THE IDÉOLOGUES REVISITED:
IDEOLOGY, SCIENCE AND PERFECTIBILITY

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The project of creating a language of rational concepts, as the basis for propagating a secular and liberal perspective on social institutions, reached its highest point in the late eighteenth century in the writings of the French idéologues. The problematic of the idéologues was that of the utilitarian social philosophy and linguistic rationalism of the late Enlightenment.[1] According to this perspective, a scientific understanding of human needs and human nature demonstrated that the social and political institutions of the *ancien régime* were incompatible with human reason and freedom. The philosophes and their intellectual descendants, the idéologues, elaborated a philosophy of social perfectibility in which progress was measured in terms of the diffusion of scientific knowledge and its embodiment in rational institutions. These institutions and doctrines were liberal insofar as they were designed to extend individuals' opportunities for satisfying their wants with minimal interference from their fellows or from public authorities. Thus the idéologues advocated representative government, a market-liberal economic system, freedom from censorship, and the rational reform of educational curricula.

Central to this project of social perfectibility was the concept of *idéologie*. This concept, denoting the science of the origin and elaboration of ideas, embodied the dual character of the project: on the negative side, the purging of 'irrational' ideas such as traditional metaphysics, theology, and custom-bound prejudices; and, on the positive side, the dissemination of empirical knowledge and rational morality. This paper discusses the original version of the theory of idéologie, as developed in particular by Destutt de Tracy.[2] The focus is on the political significance of the idéologues' theory of language; a focus justified not only by the intrinsic connection between language/knowledge and politics in the doctrines of the idéologues, but also justified by our own concerns in contemporary social and political theory with notions of communicative competence, undistorted communication, the public sphere, cultural hegemony, and so on. (The latter notions are not directly raised in the present discussion. However, the affinities between the project of the idéologues and that of certain contemporary theorists of language and social reform will not escape the attention of many readers.)

The argument of this paper is that the original theory of idéologie developed as a radical form of linguistic empiricism and sensationalism, harnessed to a rationalist conception of social science and a liberal conception of institution-building. The reform of language was intimately linked to the reform of

institutions; and the control of language/knowledge implied a new role for the idéologues themselves as policy advisors in the process of social reconstruction and as legitimators of the new social order. The 'scientific' reform of language was intended to lead towards a program of civic education and institutional change, wherein the secular intelligentsia sought to establish a new system of rational-legal authority founded on the social application of the science of ideas, idéologie. One difficulty with the idéologues' project was the tension between its elitism and its concern with democratic representation. Another difficulty lay in its failure to examine the social and economic bases of ideas, interests and everyday linguistic usages. Other problems arose from inconsistencies, internal to the theory of idéologie, between an idealist view of the subject — a legacy of the Cartesian *cogito* — and a materialist/empiricist philosophy of the origins of ideas. First, however, it is necessary to establish the meaning and purposes of the concept of idéologie.

The birth of idéologie

Destutt de Tracy and his colleagues in the Institut National assumed, in the light of Condillac's reworking of Lockean empiricism, that accurate knowledge of man and nature could only be guaranteed on the basis of a thorough understanding of man's intellectual operations — the substratum of all knowledge. The theory of idéologie served to provide this guarantee of scientific certitude: the science of the formation and expression of ideas was to become the logos of all the sciences.

Destutt de Tracy presented his colleagues in the Class of Moral and Political Sciences on 20 June 1796 with a problem of nomenclature: what would be the most appropriate name for a "new" science of ideas? Inspired by Lavoisier's and Condillac's concern with nomenclature and conceptual reform, Tracy was keen to find a suitable name for a science which, he claimed, "is so new that it does not yet have a name".[3] The birth of a new science evidently required a baptism; and the best place for this was amid that section of the Class devoted to *Analyse des sensations et des idées*, whose task was precisely the further development of this science. In seeking a new name, Tracy was trying to mark off the scientific study of ideas from the pre-scientific "metaphysics" of the past, just as it had been necessary for astronomy to separate itself from astrology.[4]

Condillac had been content to describe his analytical method as a form of *métaphysique*, albeit with the qualification that scientific or observational procedures should be used in the gathering and analysis of facts. Tracy regarded this term as quite misleading and discredited. The common meaning of *métaphysique*, said Tracy, is

