**What is Ideology?**

An **ideology** is a set of [beliefs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beliefs) and [values](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Values) attributed to a person or group of persons, especially as held for reasons which are not purely [epistemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology).[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-1)[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-2) Formerly applied primarily to economic or political theories and policies, in a tradition going back to [Karl Marx](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx) and [Friederich Engels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Engels), more recent use treats the term as mainly condemnatory.

The concept of ideology is often used in the media and the social sciences, but it is notoriously vague. Its everyday usage is largely negative, and typically refers to the rigid, misguided, or partisan ideas of others: we have the truth, and they have ideologies.[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-:1-3)

The term was coined by [Antoine Destutt de Tracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_Destutt_de_Tracy), a [French](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France) [Enlightenment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Enlightenment) [aristocrat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristocracy_(class)) and [philosopher](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher), who conceived it in 1796 as the "science of ideas" to develop a rational system of ideas to oppose the irrational impulses of the mob. In [political science](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_science) the term is used in a descriptive sense to refer to [political belief systems](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_ideologies).[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-:1-3)

**Etymology and history**

The term "ideology" was born during the [Reign of Terror](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reign_of_Terror) of [French Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Revolution), and acquired several other meanings thereafter.

The word, and the system of ideas associated with it, was coined by [Antoine Destutt de Tracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_Destutt_de_Tracy) in 1796,[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology" \l "cite_note-hart-4) while he was in prison pending trial during the Terror. The word was created by assembling the words [*idea*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idea#John_Locke), from [Greek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greek) [ἰδέα](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E1%BC%B0%CE%B4%CE%AD%CE%B1) (near to the [Lockean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Locke) sense) and [*-logy*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/-logy), from [-λογία](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/-%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%B3%CE%AF%CE%B1). He devised the term for a "science of ideas" he hoped would form a secure foundation for the moral and political sciences. He based the word on two things: 1) sensations people experience as they interact with the material world; and 2) the ideas that form in their minds due to those sensations. He conceived "Ideology" as a [liberal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberalism) philosophy that would defend individual liberty, property, [free markets](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_markets), and constitutional limits on state power. He argues that among these aspects, ideology is the most generic term because the science of ideas also contains the study of their expression and deduction.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-kennedy-5)

The coup that overthrew [Maximilien Robespierre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilien_Robespierre) allowed Tracy to pursue his work.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-kennedy-5)[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-hart-4)

Tracy reacted to the terroristic phase of the revolution (during the Napoleonic regime) by trying to work out a rational system of ideas to oppose the irrational mob impulses that had nearly destroyed him.

[Napoleon Bonaparte](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Napoleon_Bonaparte) came to view 'Ideology' a term of abuse, which he often hurled against his liberal foes in Tracy's [Institutional](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institutional). According to [Karl Mannheim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Mannheim)'s historical reconstruction of the shifts in the meaning of ideology, the modern meaning of the word was born when Napoleon used it to describe his opponents as "the ideologues". [Karl Marx](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx) adopted this negative sense of the term and used it in his writings (he described Tracy as a "fischblütige Bourgeoisdoktrinär", a fishblooded bourgeois doctrine).[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-6)

Tracy's major book, *The Elements of Ideology*, was soon translated into the major languages of Europe, and in the next generation, when post-Napoleonic governments adopted a reactionary stance, influenced the Italian, Spanish and Russian thinkers who had begun to describe themselves as "liberals" and who attempted to reignite revolutionary activity in the early 1820s (these included the Carlist rebels in Spain, the Carbonari societies in France and Italy, and the Decembrists in Russia).

In the century after Tracy, the term ideology moved back and forth between positive and negative connotations.

(Perhaps the most accessible source for the near-original meaning of *ideology* is [Hippolyte Taine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolyte_Taine)'s work on the [Ancien Régime](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancien_R%C3%A9gime) (the first volume of "Origins of Contemporary France"). He describes ideology as rather like teaching philosophy by the [Socratic method](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_method), but without extending the vocabulary beyond what the general reader already possessed, and without the examples from observation that practical science would require. Taine identifies it not just with Destutt De Tracy, but also with his milieu, and includes [Condillac](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89tienne_Bonnot_de_Condillac) as one of its precursors. (Destutt de Tracy read the works of Locke and Condillac while he was imprisoned during the [Reign of Terror](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reign_of_Terror).))

The term "ideology" has [dropped some of its pejorative sting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphemism_Treadmill), and has become a neutral term in the analysis of differing political opinions and views of social groups.[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-7) While [Karl Marx](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx) situated the term within [class struggle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Class_struggle) and domination,[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-8)[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-9) others believed it was a necessary part of [institutional functioning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural_functionalism) and [social integration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_cohesion).[[10]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-10)

**Analysis**

Recent analysis tends to posit that ideology is a *coherent system of ideas* that rely on a few basic assumptions about reality that may or may not have any factual basis. Through this system, ideas become coherent repeated patterns through the subjective ongoing choices that people make. These ideas serve as the seed around which further thought grows. Believers in ideology range from passive acceptance through fervent advocacy to true belief. According to most recent analysis, ideologies are neither necessarily right nor wrong.

Definitions, such as by [Manfred Steger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manfred_Steger) and [Paul James](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_James_(academic)) emphasize both the issue of patterning and contingent claims to truth:

Ideologies are patterned clusters of normatively imbued ideas and concepts, including particular representations of power relations. These conceptual maps help people navigate the complexity of their political universe and carry claims to social truth.[[11]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-11)

The works of George Walford and Harold Walsby, done under the heading of [systematic ideology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systematic_ideology), are attempts to explore the relationships between ideology and social systems[*[example needed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:AUDIENCE" \o "Wikipedia:AUDIENCE)*]. Charles Blattberg offers an account that distinguishes political ideologies from political philosophies.[[12]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-12)

David W. Minar describes six different ways the word "ideology" has been used:

1. As a collection of certain ideas with certain kinds of *content*, usually normative
2. As the *form or internal logical structure* that ideas have within a set
3. By the role ideas play in *human-social interaction*
4. By the role ideas play in the *structure of an organization*
5. As meaning, whose purpose is *persuasion*
6. As the *locus* of social interaction

For [Willard A. Mullins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willard_Mullin) an ideology should be contrasted with the related (but different) issues of *utopia* and *historical myth*. An ideology is composed of four basic characteristics:

1. it must have power over cognition
2. it must be capable of guiding one's evaluations;
3. it must provide guidance towards action; and
4. it must be logically coherent.

[Terry Eagleton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Eagleton) outlines (more or less in no particular order) some definitions of ideology:[[13]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-13)

1. The process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life
2. A body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class
3. Ideas that help legitimate a dominant political power
4. False ideas that help legitimate a dominant political power
5. Systematically distorted communication
6. Ideas that offer a position for a subject
7. Forms of thought motivated by social interests
8. Identity thinking
9. Socially necessary illusion
10. The conjuncture of [discourse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse) and power
11. The medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world
12. Action-oriented sets of beliefs
13. The confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality
14. Semiotic closure[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology#cite_note-14)
15. The indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure
16. The process that converts social life to a natural reality

The German philosopher [Christian Duncker](https://web.archive.org/web/20110701015904/http:/www.ideologieforschung.de/web/Christian_Duncker.html) called for a "critical reflection of the ideology concept" (2006). In his work, he strove to bring the concept of ideology into the foreground, as well as the closely connected concerns of [epistemology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology) and history. In this work, the term ideology is defined in terms of a system of presentations that explicitly or implicitly claim to absolute truth.

There are many different kinds of ideologies: [political](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics), [social](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_issues), [epistemological](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemological), and [ethical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics).