

CHAPTER 1



Introduction

Freedom and equality are on everyone's lips, are endlessly proclaimed by politicians, and seem to be self-evident terms until we apply them to current events. For instance, President George W. Bush talks about terrorist evildoers as the enemies of freedom. His opponents point to him as an enemy of freedom because he has enlarged the power of government to place its citizens under more complete surveillance. Perhaps President Bush is close to some 1960s radicals who proclaimed "No freedom for the enemies of freedom." His extension of this view would seem to be: "No freedom for *anyone* until the enemies of freedom have been destroyed." But I am not going to discuss politics in this book. Consequently, few will take it seriously in an age in which every issue has been politicized. This book will be dismissed by those who live for politics or who enjoy it as a kind of entertainment. Everything is political. How can anyone deny it?

And yet everything is concurrently an economic issue. We think everyone acts out of self-interest, most often economic self-interest. Global capitalism has cowed the political Left; the Left has run out of alternatives to capitalism now that it is global. Some even maintain that global capitalism portends the end of the nation-state and of politics as we have known it for the past two centuries. So what is it—politics or economics? Is the former reducible to the latter under global capitalism, just as the reverse was the case under mercantilism? Again, this book will be immediately rejected by those who think that global capitalism is the most important factor in the organization of modern society.

By contrast, I maintain that behind global capitalism and the political state is the technological system. As I indicate in chapter 3, modern technology includes both machines and nonmaterial techniques such as bureaucracy, advertising, and propaganda. Historians of technology have demonstrated that the nonmaterial techniques as developed and used by the political state were well developed prior to the Industrial Revolution and the advent of capitalism. Indeed, following Max Weber and Jacques Ellul, I maintain that capitalism is a form of economic rationality and that technology cannot be regarded as an epiphenomenon of capitalism. Whether used for political, religious, or economic purposes, technique is the most powerful, efficient means of acting. In all its manifestations, technology is driven by the will to power. Technology is the single most important factor in the evolution of modern societies. As we will see, however, it exacerbates political and economic conflicts all over the world. Without the technological system global capitalism is impossible. Technology is the context within which to understand the meaning of freedom and equality today.

I rely heavily on Jacques Ellul's theory of the technological society, which I summarize in chapter 3. Ellul's views on technology run parallel to those of Max Weber, Martin Heidegger, Lewis Mumford, Arnold Gehlen, Friedrich Juenger, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, and Anthony Giddens, among others. What sets his views apart is his understanding of technology as a sociological force. Ellul explains how technology became the chief determining factor in the organization of modern society. Technology supplants experience and fragments and thus sterilizes human symbolization. Hence, social institutions as symbolically mediated experiences are replaced by organizations, such as bureaucracy, and psychological techniques, such as advertising and self-help manuals.

Peculiar to Ellul is the understanding that technology has been made sacred in the modern world. This is the cultural motivation to rely almost exclusively on technology to "solve" all natural and social problems. Concurrently, technology has become a system (the interrelationship and coordination of specific technologies) and as such our environment or milieu. In short, Ellul's sociological understanding of technology is more complete than that of any other theorist. To be fair, Weber wrote decades before technology emerged as system and milieu.

Many have accused Ellul of being a determinist, but this is based on a misunderstanding. Ellul's determinism is sociological not metaphysical. All societies control the actions of their citizens through a common culture and related institutions. All societies promote conformity. Freedom is always possible, but it necessarily involves conflict and nonconformity. Of course, societies differ in the degree of control they exercise. Freedom in a totalitarian society comes at a much higher price.

The most important facts are rarely those of current events. Underlying current events are longer term historical structures. The *Annales* School of History in France and German sociologist Norbert Elias called attention to the relationship between structure and history.¹ The deeper and more important the structure, the longer it takes to play itself out. Elias' "civilizing process" took at least six centuries before culminating in the nineteenth century. Events are of short duration and tend to be less important in understanding a society than the underlying structures around which events fluctuate. Events can be symbolic "triggers" that set a social movement in motion, but they only have this power on account of their relationship to the deeper structures. Economic structures today such as global capitalism are deeper and of longer duration than political events, but technological systems are of greater depth and historical length. Consequently, I will center my attention on a relatively few facts about technology and draw inferences about them for an understanding of freedom and equality today. The political and economic meanings of freedom and equality in the Enlightenment, whose ideological remains are still with us, work to conceal the technological context.

Freedom and equality have enormous importance in the history of Western civilization. In the highly acclaimed *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, a historical sociology of the cultural value of freedom from the time of Greek civilization to the Middle Ages, Orlando Patterson states: "No one would deny that today freedom stands unchallenged as the supreme value of the Western world."² He attempts to show that freedom is "a tripartite value," whose three meanings are interrelated in history but differentially emphasized at various times. Personal freedom is freedom to act as one chooses to do without coercion but within the limits placed by other people's expectations and choices. Sovereign freedom is absolute freedom, the ability to do whatever one desires and even impose

that choice on others. Civic freedom is the freedom to participate in the governance of a community.

Civic freedom is political in nature and is often called “liberty.” Personal freedom is individual freedom set within the moral expectations of the community. Sovereign freedom assumes both individual and political forms because it is about the power to impose one’s will on others if necessary. Each of these types of freedom has various shades of meaning, for example, personal freedom can become inner or spiritual freedom.³

In *Sovereign Virtue*, legal scholar Ronald Dworkin argues that equality is the most important civic virtue. In discussing the various forms of equality—equality of welfare (in the broad sense of the term), equality of resources, and political equality—he maintains that equality is more important than liberty: “Any genuine contest between liberty and equality is a contest liberty must lose.”⁴ Dworkin says this in a political context in which, he argues, there is near universal agreement that government should demonstrate *equal* respect and concern for the lives of its citizens. Liberty must never be at the expense of the welfare of others.

Dworkin’s well-reasoned book illustrates the danger of analyzing any virtue or value as a more or less autonomous ideal. All virtues and values take on their meaning in terms of the context in which they are discussed and the actions to which they are applied. A different dimension of equality, for example, comes to light when it is paired with the ideal of justice. Justice and liberty bring out different aspects of equality in part because justice and liberty are themselves interrelated. All I am saying here is that the understanding of any virtue or value necessitates the exploration of its larger cultural and historical context.

In what I consider the best treatment of Western civilization, *The Betrayal of the West*, Jacques Ellul identifies three values that are unique to the West: the individual, reason, and freedom. Ellul recognizes that all civilizations are unique in the total configuration of their values and that there is no way to establish an objective hierarchy of civilizations. Consequently, he is not arguing for the superiority of the West.

In the long evolution of these closely-related values, individuality became the “subtle, infinitely delicate interplay of reason and freedom.”⁵ The free and rational individual reaches its highest expression in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It is here we

find a defense and justification of these three values. Before these values became a political project in the Enlightenment, they required a long period of cultural maturation.

Reason was central to the emergence of individual freedom in two ways. First, it led to the concept of self-control. One limits the expression of emotions out of concern for others, because of a dependence on others, or a fear of reprisal. At its best, self-control does not "repress" the expression of emotion altogether, but channels and directs emotion for the sake of the other. For example, I do not immediately say what comes to mind in relationships because part of the time it is harmful or destructive. To be in control of my emotions means that I reflect even if only tacitly before I speak or act. This necessarily means that positive feelings are subject to a momentary check as well.

Individual reason can free me from the tyranny of instinct, but as well it can be used to reflect about external constraints on freedom. I can think about the ways in which cultural and political control are exercised. Out of this reflection comes the realization that the individual and the group are sometimes at odds. The principle of civil disobedience is perhaps the highest expression of individual freedom: I do not deny the community's right to create norms and enforce them but retain the right to violate an unjust law. Hence, I willingly accept the punishment for my free action. Freedom, then, necessarily involves conflict with self and others.⁶

Unfortunately, reason can readily become instrumental rationality; freedom can easily become what Patterson calls "sovereign freedom," the will to impose one's will on others. Ellul notes that Western civilization betrayed its own values, always imperfectly realized in practice, over the past two centuries. The power of science and technology, the growth and centralization of power in the political state, the emergence of corporate capitalism, the centralization of power in bureaucracy and the mass media, were both cause and effect of imperialism and racism. The West imposed its power on those less technologically advanced and ultimately on its own.

Going beyond Western civilization, Louis Dumont refers to equality and individualism as the modern ideology. His argument is not so much that Western civilization imposed this ideology on developing countries (although it attempted to do this on occasion) but that the conditions of modern life make necessary the modern ideology. The latter is less a self-conscious choice than a justification

for a set of conditions after the fact. This set of conditions is sometimes referred to as the "American Way of Life," an existence defined in terms of individual consumption.

Dumont contrasts the modern ideology of individualism and equality with the traditional ideology of holism and hierarchy. Holism implies hierarchy, just as individualism implies equality. In the traditional ideology, as least when it worked well, hierarchy was constrained by a sense of the entire community. Differences in status and power were limited by the sense that the overall community is more important than any individual or group's relative superiority. To be placed in a position of authority meant that one should exercise that authority in a responsible way.⁷

At the same time holism was unimaginable without authority or hierarchy. Order meant a hierarchy of groups based on age, sex, and eventually occupation. Hierarchy required mutual responsibility for those who exercised authority and those who obeyed it. Hierarchy is based on the idea of complementarity. Take men and women for instance. Each group has certain responsibilities based on a division of labor. Even if men have authority over women, that authority is mitigated by the idea of complementarity (and even the reversal of roles). Each group has authority within its domain even if one group has higher status. Sometimes higher status goes with a function that was at one time perceived to be more critical for the short-term survival of the group, for example, men as hunters and warriors. Complementarity is based on cooperation and militates against overt competition.⁸ Hierarchy breaks down when the power of a higher status group becomes absolute, an end in itself. When this occurs, holism suffers in the sense that it must be imposed. As a result, covert competition ensues.

In the modern ideology, equality replaces hierarchy, and individualism replaces holism. In the modern world, order is transitory and is the result of an endless competition for power. Each group is independent of the other and is forced to compete for the scarce resources of money, information, and political influence. We often see the dangers of excessive individualism but not those of equality, and we fail to see the connection between the two. If we redefine individualism as individual freedom, then the modern ideology contains freedom and equality as its two main components.

Are freedom and equality in conflict? Perhaps not ideologically, but certainly in practice, Alexis de Tocqueville argued. There are

times when freedom and equality are in perfect harmony, so that in a fully participatory democracy, for instance, each citizen is both free and equal. But Americans, he argued, prefer equality to freedom. Freedom involves conflict, constant vigilance, and courage. Social equality, by contrast, is more pleasurable in that one becomes more like others and merges with them in groups, associations, and crowds. Equality, unlike freedom, can be institutionalized.

Centralized government and strong public opinion move equality toward uniformity and are a threat to freedom. Tocqueville concluded that both citizens and government in a centralized democracy love equality. The latter is an advocate of equality because, Tocqueville argued, the more alike people become, the easier they are to govern.⁹ Whether his argument was correct about America in the early nineteenth century or not, he raised an essential question. The collectivistic tendencies of the modern world are a greater threat to freedom than to equality. One of my main arguments is that both freedom and equality are heavily collectivized in a technological civilization. The liberalism of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on individual freedom and equality has been ideologically transformed to justify our highly collectivized postmodern (technological) existence. This outdated ideology, liberalism, allows modern societies to maintain a façade of individualism.