> a science which treats the nature of beings, spirits *(esprits)*, different orders of intelligence, the origin of things and their first cause . . . Moreover, metaphysics strictly means something other than physics: yet the knowledge of the faculties of

> man, as Locke believed, is certainly a part — an important part
> — of physics, whatever (ultimate) cause one wants to ascribe
> to these faculties.[5]

Another possibility was the term *psycologie*, which Condillac had sometimes used along with Charles Bonnet. However, Tracy argued that psychology literally meant "science of the soul *(âme)*"; it would not only be presumptuous to claim a knowledge of such an entity, but it would give the false impression that the *savants* of the Institut were investigating first causes. On the contrary, insisted Tracy, "the goal of all your works is the knowledge of effects and their practical consequences".[6] What, then, was to be the name for this behavioural science to which Tracy and his colleagues were devoting their attention?

Tracy recommended his own neologism: "idéologie, ou la science des idées". Idéologie, he said, had a very clear etymological meaning, based on the Greek *eidos* and *logos*, and it made no presupposition about causes. Hence, it was a suitable word to express "the science of ideas which treats ideas or perceptions, and the faculty of thinking or perceiving".[7] This formulation of the content of idéologie was by no means neutral, however, Tracy had not only defined the content in behaviouralist terms as knowledge of "effects" and "consequences", but he had also imported a sensationalist epistemology by his equation of ideas with perceptions and of thinking with perceiving.

> This word has still another advantage — namely, that in giving
> the name idéologie to the science resulting from the analysis
> of sensations, you at once indicate the goal and the method;
> and if your doctrine is found to differ from that of certain
> other philosophers who pursue the same science, the reason
> is already given — namely, that you seek knowledge of man
> only through the analysis of his faculties; you agree to ignore
> everything which it does not uncover for you.[8]

Not only were the procedures and content of idéologie defined in terms of analysing sensations and intellectual faculties; but sharp limits were placed upon what was held to be knowable. Reliable knowledge, according to Tracy, must be derived from investigating the operations of the mind in forming and expressing ideas.

Science and idéologie

For the idéologues, the science of ideas was the fundamental science, necessary for certifying reliable knowledge in all the other sciences. Tracy's reasoning seems to be as follows: all knowledge, regardless of subject-matter, consists of ideas, and their accuracy depends on our capacity for making a series of precise judgements; knowledge of the processes by which errors arise and by which correct judgements may be formed, is the only basis available for

ensuring the reliability of knowledge. The primacy of idéologie over the other sciences arises from the fact that, in explaining the general operations of our intellectual faculties, it points out the methods for attaining certainty and avoiding error. Or, as Tracy succinctly wrote:

> knowledge of the human understanding is really the only
> science (*la science unique*); all the others, without exception,
> are only applications of this knowledge to the diverse objects
> of our curiosity, and it must be their guiding light.[9]

Tracy gave two main kinds of reasons for the primacy of idéologie — one relating to scientific method, and the other concerning the nature of human experience. The first argument is straightforward: he asserted that all the sciences require a guarantee of their truth content; that scientific methods of observation and analysis are the best procedural guarantees of reliable knowledge; that all the sciences should adopt such methods; and that idéologie is central because it clarifies and recommends the logic of scientific method and explanation.

The second argument, however, is more contentious and surprising. Here, Tracy argued that the science of ideas is fundamental to all our knowledge because the ideas of an individual are constitutive of his experience of the world and of his self.

> In fact, since nothing exists *for us* except through the ideas we
> have, since our ideas are our whole being, our very existence,
> the examination of the manner in which we perceive and
> combine them is alone able to show us in what consists our
> knowledge, what it encompasses, what are its limits, and what
> method we must follow in the pursuit of truths in every field.[10]

This doctrine of the primacy of ideas-as-experience is rather anomalous in what is otherwise a philosophy of monist materialism; indeed, the doctrine plays only a background role in Tracy's overall conception of idéologie and the human sciences. However, it suggests the overwhelming residual influence of the Cartesian *cogito* in French philosophy, and served to reinforce the idéologues' conception of the fundamental role of a secular intelligentsia in defining and policing the linguistic and social order.

