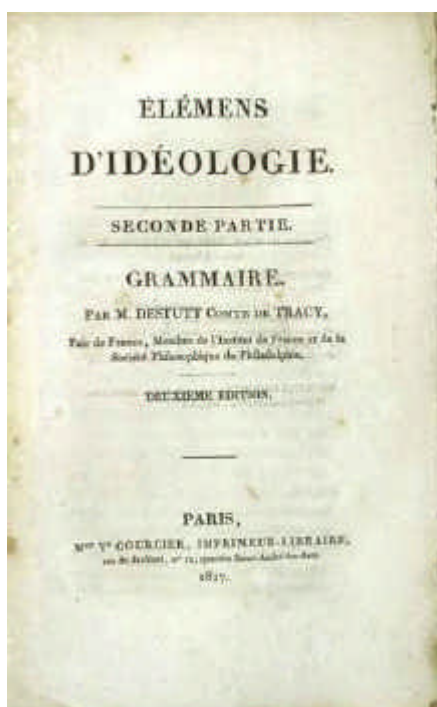


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Who were the idéologues? How influential were they?

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The idéologues and their influence

Ideas are and have been for a long time an interesting subject for many different people and for many different reasons. To find out how people think and make sense of their world has not only been interesting for the sake of answering basic questions about one's life and identity, but are and have been essential for the success of economic as well as political enterprises. A quick look at the efforts of political parties, companies and various interest groups to influence public discourse in the mass media or the education system indicate the *importance of "controlling" ideas to exercise power*. The central concept in the social sciences to describe such a prescribed pattern of thought and action promoted primarily by elitist groups as reasonable social arrangements is the concept of *ideology*.

But as much as there is disagreement within society about which ideas are good, there is disagreement within science about *how to approach ideas*. While *cognitive science* and *artificial intelligence* aim to find and codify laws of thought, *cultural history* is interested in the different concepts, representations and metaphors people used to express themselves in different contexts. As Roger Chartier (1988) points out, this is not an easy task, because within the history of ideas, "the vocabulary that describes intellectual history is doubly uncertain. Each national historiography has its own conceptualisation, and in each one poorly differentiated ideas compete" (Chartier 1988: 20). It is therefore important to accurately look at the context of the used term as well as its user's intention and social location. The *history of ideology* itself may serve as a good example to approach in this way a central concept and its changing meaning both within scientific as well as in political discourse. It is the aim of this essay to look at *ideology's first usage* in France during and after the French Revolution. *Ideology* was coined by *the idéologues*, a Parisian group of intellectuals, to denote a *science of ideas* whose insights were sought to provide the basis for *social and cultural transformation*. I will try to answer *who the idéologues were* by describing the social, academic and political context they worked in as well as how they developed their "science of ideas". I will then go on to describe their *influence* that they had both politically in the formation of institutions of the new French republic as well scientifically in later developments in linguistics, biology, psychiatry and sociology. To understand their approach I will start with placing them in the bigger context of the philosophical and intellectual climate in France before the revolution.

On the night of November 10, 1619, *René Descartes* (1596-1650) had a series of three dreams which changed the course of his life and of modern thought (Roszak 1986: 234). He reports

that in his sleep, the Angel of Truth appeared to him and revealed a secret which would “lay the foundations of a new method of understanding and a new and marvellous science”. The angel’s inspiration made him fervently work on an ambitious treatise, the “Rules for the Direction of the Mind”, which sought nothing less than to describe how the mind works. Although Descartes never finished this treatise, his project was the first of many similar attempts in the modern world to *codify the laws of thought*.

Descartes is in fact only one example of a critical change in European intellectual history of the sixteenth and seventeenth century that occurred when the evidence of observation came to be accepted as more compelling and credible than inherited wisdom and authority: when *natural philosophers* quite literally insisted on believing in the evidence of their own eyes. Also Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organon* (1620) already wrote of “idols”, irrational obstacles to the acquisition of well-grounded knowledge. Supported by the spreading printing press, the later seventeenth century saw the development of societies and academies, scientific or literary journals, and that elusive wider community known as “la republique des lettres” to a larger self-defined world of intellectuals. Especially the philosophers of the Enlightenment provided France with an enthusiasm for John Locke (1632-1704), the tendency to equate science with natural philosophy and a confidence in the explanation of human affairs by material conditions. But they were not only interested in new scientific inquiries, but were also concerned with applying reason or philosophy to public life, in politics and economics. The French *philosophes* headed by François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694-1778) desired to free humanity from the shackles imposed by priests and absolutist governments (Smith 1997: 233). In his *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* (1749), Denis Diderot (1713-84) argued that ideas (also the idea of God) and values, like visual perception are relative to sensory experience. Etienne Bonnot, abbé de Condillac (1714-80), in his analysis of language and sensation, treated words as signs for ideas derived from sensation and hence regarded language as a sign system for the representation of knowledge. He stated “that the art of reasoning, reduced to its simplest form can only be a well-formed language” (quoted in Smith 1997: 235). According to Condillac, the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the sole guides of moral judgement. The result was both making religious and moral certainties as well as political beliefs relative and questionable and providing a scientific as well as political programme.

