously documented the ways in which these peasants wage war with weapons of the weak (Scott 1985; 1990; 2013). For these cases specifically, it is reasonable to think the CAH best describes why oppression persists. It remains to be seen whether other oppressive regimes follow this pattern.

#### *4.2 Watch the Oppressors.*

Knowledge comes at a cost. One's willingness to invest in acquiring information grows in proportion to its expected value. Who benefits the most from knowing whether the IH or CAH is true? Arguably, the oppressors. The continuation of their rule may depend on it. If the CAH is true, and oppressors only care about inculcating ideology and do not pay attention to stifling coordination efforts, then that could mean their demise. If the IH is true, and oppressors only care about snuffing out collective action and do not pay attention to maintaining oppressed individuals' distorted beliefs, then that could be their downfall. Since oppressors have an incentive to know which hypothesis best describes their society, looking at their behavior may prove illuminating.

There is something compelling about this logic, but it must be refined. Many argue that those who benefit from oppressive systems often remain blind to how these systems operate and impact others. Much of this work is on the “white ignorance” that characterizes contemporary liberal societies with significant racial inequalities (Mills 2017: ch. 4; Martín 2021; Kinney and Bright 2023). While this observation may seem inconsistent with the reasoning from the paragraph above, added nuance shows it is not.

The kinds of oppressive systems this literature focuses on are what I have called decentralized systems, in that oppression is not maintained by a small ruling class, but is instead perpetuated through institutions, culture, and practices. Because privileged groups in decentralized oppressive systems do not play an active role in maintaining the regime, they have little incentive to understand how it works. White ignorance is thus both unsurprising and consistent with the reasoning in the paragraph that opened this section. By contrast, in what I have called centralized oppressive systems, a small ruling class directly exercises control over an oppressed group. Given the ruling class’s active role maintaining the regime, they have a significant incentive to understand how the system works. The strategy I outline in this subsection only applies to centralized oppressive regimes.

Oppressors in centralized systems often spend significant time, effort, and resources trying to manipulate information (Guriev and Treisman 2019). More specifically, oppressors often try to convince their subjects that they are more competent than they actually are through propaganda. This, one might think, is evidence supporting the IH. Because they believe the IH is true, oppressors expend resources on propaganda to inculcate false beliefs among the oppressed that inhibit any desire to revolt.

This conclusion is too quick. While it is true oppressors often spend significant time and resources manipulating information, why they do so is unclear. The obvious answer is to inculcate ideology (Stanley 2015). Others propose a different motive: to assert dominance (Huang 2015; Táíwò 2018: 318; Carter and Carter 2023; Rosenfeld and Wallace 2024: 265). More specifically, “propaganda is not meant to ‘brainwash’ people with its specific content about how good the government is, but rather to forewarn the society about how strong it is via the act of the propaganda itself” (Huang 2015: 420). Propaganda is a way of saying: “I’m so strong I can tell you obvious lies and you’ll pretend to believe them.” Some scholars argue this is the true motive behind information manipulation because much propaganda is so ridiculous that only a fool could realistically hope others will believe it. Because there exists a plausible competing explanation for propaganda’s role in governance, we cannot interpret oppressors’ propaganda campaigns as evidence they accept the IH.

Another activity oppressors often engage in is suppression or preventing certain kinds of activities and events from taking place. What oppressors suppress can offer insight into what they believe maintains their rule. More specifically:

*Dispositive observation 3:* If oppressors in centralized regimes suppress criticism of their rule, that is evidence for the IH.

*Dispositive observation 4:* If oppressors in centralized regimes suppress efforts among the oppressed to coordinate, that is evidence for the CAH.

The rationale behind the first observation is that criticism is a threat to the ruling class only if the oppressed are currently docile due to sanguine beliefs about the regime. If the oppressed want to revolt but are simply unable to, then criticism poses no additional danger, and so it is not a

suppression priority. The rationale behind the second observation is that coordination efforts are a threat to the ruling class only if the oppressed actively want to revolt. If the oppressed have no desire to revolt, their coordinating with one another poses little danger, and so it is not a suppression priority.

Let's look at this empirical strategy in practice. In a series of papers political scientists Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts examine the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) suppression priorities. In the first paper the authors collect social media posts before they are censored, and then look at which posts are later removed. They find that "the purpose of the censorship program is *not* to suppress criticism of the state or the Communist Party," as critical posts are often left up (King et al. 2013: 326). Rather, posts attempting to coordinate collective action are taken down, leading the authors to conclude "the purpose of the censorship program is to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected" (King et al. 2013: 326).

A second paper uses data from leaked emails on 50c party members. 50c party members are individuals employed by the CCP to post things on social media that make the government look good. They are called "50c party members" because they supposedly make 50 cents per post. By analyzing the leaked data set, the authors find that 50c party members "do not step up to defend the government, its leaders, and their policies from criticism, no matter how vitriolic" (King et al. 2017: 485). Rather, "most 50c posts are about cheerleading and positive discussions of valence issues" (King et al. 2017: 485). The implication drawn by the authors is that "the strategic objective of the regime is to distract and redirect public attention from discussions or events with collective action potential" (King et al. 2017: 485).