Despite the ambitious scope of the theory of idéologie, the intention of the idéologues was not to summarize all existing knowledge about man and nature, but to recommend and demonstrate the superiority of a particular method of enquiry: *analyse*. According to this method, as elaborated by Condillac[11] (and adopted by Condorcet, Garat, and Tracy), all phenomena are explicable in terms of their location in an ordered progression from simple to complex facts; this approach is equally applicable to the study of animate and inanimate nature, and to mathematics. Any idea or concept can be "decomposed" by analysis into

its constituent simple ideas which are anchored in sense-experience. Analysis demonstrates how complex ideas are built up from simple elements.

The programmatic aspect of this doctrine implies that any ideas which cannot, in this way, be melted down and reconstituted on the basis of simple sense-experience must be expelled from scientific discourse as ambiguous or meaningless, and propositions based on such ideas are false or at least unprovable. Thus, Tracy asserted that *analyse* and *idéologie* are based upon scrupulous observation of the facts, drawing only those conclusions fully warranted by the evidence, and always preferring "absolute ignorance" to any claim which merely appears to be plausible.[12]

The study of the formation of ideas, based on observation of facts and the analysis of their relationships, was for Tracy *une science expérimentale*.[13] The implication was that there were two kinds of "knowledge" — that modelled on the physical sciences, and that which could hardly be called knowledge at all. Condillac had claimed that there was really only one *science* — the history of nature — which could be subdivided into two, interdependent, parts: that dealing with facts of experience (*physique*), and that dealing with abstractions or reasoning upon these facts.[14] Tracy, in similar fashion, claimed that there are two kinds of "truths", namely, those of "experience or fact", and those of "reasoning or deduction". The deductive or abstract truths, however, had no validity independently of the facts from which they were abstracted. Idéologie, like all positive sciences, required both types of truths. The scientific genius, wrote Tracy, is one who is able to "discover in the facts those important and very general truths which have not yet been detected — but it can never be a question of creating them out of his own head".[15] When idéologie and the human sciences had become more highly developed, he believed, they would be closer to the positive sciences of nature, especially physiology, than to any purely abstract science such as mathematics whose truths are entirely a deductive system abstracted from the objective world.[16]

The problem, in Tracy's conception, was to find a starting point for structuring "the facts" in accordance with the laws governing their inter-relationships. Once such a secure starting point had been found, the rest of the scientific system would be unfolded in a series of rigorous deductions. If this were accomplished, the system of truths would be complete and entirely "certain". On the foundation of idéologie, the human sciences, according to Tracy, were capable of certainty in the same manner as the sciences of inanimate nature. A whole system of truths about man and society would follow:

> now that we are certain of the formation and filiation of our ideas, all that will be subsequently said — on the manner of expressing, combining and teaching these ideas, on regulating our sentiments and actions, and directing those of others — will be only the consequences of these preliminaries, and will rest on a constant and invariable base, consistent with the very nature of our being. Now these preliminaries constitute

> what is strictly designated as idéologie; and all the conse-
> quences derived from it are the object of grammar, logic,
> instruction, private morality, public morality (or the *art social*),
> education and legislation . . . We will go astray in all these
> sciences only to the extent that we lose sight of the fundamen-
> tal observations on which they rest.[17]

The secure starting-point for idéologie, the fundamental building-block on which all the "ideological, moral and political sciences" rested, was sense-perception. Idéologie was therefore "a system of truths closely tied together, all stemming from this first indubitable fact, that we know nothing except through our sensations, and that all our ideas are the product of the various combinations we make from these sensations".[18]

Having assumed that the only fact of which one can initially be certain is one's own existence as an *être sensible*, the proposition that "man is a sentient being" became the *première vérité générale* from which Tracy elaborated his entire theory of man and society.[19] Tracy's disingenuous claim that his theories were devoid of presuppositions and that he had elaborated his idéologie purely by observing man's thinking processes,[20] is clearly misleading in the light of his commitment to a sensationalist paradigm of knowledge and a positivist conception of scientific method. The study of the human intelligence, as of the human body, was to be seen as part of natural history: hence Tracy's well-known claim that "idéologie is a part of zoology".[21]

Indeed, Tracy went beyond Locke, in asserting that sense perception and thinking were absolutely identical terms.[22] His purpose was to deny any independent reality to a mental or moral realm, and to assert a naturalistic monism of consciousness and physical environment. Thought (or perceiving/-sensing) consisted of four basic faculties or modes of operation: simple sensibility, memory, judgement and desire. "This manner of envisaging it in these (four) elements unveils for us the whole mechanism".[23] Where Condillac had shown that one faculty of the mind gave rise to the next in a generative manner, Tracy collapsed all such operations into aspects of sensibility, all being "the results of our organization".[24] The structure of the mind was stable and predictable owing to its uniform physiological foundation, but the *content* of ideas was largely determined by experience, education and environment.