Liberalism as an ideology was in part an ethical account of freedom and equality. Even if morality, as in some liberal theories, was an unintended consequence of self-interested action, freedom and equality still possessed a moral cast. Today, freedom and equality have been thoroughly aestheticized. Freedom has become consumer choice, right (as choice and desire), and technological possibility. Equality is related to the enjoyment of power as plural and cultural equality. In stripping its citizens of moral responsibility and freedom, a technological society turns all issues and choices into aesthetic ones. Our "freedom" as consumers, for example, is compensation for our lack of freedom in relation to technology in all its forms: bureaucracy, corporation, government, and mass media. Beneath the illusion of the equality of pluralism lies the uniformity of statistical measurement and control that is imposed on us.

Ideology and myth are "essentially contested concepts," that is, they are terms the meaning of which cannot be agreed upon by almost anyone.¹⁰ My truth is for you ideology. Without attempting to impose order on the definitional anarchy of the terms (especially

ideology), and without providing a history of these concepts, I will follow the lead of two writers, Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Ellul: the former for an analysis of ideology and the latter for a description of the relationship between the concepts of ideology and myth in today's world.

Paul Ricoeur notes that there are three major concepts of ideology: ideology as integration or identity; ideology as legitimation of hierarchy and dissimulation; and ideology as distortion. He identifies the first concept with Geertz, the second with Weber, and the third with Marx. Ricoeur's achievement is to show how the three concepts are interrelated so that each is necessary for a fuller understanding of ideology in history.¹¹

Ideology provides a society with an ideal image of itself and thus makes possible the integration of its members. This integrative function of ideology is invariably related to a story about the founding of one's society. But it also contains a project for existence in the here and now. Furthermore, ideology contains a strong element of belief which acts both to absolutize the ideal image and to simplify it. As Ricoeur notes, ideology is a "grid or code for giving an overall view, not only of the group but also of history and, ultimately of the world."¹² But the absolutizing and simplifying operations of ideology at the very moment they provide for integration also make for dissimulation. That is, ideology tends to become rigid, unwilling or unable to assimilate new experiences to its grid.

The second concept of ideology is about the legitimation of authority. The exercise of power invariably exceeds cultural authority on the one hand and what people are willing to accept on the other hand. The result is dissimulation on the part of those in power. A large part of the integrating effect of ideology is to provide a rationale for domination, for the structure of authority. Legitimizing authority entails getting those without authority to believe in the symbolic meaning of the power wielded over them. Common meaning notwithstanding, the relation between the claim of authority (for legitimacy) and the belief of the others (response to the claim) is asymmetrical. As Ricoeur perceptively observes, "There is always more in the claim which comes from the authority than in the belief which is returned to it." He calls this the "real surplus-value."¹³ Authority requires of us more than our less-than-fanatical belief can endure.

When the integrating purpose of supplying a society with an ideal image comes into contact with the system of authority, both

dissimulation and distortion occur. More than anything else it is the system of authority that resists the new experiences and new meanings by which an ideology could renew itself, but which could prove dangerous to the extant authority.

Finally, we come to the Marxian concept of distortion. The ruling class can only see the world in terms of its own interests. Ideology is set forth at the expense of those who do not comprise the ruling class. Distortion is sometimes referred to as inversion—an inversion of reality. We mistake ideology for material reality, on the one hand, and we distort reality so that it fits our expectations and desires at the expense of others, on the other hand. Marx's singular contribution was to maintain that ideology's justification of domination can be more critical than its more primitive integrating purpose.

Now it appears that all three concepts or purposes of ideology are required for a balanced view. Yet the integrating and distorting functions vary in importance in history. Louis Dumont's study of hierarchy in India and subsequent comparisons with capitalistic societies is quite revealing.¹⁴ As we have seen, hierarchical relationships often express more a complementarity of roles than sheer vertical authority. As a consequence, the integrating function of ideology has priority over the structure of power that it helps to establish.

