

## Thoughts on Ideology

From the *Cycle News Hour*, you're listening to *Power Play*. \*Music cue\* In this segment, we'll be learning all about political theory, explicating and demystifying this seemingly inscrutable science. Today, we're talking all about ideology, which is that set of intellectual blinders afflicting people and their leaders in authoritarian countries like China, Russia, the DPRK, and so on and so forth, right? Well—

**\*Play Zizek clip, 00:00-00:16\***

This is an excerpt from the film "The Pervert's Guide to Ideology." In it, Slovenian Philosopher Slavoj Zizek uses various popular films to explore the philosophies of ideology, of the ways that our beliefs are shaped. In this particular scene, *They Live!* is serving as the medium for discussing how ideology affects our everyday lives. Let's listen to a little more of his explanation.

**\*Play Zizek clips, 03:40—04:44\***

Although Zizek and I speak about ideology somewhat differently—we'll get to our differences in understanding later—it's helpful to think of ideology as something that we have, that ideology is *how* we understand the world. There is a tendency I have noticed to ascribe usage of this term to *other* points of view, connoting an undercurrent notion that, in this *other* idea, feeling and abstract theorization overrules rational thought. The DPRK has an ideology; Turkmenistan has an ideology; the US, on the other hand, the UK, Canada, Mexico—these countries do not have an ideology. They're democratic. I want to challenge this idea, however. At its core, an ideology is nothing more than a framework for understanding the world. Often you'll hear this lament about news: "I wish it was just facts, not opinion!" But the thing is: there aren't an essential set of facts that compromise the *truth* of the story. There are countless numbers of facts and only so many that can fit into a 500-word column—so a reporter must use their judgement and choose which facts are most important for understanding a story. The same is true for constructing an understanding of the world. Theories of IR, which we could also call ideologies, are frameworks which help their adherents choose which facts are relevant, order their importance, and draw conclusions.

Let's play a thought game. A factory owner in the US decides that taxes are too high for stateside production, so they move the production-line of country X. Country X is a third-world state, recovering from a long civil war following its independence from Belgium in the 1950s. In Country X, there are no labor laws so the American factory owner employs mostly pre-teens, paying them the equivalent of 10 US cents per hour.

Three political theorists are in a room. One is a Marxist, one is a libertarian, and one is a liberal. Upon hearing this story, the liberal says: “It’s really unfortunate, you know, that things had to happen this way. Personally, I find employing children distasteful and it’s a shame that we lost American jobs but this is what happens in a globalized world. Although, the cheaper costs of production will mean that products are more affordable for the consumer, it does come at an unfortunate moral cost. We should consider this: is it worse that those kids have to work, or would it be worse for them to have no income at all? It’s not a pretty question, but we don’t live in a pretty world. Other people in the same area have to work much harder for much less money. Would it be more effective to send aid in the forms of food or money? Studies say yes. What we don’t have, though, is the money to bankroll poverty in every single country around the world. At least businesses can provide some income to these areas until the government is able to form a coherent answer to the problems of systemic poverty.”

After the liberal theorist finishes speaking, the libertarian theorist speaks up: “I agree with you, it’s distasteful, but if there’s a moral failure, it falls on the US government. The business owner is just trying to stay afloat and if they want to turn a profit, they need to keep costs as low as possible. The reason they had to move is because of the high taxes—if we want to avoid a situation like this, the government should reduce taxes or offer other incentives to keep businesses stateside. I’m not against decent working standards, of course, but there are market-based solutions to these issues. The answer is not more government overreach, restricting what businesses can and can’t do, reducing our freedom of choice—the solution is less government, to stop messing around with what works. We need to let fair outcomes be the rule of the day. It’s apparent what happens when people who don’t understand business start making policy about it.”

Finally, the Marxist theorist breaks in: “The thing you fail to understand, my friends, is that this issue is not just about this one factory. The solutions you both are offering—well, it’s nothing but self-serving vampirism in the guise of humanitarianism. Consider this question: why is Country X poor? Or—perhaps we should reframe that. Why is Belgium rich? Belgium is rich because it had hundreds of years to develop vibrant political and academic life, supported by trade with other nations, advancement in working conditions forced by union power, and—importantly—it had military control over colonies, from which it extracted cheap resources to turn into higher value goods. The income from these goods remained in Belgium or went elsewhere in Europe. Country X, conversely, had this development eviscerated by Belgium. The political life that the people in Country X experienced prior to colonization was destroyed by their new rulers; later attempts to create political or academic life were stunted by Belgian power. The

time and money and effort that go into making effective government institutions were purposely kept from Country X. All the while, any methods of solidarity among Country X's people, be they ethnic or labor, were ruthlessly smashed by colonial authorities. Ethnic divisions were played upon, financial divides were widened. Anything to ensure a weakened, segmented society. So can we be surprised that the result of Belgium suddenly leaving was civil discord? No, this is the natural conclusion of every policy pursued in the colonies. My point is: this situation was created by imperialist power. And your humanitarian solutions to once again take advantage of Country X's human capital to create profit for Western business seems like nothing more than modern imperialist exploitation to me."