The science of signs

In focussing their attention on the behavioural effects and operations of the mind, the idéologues took a special interest in the connections between thought and language, ideas and words, the signified and the sign. Here was a field where they expected idéologie to make great progress. Idéologie, as the *science des sciences*,[25] was directed towards the task of clarifying ideas, making concepts more precise, and thereby promoting scientific understanding of phenomena in every field. The priority of idéologie over the positive sciences of man and

nature depended on a view of language as a conventionalized set of signs expressing our ideas, and a view of scientific advance as dependent on clarifying concepts and rejecting those not validated by sense-experience. The scientific language of "elements" and "compounds" also had the eminent advantage, for the idéologues, of lending itself to what Gillispie has called "a naturalistic pedagogy".[26] Idéologie was seen to provide a grammar and syntax of nature, and a set of procedural rules for finding the basic elements (signs, concepts) of any language. The analysis of language was thus of critical importance for the idéologues, in their dual roles as both scientific observers and as educators of mankind.

A language, according to Destutt de Tracy, is a system of signs whose meanings have been fixed or formalized by the attribution of conventional meaning to each symbol.[27] Some languages or sign-systems are more specialized than others (algebraic notation, for example, or the symbols of chemistry), but all share certain characteristics. First, language is created and sustained as a social phenomenon: it is a kind of collective network through which individuals share experiences and perhaps even contribute to the enlargement of knowledge. Secondly, a mastery of language involves a mastery of knowledge, of which words are the signifiers. The problem was to ensure that the words actually designated precise and observable facts, and that general ideas were squarely based on such facts.

The analytical method of idéologie was invoked to perform this function — to ensure that the vocabulary and syntax of languages were consistent with the facts discovered by observation, and with a rigorous inter-relationship of concepts. As Gillispie has aptly remarked, the Baconian project of a renovation of learning became, in Condillac's work, identified with a "linguistic reform, redesignating words where necessary to make them speak facts, recombining them in a syntax of experience, lending reality to the expression used of the ancient atomists that theirs was an alphabet of nature".[28] The idéologues' model of language was no less atomistic and naturalistic. In the generation of ideas, claimed Tracy, a small number of basic elements, combined in various ways, produce "an almost infinite multitude of ideas, just as a small number of letters variously arranged suffice to represent those ideas. Here as elsewhere, nature shows a remarkable economy of means and profusion of effects".[29]

Ideological analysis was designed primarily to clarify our existing stock of ideas, eliminate vague concepts and false propositions, and provide criteria for rebuilding the human sciences. To establish idéologie as an empirical science, Tracy believed it necessary to overthrow "innatist" theories and to demonstrate instead the instrumental functions of language in satisfying human needs. It would then become possible to improve the capacity of a language to be a precise instrument for codifying, communicating and enlarging our knowledge.

The superiority of the human species over the animals consisted in the ability to use conventional and durable signs, giving permanent form to ideas, and enabling men to combine and multiply their ideas in a variety of ways in co-operation with their fellows. Signs were necessary to fix in one's memory the

meanings of and the relations between ideas. The use of consciously developed language set man apart from the beast, and made it possible for him to emerge from that historical stage where he was dominated by his immediate needs.[30] Language, the symbolic embodiment of rationality, was seen as the instrument of man's perfectibility. Having begun in total ignorance, the human species profited by shared experience and knowledge, and eventually reached a point where the desire to increase and propagate knowledge developed its own dynamic.[31]

> And so we are entirely the product of art (rather than nature), that is, of our work; and we resemble the natural man, or our original mode of existence, as little as an oak resembles an acorn or a chicken resembles an egg.[32]