Hierarchy in traditional societies is radically different from hierarchy in modern societies—different assumptions, logic, and ideology. In traditional societies the community (the whole) takes precedence over the individual (the part) and any particular social category (gender, occupation). All oppositions, male/female, old/young, warrior/farmer, leader/follower, are dialectically related. Each category needs its opposite, is defined in terms of its opposite, so that both categories together form a totality—the community. The various social categories are not mutually exclusive and a higher category's authority over a lower is tightly circumscribed. As Dumont puts it, "Essentially hierarchy is the *encompassing of the contrary*."¹⁵

Modern hierarchy, by contrast, is based on a logic of mutually exclusive categories. Rather than a communitarian ideology, we find here an individualistic ideology so that the hierarchy is not a totality in any symbolic sense. In this situation competition is emphasized over cooperation. The winners and losers are members of mutually exclusive categories. Community is narrowed to the community of winners—the ruling class. This is the point at which ideology's

function of distortion is most marked. For now the ruling class, which has its power only loosely checked by a sense of a moral community as the totality of societal members, has to suggest that the current ideology still applies to everyone. Social classes become mutually exclusive communities in respect to power and its benefits but still have a common ideology.

I am not convinced that the difference between a communitarian ideology in which hierarchy is transformed into relationships of complementarity and an individualistic ideology in which hierarchy devolves into mutual antagonism is sufficient to explain the difference between traditional and modern society. The missing ingredient in making such a comparison is power. There are two points I wish to make in this regard. The first is that power—technological, economic, political, military—is not a constant in history. There has been, for instance, an uninterrupted growth of and centralization of power in the political state since the fifteenth century.¹⁶ There is no comparison between the forms and extent of power in traditional societies and those in modern societies. The second is that there is an inverse relationship between power and values.¹⁷ The more human power grows, the less efficacious values are. If there is one law of history, this is certainly it.

Applying these assertions to the question of ideology, I think one can safely conclude that by the nineteenth century in the West, the power of the capitalist classes was enormous. Moreover, this power was, as Marx noted, only possible at the expense of the working class. In this context ideology's main purpose was distortion. Adam Smith's ideology had to assert rhetorically that capitalism benefits everyone ("the greatest good for the greatest number . . ."). The main value of the capitalistic ideology was success. But what is success, if not the moment of power? I succeed when you fail.

As I will argue in chapter 3, power today has become abstract, that is, it is centered in technology, bureaucracy, and the media: in the technological system. Now ideology does not justify a ruling class but a "ruling system." Freedom and equality are ideological concepts that are in the service of technical information, a power that has come to surpass that of capital.

As Ricoeur notes, it may not be appropriate to use the same concept (ideology) to refer to traditional societies where the integrative dimension is so apparent and to modern societies where the distortive aspect is so pronounced.¹⁸ Ideology would appear to be

the result of a growing rational and conscious dimension of culture that exists side by side with its unconscious dimension.

By contrast, myth appears to be more spontaneous, unconscious, and universal. The most important myths are religious and take the form of cosmogonies (theories of creation, of the beginning of time and the end of time). Myth survives into the modern world even with the presence of ideology. Jacques Ellul maintains that whereas the great ideologies of capitalism, communism, and socialism during the Cold War divided modern and modernizing societies, the myth of technological progress united them on a more primitive unconscious level.¹⁹ In this book I will show how the ideology of freedom and equality, the foundational ideology of all ethnic and national ideologies, is related to the myth of technological utopianism.

Chapter 2 describes the meaning of freedom and equality in Enlightenment thought and in American history. Chapter 3 articulates the various ideological meanings of freedom and equality in a technological civilization. Freedom is defined as consumer choice, as right, and as technological possibility; equality is defined as plural equality on the one hand and as cultural and communicative equality on the other hand. Chapter 4 demonstrates that the reality of freedom and equality is the reverse of the ideology. It took over 150 years for Marx's concept of ideology as the inversion of reality to be fully realized. The reality of freedom is forced consumerism, legal process, and technological necessity. The reality of equality is group conformity and competition on the one hand and uniformity on the other hand. Chapter 5 arrives at certain conclusions and explores the implications of this interpretation for living as free and equal individuals in a technological society. This chapter offers no solutions (as if there were any) but suggests only in a general way an attitude and conviction we must maintain if we are to begin to resist the loss of freedom and equality. The meaning of freedom and equality will only resurface in the common effort to regain control of technology.