The French Revolution swept away the educational and cultural institutions of the ancien régime, and it created the opportunity in the 1790s to reorganise higher education and the professional institutions of science, engineering, medicine and law. In the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* (*Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*) of 1789

“natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man¹” are guaranteed “in order that the demands of citizens, founded henceforth upon simple and incontestable principles, may always be directed towards the maintenance of the Constitution and the welfare of all” (quoted in Rietbergen 1998: 338). But what exactly those principles should be and how they should be applied, subsequently became topic of heated political debates. In this debate, the *idéologues* gained for a few years an influential position in the establishment of the *écoles centrales*. Their power-base was the Institut National, which had been created after the Revolution to provide a strategic research basis for the re-organisation of French life. Among the membership in the Institut National, their writings on ideology and their support for the *écoles centrales*, Martin S. Staum (1980a: 372) and Brian W. Head (1980: 260) point out further criteria to identify the *idéologues*: They were staff members or contributors to the journals *La Décade philosophique* and *Le Conservateur*. Finally, they regularly had salon gatherings at Mme Helvétius in the Paris suburb of Auteuil and at Mme de Condorcet in Paris. According to these criteria the *idéologues* consisted of Destutt de Tracy, Cabanis, Volney, Garat, Ginguéné, Daunou as well as Siéyès and more peripherically Degérando, Roussel, Andrieux, Laromiguière, Roederer, J. B. Say, M. J. Chénier, B. Constant and Maine de Biran. The *idéologues* thus worked in a diverse interdisciplinary² network of Parisian intellectuals. Although Tracy and Cabanis preferred the term “idéologistes”, their preference did not prevail, especially in the realm of politics where members of the liberal-republican opposition to Bonaparte were, as we will see, attacked as doctrinaire and schematising *idéologues*.

In 1795 the Thermidorian Convention created the Class of Moral and Political Sciences as the second branch of the new National Institut³. This attempt to fulfill Enlightenment aspirations for the sciences of man and society was in practice the first effort to institutionalise several modern social sciences (Staum 1980a: 371). Its section for the “analysis of sensations and ideas” was the domain of the *idéologues*. As Martin S. Staum (1980a) points out, the second Class and especially its “analysis” section was set up by significantly less clergy and noble personal in comparison to provincial academies. Additionally it had the youngest average age at election (42.2 for the “analysis” section compared to 64.2 for history) and a more pro-revolutionary political attitude compared to the conservative or reactionary history and geography sections.

¹ The Revolution did not help women acquire full legal rights. Suffrage and property rights exclusively remained with men well into the nineteenth century.

² Their fields of interests ranged from epistemology, economics, medicine, physiology, psychiatry, geography, literature, linguistics, ethics, education, religion and history to government and anthropology.

³ Class One of the Institut National was for the physical sciences and their engineering applications, and Class Three was for fine arts and literature.

While the “analysis” section was more successful in their output of publications than any other section, their attendance figures indicate that they spent a lot of time in political positions as well. In the “analysis” section Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis (1757-1808) and Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) formulated their empiricist “science of ideas” combining medical interest in the body, Condillac’s analysis of knowledge as ordered language and the ideal that knowledge of human nature makes a rational society possible. As heir of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, Destutt de Tracy argued in his *Eléments d'idéologie* (1801-1815) that well-grounded ideas originate with experience and physiology. For him the study of ideology was part of zoology. This expansion of a science of ideas to the study of the body and its functions and needs as opposed to the analytic treatment of knowledge and language, was developed by Cabanis in twelve memoirs published in 1802 as *Rapports du physique et du morale de l'homme* (*Studies on the Physical and Moral Nature of Man*). He argued that progress in the moral or human sciences depends on the treatment of each human being as a physical and moral unity. He concentrated his attention on the nervous system, the structure which by then was accepted to be the integrative structure of the body, the physical environment and society. Searching for truth thus meant analysing the relation between language and sensations and eliminating errors by avoiding words that don’t clearly express sensations. Or as Cabanis puts it: “It is therefore the exactitude and correct usage of words, or more generally of signs, which must be considered as the criterion of truth; imperfect concepts, prejudices, errors and bad mental habits can be attributed to the vague character and uncertain and confused way in which they are deployed” (quoted in Williams 1953: 314). While Cabanis thus pioneered experimental psychology, Pinel placed the treatment of mental illness on a new foundation and Dupuis (in his *Origine de tous les cultes*) treated the natural history of religion in an empirical manner (Lichtenhain 1965: 166).