If signs were the instruments of human progress and reason, it followed that an individual who was denied the opportunity to participate in a linguistic communication system would be unable to develop his mental capacities to more than an "animal" level. The idéologues, and before them the sensationalist philosophes (including Diderot, La Mettrie and Condillac), had taken this to be a clear refutation of any innate-ideas hypothesis. Two examples were of particular interest to them, and were widely discussed — the case of deaf-mutes, and the case of so-called "wolf children". The deaf-mute from birth, asserted Tracy, cannot share in advanced forms of communication; his intellectual capacities will therefore reach only a limited level, even though he may be helped by instruction in gestural language. The *enfant abandonné* was in a similar position: deprived of social interaction and advanced language skills, his intellect was seriously deficient.[33] (The example of *le sauvage de l'Aveyron*, captured in 1799, had provoked great interest among the idéologues including Philippe Pinel and Jean Itard.[34])

Language was the source of cultural progress, but there were certain inherent defects in the use of signs which prevented perfect communication, the implicit goal of idéologie. In the first place, there was the impossibility of guaranteeing that the same meaning was always given to a sign by different people. Tracy assumed that there is always a degree of uncertainty and vagueness in using conventional signs, especially in ordinary language where the sign system is more subject to individual variability in usage. Simple perceptions might be experienced in similar ways by every person owing to their identical organic faculties, but complex ideas allowed more possibilities of vagueness, error, or variability in meaning, and the intrusion of faulty memory. Language in use, therefore, was necessarily individualized and imprecise, owing to the improbability of each person attaching exactly the same meaning to the same words.[35]

Idéologie could do much to reduce the problem by showing how to avoid precipitate judgements, at least in those specialized languages known as systems of scientific knowledge. Fortunately, some defects in language were not

inherent in communication — some defects were caused by ignorance and by habitual errors of judgement which could be overcome by education and by correcting certain anomalies in the written language.[36]

Tracy came to reject Condillac's tendency to posit algebraic equations as the epitome of linguistic precision. Tracy's comparison of language and algebra throws light upon the limits of his project of conceptual reform, and the impossibility of a perfect language for expressing truths about man and society. Algebra was distinguished from ordinary language in being confined to precise quantitative units: providing one follows the rules, one always reaches a correct conclusion. But most of our ideas are not quantitative, and it would thus be mistaken to take algebra as a model for reforming ordinary langauge, whose signs and relationships can never have the simplicity and precision of quantitative signs. Algebraic signs are a particularly clear and limited group of precise symbols; ordinary language is relatively untidy and imprecise.

> Words are . . . formulae which depict in an abridged way the results of previous combinations and which relieve our memory of the obligation of having these combinations presented ceaselessly in all their details . . . (B)ut the results which these words express are not of a kind as simple or precise as those represented by algebraic symbols; and the modifications which we make them undergo in discourse . . . are much more varied and much less measurable than those undergone by algebraic symbols . . . (which) are all perceptible in numerical terms; those of words are not so, and that is an immense difference.[37]

In rejecting the model of algebra for a perfected language, Tracy rejected Condillac's notion that correct judgements are simply statements of identity between the two terms of the judgement. Tracy thereby unwittingly cast doubt upon the very possibility of a (deductivist) science of man, implicit in his earlier assumption that the human sciences could be brought to the same degree of certainty as the mathematical sciences.

Tracy was determined, above all, to show how the study of our intellectual faculties could throw light on the correct operation of our judgements. Given Tracy's view that language consists of signs and the combinations we make of them, the reform of language consists in making our signs (concepts) more precise, and in making the links between them more certain. His ultimate practical objective was a programme of "ideological" education which would "make correct judgements habitual".[38] This would be a substantial and long-term project of public instruction, which would never be completely successful, given the inherent defects of signs. However, some progress could be made.