We could go on with all of these arguments, but let's not get bogged down in the minutiae. Although I would personally love to, the point is not to re-litigate politics in postcolonial counties. I want you to focus on how the same basic set of facts can lead three people in three completely different directions based on how they prioritize information, which we could also call ideology.

None of these arguments are comprehensive representations of their schools of thought, and I'm sure a great many adherents of all of them would tell me that I've horribly mangled how *they* would approach this question—but here's the thing: even within coherent schools of thought, you're still going to have individual differences among people who are more or less studied, more or less influenced by other schools of thought, and so on. There are a million features on so many levels which can lead to the formation of different personal ideologies.

The purpose of this exercise is only to help us understand that your way of thinking is not more rational, more clear-sighted, more learned than someone else's just because their perspective is foreign to you. If you were here for our last *Power Play*, you might recall our discussion of the dominant political lens of much of the world today: liberalism. Recall that broader liberalism—the kind underlying both progressive and conservative politics—is descended from philosophies developed during the Enlightenment. Those philosophies were created by intellectuals who opposed formal religious authority and divine-right monarchies, and instead based their ideas in rationality.

Of course, that sounds really good—and I think it's inarguable that their philosophical evolutions were a major improvement upon government by patrilineal despotism, but remember that philosophers are not accessing deeper truths about the universe, but providing novel ways of understanding the world around us. So these intellectuals didn't unlock a secret form of human thought, they created an alternative way of looking at the world, characterized by their own biases. So, keeping in mind that these philosophers of the Enlightenment were almost entirely

white men, many of them of good financial means, it should not be entirely surprising that the resulting form of government denied the vote to women, non-white people, and often non-landholding men, too. Many of the resulting government, our own included, refused to even acknowledge the basic humanity of many groups of people, and justified carrying out horrific tortures, systematic mass murder, and the centuries-long trade in and usage of chattel slavery.

The most foundational Enlightenment thinkers, read by dozens of thousands of undergrads each year, simply refused to put much more than basic critical thinking skills into the concept of race. Let's listen to youtuber Oliver Thorn, also known as Philosophy Tube, as he reads some of Kant's writings. Be aware, he is in character as a particularly active Australian here, so there is a lot of censored cursing. If there happen to be any children near you, they probably won't be able to understand his accent, so it should be fine.

**\*PhilosophyTube, 00:00-02:15\***

At this point, some of you may be wondering why I'm harping on about this so much—these guys are dead, we know that what they're writing is ridiculous, all the atrocities that I mentioned happened in the past and so on. The reason that I'm bringing this up so much is because I want to demonstrate the fallibility of even the smartest people. The people who created the modern concept of rationality by in large believed similar things to Kant about race. Statesmen then used this rationality to declare women unable to vote, people of color to not be people, and certain races worthy of extermination. That's liberal rationality. And while liberal philosophies have evolved immensely since then—every generation brings dozens upon dozens of tweaks and modifications to every school of thought, not least of all the dominant ones—the fact is that every ideology still has its blindspots and its shortcomings. Modern liberal theory, perhaps because of its adherence to the idea of objective rationality, often likes to think of itself as non-ideological. But the fact is: liberal philosophies are just as ideological as Marxist-Leninists, anarchists, and anarcho-capitalists.

And again, when I say that it's just as ideological, I mean that the way of perceiving the world is the same: certain facts are emphasized, certain facts are de-emphasized, and all facts are put in an order of importance. It's fallible, and it's susceptible to the biases of the people creating it. Just like every ideology.

Why is this important? Let's recall the definition of a state that we went over in our episode about *Realism*. The most popular definition of a modern state is a sovereign political entity in a defined geographic area with a monopoly on legitimate violence. Let's focus on *legitimate violence*. What is legitimate violence, who can carry it out, how can it be done, who are acceptable targets of

state violence? Being that violence is an inherent part of the state, we must ask these questions. Because, like it or not, they're being answered by someone. It tends to be the case that the answers are then guided by the ruling ideologies, be it liberalism or Marxism.

Let's talk about state violence in its most extreme forms: genocide. There are a few things you should know about genocide: the concept as we recognize it today isn't very old. In fact the word was coined in the 1940s by Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish-Polish lawyer who lost much of his family to the Holocaust, who spent many years lobbying the UN to make it a recognized concept. He achieved limited success: while the UN did ratify a version of it in 1951, there was a great deal of pushback on it. The US, for example, didn't ratify it until 1986, thirty-five years later.

Secondarily, genocide can be many things. While the legal definition does include the classical example—an attempt to murder a whole race or group of people—intent matters, too. Even the desire to destroy a part of a group of people can be called genocide. There doesn't have to be any killing for something to be considered genocide, either. The systematic removal of children or suppression of culture with the intent of preventing all or part of a group from continuing to exist can also be considered genocide.