Destutt de Tracy



P.-J.-G. Cabanis

This scientific approach fitted well to the government in the Directory but became potentially disturbing in the era of Catholic revival in the Consulate. The *idéologues* deduced the equality of men from the sensational basis of human consciousness. Since all men have the same sensations and the same needs, equality is the “natural” condition of man. Liberty as a “natural”

attribute of man was deduced from the pleasure-pain principle. Destutt de Tracy defined liberty as the power of exercising one's will in conformity with a desire. Since an unfulfilled desire is an unpleasant sensation, and since man's nature is such that he avoids pain and seeks pleasure, it is in accordance with natural law, that the means for the satisfaction of desires, i.e., liberty, should be a fundamental possession of man (Williams 1953: 314). The logical virtue of their social morality thus became actions useful to the individual and to the society. This logic seemed convincing for the government in the Directory and found its "natural" application in the development of a school-syllabus.

But the remaking of society by the *idéologues* was not merely a constructive, but also a destructive task. The rubble of the priest-ridden "gothic" period had to be removed. The *idéologues*' concept of the *écoles centrales*, which was embodied in the law of 1795 therefore included ideology itself to prevent the young citizens from the misleading priests and charlatans. The *idéologues* thus used the important posts⁴ they occupied in the post-thermidorean government for the implementation of the *écoles centrales*. While the people of France accepted the schools eagerly, the underlying philosophy of education was rejected. Because of the relatively independent Departmental Administrations that built up the *écoles centrales*, their history is not a coherent, centrally-directed institution, but a series of individual histories. L. Pearce Williams (1953) points out, that school attendance was only high in subjects that had direct utility and applications while the ideology section was regarded almost as completely worthless. By the time of Napoleon's coup d'état of 9 November 1799, it was obvious to all that the educational system of France was in desperate need of reform. Where the inefficiency of the schools disturbed Napoleon's sense of order, the philosophy of education on which these schools were based horrified him. A completely secular morality based solely on social utility could not be reconciled with the governmental philosophy which established the Concordat of 1801 and made *Dieu et l'Empereur* the Imperial motto. After his return to Paris from the disaster in Russia in 1812, Napoleon blamed the *idéologues* for the catastrophe into which his own despotism had plunged the country: "It is to the doctrinaire of the *idéologues* – to this diffuse metaphysics, which in a contrived manner seeks to find the primary causes and on this foundation would erect the legislation of peoples, instead of adapting the laws to a knowledge of the human heart and of the lessons of history – to which one must attribute all the misfortunes which have befallen our beautiful France" (cited in Williams 1983: 154). In his view, the only realistic way to run the country was by making an alliance with the Church.

⁴ Danou, Garat, Ginguéné and Lakanal served on the *Comité d'instruction publique* and under the Directory were the government agents in charge of education. Danou was one of the commissioners responsible for the revision of the constitution of 1793 (Williams 1953: 313).

Staum (1980: 294) puts it thus: “The regime found the Church a more effective control on wayward consciences than the pale natural morality associated with Ideology.” Napoleon, who in 1797 had become an honorary member of the Institut National, thus restructured it closing its second section to reduce the influence of the *idéologues*. The Napoleonic creation of the *lycées* was, therefore, almost a complete denial of the *écoles centrales*. Military discipline, strict administrative control and the abolition of such useless and dangerous courses as general grammar and legislation characterised the Napoleonic educational reform.

Despite of the closing of the second section of the Institut National and their decline in political influence, the *idéologues* had lasting influence in various scientific fields as well as precedents for the application of the sciences of man to social administration, education, medicine and the legal and penal systems. For example, they influenced the alienist or specialist in mental diseases J.-E.-D. Esquirol (1772-1840), who was at the centre of a network of physicians who wanted to unify health care and social hygiene in the period after the restoration of the monarchy in 1815. Ideology anticipated a science and a technical expertise whose purpose was to render people happy and moral and society prosperous and well ordered. It exemplified a zeal evident across Europe and North America in education, the treatment of mental disorder, punishment, the care of orphans, legal medicine and public hygiene, poverty and more besides (Smith 1997: 241). Their works were widely translated into Spanish, Italian, German, and English and influenced later developments in linguistics, biology, psychiatry and (thirty years later) in sociology. They were the forerunners of Comte’s positivism, which sustains the faith in reason to discover the invariable natural laws of all historical phenomena and prepared the sociology of knowledge, which investigates the social formation of knowledge.

To conclude, the *idéologues* were a group of Parisian intellectuals that developed ideology as a “science of ideas” that was based on the analysis of how perception and physiognomy relate to language and ideas. As heirs of the Enlightenment *philosophes* and underpinned by their position in the Institut National, they used their “ideology” as the basis for social and cultural transformation especially in the development of a syllabus for the *écoles centrales*. Although their direct political influence only lasted three or four years in the 1790s, their new methods of reflection and research had lasting impacts on later developments in linguistics, biology, psychiatry as well as sociology.

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