> . . . a complete reform (of words and syntax) is almost
> impossible, for too many habits resist it. To change completely
> a usage which is tied at so many points to all our social
> institutions, would require a unanimous consent which
> cannot even be conjectured, and would be a real revolution in
> · society. (But) . . . while letting this usage subsist, since it
> cannot be destroyed, it would be very useful to point out
> properly its defects, their causes and consequences, and to
> place alongside our existing written language a perfected
> model of what it should be.[39]

Tracy consistently argued against utopian images of a perfect language — such
a language was a "chimera". Even if a genius could be found to invent it, it would
not be widely adopted, and would immediately become disfigured by the
conventional usages of spoken language and by the inherent weaknesses or
limitations of our intellectual faculties.[40] A less ambitious series of reforms
would attempt to improve spelling and pronunciation; make syntax follow more
closely the "natural progression of ideas in deductions"; eliminate vague and
euphemistic expressions; encourage the adoption of new terms wherever
needed; formulate properly methodical nomenclatures in all the sciences; and
correct our ideas by the discovery of new truths, especially in idéologie.[41]
Tracy was clearly unconcerned here about the fate of purely literary works
relying upon subtle images — he was far more concerned to promote a
standardized language for the expression of scientific truths about man and
society. The idéologues were also concerned to improve general levels of
literacy and eliminate the regional dialects (*patois*) which obstructed a national
language for the communication of information and education.[42]

Idéologie and social reform

The idéologues of the 1790s had placed great faith in the progressive
consequences of conceptual reform; it was central to their conceptions of
public instruction and the production of enlightened and virtuous citizens. This
explains why the *écoles centrales*, created in the law of October 1795, included a
course on *grammaire générale*, a subject which, according to Tracy, would
demonstrate that "all languages have common rules which are derived from the
nature of our intellectual faculties", and that this knowledge is necessary "not
simply for the study of languages but is also the only solid basis of the moral and
political sciences, (on which . . .) all citizens should have sound ideas".[43]

The science of language was intended to have important and beneficial
consequences for social and moral behaviour. While great improvements could
be made by linguistic and conceptual reforms introduced into the education
system by enlightened teachers and administrators, the other side of the
problem was to combat the sources of error and mystification which were

institutionalised in positions of authority. The doctrines of the Catholic Church (which the idéologues regarded as the greatest propagator of illusions and ignorance) had to be combatted, by excluding the Church from any formal association with the State or the education system; and by establishing secular, liberal and rational principles of morality and civil authority. Science, believed Tracy, would spell the demise of illusions about man and nature. All the "subtleties of the old theological metaphysics will vanish as soon as we specify the proper meaning of the word, to *exist*".[44] As soon as the unity of man and nature was fully appreciated, the influence of supernatural metaphysics would decline, and it would become possible to educate people in the ideological art of forming correct judgements about reality on the basis of observation.

The idéologues' desire for certainty in the human sciences may be understood as inherent in their view of science as control or mastery of the environment. In seeking a secular alternative to the "metaphysics" of the past, they found in positive science a model for theoretical knowledge and practical applications. A science of ideas and of society would be characterized not only by the empiricist methods of the natural sciences, but also by a central concern with public policy objectives. Science, man's rational mastery of nature and society, implied for the idéologues a technology of control over natural processes for the benefit of man, and the possibility of social reform directed towards objectives dictated by reason.[45]

This viewpoint was extremely ambiguous in regard to democratic control: it was perhaps more logical to support government by an élite ruling in the rational interests of the people than to support government directly controlled by the people. Scientism in social theory has often been linked with advocacy of a special role for the knowledge élite: the writings of Saint-Simon and Comte in the 1820s led to a technocratic conception of good government. The idéologues of the 1790s resisted technocracy because they were equally influenced by more traditional liberal conceptions of limited government, laissez-faire economics, the central importance of individual rights, and ultimately a belief that politics is about wants and not about objective interests. The element of elitism underlying the idéologues' theories of government and education was sustained by two related sources. One was their scientism, with its meritocratic concern to give authority and leadership to the knowledge élite. The second was an argument from prudence, claiming that the masses had insufficient understanding and experience of the public sphere to play any useful role: their direct involvement had usually had unfortunate consequences.

Tracy's conception of scientific certainty implied that once the truths about human capacities and needs were known, it would be possible to deduce a set of social institutions which were most suited to "human nature". Man's needs for sociality, for individual liberty, and for extending his rational control over his society and over nature, were held to be deducible from analysis of his basic faculties of thought and action. Representative government itself was justified in terms of its ability to meet the needs of civilized men for a free and secure existence. One of the problems with Tracy's approach was the inherently

slippery concept of "needs" in relation to a doctrine of human nature. How are needs defined? How do needs differ from interests, wants and passions? Even if these questions could be satisfactorily resolved, there was the second problem of establishing priorities, programmes and institutional frameworks to cater for such needs, and determining how far each type of need must be satisfied.