A third paper runs an experiment. The authors created accounts on Chinese social media platforms and then looked at which of their posts were taken down. Once again, they find evidence that the CCP does not care about being criticized but does care about collective action. They summarize:

Criticisms of the state, its leaders, and their policies are routinely published, whereas posts with collective action potential are much more likely to be censored ... Chinese people can write the most vitriolic blog posts about even the top Chinese leaders without fear of censorship, but if they write in support of or opposition to an ongoing protest—or even about a rally in favor of a popular policy or leader—they will be censored (King et al. 2014: 891).

In sum, King, Pan, and Roberts find convincing evidence that the CCP does not care about suppressing criticism, only about suppressing collective action. In the case of China, we thus have some evidence for the CAH, but none for the IH. It remains to be seen whether further analysis of the CCP confirms these findings. It also remains to be seen whether other centralized oppressive regimes follow this pattern.

#### *4.3 Watch for Revolution.*

A final empirical strategy is to look at why revolutions happen. Our puzzle is why oppressive social and political systems persist, but sometimes they don't. If we understand why a revolution happens, then we may get a better sense of why the oppressive regime preceding it persisted so long in the first place. Did the revolution happen because distorted beliefs about the

regime were corrected (this would support the IH) or because coordination was facilitated (this would support the CAH)?

Caution must be exercised here because in many cases the causes of a revolution support both hypotheses. For instance, there is significant evidence that increased access to the internet and social media makes protest activity more likely (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020). As one recent paper demonstrates:

... without Facebook, 14-26% fewer protests would have taken place around the world during the study period. The magnitudes at the individual level indicate that being a Facebook Speaker [i.e., someone who has access to Facebook in a language they can speak] increases participation by 10% on average (Ferguson and Molina 2021: 3).

Information technology as a cause of revolution is consistent with both the IH and CAH. More access to the internet and social media can increase “the number of informed citizens who are unhappy with their governments and, thus, potentially ready to take part in political protests” (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020: 420). This is an interpretation of information technology’s role in revolution that supports the IH. More access to the internet and social media can also increase “horizontal flows of information between users of social media” which “allow them to exchange logistical information about upcoming events and coordinate their tactics on the spot” (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020: 420). This is an interpretation of information technology’s role in revolution that supports the CAH.

Although technological advancement as a cause of revolution itself does not support either hypothesis, a more nuanced understanding of how the technology influences oppressed individuals’ beliefs may prove helpful. Information technology always makes coordination

easier, but it does not always erode support for an oppressive regime; support may remain unchanged, or even increase. Hence:

*Dispositive observation 5:* If information technology causes revolution, and the technology increases or at least does not change support for the regime, then that is evidence for the CAH.

Because information technology makes it easier for people to coordinate, if we see that information technology leads to revolution without first changing people's beliefs against the regime, this suggests distorted beliefs weren't what was ossifying the regime in the first place. The main obstacle must have been difficulty coordinating.

Let's look at this empirical strategy in practice. One study looks at the effect of VK—a Russian online social network—on protest activity in Russia. The authors demonstrate that “VK penetration indeed had a causal positive impact on protest participation in Russian cities in December 2011” (Enikolopov et al. 2020: 1481). The authors then turn to whether this impact was due to changing people's beliefs about the regime or lubricating collective action. They pursue this by looking at the effect of VK on voting patterns. The authors find that “higher VK penetration led to higher, not lower, pro-governmental vote shares in the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012 and in the parliamentary elections of 2011” (Enikolopov et al. 2020: 1482). In other words, social media increased protest activity *and* support for the regime. The implication is that “social media penetration facilitates participation in political protests, and that reduction in the costs of collective action is the primary mechanism behind this effect” (Enikolopov et al. 2020: 1483). In the case of Russia, we have some evidence for the CAH.

A second paper looks at the effects of Facebook on protest activity globally. The authors find (I quoted some of their results a few paragraphs above) that access to Facebook causes

protest. They then turn their attention to whether Facebook does this by changing people's beliefs about the regime they live under or facilitating coordination. They do this by looking at whether access to Facebook influences survey respondents' attitudes towards their government. They find "no evidence that Facebook deteriorates perceptions about institutions or the government" (Ferguson and Molina 2021: 26). In some cases, "we actually observe an average increase in trust on institutions" (Ferguson and Molina 2021: 26). The fact that "Facebook access changes protests but has limited effects on political views suggests that the coordination/social channels play a potentially more important role than information" (Ferguson and Molina 2021: 26). For the countries in the sample, we have some evidence for the CAH. It remains to be seen whether other oppressive regimes follow this pattern.

## 5. Conclusion

Why do oppressive social and political systems persist for as long as they do? Social scientists appeal to collective action problems, while critical theorists point to distorted beliefs. In this paper I tried to make some progress toward resolving the debate. I made two contributions. First, I argued against what I call *conclusive resolutions*, which are attempts to show that one of the hypotheses is fatally flawed, so the alternative must be embraced. Existing conclusive resolutions face serious shortcomings, I argued. Second, I presented an alternative approach: *piecemeal resolution*. This approach says we should decide which hypothesis best explains persistent oppression on a case-by-case basis. I then sketched the beginnings of an empirical strategy to pursue piecemeal resolution.



### Compliance with Ethical Standards

- The author has no potential conflicts of interest to declare.
- This research did not involve human participants and/or animals.
- Because research did not work with human participants, informed consent not applicable.

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