Introduction: The Languages Ideology

The ideology of a community is established by the usage of [ideographs] in specifically rhetorical discourse.

McGee 1980:16

Ideology

Ideologies are understandings acquired, expressed, and perpetuated or modified through social practice. As invisible, widely-shared complexes of assumptions, principles, beliefs, ideas, theories, conceptual frameworks, facts, values, labels, procedures, policies, canons, and activities, ideologies describe and shape our experiences, establishing common interest and understanding. Ideologies are manifest unevenly in societies and, as Pennycook and Otsuji (2016) demonstrate, they can be subject to negotiation and “rework[ing].” Nevertheless, by providing the primitive notions that form the basis of both common sense and formal systems, ideologies help us to know why things are as they are. They also shape our expectations of how things should become and provide the discursive resources for making it so. (See McGee 1980.) Importantly, as ideologies shape self-awareness, they put flesh on imaginary bones. As they establish standards of similarity and difference, ideologies naturalize distributions of privilege and power. Individually and collectively, we are largely unaware of the ideological forces shaping the categories that organize our perceptions and direct our behavioral choices, often prompting us to ignore or reject conflicting evidence. Recent elections and the resulting political aftermath in the United States reveals the extent of ideology’s power to impose belief and limit thought.

As unexamined assumptions and understandings with no basis in fact are repeatedly enacted, ideology is manifest in various ways – in xenophobia, in sexism, in agism, in the cultural, intellectual, and moral hubris that undergirds colonial exploitation, in science, and in religion. For example, widespread but mistaken understanding lead ancient Greeks to interpret mammoth bones as belonging to giants and to see dinosaur bones as the remains of griffins (Mayor 2000). Similarly, for centuries Christian ideology, Catholic and Protestant,
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prompted scientists to accept Aristotle’s claim that underground spontaneous generation was the source of fossil seashells buried in the earth and that marine shells found on mountain tops were deposited by the great flood (A. Cutler 2003). In another example, Fields and Fields (2014:20–21, referencing Dillenberger 1961) write of Martin Luther’s rational excoriation of superstition and his claim that witches “do many accursed things while they remain undiscovered.” Luther’s understanding was inescapable, Fields and Fields contend, because it reflected the ideology of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance that “... took for granted the existence of an active, well-populated invisible realm that manifested itself in the realm of the seen as real things, events, and persons” (21). Men, women, and even dogs thought to be witches were executed in what is now Massachusetts in the late sixteenth century. A later example is provided by the eighteenth-century theologian, John Wesley. In his preaching and writing, Wesley conflates two philosophical schools of thought regarding the nature of so-called primitive cultures. On the one hand, consistent with the Doctrine of Original Sin, like many in the Enlightenment, Wesley subscribed to the belief that humans had degenerated from an original pure state. He saw savage/barbaric/primitive peoples (e.g., Africans, Native Americans, Lapplanders, Finns, Northern Scotts, and the Chinese as degenerate “gluttons, drunkards, thieves, dissemblers and liars” who were “lower than brutes” (Hodgen 1934:315, 320 citing Wesley IX 161–162, 178). On the other hand, in order to advance his abolitionist sentiments, Wesley presented Africans “on a higher plane than other primitive peoples ... “on a parity with ... civilized man” (320). That today educated persons are familiar with fossil dinosaurs, the movement of tectonic plates, no longer fear witches, nor subscribe to the notion of primitive cultures developed by early anthropologists illustrates that even potent ideologies are escapable.

Fields and Fields’ (2014) primary object of concern is a second, pernicious ideology which they analogize as racecraft. Using numerous contemporary examples, they demonstrate that, although ideologies are neither internally consistent nor uncontested, logical incongruities continue to plague those who, despite acknowledging there is no biological basis for race, accept race as a useful social construct. Among the several instances they point to, one is particularly striking: Dr. James Dewey Watson, a 1962 Nobel Laureate molecular biologist, zoologist, geneticist, and co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, predicted that “genetic evidence for black peoples’ lesser intelligence w[ill] emerge within a decade” (8). This 2007 remark, which was “roundly condemned as ‘racist’” and dismissed as “genetic nonsense” by others in the field (Anonymous 2007), is reminiscent of remarks by another Nobel Laureate, William Shockley, who earlier advanced similar views with respect to the genetic differences