Tracy's theory of social science seemed to imply that public authorities should be involved in attempts to maximize the satisfactions of their citizens. However, Tracy contented himself with the view that government should provide only a rational framework of legislation and public instruction, beyond which it was the province of individuals to pursue their own satisfactions in accordance with their various talents and resources. Tracy's faith in scientific demonstration of truths about human nature sometimes led him towards a flirtation with the idea that there should be a progressive alliance of power and truth, government and education, politicians and *savants*. However, his recognition of the empirical diversity of men's opinions and desires, together with his appreciation of the abuses inherent in government control of censorship and propaganda, prevented him from urging this kind of educative autocracy.

Conclusions

Idéologie in its restricted meaning denoted a theory of signs or language, examining how simple units of sense-experience were variously transformed into complex and inter-related ideas. By uncovering the mechanisms of idea-formation and the operations of judgement, idéologie attempted to provide techniques for improving men's reason, for eliminating erroneous and "metaphysical" ideas, and ultimately for making men understand better the basis of rational institutions and moral rules. Empirical enquiry was not only seen as the most reliable method for describing and explaining social reality: it was also used to buttress a view of human nature and to lend scientific credibility to the political and educational practices desired by the idéologues.

Idéologie was an instrument for discriminating between truth and error in concepts; by extension, it became an instrument for distinguishing between practices which enhanced and those which harmed men's liberty and happiness in society. Civic instruction, in "ideological" terms, involved transmitting selected packages of concepts which showed men their interests as rational and free individuals. Thus, at the level of social and political theory, idéologie sought to propagate and actualise the Enlightenment ideals of reason and freedom, to destroy the sources of prejudice and traditional privilege, and to develop the policy sciences in law, government and education. The tension between elitism and representative government has been underlined in the previous discussion.

The idéologues' concern with education, and the leading role envisaged for *savants* and philosophes in social reconstruction, arose directly from their emphasis on the primacy of conceptual reform. The road to social progress was

seen to lie in successively influencing the ideas of all levels of society (beginning with the elites); obstacles and resistances were identified as ideational rather than as socio-economic. Like Condorcet, Tracy's view of history was that of man's gradual mastery of nature and social organization, understood as the unfolding of reason and social co-operation. Thus, Tracy's idéologie drew virtually no connections between systems of ideas and social groupings (whether classes, estates, occupations, regional groups, etc.); despite its materialist/sensationalist epistemology, the theory of idéologie contained no hint of a historical-materialist account of the relations between ideas and socio-economic forces. It was partly for this reason that Marx regarded the idéologues as naive liberal idealists. For Marx, Tracy's idéologie, far from providing a scientific account of the relationships between ideas, society and nature, was itself an example of liberal-individualist philosophy posing as social science — a philosophy advocating a rationalist and naturalistic perspective without understanding those historically evolving and contradictory socio-economic forces which alone could bring into existence a rational society.

All that Tracy and Marx had in common, apart from the mere word 'ideology', was a somewhat grand conception of social science as a body of explanatory laws governing social phenomena, useful in analysing the degree of human freedom and happiness under particular forms of social organization. But for Marx, the main obstacle to a free society was the power of the dominant economic class, whose power was typically disguised by prevailing social assumptions (ideologies) concerning the natural or necessary qualities of the existing social and political order. For Tracy, the survival of oppressive institutions was explained by ignorance and prejudice, reinforced by habits of everyday usage and by irrational educational curricula. Tracy's solution, conceptual and institutional reform, was posited in terms of a generalised reason inexorably influencing the policies of elites. However, the social conditions under which enlightened policies could be effectively implemented, were not addressed. Nor did the idéologues acknowledge the class interests which were at stake in the remodelling of economic and political institutions.

These silences may be explained largely in terms of the idéologues' highly individualistic conception of social relations, typical of liberal and utilitarian philosophy. On the one hand, this facilitated their tendency to divide society into two ideational groups (rational/enlightened *versus* irrational/prejudiced) rather than into socio-economic interests, and enabled them to posit a unifying human interest in reason. On the other hand, their individualistic perspective on the acquisition of ideas and on the constitution of the self through such ideas, directed attention away from the social construction of language and from the social conditions under which individualism itself could be sustained.

