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ideology

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comprehensive system of concepts and beliefs, often political in nature, held by a group or an individual. the term was coined by the french philosopher antoine destutt de tracy (1754-1836), one of the so-called ideologues, who attempted to reform postrevolutionary french society according to a pragmatic "science of ideas."

modern origins

the modern concept of ideology originated in the writings of karl marx, who believed that ideologies were false systems of political, social, and moral concepts invented and preserved by ruling classes out of self-interest. according to marx, religious hierarchies, for example, perpetuate systems of faith that at bottom protect the economic well-being of those in power. as refined by later social thinkers, this pejorative definition of ideology came to dominate modern usage of the term. following marx, proponents of a particular sociopolitical system felt free to dismiss arguments offered by opponents as ideologically based, that is, false because they reflect only the ideological biases of the opponent and not the true state of affairs. because this tactic could be used to argue against every ideology, the clash of modern ideologies became a strident and passionate affair dominated more by propaganda than by rational argument.

ideology in the 20th century

perhaps the chief distinguishing characteristic of 20th-century ideologies has been the almost religious devotion of their adherents to systems of political ideas that are viewed as absolutely incompatible with other systems. this trait has been most pronounced in the two major modern ideologies, communism and fascism. other political concepts, such as socialism, democracy, and conservatism, while often strongly upheld, have tended to be more diffuse and less exclusive; their proponents differ on some issues while agreeing on others.

the concept of ideology has had a profound effect on world civilization in the 20th century. almost all modern conflicts, from the "crusade against fascism" in world war ii to the various "police actions" of the postwar period, have had ideological overtones. the prime example of an ideological conflict was the cold war, in which the principal antagonists (the u.s. and the ussr) waged a political, economic, and psychological struggle for influence in every part of the world.

citation information