Why is genocide relevant? Well, what's the difference between wide-spread government violence and genocide, given these definitions? The question of whether or not US treatment of Americans constitutes a genocide is still hotly debated today. It is generally accepted that Native American population was reduced from anywhere between 70% to 95% in the centuries following the arrival of Europeans. Is that a genocide? Those who would say yes would point to forcible christianization of Native Peoples, the systematic removal of children from Native communities, the forced relocations, the local massacres, and the intentional infliction of disease. Those who say no would point to the unintentional spread of disease, which inarguably killed the vast majority of Native Americans over time. So, is it a genocide? Well, scholars debate. Let's look at realities in political spheres, though: the US does not recognize this as a genocide. As of the time of this writing, the US, federally, also does not recognize the Armenian genocide. Why? Because Turkey does not want the Armenian Genocide to be a genocide. Politically, it's more convenient for it not to be and therefore, politically, it is not. Although common sense might dictate that large scale killing of people is always genocide, the reality is that what is and is not considered genocide is more often a political question. Was the Irish famine that wiped out a fourth of Irish people a genocide? Were the famines that killed millions in India during the colonial era a genocide? Was the Holodomor a genocide? Is the systematic murder and removal of the Rohingya people a

genocide? The answer to all of the questions relies as much on political realities as they do historical ones.

Legitimate violence is determined by political reality, which is shaped by popular ideological lenses. So, given that the US relies on a liberal lens to understand its world, it's up to us to ask about the ramifications of this. This is incredibly important when it comes to contemporary questions of state violence. How *we ourselves* view modern politics and US history is inextricably bound with our ideology, and every time we make a value judgement, that ideology is coming into play.

So, at long last, here's my ultimate thesis: there is no such thing as non-ideological, non-biased thinking. Everyone has a lens they use to interpret the world. This isn't a bad thing, it's just how the world works. But we should seek to identify our ideology and try to understand how it affects our value judgements. There is no such thing as true objectivity, only subjective viewpoints that enough people agree upon. By pretending that our popular viewpoint is objective, rather than widely-accepted subjectivity, there is the possibility for us to overlook important facets of life that are de-emphasized in our personal ideologies.

Am I saying that there is no objective reality? Of course not—I'm merely saying that any given event has too many minutiae to be understood wholly and it's the nature of human perception that we have to create a simplified version of it in our understanding to save time.

Furthermore, our political lives are defined by these almost invisible and unacknowledged ideologies. This is, as I've mentioned more prevalent in liberal societies than in openly ideological ones—in a state like Vietnam, which openly embraces a Communist platform, the effect of ideology on political life is much more obvious. Here in the US, ideology is just as important, but in much more invisible ways. Every ideology is fallible, and that includes ours.

So that's ideology. Before we go, I have a few final things I want to say:

First: as I was writing the above section about Kant's views on race, I could hear this objection in the back of my mind: it's unfair to apply the standards to today to historical figures. I reject this notion entirely for this reason: there were contemporaries of Kant that knew better. It's not the case that no people of color in Germanic academia: when Kant was only a boy Anton Wilhem Amo—a Ghanian student taken to Amsterdam by the Dutch East India Company as a child—achieved a PhD from the University of Wittenberg. As Kant was coming of age, the topic of abolitionism was coming to its most heated days in Europe. Frankly, there were people that preceded Kant—such as Mary Wollstonecraft—that argued for a similar basis of thought in rationality while also pointing out the equality of men and women. The possibility for different

thought on race and sex—I would argue that it was there, but Kant and others had to make a decision not to include that in their philosophies. Our ideologies are not accidents, but a series of choices

Second, if you're interested in learning more about ideology, I would highly recommend the rest of the Zizek's film, "The Pervert's Guide to Ideology."

Third, if you're still wondering where Zizek and I differ—as I mentioned at the beginning of this episode—the important thing to note is that Zizek is the most famous communist philosopher alive today. When he speaks of ideology, he sees it as an obscuring lens which can be taken off to see true reality: for Zizek, the true reality is that of material and cultural control of the economic elite. It's not that that is all of reality, but that that economic logic controls significant portions of our lives. I'm arguing, however, for ideology as a necessary heuristic for understanding the world. I don't think they're necessarily mutually exclusive definitions, but the ultimate point we're trying to make certainly differs.

Finally: on the topic of political reality and violence. Imagine your hometown. Imagine friends, family, neighbors. Now imagine death rained upon your town, bombings, shooting, disease. Imagine that you lose 9 out of every 10 people in your town. Whatever the political reality, whatever an academic has to say about this technically not being genocide, whatever talking heads have to say about inevitability of mistakes and collateral damage—you're still left there among the ruins, burying your dead and uncertain about your future.

Whatever the technical details, we should never forget that questions of human lives are about *real, actual people* who deserve rights and happiness as much as we do.

For those of you still listening, I'm Cameron Lallana, you're listening to the Cycle News Hour and this has been *Power Play*. Thank you.