Finally, the project of the rational reconstruction of language/knowledge and thence society was undermined by Tracy's recognition that perfectibility in the reform of ideas was ultimately an idealist utopia, flying in the face of the necessary ambiguities and distortions of everyday linguistic practices. The quest for precision, and above all the rational *control* of the meaning of key

concepts, remained central to the idéologues' educative program, but they remained unable to specify the social conditions and interests which lay at the foundation of their ideological project.

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Notes

1. For recent studies of their work, see S. Moravia, *Il pensiero degli idéologues*, Firenze: La nuova Italia editrice, 1974; and G. Gusdorf, *La conscience révolutionnaire: les idéologues*, Paris: Payot, 1978. For detailed studies of particular idéologues, see E. Kennedy, *A Philosophe in the Age of Revolution: Destutt de Tracy and the Origins of 'Ideology'*, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1978; M. Staum, *Cabanis: Enlightenment and Medical Philosophy in the French Revolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980; P. Bastid, *Benjamin Constant et sa doctrine*, 2 vols., Paris: Armand Colin, 1966. The present paper draws on my doctoral dissertation: *The Political and Philosophical Thought of Destutt de Tracy*, University of London, 1979.

2. See E. Kennedy, "Ideology from Destutt de Tracy to Marx", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 40 (3), July 1979, pp. 353-368; B.W. Head, "The origin of idéologue and idéologie", *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 183, 1980, pp. 257-264.

3. A.L.C. Destutt de Tracy, "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", *Mémoires de l'Institut National, Classe des Sciences morales et politiques*, vol. I Paris, 1798, p. 322.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 322-3.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 286 (emphasis added).

11. See especially abbé de Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* (1746), in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. G. Le Roy, Paris, 1947, vol. I.

12. Tracy, "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", p. 386.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

14. Condillac, *De l'Art de raisonner* (1755), in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, vol. I, p. 619.

15. Tracy, "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", pp. 384, 377-8.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 389-390.

17. Destutt de Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie* (1801), reprint of 3rd ed. 1817, Paris, 1970, pp. 212-3.

18. Tracy, "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", p. 317.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 389.

20. Destutt de Tracy, *Logique*, Paris, 1805, p. 424.

21. Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, p. xiii.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

23. Tracy, "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", p. 327.

24. Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, p. 53.

25. Destutt de Tracy, *Grammaire* (1803), reprint of 2nd ed. 1817, Paris, 1970, p. ix.

26. C.C. Gillispie, *The Edge of Objectivity*, Princeton, 1959, p. 203.

27. Tracy, *Logique*, p. 504.

28. Gillispie, *The Edge of Objectivity*, p. 169.

29. Tracy, "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", p. 327.

30. Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, p. 294.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 297-8.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 292-3; "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", pp. 402-3, 408-10.

34. See L. Malson, *Wolf Children*, London, 1972, and H. Lane, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*, London, 1977.

35. Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, pp. 379, 383, 386; *Logique*, pp. 57-8.

36. *Éléments d'idéologie*, p. 387; *Logique*, pp. 166f.

37. *Éléments d'idéologie*, p. 342n.

38. Tracy, "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", pp. 442-3.

39. Tracy, *Grammaire*, pp. 359-60.

40. *Grammaire*, pp. 369-80; "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", pp. 415-6.

41. *Grammaire*, pp. 382-9; "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser", pp. 414, 417.

42. See M. Lyons, "Politics and Patois: the linguistic policy of the French Revolution", *Aust. J. of French Studies*, 18(3), September 1981, pp. 264-281; P. Higonnet, "The politics of linguistic terrorism and grammatical hegemony during the French Revolution", *Social History*, 5 (1), January 1980, pp. 41-69.

43. Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, pp. xxiii-iv.

44. Destutt de Tracy, "Dissertation sur quelques questions d'idéologie", in *Mémoires de l'Institut national*, Classe des sciences morales et politiques, vol. III, Paris, 1801, p. 514.

45. This theme is explored in B.W. Head, "The origins of *la science sociale* in France, 1770-1800", *Aust. J. of French Studies*, 19(2), May 1982, pp. 115-132.